

Richard Matthew Pollard (Ed.): *Imagining the Medieval Afterlife*

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Medieval theologians have grappled with the concepts of heaven and hell in a variety of ways. Some topics were highly controversial (do unbaptized children go to purgatory or heaven, can the diseased return as ghosts), others much less so (good Christians go to heaven, bad people to hell or purgatory). In many regards, the afterlife discourse defined contemporary life on Earth.

The medieval mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg (c. 1207-c.1282) contributed highly allegorical visions of heaven and hell to this often male-dominated discourse. In *The Floating Light of the Godhead*, a 13th-century collection of the beguine's visions, Mechthild describes hell as an allegorical space where Lucifer ingests »Sodomites« and hits murderers with swords until they bleed (book 3, 21), and heaven as well-ordered, hierarchical place of divine joy. Considering her own status, the text is surprisingly critical of the current stage of religious practices and clerical behavior – comparing some clerics to wolves in a wolf in sheep's clothing and admonishing a general laxity in regard to observing religious practices (book 3, 21). Mechthild's visions further challenge established theological doctrine in regards to unbaptized children who were believed to reside in Purgatory. In contrast, in Mechthild's vision, unbaptized children who died at the age of five or younger have received a »special honor«, dwelling in a place of »great comfort« in heaven (book 3, 1).

Mechthild's unique, at times controversial, and highly allegorical visions of

the afterlife present an important chapter in *Imagining the Medieval Afterlife*, edited by Richard Matthew Pollard (Cambridge University Press 2020). This edited volume expands on previous research to bring together afterlife discourses. The collection contains fifteen essays composed in handbook style ranging from overviews of specific discourses (e.g., intercessional prayers, placement in the afterlife, the return of the deceased) to literary analyses (e.g., Dante's *Inferno*, *The Vision of Tnugdál*, Gregory's *Dialogues*), covering roughly 1000 years, often with a specific geographical or temporal focus. The almost exclusively Christian literary sources that are examined in the essays share the spatial division of the afterworld into heaven and hell, Purgatory and purgatorial spaces. Most of the analyzed material is taken from theological treatises or vision literature – such as Mechthild's revelations in *The Floating Light of Godhead*.

Imagining the Medieval Afterlife presents an important attempt to offer an overview of medieval visions of the otherworld. In an impressive way, many of the chapters expand on and complement each other. In dialogue, these chapters give insight into various aspects of images of afterlife in the Christian Middle Ages, offering a comprehensive view while repeatedly pointing out that no conclusive findings can be drawn in such a limited space. The coherence and consistency of the articles, which combine both recent scholarship as well as many canonical sources, makes the volume easily accessible and establishes a very

valuable resource for research as well as teaching.

The essays are connected through a focus on various themes and topics. A prominent theme that emerges across cultures is that the representation of heaven and hell have one central aspect in common: heaven is associated with order and light, hell with chaos. Stead's art history essay validates this finding through his analyses of non-verbal sources.

A second related theme is a critique of Jacques Le Goff's *The Birth of Purgatory* (1981). In his highly influential monograph, Le Goff argued that the doctrine of Purgatory does not appear in the theological discourse of Western Christianity before the late twelfth century. He tied the formation of the idea of Purgatory to social, cultural, and intellectual changes in the high Middle Ages. Drawing on various primary sources, many of the contributors of *Imagining the Medieval Afterlife* argue that, first, the concept of Purgatory was established much earlier than the 12th century and that Le Goff's argument is based on his radically eclectic sources, and that secondly, the image of Purgatory was amended and specified in 12th- and 13th-century literature. Further, the contributors caution against using the concept of Purgatory as one single, clearly defined space and suggest that rather than speaking of Purgatory, it is important to acknowledge a variety of purgatorial stages and spaces.

But the authors focus not just on the visions of the afterlife but also on the implications of these visions for the living. Several authors argue that death, provision for death, and care for the salvation of the deceased are topics much more central to the medieval societies in Europe than to their modern successor. In a sub-discussion to the implications for the living recipients of these visions, several chapters also consider the use of ot-

herworld depictions as strategic political tools. The discussions on the Anglo-Saxon and Italian contexts highlight the political implications of these visions.

As the first chapter after the brief introduction, Susanna Braund and Emma Hilliard's chapter »Just Deserts in the Ancient Pagan Afterlife« offers an important overview of Greco-Roman influences on the Christian Middle Ages. With examples from Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Cicero's *De re publica* (specifically: Scipio's dream), Braund and Hillard offer a succinct overview of some of the most essential sources from the Greco-Roman antiquity that influenced medieval scholarly discussions.

Yitzhak Hen's subsequent chapter »Visions of the Afterlife in the Early Medieval West« continues the chronological overview from Braund's and Hilliard's chapter. Perhaps most importantly, Hen addresses »oriental inspirations« as well as the influences of Visigoth Spain, thus offering a crucial intervention in the otherwise almost exclusive focus on the western-European Christianity of the following chapters. Unfortunately, Hen's chapter ultimately succumbs to other canonical material by focusing on texts such as *Dialogues* by Gregory the Great (d. 604) and the *Ten Books of History* by Gregory of Tours (d. 509) as well as their reception in the Merovingian era.

Richard Matthew Pollard takes the reader from the Merovingians to the next major European political period with his chapter »A Morbid Efflorescence: Envisaging the Afterlife in the Carolingian Period.« Pollard adds and explores a central aspect of the medieval discourse on afterlives: intercessional prayer. Pollard links this discourse to Carolingian religious practices and the reception of earlier theologians (such as Augustine and Gregory the Great) and explores the increa-

sed importance of intercessional prayer in the context of Carolingian vision literature.

In contrast to Carolingian visions, the Anglo-Celtic material strives to localize the afterworld(s) in a geographical as well as a politically familiar context, as Gernot R. Wieland argues in the chapter »Anglo-Saxon Visions of Heaven and Hell.« Wieland argues that the Anglo-Saxon authors »localized« the continental visions in Britain through copies, translations, and other forms of adaptation. This is in large parts due to the Venerable Bede, who places the events in older visions in Britain and uses them to ultimately draw a direct line from ancient miracles to contemporary Britain. Bede's attempts at localization are a reaction to Anglo-Saxon sentiments: While the Catholic faith had reached the Anglo-Saxons from abroad, the Anglo-Saxons were not content with afterlife visions from »foreigners« and made them their own.

Gwenfair Walters Adams' chapter »Visions of the Otherworlds in Late Middle Ages, c. 1300-1500« concludes the chronological overview in the first part of the book. Yet, Adams' chapter expands the discussion by focusing on topics that had not been stressed thus far: questions of genre, otherworld travels that are not strictly visions, and the return of the dead. Her focus on meditations, sermons, and saints' legends introduces material that circulated outside of the theological-learned spaces and thus reached a much wider audience. Further, she is the first one to address the fascination with afterworlds among authors of non-religious, fictional literature by including narrated fictional glimpses into journeys to the otherworld.

Although assigned to the next section of this book, Isabel Moreira's chapter picks up where Adams left off: the discourses on intercessional prayer and the

appearance of souls of the dead to the living within a theological framework. In »Purgatory's Intercessors: Bishops, Ghosts, and Angry Wives« Moreira offers insights into the highly debated field of revenants among medieval scholars—showing us that there was no agreement as to how far intercessional prayer could intervene in the afterworldly fate of the departed. Moreira also returns to the question of purgatory, arguing for a differentiation between Purgatory as represented in papal doctrine and purgatory as post-mortem purgation attested in many various sources.

Helen Foxhall Forbes chapter »The Theology of the Afterlife in the Early Middle Ages, c. 400-1100« approaches the afterlife from the perspective of the living in two regards: how can a good afterlife for dearly departed souls be aided and what provisions can be made to ensure a place in heaven. A strength of her chapter lies in the fact that she traces larger developments within religious discourses while cautioning against generalizations. Foxhall Forbes argues, for example, that while earlier Christians believed that basically any Christian would reach salvation, the theological discourse of the high Middle Ages highlights a difference between »good« and »bad« Christians – being Christian alone did not guarantee access to heaven anymore.

Henry Ansgar Kelly's chapter »After-death Locations and Return Appearances, from Scripture to Shakespeare« is equally concerned with cautioning against generalizations. The chapter returns to re-envisioning the medieval concept of Purgatory and proposes that there are various spaces of purgation – spaces that could even be located on earth. Such spaces, Kelly argues, were particularly relevant to the discourse on the appearance of the dead to living people and their envisio-

ned journeys between this world and the otherworld.

Adam R. Stead's chapter »Eye Hath not Seen... which Things God Hath Prepared....«: Imagining Heaven and Hel in Romanesque and Gothic Art« opens the concrete material analysis section of the book with a true highlight. In this richly illustrated chapter, Stead brings the visual representations of afterworld visions into the discussion. Stead explores medieval artists' fascination with representations of afterworlds both in the public spaces of churches as well as in manuscript illuminations. The focus of these images is often on the contrast between heaven and hell, serving, in consequence, a warning to the living to conduct a life that would lead to heaven.

Jesse Keskiaho's chapter »Visions and the Afterlife in Gregory's *Dialogues*« initiates the final section of the book (»Notable Authors and Texts«) with an analysis of pope Gregory's (c. 540-604) notions of visions and the afterlife. Keskiaho returns to the highly influential four-volume theological monument *Dialogues* (c. 593-4) that many of the previous chapters already mentioned, now with a more in-depth analysis. While Gregory's understanding of nature, topography, and scenery of otherworldly locations as well as his reflections on the soul were significantly shaped by previous theologians – most importantly Augustine of Hippo –, Gregory's reflections were unprecedented in their influence on medieval Christian visions of the afterlife, as several chapters in this book show.

As the second chapter in this section, Eileen Gardiner offers a closer analysis of a text, which previous contributors had also repeatedly referenced. Gardiner's »The *Vision of Tnúgdal*« focuses on a near-death experience of an Irish 12th-century knight – a story that was widely read and that was translated into more than

fifteen languages before 1600. Heavily influenced by various other medieval vision texts and – most importantly – Bernard of Clairvaux's theology, the vision reflects the familiar tripartite structure of the afterworld. This structure of heaven, hell, and intermediate places had been prevalent in the medieval theological discourse long before the 12th century as other chapters have shown in contrast to earlier scholarship.

The penultimate chapter by Debra L. Stoudt, »The Afterlife in the Visionary Experiences of the Female Mystics,« focuses on the writings of a group of female – mostly German – mystics, most prominently Hildegard of Bingen and Mechthild of Magdeburg. Their writings are similar in that they aim to reconcile an often self-perceived unworthiness due to their female identities with in-depth insights into divine providence. Ultimately, Stoudt argues the female mystics share a common goal of using their visions to teach and admonish the living, guiding them towards a path that leads to God and thereby directly to heaven.

The final chapter brings into the discussion the medieval literate best-known for his visions of the afterlife: Dante Alighieri. George Corbett's »Dante's Other-Worldly Surprises and This-Worldly Polemic« focuses particularly on the political implications of placing contemporaneous popes in hell. By doing so, Dante offers a powerful criticism of contemporary papacy, portraying it as corrupt institution filled with individuals who betray the most sacred office of western Christianity.

Most of the texts focus on Christian-religious vision literature or theological treatises. Even *The Vision of Tnúgdal* ultimately represents a vision of the afterworld within a strictly theological-religious discourse. What is missing then – and only

vaguely explored in the Dante chapter – are visits to the otherworld in fictional stories and the impact of the theological ideas on non-religious literature. Medieval authors were fascinated by stories about Alexander the Great – including Alexander's attempts to visit earthly and otherworldly paradises (*iter ad paradisum*). Further, the idea that St. Patrick's Purgatory could be accessed from the world of the living by the living captured medieval imagination. The most famous premodern German example of a visit to St. Patrick's Purgatory is included in the Early New High German prose novel *Fortunatus* (Augsburg, 1509).

Despite the self-proclaimed goal to diversify and de-canonize the scholarly discussion of the afterlife, the primary literature choices as well as the geographical and religious-cultural context remain fairly classic and almost exclusively consider European western-Christianity. Therefore, a chapter on the influence of Islamic and Jewish thought on the

Christian medieval theological discourse would have aided that claim – which seems even more relevant as many of the sources from Greco-Roman antiquity reach the medieval authors through non-Christian translations. In consequence, many of the scholars end up focusing on fairly canonical texts that represent the afterlife discourse through familiar ecclesiastical voices. And thus, while the editors set out to expand and modify the discourse on afterworlds in the Middle Ages, the actual discussion remains fairly conventional.

Nevertheless, on a scholarly level, the book makes medieval discourses easily accessible through the succinct representation in the various chapters, and most importantly, serves as broadly conceived and overdue intervention to Le Geoff's monolithic monograph.

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