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Rethinking medieval margins and marginality

edited by Ann E. Zimo, Tiffany D. Vann Sprecher, Kathryn Ryerson, Debra Blumenthal, London and New York, Routledge, 2020, 272 pp., \$48.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780367439569

Georgi Asatryan & Jack Kalpakian

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BOOK REVIEW

Rethinking medieval margins and marginality, edited by Ann E. Zimo, Tiffany D. Vann Sprecher, Kathryn Ryerson, Debra Blumenthal, London and New York, Routledge, 2020, 272 pp., \$48.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780367439569

For a serious academic work, this book is very enjoyable and can be said to have appeal beyond its expected academic readership. It takes analytical categories used to understand the present and looks at how they were applied in the past and how Medieval people, primarily but not exclusively in Europe, understood them. Specifically, the book is about how our current perceptions of marginality and the categories of people within it do match with the actual dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in Medieval times. It developed out of a 2016 panel on Marginality during the 22nd Arizona for Medieval and Renaissance Studies Conference. According to the authors, the panel was lively, and they concluded that today's scholars may be reading marginality into what is a far more complicated picture. Duplicating to some extent the race/gender/class categories of contemporary critical social science, the book is organized around the marginalities of race, geography, gender, the law and the body.

Lori De Lucia begins the regular chapters of the book with a deep discussion of the economic relationships between Borno, a state in the Sahel, and Palermo. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 forced Palermo to find new sources of slaves, and it turned to more direct relations with the Sahel through Tripoli. Drawing upon earlier delineations that used colour as an indication of status in North Africa, Palermo (and Valencia) minted the association of Blackness with enslavement in a European context. De Lucia explains exactly how this process took place and provides the reader with a deep awareness of the extent of this process (29–47). In contrast with enslaved Africans, the Mongols of the 13th century presented a clear threat to both Europe and the Middle East. Sierra Lomuto addresses how the Latin Catholic world saw the Mongols (48–65). The sources used to reconstruct the picture are those of travelers who interacted with the Mongols, often ascribing fantastic and surreal characteristics to them in order to other and dehumanize them, but at the same time attempt to bring the Mongols into the Christian fold.

In the rather large geography section, Jeremy DeAngelo argues that the Anglo-Saxons conversion to Christianity entailed both an internalization of pagan inferiority and an embrace of geographic marginality as a sign of Christian humility in sharp contrast to the Franks who saw their role in Western Christianity as central and their own culture as superior. DeAngelo applies the ideas of Frantz Fanon to Anglo-Saxon Britain, which is somewhat unusual but interesting nonetheless (67–79). Meg Roland approaches

marginality in geography by examining Sir Thomas Malory's approach to the Arthurian myths. Malory takes a marginal town, Sandwich, and makes it central to the Arthurian geography. The town is used to connect England to the world and make it central in his narrative (80–93). This of course constitutes a rejection of the earlier Anglo-Saxon tradition of acceptance of marginality. A similar consideration of Arthurian-type myth is examined in the case of Catalonia by Nahir I. Otaño Gracia. Otaño Gracia looks at Guillem de Torroella's *La Faula*, a Catalan treatment of the Arthurian myths roughly contemporary of Malory's 15th century work. Otaño Gracia argues that Arthurian myths as used in Catalonia seek to advance European imperialism by arguing that the margins, like Catalonia, are under the threat of Islam and thus needed to expand to preserve themselves (94–115). The part concerning geography concludes with Lisa Wolverton's 'Why Kings?'. Hers is a discussion of the geography of power. Wolverton suggests that the focus on Kings is teleological, often set up after the consolidation of their domains their claims on Kingship are established and recognized. Instead, she argues that a more general term like 'prince', especially given the existence of regions in Europe and elsewhere where non-Kings were instrumental in the creation of political communities and polities like Wales and the Czech lands (116–133).

The third part of the edited volume consists of a discussion on gender. The part opens with a chapter discussing 14th century women slave owners in Mallorca. The author, Kevin Mummey, uses notarial protocols as a source of information for their economic activities. He argues that these women were far from marginal for the local economy (135–158). Mummey's chapter is followed by Roisin Cossar's study of the difficult position of women who served as de-facto concubines for the clergy. Academic life has often relegated the role of these women to marginality, ironically duplicating the institutional Church's historic hostility to them. Cossar argues that in many contexts and situations, these women were the key to the survival of clerical households as well as invaluable sources of community organization and leadership (159–178). The third and final chapter on gender addressed the 13th century founder of the Sorbonne, Robert de Sorbon, and his approach to female lay monastics, called the Beguines. In that chapter, Tanya Stabler Miller studies sermons given by de Sorbon and argues that he found the Beguines marginality central and that their presence, humility and involvement were central to his religious and educational mission (180–201).

The fourth part of the book addresses marginality in the law. In this case, Muslims living in lands controlled by Christians during the Middle Ages and pirates are the topics of the two chapters offered. Ann E. Zimo argues that Muslims were an integral part of the Frankish economy in the Crusader states in the Levant and that their marginalization was found in the legal realm. Muslims did not participate in the courts of the Crusader states, and while there were exceptions, they did not hold fiefs. Their access to the courts was also skewed and biased, with their testimony counting lower than that of Christians. Zimo cites Usāma Ibn Munqidh (1095–1188), whose *Kitāb al-I'tibār* (Book of Contemplation) provides, among many other things, details of

his extensive interactions with the Franks. Ibn Munqidh was essentially a feudal lord, a scholar, a courtier and a poet. He was able to use the Frankish legal system to settle disputes with Franks by direct appeal to the King. Another example of this functionality was the Condominia/Munāṣafat – areas where Crusader lords shared revenue from certain areas with Muslim rulers nearby. Zimo clearly establishes that the reality did not correspond to the legal frameworks that the Franks attempted to impose (203–226). Perhaps even more excluded than Muslims were pirates, whose profession made them a threat to commerce and to coastal towns and cities, as such pirates are seen as marginal. Kathryn Reyerson and Caley McCarthy argue that there is a lot more to that marginality than it what initially appears. Piracy was not a permanent profession during the Middle Ages and were often reintegrated into their home communities. They were often the recipients of letters of marque, which legalized their activity within the framework of war, meaning that they were part and parcel of the political system (227–245).

The final section addresses issues related to the body. Caley McCarthy discusses the 15th century Hospital of Saint-Esprit in Marseille. The hospital provided services to prisoners of conflict, sailors, sex workers, foreign pilgrims and foundlings. McCarthy shows how the institution helped incorporate these diverse individuals into its community both morally and physically (247–267). In some ways, the final chapter was the most radical. Using a 14th century English devotional poem, *The Prik Conscience*, Seal argues that in the Medieval perspective, all of humanity was marginal in view of original sin and the movement of people away from the perfection of God (268–288).

Recommending this book is a fairly easy call. It is well written and easy to understand for social scientists for a wide variety of fields. The sole criticism one can raise concerns the need for some coherence. There are some chapters that are concerned with texts, while others discuss relationships of power and exclusion/inclusion. Any follow-up efforts may want to consider a division that takes these differences into account. Beyond that, this book is a pleasure to read, and has the distinction of being one of a few Western sources to use the works of Ibn Munqidh, whose text should always serve as a warning against clear categories that politicized memory constructs in contradiction to what actually took place.

Georgi Asatryan
Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, Moscow, Russia
Institute of Scientific Information on Social Sciences, Russian Academy of
Sciences, Moscow, Russia

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0266-3097>

Jack Kalpakian
Al Akhawayn University, Ifrane, Morocco

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