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The Towns of Italy in the Later Middle Ages

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In the middle of the period covered by this book, one of the most resonant accounts of urban life ever written was composed by the poet Dante. For all its startling vividness, however, Dante's evocation of the city in the *Divine Comedy* is not easy to interpret. Writing of the Italian cities of his own day, the poet oscillated between extremes of optimism and gloom. His own birthplace, Florence, is described both as the virtuous daughter of Rome and new cradle of civilisation, and as the sinister and corrupting child of the devil. What relation did the poet's rhetoric bear to the wider experience of life in the medieval Italian towns? What were they really like to live in, those walled and towered cities of hill and plain, those republics and signories of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy? With this collection of contemporary sources in English translation, Trevor Dean brings the modern reader directly into contact with many features of that urban experience. In a diverse collection of over one hundred documents, all of them previously published but very few hitherto available in English, Professor Dean provides both the novice and the experienced historian with diverse and often fresh stimuli to reconsider the primary evidence. Accessible and lively, the anthology is greatly to be welcomed and deserves wide sales and readership. Dante, paradoxically and a little disappointingly, is absent, for the reason that translations are easily available elsewhere; Petrarch and Boccaccio are similarly excluded. Included, however, is a considerable variety of texts, grouped into five sections: 'the physical environment and social services', 'civic religion', 'the urban economy', 'social organisation and tensions', and 'political structures'. The whole is a mine of thought-provoking material.

As any editor of historical documents is keenly aware, however, such materials are never as transparent as they look. Lifted out of its context and translated into the language and modern idiom of the reader, an excerpted written source acquires a seeming directness and simplicity which only increase the dangers of

misinterpretation. Professor Dean's introductions to the sections of the book, and to the individual documents, are assured and clear, but they are quite brief. One senses that this lightness of editorial touch is a reflection not only of the format of the Manchester University Press series to which the book belongs, but also of Professor Dean's personal preference. It is certainly refreshing for the reader to be given freedom to interpret the historical evidence. None the less, at times the non-professional or the undergraduate user of the book might have welcomed a little more guidance. For example, the section entitled 'the physical environment and social services' mixes together the more or less literary accounts of historians and poets with the relatively dispassionate records of civil administration. The opening document of the collection is a famous description of Milan by Bonvesin della Riva, which appears to be well informed in the detail it gives of the numbers of butchers and school-teachers and so forth, but which, apart from its value as a descriptive record, needs to be set in the context of a rhetorical tradition of *encomia* of cities. The major article on that tradition by Hyde is cited in a footnote, but Professor Dean chooses not to draw the reader's attention to the artificial and celebratory qualities of a number of these texts, which ask to be read in a different way from the by-laws with which they alternate here. Of one passage, indeed, he warns that it 'needs to be handled with care'; but the point is not only the need for caution, but also the fact that all of our sources, whether poetic, historical, legal, epistolary or religious, give in some sense an artificial image of the city. This is not to say that we cannot know these towns as their medieval inhabitants did, for they too made various uses of myths and idealised images of the city in order to give order and value to their lives. But the risk, in presenting such a collection as this of miscellaneous types of contemporary sources, is that it will be drawn upon for its many vivid descriptions of material, social and political life, while insufficient attention is given to the evidence of mental attitudes contained in the very rhetoric of the texts themselves. The rhetoric of the sources, the particular aims of their authors, and the identity and likely response of their audiences, receive little attention from Professor Dean. But perhaps this is a complaint directed not at this volume in particular, but at the entire *genre* of published collections of extracted sources, one of whose conventions is the gentle, unhectoring editor, of which Trevor Dean is a gracious exemplar.

That said, the collection includes many telling examples of the use by communal governments of the rhetoric of collective identity and public space: language which is as eloquent as the detailed matters it touches upon of the aspirations of many, at least amongst the citizenry of the medieval Italian towns. Thus Salimbene tells how in 1283 the Parmesans 'enlarged the new communal piazza and bought up, for the commune, all the buildings around the piazza'; and Agnolo di Tura records the construction by the Sienese government in the 1320s of houses to attract new residents. The more celebratory accounts give little impression of the large body of resistance encountered by communal ideals. However, some idea of this conflict is recorded in documents in which communes are recorded as attempting to suppress all other local organisations bound by oath, including societies of knights and guilds of craftsmen. (These references, respectively to Ferrara p.132, Bologna p.162 and Perugia p.217, are dispersed into three different sections: some cross-referencing, here and elsewhere, would have been helpful.) Of course, citizenship was never conceived as a status available to all, and the texts printed here show how the urban 'community' was defined not only inclusively, but in exclusive terms as well. Helpfully clarifying a point which continues to confuse modern students, the leading citizens of Naples in the 1330s announced, as a gloss on the text of a civic peace agreement, that 'we intend by the *popolo* that which is commonly called the *popolo grasso*, and not the *popolo minuto* and the artisans, who are not accustomed to be associated in such things...' And more than one civil regime is here quoted as restricting immigration from the countryside to the newly prosperous cities, 'lest all peasants should turn themselves into citizens'. A further consequence of the developing notion of civil society was the communal prison. City prisons, used not merely as temporary expedients but as the more or less long-term destinations of sentenced enemies of public order, appear in this collection at Venice in 1297 and at Siena in 1330; though in the former case, at least, the smell of the poor prisoners in the *Stinche* was already at this period wrinkling the noses of the senators in the adjacent council chambers. Such juxtapositions and tensions were of the essence of medieval Italian urban life.

Certain sources tend, by their very nature, to give a thoroughly positive image of the city commune in action, which other records tend to throw into question. Thus this collection includes the extended and colourful description by Goro Dati of the St John the Baptist's day procession at Florence (previously

published in English in 1971 by Gene Brucker in *The Society of Renaissance Florence: a Documentary Study*). The text is undeniably one contemporary view of such events: pious, celebratory, and optimistic about the urban 'community'. Yet these communal shows, for all that they offered to a variety of participants the attractive opportunity to participate in the language of civic pride, also brought out the persistent tensions within urban society. These are revealed in sometimes violent disputes over precedence in the Venetian Corpus Christi procession, and in the more explicitly agonistic rituals of other cities, such as the battles of rocks fought between the various *contrade* at Bologna, Perugia and elsewhere. Although these examples are absent, the present collection is by no means free of bloodshed: there are food riots and fist-fights in Siena, and vendetta at Pistoia. But in its overall image of the medieval Italian city, the book perhaps errs a little on the side of stability. A significant reason for this impression may be the focus upon published sources, amongst which, apart from civic histories, many of a semi-official nature, normative measures such as statutes and by-laws prevail. For the operation of such legislation in daily and controversial practice, one would need to spend more time in the law courts, and in the company of the civil notaries. As historians in the field know all too well, that obscure army of thousands of lawyers has left, in most towns of the peninsula, an overwhelmingly daunting mass of evidence, not only of personal testaments, household and shop inventories, and contracts relating to economic and social relationships, but also of conflicts and their negotiated resolution. The paucity of legal and notarial materials in this collection could be justified by the wealth of other sources more readily available in print; yet their better representation would have helped to balance the weight of official and governmental views of urban society and culture. The editor in his introduction anticipates criticism of exclusions from the range of sources in his volume, asking to be judged rather upon what has been included. This is entirely fair, except where the editorial selection process results in a cumulative image of the central subject - medieval Italian towns - which is significantly unbalanced. Professor Dean's introduction also includes a welcome call to consider not only the well known cities, but also less familiar places, in order to broaden the perspective on the subject as a whole. To some extent the range of towns represented in the collection lives up to the expectation thus engendered: here are not only Florence, Venice and Milan, but also Perugia, Parma and Ferrara. All the same, it is not just carping to point out that the net has still not been cast particularly wide. The peninsula south of Rome is represented only by fleeting visits to Brindisi, Barletta, Reggio and Naples; in the northwest, Genoa merits just one significant appearance. And something might usefully have been done here to include in the picture the smaller, market towns, whose persistent absence from general discussions encourages a false impression that Italy knew only the great contrasts of big-town urbanity and utter rusticity.

A further point about the scope of this collection relates to its chronological range. This is nowhere very precisely defined, but effectively extends from 1200 to 1400. The first of these dates presumably relates to the availability of sources, although it would have been worthwhile to indicate that attempts to forge a communal identity, which figure largely in this volume, were anticipated in many towns during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In fact, the majority of the documents included in the section on 'political structures' relate to the replacement of communal solutions and the imposition, from the late thirteenth century onwards, of relatively narrowly based civic regimes or 'tyrannies'. The terminal date, on the other hand, seems to result simply from a reasonable desire not to duplicate existing document collections on the Quattrocento. No clear message stands out from these chronological choices, and one might think this intentional, were it not that the cover blurb states that '*The Towns of Italy in the Later Middle Ages* is carefully structured around the crisis of the fourteenth century'. This was perhaps an unwise claim, since the light which this collection sheds upon the particular social problems consequent upon demographic and economic pressures in the fourteenth century is largely indirect. The book does implicitly underline the complexity of the issues at stake, precisely because it is *not* organised to demonstrate the effects of a 'crisis'. For example, it includes a sample of the moralising literature which, in the wake of the population losses after 1348, criticised newly prosperous survivors who affected dress and manners above their social station; yet also included is sumptuary legislation from Bologna in the later thirteenth century, demonstrating incidentally that the perception of social mobility was not brought in by the early fourteenth-century famines or the Black Death.

One cannot review this collection of sources on medieval Italian towns without expressing disappointment at

what was presumably the publisher's decision to exclude visual material. There is, of course, so much to be learned from the material evidence of urban culture; and the practical and financial difficulties of reproducing black-and-white images on text paper are now very much smaller than they used to be. The absences consequent upon this decision are many: the plans and topography of cities; the structure and internal disposition of town houses; the symbolic imagery both of the communes and of rival interests; the costumes and trappings of religious and civic festivals; the evidence of artisan production and trade; the architecture and decoration of civic churches; all the material culture of everyday life. One realises, in expressing this lament, how much good could yet be done by publishers to help break the exaggerated dominance of written sources in historical research.

None of these reservations, however. detracts from the rich interest and value of the texts which Professor Dean has assembled and translated. It can be hoped that their publication will contribute to the better understanding of cities in general. Those which so many of us in the west inhabit today are the direct descendants of those whose formative period is chronicled in the documents included in this book. Debate on the traumas of life in our modern cities is generally all too lacking in a historical dimension; and rare exceptions, such as Prince Charles's invocation of the supposed harmony of medieval Italian urban life, can appear idealising for rhetorical effect. Read critically, these medieval texts can begin to yield a more balanced picture.

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