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Review of periodical articles

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Pre-1500

The subject that continued to preoccupy discussions within the international academic community in 2023 was, sadly, war. Still animated by Vladimir Putin's unrelenting invasion attempts in Ukraine, and galvanized in November by the severely renewed hostilities in Gaza between Hamas and the Israeli government under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu, the end-of-year period was dominated by heated debates, protests and occasionally violent clashes between groups of students and faculty members. The main issue was anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim discrimination. This was perhaps most pronounced in the United States, where the ideologically charged confrontations resulted in the (near) resignation of several Ivy League presidents and may even have contributed to the shooting of three Palestinian students. The escalation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict into the Israeli government's war against Hamas and Gaza also brought forth mass demonstrations in cities around the world. While mainly formulating peaceful demands for a cease-fire and actions against the Israeli government, there is also a palpable anger in these crowds at the duplicitous attitude of the international community and its leaders. City governments have variously responded to these demonstrations by subjecting them to different levels of control, censure or even by banning them outright. At the same time, the crowd functions as the conscience of the international community and adds legitimacy to investigations into the perpetration of war crimes and even the potential genocidal nature of Israeli operations in Gaza (investigations which have just begun at the moment of writing this review).

Although this period of turmoil has not yet translated into a surge of interest in matters pertaining to warfare, sovereignty and religious discrimination among urban historians of the pre-1500 period (as we saw in 2022), the year 2023 did see the publication of an intriguing article that relates to the 'two faces' of the urban crowd. Mireille Pardon shows that in the medieval county of Flanders, crowds were, on the

one hand, considered illegitimate entities that endangered the peace and stability of the city. On the other hand, crowds were indispensable elements in the towns' legal system by providing communal consensus and affirming juridical actions. A key problem for historians of the pre-modern period is that the voice of the crowd itself is usually elusive in the source material. Thus, the motivations and behaviours of crowds are veiled by a curtain of descriptions performed by outsiders, often years after the actual events took place. To overcome this problem and to understand both how crowds were perceived and the actual motivations of the participants, Pardon cleverly focuses upon the curtain itself. Taking the cities of Ghent and Bruges as case-studies, she unravels the language that commentators used to describe crowds, detecting key elements that distinguished the legitimate communal crowd from the unruly rabble. Intriguingly, in describing 'illegal' assemblies that performed subversive actions, medieval authors did not place the responsibility for these acts with the crowd itself, but with a trigger – an individual who had a corruptive influence on the crowd through performing speech acts. Chroniclers noted how easily crowds were stirred by such riotous words. Any act of evil speaking and spreading false rumours was therefore considered a punishable offence as it might stir up the urban commune. Paradoxically, rumours were also a key element in proving someone's guilt in court cases, and public opinion regarding the accused's character functioned as aggravating or mitigating circumstances. Rumours, evil speaking and speech acts were therefore an active part of the legal system. Meanwhile, crowds were integral to it in a more passive capacity: by witnessing executions, the crowd legitimized the killing of a convict. By that same token, crowd interventions in what they perceived as unjust executions were seen as legal acts (Mireille Pardon, 'The crowd's two faces: keeping the peace and fearing the stranger in late medieval Flanders', *Journal of Medieval History*, 4 (2023), 275–90).

Subversive speech was not equally tolerated from all individuals, though. As demonstrated by Esther Liberman Cuenca, those closest to urban power had to be even more careful when it came to the words they uttered. Although urban society increasingly became a written one during the late Middle Ages, the spoken word remained highly authoritative far into the early modern period. Liberman Cuenca examines this by exploring the phenomenon of oath-taking among the urban officials of British towns, in particular the bureaucratic secrecy that their oaths bound them to. Investigating which officials were bound to secrecy in this way also reveals the hierarchical ordering of civic government. Access to 'privileged' information was just that: a sign of privilege and power, the flipside of which was public responsibility. Indeed, while the oaths made little explicit reference to the common good, their performance in a public space in itself constituted a solemn promise to keep communal interests in mind. Secrecy was also an important element in the oaths sworn by newly accepted citizens, even though most citizens never sat on the town government. Still, they were formally bound to safeguard the secrets of the urban community, making them complicit in maintaining the political order. This dovetails with Pardon's analysis for Flanders, as it explains further why evil speaking was considered such a heinous crime. In fact, citizens had to swear that they would not participate in illicit meetings or utter subversive speech. Through a rich collection of examples from both the medieval and the early modern period, Cuenca thus showcases the bureaucratic complexity of keeping secrets in British towns. The spoken word helped structure the duties and hierarchies in urban administrations and governments that were otherwise increasingly dependent upon writing (Esther

Liberman Cuenca, 'Oath-taking and the politics of secrecy in medieval and early modern British towns', *Continuity and Change*, 38 (2023), 9–29).

A more tangential connection between the current political climate and the scholarly trend in 2023 was evidenced by an article by Tobias Boestad on the assemblies of the Hanseatic League, the international trading association of European towns that stretched from Estonia to Amsterdam. Boestad's study implicitly ties in with the military conflicts of 2023, as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza have led to rising critiques of the efficacy of the pre-eminent transnational assembly of today, the United Nations Security Council, over its perceived failure to marshal a military response in both conflicts because of the power of veto exercised by a single member state. Expanding the timeframe of a historiographical debate that has so far mainly focused on the sixteenth century, Boestad analyses the earliest records (*Rezessen*) of the Hanseatic 'diets' (*Tagfahrte*) from the period 1360–1450 to explore the discrepancy between the official remit of Hanseatic representatives and their unofficial actions at the Hanseatic assemblies. He demonstrates that in practice, these officials enjoyed a large degree of leeway. In particular, the quasi-illegal representation by town notaries (*Stadtsschreiber*), who were officially forbidden from acting as Hanseatic consuls unless accompanied by a member of their town council, reveals that the messy ways of the 1500s Hanseatic League were not simply a consequence of institutional failure during the League's commercial decline, as they dated back to the days of its prime (T. Boestad, 'Les plumes de la Hanse. Rôle et capacité d'action des notaires municipaux aux diètes hanséatiques (c. 1360–c. 1450)', *Revue historique*, 706 (2023), 179–204).

The importance of international networks and diplomacy was further emphasized in an engaging study by Mark Whelan on the rather unusual topic of beeswax. Whelan shows that instead of the typical gifts of wine, jewelry and money, the urban government of the Flemish city of Bruges more often presented beeswax to their diplomatic relations, most notably their overlords, the Valois dukes of Burgundy. Previous scholarship on gift-exchange has often ignored this peculiar emphasis on beeswax. This is somewhat surprising as wax was more precious than the other typical gifts. Moreover, while wine, jewellery and money are gifts registered across medieval Europe, gifting beeswax was a trend distinctive to the Baltic and North Sea region. Whelan offers a wide array of examples from the city accounts of Bruges that prove the central place of beeswax in its gift-giving ceremonies. As wax required higher degrees of investment and logistical organization than any other gift, it was a way for the city government to showcase the city's commercial networks and the broad range of wares they had at their disposal. In doing so, they distinguished Bruges from the other cities of the Burgundian Low Countries and emphasized its pivotal position in the production and trade of wax in the Baltic – a fascinating and subtle mechanism of medieval city marketing (M. Whelan, '"On behalf of the city": wax and urban diplomacy in the late medieval Baltic and North Sea', *Urban History*, 50 (2023), 22–37).

City marketing before 1500 was, as it is today, also expressed through building projects. St Stephen's Cathedral of Vienna was one such building project at the beginning of the fifteenth century. In 1408, when the building project was in full swing, the city of Vienna experienced a period of crisis and rebellion over ecclesiastical and ducal power, and the power balance between the city's craftsmen and its mercantile elite. As the same powers all had interests in the cathedral building project, Gabriel Byng explores this complex urban conflict via the building site. In doing so, he contributes to an established theoretical framework on the socio-political

character of architecture, but adds an approach centred on social practice through which the political character of the city is continuously performed through a sum of practices, including those at the building site of St Stephen's Cathedral. Byng examines this phenomenon through the accounts of the construction works, which were only recently introduced as a financial instrument in the city of Vienna at the time. He argues that this new type of record substantially altered the mode of interaction between the social practices at the building site and the practices of Vienna's government. Ultimately, Byng claims, this even changed the way in which urban elites perceived and understood architecture. That said, the rebellion of 1408 obstructed the construction works, but never fully interrupted progress on the building. Byng finishes the article by stating it is remarkable that, although the events of 1408 clearly affected the building site, the administration of the site shows so much continuity over time. While some may argue that the article slightly over-theorizes the instrumentality of the performative aspect of the accounts, it is a provocative approach that may inspire further debate (Gabriel Byng, 'St Stephen's, Vienna, and the crises of 1408: practice theory and the socio-politics of the medieval building site', *Journal of Medieval History*, 49 (2023), 516–36). In this context, it is also worth mentioning an article by Albrecht Classen, who focuses on the performance of urbanity in the literary sphere. He observes a transition towards literary 'urbanization' in late medieval German texts. Based on a comparison of Rudolf von Ems's *Der guote Gêrhart* (The Good Gerhard, *c.* 1220) and certain verse narratives by Heinrich Kaufringer (*c.* 1400), Classen discerns the emergence of the city as a crucial platform of interactions for literary protagonists. On this basis, he argues that in the period between the early thirteenth and later fourteenth century, the urban sphere not only became a *locus operandi* in the literary imagination, but literary characters increasingly belonged to the *civitas urbana*. By the time Kaufringer was active, idiosyncratic urban characters such as merchants and burgomasters not only crop up as the heroes, but also as villains. As with Byng's analysis of the performance of urbanity in the context of building sites, Classen's literary approach is first and foremost thought-provoking and invites further debate (A. Classen, 'A new focus on cityscapes in late medieval German literature: Rudolf von Ems and Heinrich Kaufringer', *Medieval History Journal*, 26 (2023), 113–36).

On the subject of debate, arguably the most impressive contribution in last year's urban history scholarship of the pre-1500 period were two articles by Michelle Armstrong-Partida and Susan McDonough that relate to another concern exposed as particularly pressing for policy makers around the world in 2023: the position of women. The UN Gender Snapshot of 2023 signals that if current trends continue, more than 340 million women and girls (or 8 per cent of the global female population) will live in extreme poverty by 2030. The interconnected fallouts of climate change, war and forced migration have an accelerating effect on gender inequity: a widening gap in food security, schooling, physical safety in general and income. As McDonough and Armstrong-Partida note, this calls for a better understanding of the long history of that inequity. In the first article of their brilliant diptych, the authors do so by offering convincing pushback against the deeply entrenched scholarly tendency to trace the emergence of the modern European Marriage Pattern to a divergence between north(western) and southern Europe in the pre-modern period. The reigning orthodoxy thus far has been that women in the medieval south married young, which meant that they rarely entered into domestic service and were less economically active than their north European counterparts. This has been taken to

mean not only that the economy of the northern part of the continent was more developed in the late medieval period, but that the medieval south was somehow 'less European'. Armstrong-Partida and McDonough put paid to that notion by exposing how single women pervaded a wide range of economic activities in the late medieval (Christian) Mediterranean. Drawing on archival sources (wills, service contracts, court fines) and published notarial registers stemming from port cities such as Barcelona and Venice, the authors dispel the myth that south European women predominantly moved directly from their parents' households into their marital homes. They do so in part by moving beyond previous historians' social bias towards the well-to-do, instead foregrounding the substantial category of socially vulnerable single women: migrants who worked outside domestic service, sex workers and the enslaved – which made up a significant proportion of the population in Mediterranean port cities (e.g. 16–19 per cent in Mallorca). An interesting point in among this layered analysis is that such women actively engaged in 'performances of singlehood' when they took part in business transactions as solo actors, contracted their own marriages, negotiated the terms of their own manumission or drew up their last will and testaments. Another noteworthy phenomenon that McDonough and Armstrong-Partida discuss is how small groups of Mediterranean women who were not well-to-do occasionally pooled their resources to acquire (female) slaves (Michelle Armstrong-Partida and Susan McDonough, 'Singlewomen in the late medieval Mediterranean', *Past & Present*, 259 (2023), 3–42).

In the second panel of their diptych, Armstrong-Partida and McDonough tackle the innovative issue of concubinage and female sex work in late medieval Mediterranean cities, exploring moments 'when a woman in the sex trade entered into an exclusive relationship with a man'. Using an exemplary structure that facilitates diagonal reading while rewarding the slow reader with the most fascinating details, the article alternatively approaches such relationships from the perspectives of the couple, the individual man and the woman. Departing from earlier studies that considered the partnership between *amigas* and *amichs* – which features prominently in court registers of the late medieval Mediterranean – as pertaining to one between pimps and prostitutes, McDonough and Armstrong-Partida instead argue that this relationship should be understood as concubinage. In doing so, they not only accord a more active role to the concubines, but they also solve the thorny issue that these *amigas* were often fined for the male half of their partnerships, which makes more sense if they were engaging in concubinage. For the prostitutes, the benefit of concubinage was that it allowed them to gain power and financial stability, while their low-status male partners used it to broadcast their masculinity in a way that was otherwise closed off to them because they lacked the financial resources to maintain a household (a vital component of masculine identity in the emerging bourgeois moral code). For the prostitute, the partnership was also a means to claim a degree of power within her relationship with her lover or with the hosteller to whom she owed rent. For both sexes, meanwhile, concubinage was a kind of dress rehearsal for the responsibilities and requirements of marriage. In the introduction, Armstrong-Partida and McDonough explain that their own 'partnering up' for this article is essentially due to happenstance: while working in the archives on separate book projects, one on concubines and one on sex workers, they noticed time and again that these two identities overlapped in the record. Their partnership on this and the previously discussed article demonstrates that such collaborations can allow historians to reach a level of excellence that is unattainable while working in isolation. Very

commendable, moreover, is McDonough and Armstrong-Partida's conscious alternating of the first author position between these two articles, which they explain as signalling their commitment to feminist praxis, and which invites emulation in other such future team projects (Susan McDonough and Michelle Armstrong-Partida, '*Amigas* and *amichs*: prostitute–concubines, strategic coupling, and laboring-class masculinity in late medieval Valencia and the Mediterranean', *Speculum*, 98 (2023), 49–85).

Last year also witnessed the publication of a timely special issue of the *Journal of Medieval History* on the subject of food insecurity ('Meanings of food in medieval Britain and Ireland'), one of the issues that the UN Gender Snapshot of 2023 singles out as exacerbating present-day gender inequity. This is a clear continuation of a trend we noticed in 2022, which saw the publication of several studies addressing urban food policies in relation to dreaded shortages. The special issue stems from a collaboration between members of the 'Diet Group' (which in this case does not refer to the Hanseatic diets as studied by Boestad, but to an informal group of historians, archaeologists and archaeological scientists that has met biannually in Oxford since the early 1990s to study food in the Middle Ages). As C.M. Woolgar explains in his brief introduction, the contributions primarily gravitate towards two themes: cereals and food security, and food culture. A notable contribution on the first theme is an essay by Margaret Murphy and James Galloway on Irish towns and food security, which they define as when 'all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet dietary needs for a productive and healthy life'; in other words, availability, access and stability of supply. Insecurity is when one or more of these elements are absent or threatened, which can be a chronic or cyclical issue. As Galloway and Murphy note, Irish town dwellers chiefly relied on the staples of bread and ale. The evidence of individual case-studies, most notably Dublin but also smaller towns like Drogheda, show that the rural hinterland was a key source for urban food provisioning. In fact, agricultural specialization in Ireland appears to have been shaped by the interplay of environmental possibilities and urban demand. Murphy and Galloway note that most townspeople in Ireland had an acceptable level of food security up until the final decades of the thirteenth century. This changed due to a combination of deteriorating climatic conditions and increasing political instability. Food conditions worsened during the Great Famine of 1315–18, for example, but this situation was severely exacerbated by the invasion of Robert and Edward Bruce. As in other parts of urban Europe, Irish town councils tried to respond to such crises by regulating the access to and price of food. In contrast to what happened elsewhere, however, the building of public granaries was an uncommon corporate solution. Affluent Irish town dwellers did keep private storage facilities called 'haggards', but the urban authorities banned these haggardmen and haggardwomen from buying grain in the town market. Indeed, in 1466 the Irish parliament passed a law against the large-scale buying up of corn. This was purportedly in response to groups of individuals (called 'badgers') who had been purchasing large quantities in one market to sell them at a profit elsewhere – a common ideological trope in medieval societies, though probably one with a strong basis in fact (James Galloway and Margaret Murphy, 'Food security and insecurity in medieval Irish towns', *Journal of Medieval History*, 49 (2023), 607–30).

The special issue's second theme, food culture, features centrally in an engaging essay on the late medieval burgh of Aberdeen by Elisabeth Gemmill. Based on a series of records (by-laws, lawsuits, admissions of burghers and guildspeople, accounts)

that have survived almost uninterruptedly from 1398 onwards, Gemmill focuses on the relationship between food and status. In particular, she delves into the role of food in diplomatic gift-giving to the king and other important personages by Aberdeen's town council and its convener, the provost. In bequeathing such prestigious 'propines', as they were called, the townspeople could demonstrate Aberdeen's status as a centre of international trade. This meant walking a tightrope, though. On the one hand, the gift had to be luxurious enough to showcase Aberdeen's status. Unlike in Bruges, beeswax does not appear to have figured in the Scottish town; rather, examples include expensive spices such as the confection known as *scorchet*, a mixture of sugar and rosewater. On the other hand, the propine should not imply undue intimacy with the king. It was especially important with regard to gifts of foodstuffs to avoid the impression that the burgh was thereby *provisioning* the king – nobody wanted to imply that the Scottish monarch was in need of food supplements! Meanwhile, much as food and drink helped to define relationships with those outside Aberdeen, within the town walls, it could create divisions. Small-scale sellers of cheaper foods, such as brewsters and bakers of oatcakes (who were usually women), were often subjected to restrictions by the town council. This could indirectly victimize the substantial proportion of the urban population that had no means of preparing food themselves, who relied on purchasing other people's weak ale and coarse oatcakes – a form of proletarianization that resonates with how vast numbers of present-day city dwellers rely upon street food in the megalopolises of the Global South (Elizabeth Gemmill, 'Poor commons and kings' propines: food and status in later medieval Aberdeen', *Journal of Medieval History*, 49 (2023), 725–38).

Another way in which urban governments negotiated power relations with external political heavyweights such as lords and princes was, of course, through formal written communications such as letters. José Antonio Jara Fuente takes an interesting approach in this regard by foregrounding the use of emotive rhetoric by city governments as a political instrument. He argues that emotional language offered urban authorities both a way to build a discourse about their place in regional hierarchies of power, and a framework to connect intellectually and affectively with external addressees and the urban community alike. This did not shape political relations so much as it 'lubricated' them. Jara Fuente focuses on the Castilian city of Cuenca and primarily on communications between Cuenca's city councillors and the aristocracy of its hinterland, through written sources, the survival of which is relatively rare in the context of medieval Castile. He argues that the Cuenca council's use of introductory formulas in letters, in particular, was a means towards socio-political hierarchization. The city council would at times deliberately omit references to the word 'friendship' in communications with members of the regional nobility, for instance, instead invoking a more hierarchical rhetoric. In other words, this was as much about omission as it was about inclusion. In a letter of 1436, for example, Cuenca's councillors addressed Lope Ruiz de Alarcón, lord of Valverde, without including his title, because his vassals had been committing robberies in the city. In other cases, they did use such titles but explicitly referred to the 'noble' status of their own city as well. Such references to titles and other status markers were important bargaining chips in the relational framework of power in medieval Castile. Nobles in turn used emotive rhetoric by promising to perform *pleito-homenaje* (an oath of homage) to the city, which forged their connection to the settlement while placing city and nobleman on a relatively balanced level of friendship. Within Cuenca itself, meanwhile, references to such emotions as charity and love were part of the city

council's attempts to nourish a sense of union and a commitment to the common good. Jara Fuente offers the example of a public reading of an ordinance in 1408 to that effect. The urban government adopted the rhetoric of concord not only for the sake of the city but for the kingdom as a whole, which should be understood in the context of the prolonged period of civil wars that plagued Castile from the beginning of the century to the dynastic union of Isabella and Ferdinand (José Antonio Jara Fuente, 'In (political) love. Building social order and consensus through emotional politics in fifteenth-century urban Castile: the case of the city of Cuenca', *Journal of Medieval History*, 49 (2023), 537–57).

All in all, then, last year saw the continuation of several trends in pre-1500 European urban history scholarship, starting with the relatively restricted number of published articles. Scholarly interest in themes such as gender, food security, international diplomacy and urban dissent continue to thrive unabated. In contrast, as noted at the outset, the themes of war and religious discrimination seem to have fallen in popularity somewhat compared to previous years, as has the analytical framework of the spatial turn. Instead, we see a renewed interest in alternative approaches to familiar source material through against-the-grain readings, for example influenced by the history of emotions. Finally, as demonstrated by the McDonough/Armstrong-Partida (or Armstrong-Partida/McDonough) diptych in particular, the scholarship remains of very high quality indeed.

1500–1800

Food history is a particularly topical theme these days. In their latest article, a multidisciplinary team of historians, microbiologists and brewers takes a fresh look at early modern beer (Susan Flavin *et al.*, 'Understanding early modern beer: an interdisciplinary case-study', *Historical Journal*, 66 (2023), 497–515). Even though ale and beer were among the most basic staples in early modern Europe, surprisingly little is known about their main features. For want of evidence, it is commonly assumed that the alcohol percentage was rather low for ordinary beer, as people drank several pints a day (estimates ranging from 6 to 12 units). It is also taken for granted that the calorific value was high (up to 400 kCal). However, up until now these (gu) estimates were based on shaky ground, taking grain content or modern equivalents as a proxy. Slavin and her team did things differently by recreating the actual brewing process with the original recipes, old strains of barley and oats, ancient yeasts and replicas of early modern technology such as quern stones, mash vats and wilch tube taps. This piece of experimental archaeology leads to some fascinating results. Slavin *et al.*'s experimental brews were – in most cases – much higher in ABV than expected and come close to our modern 5 per cent lagers. With a consumption of five to ten pints a day, the risk of being permanently inebriated would have been real. Moreover, the calorific intake was with 260–70 kCal per unit significantly lower than earlier estimates. Nevertheless, given the large volumes consumed in terms of calories, beer would have been one of the most important – if not the most important – cornerstone of early modern (urban) diets.

From beer it seems but a small step to punch, but Tyler Rainford immediately makes clear that this is not the case, as liquors, in contrast to more traditional alcoholic beverages such as ale or beer, were increasingly stigmatized in the