

ROBERT E. BJORK, *Catastrophes and the Apocalyptic in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance 43). Turnhout: Brepols 2019. xii, 207 pp. – ISBN: 978-2-503-58297-9 (€ 70.00)

- ANDRÁS KRAFT, Princeton University (akraft@princeton.edu)

This collected volume presents the proceedings of the 2014 Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (ACMRS) conference. The majority of the studies revolves around the textual analysis of medieval and early modern writings. The examined sources range from poems, songs, sermons, satires, and homilies in European vernaculars to illustrated manuscripts, Ottoman historiographies, and paintings. The volume proceeds chronologically from eleventh-century Ireland to modern-day Russia. This review covers each contribution in turn, offering brief summaries and some supplementary remarks.

The succinct introduction by the editor, ROBERT E. BJORK, highlights the conceptual breath of the notions named in the volume's title, namely apocalypse and catastrophe. He distinguishes between vertical (heavenly journeys) and horizontal (historical narratives) apocalypses and points to the related terms eschatology, apocalypticism, chiliasm, and utopia. BJORK refrains from discussing these terms in details. Similarly, the term catastrophe is mentioned, but not strictly defined (pp. viii–x). By not giving any precise definition to these key notions, the editor leaves ample room for terminological variation and grants great liberty regarding the possible scope of inquiry. Accordingly, the contributions are highly diverse in terms of topic and approach, which is immediately clear from the short synopsis at the end of the introduction (pp. x–xi).

The first study is by NICOLE VOLMERING, who argues that the *Second Vision of Adomnán*, an eleventh-century Irish composition, stands out among contemporary writings, as it does not associate catastrophe with apocalypticism. Rather than testifying to any apocalyptic fear in late eleventh-century Ireland, the text presents an *ex eventu* prognostication of a plague that is devoid of any eschatological significance. It is true, she concedes, that the *Second Vision of Adomnán* holds apocalyptic *topoi*, such as the characteristic exclamation “woe” (“vae”) or the plea for moral reform, but this does not render the text an apocalypse nor its message apocalyptic (pp. 12f). By

de-eschatologizing the *Second Vision of Adomnán*, VOLMERING cautions against inflating the use of the term “apocalyptic”. She sees in the vision not an apocalyptic narrative but “a reform-inspiring rhetoric of catastrophe” (p. 13). One may wonder how this source relates to the category of vertical (or moralizing) apocalypses, mentioned in the introduction. Both the *Second Vision of Adomnán* and moral apocalypses (or heavenly visions) share a disinterest in predicting the time of the end, while agreeing on the importance to admonish the reader/listener to repent. Yet, the fact that the *Second Vision of Adomnán* relates worldly events sets it apart from classical examples of moral apocalypses, such as the late antique *Apocalypse of Paul*. Can this composition be seen as a hybrid with both vertical and horizontal apocalyptic elements?

DANIEL NAJORK brings attention to the Old Norse-Islandic *Mariu saga*, which instructs the reader on the Christian theology of death through an exposition of the Virgin’s assumption. This is a peculiar text, not only because it combines a biography of the Virgin with a theological commentary but also because it relates only the joys of the post-mortem fate of the soul; there are no graphic descriptions of the torments in hell (pp. 17f). NAJORK discusses the content and sources of this vertical apocalypse and shows that it stands out amidst contemporary works on the afterlife, as it presents an entirely positive view of death and the last judgment (p. 27).

KARLYN GRIFFITH analyzes ten illustrated Apocalypse manuscripts made in the Lorraine region between c. 1295 and 1350. This Lorraine group, as she names it, differs from earlier Anglo-Norman illustrated codices in terms of format, iconography, and supplementary texts. For instance, the group supplements the illustrated Apocalypse with vernacular texts, such as the *Prophétie de la Sibylle Tiburtine* and the *Tournoiement Antécrist* (pp. 37, 50). She argues that such additions reflect the needs of a lay audience that sought eschatological guidance “without clerical supervision” (p. 38). The argument is enforced by an analysis of iconographical changes that made the imagery of the illustrated manuscripts “more culturally relevant” to potential secular buyers (p. 39). She may well be correct in concluding that the ultimate aim of the Lorraine group was to allow “owners [of the codices] to personalize their eschatology” (p. 52).

KIMBERLY FONZO deals with William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, a late fourteenth-century English poem. Her analysis of the source focuses on Passus III, where “Conscience”, the main narrative persona, predicts the fall of King Saul, the rise of a new King David, and the conversion of

Jews and Muslims (p. 55). FONZO shows that such apocalyptic motifs were used in English poetry of the time, which depicted King Edward III (d. 1377) as a new David, who must do battle as the chosen one by God (pp. 55f). The *Piers Plowman* exposes such overt war propaganda to be driven by greed: war profiteering is the main motive of such apocalyptically evocative rhetoric. FONZO argues that Langland's poem parodies (p. 54) contemporary political prophecies by insinuating that war mongering and war profiteering represent moral decay that precipitates the end of times (p. 64). In contrast, the *Piers Plowman* advocates penitence and admonishes King Edward III to reform so as to conform with the true Davidic model (pp. 63f).

The essay by ALISON BERINGER highlights the ambivalent attitude of fifteenth-century German apocalyptic thought towards the printing press. BERINGER singles out Hans Folz's song *Vor langer frist* and Sebastian Brant's satire *Narrenschiff*, both late fifteenth-century texts, and compares their views on the printing press and its perceived relationship to the Antichrist. She establishes that by the fifteenth century the notion of the Antichrist had developed from a distorter and destroyer of sacred books to an author who would harness the power of printing for his pernicious designs (pp. 66–69). Yet, neither Folz nor Brant condemn printing as such, but only caution against its potential dangers (pp. 71f, 76f). They present arguments on both sides: the new technology may function as enemy or ally of the Antichrist (p. 79). The best precaution against its diabolic abuse, they insinuate, is the intelligent use of printed books (p. 78). It is noteworthy that BERINGER's readings of the sources and her overall argument rest on the presumption that the material "paper" can be equated in every instance with the technology of "printing" (pp. 69, 74f). Although certainly plausible (cf. p. 74), this key presumption would have benefited from some additional explanation and justification.

FABIAN ALFIE edits a hitherto unpublished Italian sonnet, which comes down in seven fifteenth-century manuscripts. The poem brings to mind one's eventual death and heavenly judgment, thereby advancing the classical admonition of *memento mori* (p. 85). Two versions of the poem are singled out for analysis; they are translated and discussed with regard to differences in content and sources. It is shown that the anonymous poem draws upon the Church Father Jerome and, in a similarly reverential way, upon Dante. ALFIE infers that Dante was seen as an authority on eschatological matters in Quattrocento Italy (pp. 90, 92).

H. ERDEM ÇİPA turns attention to Ottoman apocalypticism. He investigates Ottoman apocalyptic reactions to the 1509 Istanbul earthquake and notices that despite contemporary reports on widespread destruction there is no contemporary evidence of an apocalyptic interpretation. This is surprising since earthquakes constitute a standard motif of the apocalyptic tradition in Islam. The *Qur'ān* and *ḥadīth* collections abound in apocalyptic references to quakes and tremors. ÇİPA highlights the importance of sūrah 22:1, which associates an earthquake with the end of time (p. 101). Such scriptural passages were well known in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, which saw its fair share of apocalyptic anxieties. The *Dürr-i meknūn* (“The Hidden Pearl”), commonly attributed to Aḥmed Bīcān (d. after 1465),¹ gives ample testimony to contemporary apocalyptic speculation. Thus, it needs to be explained why there is no contemporary textual evidence that attributes apocalyptic significance to the 1509 earthquake.² According to ÇİPA, such an interpretation first appeared in the second half of the sixteenth century, in the chronicles by Ḥoca Sa‘deddīn Efendi (d. 1599) and Muṣṭafā ‘Ālī (d. 1600) (pp. 104f). ÇİPA remains puzzled by the hiatus of earlier apocalyptic interpretations (p. 106). Regarding the question why they appeared towards the end of the sixteenth century, he responds by pointing to millenarian anxieties in anticipation of the year 1000 AH (= 1591/1592 AD) and to a “decline consciousness” (p. 111) that had been steadily cultivated in Ottoman “advice literature” over the course of the preceding decades (pp. 107–110). In addition, one may consider the possibility of censorship, which may have inhibited contemporaries to voice publicly any apocalyptic fearmongering regarding the 1509 earthquake. One may also take into account the competitiveness between Christian and Muslim apocalyptic narratives, which greatly shaped the last quarter of the sixteenth

1. It should be noted that the traditional attribution to Aḥmed Bīcān has been challenged by CARLOS GRENIER, *The Yazicioğlus and the Spiritual Vernacular of the Early Ottoman Frontier*, Ph.D. dissertation. Chicago 2017, pp. 248–274. Another important Ottoman work that influenced the apocalyptic expectations of the period was the *Miftāḥ al-jāmi‘* (The Key to the Comprehensive Prognostication) by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 1454).

2. During the Byzantine era apocalyptic texts were rigorously censored by the state; see WOLFRAM BRANDES, *Kaiserprophetien und Hochverrat: Apokalyptische Schriften und Kaiservaticinien als Medium antikaiserlicher Propagnada*. In: WOLFRAM BRANDES – FELICITAS SCHMIEDER (Hrsg.), *Endzeiten: Eschatologie in den monotheistischen Weltreligionen* (Millennium-Studien 16). Berlin – New York 2008, pp. 157–200. For Ottoman censorship of apocalyptic interpretations, see the brief remark by KAYA ŞAHİN, *Constantinople and the End Time: The Ottoman Conquest as a Portent of the Last Hour*. *Journal of Early Modern History* 14,4 (2010) pp. 317–354, at p. 326.

century, particularly in view of the conquest of Cyprus (1570–1571), the battle of Lepanto (1571), and the reign of Selim II (d. 1574).³ Accordingly, any hermeneutical exploitation of the earthquake by Christians (cf. p. 98) was likely to have been met either by an Ottoman counter-narrative or by a repudiation through silence.

The essay by CATHERINE SHULTZ MCFARLAND marks a break from textual analysis. The author explores the two renowned paintings by Pieter Bruegel of the Tower of Babel, which – she argues – express the Reformation turmoil in the Netherlands of 1560s. MCFARLAND shows how the elements of the Tower of Babel story such as sin, blasphemy, escape from deluge, ultimate destruction, and the confusion of languages well applied to the Antwerp of Bruegel’s age (pp. 115f). His paintings allude to these elements and warn against the hybris of monarchs and the populace alike (p. 118). Furthermore, they convey an ambiguous criticism of the papacy (p. 119) and, most importantly, express a “waning of faith” (p. 128) in the Neoplatonic / Neopythagorean ideal of the Golden Mean (pp. 119–123), which is visually expressed in the geometrically unstable spiral shape of the Tower. Bruegel’s two paintings of the Tower of Babel use allusions to undermine the ideological master narratives of his age, thereby marking the transition from the ideals of the High Renaissance to the disharmony and distortion of Mannerism (pp. 128f).

The Tower of Babel motif also appears in the contribution by EVAN J. BIBBEE, who returns the reader to the plane of textual analysis. He investigates the Huguenot poem *La Fatale mutation lyonnaise*, whose 114 verses use apocalyptic imagery to justify the Protestant iconoclastic fury during the Sack of Lyon (1562) (p. 134). The poem is analyzed in detail (pp. 138–143), whereby two main sections are differentiated: the first half of the poem presents a perplexing apocalyptic vision with confused

3. See among others, BASILEIOS LAOURDAS, Κρητικά παλαιογραφικά: 10, Ὁ Μαρκανδός κώδιξ τοῦ Γεωργίου Κλόντζα καὶ οἱ περὶ Κρήτης χρῆσιμοι. Κρητικά Χρονικά 5,2 (1951), pp. 231–245; DEAN SAKEL, Some Notes on Late Sixteenth-Century Byzantine Oracular Collections. In: JAVIER A. ALDAMA – OLGA O. SÁENZ (eds.), *Cultura neogriega. Tradición y modernidad: Actas del III Congreso de Neohelenistas de Iberoamérica* (Vitoria-Gasteiz, 2 de junio-5 de junio de 2005). Bilbao 2007, pp. 621–635; ANTONIO RIGO, Profetizzare Lepanto. In: ΚΩΣΤΑΣ Γ. ΤΣΙΚΝΑΚΙΣ (ed.), Πρακτικά τῆς Ἐπιστημονικῆς Συνάντησης: Ἡ ἀπίχηση τῆς ναυμαχίας τῆς Ναυπάκτου στὸν ευρωπαϊκὸ κόσμo (Ναύπακτος, 13 Οκτωβρίου 2012). Athens – Venice 2013, pp. 139–156; TAMÁS KISS, The Selimiye Mosque, the Apocalypse and the War of Cyprus (1570–71): The Creation of Selim II’s Sultanic Image. In: IRINA VAINOVSKI-MIHAI (ed.), *New Europe College Yearbook 2013–2014*. Bucharest 2014, pp. 261–285.

roles and strange images, while the second half advances a clear vision of Lyon as the new Jerusalem, which is opposed to the Babel of the *Old Testament* (p. 143). According to BIBBEE's assessment, the poem "mimics the iconographical destruction" of the Sack of Lyon by overturning traditional rhetoric devices before pronouncing the advent of a new Lyon (p. 143).

The essay by KATRINA KLAASMEYER seeks to explore astrology in sixteenth-century European court culture and, in particular, in a painting by the court artist Antoine Caron (d. 1599). She outlines the importance of astrology in European culture focusing on the court of French Queen Catherine de' Medici (r. 1547–1559). KLAASMEYER contrasts the courtly belief in astrology with Tycho Brahe's (d. 1601) revolutionary calculation of the comet that appeared in 1577 (pp. 156f). Brahe's calculations situated the comet outside the sublunar sphere, which amounted to a refutation of Aristotle's theory that comets cannot question the immutability of the heavens as they – technically speaking – do not belong to the heavens, but only to the sphere beneath the moon. Notwithstanding Brahe's revolutionary cosmology, most contemporary scholars adhered to traditional astrology, seeing in the comet a sign of death and destruction. KLAASMEYER suggests that Antoine Caron subscribed to such an apocalyptic interpretation (p. 158). Furthermore, she suggests that the burning orb of the sun depicted in Caron's painting does not show any contemporary eclipse (pp. 160f); in fact, it does not show any heavenly event of that period, but the eclipse at Christ's crucifixion (pp. 162f). She thus agrees with the recent renaming of the painting (1986) to "Dionysius the Areopagite converting the Pagan Philosophers" (p. 162). The reader is left to wonder how this interpretation of the eclipse relates to Caron's assumed apocalyptic expectations and, more generally, what purpose this theme served at the French court. A number of further questions remain unaddressed, which is largely due to the fact that KLAASMEYER's essay relies heavily on secondary literature. The essay reads more like a compilation of contemporary scholarly views on sixteenth-century astrology than an autonomous analysis of any primary source.

JOANNA MILES compares the apocalyptic anxieties of fourteenth-century England with those of seventeenth-century Puritan New England, arguing that both periods saw an intensification of eschatological fears. She establishes that Puritan clergymen and medieval priests faced the same criticism, which accused them of moral corruption and pedantic formality (pp. 170f). At the same time, apocalyptic terror was enhanced in both periods by

religious authorities, who employed apocalyptic imagery to reassert their authority *vis-à-vis* criticism and opposition (p. 172). An analysis of the sermons of Thomas Wimbleton (fourteenth century) and Increase Mather (seventeenth century) shows how clergymen prescribed behavior on evading eternal damnation and how they used the notions of repentance and readmission as tools of social control (pp. 173–177). The overarching argument of this essay is that – if seen from perspective of the apocalyptic tradition – the medieval and early modern periods (eleventh through eighteenth centuries) are not separate periods but are inherently connected through the same “shared apocalyptic tradition” (pp. 165–167, 178).

Finally, J. EUGENE CLAY turns to the reception history of the eschatological work attributed to Ephraem the Syrian (d. 373). He focuses on Ps-Ephraem’s *Sermon on the Antichrist* and describes a few episodes of how this pivotal text was received in Russia. A brief introduction to Ephraem’s life and work is followed by a summary of the Slavonic translation of the pseudepigraphic *Sermon on the Antichrist* (pp. 186–191). It is regrettable that the author refers to the 1647 print edition of the text and not to the more recent, scholarly edition by GEORG BOJKOVSKY, which is mentioned (p. 186, n. 24), but not used. This makes it difficult to follow the author’s references. Moreover, a few words on the relationship between the Slavonic translation and the Greek original would have been appropriate.⁴ CLAY’s analysis stresses that Ps-Ephraem does not speculate about the timing of the

4. For instance, CLAY points out (p. 187) that the Slavonic *Sermon on the Antichrist* likens the future workings of the Antichrist to the Midianite women (Num. 25) who had tempted the Israelites into adultery and idolatry, see GEORG BOJKOVSKY – RUDOLF AITZETMÜLLER, *Paraenesis: Die altbulgarische Übersetzung von Werken Ephraims des Syrers* (Monumenta Linguae Slavicae Dialecti Veteris XXIV (XX, 4)), Vol. 4. Freiburg i. Br. 1988, pp. 364–403, at pp. 374–376 (Sermo 98). It is noteworthy that the Greek text – as edited by KONSTANTINOS G. PHRATZOLAS, *Οσίου Εφραίμ του Σύρου έργα*. Vol. 4. Thessaloniki 1992, pp. 111–128, at pp. 116–117 – does not contain this section. Was the Midianite typology inserted only into the Slavonic *Sermon of the Antichrist*? Is there any connection with the use of this typology in the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodios*, which (chap. V.4–7 and XIII.11–13) presents the Midianites (Judg. 6–8) as the typological precursors of the seventh-century Arabs? On the Midianite typology in Pseudo-Methodios, see GERRIT J. REININK, *Ismael, der Wildesel in der Wüste. Zur Typologie der Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodios*. *ByzZ* 75 (1982) pp. 336–344. The Slavonic Ps-Ephraem and the Syriac Ps-Methodios use the same typology to explain the hardship that the new Israelites will undergo in the last days. But is there any deeper connection? A comparison of the Slavonic and Greek versions would be a necessary first step to address these questions.

end, but gives a timeless exhortation to remain faithful (p. 191).⁵ Regarding the text's reception history in Russia, he points to the liturgical reform under Patriarch Nikon in 1653, during which Ps-Ephraem's description of the Antichrist was applied to the Patriarch. The same invective strategy was used against Tsar Peter the Great in the eighteenth century (pp. 193–195). A final example from the Soviet era (pp. 195f) exemplifies the lasting legacy of the Ps-Ephraemic *Sermon on the Antichrist* (pp. 195f) in Russia.

In the final verdict, the volume contains a number of well-researched topics on a great variety of textual sources, mostly in European vernaculars. It thus makes a genuine contribution to the developing field of apocalyptic studies in medieval and early modern history. A useful index that lists names, localities, works, and events concludes this carefully edited book.

Keywords

apocalyptic studies; natural disasters; Antichrist; de-eschatologization

5. It is not clear when this timeless message was composed. CLAY mentions in passing that “the sermon probably dates to the sixth or seventh century” (p. 179), but he does not give any argument or reference.