

Die Fünfzehn Zeichen vor dem Jüngsten Gericht: Spätmittelalterliche Bildkonzepte für das Seelenheil. Daniela Wagner.

Berlin: Reimer, 2016. 336 pp. €49.

“On the tenth day, all trees and plants will drip with blood. On the eleventh day, the mountains, hills, and human edifices will be reduced to dust”: these are some of the supernatural events enumerated in the Fifteen Signs before the Last Judgment. Other terrifying events include the rising of the sea to the height of the mountains, an earthquake, and the reanimation of the dead. The oldest known version of the Fifteen Signs appeared in Pseudo-Bede’s *Collectanea* (820), and versions are found in the writings of Peter Damian, Peter Comestor, and the *Golden Legend* of Jacques Voragine.

Such material could not remain confined to text for long, and in the fourteenth century the Fifteen Signs began to appear as a series of images. Daniela Wagner’s study focuses on these images, rather than the text that inspired them. The images appeared in a variety of formats, including manuscript illustrations, stained glass windows, murals, and block books. Wagner presents sixty examples, with specimens in Southern and Northern Germany, England, France, Italy, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, and Spain.

Wagner’s work offers the first comprehensive study of the visual representations of the Fifteen Signs in their various formats and locations. Her detailed, encyclopedic presentation of these images is the result of first-rate investigation, and will be invaluable for future researchers. Likewise, the many color plates offer a substantial visual reference guide. One goal of this monograph is to find order within the enormous variety of visual representations. Wagner discerns five main “object groupings” of the Fifteen Signs with iconographical and structural connections. She then attempts to trace the visual antecedents of the Fifteen Signs. Her conclusion is that the strongest influence on the development of the images was the text itself. Thus, although the emphasis of Wagner’s research are the visual representations of the Fifteen Signs, these representations were highly dependent on—and frequently accompanied by—the text. Wagner notes that this practice of making a text visible was prevalent in the fourteenth century, and represented a parallel development to the new literacy in vernacular languages.

Especially illuminating is the volume’s third chapter, which examines the audience for the Fifteen Signs. Wagner interprets this audience in several senses. She begins with a discussion of the visual depictions of witnesses, but then turns to the audience outside of the frame. Through an examination of the various audiences who encountered the Fifteen Signs, Wagner demonstrates that depictions of the Fifteen Signs were closely related to both the new *Frömmigkeitstheologie* and personal piety practices in the later Middle Ages. She points out, for example, that the list of Fifteen Signs could be found alongside other lists used for devotion, such as that of the *arma Christi*. She also notes the presence of the Fifteen Signs in the context of other works emphasizing structure and order, such as those depicting the liturgical hours or the divine ordering

of the world at its creation. This leads Wagner to the trenchant observation that, “Contrary to one’s first impression, the End of the World does not occur in a chaotic manner, but is orderly and organized, just as the Beginning was” (202).

The most interesting and informative aspect of Wagner’s research considers the individuals who commissioned paintings of the Fifteen Signs for public spaces. Based on Wagner’s evidence, one can conclude that many individuals viewed the Fifteen Signs as suitable subject matter for endowments specifically designed for a general Christian public. Both the evidence of manuscripts, and that of public commissions, supports Wagner’s conclusion about the intention of depictions of the Fifteen Signs to inspire penance and piety in preparation for the Last Judgement.

However, Wagner observes, this does not mean the people who commissioned or encountered the Fifteen Signs were gripped by apocalyptic fear. Rather, Wagner questions long-held assertions that the prevalence of expressions of the end time in the later Middle Ages indicate either heightened expectations of the end or a time of crisis. Perhaps, finally, we as a scholarly community will be able to dismiss these assumptions and instead see depictions of the end for the complex documents they were: prompts to piety, attempts to understand the world and its historical trajectory, political statements, and even entertainment.

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The Materiality of Devotion in Late Medieval Northern Europe: Images, Objects, and Practices. Henning Laugerud, Salvador Ryan, and Laura Katrine Skinnebach, eds.

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This collection takes up the topic of materiality in late medieval religious practices in the tradition of Caroline Bynum, especially her book *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (2011). Where trendy medievalists use thing theory or object-oriented ontology, most of these essays engage fruitfully with theology; some point out what ought to be a truism: the Christian facts of Divine Creation and the Incarnation sanction (and even require) sensory experience and materiality in Christian practices. The articles mostly focus on the body (incarnated and/or corporeal), on the senses (bodily and spiritual), on objects of devotion (physical or imagined/remembered), and on how these worked together to furnish and further devout imaginations and spiritual journeys (meditative, unitive, or eschatological). The contributors are all members of the European Network on the Instruments of Devotion (ENID) based at Bergen University, a group focused on media of devotion and how media both reflect and shape spirituality. The collection (which includes translated essays) provides valuable perspective on Northern European scholarship in this area.