CHAPTER 1

Cities and Their Strangers

Stranger in a Strange Land
What's a man supposed to do?
Just a Stranger in a Strange Land
(Waiting and watching and wondering)
When will the light come shining through.

Rik Emmett,
Stranger in a Strange Land (1984)

WORDS AND THEIR MEANINGS

THE TERM 'STRANGER' – *FORINSECUS*, *FORENSIS* – WAS USED IN MEDIEVAL TEXTS to describe a whole array of groups and individuals. It was most usually used to describe newcomers from villages or small towns in proximity to a city, in the first stages of their relation to the town or city, before they became settled, *incolae.* These were usually people of modest means – variously trained and skilled – whose absorption into urban life often went undocumented. 'Strangers' also described newcomers from further afield, people with distinctive dialects and occupations, associated with other cities or realms, whose presence was often reinforced by chains of migration, like German merchants in twelfth-century London, or Tuscan bankers in thirteenth-century Provence. A pathway to citizenship was open to such newcomers if they wished to associate their lives with the city. To these two groups we may add individuals and groups in towns and cities who were not foreigners, yet to whom a quality of 'strangerhood' was attached, what Simona Cerutti has called 'extranéité'.[1] Indeed, a cognate word was sometimes used, as in the statutes

of Marseilles: 'a foreigner, that is a strange person' ('forensis, id est persona extranea').[2] They were never described as strangers by their contemporaries, but they were touched by difference even after decades of settlement, like Jews in most parts of Europe, Muslims in Iberia and Sicily, or Greeks in Venice.

Towns also experienced a constant stream of passers-through – traders in their markets, pilgrims, students, ambassadors, mercenaries, artisans, and servants – each type with its own effect on urban life, each with its own marks of difference. In going about their duties, civic officials sought to assess the disposition of each type – a peasant from the contado, a foreign student, a Jew – and their opinions were affected by custom and law, as well as by religious instruction. Living in towns and cities meant living with strangers.

EUROPE'S CITIES

The urban centres of the later Roman world – *civitates* – were hubs for administration, where imperial law held sway, manufacture and commerce flourished, a rich public life was on display, and entertainment was offered in stadia and hippodromes.[3] Such cities were most densely located all around the Mediterranean, and they reached as far as London, Cologne, and Trier in the north. Early in the fourth century, the practice of Christianity was permitted throughout the Empire, and by the next century this had become the official religion. So cities became centres for church administration too, where bishops presided from their urban cathedrals over Christian life within their dioceses. Bishops assumed authority and responsibilities beyond the solely religious domain: they were keepers of the peace, supervisors of their city's water and food supplies, managers of charitable distributions, and founders of schools. In the fifth and sixth centuries, the western part of the Empire was transformed into a set of kingdoms – such as those of the Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Franks, and Vandals – and in them city life persisted, though the overall volume of trade declined. From the seventh century, the Mediterranean was re-ordered following the Muslim conquests and the establishment of the Umayyad Caliphate in large parts of the old Roman world, in North Africa, Iberia, Sicily, and Italy.

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In the space we may usefully call Europe, cities were resilient centres to which refugees often fled for safety. Some European cities were seats for ambitious new dynasties, like the Ravenna of the Ostrogoths or Aachen of the Carolingians. When in the later eighth and ninth centuries, Northern people – Vikings – forcefully settled in the regions of northwest Europe, they linked existing inland cities and ports with the sinews of trade, promoting such centres as Dublin and York. Cities old and new required food, services, and manufactured goods; they generated demand and stimulated commercial activity.

New types of urban settlement developed in response to the notable growth of population around 1000. So existing cities grew, and thousands of new towns were created. According to its greatest historian, the Belgian Henri Pirenne (1862–1935), this new type was the *medieval* city.[4] New urban centres were often situated on the site of former Roman forts, on bends in rivers, or adjacent to monasteries, at places where the exchange of agricultural produce and some manufactured goods – pottery or armour – could take place in safety.[5] Drawing from the immediate countryside, but also attracting merchants from further afield, such new settlements were largely composed of newcomers, strangers assembled with a shared cause.

Such urban life was varied in its quality and reach, and those who lived it sought to make it viable. So inhabitants strove to win customs and freedoms through negotiation with whoever held local authority: a monastery, a bishop, a count, or a king. By 1000, a complex coming together of demographic, technological, and political processes prompted the developments that, over the next three centuries, saw the threefold rise in Europe's population, together with growth in areas of settlement, in the amount of food produced, and in the scope and pace of trade.[6] The number of Europeans living some form of Christian life was also on the rise, and it came to include people in large parts of Scandinavia, in the kingdoms of Poland and Hungary, and in those lands of Iberia, Italy, and Sicily soon to be taken from Muslim rulers.[7]

The economic stimulus was felt earliest in the south and northwest of Europe, and it was experienced by millions of peasants in their daily lives.[8] Some would choose to be involved in urban life through manufacture, service, or commerce; and as they came together they created urban communities for profit and safety.

This was nothing short of an urban transformation of Europe. In the Low Countries, a quarter of the population lived in urban settlements, while in Italian regions perhaps 30 per cent did.[9] In towns and cities trade and manufacture set the tone of life, where a variety of religious and educational institutions offered their services, while walls provided safety. Such walls marked the space within which townspeople interacted in administration, where governance was conducted in promotion of commerce and craft, safety and sociability, and stable family lives. All these activities were also moulded by criteria for inclusion and exclusion.

As the extent of manufacture and exchange grew, urban groups came together with the aim of gaining rights for their communities. These efforts were often led by men who already enjoyed some connections with landed families or with the local bishop. Sometimes lords initiated the formation of urban communities as centres for the marketing of agricultural produce yielded by their own lands. Lords – be they secular men or religious institutions – habitually ceded some jurisdiction to a community of town dwellers and in turn benefited from the annual payment of a fee from a market for agricultural goods and from a share in the income from justice or customs on trade.[10]

Sworn associations soon emerged in these growing urban centres.[11] There was a rush of such activities from the later eleventh century: in Le Mans, in 1070, we are told by the bishop's chronicler that 'thus was made a conspiracy, which they called a communion' – communion being a word rich with religious meaning.[12] Such leading organised groups were sometimes empowered by royal charters to create their own officials, as in Arras in 1111, York in 1154, Dublin in 1171, or Oxford in 1199. In Italy, similarly, Pisa negotiated in 1099 with Emperor Henry IV its privileges and rights to elect officials, as did Genoa, which acted through a *compagna* of townsmen. From Italy this communal movement seems to have spread to southern France, as it reached Marseilles in 1128, Arles in 1131, Avignon in 1136, Montpellier in 1141, and Narbonne in 1148. These processes of enfranchisement were associated with the election of officials sworn to uphold the town's interests, and to execute the will of its governing group; in southern France and Italy these officials were often called consuls.

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Membership in the city was associated with settlement, and the ownership of a plot of land, a 'burgage' plot. As the new settlement was defined and soon surrounded by walls, plots of equal size were measured out within it, to form the basis for the emergent community.[13] Representatives of the lord may live in castles or grander habitations, alongside local bishops or other religious institutions, but townspeople first dwelt on fairly equal plots, just as centuries earlier Plato had imagined his perfect urban polity city, made up of 5,040 citizens occupying 5,040 plots, 'owning a share of the land and set to defend their allocation'.[14] When Duke Barnim of Pomerania founded the city of Prenzlau in 1234, he laid out 300 'mansos' – 200 on one side of the river Ucker and 100 on the other.[15] From this basis there developed a variety of status and of wealth, and this became visible in the subdivision, or accumulation, of urban land. The rich emerged alongside the poor, and new forms of association and civic action developed: the craft guilds with their mutual support of workers in a given trade; political assemblies and participatory governance in local councils;[16] and hospitals for the urban sick and poor, as well as schools as centres for critical thinking and useful professional training.[17] Urban architecture developed to match, with squares and city halls.[18] In all of these initiatives were enshrined precepts and prejudices, some of which were long to persist, like the exclusion of women, and civic rights dependent on the possession of property and religious orthodoxy.

Urban life spread across Europe, but not always in the same way or at the same pace. The legal heritage, location, climate, agrarian regimes, and natural endowments of settlements varied across the continent, as did the political capacity of rulers to direct economic processes and migration. While new towns were created in England and France (which included Flanders) from the late eleventh century, they only emerged in Bohemia and Poland later, in the twelfth century. By 1300 there were large cities aplenty in northwest Europe: Cologne with 80,000 inhabitants, Bruges with 50,000, Ghent with 80,000, and, greatest of all, Paris with 200,000. In central and northern Italy there were many large cities too: Venice unique with 120,000, Genoa and Milan both with 100,000, and Florence with 90,000; England had London, with 80,000; but no such large cities existed in Iberia, the Nordic sphere, or Central Europe.[19]

Contemporaries noticed the differing rates of urban growth. When the Franciscan scholar Bartholomew 'the English' (1203–72) surveyed cities in Europe and beyond, he mentioned none in Iceland, Finland, the Baltic, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, or Hungary. In Bohemia, he only mentioned Prague.[20] Cities also differed in character: there were capitals, ports, ducal residences, cities with cathedrals, and a few with universities; some cities were important pilgrimage centres, others were noted for the manufacture of particular goods, such as silk in Paris and brocade in Venice. Smaller urban centres were kept buoyant as administrative hubs or regional markets.

The diversity of urban populations was hardwired into the lives of whole regions. The county of Champagne became familiar with Lombards, the financiers and merchants most likely to offer credit at its fairs, those hubs of commerce in late twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe.[21] The cities and towns that made up the Hanse were similarly diverse.[22] The Hanse sphere was an association of merchants around the North and Baltic Seas and along the rivers that fed into them. It encouraged ease of movement, legal protection, and fiscal advantages to its members, from England to Livonia, as far north as Gotland and as far south as Cologne.[23] Merchants could move from one Hanse city to another, becoming for a while familiar neighbours, if not citizens, thanks to the possession of a shared language – Low German – and trust in the fair and lucrative trade to which they all contributed. Ties through marriage and business partnerships further thickened the Hanse network, and the sociability of confraternities helped socialise its young and rising merchants.[24]

Some strangers therefore benefited from arrangements that rendered their difference an accepted feature of city life. Cosmopolitanism is a word often used to describe cultures acquainted with ease of movement.[25] It can be used to describe those who travelled the Mediterranean through the network of hospitality maintained in its ports, and which Olivia Remie Constable has studied so well. This network of *funduq*s, with its roots in late antiquity, offered to foreign traders lodging and support designed to 'meet the needs of travellers' and provided safety for merchants who were far away from home.[26] By the early thirteenth century, these were emulated in Venice for the

accommodation of its northern visitors, with the Fondaco dei Tedeschi; and other trading cities followed suit.[27] Foreign merchants were allowed to settle for long periods without seeking citizenship: Germans in the Steelyard of London, men of Lübeck in St Olav's Court in Novgorod, or Tuscans in Bologna's Compagnia dei Toschi.[28] The city of Lucca approved the statutes of its merchants in Bruges in 1377, as it did for other Lucchese communities in Avignon, Genoa, London, and Paris. This society in Bruges dealt with matters ranging from arrangements for the burial of members in the church of St Augustine in Bruges, where they had their chapel, to banking contacts with London.[29]

These were men who remained as foreigners for long periods of time, who wielded influence and enjoyed wealth, and who were occasionally buffeted by the political fortunes of their hometowns.[30] Sharon Farmer has recently suggested that the Lombard financiers in Paris, men who lived with other male kin, and away from their families, were disruptive, even violent, in their treatment of the women they employed, or of those who approached them for loans.[31] Such men were both settled and different, embedded yet keen to maintain their native connections. They lived as foreigners, and their connections elsewhere underpinned their prosperity.

The world of high scholarship, of study–work sociability in cities with schools and universities, was highly cosmopolitan, too. Men who shared the experience of Latin pedagogy, and the career prospects it made possible, could move across Europe with ease. This world expanded greatly with the creation of fifty new universities in Europe over the course of the fifteenth century. Men associated with religious orders were a regular presence in cities.[32] Such organisations were European in scope, and hence members travelled in the course of administration and study for periods of varying length. The orders of friars were quintessentially urban institutions, and the military orders also possessed urban bases, where travelling or visiting members were hosted.[33]

People settled in some strangerhood, with meaningful attachment to another place, and to others who shared that affinity, in what is now frequently thought of as a diaspora.[34] The idea of diaspora is a powerful one, and it is linked to identity and memory maintained by groups, expressed in their rituals; it is a state of being. Diaspora is powerful in

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capturing how lives are constituted in the aftermath of trauma – exile, famine, enslavement – new lives, powerfully linked to old. Diaspora is a deeply subjective experience, even when its members are well settled in their new homes. We should bear it in mind as we think of exiles and banishments, and encounter the aftermaths of expulsions, of conquest and reconquest.

URBAN CULTURE: COHESION AND DIVERSITY

All that was new and flourishing in towns and cities depended on a diversity of talents and endowments: on lawyers and notaries, merchants and bankers, physicians and teachers, on artisans in dozens of crafts; on priests, actors, and street vendors. At their inception, towns were composed of strangers who came together to create an effective community. Towns were soon shaped by the ideas and interests of merchants, lawyers, and bankers, as well as by the preaching of friars.[35] The history we are about to encounter in the period of economic growth witnessed an imaginative willingness to attract and receive into towns and cities those who could provide services and skills: Genoese ship-makers in twelfth-century Seville; Italian and Jewish financiers in thirteenth-century Hungary and Poland; or Flemish weavers in fourteenth-century England. The resulting urban mix varied according to region, and it changed over time. It always preoccupied those who governed, those charged with maintaining economic growth, safety, and fiscal viability for their urban communities.

Alongside the clerical and diplomatic Latin culture of religious institutions and royal courts, there were European zones characterised by a *lingua franca* – a shared vernacular language – which facilitated commerce and the spread of civic culture. The arc of linguistic comprehensibility, which stretched from Catalonia to Piedmont, allowed business contacts to develop with ease, as they did, for example, for Tuscan bankers in Provence.[36] Marco Polo (1254–1324) chose this Romance *lingua franca* when writing about his travels in *The Description of the World* (*Le divisament dou monde*), a work rendered into Tuscan by Rustichello da Pisa (fl. late thirteenth century) as *The Million* (*Il milione*).[37] At the same time, as we have seen, in northern Europe a sphere of trade and a civic

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culture evolved for ease of movement and interaction in the area between the Baltic and East Anglia, and its common language was Low German.[38] Low German in its many dialects also served the cities of central Europe – Buda/Ofen, Krakow, Liegnitz/Legnica – where German traders settled as privileged newcomers. They were allowed to operate in their mother tongue under protective privileges offered by the kings of Hungary and Poland.

In these urban spheres, the heritage of classical legal and political theory combined with local custom to inspire the aspirations of leaders and to inform discussions about the urban common good, the *bonum comune*.[39] Urban writers – and these were often holders of important offices, such as Galbert of Bruges (d. 1134), Brunetto Latini (1220–94), Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), and Geoffrey Chaucer (1343–1400) – reflected on how cities should be governed, and how their inhabitants might live as moral communities. Yet the meaning of the common good was always ideologically charged and contested, since so many claimed to be its promoters and defenders: kings, prince-bishops, dukes and counts, city councils, craft guildsmen, and friar-preachers, each type with its own understanding of what made cities thrive.[40]

Those who theorised about urban life believed that townspeople shared more than mere closeness in space: they saw in the coming together of townspeople a rational, and hence moral, act. They all knew the definition offered by Isidore of Seville (d. 636):

> A city, *civitas*, is a multitude of people united by a bond of fellowship. It is named from the citizens, *cives*, that is, the inhabitants of the place (because it decides upon and holds the lives of many people). *Urbs* is the town itself, the *civitas* is not rocks, but the inhabitants.[41]

The Florentine notary, scholar, and politician Brunetto Latini reworked the classical tradition in his encyclopaedic *Le Livre dou Tresor* of the 1260s:

> From that time they began to build houses and strengthen cities and fortresses and enclose them with walls and ditches. 3. From that time on they began to establish customs, and laws, and rights, which were common to all the citydwellers. For that reason Cicero says that the city is an assembly of people for living in one place and under one law.[42]

In the following century, the jurist Bartolus of Sassoferrato (1313–57) made it clear that a mere collection of houses did not make a city; that a moral dimension was essential to true urban flourishing.[43] The fourteenth-century jurist Nikolaus Wurm (d.1383), who worked in Lieg-nitz/Legnica, set out his digest on urban laws for his and other Silesian towns in Low German. Educated at the university of Bologna, he expounded in the form of a dialogue:

> *Menius*: Why should one call something a city, and what should one call a city?
> *Gayus*: It is called a city because the people therein should live peacefully in a union and keep and strengthen the laws.[44]

The search for urban stability and prosperity led to the development of distinctive genres of writing about urban affairs. The city of Arras, from its inception as a self-governing community in 1111, valued the composition and performance of poetry and drama. Its *Jeu de St Nicholas*, composed by town clerk Jean Bodel, even featured a pious local magistrate as a protagonist. Such vernacular eloquence was a sign of what Carol Symes has called the city's 'prosperous diversity', and Bodel was member of the confraternity of poet-performers, *jongelurs*.[45] Notaries and judges, jurists and preachers, all tried to define the essence of good urban living. Judge Albertanus of the city of Brescia composed in 1245 – ostensibly as a guidebook for his son – his *Book of the Art of Speaking and Keeping Silent* (*Liber de doctrina dicendi et tacendi)*, a summary of classical and later maxims on comportment and prudent speech in the civic sphere.[46] To be a citizen was to speak, advise, and discuss in a manner that newcomers had to learn and emulate. Alber-tanus, and Brunetto Latini a few decades later, emphasised that com-mand of bodily comportment, and especially of speech, through the rhetorical training of citizens, was central to the city's well-being. Wise use of language was not just a matter of style: it helped to avoid strife and to promote civic peace. For this reason a moral tract, like the Dominican William Perault's (c. 1190–1271) *Summa of Vices (Summa vitiorum)* of 1236, was so widely disseminated and translated throughout Europe, with extended sections on 'sins of the tongue', malicious speech, and its consequences.[47]