Lucie Doležalova (ed.), The Making of Memory in the Middle Ages, Brill, Leiden, 2010; pp. 480; RRP €152.00 / US$225.00 hardback.

Part of the Brill series on Later Medieval Europe, The Making of Memory in the Middle Ages taps into the formative theoretical work of influential memory scholars such as Janet Coleman, Mary Carruthers, and Patrick Geary. The result is a rich survey of both the variety of research currently underway in the field, and of the wide range of uses to which the study of memory may be put. The volume begins with a preface by Patrick Geary, author of the influential Phantoms of Remembrance. Referring to the so-called 'memory boom' of recent years, Geary observes that scholars from diverse subsets of memory studies too often “work in isolation from each other, rarely asking to what extent, if any, these aspects of memory are related” (p.xi). This book, by contrast, forms a web of interrelationships that is a delight to read, compare and contrast. To those with an existing interest in the discourse on memory, The Making of Memory represents a welcome and invigorating collection of new perspectives and approaches.

Upon picking up the volume, the reader is presented with a prismatic cover image of intriguing design. Although not initially apparent, one learns after reading the book that the cover art has in fact been generated from the image of a skeletal archer, the mnemonic image of death or mors (Kiss, p.50 – from Prague Nat. Library MS I. G. 11a, fol.17r). This motif is a powerful representation of the book it has been chosen to represent, for when opening its pages, the reader is dazzled by an array of perspectives that put one in mind of the view through a prism: a scintillating collection of facets.

By breaking the contents of this lengthy volume into two sections —‘Storing and Recuperating Knowledge’ and ‘Remembering and Forgetting the Past’— Doležalová facilitates the peripatetic scholar seeking to home in on those sections that most concern them. This division between the presentation of memory and the vagaries of memory in practise is then further subdivided into sub-sections. My only criticism of this approach is that, when reading the collection as a whole, its contents fall unevenly under the aegis of the topic. Whereas the majority of papers clearly reside within the stated scope of the book, there are a number of outliers that, while interesting, are somewhat distracting. In practise, certain sections are solid contributors to the making of memory, whereas others have the feel of an appendage. In a quest to balance cohesiveness with variety, it seems the results can be a touch riotous. Certain papers within the book jump out as particularly emblematic of its primary message to the reader. The examples below will give interested parties an idea of what to expect, yet many more await within.

In the section entitled ‘The Art of Memory in Practice,’ Kimberly Rivers discusses the memory of the virtues and the vices in the Fasciculus Morum of John Sintram. This intriguing piece delineates the mnemonic techniques utilised by a fifteenth-century Franciscan friar. Rivers makes the important point that, “As scholars struggled to read only parts of works; new organisational techniques made finding the desired sections much easier” (p.46), and that the mendicant orders were particularly adept at creating new research tools to this end. John Sintram is presented as a gifted arranger of mnemonic material, who effectively links the virtues and vices together through interrelated layers of material acting to foster memory not only of moral principles, but their interrelationships. It represents but one
of a series of essays illuminating the production and function of mnemonics within the text.

The essay is followed by a second essay strongly supportive of this theme, that of storing and recuperating knowledge. Farkas Gábor Kiss' study of the fifteenth-century memory machine in Central Europe provides a cogent representation of mnemotechnics in action. This ‘machine,’ argues Kiss, was composed of a text filled with allegorical figurae, of which the grandiose claim was made that, through it, the entirety of theology could be memorised (p.58). The text, the author argues, creates a complex network of mnemonic connection, linking each ingredient of theology with its subsets, and these subsets with Biblical quotations illustrating them. This paper is particularly effective, since it demonstrates the many layers of allegorical meaning able to be synthesised in a single, cohesive nexus of memory.

In a section entitled ‘Mnemonic Aids’, Laura Iseppi De Filippis presents a piece on verbal and visual enthymeme as Late Medieval Mnemotechnics. The Aristotelian device of the Enthymeme or abridged syllogism is put forth by the author as a device of implied or subconscious meaning, one that encourages the reader to recall implied or suppressed significance, thus invoking a “fluctuating or latency of images” (p.137). Allegorical images in late medieval sermon literature and wall paintings, it is argued, prompt an 'informal' kind of logical reasoning in which the audience is encouraged to make use of latent knowledge in order make meaning (p.146). The philosophical framework of this paper offers a thoroughgoing analysis of the evoking of memory following its storage or retention.

The paper by Cédric Giraud about Anselm of Laon in the twelfth-century schools was particularly representative of the second theme, that of remembering and forgetting the past. The paper juxtaposes the great fama (the authority of the teacher and success gained thanks to teaching) of Anselm with the power post mortem granted to his intellectual work. Such was the memory of a single great master on the schools that, when critics attached their teachings, it became necessary to clearly define the providence and 'level of authority' attributed to his mnemonic legacy and those of other great teachers. So strong was the influence of masters like Anselm, argues Giraud, that the very notion of a 'school' became defined by them. This research compliments the seminal research of C. Stephen Jaeger in The Envy of Angels on self-imagination in the schools, once again adding a new approach to a topic of great interest.

The result of collating such a wide collection of perspectives into an edited volume presents a veritable menagerie of memory studies, with impressive breadth in both geographical and thematic scope. Like any good menagerie, the exoticism of the subject is kept well in hand, and each individual chapter and section is meticulously arranged for ease of reading and reference. The collection boldly pursues memory into corners of medieval culture beyond the scope of this review, from biblical exegesis and preacher's handbooks, to Norse kennings and the trials of the Inquisition. In The Making of Memory in the Middle Ages, the academic reader is sure to encounter a contribution to the study of memory as prismatic as its cover art.

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