

Reading Medieval Reviews

B. Besamusca and F. Brandsma eds. *The Arthur of the Low Countries, The Arthurian Legend in Dutch and Flemish Literature, Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, University of Wales Press, 2021

In this latest instalment of *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, we find a balanced volume offering a clear and complete overview of Middle Dutch and Flemish Arthuriana, the first book-length study of its type. The volume invites both experts and students to immerse themselves in familiar and unique stories with rigour and clarity. The volume addresses explicitly advances in Arthurian Literature in the Low Countries over the past forty years, and it is an essential contribution to Arthurian scholarship at large.

The Arthur of the Low Countries sets out to present an up-to-date survey of Arthurian manuscripts and texts in the medieval Low Countries to serve the needs of both Dutch Arthurian scholarship and the international community. It is the tenth instalment of the Vinaver's Trust series *Arthurian literature in the Middle Ages*. It aims to provide "a reliable and comprehensive survey of Arthurian writing in all its generic and linguistic diversity".¹ In this, the volume excels and delivers what it sets out to offer. It delves into the richness and diversity of medieval Arthuriana in the Low Countries, expanding on what had been a contribution in a single chapter dealing with this subject in *The Arthur of the Germans*. While focusing on Dutch-language, the volume covers a broader cultural perspective by considering material consumed and produced in the Low Countries written in French and Low German. Furthermore, its final chapter investigates the influence of medieval Arthuriana in a post-medieval setting. The volume is accessible to the general reader, despite being part of a series designed for Arthurian scholars.

The first chapter in the book describes the historical background and social and cultural contexts of the texts. It looks into questions of origins, the where and when of the composition of the romances. It follows a geographical approach focusing on the 'River Lands' of the Meuse and Rhine, the County of Flanders, the Counties of

Holland/Zeeland and Hainaut, and the Duchy of Brabant. Furthermore, it synthesises these regions' cultural and political situations, placing the texts within specific contexts. As such, the chapter delves into questions about audiences, concluding that the romances were probably written for wealthy and cultured laymen but not for high courtly circles. It is an interesting opening to the volume, which sets up the scene for later in-depth literary analysis of the romances.

The production of French Arthurian narratives in the Low Countries, as a by-product of the multilingual culture of Flanders, is addressed in chapter 2. The chapter argues that the highest nobility preferred French as its language of culture, which attests to the production of French Arthurian narratives commissioned in Flanders. The chapter thus focuses on a specific corpus in French, which together with the manuscripts in which it is to be found is explored carefully in this section of the book. It looks into questions of patronage, concluding that it is essential not to isolate the romances from other literary corpora for which similar logics of patronage might have been present. When looking at ownership of the books, the chapter argues that ownership of Arthurian manuscripts in French was widespread among members of the medieval aristocracy of the Low Countries, with members of the merchant class owning books as early as the beginning of the fourteenth century. According to the chapter, the production of Arthurian Manuscripts in the Southern Netherlands attests to the popularity of the *Lancelot-Grail* Cycle c. 1270 and 1350. The chapter concludes that Flanders became a centre for Middle Dutch Arthurian literature and that French Arthurian literature remained in circulation in the Low Countries throughout the Middle Ages.² A helpful list of digitised Arthurian manuscripts mentioned in the text is provided at the end of the chapter.

Manuscripts and manuscript fragments of Middle Dutch narratives are discussed in chapter 3. Here, both the most luxurious copies are considered alongside codices of lesser quality, such as the *Lancelot* Compilation, now MS The Hague, KB, 129 A 10. The chapter thus considers the overall corpus before asking when and where the manuscripts were produced. It then considers their format and appearance, highlighting interesting features of both modest copies and more lavishly illustrated codices. In the case of the famous *Lancelot*

Compilation, interesting clues are provided as to its composition, together with an analysis of key annotations made by a contemporary corrector. This analysis leads the chapter to suggest exciting conclusions about the performance of the text for a listening audience. Another section of the chapter looks into the questions of correctors for the *Ferguut* copy now in Leiden, UB, Ltk, 191, fol. 1-32. The concluding section of the chapter focuses on French Arthurian romances that survive in two types of manuscripts: single-text codices and multi-text codices before expanding on questions of transmission, the richness of the material preserved, and the loss that is thus apparent from what has indeed been preserved. The chapter also includes a section listing digitised manuscripts mentioned in the text.

Chapter 4 discusses the range of references to and stories of Arthur found in Middle Dutch historiographical sources. It begins by looking into the work of the Flemish author, Jacob van Maerlant, which include the first references to King Arthur in Middle Dutch works. Maerlant wrote works on various subjects, including a mirror of history, the *Spiegel historiael*, and his works were written to both instruct and entertain. The chapter continues its analysis of historiographical sources by discussing the work of Maerlant's continuator, Lodewijk van Velthem. Velthem completed Maerlant's *Spiegel historiael* and produced a continuation for another one of Maerlant's works, the *Boek van Merlin*. Here, the chapter argues that Maerlant's initial scepticism towards the historicity of Arthurian romances is replaced by Velthem's enthusiasm and a broad mixture of references to other Arthurian narratives in his chronicles, which he does by linking Arthurian themes with King Edward I of England. Furthermore, Velthem is credited as the owner of the *Lancelot* Compilation. This chapter concludes with a brief discussion of Arthur's inclusion in poems listing the Nine Worthies and its imprint in later historiography.

Chapters 5-7 analyses Arthurian romances produced in the Low Countries based on the source material. Chapter 5 studies the translations of French verse romances. Thus, it concentrates upon Tristant, Wrake van Ragisel, Ferguut, Perchevael and Torec. These constitute the oldest translations or adaptations of the Middle Dutch Arthurian tradition. They were produced in the west, in Flanders. The chapter discusses each translation of Old French Arthurian verse texts,

presented in their presumed order of composition.³ Special attention is given to the subsequent phases in the adaptation process. For each romance, an initial introduction is included, considering the physical and contextual characteristics of the surviving fragments. A summary of the romance follows, with a subsequent discussion, including one or more sections of analysis. The conclusion to the chapter argues for standard features in these romances, such as their critical attitude toward the chivalric ideology of the Arthurian court.⁴ Furthermore, the romances are presented as less complex and ambiguous but more realistic than their French sources.⁵ According to the chapter, they recount good, fast-paced stories which they emphasise, resulting in more one-dimensional narratives with exemplary qualities.

Chapter 6 looks into the original compositions produced after the first translations of verse romances from Old French into Middle Dutch. It thus discusses what the chapter labels as indigenous Arthurian romances: *Walewein*, *Moriaen*, *Ridder Metter Mouwen*, *Walewein ende Keye*, *Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet*. These five Middle Dutch Arthurian romances were produced in Flanders in the second half of the thirteenth century. *Walewein* is considered the greatest of all Flemish Arthurian literature. At the same time, the other four texts were adapted to be included in the *Lancelot* Compilation, using a standard set of characters within generic plot patterns. In the introduction, the chapter argues that these texts were written for readers and listeners who were already familiar with these texts, and which placed *Walewain* in centre stage. After the introduction, the chapter follows a structure similar to that found in the previous chapter. The generalities of each text are discussed, followed by a summary of the narrative and literary criticism. The conclusion poses the question of audiences by asking about the target recipients of indigenous Arthurian literature in Flemish and by discussing the literary knowledge of intended audiences. It argues that authors' choices when writing in Flemish and not in French can be seen as an act of competition and emancipation.⁶

Chapter 7 delves into renditions of the French prose romances, which included at least three independent versions of the French Prose *Lancelot*, together with the texts described as the Merlin Cycle and the Lancelot Cycle. It evinces a salient appreciation for *Walewein*, which is also purported in chapter 6. The chapter proposes a chronological

approach to the discussion of the texts, thus starting with Maerlant's Grail and Merlin, followed by three Lancelot translations, the *Lancelot* Compilation, Velthem's *Merlin* Continuation, and finally the *Historie van Merlijn*, the only printed Arthurian text. Without standardised accompanying summaries, which only appear occasionally when needed, each section critically discusses each one of the works mentioned above, highlighting interesting motifs or relevant themes and posing comparisons to other Arthurian texts when needed. The detailed discussion of the *Lancelot* Compilation is a highlight, answering the questions of 'how?', 'who?', and 'why?' the compilation was made. It argues for the creation of a coherent cycle in which seven inserted texts find their place within the framework of a trilogy⁷ and offers an in-depth analysis of the compilation process.

Following a geographical line of argument, chapter 8 discusses the considerable amount of material tending eastward and situated in the Germanic regions, especially the Rhineland, a region the chapter highlights as significant to Arthurian scholarship, being the intersection point of French, Middle Dutch and Middle High German Arthurian traditions. The chapter discusses the eastward distribution of romances produced in Flanders or Brabant and the role of the Low Countries as a transit zone in this process.⁸ It showcases 'first, the direct translations of Old French texts; second, the reimportation of the Old French classics via the Middle Dutch and Middle High German adaptations; and third, the continuous tradition of scholarly Latin Arthurian texts found in monastic libraries.'⁹ The chapter then proceeds to discuss Merlin, Parcheval, and Lancelot's figures and finalises with the general characteristics of the tradition. It argues for the presence of 'a wide-ranging Arthurian tradition of varied intensity and impact' in the Rhineland.¹⁰ Latin historiography is equally present with French romances, Middle Dutch, and occasionally Middle High German adaptations. The chapter concludes that generally, the Low Countries and the Rhineland do not play a geographical or genealogical role in the German Arthurian classics. No distinct and independent regional Arthurian tradition developed in the Rhineland.

The last chapter in the book traces the development of Arthurian narratives in a post-medieval setting, discussing the re-emergence of Arthurian material in Dutch literature, particularly in the nineteenth

and twentieth centuries after an apparent period of neglect. It looks into different media: novels, plays, comic strips, music, radio plays and film. The chapter proves how Arthurian stories can renew themselves, generating a significant new message for each generation.

We are dealing with a ground-breaking volume, given the scope of the material it presents and the rigour the authors bring about in their chapters. There is ample evidence of solid editorial work. The pieces are well integrated and cross-reference each other effectively. This text is not a piece-meal volume; it rather firmly stands together as a cohesive piece of work. It provides a comprehensive overview and up-to-date state of the field in Arthurian literary studies in the Low Countries. It is evidence of the richness in Arthurian scholarship both to the general reader and the Arthurian scholar.

M. Carolina Escobar-Vargas, PhD

Department of History

Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Sede Medellín

Notes

-
- 1 B. Besamusca and F. Brandsma eds. *The Arthur of the Low Countries, The Arthurian Legend in Dutch and Flemish Literature*, Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, University of Wales Press, 2021, p. ix.
 - 2 Besamusca and Brandsma, p. 41
 - 3 Besamusca and Brandsma, p. 78
 - 4 Besamusca and Brandsma, p. 108
 - 5 Besamusca and Brandsma, p. 109
 - 6 Besamusca and Brandsma, p. 146
 - 7 Besamusca and Brandsma, p. 180
 - 8 Besamusca and Brandsma, p. 148
 - 9 Besamusca and Brandsma, p. 195
 - 10 Besamusca and Brandsma, p. 199

Ryan H. Wilkinson, *The Last Horizons of Roman Gaul: Communication, Coin Circulation, and the Limits of the Second Burgundian Kingdom: A prosopographical, numismatic, and ceramic synthesis (ca. 395-550 CE)*. British Archaeological Reports, International Series no. 3006. Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2020.

In this revised edition of his doctoral thesis, Ryan Wilkinson offers a communication-focused approach to the end of Roman Gaul and the beginnings of its early-medieval successor polities. Wilkinson argues that the Roman empire can be seen as a network and its decline can be characterised as the moment when ‘customary ties between communities broke down’ (p. 1) and led to the fragmentation of the wider, inter-connected whole.

The nature of early-medieval Burgundian hegemony has not been overlooked, but it is not frequently the focus of a monograph. While Wilkinson does not seek to supplant the monograph of Justin Favrod, nearly 25 years later this book may be its closest sequel. Wilkinson offers an erudite analysis of ceramic and monetary finds across Northern Burgundy, complemented by a review of episcopal councils and movement; scholars and students of Merovingian Gaul will find much here, especially the overall contention that the most conspicuously ‘Roman’ region of early-medieval Burgundy was also the least connected to contemporary Roman successor states.

Of greater interest for scholars with a wider interest in the history of the region or period, however, is Wilkinson's use of communication and network theory to analyse these findings. By exploring the dynamics of power and communication, Wilkinson avoids recent emphasis on social networks as evidence for individual agency to focus on communication structures that constrained and linked individuals. Noting that so-called ‘weak’ ties— those between people from different social circles— are considered highly important for modern knowledge, contact and resource exchange between different social groups, he contends that a significant strength of the late-Roman empire was its decentralised, inefficient, disordered networks of communication. The increased channelling of early-medieval communication through royal embassies, abbots and bishops served to delimit communication and connectivity, as communities became less resilient to individual deaths,

disputes and new borders. This trend impacted different types of exchange and community differently: although it funnelled communicative power into key elite powerbrokers who most easily integrated into new, Merovingian networks when the region was conquered, Wilkinson suggests that the manufacture and movement of goods was often more slowly affected by political transformation.

Wilkinson focuses on the area around Langres, Dijon, Autun and Chalon-sur-Saône, cities that are often ignored in analyses of early-medieval Burgundy in preference for the Rhône basin and Lake Geneva. In consequence, his study has many new offerings. Sometimes, however, it is difficult to determine how far his hypotheses can be supported without seeing a comparable study of the main Burgundian metropolises of Lyon, Vienne and Geneva. Likewise, the remit does not permit Wilkinson to consider the re-founding of the Alpine monastic nexus of Agaune under Burgundian royal control: this might have provided an interesting counter-study. More broadly, the central hypothesis of the book reifies the existence of an interconnected Roman Gaul that disintegrated in the early Middle Ages: it would be interesting to consider if the network of mobile elites and long-distance marriage alliances that Wilkinson treats as typical of Roman Gaul and the empire were, rather, a brief late-Roman anomaly not the norm from which the early Middle Ages departed.

There are occasional repetitions in phrasing and the reproduction of images does not always provide as much detail as may be desired. More painful is the lack of indices: although the book is designed to be read from cover to cover, this omission renders the print copy frustrating for checking references. These are very minor details, however, and are both outweighed by the very low retail price of this book and its inclusion in digital BAR subscription packages which leave it very accessible to many (graduate) students, scholars and libraries. Overall, it is an ambitious and exciting reframing of early-medieval Gaul and the end of the Roman empire that will hopefully spawn wider debate and case studies.

Becca Grose
University of Reading

J. Dresvina and V. Blud eds. *Cognitive Sciences and Medieval Studies: An introduction*, University of Wales Press, 2020.

Cognitive Sciences and Medieval Studies: An introduction is the most recent in the University of Wales Press' series *Religion and Culture in the Middle Ages*. The series encourages the use of a variety of tools and theoretical approaches to understanding medieval culture, this edited collection of papers turning to the neurosciences. The editors are Victoria Blud, a research associate in the English department at the University of York, and Juliana Dresvina, a member of the History Faculty at Oxford.

They begin with an introduction setting out this complex and varied material; the range of papers then starts with Part I, 'Questions of method'. In 'How Modular are Medieval Cognitive Theories?' Jose Filipe Silva finds parallels between modern and medieval models of cognition and the mind. Ralph Hood, in 'An Unrealised Conversation: Medieval Mysticism and the Common Core' looks at the psychology of religion and challenges psychology to be more open to something other than methodological naturalism, whilst in 'Questions of Value: Brain Science, Aesthetics and Art in the Neurohumanities', art historian Matthew Rampley offers a helpful note of scepticism and caution about scientific data and how it is interpreted.

In Part II 'Histories of Neuroscience, Psychology and Mental Illness' Daniel Lord Smail's paper 'Neuroscience and the Dialectics of History' suggests that a neurobiological consideration of societal stress can offer a useful explanation of violent behaviours. Wendy Turner writes on 'Medieval English Understanding of Mental Illness and Parallel Diagnosis to Contemporary Neuroscience' considering diagnoses of mental disorders arising in late medieval English legal records, in the light of modern disorder classifications. Dresvina's own article on 'Attachment Theory for Historians of Medieval Religion: An Introduction' considers medieval religiosity in the light of psychological insights from the study of secure and disrupted emotional bonding.

Part III gives 'Case Studies: Reading Texts and Minds'. Godelinde Gertrude Perk writes on 'A Knot So Suttel and So Mighty: On Knitting, Academic Writing and Julian of Norwich', examining the cognitive processes involved in Julian of Norwich's experiences as related to

those of anchoritic knitting crafts, as an example of embodied cognition. Victoria Blud explains how computational brain-based models of cognition have expanded to better understand the mind in its wider physical and environmental context, in ‘Making up a Mind: ‘4 E’ Cognition and the Medieval Subject’. Cognition is here seen as embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended, an approach which more easily includes the humanities; she uses it to further explore the writings of Julian of Norwich. Antonina Harbus also uses ideas of embodied cognition in the study of the stimulation of emotion in two poems from the Exeter book, in her paper ‘Cognitive Approaches to Affective Poetics in Early English Literature’. Part IV, ‘Approaching Art and Artefacts’ continues with ‘Medieval Art History and Neuroscience: An Introduction’ by Nadia Pawelchak. She combines psychological research and medieval scholarship to illuminate how a medieval viewer might have responded to an image on an ivory mirror case. In ‘Spoons, Whorls, and Caroles: How Medieval Artefacts Can Help Keep Your Brain on Its Toes’, Jeff Rider looks at other artefacts and records of a medieval dance, considering human interactions with objects from the perspective of embodied cognition. Finally, John Onians summarises the collection in his ‘Afterword: The Medieval Brain and Modern Neuroscience’; he accepts the provisos of the more sceptical contributors but concludes ‘there is no activity of the mind which cannot be illuminated by the study of the brain.’¹

Cognitive neuroscience is the study of the biological processes underlying cognition. It is concerned with processes at the chemical, neuronal and neural network levels in tasks like memory, perception, attention, language, and processing emotion. It is a rapidly developing field, generating many insights of benefit across academic boundaries; its influence in the humanities has increased over the last twenty years, with the birth of new fields such as neuroaesthetics – the ‘cognitive turn.’ Smail remarks that ‘history and neuroscience make strange bedfellows’ but the hope, and the unifying theme of the book, is that the light that such science might shed on historical phenomena.² As a neuropsychologist turned medieval historian I was obviously drawn to this combination of my two passions, and hoped that it might provide insights for my own research on ideas about the brain and ‘disorders of the head’ in medieval medicine.

The papers cover a wide array of disciplines, with contributions from historians, art historians, literary scholars, a psychologist, and a philosopher. As editors, Blud and Dresvina lay the ground for this with an excellent, clear, introduction helping to make it more accessible. Neuroscience here is interpreted widely, including sometimes psychiatry and general human biology, but this does allow for some interesting papers. Smail suggests that state-on-subject violence in the form of public executions and other oppressions in late medieval Europe was a form of stress induction which reduced testosterone in the male population; rewards or stresses meted out by state authorities served those in power by exerting control at a neurobiological level.

Some of the strongest papers are those of the editors themselves, who show a clear understanding of current psychological research and thinking, as well as the medieval scholarship. Also impressive is the article by Pawelchak who comments on how the neurosciences can illuminate possible medieval perceptions, making this concrete in the example of an image of courtship in a hunting scene. Viewers, both then and now, would have an automatic, embodied, neurologically based mirroring response to the two lovers, to their posture and gaze direction, driven by innate processes but shaped by their own experiences. She cites psychological research on responses to eye gaze and body stance in modern research participants; at the same time, she explores medieval conventions of aristocratic courtship and the symbolic significance of the falcons depicted.

My first concern was that the utility of a neuroscience approach might be overstated, a fashionable enthusiasm provoked by a wide-eyed wonder at the advances in cognitive and brain research. Fortunately, my own hesitations are shared by several contributors, which are taken into account. Perk helpfully explains that we need to be cautious about assumptions that medieval and modern brains operate in the same, or even similar way. Although the human brain is the product of evolution, it has considerable neuroplasticity and culture and experience cause significant changes in neuronal organisation and function. Art historians have been very taken with primate mirror neurons, but these may not even be present in humans; Rampley warns of the limitations of investigative techniques like functional MRI. This all accepted, do the assembled chapters then convince us that this novel approach is a

helpful enterprise? The application of neuroscience to the medieval world is sometimes pushed to the limits of its usefulness and sometimes beyond. Some papers are interesting in their own right but the addition of a neurocognitive perspective can seem tenuous and strained. In many cases however, the experiment is well worthwhile; in particular, Dresvina and Pawalchak's analyses give a fascinating and effective demonstration of a happy marriage of the two approaches. With a wide spread of contributions, this volume has something for everyone, with several gems.

Anne Jeavons

University of Reading

Notes

- 1 Onians, J., 'Afterword: The Medieval Brain and Modern Neuroscience' p. 234.
- 2 Smail, D.L., 'Neuroscience and the Dialectics of History', p. 83.