
The third book in the Brill *Visualising the Middle Ages* series delivers just what its publication mandate promises: a multifaceted vision of medieval thought. Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak presents an argument grounded in a stated desire to better understand the vision of personification, representation and authority invested in the seal. In the introduction to the book, the author explains that this task requires the use of a “...diverse range of interpretive tools derived from diplomatics, semiotic anthropology, cultural history, material culture, and literary criticism” (p.4).

The book opens with ‘Beyond the Text’, the first chapter in the critically charged ‘Sources and Methods’ section in which the author outlines her approach to documentary practice. Claiming that “...Northern French charters reveal their fullest significance when analytical and interpretive attention is given to, and inspired by, their technicalities,” (p.36) Bedos-Rezak argues for a depiction of the charter attuned to issues of production and social meaning, rather than “the self interpreting model created by a civilization for its economic, legal, and administrative purposes” (p.34). This goal is then swiftly addressed in the second sources and methods chapter, ‘Towards an Archaeology of the Medieval Charter’, in which the provenance of charters is examined. The chapter aptly raises some interesting questions concerning the ‘genealogy’ of extant charters and the ghosts of proposed documents that may or may not have once existed (pp.39-40).

In the second section of the book, entitled ‘Imago’, Bedos-Rezak outlines the representative qualities of the seal and of the practice of sealing in a series of four chapters. The first of these, ‘The King's Sign’, discusses the genesis of French sealing practice in the Merovingian and Carolingian eras. The chapter puts forth the proposal that the kings of the early Middle Ages sealed with the intent of implying their own presence, rather than as a practice of authentication (p.77). As Carolingian sealing practice fell increasingly under Church authority, Bedos-Rezak argues, the eleventh century the seal came to represent “but a single facet of their broader commitment to the written word as a tool that articulated and supported their own ideologic positions” (p.86).

In chapter five, ‘Eucharistic Theology and Episcopal Signature’, we are introduced to the notion that the sharing of characteristics between signifier and signified represented a radical new development (pp.100-101). Citing the growing debate over the doctrine of transubstantiation, Bedos-Rezak argues that the seal, as with the presence of Christ in the host, became indicative of a real present of the signified individual within the process of sealing, an “actualisation of personal authority and identity in engraved matter” (p.101).

In chapter six, ‘Medieval Identity: Subject, Object, Agency’, Bedos-Rezak argues that “Prescholastic sign theory informed and enabled the representational capacity of seals, so that seals could embody the identity and operate as the *imago* of their owners through their very modes of signification.” (p.159) This process was enacted though the semantic components of the seal (text and image) together with diverse forms of semiotic operation (stereotypy, resemblance, replication, and mechanisation). In this section, the book turns to an image of *imago* as a commonly understood, replicable, code of authority and identity (p.159).
The seventh and final chapter of the ‘Imago’ section ties the semantics of sigilography to a broader semiotics of *imago* as personal semiotics, an “immanent theory of signs” as the author puts it (p.171). Proposing that “the economy of representation through images became inseparable from its anchor in personality, whether human or divine,” Bedos-Rezak presents a compelling picture of the seal as an ambiguous entity. Both invoking the immediate presence of the signified human object as a *type* of a divine archetype and blurring originality and authenticity through replicability, the author's complex and yet elegant semiotic analysis presents a compelling image of the seal as *imago* (p.204).

In the third and final section, entitled ‘Ego’, the author ties off her argument by discussing two fascinating case studies in twin chapters: the notion of *difformitas* or dissimilarity (Ch 8) and the semiotics of personality (Ch 9). In chapter eight, we are presented with the intriguing notion that sealing practice reveals a culture not of individuality, but of the replicability of personal identity. Bedos-Rezak describes the pejorative description of *difformitas* (difformity) as deviance or dissimilarity vis-à-vis the ‘shape’ of one's proscribed form. This “reveals a deep anxiety about the perceived malleability of man and society, their susceptibility to various impressions, the fluidity of their boundaries.” (p.230) The ninth chapter ties the various threads together with a study of various seals from cities, individuals, kings and ecclesiastical figures in light of the Ego/Imago model. This chapter is of particular interest for cultural historians, for it delves into the iconographic representation of collectives such as the city in depth.

While my assessment of the book is largely positive, there are a few qualifications that a potential reader may wish to take into account. The prose style of the book is characterised by an intensity and turgor that is both exhausting and stimulating to read. Sentences are often telegraphed and filled with compressed terminology, for no word is wasted. The footnotes are practically bursting at the seams with additional content. I found these characteristics challenging in a positive sense, yet suspect that it may vex some readers. This may be taken as a criticism, but to my mind this style of writing is entirely appropriate to the subject matter.

As a book, *When Ego was Imago: Signs of Identity in the Middle Ages* is complex and intense, and yet exudes a manifest enthusiasm that lends it a charismatic appeal. It does credit to the series to which it belongs, providing a truly original vision of medieval thought that will, I suspect, remain with me for many years to come.

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