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Andreas Tacke. *Ich armer sundiger mensch: Heiligen- und Reliquienkult am Übergang zum konfessionellen Zeitalter.* Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2006. 542 S. EUR 35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-89244-992-8.

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The Art of Holiness

The articles collected in this volume stem from a conference held in 2004 in Halle, which is located near Leipzig and the birthplace of the Protestant Reformation, Wittenberg. The volume, as the conference from which it emerged, deals with the veneration of saints and cults of relics across central Germany on the eve of the Reformation. The authors are mostly art historians, although the book includes contributions by historians and theologians, and the articles focus mainly on relic collections, the ceremonial display of relics, and the description of relic collections in elaborately illustrated volumes. While the studies cut a swath across central Germany, the principal locales involved are Halle itself, Wittenberg, and Aschaffenburg, near Frankfurt am Main. The two key figures of the volume as a whole are, without question, Saxon Elector Frederick the Wise, who assembled a great relic collection in Wittenberg, and Albrecht of Brandenburg, Archbishop of Magdeburg, who assembled an equally impressive collection in Halle that was later split when the Reformation became too heated and moved to Mainz and Aschaffenburg. This is not to say, however, that these two men and their collections figure in every article in this volume. Article collections are often criticized for their lack of thematic focus and coherence. That is in no way a criticism that can be leveled here. One can only wonder at the effort it must have taken, either in the organizational phase of the initial conference or the editorial phase of the book, to nudge so many authors into such tightly interlocking arguments. German academics are certainly better at this, in general, than their American counterparts. Still, Andreas Tackes must be congratulated for producing a particularly well-organized and well-structured volume, in which the articles actually build on one another, not quite like the chapters of a monograph, but still to an impressive degree. Naturally not every article fits precisely in its allotted place and some of the essays are outliers. But overall, this collection that actually repays reading in order from beginning to end.

In the tradition of German scholarship, the volume includes much less "setting of scene" than would be normal in an equivalent American volume. Tacke's foreword is a crisp little affair of only two pages, rather than the separate, article-length introductory essay that might be expected or desired. The articles themselves frequently do not sketch out much of the background against which they are working, but dive directly into their findings and analysis. A map of central Germany showing the (sometimes fairly small) locales under discussion would have been helpful. I raise these points because, for all its specificity, this volume addresses major issues in late medieval religiosity and deserves to be read by a broad audience.

The overarching theme of the book is how, why, and to what purposes late medieval religiosity manifested itself via relics and their cults. Relics were, of course, important symbols and foci of devotion. They might be aesthetic objects or at the very least surrounded and encased by aesthetic forms. They also symbolized and to some extent generated political power, civic unity, and social

identity. A number of the articles here dwell on why so many late medieval German princes found it useful to assemble great relic collections, display them ostentatiously, and record them in elaborately illustrated catalogs. These men competed with one another to gather relics, and then competed again to advertise their relics, the indulgences they might confer, and the social, economic, political, and certainly religious power they represented. Another group of articles explores the visual, and in one very interesting case the acoustic, elements of ritual processions of great relic collections. A relic collection, and above all the display of a relic collection, was an important means to establishing identity and integration within a community.

As mentioned, a few of the contributions included do not quite seem to fit the grander purpose, or at least do so only tangentially. One article, which attempts to decipher a pair of, supposed, artificial "dragon's wings" preserved in the town of Halberstadt, ultimately concludes that they are, in fact, "relics" of angel-costumes used in a civic ritual. Most of the article, however, traces examples of dragon-imagery in other religious ceremonies and town festivals throughout the Middle Ages. One learns some interesting facts about the number of stuffed Egyptian crocodiles hung up in medieval churches as images of the dragon of the apocalypse, which certainly could be considered a type of anti-relic, but we seem rather further from the central theme of the book here than with most of the other articles. Similarly, an enormously long piece presents a speculative argument about a somewhat strange painting of the Lamentation of Christ by Matthias GrÃ¼newald, commissioned by Albrecht of Magdeburg to serve as decoration for a chapel to the holy grave in Aschaffenburg. The place and the personalities are right, and certainly veneration of saints is a part of the argument, but again this article does not enjoy the resonance of most of the others.

Where is Luther in all of this? The volume is true to its title of exploring saints' cults on the point of transition to the Reformation, but not during the Reformation. One waits until the final article for any direct treatment of Luther and the position he took regarding saints and their relics. The article is, however, worth the wait. It is a fine piece on Luther in transition, as he became the anti-saint reformer known to history. Later in life, Luther described his younger self as totally caught up in the cult of saints, only rebelling against its excesses later in life. As is demonstrated here, however, well before he became a Reformer, he was delivering sermons fully in tune with the reformist trends typical of late medieval German universities. He railed against excessive devotion to the saints, the uncontrolled and unapproved multiplication of elements surrounding their cults, and facile credulity in extravagant miracle stories. Like many other late medieval religious authorities, Luther regarded such practices among the common people as superstitious. His own opposition to the very notion of saints as active intercessors developed not so much from these roots, contends the article, as from university debates about the state of even the most holy dead in the afterlife, and the possibility of human communication with them.

No conclusion is included in the volume, although the final article might, in some sense, be taken as a concluding statement. It places Luther himself within, rather than in stark and simplistic opposition to, the complex, multifaceted world of late medieval relics and saints' cults. The volume as a whole does a fine job of charting the scope and richness of that world.

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