

Gert Melville/Martial Staub (Hrsgg.): Brill's Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages. Leiden/Boston: Brill 2017. 2 Bde. XXI, 1332 S. € 350.00/\$ 420.00. ISBN: 978-90-04-29315-1.

*Brill's Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages* provides an English translation of Gert Melville and Martial Staub's *Enzyklopädie des Mittelalters*, originally published by Primus, the Darmstadt-based imprint of the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft. Since its publication in 2008, the *Enzyklopädie* has become something of a household name in Germany, where it is listed frequently alongside other encyclopaedias and dictionary-type reference works such as the famous *Lexikon des Mittelalters*. Due to its continuing popularity, particularly amongst University students and a wider public, a second edition of the *Enzyklopädie* was published in 2013, and it is this second edition that provides the basis for Brill's new English translation. Given the mostly favourable reviews that the *Enzyklopädie* has received over recent years, it should come as no surprise to find that Brill's *Encyclopedia* maintains the tried-and-tested format of its German exemplar. The two-volume book has been produced to a very high standard, and its solid material quality means that it will withstand even the most frequent usage in a University library.

Unlike many existing reference works, *Brill's Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages* does not provide alphabetically-structured lemmata, but instead offers its reader a broader (one might even say global) panorama of medieval Europe (and the study thereof), which is developed thematically over the course of eight subject-specific chapters. These are, in order of their appearance: *Society* (pp. 1–428); *Faith and Knowledge* (pp. 429–584); *Literature* (pp. 585–662); *Fine Arts and Music* (pp. 663–750); *Economy* (pp. 751–820); *Technology* (pp. 821–904); *Living Environments and Conditions* (pp. 905–988); and *Constitutive Historical Events and Regions* (pp. 989–1104). Rather like a Russian nesting doll, each of these chapters incorporates several layers of sub-sections. To give an example, the *Encyclopedia's* opening chapter, *Society*, contains sections entitled *Sovereignty*; *Social Formations*; *Norms*; and *Interaction and Communication*, each of which is broken down further into smaller sections. *Sovereignty* is divided into *Conceptions of Political Order* and *Forms of Organisation*, the first of which distinguishes further between *Universal Powers*; *Hierarchical Order*; and *Corporate Order*. Finally, *Universal Powers* is subdivided once more into *Papacy* and *Empire*.

Like any encyclopaedia, *Brill's Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages* is inevitably selective with regard to its contents and the way in which these are organised and presented to the reader. As the editors emphasise in their Introduction, “[t]he guiding principle [...] is always to highlight the relationship between the [encyclopaedia’s] individual parts and the whole” (p. XVII). This dynamic relationship is reflected in the way the *Encyclopedia’s* individual chapters and (sub)sections relate to one another. Taken together, they combine into a coherent and, it must be said, remarkably comprehensive discussion of the European Middle Ages. The extent of cross-referencing between individual entries is balanced carefully against the text’s readability. Cross-references are inserted in parentheses and, due to their short format, cause minimal distraction from the reading process. The *Encyclopedia’s* individual sections are of good length, and they often offer more detail and discussion than the average dictionary entry, at the same time as engaging with key historiographical issues and debates. Indeed, the editors and contributing authors have succeeded in producing a user-friendly and easy-to-navigate resource that serves not merely as a reference work in the traditional sense, but also as an up-to-date review of scholarly discourse in the interdisciplinary field of Medieval Studies.

Given the *Encyclopedia’s* ambitious scope, which combines historical studies with literary studies, history of art and architecture, sociology, philosophy, theology, music and communication studies, it is impossible to review a large number of topics in sufficient detail. Instead, I would like to exemplify my impression of the work as a whole by selecting two specific chapter/sections for review. In making this selection, I have allowed myself to be guided primarily by my own research specialisms, whilst reserving topics with which I am less familiar for the scrutiny and judgement of specialist readers.

The first section selected for review here is that entitled *Ecclesiastical Forms of Organisation* (pp. 110–150), which is nestled under *Society > Sovereignty > Forms of Organisation* in the *Encyclopedia’s* first volume. It incorporates five sub-sections dedicated to the *Papacy*, *Curial Systems*, *Cardinalate*, *Councils and Synods*; *Bishoprics*; *Parishes*; and *Religious Life – Monasteries and Religious Orders*. The section operates largely chronologically, beginning with the history of the early Church and its communities, thereby reaching into pre-medieval periods, before focusing more specifically on early medieval Rome and the emerging Papacy. From here on, the spread and development of ecclesiastical organisation throughout the Latin West (and sometimes

beyond) is explored with continuous reference to the Roman Curia and its dependent institutions. Following a concise section on ecclesiastical councils and synods from the earliest oecumenical councils all the way to the thirteenth century, the role of medieval bishops and bishoprics is investigated from a historical and comparative perspective. This, in turn, feeds naturally into the next section on parishes and their relationship to the diocesan bishops, which dovetails neatly with the analysis of monasteries and religious orders that concludes the section, especially the discussion of monastic reform and liberty *vis-à-vis* episcopal authority.

As someone whose main research and teaching activity falls within the field of medieval monastic history, I can see this approach offering a number of important benefits to the *Encyclopedia's* users. Indeed, some of the most notorious difficulties in teaching and publishing religious history in an increasingly secular(ised) society emerge from having to communicate to students/non-specialist audiences the fundamentals of ecclesiastical organisation and its impact on the socio-political structures throughout medieval Europe. In striking the delicate balance between 'textbook-style' information and advanced scholarly debate, the *Encyclopedia* provides an easily accessible resource that fulfils this important desideratum.

Another section I will discuss in more detail is that dedicated to *The Human Being* (pp. 498–515), which forms part of the *Encyclopedia's* second chapter, *Faith and Knowledge*. The section is divided into *Conceptions of the Human Being*; *Trivium*; *Historiography*, *Perception of History*; and *Exemplum*. This is an intriguing structural choice, especially as it raises the question of the placement of *Historiography*. Whilst some readers might instinctively expect this topic to be addressed in the course of one of the *Encyclopedia's* other chapters/sections – for example, *Interaction and Communication*, perhaps even *Literature* –, the rationale behind the editors' decision reveals itself in conjunction with the section's adjacent topics: by detaching historical consciousness and historiographical production from discussions about 'genre', and by linking them explicitly to frameworks of human perception of the self (and, by implication, the 'other'), they become an integral part of the *conditio humana*. Writing history, in this sense, is conceptualised not merely as a means of processing and generating knowledge, but, moreover, as a fundamental act of human self-perception and identity formation, individually, collectively and, not least, institutionally. Last but not least, the section also ties in well with recent investigations into the inherent relationship between history,

historiography and (cultural) memory. Similar to the section discussed above, the one under scrutiny here succeeds in presenting a multi-faceted topic in terms that can be appreciated by non-specialist readers without failing to do justice to the complexity of the issues and debates that underlie it.

All in all, *Brill's Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages* offers a commendable reference work that convinces through both the quality of its contents and its innovative structure and approach. The contributions are authored by well-established scholars who are recognised internationally as leading experts in their respective fields. Whilst this is to be appreciated in terms of quality assurance, it nevertheless might have been a nice touch also to include a number of contributions by early-career scholars alongside those of senior academics. As it stands, the *Encyclopedia* offers an impressive collection of thematic studies exploring the European Middle Ages that covers a wide range of important perspectives.

If there is one point of criticism, it arises in respect of the bibliography provided at the end of the *Encyclopedia's* second volume. To begin with the positive aspects: the bibliography is organised helpfully into smaller, chapter-based sections, which greatly facilitates reference and provides the reader with succinct thematic lists. These will prove particularly useful to readers less familiar with the specific topic at hand, as well as to students seeking reliable citations for their coursework and revision. The publisher's blurb confidently markets the *Encyclopedia* as "supported by an extensive bibliography, updated with the most recent works and adapted to suit the needs of an Anglophone audience". Whilst some effort has clearly been made at updating the bibliography with items published since the release of the *Enzyklopädie's* second edition in 2013, this could perhaps have been followed through a little more consistently so as to incorporate yet more recent scholarship of the years immediately preceding the *Encyclopedia's* publication. Similarly, it might have been advisable to revise the bibliography a little more extensively in keeping with the book's new Anglophone target audience. Despite a good amount of references to scholarship written in different European languages (particularly French and Italian), there remains a noticeable dominance of German-language publications. Whilst this is not, of course, a problem *per se*, and should perhaps be expected in from encyclopaedic work written primarily by German-speaking scholars, it might, however, pose certain limitations to users unable to read German.

This includes, in the first instance, History students at UK/US Higher Education institutions, the majority of whom tend to be native-speakers of English. It is no secret that one of the main challenges faced by many Anglophone Universities in seeking to communicate international scholarship in the course of their History degrees is the lack of foreign language skills amongst students, meaning that course reading lists rarely include essential readings in languages other than English. The *Encyclopedia* makes a significant contribution by offering a wide range of chapters that, though originally written in German and now translated into English, are informed by pan-European scholarship, rather than national academic traditions. Whilst Anglophone students will thus benefit greatly from reading the *Encyclopedia's* individual chapters, they might find it somewhat more difficult to follow up on some of the readings listed in the bibliography. The inclusion of a larger number of English-language publications alongside the existing German, French and Italian items might have improved further the bibliography's usability amongst English native speakers.

In conclusion, I have little doubt that Melville and Staub's *Encyclopedia* in its most recent incarnation will continue the success story of its German exemplar in offering an important and well-conceptualised reference work. It has been translated competently into English, and it can now be expected to be embraced by an even larger and, importantly, international audience. The only factor that might pose an obstacle for the *Encyclopedia* to achieve this wider impact and reception is its rather hefty price tag. Some readers might feel slightly puzzled by the publisher's decision to retail the *Encyclopedia* at € 350.00, especially considering that the most recent German edition (published in February 2017) offers the same content at a mere fraction of the price (€ 29.95). Unlike the German version, which is affordable even for students, Brill's English translation might thus find its primary target market amongst research and university libraries. This is a shame, and it seems like the publisher missed a trick by embracing a pricing strategy that precludes most of the private and/or student book market.

Those willing and able to make the investment will without a doubt find *Brill's Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages* an invaluable first-class resource for both research and teaching purposes. The editors and contributing authors must be congratulated for making this fine collection of state-of-the-art European scholarship available to non-German speaking audiences.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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