

Bram Caers, Lisa Demets and Tineke Van Gassen (eds.), *Urban History Writing in Northwest Europe (15th-16th Centuries)*. Studies in European Urban History (1100-1800) 47 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019, 231 pp., ISBN 978-2-503-58376-1).

The timely collection of essays in *Urban History Writing in Northwest Europe (15th-16th Centuries)* gives an overwhelmingly positive answer to anyone who questions the concept of urban chronicles. There did not exist a medieval template for what a chronicle of a town might look like and therefore one might query whether there existed a genre of historical writing devoted to the history of towns. Given the varied ways in which in the later Middle Ages the past of towns and cities was recorded, the authors of the essays collected here embrace the notion that historical writing about urban communities flourished, albeit not in rigid genre-specific ways. The editors Bram Caers, Lisa Demets, and Tineke Van Gassen encouraged their contributors to explore the genre of urban historiography quite widely by embracing a diverse collection of written documentation and narratives in or about a medieval town or city. The geographical focus is on Northwestern Europe with special attention to the Low Countries. Moreover, the edited volume also covers the German cities whose nineteenth-century scholarship provided ambitious text editions of town chronicles (*Die Chroniken der deutschen Städte von 14. bis in 16. Jahrhundert*, edited under the auspices of the Historische Kommission bei der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften from 1862 onwards), which stimulated the study of towns as political and socio-economic entities. Important as this impetus was, in line with the nineteenth-century editorial approach, historians only published contemporary or near-contemporary sections in these chronicles omitting accounts based on earlier sources or indeed of mythical or legendary pasts. Rightly this scholarly approach has long since been abandoned. In fact, much of the present volume is concerned with just this late medieval interest in their towns' long distant past and what it tells us about the sense of self-identity emerging from the urban dossiers. The stimulus for this impressive collection of studies comes from a group of young scholars at the Flemish universities of Ghent and Antwerp, themselves situated in the region that was the most urbanised in medieval Northwestern Europe. It is also the geographical area that has seen pioneering modern scholarship devoted to medieval urban history ever since the days of Henri Pirenne, François-Louis Ganshof and Hans Van Werveke.

The book is divided in three main sections. The first, concerned with questions of genre and typologies, contains four contributions. Two chapters on respectively southern German town chronicles of Basel

(Marco Tomaszewski) and Königshofen (Ina Serif) discuss the shortcomings of the nineteenth-century German Town Chronicle project and offer ideas as to how a new project might look like. The answer is clear: be faithful to the texts as they appear in manuscripts and try to understand why the medieval inhabitants of the cities at their heart cared so much about their earliest history. In a stimulating essay Jenine de Vries offers a comparative analysis of some medieval narratives of towns in England and the Southern Low Countries, making sense of the relative dearth of English urban chronicles. Questions of genre are equally raised by Paul Trio in his stimulating study of Ypres on the tension between local (Ypres) and regional (southern Flanders) medieval historiography. The second section is devoted to the circumstances that led to the production of so many diverse narratives about the past of the cities of Tournai (Laura Crombie), Ghent (Tineke Van Gassen) and, comparatively, that of Bruges and Mechelen (Bram Caers and Lisa Demets). Unsurprisingly, in these cities conflict emerges as a catalyst for writing after traumatic events, such as sieges and urban strife, to put the recent past into perspective and make present tensions bearable. The third and final section concentrates on studies that look at the materiality of the historiographical dossiers. Their authors draw attention to the manuscripts, early printed books, and illumination. Furthermore, they explore what the material culture of late medieval urban historiography tells us about patrons' interests and the medieval chroniclers, who often were city recorders or administrators. A diverse group of texts is presented, such as almanacs as testimony to urban religious dissent (Louise Vermeersch), the serial narratives produced in the Hanze city of Kampen (Peter Bakker), and the heraldic mementoes in the chronicles of Augsburg (Marcus Meer).

The contributions are admirably situated in their historiographical and methodological contexts by Jan Dumolyn and Anne-Laure Van Bruaene in a magisterial introduction. In an essay in which the authors do not mince their words, they sketch the development of modern scholarship on historical writing centred on medieval towns, praising those scholars who anticipated their own view that narratives on the history of a town might take on a wide variety of forms, and criticising (rightly by today's standards) others, like for example the present reviewer who tried to squeeze these narratives into the genre of 'local and regional chronicles' for the series *Typologie des Sources du Moyen Age Occidental*. They make suggestions to avoid the pitfalls of twentieth-century scholarship in order to widen plausible explanations for the rise of urban narratives. They sensibly advocate a continuation of the trend to take the materiality of the sources seriously by in-depth investigation of codicological and paleographical as well as literary studies of the sources if only to avoid being seduced by neat and unproblematic editions. The specialised and ever-increasing detailed study of artefacts, however, is not an end in itself and needs to be accompanied by comparative study or urban historiography. What happened in Northwestern Europe

cannot be understood without taking note of the urban history further north in Scandinavia, west in Britain, in Eastern Europe and of course the Mediterranean in the south of Europe. The introduction is a tour de force that should be compulsory reading for anyone interested in medieval urban history. Altogether this book is an admirable product of effective collaboration to provide stimulating ways of thinking about the manners in which we might approach the history of cities and about the diverse motivations that prompted urban inhabitants to record the past of their cities.

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