

Book Reviews

Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe, 900-1200. ELISABETH VAN HOUTS. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. 196 p. ISBN 0-8020-8277-7.

The transmission of knowledge about the past in the Middle Ages is usually associated with monastic chroniclers and clerical historians. The surviving chronicles, annals, and histories have been the focus of much scholarship and research, and have been extensively quarried for the information they reveal about the events of their time. Only in fairly recent times has attention shifted to other records of the medieval past and to the interplay between oral and written traditions as sources of cultural memory.

Elisabeth van Houts draws on this newer approach to investigate “how between [the years] 900 and 1200 people remembered their past and recorded their experiences in oral and written traditions” (p. 145). She situates these traditions mainly within the realm of the family and emphasizes, in particular, the different roles of women and men in this process. She begins with a thematic account of the different tools which medieval people used for remembering and recording the past, starting with chronicles and annals and moving on to look at accounts of saints’ lives and other written materials (charters, letters, fictional literature). Her interest in these written sources is focused particularly on the oral elements within them. In relation to chronicles and annals, for instance, she examines how writers distinguished between different levels of personal experience, ranging from the author as a personal witness of events to the use of stories about people who were remote in time or place from the author.

Her willingness to move beyond these written sources is demonstrated by a detailed and interesting discussion of the role of objects and physical sites as “pegs for collective memory.” Among the types of objects covered are relics and reliquaries, vestments, jewelry, tapestries, and books. Although those objects that survived to the present did so because they were preserved by

ecclesiastical institutions, van Houts is able to reconstruct some of their significance for personal and family memorial traditions.

In addition to this examination of the different types of sources, van Houts looks at the memorial tradition of a specific dramatic event, the Norman Conquest, which has resonated in the history of England for over nine hundred years. Her concern is with the remembrance of that event in England and Normandy over the first hundred years after 1066. She shows how, on the English side, there was initially a shocked silence in the written sources, in response to the trauma of such a national disaster. After fifty or sixty years and one or two generations, however, there seems to have been a growing realization that personal knowledge of this event was declining rapidly. As a result, the first efforts were made to collect and pass on this information, usually in oral form, but sometimes in writing. It was only in the next fifty years or so that full written histories began to appear.

An important and original aspect of this book is the way in which van Houts examines the different roles of women and men in the process of remembering the past. Her thesis is that, for the most part, women were responsible for passing on the oral traditions, particularly those relating to family histories. These were later written down by men – primarily the monastic and clerical chroniclers – though they were generally reluctant to acknowledge women as their sources. Nevertheless, as van Houts emphasizes, this was a collaborative process, shared between women and men. She uses a range of evidence to illustrate her argument, and mounts a case which is compelling, if not necessarily conclusive. At the very least, she has ensured that scholars in the future will not be able to ignore the contribution of women to the process of preserving the cultural memory of medieval Europe.

From a modern perspective, one of the most interesting aspects of this book is the range of sources consulted and the way in which van Houts makes use of them. While a significant proportion of the written documents from the period between 900 and 1200 has not survived to the present, that which *has* survived still amounts to a substantial number of histories, chronicles, charters, saints' lives, and so on, scattered in libraries and archives throughout Western Europe and even in North America. Van Houts manages to bring a new perspective to this material and looks at it with fresh eyes. But she goes further than this in her willingness to consider objects – largely held in museums and churches – as sources of equal importance. She even includes physical locations in the range of relevant sources. By doing this, she illustrates effectively and convincingly the way in which a variety of different cultural objects – not just written documents – embody the memory and heritage of the past, even when this is as distant as the Middle Ages.

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