



## Reviews of books

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**Miri Rubin**, *Cities of Strangers: Making Lives in Medieval Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xv + 185pp. 5 figures. 2 maps. Index. £18.99 pbk. doi:10.1017/S0963926822000190

*Cities of Strangers* is an ambitious book, which, despite its title, is self-avowedly 'not another history of cities, nor a history of migration' (p. 20). Rather, this is a book about the conceptualization of 'strangers', or perhaps more broadly of difference, in medieval cities. Originating in the Wiles Lectures given by Miri Rubin at Queen's University Belfast in 2017, it is very much a book of the present, inspired by the search for refuge by many Syrians in the wake of the conflict in 2015. Rubin's response to this modern experience of migration is an expansive work of synthesis, drawing examples from across the continent of Europe, from Kilkenny to Buda, and from the years around 1000 to 1500. Throughout the book, a central argument is made that the treatment of 'strangers', be they migrants or 'strangers in their own cities', was always conditional upon 'a combination of economic opportunities, demographic realities, and discursive frames of reference' (p. 94), and thus tended to follow the contraction of relative prosperity in the late medieval economy.

The first chapter 'Cities and their strangers' uses a range of legal and philosophical texts to define who was a stranger, which obviously also rests upon defining who was integrated as a member of a community. Rubin explores this through a sketch of the earliest history of post-Roman cities, and the origins of the freedoms that allowed their rulers to establish their own rules. These, she argues, often embodied an 'imaginative willingness to attract and receive into towns and cities those who could provide services and skills' (p. 8). This sets up the main explanatory themes running throughout the book: the impact upon tolerance of strangers of the shifting balance of power between monarchies and cities, and between pragmatism and moralism. The second chapter, 'Strangers into neighbours', focuses upon migrants and visitors as perhaps the most obvious form of strangers in medieval cities. The main theme is the sliding scale of integration, from the widespread welcome for merchants or other temporary visitors, to the often very gradual and well-guarded processes of assimilation for long-term residents. The fact that usually only a minority of residents of medieval cities were citizens reminds us that strangers were just another group within a broad spectrum of rights and privileges. Within this framework, local practice varied greatly, and Rubin uses diverse

examples, often from places off the beaten track, such as examples taken from Matthew Stevens' work on Ruthin, Wales. The key argument throughout, however, is that an optimistic 'urban sense of purpose' 'enabled a certain latitude in the incorporation of newcomers' in the High Middle Ages, but this was distinctly tempered after the Black Death, as the voices of economic protectionism, and more vigorous social and religious regulation, tended to grow stronger (p. 46).

'Strangers' are conceived somewhat differently in the third and fourth chapters of the book, which examine Jews, and women, as groups who experienced 'utter embeddedness and yet not quite full enfranchisement' (p. 57). The position of Jewish people in medieval European cities returns us to the question of the influence of monarchs, whose claim to special privilege to rule Jews in their territory is explored with reference to legal and theological texts, over towns. Rubin again uses examples from across Europe to illustrate the ways that relationships between Jews and their Christian neighbours, despite being marked by difference, were rarely characterized by separation. Once again, the trauma of the Black Death is used to explain a common change in attitude, when 'deliberation on the common good now emphasized the danger of moral difference, and encouraged uniformity' (p. 64), and visible difference therefore came to carry a risk. Rubin's fourth chapter, on women in medieval cities, draws a similar analogy of disempowerment, arguing it can be 'useful to think of women in their towns and cities like a Fleming in London' (p. 72). The picture painted is once again drawn from diverse towns and cities, and notably gives more of a view of individual lives than tends to be seen in other chapters. Rubin's interpretation in this chapter is quite positive in outlook. Despite women's legal disadvantages, and the dangers of the streets, Rubin offers numerous examples of their economic and religious autonomy, for example as Beguines, or *femme sole* traders. In this respect, her focus seems to run counter to the work of feminist historians including Bennett, who have tended to downplay the significance of legal provisions such as *femme sole*, which appear to have been little employed in practice. More broadly, though, the case of women in medieval cities fits into Rubin's argument that treatment of those outside of the narrow, male, governing citizen elite was always contingent on the interests of that group.

Rubin's great achievement in this book is crafting a clear and cohesive argument spanning an entire continent, 500 years and at least three distinct ways of considering someone to have been a 'stranger'. Such a broad and expansive account can only ever be a sketch, and indeed the author is well aware of this, remarking in her conclusion that while she has outlined some 'clear lineaments' following economic and demographic change across the continent, regional studies are also required. There is no doubt, however, that she has succeeded in her aim of helping historians to 'conceptualize as to what Europeans shared – and how they diverged – in the treatment of newcomers and in living with neighbours marked by difference' (p. 94). The explanatory framework of the book is shaped by economics, demographics and discourse, but, perhaps inevitably given the scale of its coverage, it rests largely upon normative texts, usually philosophical or legal, rather than focusing upon lived experience. This is largely a top-down view of medieval society, perhaps contrasting with other recent approaches such as Charlotte Berry's *Margins of Late Medieval London* (2022). Rubin has anticipated this criticism with the very pertinent and undeniable observation that 'exclusion and separation are never about a

sole group and its attributes, but are related to a vision of power and privilege that affected everyone' (p. 96). *Cities of Strangers* offers an extremely useful survey, encompassing an admirably decentred geographical coverage, which will be of particular use for those new to the subject, especially undergraduates. It also offers an excellent opportunity for researchers more familiar with the subject to frame local and regional studies in a broader and comparative perspective. It is sure to be the key starting point in the subject for years to come.

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**Peter Csendes and Ferdinand Opll**, *Wien im Mittelalter. Zeitzeugnisse und Analysen*. Vienna and Cologne: Böhlau, 2021. 520pp. 48 figures. Bibliography. €45.00 hbk.

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Medieval Vienna has been treated well by its historians. Ferdinand Opll and Peter Csendes, director and vice-director of the Vienna Municipal Archives until 2010 and 2004, respectively, have been the most prolific researchers of the medieval city in the last 50 years. They had joined forces to edit a three-volume urban biography of Vienna (*Wien. Geschichte einer Stadt*, 2001–06) and were among the key authors of a brand-new English-language *Companion to Medieval Vienna* (2021). Beside dozens of articles and book chapters, Csendes has edited the most important legal sources of Vienna (1986–87) and Opll has written a lively monograph on life in medieval Vienna (1998). The present volume, published on the 800th anniversary of the first ducal charter of privilege granted to Vienna (1221), offers a fresh summary of the two prominent authors' research.

Having put down so many important works on the table, the greatest challenge for the authors was to find a new format that allows them to avoid repeating earlier overviews. To this end, the story of Vienna unfolds here as a thickly woven cloth, the warp and weft being the two terms in the book's subtitle: 'witnesses of the times' and 'analyses'. The warp revives the old chronological tradition, summarizing the most important events year by year. After a summary of the archaeological data on the ninth to eleventh centuries, the first concrete date in the row is 1137, the famous exchange treaty of Mautern between the margraves of Austria and the bishop of Passau on the patronage of the Viennese parishes and the foundation of St Stephen's, the later iconic Stephansdom. This first testimony of an important settlement in the making is followed in the next century sporadically, and from 1244 indeed yearly by new entries. One can only be grateful for the survival of the archival material that allows for this dense flow of events.

Within their chronological section, the authors' intention was to show not only the most decisive happenings, but also the variety of data available for Vienna. This method reminded me of the chronicles painted on the walls of some urban parish churches in Transylvania and Spiš (parts of medieval Hungary, now in Romania