

Urban Panegyric and the Transformation of the Medieval City, 1100-1300

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This short book deals with urban panegyric in the 12th and 13th centuries. It takes ‘urban panegyric’ to mean the ‘praise of cities’, whether expressed in (quite often poetical) texts written with the express purpose of praising cities, or as parts of texts whose titles do not necessarily suggest that praise of a city might be found there. It is a historical study of panegyric rather than a literary one. Matters of genre are far less important than the function praise had in the texts chosen as part of the corpus of sources studied. The thesis of the book is threefold. First, urban panegyric was written to comment on the transformations cities underwent between 1100 and 1300. Secondly, it reached a far wider audience than might appear at first sight. And thirdly, urban panegyric was integral to the process of urbanisation itself. The author provides a wide range of arguments to substantiate his thesis, and, on the whole, he has convinced this reader of the usefulness of the study of urban panegyric for the understanding of medieval urbanisation generally.

The introduction sets the scene by a concise overview of urban development in the period 1100-1300, and by a consideration of the difficult matter of defining what a city was. The terminology used in the sources is adduced, as are the definitions given by authors from late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages as well as the authors from the central Middle Ages who wrote the texts that are central to the book. Scholarly thought on the ‘city’ is also summarised, and the conclusion is reached that ‘in truth, not one of the multiple ways of categorizing the city is fully satisfactory and deserves privileging. ... The ensuing study should ... at least offer the reader several angles through which to see how flexible ... definitions of the city could be, and to consider some of them as they might apply in the Middle Ages’ (pp. 13-14).

This overview follows a consideration of the question of what urban panegyric is, and a summary of the meagre historiography of urban panegyric. ‘Urban panegyric appears in many literary shapes and sizes, but simply put, I identify it here as any textual record that can be interpreted as praising (implicitly or explicitly) an aspect of urban life’ (p. 4). These records include *microlaudes*, as they were called by Elisa Occhipinti. The author describes them as ‘smaller passages of urban panegyric and description of various forms and length inserted into larger works’ (p. 6). The inclusion of such *microlaudes* allows one to go beyond texts exclusively meant to praise cities. Sometimes, however, the length of these *microlaudes* (including that of

their opposite, disparaging remarks about cities inserted in, e.g. letters or poems) ought to be taken into account as well. For, according to Oldfield's definition, any remarks on a characteristic of a town might fall under the heading of *microlaudes*—including that of Walther, the later bishop of Speyer who, as schoolmaster at the cathedral school, called his town a *vaccina* ('cow village') in the 970s.⁽¹⁾ Rather than as (*micro-*)*laudes* such snippets might be considered as the reflection of urban panegyric. This suggests that, in order for a 'smaller passage' to be considered as 'urban panegyric', it must be shown to have been meant to praise or disparage. But, when it cannot be shown to have had such a purpose, such a passage may at least show something of the reception of urban panegyric.

Oldfield concentrates on the period 1100-1300. Because some of the elements of the panegyric he has chosen to study can clearly be shown to have been borrowed from earlier texts, these texts are also referred to whenever this is warranted. He very seldom ventures beyond the year 1300, however, although the urbanisation of Europe may be said to have gained speed then, and the number of texts from the later Middle Ages that might be considered from the point of view of urban panegyric is growing considerably. The reasons for the cut-off date of 1300 are purely practical; the book, which really is the first of its kind, and which is the result of a truly pioneering study, would not yet have been published had it taken a wider purview. Indeed, had Oldfield chosen to include all urban panegyric written in the 12th and 13th centuries (even when excluding the less obvious *microlaudes*), his studies would most probably never have come to a conclusion. The book concentrates on Italy, Spain, France, England, and Germany, with the inclusion of only a few case studies from the wider Mediterranean and the Low Countries, and this restriction seems sensible as well. The book is not to be read as a complete survey of medieval urban panegyric in the 12th and 13th centuries—even if many of the cities that are most often present in general histories of medieval urbanisation in these centuries duly make an appearance, with leading parts being played by the panegyrists of Milan, London, Rome, and Paris, and sustaining parts being played by those of Bologna, Chester, Florence, Trier, Genoa, Seville, Venice, Palermo, Tournai, and York. But his book may prove most useful in offering a model for studying the development of urban panegyric as an integral part of urbanisation, elsewhere and in later centuries.

A large part of the book is concerned with praising cities under the headings of 'The Holy City', 'The Evil City: Urban Critiques', 'The City of Abundance: Commerce, Hinterland, People', 'Urban Landscapes and Sites of Power', and 'Education, History, and Sophistication' (chapters 3-7). All of these chapters provide a concise background on the themes they deal with, followed by paragraphs on the various kinds of praise that can be subsumed under the titles of the individual chapters.

Sometimes, as in chapter 3 on 'The Holy City', it was necessary to go back to late Antiquity and the fathers of the Church, as religious panegyric started with them. The general Christian discourses and models of the city, dating back to the days of St Augustine, show few developments in 1100-1300, and therefore the examples adduced needed to be few in number. They show the reception of these earlier discourses rather than their developments. This first section is followed by one in which Bologna and Chester are centre stage, in attempts by panegyrists at 'Replicating the Holy City' of the first section. In a third section, Oldfield deals with 'Cities as Records of Christian Triumph' over paganism, and here, after adducing some examples of panegyric from the (very) early Middle Ages, he gives further examples illustrative of the delicate balance to be maintained by panegyrists dealing with the Christian present of cities with a considerable 'pagan' earlier history. The final section, 'Praising the City's Religious Matrix: Saints, Hierarchies, and Piety', focuses on the religious 'nuts and bolts' shared by all cities, including the religious buildings that defined the religious skyline. In this section, the change brought about by the increasing influence of the papacy in the period 1100-1300 is highlighted.

In chapter 4, 'The Evil City', a distinction is made between 'Deep Critiques' that come from anti-urban discourses (often, although by no means always, originating in monastic *milieus* or in the Bible), of which many examples are offered, and 'Disorder and Lamentation'. Oldfield concludes that it was not so much the city itself that was responsible for the perversion of the good things that could be found there, but sin. 'This is a crucial distinction. In the majority of cases ... censure and lamentation could only exist in a framework

shaped by an inherently positive interpretation of the city and one which looked creatively to the future’.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus almost exclusively on contemporary developments. In ‘The City of Abundance’ (chapter 5), the ‘Commercial Revival’ is singled out, followed by a section in which the interdependence of the city and its ‘Hinterland’ is discussed. A final section on ‘People’ focuses first on the influx of people into the city from the hinterland, and then on general praise for large numbers of inhabitants due to immigration from far and near, and on attempts to quantify them (notably by Milan’s Bonvesin de la Riva, incidentally one of the author’s heroes, who is adduced in every chapter). In chapter 6, ‘Urban Landscapes and Sites of Power’, praise of building activities (‘The Medieval Building Boom’), deals with the various forms of ‘Urban Fortifications’, and then considers ‘Metropolises and Sites of Public Power’, cities where centralised or royal power was beginning to become visible (as shown, e.g. by the examples of Rouen, Paris, London, and Palermo). In this section there is also a discussion of the impact of the cities’ autonomous governments and their institutions on the urban landscape (with examples mainly from central and northern Italy, such as Bologna and Venice). The meanings of those buildings in town, showing urban power and authority set in stone, might be misunderstood; Oldfield rightly concludes that ‘they could mean many things to many people’ (p. 159).

Chapter 7, ‘Education, History, and Sophistication’, focuses first on ‘The City and the Medieval Intellectual Renaissance’, in which the role in urban panegyric of the universities and their predecessors is highlighted. Apparently, literacy was taken for granted, as there are no examples given of the literacy of the general urban population, with the exception of the data provided by Bonvesin de la Riva on Milan, which boasted no less than 1,500 notaries and eight professors of grammar, more than seventy teachers of elementary education, and forty ‘book copiers’ (p. 163). We may be grateful to Bonvesin for his data on Milan in 1288, but he used them mainly to explain why it was not necessary for Milan to have its own university, under these circumstances. The second and last section of this chapter, ‘Ancient Urban Histories’, deals with the ways in which ‘the construction of deep, classicizing histories’ could help to bolster a city’s status (p. 184). These histories were sometimes supplemented by visual materials, and their contents could become known more widely than in the circles of their authors through the translations of any Latin originals into the vernacular, if not in written form then at least in the retelling of the originals. Through repeated instance of what Peter Burke would call ‘cultural translation’, it could become more widely known than might be assumed that, e.g. in London Ludgate was named after King Lud (cf. p. 179).

Oldfield offers a convincing case for the first part of his thesis, that it was contemporary developments which led to the writing of urban panegyric. His arguments need to be found in the discussions of the many examples taken from the sources in chapters 3-7. The second part of his thesis, that the audience for urban panegyric was much larger than that of the readers of the (Latin or, in some cases, vernacular) texts. The arguments for this can also be found throughout chapters 3-7, and here the example of King Lud must suffice. In chapter 2, ‘Interpretation and Audience’, something more is said on this matter. A first section, ‘Interpreting Panegyric: Fabrication, Hyperbole, and Truth’, deals with the ways in which we, as modern historians, ought to read urban panegyric. The conclusion of this section and the next one, ‘Authorship and Literary Conventions’, is that ‘rhetoric, hidden agendas, and recurrent conventions and tropes should not overshadow the valuable information that can be drawn from them’ (p. 60). We should not look for the kind of factual information that a positivist agenda has conditioned us to look for. We should not, e.g. censure Lucian of Chester’s *De Laude Cestrie* for a cruciform positioning of four churches around the cathedral because it did not quite form a cross at right angles (pp. 74-75), or question the use of imaginary kings such as King Lud, but rather ask about the use of such crosses and kings. Even more important are the conclusions to be drawn from the third section, ‘Audience’, that there were ‘many channels for dissemination of the textual material, and the equally numerous comparable messages found in the urban landscape, buildings, coins, and seals’, that ‘indicate that urban panegyric was operating in an ongoing multimedia dialogue with the contemporary urban world’ (p. 60). This is clear from the many instances in which oral and non-verbal forms of communication are mentioned in chapters 3-7 (although they are not mentioned in the index, which is confined to proper names).

The arguments for the third part of Oldfield's thesis are very slender by comparison. No attempt is made to find clear instances of urbanisation which were not accompanied by forms of urban panegyric. Quite possibly there are very few cases to be found in the 12th and 13th centuries—although this might in the end depend on the flexible definition of 'cities', and whether lesser 'towns' might not also be included in it. The development of towns is underlying that of cities, and both developments might be termed instances of 'urbanisation'. As urbanisation was not restricted to the period 1100-1300, nor to the countries considered by Oldfield, to look for cities without clear evidence of urban panegyric we could extend the field to include regions contiguous to those studied by Oldfield, and to look beyond the year 1300.

Irrespective of whether urbanisation without urban panegyric might be found, as I have suggested above, this book may prove most useful for the questionnaire it offers for studying the development of urban panegyric elsewhere and in later centuries. The questions implicit in chapters 3-7 could be asked, e.g. of the 36 volumes of *Die Chroniken der deutschen Städte*, which give the texts of German town chronicles from the 14th to the 16th centuries. The collection was published originally in Leipzig between 1862 and 1931, and offers ample opportunities of studying *microlaudes* and more in medieval Central Europe. Does urban panegyric show different emphases in these chronicles than in the earlier texts studied by Oldfield? And if so, are these differences caused by the ongoing developments in urbanisation in the 14th and 15th centuries? Or by the diminishing preponderance of 'cities' to the benefit of the smaller urban settlements that are the 'towns'. And how about the cities and towns even further away geographically? Those of Scandinavia, East Central Europe, and towns on the Balkans, e.g.? And how did urban panegyric develop after 1300 in Italy, Spain, France, England, and the Low Countries?

That Oldfield's book suggests us to ask many new questions for further research is an indication of its qualities. That the copy-editing has left something to be desired, with a number of typos going unnoticed, does not really matter. They do not hinder the reader in his progress. In the quotation from Matthew 5:14 *ascondi* is easily corrected in *abscondi*, and the *ars dictaminis* does not really deal with public speaking but with the rules for drawing up documents—but these are minor quibbles. This is an important book, which may prove to become even more important when scholars of other regions and centuries seek to test its thesis.

Notes

1. Walther von Speyer', ed. Karl Strecker, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Die lateinischen Dichter des deutschen Mittelalters*, 5.1, Ottonenzeit (Berlin: Weidmann, 1937), pp. 1-79, at p. 12.

The author is happy to accept the review and thanks Professor Mostert for his careful and insightful reading of the book.

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