



**Introduction. Pleasure in the Middle Ages: Collected Papers from the  
2013 Leeds International Medieval Congress**

**Introducción. El Placer en la Edad Media: artículos presentados en el  
2013 International Medieval Congress, Leeds**

**Introdução. O Prazer na Idade Média: artigos apresentados ao  
International Medieval Congress 2013, em Leeds**

Ian N. WOOD<sup>1</sup>

The papers in this edition of *Mirabilia* are derived from presentations at the 2013 Leeds International Medieval Congress (IMC). As a large gathering of scholars, the largest of its kind in Europe, with numerous sessions for short presentations, the IMC has proved an ideal forum for early career scholars. Many a young scholar, from both hemispheres and from every continent, has presented her or his first international paper at Leeds. But it is not only a forum for young scholars. Established academics come every year, presenting new ideas alongside their peers: as can be seen in the following collection.

Each year the IMC chooses a specific theme, to provide a focus, above all for the keynote lectures, but also for a significant proportion of the group sessions, most of which boast three presentations. Not every keynote is linked to the theme, nor are all the group sessions, but many have the year's theme in mind. In 2013, the theme was 'Pleasure in the Middle Ages'.

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor of *Early Medieval History*, School of History, University of Leeds, United Kingdom. E-mail: [i.n.wood@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:i.n.wood@leeds.ac.uk).



WOODS, Ian, *et alii* (org.). *Mirabilia 18* (2014/1)  
2013 Leeds Congress  
Congresso de Leeds 2013  
Congresso de Leeds 2013

Jan-Jun 2014/ISSN 1676-5818

A significant number of papers in the collection we have assembled directly address the history of pleasure. Thus, **Iliara Ramelli** considers the rejection of the Epicurean ideal of pleasure by patristic authors, and in so doing highlights their importance as source for epicureanism, because of the fragments of the earlier philosophy cited within their arguments.

A significant number of papers deal with the relation between pleasure and sin in medieval thought. **Burçin Erol** addresses the pleasures of gluttony, and the assessment of that particular vice within the medieval spiritual value-system. A further sin, that of curiosity, is considered by **Anna Kolos**, who notes that from the patristic period curiosity was regarded as a potential incitement to vice. Yet curiosity could alternatively be an incitement to learn, and as such it would prove to be crucial to the scientific developments of the sixteenth century.

Also associated with vice, from the Old Testament onwards, is the city of Sodom. **Andrea Gatti** reminds us that the sin of the Sodomites was the refusal of hospitality, not the committing of sodomy itself. Sex is, however, an issue in the tale of Lot, because of the act of incest committed with his daughters: this Biblical passage raised a particular problem (as did the parallel story of the drunkenness of Noah), given that Lot himself was regarded as one of the righteous. Lot's act of incest had an ambiguous outcome, in that Lot's daughters were regarded thereafter as mothers of the Moabites and Ammonites.

Other papers look at Christian pleasure, and its representation. **Brigit Ferguson** examines the pleasure of dying for Christ in representations of martyrdom, and especially in a sculpture of representation of St Stephen from the late thirteenth century, where the saint's smile is seen as an indication of his angelic nature, by contrast with the demonic nature of his grimacing attackers. Here approaches to the history of emotions are applied to the study of sculpture. Related, at least in terms of its concern with martyrdom, is **Sarah Schäfer-Althaus'** study of the narratives of the torture of women, in martyr-acts. The delight in pain ascribed to certain female saints, most especially Agatha, is seen as bordering on the erotic and of pornography.

Not unrelated, although in this case the subject matter is not martyrdom, is **Vicente Chacón-Carmona's** examination of the presentation of beauty in English and Spanish nativity plays. Here we find that, before the appearance



WOODS, Ian, *et alii* (org.). *Mirabilia 18* (2014/1)  
2013 Leeds Congress  
Congresso de Leeds 2013  
Congresso de Leeds 2013

Jan-Jun 2014/ISSN 1676-5818

of the angel, the physical setting is distinctly unpleasant: the environment in which the shepherd's work is presented stormy. The arrival of the angel, however, initiates a transition in which the landscape is transformed, as indeed is the language of the shepherds themselves, who even begin to speak in Latin, an indication of their new angelic state. Thus the characters in the plays, like the world itself, are transformed by the Incarnation.

Also concentrating on the evidence of late medieval drama, especially from *The Castle of Perseverance*, but also the York and Towneley plays, **Helen Frances Smith**, considers the representation of sinfulness as disability. The ageing of the body is linked to covetousness or avarice: so too, ageing is marked by changes of dress. Seeing Christ, however, gives strength to the viewer, as in the case of Simeon. As for Jerome (rather than Augustine, for whom original sin was a key issue), good and bad old age was related to the individual's personal level of sinfulness.

Medieval drama was obviously urban in its setting. It thus has its links with the processions and public festivities held in medieval Portuguese towns, as discussed by **Arnaldo Sousa Melo** and **Maria do Carmo Ribeiro**. These take us to royal entries and weddings, as well as Corpus Christi processions, and provide ample illustration of the importance of urban space as a privileged place for festivities.

An examination of festivities is perhaps only tangentially connected to the topic of pleasure. Two other papers, however, address pleasure directly, and do so from the standpoint of modern theory. **Annika Hüsing** looks at humour through the example of the Lewis chessmen, using the cultural turn to examine the sideways-glancing Warder. **Oya Bayılmış Öğütücü** takes Roland Barthes as the starting point for an examination of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, presenting it, through its open-ended presentation and conclusion, as 'the site of bliss'.

This group of papers provides a representative selection of work that responded either deliberately or by chance to the chosen theme of the year. Not all the contributions to the 2013 IMC were dedicated to the topic of Pleasure, nor are all the contributions to this volume. Some of these other papers, however, do connect with those we have already noted. Thus **Estelle Cronnier**'s study of the development of cult of the relics, and the functions of relic discovery in the East, considers the period from which the earliest of the



martyr acts were drawn, emphasising the significance of relic cults in providing for the religious needs of particular communities.

Moving only a century forward from Cronnier's field of study, **Michael Burrows** dissects a group of stories in Gregory of Tours' *Histories*, to show how the bishop used his narrative to critique such matters as the failure of military discipline, under certain kings. Even lower-class violence, which one might have expected to be condemned simply as illegitimate, could be presented in a nuanced way.

Another early-medieval historian, Bede, also features in our selection, though not for his historical works. **Maya Petrova** examines Bede's use of Donatus, stressing the extent to which he adapted the earlier grammarian out of concern for the needs of monastic readers. Sometimes he prefers other grammarians, Pompeius and Sergius, but he also cites Isidore's *Etymologies*. Thus, he adapted classical tradition to Christian discourse.

In addition to his grammatical writing, Bede also attracts attention for his biblical exegesis. **Maria Nenarokova** presents Bede's *Commentary on the Apocalypse* as a text with a particular concern for preaching and preachers, and thus reveals its importance for understanding his view of missionary work.

Mission also provides the focus for **Dimitri Tarat**'s consideration of the Christianisation of Scandinavia. In opposition to the main propagandist thrust of the narrative of Adam of Bremen, Tarat argues for the importance of the personal initiatives of local rulers, rather than of the see Hamburg-Bremen, in the conversion-process. He does this largely through a discussion of the policies of kings Emund and Stenkil of Sweden and Harald Hardrada of Norway.

Politics, and the use of religion within politics, is a dominant theme of **Laura Wangerin**'s examination of royal feuds and the politics of sanctity, as evidenced in both Ottonian Germany and Anglo-Saxon England. Wangerin uses the differing significance of royal murder and martyrdom in the two regions to expose divergent patterns of competition for royal power.

Finally, among the contributions to this volume of *Mirabilia* we have a group presentation of computer-assisted transcription-system for handwritten or early-printed documents, representing one other aspect of the work offered at



WOODS, Ian, *et alii* (org.). *Mirabilia 18* (2014/1)  
2013 Leeds Congress  
Congreso de Leeds 2013  
Congresso de Leeds 2013

Jan-Jun 2014/ISSN 1676-5818

Leeds, where such projects can be the subject of sessions, workshops, or round-tables.

Here, then, we have a selection of work presented at the 2013 IMC. The collection provides – at least in the eyes of the editors – a good example of the range of work on offer, in terms of its chronological and thematic coverage, and in terms of the approaches adopted. We hope that in their published form these pieces stimulate as much discussion and interest as they did when delivered as lectures.

Special Editors

Ian Wood

Jason R. Berg

Tim Barnwell

N. Kivılcım Yavuz

Catalin Taranu