

Bringing the *Distant City* Closer

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Chiara Frugoni's *A Distant City: Images of Urban Experience in the Medieval World* offers the reader insight as to how medieval people viewed the city by providing examples in art. She spends the majority of the text explaining two principal points, namely the city as a symbol of protection and the city as a model of Jerusalem, which was primarily important in religious terms. Frugoni's book, first published in 1983 and translated from the Italian in 1991, focuses on Italian examples in her discussion, devoting an entire chapter to the changing view of the city visible in Siena's artwork.

Frugoni's principal ideas require her first to distinguish between two conceptions of the city, which she terms the *urbs* and the *civitas*. Effectively, she shows a divide between the city as a physical entity and the state or the people of the city. Frugoni follows the integration of these two ideas throughout the middle ages into an eventual unified whole. She argues that in the early middle ages, the people perceived the city as consisting primarily of single houses; its defining attribute as a city comes from its walls, and empty walls represent cities through the year 1000. Maps and coins depicted cities as empty hexagonal walls as early as the fifth century. Jerusalem was the only distinguishable city in art, and sketches of the city date from the ninth century, yet these sketches link the earthly and heavenly Jerusalem. Cities became part of a historical tradition through association with prosperous, old, distant cities, such as Byzantium. A city's other defining characteristic, of course, was its church. Frugoni refers to a Bartolo di Fredi painting from 1382 which clearly depicts Siena; the viewer can identify the city from its black and white church. Frugoni also uses written accounts, such as a

manuscript from the ninth century which praises Milan, to convey that the city was defined by its founders and its walls. Artists, she adds, struggled to make figures interact with the urban backdrop. Buildings tended to look distant from the goings-on in a piece of art.

Frugoni emphasizes the importance of the church to the city throughout her text. As the home of churches, the city granted a space safe from evil; all that which was outside the city, then, was perceived as chaos. Therefore, the city became a place of spiritual defense, and the church functioned as a miniature city. The church so defined the city that Frugoni observes it to be the first building shown within the city walls, again citing de Fredi's 1382 depiction of Siena. Frugoni also traces the way in which other public spaces, as they develop, stand beside but do not overpower the church. Ambrogio Lorenzetti's mural of *Buon Governo* in Siena, painted in 1338, places the theological and cardinal virtues alongside the personification of good government. Moreover, most cities eventually adopted a spiritual protector, bishop or saint, as certainly as they had walls. Frugoni does not mention the secular protection (such as sanctuary) offered by such spaces, though this would certainly have been pertinent in the time of Margery Kempe.

Frugoni presents a clear, strong argument for the city and its pieces as symbols of protection and defense to the medieval mind. Well chosen examples from medieval art and writing as well as a carefully constructed argument make the book an informative, worthwhile read.