

MEDIEVAL DESCRIPTIONS OF CITIES

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THE men of the Middle Ages neither expected nor praised originality in their writers, and this, coupled with the natural preference of most men for well-worn paths, means that the greater part of the literature of the period falls into clearly defined classes. Of the sources most commonly used by historians, annals and chronicles, saints' lives and the lives of monarchs, all had their conventional forms, most of which can be traced back to prototypes in classical Latin literature or to the writings of the early Middle Ages. The survival of a number of literary descriptions of cities, the earliest belonging to the eighth century and the last examples to the seventeenth century or even later, therefore raises the question of whether these writings were linked by a tradition or traditions, and what their origin may have been. The first person to divine the potential significance of this class of literature seems to have been the great Muratori who, introducing his edition of a fourteenth-century description of the city of Pavia in 1727, expressed the wish that many more such descriptions might be made available to historians¹; by the end of the nineteenth century this wish had been largely fulfilled and the chief examples of the *genre* had appeared in print. But the *descriptions* as a class of literature had received very little attention; historians like Francesco Novati and L. A. Ferrai, who treated the subject briefly, assumed that they constituted some kind of literary tradition but made no real attempt to discover what its positive content might be. Moreover, they seem to have regarded the tradition as a purely Italian one and took no account of the appearance of similar writings in other countries, while in their conjectures concerning the chronology of the various Italian works they were seriously misled by misconceptions about the dating of the important corpus of material relating to the city of Rome.

¹ *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores* [RIS], XI (Milan, 1727), 3.

Apart from the clarification of the Roman literature, the chief advance in the present century has been the publication of a number of new editions of *descriptions*, some of which mark a considerable improvement on those formerly available, but as their editors have restricted their attention to one or two texts, understanding of the nature of the tradition as a whole has hardly increased at all.¹

Viewed in its entirety the subject is a very large one, for it involves the contribution of topographical descriptions to the historiography of the Renaissance and this, at least in Italy, was far from negligible. Italian history being, up to the nineteenth century, mainly local history, descriptions and surveys of cities and their territories were an important constituent of Italian historical literature. If attention is restricted to the earlier examples, the subject becomes more manageable, and though the element of continuity was certainly very great, a useful distinction may be made between the medieval and renaissance forms of the *genre*, the line being drawn at about the beginning of the fifteenth century. The change which occurred about this time may be seen by comparing the two descriptions of Florence belonging to the years 1338-9 with Leonardo Bruni's *Laudatio Florentinae Urbis*, which appeared some sixty years later. The former are strictly factual, with virtually nothing in the way of literary embellishment; the *Laudatio*, on the other hand, was the first city *descriptio* to be inspired by humanist ideals of rhetoric, the avowed model being the *Panathenaicus* of the second-century Greek rhetorician Aelius Aristides.² Bruni's sense of order and proportion was not only stylistic, but extended to his whole picture of the city as an entity of co-ordinated parts; few Renaissance *descriptions* were as good as this, but they do seem to belong to a genuine literary tradition, with each writer consciously seeking to emulate his predecessors. In the Middle Ages a tradition in this sense

¹ The most important editions of all the city descriptions discussed in this article are listed in the Appendix together with the chief critical articles relating to them. Unless otherwise stated all references are to the edition first listed.

² This important work of Bruni's is as yet unedited; for its significance see H. Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (Princeton, 1955), i. 163 ff.

was either lacking, or at the best sporadic ; instead of a continuous literary development, the descriptions before 1400 reflect successive stages in the fortunes of medieval cities. The gradual elaboration of descriptive literature from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries represents not so much the growth of a literary tradition as a change in its subject-matter. The medieval *descriptions* are a manifestation of the growth of cities and the rising culture and self-confidence of the citizens.

The description of a city presented the medieval writer with a considerable challenge. If he undertook a chronicle or a biography, it was easy for him to know what was expected of him : he was supposed to record the acts of God and of great men as accurately as he could and in due order. His subject-matter was proposed to him by long-standing traditions and generally the sole principle involved in its arrangement was the simple and objective one of chronology. In descriptive literature, on the other hand, not only had the author to make some kind of selection of things worthy of note, but also, if his work was to be more than an unco-ordinated heap of observations, he had to find some plan by which he could place its parts in an ordered sequence and perhaps even impart some kind of artistic unity to the whole. Antiquity could give him little guidance on either score. Latin literature did not provide a great exemplar which could be adapted to successive occasions. The Greek rhetoricians, it is true, had not only written descriptions of cities but had also laid down the principles of epideictic literature of which they formed a part, but their work was apparently known in the Middle Ages only in a much attenuated form through the late-Roman handbooks on rhetoric.¹ Very few of these contained anything significant on the subject of cities and their influence in the Middle Ages was small. Occasionally, a medieval writer seems to have followed a simple plan which may have been derived from such a source, but often he was clearly in the unusual position of being out on his own without a hand from antiquity to guide him. The patterns which were evolved in these

¹ T. C. Burgess, "Epideictic Literature", *Studies in Classical Philology*, iii. (Chicago, 1902); for examples of the Latin handbooks see C. Halm, *Rhetores Latini Minores* (Leipzig, 1863), reprinted Frankfurt, 1964.

circumstances can therefore provide an important insight into the medieval idea of the city.

Since it is the form or pattern to be found in city descriptions which is the centre of interest, it follows that certain kinds of description can be ignored or regarded as of only marginal importance. Thus brief descriptive passages embedded in other works can on the whole be disregarded as lacking the length and autonomy necessary for them to display a significant pattern of their own. The same applies to notices of towns in encyclopedias or general geographical works. The observations of travellers like Benjamin of Tudela are too superficial to yield very much, as is the pilgrim literature written by visitors or for visitors, such as that relating to the Holy Land and Jerusalem. The importance of pilgrim literature in this context is not so much for itself as for the diffusion which it gave to the idea of a *descriptio* and the spread of a simple pattern to regions where it would otherwise have been unknown. If there is therefore certain topographical literature which is irrelevant, there is also some non-topographical material to be taken into account. Besides its bricks and stone, a medieval city possessed many other less visible attributes, among them the power of the local saints and relics and the legal rights and privileges of the citizen-body. Thus catalogues of shrines and ecclesiastical *ordines*, municipal charters and *privilegia* were important sources for the composers of *laudes*, and the curious *Honorancie Civitatis Papie*, which details the offices and fiscal rights pertaining to the Imperial palace at Pavia, must certainly be accounted a description of the city, though not a topographical one.¹ It was the appearance of new sources in the shape of the municipal administrative records, which became available in ever-increasing volume from the twelfth century onwards, that more than anything else made possible the final stage in the evolution of the medieval *descriptio* in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

The history of medieval descriptions of cities begins in the second quarter of the eighth century at Milan where an unknown

¹ Ed. A. Hofmeister, *MGH.*, SS. XXX, ii (Leipzig, 1934), 1444-60; also ed. A. Solmi, *L'amministrazione finanziaria del regno italico* (Padua, 1932), pp. 21-24.

writer, presumably a cleric, composed a short poem of seventy-two lines in praise of the city and its saints. Technically competent, but no more than mediocre as poetry, the most remarkable thing about these verses is the originality of the theme and its treatment. If the Milanese writer had a model it has not yet been identified. A possible source of inspiration could have been the *Ordo Nobilium Urbium* of Ausonius, a group of verses on a number of cities, including a few lines on Milan and a longer and potentially much more useful description of the poet's native city, Bordeaux. Yet there is not the slightest sign in either the language or the plan of the *Laudes Mediolanensis Civitatis* which suggests that the author was acquainted with the work of his fourth century predecessor, and indeed Ausonius' verses seem to have been unknown to Milanese writers until Benzo d'Alessandria discovered a copy of them in the chapter library at Verona in the early fourteenth century. Another guide which the Milanese poet might have used would be one of the *artes rhetoricae*, and in fact one of these, which has been preserved in a manuscript in a Lombard hand of the eighth century, contains an unusually detailed section under the heading *De laudibus urbium*.¹ Here it is suggested that a city should be praised firstly by mentioning its real or mythical founder, and secondly by a description of its site, whether in mountains or in the plain; then its natural resources should be detailed, and finally the manners and achievements of the citizens in peace and war. If the Lombard poet had seen such a plan, he interpreted it very freely; in fact, the argument of the *Laudes* seems to stumble in places exactly as if the author were feeling his way towards an entirely new pattern of *descriptio*. The result may be summarized as follows. After a short introduction, the first section is devoted to the city walls, a brief enumeration of the gates leading on to some desultory remarks about other public works, the legacies of antiquity, although the poet does not say so. From these, the poem passes to the churches and the author's main interest, the Milanese church whose chief attributes, its primacy, the charity and devotion of the people, and

¹ Halm, *Rhetores Latini Minores*, p. 587; cf. p. 557.

above all the saints who ensure the safety and prosperity of the city, are all extolled in rather haphazard order. The only real digression is made in order to mention the reigning Lombard king, Luitprand ; the poet closes with a prayer for the city and a doxology. The reason for the writer's departure from the models which may have been known to him is sufficiently apparent ; the *Laudes Mediolanensis Civitatis* is profoundly Christian and clerical in its inspiration, and as such it can have been at the most only marginally influenced by pre-Christian writings.

The *Laudes Mediolanensis Civitatis* did not become well known ; later Milanese writers do not seem to have heard of it and the only early manuscript to survive belonged to the chapter library at Verona, a significant fact since it was from that city that a reply came after an interval of over half a century. The poem known as the *Laudes Veronensis* or *Veronae Rythmica Descriptio* belongs to the last years of the eighth century, in all probability soon after 796, and was clearly directly inspired by the Milanese precedent. The earlier poem begins :

Alta urbs et spaciosa manet in Italia,
firmiter edificata opere mirifico
que ab antiquitus vocatur Mediolanum civitas.

to which the later echoes :

Magna et preclara pollet urbs haec in Italia
in partibus Venetiarum, ut docet Isidorus,
que Verona vocitatur olim ab antiquitus.

The outlines of the two works run so closely parallel that in his less inspired moments the Veronese poet seems to be simply scoring off his Milanese rival, balancing King Pepin against King Luitprand and outdoing his adversary with a longer catalogue of early bishops and saints associated with his city. Particularly interesting is the way in which he seizes on the idea of the bodies of the saints as defenders of the city which he found in his model, and interprets it quite literally, listing the shrines around the walls of Verona in topographical order. These examples show up the weakest side of the Carolingian writer ; some critics, too, have found in his vocabulary and syntax evidence of a decline in Latin culture relative to the

earlier eighth century. But a poet is entitled to be judged by the use which he makes of the instrument available to him, and there can be no doubt that the Veronese anonymous was more successful than his predecessor in conveying the spirit of his city. Apart from being much more informative, he addresses his subject with a warmth of feeling beside which the Milanese *laudes* seem cold and wooden. The *Laudes Veronensis* is also far better planned. The author perceived the implicit contrast between the pagan and the Christian city which the earlier writer had expressed almost by accident, and he developed it into the central theme of his poem. In the first part he lists the material remains of antiquity, such as the walls, forum, *castrum* and the temples, and in the second the glories of the Christian city, which are mainly of a religious character, summed up in the lines

Iam laudanda non est tibi urbis in Ausonia,
splendens, pollens et redolens a sanctorum corpore,
opulenta inter centum sola in Italia.

The point of division between the two parts is emphasized by a short digression on the Incarnation.

Taken together, the *Laudes Mediolanensis* and *Veronensis* are a remarkable testimony to both the strength and the weakness of the cities of eighth-century Italy. The fact that they were written at all points to the existence of some kind of civic spirit, and if their description of the contemporary appearance of the cities is, with the exception of one or two churches, extremely vague, it may be because there was very little to describe. The contrast pointed by the Veronese writer between the material splendour of the pagan legacy and the Christian times whose only boast is in their saints seems to be extremely significant. Even more remarkable in view of later developments is the feeling about the pagan past expressed in the lines

Ecce, quam bene est fundata a malis hominibus,
qui nesciebant legem Dei nostri, atque vetera
simulacra venerabant lignea, lapidea.

Such an antipathy, even hostility, towards the Romans would be extraordinary in an Italian writer of any other period; that it may not have been unparalleled in early medieval times is

suggested by a comparison with the famous *O tu qui servas* which is attributed to a Modenese poet writing in perhaps the last years of the ninth century.¹ As has been often pointed out, these verses, although in no sense a *descriptio*, do seem to catch the defiant spirit of the struggling Italian urban communities around the time of the Magyar raids. The poet addresses the watchman on the walls, drawing the parallels from Troy and Rome.

O tu qui servas armis ista moenia,
 Noli dormire, moneo, sed vigila.
 Dum Haector vigil extitit in Troia,
 Non eam cepit fraudulenta Gretia.
 Prima quiete dormiente Troia
 Laxavit Synon fallax claustra perfida.

Per funem lapsa occultata agmina
 Invadunt urbem et incendunt Pergama.
 Vigili voce avis anser candida
 Fugavit Gallos ex arce Romulea ;
 Pro qua virtute facta est argentea
 et a Romanis adorata ut dea.

Then comes the contrast between the pagan and the Christian dispensation.

Nos adoremus caelsa Christi numina,
 Illi canora demus nostra iubila,
 Illius magna fisi sub custodia,
 Haec vigilantes iubilemus carmina . . .

If these two writers were at all representative, it would suggest that the city-dweller of the early Middle Ages regarded the pagan heritage with much more reserve than was the case from the eleventh century onwards. Perhaps at this early time the grandeur of the material remains of the past age were almost overpowering compared with modest achievements of recent times, stirring the fear that the power of the ancient gods might not be quite broken.

The *Laudes* of Milan and Verona were destined to remain an isolated exchange without influence on the subsequent development of the medieval *descriptio*; more seminal was the *De situ urbis Mediolanensis* which appears to have been the first

¹ See M. A. Roncaglia, " Il canto delle scolte modenesi ", *Cultura Neolatina*, viii (1948), 1-46.

prose description of a city in the medieval period. This little work forms a part of the introduction to the legend of St. Barnabas and the lives of the earliest archbishops of Milan, and its purpose is to give the setting for the Milanese church's claim to primacy in Lombardy which is the theme of the whole book; Ferrai's suggestion that it represents an adaption of an earlier description must, on the evidence so far adduced, be regarded as conjectural.¹

Since the days of Muratori many theories have been advanced concerning the date of the *De situ* and the *De adventu Barnabae*. The limits are set on the one hand by the author's use of the Lombard history of Paul the Deacon, and on the other by an unmistakable reference to the whole work, already regarded as *annosus*, in the chronicle of Landulph Senior, which was completed in the last years of the eleventh century. Within these *termini*, the only clues are the obvious purpose of the work, to assert the independence of the Milanese see, presumably against its only serious rival, Rome, and the author's dedication of his book to an unnamed archbishop of Milan "in this time of unrest" ("in praesenti turbine"). Given the nature of the history of the Milanese church during these centuries, this leaves open a wide field for conjecture. The most recent editor of the work, A. Colombo, rejects the mid-tenth century date formerly most favoured by historians, and after considering two other possibilities, finally comes down in favour of the year 789, interpreting the book as a defence of the Milanese church and the Ambrosian rite against an attempt to impose the Roman liturgy. Whether this theory is acceptable is primarily a question for experts in Milanese history; here it may be observed that this early date would place the composition of the *De Situ* barely fifty years after the appearance of the *Laudes Mediolanensis Civitatis*. Assuming both to be the work of Milanese clerics, and taking into consideration the similarity of the subject matter, the contrast in outlook displayed in the two works is very striking, for the earlier writer knows nothing of St. Barnabus. While it is impossible to say that such a change could not have come about in the short space of half a century, it is probable that a longer lapse of time should

¹ L. A. Ferrai, "Il 'De Situ Urbis Mediolanensis' e la chiesa ambrosiana nel secolo X", *Bollettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano*, xi (1892), 99-160.

be allowed by bringing the date of the *De Situ* down into the ninth or tenth century. The so-called *Mutinensis Urbis Descriptio*, a comparable example of a topographical preface attached to a local saint's life, is generally attributed to the early tenth century.¹

Fortunately, the evaluation of the place of the *De situ* in the development of the medieval city-description is not affected by the uncertainty as to its date within the limits already defined, for by any interpretation it is the earliest true *descriptio* in prose which has yet come to light. Despite its brevity, the *De situ* has, in contrast with the descriptive element in the *Mutinensis Descriptio*, a clear-cut structure of its own, which is defined by the author as falling into three parts: "de situ, qualitate loci, causa vocabuli et dignitatis." This simple plan may well have been derived from a book of rhetoric, and in this context it is worth noting that the writer claims to have consulted both Greek and Latin chronicles in search of material for his book. It could equally well have been put into effect through the medium of either verse or prose. The contrast between the *De situ* and the verse descriptions which preceded it lies not in itself but in its fate, for while the latter were almost lost sight of, the *De situ* and the legend of St. Barnabas became, from the time of Landulph Senior, the first link in a continuous chain of local Milanese chronicles. The *De situ* had the unique distinction of being quoted and paraphrased by no fewer than three local writers within the city-description genre, Bonvesin della Riva, Benzo d'Alessandria and Galvano Fiamma.² With the exception of Rome, Milan is the only city where one may speak without qualification of a tradition of descriptive literature in the medieval period, and the *De situ* was its fountainhead. Beyond its local setting, however, the influence of the *De situ* cannot be traced, and since Milanese writers did not contribute to the group of

¹ Ed. L. A. Muratori, *RIS.*, II, ii (Milan, 1726), coll. 691-2.

² All these borrowings are given in detail in the notes to the Colombo edition. To avoid further confusion it should be noted that the poem *Rex Karolus caput orbis* obscurely referred to on p. 7 note 1 is in fact lines 92 ff. of *Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa*, attributed to Angilbert (*MGH.*, *Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini*, I. 366-79). It does not describe Milan but Charlemagne's northern headquarters, presumably Aachen.

city-descriptions which made their appearance in the twelfth century, its origins must be sought elsewhere.

It is ironic that the first of the twelfth century *descriptions*, the *Liber Pergaminus*, should relate not to one of the great medieval cities which were growing so rapidly at that time, but to the minor Lombard centre of Bergamo where the growth of population and trade had as yet made little impression. If the subject of the *Pergaminus* did not reflect the new currents of the time, the career of its author did, for Moses de Brolo was one of those scholars from the Latin West who, by settling in Constantinople and mastering Greek, contributed to the enlargement of knowledge known as the renaissance of the twelfth century. Author of a treatise explaining the Greek words used by St. Jerome, Moses is mentioned by Anselm of Havelberg as the interpreter in a theological disputation held before the emperor John Comnenus in 1136 ; the approximate date of the *Pergaminus* is fixed by a reference to Ambrogio dei Mozzi, bishop of Bergamo from 1112 to 1133. A gloss in the only complete manuscript of the poem relates that it was written at Constantinople at the request of the emperor, who wished to know something about the background of the western scholar, and the mildly idealized picture which it presents is not inconsistent with the nostalgia of one who had lived for some time abroad. However, the great merit of the *Pergaminus* is the way it brings out the individual characteristics of the city, which contrasts strongly with the rather generalized praises of the earlier literature. Bergamo is depicted as a quiet hill-town whose squares serve equally as playgrounds for the children and for the trying out of the war horses which are the chief pride of the simple warlike citizens. The setting of the city, its suburbs and neighbouring villages are very amply sketched so that not only is the *Pergaminus* the longest of the verse *descriptions* but it is also visually the most successful picture of an actual city produced in the medieval period.

Moses of Bergamo's close acquaintance with Greek literature makes the problem of the inspiration of the *Pergaminus* very difficult to resolve. However, the form of the poem, which is one of the earliest examples of rhyming Latin hexameters (Leonine verse), is sufficient to suggest that the author was not

in any way dominated by the literary milieu of Constantinople. Cremaschi has shown that the *Pergaminus* was planned to consist of three equal parts, each introduced by an invocation, but the last seventy-five lines are now missing. The first part is dedicated to the *loca exteriora* of the city, its suburbs and hinterland; the second to the physical appearance of the city itself, while the third enlarges on the character of the city as epitomized by its mythical founder, the Gaulish chieftain Brenus, and its first conqueror Fabius who brought the civilized ways of Rome. As this plan is both unique and also ideally adapted to make the most of a minor centre like Bergamo, it seems likely that Moses invented it himself. His account of the actual city, particularly its concentration on water supplies and wells, offers some striking parallels with Ausonius' description of Bordeaux, but the complete absence of verbal echoes suggests that this is no more than a coincidence arising from both poets facing essentially the same problem, that of how to make the best of the modest places in which they happened to have been born.¹

Although a remarkable achievement in itself, the *Liber Pergaminus* is largely irrelevant to the development of the *genre* of city descriptions. It was highly original in conception, and it seems to have remained almost unknown outside Bergamo until 1584, when it was published by Achille dei Mozzi with a spurious introduction and conclusion designed to disguise it as a work of the seventh century. Nevertheless, the *Pergaminus* shows certain attitudes which are not without importance for comparison with other *descriptions*. The short section devoted to the municipal government represents the first reflection of the rise of the communes in descriptive literature.² The element of early history, which had made its first tentative appearance in the *De situ mediolanensis*, has grown into a major constituent of the poem; through it Moses expresses an attitude towards antiquity which represents a complete revolution compared to the disapproval to be found in the *Laudes Veronensis*. At first sight, the prominence given to Brenus seems to suggest that Moses intended

¹ Compare the description of the Fons Vaginus, *Pergaminus*, lines 213 ff. and Ausonius' *Burdigala*, lines 21-35.

² *Pergaminus*, lines 275-282.

to portray a balance of Gaulish and Roman elements in the foundation of his native city, but a closer examination shows that the Gaulish leader's glory is really only a reflection of that of the Eternal City which he was privileged to capture. The civic virtues are implanted in Bergamo by the Roman Fabius and are maintained by his descendents; the missing conclusion to the poem may be presumed to have tilted the balance in favour of Bergamo's Roman inheritance still further. Most remarkable of all is the complete lack of reference to Christianity or to the Bergamasque church; Ambrogio dei Mozzi is mentioned not as bishop but as an illustrious member of the Mozzi clan. In a writer who elsewhere shows himself actively interested in theology this omission can only be interpreted as deliberate self-limitation; more than anything else in the *Pergaminus* it suggests an untraced classical model.

It was about the year 1143, at least a decade after the composition of the *Pergaminus*, that a certain Benedict, canon of St. Peter's, completed what was to be the most popular and influential of all the medieval *descriptions*, the *Mirabilia Urbis Rome*. Since no city in the medieval world could compare with Rome for the wealth of its monuments and the number of its visitors, pilgrims and others, who no doubt wished to know something of the historical significance of what was to be seen there, it is surprising that no real description of Rome had appeared before. In fact, descriptions of a kind had been produced sporadically as the need arose from the fourth century onwards, but this material, consisting of almost bare catalogues of monuments and shrines, lacks the essential elements of pattern and form which are the mark of true descriptive literature.¹ Admittedly, the *Mirabilia* contains a considerable amount of undigested earlier material which is not even very skilfully arranged, so that the overall pattern is somewhat confused; what holds the work together is rather the mood of the writer and his particular attitude towards antiquity, which hits off exactly the spirit of the times. The new appreciation of ancient

¹ See R. Valentini and G. Zucchetti, *Codice topografico della città di Roma*, II, *Fonti per la Storia d'Italia* (Rome 1942), in which the chief sources from the fourth to the twelfth century are published.

Rome which has been noted in the *Pergaminus*, is here transformed in the hands of a cleric into an almost unqualified enthusiasm for the pagan past. Appearing on the eve of the formation of the Roman commune, the *Mirabilia* expresses before all else the revival of the civic spirit of Rome in the twelfth century.

Four elements, formerly existing separately, may be distinguished within the body of the *Mirabilia Urbis Rome*. The first, represented by the opening description of the walls and gates (chaps. 1-2), is ultimately derived from a military and administrative document of about the end of the fourth century, successively but not always accurately brought up to date in the intervening period. The second element, consisting of lists of notable features of the city of various kinds, from palaces, baths and theatres to the places of martyrdom and the cemeteries of the Roman saints (chaps. 3-10), can have had no administrative origin, but is the contribution of a specifically tourist literature, the Christian section of which can be traced back at least as far as the *Depositio Martyrum* of 354. An early fusion of these two elements dating from the late seventh or early eighth century was preserved by William of Malmesbury in his *Gesta Regum Anglorum*.¹ Had Rome been no more than a great pilgrim centre, the development of its descriptive literature might have stopped here, as it did in the case of Jerusalem, where a similar body of writings, which had come into existence to satisfy the curiosity of visitors, provided the material for two important guidebooks to the Holy Places compiled during the twelfth century. But Rome was the symbol of political as well as religious aspirations, and in addition to being a symbol the city had a political life of its own. It was this aspect which was responsible for the inclusion of two further elements in the *Mirabilia*. The first, derived from administrative documents detailing the court officials of the late imperial and Byzantine periods, is represented by only one chapter (13) in the original version of the *Mirabilia*; since this element was destined to increase considerably in later versions, discussion of its significance is best postponed. It is the last element, which may be

¹ Valentini and Zucchetti, II. 132-53; also William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ed. W. Stubbs (Rolls Series, 1889), ii. 402-8.

described as speculative archaeology, which is especially characteristic of Benedict's work ; dominating the latter two-thirds of the *Mirabilia*, it was this element which caused Duchesne to describe it as " le plus ancien essai de topographie érudite ".¹ The earlier chapters in this group record traditional legends connected with Roman monuments, such as the legend of the *Salvatio Rome*, which related that there had once been a series of statues in the Capitol each bearing the name of a province or people and each holding a bell which rang when the province concerned was in revolt ; this fantasy can be traced back to a Greek source of the eighth century, but the later ones, from chapter 19 onwards, seem to represent Benedict's own ideas ; while the main theme of the former is the establishment of some link between pagan antiquity and Christian times, in the latter the Christian element dwindles to nothing. Benedict's main enthusiasm was reserved for the monuments of pre-Christian Rome, particularly the temples, over a hundred of which are mentioned as against less than twenty other buildings. True, Benedict's methods bear much the same relation to scientific archaeology as does magic to experimental science. His guesses as to the identity of the various ruins were almost all wrong, though some were not without a certain appositeness, as when he achieved the apotheosis of Cicero by discovering a temple dedicated to him on the Tullian. But like all successful magicians, Benedict must have given his public what they wanted. The *Mirabilia Urbis Rome* is the most eloquent testimony to the twelfth-century passion for antiquity.

The instant and lasting popularity of the *Mirabilia* may be ascribed to its being written for one body of readers but appealing to another. Inspired by Roman civic patriotism and the spirit of *renovatio*, Benedict's mixture of fact and fantasy proved highly acceptable to the flood of pilgrims and visitors and, being carried by some of them back to their homes, was no doubt read by many who had never set foot in the Eternal City. Rome was the unique case where the local and the universal coincided. Yet, although the latter part followed a roughly

¹ Introduction to *Le Liber Censuum de l'Église Romaine* (Paris, 1901), p. 98.

topographical arrangement, the work as a whole was far from being perfectly adapted for use as a guidebook, and already before the end of the twelfth century new versions had appeared in which its deficiencies in this respect were partly rectified. About the beginning of the thirteenth century, a certain master Gregory who was possibly an Englishman, wrote a rival work, the *De Mirabilibus Urbis Rome*, in which he implicitly criticized Benedict by excluding as far as possible the fabulous element and concentrating on the monuments themselves. In his secular attitude and his passion for antiquity, however, he was entirely at one with his predecessor.

The most important development on the theme of the *Mirabilia* is the *Graphia Aureae Urbis Romae* which was compiled by an unknown writer sometime between 1154 and about 1275. It falls into three distinct parts, of which the second (chaps. 13-40) is no more than a slightly revised version of the *Mirabilia*. The short first part supplies an obvious need by providing a brief account of the several cities built on the site of Rome from the time of Noah until Romulus united them within the circuit of a single wall. The third part (chaps. 41-52) is more important, since it is an elaboration of the administrative material found in chapter 13 of the *Mirabilia*. The chief sources are a *constitutio* of Constantine dealing with palace officials which had been embroidered upon in papal circles in the mid-ninth century, and a Byzantine court ceremonial of the tenth or early eleventh century, padded out with excerpts from Isidore of Seville. The whole is infused with a spirit of almost mystical imperialism, partly Byzantine in inspiration but acclimatized to the Old Rome, while even in those parts which had been transmitted through papal channels, the role of the clergy and the papacy is systematically minimized.

The third part of the *Graphia Aureae Urbis* is not, of course, in the strict sense topographical at all, though it obviously contributes to the *laudes* of the city. Very similar material existed at the old Lombard capital of Pavia, where an old document recording the fiscal rights of the royal palace, its officials and trade and craft guilds, was used by a civic patriot as the substance of a plea for the restoration of the palace in the first

years of the emperor Conrad II (1025-7). This tract, generally known as the *Honorancie Civitatis Papie*, was once more refurbished in the fourteenth century and provided with a rhetorical preface and conclusion; it might easily have been assimilated into a *descriptio*.¹ The incorporation of material derived from administrative documents into the *Graphia* illustrates the propensity of descriptive literature to absorb all kinds of miscellaneous writings, and in particular it looked forward to the final period of the medieval *descriptio*, when a great part of the data would be provided from administrative records.

The unexpected appearance of two city descriptions in England in the late twelfth century must be attributed to the stimulus provided by the guidebooks on Rome and Jerusalem. It is true that in the first of these, the *Descriptio Nobilissimae Civitatis Londoniae* with which William Fitzstephen prefaced his life of Thomas Becket, the author claims to be following the example of Plato's *Republic* and Sallust's *Jugurthine War*, but this is a mere pose. Nor can the contemporary topographical writings of Giraldus Cambrensis have provided a model, since they relate to countries not cities. But if the *Mirabilia* and the like were his inspiration, Fitzstephen did not attempt to copy them in detail. At the outset he says he will describe the happiness of the city as shown in turn by the climate, the Christian religion, the strength of the fortifications, the surrounding countryside, the honour of the citizens and the virtue of their wives, their recreations and the noble men who have been born there. He does not exactly follow out this plan either, for just as Benedict was fascinated by the Roman temples, so William's enthusiasm was fired above all by the street life of Angevin London. Thus he has little to say about the city government, but a great deal about popular festivals and the various markets; he particularly mentions the lively disputations of the schoolboys on public holidays. So in spite of its rather stilted beginning, the *Descriptio Londoniae* is chiefly notable for its vivid portrayal of the character of the Londoners, especially the young. The

¹ For a detailed analysis of the *Honorancie* see F. Ladogna, "La genesi delle 'Honorantie civitatis Papie'", *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, ser. V, xlix (1922), 295-331.

section on illustrious citizens, which lists Brutus, Constantine, the empress Matilda, the young Henry and, of course, St. Thomas, is the first example of a feature which was to have an enormous development in the *descriptions* of the Renaissance.

The *De Laude Cestrie* is a work of a very different character. The author, Lucian, a monk of St. Werburgh's, was faced with the same problem which had confronted Ausonius and Moses of Bergamo, how to make the most of a minor city, but his solution of it was entirely unlike theirs. He chose to allegorize his subject, interspersing it with all kinds of sermon material so that his plan is hard to follow through the forest of digressions. Lucian begins with three interpretations of the name Cestria and then moves on to the site of the city; the two Roman streets meeting at the centre are the occasion for the drawing out of an elaborate symbolism of the Cross, and the virtues of the angelic guardians of the four gates are described. The cross-symbolism is then extended to the surrounding country before the topographical thread disappears completely. Although the spirit is very different from that of the Roman literature, the miraculous element does recall some of the fables of the *Mirabilia*; it is perhaps worth mentioning that Master Gregory's *De Mirabilibus Urbis Rome* was known at St. Werburgh's in the early fourteenth century.¹ Lucien's allegorical method was so prevalent in his time that it is unnecessary to look for any particular source, but an interesting parallel exists in a twelfth-century treatise on the monastic life, the *De Claustro Animae* attributed to Hugh Fouilly.² Here the third book draws moral teaching from allegories of the various parts of a monastery (e.g. *de refectorio animae*, etc.), while in the fourth, the same method is applied to the city of Jerusalem, the headings (*de muris, de numero portarum, de vicis, de plateis*, etc.) being clearly derived from the pilgrim guidebooks.

In the thirteenth century, normally considered to have been the heyday of the medieval city, there is a curious pause in the flow of urban *descriptions*; apart from the *Graphia Aureae Urbis* which may have been compiled during this period, the

¹ Valentini and Zucchetti, III. 141.

² Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, clxxvi. coll. 1017-1218.

first new work did not make its appearance until more than half the century had run its course. Long attributed to the late twelfth century, it has been shown that the *De laude civitatis Laude* was written by a Franciscan, in all probability soon after the return of the friars to Lodi in 1252. The mistake is significant, for the *De laude* was distinctly old-fashioned even when it was written. The last of the verse *descriptiones*, it consists of little more than a string of commonplaces from earlier descriptive literature preserved in lifeless rhyming hexameters. The site of the city and its fertility, the walls, the wisdom and piety of the citizens of various ranks and professions are all cursorily mentioned, some more than once and all in very general terms; so, far from marking a new beginning, the *De laude* represents the last gasp of the early medieval tradition. Apart from sheer lack of talent on the part of the writer, the most likely explanation of the conservatism of the *De laude* is to be found in the immediate cultural milieu. Lodi was one of the lesser communes which tried to maintain a precarious independence on the fringes of Milanese territory; in the mid-twelfth century the Milanese had destroyed the city altogether, so that it was necessary for it to be refounded on a new site by Frederick Barbarossa in 1158. In these circumstances it is remarkable that Lodi developed any intellectual traditions at all. However, during the reign of Frederick II a local judge called Orfino wrote a rambling poem on the duties of rulers which established his reputation for wisdom and eloquence, and the author of the *De laude* was strongly under his influence.¹ Twice in the poem Orfino is praised by name and in many passages his versification is slavishly imitated.

The other inspiration of the *De laude*, although the writer did not mention it, was, of course, the example of Milan. The Franciscan had probably read the *De situ*, and may have known the *Laudes Mediolanensis Civitatis*; he must have seen the short laudatory poem beginning

Dic homo qui transis, qui portae limina tangis
Roma secunda vale, regni decus imperiale . . .

¹ *Poema de Regimine et Sapientia Potestatis*, ed. A. Ceruti, *Miscellanea di Storia Italiana*, vii (Turin, 1869), 27-94. Despite the title, only a part of this work is devoted to the office of *podestà*.

which was inscribed on one of the gates of the Lombard metropolis.¹ During the thirteenth century Milan had drawn away in wealth and population from its neighbours and had established its position as one of the greatest cities of Christendom, rivalled in Italy only by Venice and the upstart Florence. Yet, although it was the seat of a lively chronicle tradition, no description of Milan had been written since the *De situ*. Now, almost in the last decade of the century, a Milanese writer set out to remedy the defect, and within a generation the city had been described in two very different works, each of which was outstanding in its own way ; together they establish Milan as the most important centre of city descriptions in the Middle Ages.

Bonvesin della Riva was a professional teacher of grammar and rhetoric and a minor poet in the vernacular ; in 1288, as he explains in his introduction, he set out to make a full description of his native city not only for the information of foreigners but also for his fellow citizens, whom he felt were too often ignorant of Milan's greatness. As he wrote, he must have had before him a copy of the *De situ*, for he incorporated relevant passages into his own work ; his statistical description of the city's walls and gates also echoes the old Roman surveys incorporated into the *Mirabilia* and *Graphia Aureae Urbis*. However, the *De Magnalibus Urbis Mediolani* is a description of an entirely different character from any that had gone before. Part of its novelty lay in the sheer mass of information which was recorded. For example, although in no sense a chronicle, the *De Magnalibus* contained a compendium of Milanese history which was intended to illustrate the fortitude of the citizens ; again, while every *descriptio* had contained something about the fertility of the soil in general terms, Bonvesin developed this section of his book into a veritable catalogue of grain, vegetables, fruit and nuts. Where earlier writers were generally vague, Bonvesin had a positive appetite for specific facts, as, for example, the particular month in which the various fruits came into season. His thirst for statistics is only a special instance of this tendency. Sometimes Bonvesin allowed his passion for figures to overcome his good

¹ Quoted by both Bonvesin della Riva, pp. 152-3, and Benzo d'Alessandria, p. 27.

sense ; his attempts to calculate the population and the consumption of various foodstuffs may not always be successful but they are at least appropriate ; it was hardly necessary, on the other hand, to record besides the number of churches, the number of altars within them and the number of bells and bell-towers with which they were adorned. He is saved, however, by his sense of humour ; after claiming for Milan over a hundred noble families accustomed to hunt with hawks and falcons, he confesses that he has no idea how many hawks they have. As he repeats over and over again, Bonvesin tried to find out all that he could by diligent enquiry, and most historians are now convinced that he made an honest attempt to be accurate. Clearly, he had far richer administrative sources to draw on than had been available to his predecessors, and he seems to have used not only some of the records of the commune but also those of the guilds and possibly some ecclesiastical archives. But this alone is not sufficient to account for his originality. What the earlier descriptive writers lacked, and what Bonvesin and his public clearly had, was the kind of bourgeois mentality for which figures talk, and for which statistics are a not inelegant form of praise.

Bonvesin della Riva's original contribution to descriptive literature was not confined to the drawing in of new data, he also put into practice an entirely new way of arranging his material. While earlier writers had merely described, Bonvesin set out to prove the excellence of his subject in various respects. The *De Magnalibus* is divided into eight chapters, in which Milan is commended *ratione situs, habitationis, habitantium, fertilitatis et omnium bonorum affluentie*, which includes spiritual as well as material goods, *fortitudinis, fidelitatis, libertatis*, and finally *dignitatis*. Not only are the subdivisions much more clearly thought out than in earlier *descriptions*, but what may be called Bonvesin's dialectical approach also makes for much more purposeful writing within each chapter, and only occasionally does the author's exuberance lead him to indulge in empty rhetoric. The most striking omission is the failure to deal with Milan's political organization and the reason for this is sufficiently apparent ; as the two passages denouncing tyranny show,

Bonvesin was a supporter of the commune and was hostile to the newly established *signoria* of the Visconti.¹ With all its faults, the *De Magnalibus* represents the definitive form of the medieval urban *descriptio*; more than this, Bonevisin was the first to use the pattern which underlies most of the more factual *descriptions* of the renaissance period. All that was necessary was that Bonvesin's typically medieval rhetoric should be replaced by the more sophisticated rhetoric of the humanists.²

Unlike the *De Magnalibus*, the second important work relating to Milan was not intended to stand alone, nor was it written by a citizen. Benzo d'Alessandria was a friar and priest who served as chancellor first to the bishop of Como and then to Cangrande della Scala and his successors, *signori* of Verona. While at Como he began a massive encyclopaedia of which only the first part has been preserved. The first ten books of this so-called *Chronicon* are devoted to ancient history from the foundation of the world to the Trojan war. The next group describe the world and its various geographical features, the most interesting being Book XIV, *de omnibus civitatibus*, which from internal evidence seems to have been written about 1316. Benzo deals briefly with most of the major cities of the ancient world, concentrating on those in Italy, where he also mentions a few modern ones, such as Florence. He naturally gives rather more space to Rome, but the section *de Mediolano florentissima civitate* easily surpasses it both in length and originality, and in itself represents an important contribution to the literature of cities.³

Benzo d'Alessandria was in many ways a typical encyclopaedist of the school of Vincent of Beauvais, but he also had a predilection for antiquity and something of a critical faculty which entitle him to be regarded as one of the precursors of the

¹ *De Magnalibus*, pp. 62-63, 155-6.

² Dr. Baron, in his *Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, ii. 514-17, contrasts Bonvesin's *De Magnalibus* unfavourably with Bruni's *Laudatio Florentinae Urbis*. While the particular criticisms are not unjustified, the general effect is somewhat unfair to Bonvesin, whose better points are not brought out. Moreover, Bruni's *Laudatio* was exceptional among Renaissance *descriptions*; most examples of the *genre* written in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were much closer to the *De Magnalibus*.

³ This is the only part of Benzo's work which has so far been published.

humanists. Book XIV shows that he knew the *descriptio* tradition extremely well ; not only was he well-versed in the Roman and Milanese literature but he also seems to have seen the *Pergaminus* and the *Mutinensis Descriptio*, and he unearthed Ausonius' *Ordo Nobilium Urbium* at Verona.¹ Benzo's critical powers are much in evidence in the *de Mediolano civitate*. The display of authorities which he uses to disprove the fables of Milan's foundation by Noah and its second name of Alba seems excessive now, but was no doubt impressive at the time ; after so much erudition, it is hard to suppress a smile when the author falls headlong into the anachronism of imagining the ancients jousting *Romanorum more* in the hippodrome at Milan. Benzo's lack of interest in modern times also emerges clearly. His resumé of Milanese history stops with the rebuilding of the city in 1167 and his remarks on the site of the city are copied verbatim from the *De situ* ; the longest sections of the *De Mediolano civitate* are devoted to its foundation and the archaeology of the Roman and early Christian periods. In fact, Benzo's interests, though not his methods, coincide almost exactly with those of Benedict of Rome and his followers, which explains Benzo's aversion towards the "Graphiae Aureae compiler Deus novit, ego ignoro". If the *Mirabilia* represents the first essay in learned topography, the *De Mediolano Civitate* was the first in which any real critical method was employed.

The works of Benzo and Bonvesin mark the emergence of two distinct branches within the descriptive tradition. The *Mirabilia* was both history and political propaganda, the *De Mediolano Civitate* was, as far as may be, a work of pure scholarship, of interest only to historians and antiquarians. The *De Magnalibus*, on the other hand, was a challenge to the writers of any of Italy's great cities. Curiously, over half a century was to pass before it elicited a comparable reply.

It must have been at about the same time as Benzo was writing *De Omnibus Civitatibus* at Como, that a work of a very different character was taking shape in Padua under the hand of Giovanni da Nono. In the early fourteenth century Padua was

¹ MS. Ambrosiana B.24 inf., fols. 140^v-142^v (Rome), 148^v (Bergamo), 149^v (Modena) ; the discovery of Ausonius is mentioned, *De Mediolano Civitate*, p. 27.

an intellectual centre of considerable importance with a humanist circle led by Benzo's friend Albertino Mussato, but Da Nono did not belong to this group. Although he was a judge of the commune, his literary culture was small, and his *Visio Egidii Regis Patavii* is a conventional *descriptio* which draws its plan not from Bonvesin della Riva but from the *Mirabilia* and the *Graphia Aureae Urbis Rome*. Da Nono describes his native city first by naming the major and minor gates of Padua, together with any buildings or other features associated with them; he then lists the principal public buildings, giving some information about the various officials who used them and the markets which occupied the porticos and adjacent squares. This scheme is derived from two headings, *de muris* and *de palatiis*, drawn from the Roman literature, and Da Nono had to do considerable violence to his subject in order to make it conform to this pattern. Thus the walls which he describes were the old ones which the city had finally outgrown during the thirteenth century, so that when he wrote a second circle had already been completed; then, so as to swell the number of *palatia*, Da Nono seems to have included some structures which may have been little more than covered markets. Despite this conventional shell which, for example, gives the impression that Padua was very much smaller than it actually was, the *Visio Egidii* contains some vivid reporting which is all the more effective because of the crude and unpretentious language in which it is phrased. The first part gives an impression of the world as it must have appeared to many of the citizens of the communes, with their own city in the centre and the outside world viewed as it were through the appropriate gate of the city. In the second part the description of the law courts and the adjacent markets is particularly detailed, with touches which reveal the lawyer whose daily work was performed there.

The *Visio Egidii* forms one section of a tripartite work called in some manuscripts the *Liber Ludi Fortunae*.¹ The first part,

¹ The chief Da Nono manuscripts are listed by Fabris in the Appendix to the *Visio Egidii*, pp. 21-26. Both the *De Hedificatione* and the *De Generatione* are as yet unedited; for further details see J. K. Hyde, *Padua in the Age of Dante* (Manchester, 1966), pp. 57 ff.

De Hedificatione Urbis Patavie, sets out to give the pre-history of the Paduan region before the coming of the city's mythical founder Antenor, rather as the first part of the *Graphia Aureae Urbis* dealt with Rome before Romulus. Da Nono gives a fanciful description of the gates of the first city, each surmounted by a statue with magical properties. The inspiration can hardly be other than the *Mirabilia*; in particular, the sailor over the east gate who points in the direction of any of Padua's allies in need of help seems to be copied from the *Salvatio Rome*. Unfortunately, after this interesting beginning the *De Hedificatione* develops into a tedious romance about the war of Dardanus, king of Padua and the Tartars. The third part of the *Liber Ludi Fortunae* is much more important. Entitled *De Generatione aliquorum civium urbis Padue, tam nobilium quam ignobilium*, this gives the history and present state of over a hundred Paduan families. It is an example of a *genre* which had a certain diffusion during the later Middle Ages and Renaissance period, but it is for its times almost if not quite unique. The common theme running through the three parts of the *Liber Ludi Fortunae* is the idea of Padua's ceaseless rise and fall at the dictates of Fortune; it is so as to integrate it with this theme that the *Visio Egidii* begins with the literary device from which it takes its name. Da Nono puts his *descriptio* into the mouth of an angel who prophesies the future appearance of the city to console King Egidius of Padua after the destruction of the city by Attila the Hun. The angel goes on to prophesy further disasters if the citizens do not reform their ways; thus while most description writers intended to praise and boast, Da Nono's purpose was to warn.¹ The writings of this eccentric judge present a baffling combination of commonplace convention and startling originality.

The first writing which may show the influence of the *De Magnalibus* is a short tract called the *Recommentatio Civitatis Parisiensis* in which an unknown author attacked the philosopher Jean de Jandun for preferring Senlis to Paris. Bonvesin's rhetorical and dialectical method was open to abuse, and the

¹ See N. Rubinstein, "Some Ideas on Municipal Progress and Decline in the Italy of the Communes", *Fritz Saxl Memorial Essays*, ed. D. J. Gordon (London, 1957), pp. 165-83.

Recommentatio is a miserable piece of pure word-play with no descriptive element at all. Fortunately, Jean spent the summer of 1323 composing his reply, first disposing of the *dictator*, as he calls him, on his own terms (part 3), then penning a charming defence of the simplicity and healthiness of life at Senlis (part 4), and finally outdoing his rival in the praises of the university city itself (parts 1 and 2). The first part of the *Tractatus de Laudibus Parisius* is unique because it describes the university, each of the four faculties of philosophy, theology, canon law and medicine being treated in decreasing order of interest. The second part, devoted to the city, is highly selective. Jean begins with Notre Dame and the royal palace; there follows a lively description of the market of Les Halles and two unusual sections on artisans and craftsmen and the character of the populace; like William Fitzstephen, he takes a real pleasure in the idiosyncrasies of the common people which is generally absent from the Italian *descriptions*. The customary sections on the situation of the city and the supply of foodstuffs which usually open the description are placed by Jean at the end. As a teacher in Paris with at least one Italian friend, Marsiglio of Padua, with whom he was to share a sentence of excommunication, Jean may well have known some of the Italian city descriptions in addition to the usual pilgrim literature, but if so, he did not allow the influence of any one of them to show in his own work.

A declining city on the fringes of the Milanese contado whose inhabitants could never forget that it had been the ancient capital of Lombardy, Pavia was a place where envy of Milan was particularly rife; both cities had the same verse claiming the honour of being the second Rome inscribed on one of their gates. A Pavian reply to the *De Magnalibus* was therefore not improbable, and in a sense this is what the *Liber de laudibus civitatis Ticinensis* is, though the special circumstances in which it was written make the relationship less clear than it might otherwise have been. Opicino de Canistris who has been identified as the author of this description only in the present century, was a Pavian priest who wrote what he called the *Libellus de descriptione Papie* at the papal court in Avignon in 1330, after more than two years in exile from his native land. His purpose was to

commend his city, then under the shadow of an interdict, to the papal authorities and also to recommend himself for a post in the administration. As a result, the glories of the Pavian church and the devotion of the people figure greatly in the *Libellus*; indeed the early part reads like a catalogue of ecclesiastical buildings and the latter like a slightly elaborated calendar and *ordo* of the local church. Various documents have been found which could have provided Opicino with some of his data,¹ but there is no good reason to disbelieve him when he apologizes for writing from memory, and Gianani has argued very plausibly that some of these apparent sources may have been compiled from the *Libellus*, with Opicino's lapses of memory, which were not many, corrected.

There can be no doubt that Opicino had read the *De Magnalibus* and he recalled some of its details. Thus, after giving the total number of churches he adds that most had several altars, and that there was an incredible number of bells. Bonvesin had been the first writer to commend the qualities of the local speech and Opicino elaborates on this; both spell out the character of their cities in the letters of their names.² But there is no trace of Bonvesin's pattern in the structure of the *Libellus*, whose disjointedness suggests that it may have been put together in haste. Opicino packed all of what he believed to be his best points into his first chapter, as if he feared that the recipient might read no further. Much of what follows is bare catalogue or tedious superlatives, but in the few chapters devoted to the secular aspect of the city there are some good passages.³ The markets are well described and something is said of the public offices which were entirely omitted by Bonvesin; where the Milanese writer has something to say about diet, only Opicino mentions the eating habits of his people, attributing their custom of serving the main course before the soup to a regard for the convenience of visitors, who may take their fill of the best dishes before being offered the inferior ones. From his other

¹ Published in appendix to the *RIS* edition of 1903.

² *Liber de laudibus Ticinensis*, ed. Maiocchi and Quintavalle, *RIS.*, XI, i (1903), 17, 49-51; cf. *De Magnalibus* pp. 71-72, 77, 172-3.

³ Ed. cit. pp. 17-32.

writings it is known that Opicino was a devotee of a curious pseudo-science which tried to interpret past and future events through the symbolic interpretation of maps, but there is no trace of these private fantasies in the *Libellus* except for a short passage in which the four gates of the city are described as being founded upon the four cardinal virtues.¹

An adequate reply to the *De Magnalibus* could come only from one of the great cities of Italy; Florence, whose wealth impressed everyone and whose citizens were especially conscious of the rapid growth of their commonwealth, was an obvious subject for a major *descriptio*. Curiously, after Bonvesin's challenge had stood unanswered for fifty years, two descriptions of Florence were written almost simultaneously; the one, anonymous and in Latin, is said to have been undertaken in April 1339, while Villani's well-known chapters, in the vernacular, refer to the years 1336-8 and must have been penned soon after.

The tract known as the *Florentie Urbis et Reipublice Descriptio* (there is no title in the sole manuscript) is a short survey on traditional lines. It begins with the walls and passes on to the river and water supply; enumeration of the *palatia* or public buildings leads on to an explanation of the civic officials, and the religious establishments, the army, the supply of victuals, the character of the people and the setting of the city in its amphitheatre of hills are all mentioned. In fact, its greatest virtue is its comprehensiveness and the way in which the various aspects are each treated in due proportion within a very small compass. Its weakness lies in the shortage of statistics, and the inaccuracy (at least in the present state of the text) of those which are given. Although the author states that his purpose was to describe the state of the city so that in future it could be seen whether it had increased or declined, the information he gives is hardly adequate for this.

The qualities and defects of Villani's description are almost exactly the reverse of those of the *Florentie Urbis Descriptio*. In form it is no more than a digression from the narrative of his

¹ Ed. cit. p. 19. For the other side of Opicino's activities, see R. Salomon, *Opicinus de Canistris, Weltbild und Bekenntnisse eines Avignonesischen Klerikers des 14 Jahrhunderts* (*Studies of the Warburg Institute*, I), London, 1936.

chronicle, arising from his remarks on the extraordinary expenditure of the commune during the war with the Della Scala in 1336-8. After describing the Florentine war effort, Villani inserts two chapters which list in detail the income and expenditure of the commune. The last chapter of the group gives statistics of the population as a whole, and also of certain professions, some details of production and consumption of various commodities, the number of churches and religious establishments, with a list of the chief officials and some remarks about the general appearance of the city by way of conclusion. There is an abundance of details and figures, over which the chronicler has evidently taken some care, but little trace of an overall plan. The walls were probably omitted because they had already been described elsewhere in the chronicle,¹ but the chief officials appear twice, once under the expenditure on their salaries and again in the final chapter. There are two curious echoes of the *Florentie Urbis Descriptio*. Both writers use similar terms to explain the purpose of their surveys, and both remark on the extensive buildings in the Florentine suburbs; while the anonymous says that collected together they would make another city, Villani goes one better, claiming that the region within six miles of the city has more houses than two Florences.²

Bonvesin's *De Magnalibus* and Villani's chapters represent the final form of the medieval *descriptio*. As a source of statistics Villani's work surpassed Bonvesin's, for, as a merchant and an active member of the city government, the Florentine had a firmer grasp of the significance of figures and was better placed to collect them, but he offered no comparable pattern to inspire the authors of further *descriptions*. By 1340 the influence of the *De Magnalibus* was a spent force. In Milan a copy had fallen into the hands of Galvano Fiamma, a nasty plagiarist who enjoyed a considerable reputation on account of his voluminous works. Not content with incorporating inaccurate summaries of the *De Magnalibus* accompanied by disparaging remarks about the author into his *Galvagnana* and *Manipulus Florum*, Fiamma plundered Bonvesin for material for his *Cronaca Extravagans*

¹ Villani, Bk. IX, chaps. 256-7, ed. I. Moutier (Florence, 1823), iv. 222-8.

² *Florentie Urbis Descriptio*, pp. 199, 122; Villani, vi. 181-8.

on the early history of Milan. The so-called philosophical plan of the latter chronicle, which takes the form of eighty three *questiones*, is no more than a caricature of Bonvesin's dialectical method.¹ Perhaps because of Fiamma's treatment and through changes in taste, the *De Magnalibus* had sunk into obscurity by the fifteenth century, and it was not until 1898 that it was published from a single manuscript surviving in Madrid.

In six centuries city descriptions had changed almost out of all recognition. Three main stages may be distinguished: first the early medieval poems framed around the contrast between pagan and Christian times, then the twelfth century *descriptions* expressing the new civic consciousness of the growing towns of the West, and finally the more detailed writings of the period 1288 to 1340 which describe the medieval cities at the height of their development before the strains and disasters of the later fourteenth century. In the process, the descriptions reflect the changing attitudes towards antiquity and the growing predominance of the lay outlook towards the world and society, though the significance of this should not be exaggerated. Unlike the Italian *descriptions* of the twelfth century, those of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries do not deliberately minimize the importance of the church, but they express its relationship with the secular world in a new way. Bonvesin della Riva, Villani, and the author of the *Florentie Urbis Descriptio* all emphasize how the religious institutions are maintained in a flourishing state by the wealth of the citizens, whereas the earlier writers had regarded the prosperity of the citizens as a consequence of the prayers of the religious. The most significant thread running through the whole development of city descriptions is rather the common trend away from generalized literary *laudes* and towards a concentration on specific details, often of a statistical nature. This change entailed losses as well as

¹ See L. A. Ferrai, "Le cronache di Galvano Fiamma e le fonti della Galvagnana", *Bollettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano*, x (1891), 93-128. A version of the *Galvagnana* was published by Muratori under the title *Annales Mediolanenses*, RIS., XVI (Milan, 1730), and excerpts from the *Cronaca Extravagans* ed. A. Ceruti, *Miscellanea di Storia Italiana*, vii (Turin, 1869), 445-506. Fiamma's borrowings from Bonvesin are noted in Novati's edition of *De Magnalibus*, where the *questiones* of the *Cronaca Extravagans* are listed in the Appendix, pp. 177-82.

gains ; the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries produced no clear-cut picture of the significance of the city to compare with the brilliant sketch implicit in the *Laudes Veronensis*. In part this weakness was simply a reflection of the dominance of content over literary form which was a common characteristic of most Latin writings of the period, but it was also related to a deep-seated failing of medieval urban society itself. Throughout, the evolution of the city description was governed not so much by the development of the literary tradition, for this was at the best weak and intermittent, but rather by the transformation of the cities themselves and the growth within them of a new class of writers and readers. From the twelfth century Italy was studded with virtually sovereign city-states, yet the ideology of the period was overwhelmingly imperialist and monarchical ; only when the communes were on the point of disappearance did they become conscious of themselves. Bonvesin della Riva, Giovanni da Nono and Opicino de Canistris all wrote at the moment when the communal form of government, which they supported, had just been superseded by a *signoria* vested in a single individual or family. The princes of the fifteenth century demanded a different kind of *descriptio* from their *littérateurs*, and this in large measure accounts for the resurgence of rhetoric in this period. Only a few Tuscan cities, notably Florence, preserved the ideals of the communes into the age of the *signorie*.

APPENDIX

LIST OF MEDIEVAL DESCRIPTIONS OF CITIES, c. 738-1340

Together with the more important editions and critical articles. Listed in alphabetical order of cities. Where there are two or more descriptions of the same city, they are listed in chronological order.

BERGAMO

1112-1133. Moses de Brolo, *Liber Pergaminus*.

(1) Ed. G. Cremaschi, *Mosè del Brolo e la cultura a Bergamo nei secoli XI-XII* (Bergamo, 1945), pp. 204-28.

(2) Ed. L. A. Muratori, *RIS*, V (Milan, 1724), 523-36.

See C. Capasso, "Il Pergaminus e la prima età comunale a Bergamo", *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, IV, vi (1906), 269-350 ; C. H. Haskins, "Moses of Bergamo", *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, xxiii (1920), 133-142.

CHESTER

- c. 1195. *Liber Luciani De Laude Cestrie*, ed. M. V. Taylor, *Lancashire and Cheshire Record Society*, vol. lxiv (1912).

FLORENCE

1338. Giovanni Villani, *Cronica*, Bk. XI, chaps. 91-94, ed. I. Moutier (Florence, 1823), vi. 177-88.

See A. Saponi, "L'attendibilità di alcune testimonianze cronistiche dell'economia medievale", *Archivio Storico Italiano*, VII, xii (1929), 19-30; E. Fiumi, "La demografia fiorentina nelle pagine di Giovanni Villani", *ibid.* cviii (1950), 78-158.

1339. *Florentie Urbis et Reipublice Descriptio*.

(1) Ed. C. Frey, *Die Loggia dei Lanzi* (Berlin, 1885), 199-223.

(2) *S. Baluzii Miscellanea Novo Ordine*, ed. G. D. Mansi (Lucca, 1764), iv. 117-9.

JERUSALEM

See T. Tobler, *Descriptiones Terrae Sanctae* (Leipzig, 1874), and descriptions published by the Palestine Pilgrims Texts Society (London, 1887-97).

LODI

- c. 1253-9. *De Laude Civitatis Laude*.

(1) Ed. A. Caretta, Lodi, 1962.

(2) Ed. G. Waitz, *MGH.*, SS. xxii (Hannover, 1872), 372-3.

LONDON

- 1173-4. William Fitzstephen, *Descriptio Nobilissimae Civitatis Londoniae*, in *Vita S. Thomae*, *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket*, (Rolls Series), iii. 2-13.

For English translation and bibliography see *English Historical Documents*, ii (ed. D. C. Douglas and G. W. Greenaway), 956-962.

MILAN

- c. 738. *Laudes Mediolanensis Civitatis*.

(1) Ed. G. B. Pighi, *Versus de Verona, Versum de Mediolano Civitate*, *Studi pubblicati dell'Istituto di Filologia Classica*, vii (Bologna, 1960).

(2) Ed. E. Dümmler, *MGH.*, *Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini*, i (Berlin, 1881), 24-26.

- c. 780-1000. *De Situ Civitatis Mediolani*.

Ed. A. and G. Colombo, *Anonymi Mediolanensis Libellus*, *RIS.*, I, ii, (New ed., Bologna, [n.d.]), 6-14.

1288. Bonvesin della Riva, *De Magnalibus Urbis Mediolani*, ed. F. Novati, *Bollettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano*, xx (1898).

See partial translation in R. S. Lopez and I. W. Raymond, *Mediaeval Trade in the Mediterranean World* (London, 1955), pp. 60-69.

- c. 1316. Benzo d'Alessandria, *De Mediolano Florentissima Civitate*, ed. L. A. Ferrai, *Bollettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano*, ix (1890), 15-36.
See Ferrai, "Benzo d'Alessandria e i cronisti milanesi del secolo XIV", *ibid.* vii (1889), 97-137; G. Biscaro, "Benzo da Alessandria e i giudizi contro i ribelli dell'impero a Milano nel 1311", *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, ser. IV, vii (1907), 282-316.
- 1329-39. Galvano Fiamma, *Cronaca Extravagans*, MS. Ambrosiana A.275 inf.
See L. A. Ferrai, "Le cronache di Galvano Fiamma e le fonti della Galvagnana", *Bollettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano* x (1891), 93-128; Novati, *ibid.* xx (1898).

PADUA

- c. 1318. Giovanni da Nono, *Visio Egidii Regis Patavii*, ed. G. Fabris, *Bollettino del Museo Civico di Padova*, N.S. x-xi (1934-9), 1-30.
See Fabris, "La cronaca di Giovanni da Nono", *ibid.* viii (1932), 1-33; ix (1933), 167-200.

PARIS

1323. *Recommentatio Civitatis Parisiensis*.
Jean de Jandun, *Tractatus de Laudibus Parisius*, ed. Le Roux de Lincy and L. M. Tisserand, *Paris et ses Historiens aux XIV Siècle* (Paris, 1867), 1-79.

PAVIA

1330. Opicino de Canistris, *Libellus de Descriptione Papie*.
(1) ed. F. Gianani, *Opicino de Canistris, l'anonimo ticinese* (Pavia, 1927), 73-121.
(2) (*Liber de Laudibus Civitatis Ticinensis*), ed. R. Maiocchi and F. Quintavalle, *RIS.*, XI, i (Bologna, 1903).

ROME

- c. 1140-3. Benedict, *Mirabilia Urbis Rome*.
c. 1154-1280. *Graphia Aureae Urbis Rome*.
c. 1150-1200. Master Gregory, *De Mirabilibus Urbis Rome*, ed. R. Valentini and G. Zucchetti, *Codice topografico della città di Roma*, III, *Fonti per la Storia d'Italia* (Rome 1946); q.v. for numerous other editions and extensive bibliography.

SENLIS

1323. See Part IV of Jean de Jandun's *Tractatus de Laudibus Parisius*.

VERONA

- 796-806. *Laudes Veronensis Civitatis*.
(1) Ed. G. B. Pighi, *Versus de Verona, Versum de Mediolano Civitate*, *Studi pubblicati dell'Istituto di Filologia Classica*, vol. vii (Bologna, 1960).
(2) (*Veronae Rythmica Descriptio*), ed. L. Simeoni, *RIS.*, II, i, (Bologna, 1918).
(3) Ed. E. Dümmler, *MGH.*, *Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini*, i (Berlin, 1881), 118-22.