

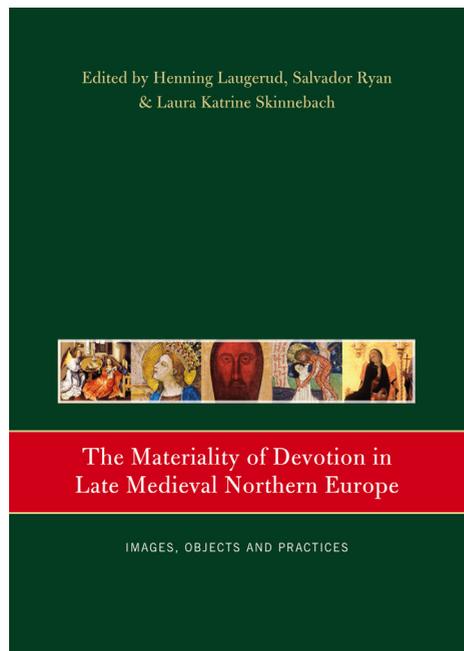
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The Materiality of Devotion in Late Medieval Northern Europe. Images, Objects and Practices, edited by Henning Laugerud, Salvador Ryan & Laura Katrine Skinnebach. Dublin: Four Court Press, 2016. ISBN 978-1-84682-5033 (191 pp).

The Materiality of Devotion in Late Medieval Northern Europe. Images, Objects and Practices is the latest publication from the members of ENID – the European Network of the Instruments of Devotion. The network focuses on the instrumental aspects of Christian piety and devotional practices from the 14th to the 20th century. It was established in 2003 and has been operative since 2004. At present, it consists of 23 scholars from Norway, Denmark, Belgium, England, Ireland, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain and the U.S.

The current volume is partly made up of papers first presented at the ENID-workshop in Michaelbeuern in Austria in 2009. The volume explores various aspects of the devotional world of late medieval northern Europe, in particular “how people interacted with texts, images, artefacts and other instruments of piety and the level of the senses,” as the editors state in the open-

ing lines (p. 1). The editors further provide the reader with three conceptual frameworks for this interaction, first outlining the sensory and bodily aspect of devotion, then the materiality of late medieval religiosity, and finally the interlaced sensorium. From the former we learn that sensing was a culturally defined practice, and that devotional practices were closely connected to memory and mnemotechnics, thereby incorporating the whole sensorium, and that material (or matter) in the medieval world was anything but static and dead. Rather, we learn that the distinction between materiality and spirituality was porous. In the part entitled ‘The Interlaced Sensorium,’ the editors establish ‘interlaced’ as the common notion for the different perspectives on medieval materiality employed by the various authors throughout the volume. It is further stated that devotional sensing included both bodily and mental exercis-

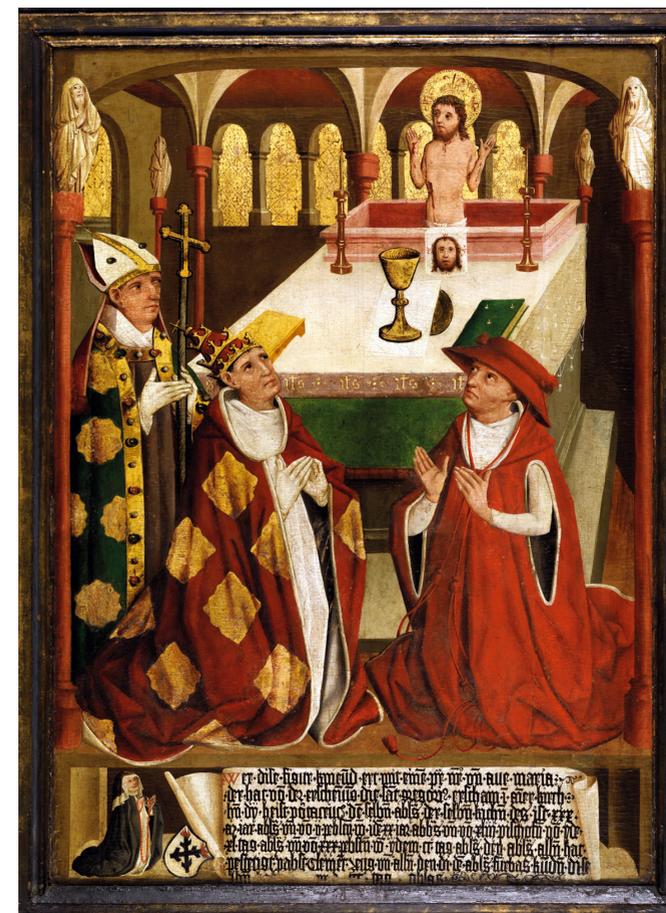


es proportionately, being “fundamentally connected to the medieval understanding of signs and meaning” (p. 4). The editors claim that medieval signs are polysemous, and that materiality mediated by the senses have multiple interpretative possibilities, too. As such, they “could open the doors of memory and trigger unending trails of reflection” (p. 5).

The polysemousness and unfolding nature of signs is a recurring theme. For example, we learn that “a single sign could, then, convey a whole world of meaning that were all intricately interlaced” (p. 4), “even the most basic sign could be unfolded to signify whole worlds” (p. 5), “through one single sign the whole mystery of Christianity could be comprehended” (p. 6), wheth-

er the editors comments on Isidore of Seville’s ‘De pictura’ or on Mary Carruthers’ engagement with later medieval writers. The editors follow Carruthers’ notion of medieval culture as being basically a culture of memory.¹ Memory is closely linked to commemoration in general and in particular commemorations of Christ’s sacrifice; the latter is known as *anamnesis*, the memorial character of the Eucharist. It is summed up as “clearly mirrored in material culture” (p. 6), thus setting the scene for the following eight chapters.

Although the ENID network is widespread across Europe, one notices that the contributors to this volume are limited to the countries Belgium, Denmark, Ireland and Norway. The first chapter, however, is written by a non-member. This is professor emeritus Bernt Hamm from Germany, who was also present at the workshop in Michaelbeuern. His chapter, entitled “Types of grace mediality in the late Middle Ages”, is based on his previous publications concerning the concept of ‘proximate grace.’ In the late Middle Ages, new ways to articulate proximate grace developed alongside a popularization of new media, like print technologies, which jointly activated the ‘formula of reciprocity’ – the one who gives something specific will receive something specific in return (p. 14). The three types of grace mediality are explained: the mediality of salvation, the mediality of mediation as subjective participation in the Christ event, and the material-technical mediality of an available image sheet (p. 25). Hamm also discusses the spread



Master of the Velden high altar: epitaph of the Dominican nun Dorothea Schürstab with the Mass of St Gregory. Painting on fir wood, 128 x 92cm. Around 1475. Formerly Saint Katharina's Convent, Nürnberg. Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nürnberg.

of e.g. woodcuts and their potential use as remedies for interiorization and/or exteriorization of devotional life. The chapter concludes with an excursion on the Reformation and the collapse in the difference between the three types of grace mediality (p. 34). We notice that Hamm mostly refers to research carried out by German or German speaking scholars, thus introducing many readers to works which are not

commonly referred to in English publications. However, the chapter also seems less integrated with the rest of the volume, as cross-references to literature listed as central to the volume’s main topic are wanting. When reading about *Augencommunion* (p. 25), I am left wondering how this concept in Hamm’s chapter could be related to Susannah Biernoff’s ‘ocular communion,’ as she is mentioned by the editors as one of

the scholars who have come up with important contributions to the study of devotional practices (p. 1). Also, when reading about the mediality of Christ as a ‘broken mediality’, I would welcome cross-references to the application of ‘broken’ in the essays in *The Broken Body. Passion and Devotion in Late Medieval Culture* (p. 163).

In the next chapter, “The Body of Christ and the union ‘without difference’: Hadewijch’s Eucharistic *Vision 7–8* reconsidered”, Rob Faesen discusses two of the thirteenth century poet and mystic Hadewijch’s visions. Faesen explains her experience of being in Christ and having Christ in her as corresponding to the theology of William of Sainte-Thierry and Peter Lombard, a radical confirmation of Christian humanism. In his chapter, “‘And how could I find Thee at all, if I do not remember Thee?’ Visions, images and memory in late medieval devotion”, Henning Laugerud is concerned with what the visionaries saw. Laugerud is also addressing Hadewijch, as well as three women from the Helfta monastery in Eisleben, and Julian of Norwich. In the case of Gertrude of Helfta, visions are explained to her by Christ as being his method of making invisible things visible (p. 56), while, according to Julian of Norwich, they are the beginning of a process that is part of a greater context (p. 60). This latter statement coincides with the introductory remarks by the editors, as well as with Laugerud’s treatment of visions, images and memory. He concludes that “The visionary’s *visio*, when it comes down to it, is nothing more than a sign that shows that the physical image –

what everyone can see – signifies. It is an image of an image in an endless chain of signs, which all lead to God so that mankind can be restored to the grace of God and be redeemed” (p. 69). A detail of language, perhaps, but Julian of Norwich’s three categories of visual cognition are said to be “based on St Augustin’s theory of the three types of human vision” (p. 63, i.e. physical vision, spiritual or ‘inner’ vision and intellectual vision) – were they, or are they re-conceptualizations, as Erin T. Chandler has argued.²

In the chapter “Christ the wounded lover and affective piety in late medieval Ireland and beyond”, Salvador Ryan discusses mystical themes in the religious works of Irish bardic poets. Ryan focuses on writers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, exploring various manifestations of ‘blood piety’ and sensual imagery relating to Christ’s wounds. Many examples from the poems discussed are – at least to this reader – a welcome addition to what is commonly referred to as material linked to devotional practices. His concern for modern readers “not normally accustomed to a blending of the religious and erotic,” however, seems somewhat superfluous. Most readers of this book will be familiar with scholarship blending the two, perhaps in particular through feminist and queer perspectives, such as publications by Michael Camille, Madeline Caviness, Martha Easton and Andrea Pearson, to name but a few.

In her chapter entitled “Transfiguration: change and comprehension in late medieval devotional perception”, Laura K. Skin-

nebach addresses transfiguration as phenomenon, taking the transfiguration of Christ as her point of departure. Looking at transformations from bodies to images in hagiography, the presence and, consequently, the absence of God, becomes evident for the one experiencing it. Relating transformation to objects, Skinnebach discusses a very interesting rubric in a Danish book of hours from the fifteenth century (p. 98), telling how one is encouraged to make a wax image of St Catherine of Alexandria and read fifty *aves* and *pater nosters* for twenty days, before transforming the image into a candle. For the bodies in hagiography and wax images in devotion it becomes clear that “materiality itself expressed the perishable nature of man before the eternal God” (p. 101) and a “comprehension through change in appearance” is seen as fundamental (p. 103). Interestingly, the same observations could have formed part of the conclusion of the chapter that follows, “Do not judge a head by its cover: the materiality of the *Johannesschüssel* as reliquary”, written jointly by Soetkin Vanhauwaert and Georg Geml. Vanhauwaert and Geml explore sculptures of the head of John the Baptist, the reliquaries known as *Johanneschüssel*, demonstrating that this reliquary may be executed in all sorts of material – from gold and silver to *papier mâché* and wood, concluding “the material of the reliquary did not matter, if you just believed in the efficacy of the container’s content” (p. 120).

In “The Annunciation and the senses: late medieval devotion and the pictori-

al gaze”, Barbara Baert turns to the iconography of the Annunciation. She analyses it “in terms of contemporary opinions on vision, incarnation, synaesthesia and the pulsating powers beneath the mystery of visible invisibility” (p. 121). Her analysis include the notion of ‘interior allegory’ and categories like wind and odour, and in the discussion of her material, the polysemousness of signs claimed in the introduction is fully operational, for example in exploring the material tribute to Mary herself, the lily, “this mysterious immaculate flower seems to be charged with all humanity’s nostalgia (...)” (p. 142). What is at stake in the Annunciation is the Incarnation, the very precious moment invisible to the human eye. Therefore, ultimately, “The history of images is a history of the desire to coincide with the visible” (p. 144). The Annunciation situates itself equally as “matrixical (receptive, prenatal) and phallic (additive, formed)”. Iconographically, it is situated “between odour and seed, between lily and dove, between a golden ray and a stain” (p. 144).

In the final chapter of the volume, “Protheses of pious perception: on the instrumentalization and mediation of the medieval sensorium”, Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen asks: “Why ‘instruments’?” (p. 146). While most authors in the anthology turn to medieval writers and scholars within the humanities interpreting their writings, Lohfert Jørgensen widens the scope by also including sociologists and media theorists. The author explores the protheses of pious perception, introducing the read-

ers to sensescapes, smellscapes and soundscapes. Lohfert Jørgensen claims that “Late medieval piety relied heavily on its techno-anthropological foundation,” established in very concrete form, making e.g. the church building something like the French cultural theorist Paul Virilio’s ‘vision machine’ (p. 164). A surplus of the layout, intentional or not: The miniature of St Hedwig of Silesia with her “sensitive fingers full of devotional instruments and media” owing her sanctity to a “multisensory posture of piety” (p. 156) is juxtaposed with a discussion of “‘iconic’ olfactory experiences” (p. 157). One cannot help to notice how St Hedwig’s posture is also present in modern visual culture, like in the commercials for Thierry Mugler’s perfumes. What was a posture of piety is now a posture for publicity – indeed a blending of the religious and the erotic.

After reading the book, I am surprised to find that its title, *The Materiality of Devotion in Late Medieval Northern Europe. Images, Objects and Practices*, has no reference to vision(s). Visions form such a substantial part of its content, in particular for the chapters by Faesen and Laugerud. Also, as the title indicates Northern Europe as the topics’ geographical boundaries, there are instances when one would have expected examples from north of the Alps rather than from the south. In this regard, the otherwise very interesting excursion on the tomb of St Nicolaus in Bari is perhaps most out of place. The translations of the texts not originally written in English seem sound and the book is thoroughly edited

and contains few typographical errors.

The cover states that the volume is beautifully illustrated. All chapters have black and white illustrations; pages with color illustrations, however, are only gathered in a middle section of the book. While understandable from the point of view of printing costs, the solution becomes slightly impractical for the reader. They are beautiful, though, and of good quality. The index at the end is helpful and comprehensive. In conclusion, the book is warmly recommended to all readers who wish a broad-ranging and well-informed guide to the materiality of medieval devotion. In their engagement with the material, texts (visions and poems) as well as objects (woodcuts, miniatures, epitaphs, reliquaries), various approaches are employed. One may neatly sum it up with one of the lines from T.S.Elliot’s *The Four Quartets*, quoted at the opening of Barbara Baert’s chapter – “and the rest is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.”

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- 1 Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory. A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- 2 Erin T. Chandler, “The Present Time of Things Past: Julian of Norwich’s Appropriation of St Augustine’s Generative Theory of Memory,” *Rhetoric Review*, Vol. 31, No.4 (2012), 389–404.