Urban historians have long regarded the cities and boroughs of early modern England as ‘deeply rooted’ in a ‘complex of tradition’ – a ‘complex’ that not only survived into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but ‘witnessed a renewed emphasis’.\(^1\) This idea of the traditional urban community has informed the assumption, still common to local historiography, that, until the onset of urbanisation in the last decades of the seventeenth century, towns were ‘pre-modern’ rather than ‘early modern’.\(^2\) More recently, it has been argued that urban ‘tradition’ was invented rather than immutable. Robert Tittler has noted that, in the course of the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, provincial townsmen constructed historical narratives that consolidated the autonomy of urban communities and the oligarchies that governed them.\(^3\) Whether in their compilation of civic genealogies, transcription of civic record, or display of civic artefacts, the historical energies of civic elites were living proof of Keith Thomas’s dictum that ‘the most common reason for invoking the past was to legitimise the prevailing distribution of power’.\(^4\) Jonathan Barry has discerned a later tradition of independent chronicling that differentiated (for example) inhabitants of Bristol from genteel ‘foreigners’, ‘urbane’ interlopers, and county antiquaries, the creation of civic memory contributing, in effect, to a sense of civic distinction.\(^5\) Arguing more generally, Andy Wood has observed that a distinguishing feature of borough custom was that it was ‘often a more overtly mutable construct’ than that in manor and parish, while Adam Fox has stressed the politics that increasingly accompanied the transcription and possession of record within local communities.\(^6\)

These accounts suggest that the ‘complex of tradition’ was nothing if not a product of agency and source of identity. Just as remembering was a deliberate and strategic act, so its material and symbolic outcomes
were intrinsic to the way in which inhabitants of a locality saw their collective selves within local and national culture. There remains the tendency, however, to regard the use and impact of civic memory as part of a more general ‘rise of oligarchy’. Just as civic elites were the primary agents of historical reinvention, so the identities so engendered reinforced their particular vision of the communities they governed. The writing of city histories is a case in point. As Peter Clark puts it, such texts were ‘strategies’ aimed at ‘the shoring up and reassertion of the values of the civic community in a time of instability’: ‘motifs’ for ‘the rise of civic oligarchy in many English towns during the Tudor and early Stuart period’. This approach is functional, regarding histories as ‘devices’ for ‘creating a deferential citizenry, suitably impressed with the lineage of local government and the necessity of strong rule’. It assumes that the wider reception of texts – and so the formation of identity – was passive and uncritical. And, to a large extent, it disregards alternative constructions and assertions of the past among freemen, burgesses and citizens. As a result, the complexities and contests of agency and identity are elided, the full gamut of ideological positions and agendas obscured.

This chapter addresses the politics of remembering and its implications for the identity and agency of not so much the individual person as the corporate bodies they constituted. The corporeality of community – and also the communal basis of public acts – was a crucial but often neglected feature of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century political culture, and also pivotal to the way contemporaries perceived themselves and legitimated public actors. The chapter suggests that an historicised framework for understanding both civic politics and the identities it spawned is not a sociological concept of ‘oligarchy’ so much as the Aristotelian notion of ‘city commonwealth’. Propagated in both theory and practice in the second half of the sixteenth century, this structured two kinds of dispute in particular. One source of contention was constitutional – whether the ‘public good’ of cities and boroughs should be organised along ‘aristocratic’ or ‘democratic’ lines. Another was religious, citizens and burgesses increasingly seeking to control the ‘common soul’ of communities and the consciences of their fellow communicants. Civic ‘traditions’ – or what contemporaries regarded as ‘customs’ – were constitutive to this politics in a number of respects. In towns as elsewhere, the past was crucial to justifying, acting upon, and changing the present: the very legitimacy of the charters, orders, and rituals upon which civic governance rested was derived in large part from their ‘customary’ and ‘ancient’ status. Insofar as history was a