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Medieval Italy: An Encyclopedia (review)

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Book Reviews

Christopher Kleinhenz, ed. *Medieval Italy: An Encyclopedia*. 2 vols. New York: Routledge, 2004. Pp. xxx + 1,290.

The ninth in a series of encyclopedias published since 1993 by Routledge, *Medieval Italy: An Encyclopedia* is a highly satisfying collection of about 950 entries on various aspects of the topic indicated in the title. In his introduction to this two-volume work (1,290 double-column pages), to which nearly 200 scholars have contributed, Christopher Kleinhenz notes that he and his coeditors “make no claim for completeness,” especially given the vastness of the subject. Yet the work is remarkably well designed to anticipate the topics about which both students and scholars are most likely to be curious, from providing longer pieces on broad topics such as the evolution of books to short notes on less familiar, but significant poets, humanists, and theologians. Much care is given to help the reader navigate through the maze of interconnected topics related to medieval Italy. The vast majority of the entries include both a critical bibliography and several cross-references to other entries. There is also a subject index at the end of the second volume, as well as useful chronological lists of popes and rulers up to the fifteenth century. At the

beginning of the first volume three maps of the Italian peninsula give a general idea of the political development from the division of Italy in the period from 600 to 1350.

The entries vary in length according to the breadth of the topic, and they can be divided thematically into several main categories regarding medieval life in Italy: major figures in politics, religion, and art; prominent cities and regions; major events; general practices, innovations, and movements; significant documents, relics, and monuments; debates and controversies; forms and techniques in literature and the other arts; and minor poets, artists, and musicians. Most entries are less than two pages long, and these largely treat historical figures or highly specific themes. There are also around 50 entries that are between two and three pages. These entries deal with broader topics, such as "Nobility," "Investiture," and "Weights and Measures," as well as smaller cities and regions, such as Todi, Vicenza, and Sardinia. Long entries—those over four pages—are divided nearly equally between cities, from Rome to Prato, and broad themes like the "Frankish Kingdom" and "Latin Language and Literature." Only four individuals receive such extensive attention: Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Francis of Assisi. There are some occasional surprises regarding the space devoted to topics. For example, the entry on the Lombards is only one page and that on mosaics is as long as those on Florence and Rome, among the longest in the collection. The entry on Italian prose is only two pages, compared to the fourteen devoted to lyric poetry alone and six additional pages on prosody.

The decision to devote a great deal of space to geographical places confirms the overall sense that the cities and regions must be developed sufficiently to provide a backdrop for important figures, movements, and events.

The work bears the strong imprint of a few scholars, John W. Barker, Joseph Byrne, and Kleinhenz himself, each of whom contributes over 40 entries to the collection. Indeed, a small core of scholars is responsible for a large portion of the entries: 12 scholars contribute over 30 percent of the entries. Many of the black-and-white photographs in the volumes, especially those of places, are courtesy of Kleinhenz and Barker. Nevertheless, Kleinhenz and his fellow editors, John W. Barker, Gail Geiger, and Richard Lansing, have marshaled together an impressive group of scholars, and they have allowed them to approach their diverse topics in different ways, particularly when the topic is a broad theme or a city or region. General editorial guidelines rather than strict requirements of form determine the shape of these entries. For example, while both are interested generally in the history

and development of the cities and are equally detailed in their accounts, the entries on Rome and Florence are organized under different headings. The presentation of the bibliographies, too, reflects the judgment of each contributor. Some entries divide the bibliography into editions, translations, and critical studies. Others are much simpler. And while the titles cited, as one might expect, are primarily works in English and Italian, with only occasional titles in German and French, the bibliographies range greatly in the number of works and in the type of work, from encyclopedias, articles, and books.

This is not to say that there is not a strong editorial presence; one finds that the entries are highly detailed but also readable. The entries, notably those focused on a central political figure or a whole people, such as that on Arabs, often succeed in condensing into a relatively small space highly specific material. Particularly in the shorter entries, one finds an admirable consistency in the type of information given. One of the collection's great strengths is that contributors regularly provide specific information regarding the life, works, and death of individuals, in a clear effort to make the reader view these figures in their social and historical context. One finds personal details about the figures treated: physical characteristics, political associations, and how they might have exemplified an epochal trend. The houses or palaces built or inhabited by prominent families are highlighted. And where little is known about the person the contributor openly recognizes this lack of information. Particularly useful to literary scholars is the consistent attention given to describing documents attributable to a given author and noting where existing works are preserved. The contributors also often note the reception of texts throughout the period.

The entries reflect an effort to relate less commonly known figures to others. For instance, even though a letter from Accursius to Pier della Vigna is reported as "of doubtful authenticity," the reference to it helps the reader place Accursius within a more familiar historical and cultural framework. In this regard, Dante figures prominently in these volumes as a central known figure to whom contributors often relate their subjects. A couple of examples of this tendency will suffice: in the entry on Marsilio of Padua, Marsilio's realism regarding how to curb the political power of the papacy is contrasted with Dante's idealistic desire for a restoration of the Roman Empire; the entry on Pope Hadrian V notes his mention in Dante's *Purgatorio*; and the entry on the Adimari family notes Dante's treatment of descendants of the family in the *Inferno*. In a random selection of about 200 entries Dante is mentioned 20 times, either in the entry itself or in the bibliography.

It is instructive to view entries in relation to one another, for one finds that the plurality of voices that this encyclopedia provides puts into relief different interpretations of the same historical events. For example, if one compares the entries on Ghibellines with that on Guelfs, despite general agreement on the facts, there are slight differences in emphasis and interpretation. While one describes the labels of Guelf and Ghibelline as arising from “the dynastic wars of the mid-twelfth century between the Hohenstaufen emperors and the Welf dukes of Bavaria and Saxony” (415), the other points to the climax of the conflict in the disputed election between Philip of Swabia of the Hohenstaufen and Otto of Brunswick. While both describe the terms as ones that polarize already existing factions in Italian communes, the Ghibelline entry cites Frederick I as the main catalyst for the adoption of these divisive parties, and the Guelf entry cites his grandson, Frederick II. If both trace the evolution of the meaning of these terms, they provide differing and complementary views of this evolution. The Ghibelline entry holds that from 1268 on, and even after 1300, the papacy was involved in efforts to overcome Ghibelline resistance in the north, and that by 1300 the term Ghibelline meant opposition to the combined control of the papacy and the Angevins. While the entry on Guelfs agrees generally with this statement, it recognizes more clearly Florence’s new relations with the papacy and the Angevins. Indeed, focusing on Tuscany, the author of this entry holds that after 1266 Ghibellinism is redefined as anti-Florentine sentiment and resistance to this city’s hegemony in the region.

The different nuances in perspective and experience that different contributors provide enriches this collection of well-wrought entries. This fine point aside, the breadth of information on this long period in Italy history and the clarity of presentation found in the volumes make it an invaluable resource for students and teachers.

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Maria Elisa Raja. *Le muse in giardino: Il paesaggio ameno nelle opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*. Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 2003. Pp. 212.

The topos of the garden is a familiar point of departure for studies of the *Decameron*. But, although *Le muse in giardino* dedicates much space and energy to Boccaccio’s masterpiece, this study is a reading of the “garden-*locus amoenus*” in the complete works of Boccaccio, with the *Decameron* as the