Passages from Leonardo Bruni’s *Laudatio Florentinae urbis / Praise of the Florentine City* (c. 1402)

How I wish the everlasting Lord had endowed me so that I could display an eloquence equal to the Florentine city of which I will speak — or equal, at least, to my will and enthusiasm, both of which (I take it) would be in abundant supply in order to demonstrate its magnificence and elegance. For, this city is of such a type that nothing could be found in all the countries of the world more brilliant or more splendid and my will has, indeed, in nothing ever been keener than this…

Truly remarkable is this city’s pre-eminence [*praestantia*] to which no one’s eloquence could be sufficient. But not a few serious and good men have even spoken of the Lord himself, the least part of whose glory and magnificence cannot be expressed in words, however eloquent the orator… And so, I myself will be seen to have done enough if, with as much enthusiasm, learning, practice in speaking and, moreover, long study as possible, I strive to praise this city as much as I can, even though I plainly understand that it is of such a type that in no way what I say can be compared with splendour – oh, so great – of the city-state [*civitas*].

… As some children have such a similarity to their parents that they can very easily be recognised by their looks, so too with this most noble and famous city there is such a congruity with its citizens that it seems that by the sharpest logic they could not live anywhere else but in it and it could not have any other sort of inhabitants than these. For, just as these citizens stand out so much from other men in a certain natural genius, prudence, stylishness and magnificence [*naturali quodam ingenio, prudentia, lauitia et magnificentia*] so this city most prudently situated surpasses all other cities in splendour, adornment and cleanliness.

As a starting point there is what is the greatest sign of prudence: we can detect that in its quiet and settled suitability [*commoditas*], Florence took care to be as far as possible from doing things for ostentation’s sake or pursuing dangerous and pointless bragging. For, it was placed neither on the highest mountains from where it could show itself off as famous, nor in the widest evenness of the fields, where it would have been open on all sides. Rather, most prudently and by the best counsel, this city was established… and positioned so that it is the mean between the extremes (which is highly regarded in all things) and was far from both the uneven mountain and the distasteful plain.

The city itself is… surrounded by a most beautiful crown of walls, though not so extensive that it might seem the city is fearful of its own strength or so ill-looked after that it could be held to be careless and ill-advised. What can I say of the thronging of people, of the splendour of the buildings, of the adornment of the churches, of the unbelievable and remarkable stylishness of the whole city? Everything – by my word – is eye-catching and adorned with outstanding beauty. … From the beginning to the end, everything is present which can make a city blessed. If you like antiquity, you will find here very many remains of the ancient in both public and private buildings. If you look for what is new, nothing could be more magnificent or splendid than the new constructions.

Of the river, which runs through the centre of the city, it is hard to say whether it serves practicality or charm more. Four bridges magnificently built of stone link the riverbanks… so that you can conveniently walk through the city as if it were not divided by any water…
…From what breed come [this city’s] people? Who were its parents? By what mortals was this famous city founded? You know, Florentines, you know your stock and ancestry! Count yourselves the most famous of all races!... The Roman people, lord and victor of the lands of the earth, are your progenitors. … But in what age did the race of Florentines arise from the Romans? This I see as very important… This most splendid colony of the Romans was founded when the power of the Roman people flourished the most, when the strongest kings and most warlike races submitted to its arms and virtue… Caesar, Anthony, Tiberius, Nero – they and their type, a plague and ruin of the republic, had not yet taken away its liberty… It is, I think, from this that we can see what was and is the most outstanding element in this city-state, before all others: the Florentines delight greatly in the liberty of all and are firm enemies of tyrants…

I believe I have said enough about the gloriousness of their race… and the virtue of the city, what it is and of what sort at home and abroad, remains to be discussed…

The virtue of this city really must be marvelled: it is in every sort of praise the unbeaten exemplar… Witness the many city-states which, when suffering from a conspiracy of its neighbours or the violence of tyrants, are supported with advice, resources, money and are protected in the darkest times… Who will ever praise this city abundantly enough for such beneficence and liberality? Or what city-state is there in all the world, which can compare in this sort of praise?... To this beneficence and liberality is joined a remarkable loyalty…

But just as this city is remarkable in its deeds abroad, so is it in its discipline and internal institutions… A certain equity has been made between the various classes, the greater by their own power, the lesser by the republic and the fear of punishment protects both sides. From this is born that saying, which we see very often thrown against the more powerful, for, when they are threatened, they respond very quickly, saying: ‘I also am a Florentine citizen’…


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