

Élisabeth Crouzet-Pavan. *Les Villes Vivantes: Italie, XIII^e–XV^e siècles*. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2009. 477 pp. index. map. bibl. €27. ISBN: 978-2-213-64265-9.

Élisabeth Crouzet-Pavan offers an innovative study of the medieval and early Renaissance cities of Northern and Central Italy through the history of their relations with the built and natural environments. Readers will not find in this volume a survey of current research designed to create generalized claims about “the Italian urban experience”; nor does it follow the older model of “total history”

enshrined in some monographs on individual Italian cities. Instead, Crouzet-Pavan has put together a series of studies, some tightly focused on Venice and drawing heavily on her original research in the archives, some collating examples culled from secondary literature and published primary sources concerning other cities. For readers led by the title to expect an overview, the small range of cities represented may be disappointing; however, Crouzet-Pavan argues that the two scales — Italian and Venetian — allow her to avoid the perils of excessive generalization, and they clearly showcase her original research on Venice.

The initial chapters of the book focus on French historiography of the Italian city and on Venice's foundation myths and relationship with the environment. Sections 3–5 are the most closely integrated parts of the book and perhaps the most immediately accessible and interesting. Section 3 looks at the politics of the communes in relation to the built environment, offering a portrait of the construction of urban identity and political power through, especially, more workaday building projects like docks and drains. Section 4 examines the cities' attitudes towards risk, especially as they faced the dangers of fire and pollution. It concludes with a section on public health and offers a much more positive assessment of the city governments' ability and desire to intervene to limit risk than is often found in the literature on the medieval city. Section 5 approaches the economic life of the city — here especially Venice — through the experience of its workers. In Section 6, the author's treatment of the sale of real estate is particularly interesting, as it gives a solid urban foundation to her contributions to the debate over family relations and the status of women in Venetian society.

This book is innovative in exploring urban history as a set of interactions between political, social, and economic life and the natural and built environments. The author is interested in agency and in the ways in which the environment affected and stimulated human responses, and at the same time she emphasizes that there was no single vision of the medieval city and no single policy for its development. Similarly she resists the common portrait of a passive, fearful medieval populace huddled behind their walls or lagoons, waiting for the next disaster to strike. Although careful not to overstate the technical and organizational capacity of medieval cities to fight fires or to control water pollution, her examples argue effectively for very real attempts to assess and manage risk, while still allowing room for growth and industry.

For an international audience, the initial historiographical chapter that examines the relative lack of French scholarship on Italian cities is less meaningful than the insights scattered throughout the book on history of sensibilities, the environment, families, and of course, urban history. A fuller discussion, beyond what is contained in the rich and interesting notes, of the intersections between her work and Italian studies of the practices of urban life would have been welcome. In the extensive bibliography it is pity not to see Robert Brentano's *A New World in a Small Place* (1994) and Roberta Magnusson's *Water Technology in the Middle Ages* (2001), both immediately relevant to the themes of

this book. Maps more specific to the content of the book would have been very useful, as would illustrations of the works of art that she discusses.

Overall, this book offers an important set of studies on the lived environment of Venice and selected other Italian cities. It is a mine of interesting information and potential topics for further research, especially for cities other than Venice. The insights on historiography and source problems further the author's project of encouraging historians to move away from studying politics, economics, and urban planning as distinct systems in past societies and to look instead at the ways in which people in all aspects of their lives interacted with their natural and built environments.

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