

Laudatio Florentinae Urbis or Panegyric to the City of Florence (c.1403-4)

by
Leonardo Bruni

Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444) was born in Arezzo and moved to Florence in the early 1390s, where he initially studied law but then took up humanistic studies under the influence of the chancellor, Coluccio Salutati. Bruni produced translations of historical, philosophical, oratorical and epistolary texts from Greek and Latin, but also wrote his own works drawing upon these classical models. The 'Laudatio Florentinae Urbis' was based upon Aelius Aristides' 'Panathenaicus', written in the second century A.D., and offered a panegyric (i.e. a speech or piece of writing that praises someone greatly and does not mention anything bad about them) to the city of Florence. Aristides claimed that Athens acted as a bulwark against the despotism of Persia, and so Bruni argued that the republican city of Florence was fighting a battle against the despotism of Milan, controlled by the Visconti family.

Would that God immortal give me eloquence worthy of the city of Florence, about which I am to speak, or at least equal to my zeal and desire on her behalf; for either one degree or the other would, I think, abundantly demonstrate the city's magnificence and splendour. Florence is of such a nature that a more distinguished or more splendid city cannot be found on the entire earth, and I can easily tell about myself, I was never more desirous of doing anything in my life. So I have no doubt at all that if either of these wishes were granted, I should be able to describe with elegance and dignity this very beautiful and excellent city. But because everything we want and the ability granted us to attain what we wish are two different things, we will carry out our intention as well as we can, so that we appear to be lacking in talent rather than in will.

Indeed, this city is of such admirable excellence that no one can match his eloquence with it. But we have seen several good and important men who have spoken concerning God himself, whose glory and magnificence the speech of the most eloquent man cannot capture even in the smallest degree. Nor does this vast superiority keep them from trying to speak insofar as they are able about such an immense magnitude. Therefore, I too shall seem to have done enough if, marshalling all competence, expertise, and skill that I have eventually acquired after so much study, I devote my all to praising this city, even though I clearly understand that my ability is such that it can in no way be compared with the enormous splendour of Florence. Therefore many orators say that they themselves do not know where to begin. This now happens to me not only as far as words are concerned but also concerning the subject itself. For not only are there various things connected one with another, here and there, but also any one of them is so outstanding and in some way so distinguished that they seem to vie for excellence among themselves. Therefore, it is not an easy thing to say which subject is to be treated first. If you consider the beauty or splendour of the city, nothing seems more appropriate to start with than these things. Or if you reflect upon its power and wealth, then you will think these are to be treated first. And if you contemplate its history, either in our own day or in earlier times, nothing can seem so important to begin with as these things. When indeed you consider Florentine customs and institutions, you judge nothing more important than these. These matters cause me concern, and often when I am ready to speak on one point, I recall another and am attracted to it. Hence, they furnish me no opportunity to decide which topic to put first. But I shall seize upon the most apt and logical place to begin the speech, even though I do indeed believe that other topics would not have provided an improper point of departure.

Section 1

Bruni describes the city's beauty at great length.

Section 2

Therefore, now that we have described what Florence is, we should next consider what manner of citizens there are here. As one usually does in discussing an individual, so we want to investigate the origins of the Florentine people and to consider from what ancestor the Florentines derived and what

they have accomplished at home and abroad in every age. As Cicero says: 'Let's do it this way, let's begin at the beginning.'

What, therefore, was the stock of these Florentines? Who were their progenitors? By what mortals was this outstanding city founded? Recognize, men of Florence, recognize your race and your forebears. Consider that you are, of all races, the most renowned. For other peoples have as forebears refugees or those banished from their fathers' homes, peasants, obscure wanderers, or unknown founders. But your founder is the Roman people—the lord and conqueror of the entire world. Immortal God, you have conferred so many good things on this one city so that everything—no matter where it happens or for what purpose it was ordained—seems to redound to Florence's benefit.

For the fact that the Florentine race arose from the Roman people is of the utmost importance. What nation in the entire world was ever more distinguished, more powerful, more outstanding in every sort of excellence than the Roman people? Their deeds are so illustrious that the greatest feats done by other men seems like child's play when compared to the deeds of the Romans. Their dominion was equal to the entire world, and they governed with the greatest competence for many centuries, so that from a single city comes more examples of virtue than all other nations have been able to produce until now. In Rome there have been innumerable men so outstanding in every kind of virtue that no other nation on earth has ever been equal to it. Even omitting the names of many fine and outstanding leaders and heads of the Senate, where do you find, except in Rome, the families of the Publicoli, Fabricii, Coruncani, Dentati, Fabii, Decii, Camilli, Pauli, Marcelli, Scipiones, Catones, Gracchi, Torquati, and Cicerones? Indeed, if you are seeking nobility in a founder you will never find any people nobler in the entire world than the Roman people; if you are seeking wealth, none more opulent; if you want grandeur and magnificence, none more outstanding and glorious; if you seek extent of dominion, there was no people on this side of the ocean that had not been subdued and brought under Rome's power by force of arms. Therefore, to you, also, men of Florence, belongs by hereditary right dominion over the entire world and possession of your parental legacy. From this it follows that all wars that are waged by the Florentine people are most just, and this people can never lack justice in its wars since it necessarily wages war for the defence and recovery of its own territory. Indeed, these are the sorts of just wars that are permitted by all laws and legal systems. Now, if the glory, nobility, virtue, grandeur, and magnificence of the parents can also make the sons outstanding, no people in the entire world can be as worthy of dignity as are the Florentines, for they are born from such parents who surpass by a long way all mortals in every sort of glory. Who is there among men who would not readily acknowledge themselves subjected to the Roman people? Indeed, what slave or freedman strives to have the same dignity as the children of his lord or master, or hopes to be chosen instead of them? It is evident that it is no trifling ornament to the city of Florence to have had such an outstanding creator and founder for itself and its people.

But at what point in history did the nation of the Florentines arise from the Romans? Now I believe that in the case of royal successions there is a custom observed by most peoples, namely, that the person who is finally declared to be heir to the king must be born at the time his father possessed the royal dignity. Those offspring who are born either before or after are not considered to be the sons of a king, nor are they permitted to have the right of succession to their father's kingdom. Surely whoever rules when in his best and most flourishing condition also accomplish his most illustrious and glorious deeds. Indeed, it is evident that, for whatever reasons, prosperous times stimulate men's minds and call forth great spirits, so that at such moments in history great men are able to do only what is important and glorious, and what is accomplished then is always especially outstanding.

Accordingly, this very noble Roman colony was established at the very moment when the dominion of the Roman people flourished greatly and when very powerful kings and warlike nations were being conquered by the skill of Roman arms and by virtue. Carthage, Spain, and Corinth were levelled to the ground; all lands and seas acknowledged the rule of these Romans, and these same Romans suffered no harm from any foreign state. Moreover, the Caesars, the Antonines, the Tiberiuses, the Neros—those plagues and destroyers of the Roman Republic—had not yet deprived the people of their liberty. Rather, still growing there was that sacred and untrampled freedom that, soon after the founding of the colony of Florence, was to be stolen by those vilest of thieves. For this reason I think something has been true and is true in this city more than in any other; the men of Florence especially enjoy perfect freedom and are the greatest enemies of tyrants. So I believe that from its very founding Florence conceived such a hatred for the destroyers of the Roman state and underminers of the Roman Republic

that it has never forgotten to this very day. If any trace of or even the names of those corrupters of Rome have survived to the present, they are hated and scorned in Florence.

Now this interest in republicanism is not new to the Florentine people, nor did it begin (as some people think) only a short time since. Rather, this struggle against tyranny was begun a long time ago when certain evil men undertook the worst crime of all—the destruction of the liberty, honour, and dignity of the Roman people. At that time, fired by a desire for freedom, the Florentines adopted their penchant for fighting and their zeal for the republican side, and this attitude has persisted down to the present day. If at other times these political factions were called by different names, still they were not really different. From the beginning Florence has always been united in one and the same cause against the invaders of the Roman state and it has constantly persevered in this policy to the present time. By Jove, this was caused by a just hatred of tyranny more than by the well-deserved respect due to the ancient fatherland. For who could bear that the Roman state, acquired with the kind of virtue that Camillus, Publicola, Fabricius, Curtius, Fabius, Regulus, Scipio, Marcellus, the Catos, and countless other very honourable and chaste men displayed, fell into the hands and under the domination of Caligula and other monsters and vile tyrants who were innocent of no vice and redeemed by no virtue? To excel in this these monsters were in a competition of mighty proportions, striving with all their power.

Bruni discusses the 'crimes' against the Roman citizens committed by the Roman emperors such as Caligula and Julius Caesar, who stamped down on freedom and indulged in terrible sins and vices.

But to what end? someone will ask. Really there are two reasons: first, to show that Florence has not, without good cause, developed its political allegiances; and second, to make it understood that at the time when Florence was founded the city of Rome flourished greatly in power, liberty, genius, and especially with great citizens. Now; after the Republic had been subjected to the power of a single head, 'those outstanding minds vanished,' as Tacitus says. So it is of importance whether a colony was founded at a later date, since by then all the virtue and nobility of the Romans had been destroyed; nothing great or outstanding could be conveyed by those who left the city.

Since Florence had as its founders those who were obeyed everywhere by everyone and dominated by their skill and military prowess, and since it was founded when a free and unconquered Roman people flourished in power, nobility, virtues, and genius, it cannot be doubted at all that this one city not only stands out in its beauty, architecture, and appropriateness of site (as we have seen), but that Florence also greatly excels beyond all other cities in the dignity and nobility of its origin.

Section 3

Since Florence derives from such noble forebears, it has never allowed itself to be contaminated by sloth and cowardice, nor has it been content to bask in the glory of its progenitors or rest on its laurels at ease and leisure. Since it was born to such an exalted station, Florence has tried to accomplish those things that everyone expected and desired it to do. Thus, Florence imitated its founders in every kind of virtue, so that in everyone's judgment the city seemed completely worthy of its fine reputation and traditions.

Moreover, Florence did not refrain from fighting to show that it stood out among the leaders of Italy. It gained for itself dominion and glory not by deceit or trickery, not by covering itself with crimes and fraud, but by wise policies, by a willingness to face dangers, by keeping faith, integrity, steadfastness, and, above all, by upholding the rights of weaker peoples. Nor did Florence strive to excel only in riches; it sought to promote its industry and magnificence even more. Nor did it consider it better to be superior in power than in justice and humanity. With these qualities in mind, Florence strove to be the greatest of states; with these it acquired its authority and its glory. If Florence had not followed this policy, it wisely and truly knew that it would be falling away from the virtues of its ancestors and that its noble forebears would be more of a burden than an honour.

Bruni digresses briefly to argue that he is not writing the text to curry favour with the people (though he wishes to be loved as much as anyone else) but rather out of genuine wonderment at the beauty and magnificence of Florence. He fears that he will incur the animosity of the enemies of Florence but takes heart in the truth of his words, even if his critics might assume that he is being dishonest.

Now if my auditors want to comprehend how outstanding a city Florence is (and I have justifiably praised it at length), let them travel through the entire world and select any city they wish and compare it with Florence – not just in splendour and architecture (although in these things Florence is unrivalled in the whole world), nor just in nobility of its citizens (though all other cities cede to Florence first place in this category), but in virtues and accomplishments as well. If they will do these things they will begin to understand what a difference there is between Florence and other cities, for they will find no other city that can compare in any of these praiseworthy categories to our Florence.

I have said ‘any,’ and so I shall prove it forthwith. If they find some city that is judged in the common opinion of men to stand out in some kind of virtue, let them give proof of that same quality in which the city is said to excel. I do not think they will find any city that, even in its own specialty, is not inferior to Florence. In short, a city cannot be found that equals Florence in any given category – not in devoutness of belief, nor in economic might, nor in concern for fellow citizens, nor in the achievements of its people. Let them enter in this competition whatever city they like; Florence will take on all challengers. Let them search throughout the entire world for a city that is thought to possess great glory in one special kind of activity, and let there be a comparison of the most outstanding accomplishments in the field in which their city appears to excel; they will be unable to find anything – unless they simply want to deceive themselves – in which Florence is not far superior. Indeed, the excellence of this city is a real marvel, and as a city worthy of praise in every kind of activity, it is really without equal.

Now I’m not going to discuss practical wisdom, a quality that everyone has always conceded to Florence in any case and that we have always seen practiced here with great capacity. Was there ever such beneficence as this city has displayed and displays now? For this quality seems intended to help as many as possible, and all have heard of the city’s liberality, especially those who have needed it most. Because of Florence’s reputation for generosity, all those who were exiled from their homeland and uprooted by seditious plots, or dispossessed on account of the envy of their fellow citizens, have always come to Florence as to a safe haven and unique sort of refuge. Hence there is no one in the whole of Italy who does not consider himself to possess dual citizenship, the one of the city to which he naturally belongs, the other of the city of Florence. As a result Florence has indeed become the common homeland and quite secure asylum for all of Italy. Here everyone, when he has need, comes and is received by the Florentines with complete goodwill and supreme generosity. Indeed, the zeal for generosity and concern for others are so great in this state that these qualities seem to cry out in a loud voice and are openly acknowledged by everyone. Hence, no one will ever think that he really lacks a homeland so long as the city of Florence continues to exist. The acts of generosity performed actually are even greater than this policy might seem to require, for exiles are not only received with a welcome hand if they are not completely unworthy but also are often helped with gifts in kind and in money. Maintained by such gifts, the exiles can remain in Florence with complete dignity or, if they prefer, they can return to their own homeland and try and recover their property there. Are these not the facts? Have even the malcontents of Italy ever dared to deny it? No, this policy has been witnessed by an almost infinite number of people who, when they had been struck with poverty at home or had been exiled from their own cities, were helped from the public treasury and were restored to their homeland by the goodwill of the city of Florence.

There is, further, the example of many cities that, when they were oppressed by the conspiracies of neighbouring states or the violence of domestic tyrants, were sustained by Florentine advice, aid, and money and thus brought through a difficult crisis. I shall omit the embassies sent wherever trouble has broken out to reconcile opposing viewpoints, for indeed this city has always been very prompt to use its authority in reconciliation. Can a city that has undertaken so much for the benefit of neighbouring states not be called beneficent? Can it really be praised enough for its great virtue and many achievements? Florence has never tolerated injuries to other cities, nor has it ever allowed itself to be an idle onlooker while other states were in trouble. First Florence always tries with all its might and moral authority to settle disputes through negotiations and, if it can, to reconcile differences to persuade the parties to make peace. But if this cannot be accomplished, Florence always aids the weaker party, which has been threatened or harmed by the more powerful. Thus, from the very beginning Florence has always extended its protection to the weaker states, as though it considered its duty to ensure that no people in Italy would ever suffer destruction. Therefore, Florence has never in its history been led by a desire for leisure or has it, because of fear, allowed any other state to suffer great harm. Nor did it think that it had the right to remain at ease and at peace while any other city or ally or friendly state or neutral nation was in danger. Rather, Florence has always immediately stirred itself, taken up the cause

of other cities, and shielded them from attack. Thus it has protected those states that seemed to be lost and aided them with troops, money, and equipment.

Who, therefore, could ever praise Florence enough for its beneficence and liberality? What city in the entire world can surpass Florence in this sort of achievement? Has not Florence expended vast sums and undertaken incredible risks for the defence of other states? Has it not protected many states when they were in danger? Since Florence has defended those states in time of peril, they have naturally begun to acknowledge it as their patron. And since Florence has become such a patron, who will deny that it surpasses other cities in dignity, might, economic power, and authority?

Bruni praises the loyalty that Florence has shown towards its allies and its contempt for danger which is the most outstanding of all Roman virtues: he illustrates this with recent examples of Florentine military escapades, emphasising the fact that these were fought for the benefit of others more than its own profit.

It has been not simply to this or that city that Florence has shown its beneficence but to the whole of Italy. Indeed, it would be judged properly an act of small import if Florence has undertaken these endeavours only for its own safety, but it is a glorious matter if a great many states have known and enjoyed the benefits of the Florentines' efforts. Indeed, it is a fact that Florence has always been motivated by a desire to protect the safety of neighbouring cities that found themselves at war. Whenever such a state was threatened by some neighbouring tyrant or the greedy desires of a nearby republic. Florence always opposed the aggressor, so it has always been dear to everyone that Florence treated these states as its own homeland and fought for the liberty of all Italy. Nor indeed would Florence, so motivated, have accomplished its goal except that many times the pious and just will of God favoured the course of action taken by this city. I do not want to go back to old examples but, rather, shall relate what our own age has just seen. I think that it is obvious in any case that the whole of Italy has been liberated from the yoke of servitude by Florence on more than one occasion.

Bruni argues that Florence has recently prevented the duke of Lombardy (ie the Visconti ruler of Milan) from conquering Italy. But the Republic has never become inflated by its success.

Section 4

As Florence is admirable in foreign affairs, so it has outstanding civil institutions and laws. Nowhere else do you find such internal order, such neatness, and such harmonious cooperation. There is proportion in strings of a harp so that when they are tightened, a harmony results from the different tones; nothing could be sweeter or more pleasing to the ear than this. In the same way, this very prudent city is harmonized in all its parts, so there results a single great, harmonious constitution whose harmony pleases both the eyes and minds of men. There is nothing here that is ill proportioned, nothing improper, nothing incongruous, nothing vague; everything occupies its proper place, which is not only clearly defined but also in right relation to all the other elements. Here are outstanding officials, outstanding magistrates, an outstanding judiciary, and outstanding social classes. These parts are so distinguished so as to serve the supreme power of Florence, just as the Roman tribunes used to serve the emperor.

Now, first of all, great care is taken so that justice is held most sacred in the city, for without justice there can be no city, nor would Florence even be worthy to be called a city. Next there is provision for freedom, without which this great people would not even consider that life was worth living. These two principles are joined (almost as a stamp or goal) to all the institutions and statutes that the Florentine government has created.

Indeed, the magistracies were created to carry out justice; they have been empowered to punish criminals and especially to ensure that there is no one in Florence who stands above the law. Thus, all conditions of men must submit to the decisions of these magistracies, and they must pay due respect to the symbols of these offices. In many ways care has been taken that these upholders of the law to whom great power has been entrusted do not come to imagine that, instead of the custodianship of the citizens, a tyrannical post has been given to them. Many provisions are made so that these magistrates do not lord it over others or undermine the great freedom of the Florentines. First of all, the chief magistracy that is commonly viewed as possessing the sovereignty of the state is controlled by a system

of checks and balances. Hence there are nine magistrates instead of one, and their term is for two months, not for one year. This method of governing has been devised so that the Florentine state may be well governed, since a majority will correct any errors in judgment, and the short terms of office will curb any possible insolence. Moreover, the city is divided into four quarters so that each section can never lack its own representative, and from each quarter two men are elected. And these men are not chosen by chance, but they have the approval of the citizens for a long time and are judged worthy of such a great honour. Now, in addition to these eight citizens, the task of governing the state is entrusted to one man, outstanding in virtue and authority and chosen in rotation from these same quarters. He is the chief of the prorate and bears the standard that is the symbol of the rule of justice over unruly men. The nine men, to whom the government of Florence is entrusted, can live nowhere except in the Palazzo Vecchio, so that they may be in a better position to govern the city. They are not to appear in public without their sergeants, for their dignity demands that they be treated with respect. Indeed, because it sometimes happens that there is a need for a larger council, the Twelve Good Men are added to discuss public matters together with the nine priors. Besides, to these are joined the standard-bearers of the Companies whom the whole population supports and follows since it is necessary to protect liberty with arms. These standard-bearers are also part of the council, and, like the higher magistrates, they are elected by quarter. They hold office for a term of four months.

These three colleges do not have power over all matters to be decided. A great many decisions, once they have been approved by these magistracies, are referred to the Council of the People and Council of the Commune for final action. Florence thinks that what concerns many ought to be decided by the action of the whole citizen-body acting according to the law and legal procedure. In this way liberty flourishes and justice is preserved in this most holy city. In this system nothing can be resolved by the caprice of any single man acting in opposition to the judgment of so many men.

Bruni continues to describe the intricacies of the Florentine constitution.

Therefore, under these magistracies this city has been governed with such diligence and competence that one could not find better discipline even in a household ruled by a solicitous father. As a result, no one here has ever suffered any harm, and no one has ever had to alienate any property except when he wanted to. The judges, the magistrates are always on duty; the courts, even the highest tribunal is open. All classes of men can be brought to trial; laws are made prudently for the common good, and they are fashioned to help the citizens. There is no place on earth where there is greater justice open equally to everyone. Nowhere else does freedom grow so vigorously, and nowhere else are rich and poor alike treated with such equality. In this one also can discern Florence's great wisdom, perhaps greater than that of other cities. Now when very powerful men, relying on their wealth and position, appear to be offending or harming the weak, the government steps in and exacts heavy fines and penalties from the rich. It is consonant with reason that as the status of men is different, so their penalties ought to be different. The city has judged it consistent with its ideals of justice and prudence that those who have the most need should also be helped the most. Therefore, the different classes are treated according to a certain sense of equity; the upper class is protected by its wealth, the lower class by the state, and fear of punishment defends both. From this arises the saying that has been directed very often against the more powerful citizens when they have threatened the lower classes; in such a case the members of the lower class say: 'I also am a Florentine citizen.' With this saying the poor mean to point out and to warn dearly that no one should malign them simply because they are weak, nor should anyone threaten them with harm simply because someone is powerful. Rather, everyone is of equal rank since the Florentine state itself has promised to protect the less powerful.

Florence extends the same protections to foreigners.

Now what shall I say of the persuasiveness of their speech and the elegance of their discourse? Indeed, in this category the Florentines are the unquestioned leaders. All of Italy believes that this city alone possesses the dearest and purist speech. All who wish to speak well and correctly follow the example of the Florentine manner of speech, for this city possesses men who are so expert in their use of the common vernacular language that all others seem like children compared to them. The study of literature – and I don't mean simply mercantile and vile writings but that which is especially worthy of free men – which always flourishes among every great people, grows in this city in full vigour.

Therefore, what ornament does this city lack? What category of endeavor is not fully worthy of praises and grandeur? What about the quality of the forebears? Why are they not the descendants of the Roman

people? What about glory? Florence has done and daily continues to do great deeds of honour and virtue both at home and abroad. What about the splendour of the architecture, the buildings, the cleanliness, the wealth, the great population, the healthfulness and pleasantness of the site? What more can a city desire? Nothing at all. What, therefore, should we say now? What remains to be done? Nothing other than to venerate God on account of His great beneficence and to offer our prayers to God. Therefore, our Almighty and Everlasting God, in whose churches and at whose altars your Florentines worship most devoutly; and you, Most Holy Mother, to whom this city has erected a great temple of fine and glimmering marble, where you are at once mother and purest virgin tending your most sweet son; and you, John the Baptist, whom this city has adopted as its patron saint—all of you, defend this most beautiful and distinguished city from every adversity and from every evil.