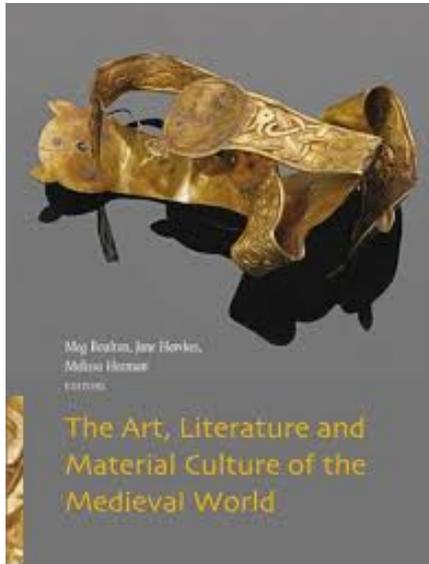


Meg Boulton, Jane Hawkes, and Melissa Herman, eds. *The Art, Literature and Material Culture of the Medieval World: Transition, Transformation and Taxonomy*



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This collected volume brings together 19 essays and explorations of cultural expressions in the medieval world. Its material presentation is enhanced by a beautiful design and numerous black-and-white and full-color images that support each chapter. From a purely aesthetic perspective, the book is both breathtaking and immediately appealing.

Echoing the subtitle of the book, the essays in the book are tied together by their focused discussion on transitions, transformations, and taxonomies of the Middle Ages. The editors directed each of their contributors to “explore the ideas of ‘transition’, ‘transformation’ and ‘taxonomy’ in their broadest possible understandings in relation to their field of study” (2). This directive results in a sense of order and thematic stability throughout the book — helping to bring together an otherwise disparate range of topics.

The downside to such order and stability, however, is that each essay focuses so much on the theoretical framework that the material culture discussion is sometimes overshadowed. The weight that is given to the *ideas* exceeds that given to the objects. Such an approach is not without merit, and certainly it does not mean that this text is not worth reading, but an outside reader who expects the focus to be on art, literature, and material culture (as stated by the title) may be disappointed to find that the real focus of the book is on the subtleties of transition, transformation, and taxonomy.



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As a book historian and someone who actively seeks to learn about and explore the role that material culture has played within historical settings, I had hoped that this collection would provide insights into areas of cultural studies that I had not previously explored. Certainly, this book does that. However, it does so in a somewhat diminished degree because of the focus on theoretical aspects of the argument. In every chapter, the reader will find her/himself with upwards of half the text to work through before the particular art, literature, or cultural object is discussed. Each participant in the volume seems to feel the need to set up, explain, or explore the “ideas” of the book first before applying them to the items at hand.

As for those items themselves, the contributors offer glimpses into a variety of interesting areas of material culture. The geographic and temporal extent of the topics includes fourteenth-century Ireland, twelfth-century Spain, eighth-century France, and (most commonly) eighth- to fourteenth-century England. Likewise, the cultural objects discussed in these essays are wide-ranging and varied: from architecture to stone tablets to gold crosses to manuscripts and beyond. Tying all of these different areas together is the focus on transition, transformation, and taxonomy. Again, these connective tissues work for the structure of the text overall, but do somewhat take away from the individual essays.

A few of these essays are worth noting for book historians in particular. These include chapters 8-11 and 15-17, all of which touch upon aspects of written language and manuscript culture. I commend, especially, chapters by Diarmuid Scully (“Ends of Empire and the Earth: Themes of Transition and the Orkney Islands from Antiquity to Bede”), Eric Lacey (“When is a *Hroc* not a *Hroc*? When it is a *Crawe* or a *Hrefn*! A Case-Study in Recovering Old English Folk-Taxonomies”), Harry Stirrup (“A Change of Clothes on the Morgan Leaf: the Apocrypha Master’s Illustration of the Transition of Saul”), and Carol Farr (“In Time, out of Time: Two Case Studies of Recycled Evangelist Pictures”). These four chapters reflect the attention that the entire collection pays to theory, but they maintain a definite grasp on the tangible historical artifacts at their center. For this reason, they are among the strongest and most balanced essays in the collection.

In many ways, *The Art, Literature and Material Culture of the Medieval World: Transition, Transformation and Taxonomy* is a beautiful work of art. The publisher’s focus on book design and use of high-quality materials demonstrates the care that went into the creation of the physical object. In addition, the use of images grounds the text in medieval material culture



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and provides the reader with both textual and visual connections to the past. The text is well suited to serve art historians, medievalists, and those who study archaeological aspects of the medieval world. Though sometimes overly concerned with the theoretical, this particular glimpse inside the world of medieval culture offers a beautiful approach to medieval studies.

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