BOOK REVIEWS


As a sort of successor volume to Towns and Cities of the Croatian Middle Ages: Authority and Property, this volume is the result of the second triennial held at the Croatian Institute of History in autumn 2013. It consists of 17 papers on images of medieval towns in the region of present-day Croatia. More precisely, these papers deal with the many complex ways in which urban spaces were depicted in narrative sources from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern period and how these sources can enrich our understanding of medieval urbanity. With regards to the subtitle, the term “image” is not limited to one rigid conceptual framework. Rather, it includes a wide range of topics, such as the formation of urban settlements and topographies, the constitution of certain civic identities and memories, and even historical-demographic calculations on the basis of noble genealogies (see the article by Nenad Vekarić).

Except for the article by László Veszprémy (pp.253–63), which examines historiographic accounts of medieval Buda, all of the papers in the volume focus on cities on the northeastern Adriatic coastline and in Dalmatia, especially Dubrovnik, Split, and Zadar. This is due in no small part to the fragmentary nature of medieval sources which have survived on these areas and cities. Nevertheless, it is a bit surprising that Zagreb is mentioned only by Marija Karbić (pp.241–52), who compiles descriptions of the free royal town from chronicles and narratives in some of the charters of the Hungarian court.

Rather than offer summaries of the individual papers, I seek here to emphasize some significant guidelines of the volume by way of example. The introduction (pp.13–60), which was written by Irena Benyovsky Latin (one of the editors), provides a detailed history of the research on the subject and also addresses the varieties and intersections of the narrative sources, which have been considered in a primarily comparative way throughout the volume. In other words, legends of local saints and bishops, annals and universal chronicles, and various histories of primarily clerical and monastic institutions are all important sources on the appearance and perceptions of high and late medieval Croatian towns. As far as images of towns in narrative sources are concerned, communal
histories (be they preserved as chronicles, laudatium urbium, or poems) are an important sources and objects of research. Furthermore, expanding the timespan up to the eighteenth century (i.e. well beyond the traditional border of the European Middle Ages) allows us to take into account travelogues and even diaries from well-known Italian humanists and pilgrims. This provides useful complementary information as well as an external point of view (see the articles by Donal Cooper, Zoran Ladić, and Dušan Mlacović).

The merits of the conference proceedings can definitely be ascribed to a constant reference to the primary sources and a distinctive approach to source criticism. This is especially true when it comes to different provenances, intricate channels of tradition, and depictions of how the prevailing circumstances were perceived at the time. The authors analyze, more or less meticulously, the respective social contexts of the chosen sources for their case studies by taking into account the medieval authors’ intentions, methods of writing, and self-perceptions. Readers of this volume are given an opportunity to refresh their insights by comparing various aforementioned narrative sources with contemporary pragmatic written records, e.g. notarial documents, charters, and municipal codifications. Zrinka Nikolić Jakus (pp.123–36) reconstructs genealogies of Dalmatian urban elites, using both diplomatic sources and information provided by Thomas the Archdeacon of Split (1200–1268) in his famous Historia Salonitana. Other examples of this include examinations which focus on the communal histories of Dubrovnik (see the articles by Zrinka Pešorda Vardić and Zdenka Janeković Röm), Trogir (see the article by Ana Plosnić Škarić), and Zadar (see the articles by Ivan Majnarić and Sandra Begonja). These literary and historiographical works contain descriptions of urban structures and topical accounts of peaceful and adversarial interactions among social groups in the cities and their hinterland. These descriptions provide (again in correlation with administrative sources) a vivid picture of everyday life and multi-faceted medieval urbanity. Apparently, the military and political conflicts with Venice in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were a trigger for the construction of narrative models of urban community which shed light on utopian ideas of cohabitation and social order in major Dalmatian cities.

In addition to the intertextual comparisons, the contributors to the volume also took into consideration material and visual sources. Starting with De Administrando Imperio, a kind of “manual” for adolescent emperors written by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus in the mid-tenth century, Ivan Basić, for instance, sheds light on the etymological confusion of the town Spalatum and
its suburb Spalatiolum (pp.61–115). He connects linguistic investigations based on contemporary chronicles with results from archaeological excavations, and he also takes epigraphic sources into account. He thus succeeds in giving a more precise picture of Split’s urban structure during Late Antiquity. This structure provided the foundation for the early medieval development of the town and its surrounding area. In his iconographic investigation, Tripimir Vedriš (pp.179–212) focuses on the cult of Zadar’s patron saints and how they became symbols of communal identity and instruments of societal differentiation among local elites. He therefore discusses how changes to their visual depiction (in shrines and on seals, coins, mural paintings, etc.) within the urban space were connected to times of struggle against the maritime republic of Venice in the fourteenth century.

The editors’ aims have certainly been met from the perspective of interpreting narrative sources not just as “histories,” whose reliability is to be determined, but rather as “historical facts in themselves” (p.58). Beyond the diversity of topics and sources brought up in combination with refreshingly comparative analyses, this volume presents matters of intensive research concerning medieval narrative sources, and it lays emphasis on Croatian cities which so far been have neglected in the secondary literature. Given the simple fact that all the articles were written in English and even short titles of Croatian sources are given in translation, the volume is accessible to a broad, international readership. It thus constitutes a crucial step towards more spatially balanced approaches to the study of medieval urban history.

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