



Symbolism and Functions of Nakedness in Medieval Germany¹. Review of the Collective Monograph “‘And They Realized that They were Naked’. Nudity in the Middle Ages”

Elina A. Sarakaeva (a) & Irena V. Lebedeva (b)

(a) Hainan Professional College of Economics and Business. Haikou, China.
Email: 2689655292[at]qq.com

(b) Caspian Institute of Sea and River Transport. Astrakhan, Russia.
Email: irenalebedeva[at]mail.ru

Abstract

This article reviews the German-language collection of scholarly works “‘And they realized that they were naked.’ Nudity in the Middle Ages” edited in Bamberg University following the conference for young scholars. The monograph comprises results of an interdisciplinary conference of the Centre for Medieval Studies held in Otto-Friedrich-University Bamberg, Germany. The conference was organised by Alexandru Anca, Stefan Bießenecker, Laura Brander, Heiko Hiltmann and Kai Lorenz. ISBN 978-3-923507-29-0, © University of Bamberg Press Bamberg 2008, 460 pages. With introduction by Stefan Bießenecker. Original title: „Und sie erkannten, dass sie nackt waren.“ Nacktheit im Mittelalter“.

Keywords

Nakedness; Nudity; Medieval; Middle Ages; Art; Literature; German; Monograph; Symbolism



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¹ Although the book under review claims to discuss history of Middle Ages in general, only two of its entries deal with countries other than Germany, so we took the liberty of giving our review this sort of title.



Репрезентация обнаженного тела в средневековой Германии, её функции и символика. Рецензия на коллективную монографию «“И увидели они, что они наги”». Нагота в Средние века»

Саракаева Элина Алиевна (а), Лебедева Ирэна Валерьевна (б)

(а) Хайнаньский институт экономики и бизнеса. Хайкоу, Китай. Email: 2689655292[at]qq.com

(б) Каспийский институт морского и речного транспорта. Астрахань, Россия.
Email: irenalebedeva[at]mail.ru

Аннотация

В статье приводится рецензия на немецкоязычный сборник научных трудов «“И увидели они, что они наги”». Нагота в Средние века», изданный по материалам конференции молодых ученых Бамбергского университета. Монография содержит результаты междисциплинарной конференции Центра средневековых исследований, состоявшейся в Отто-Фридрихском университете г. Бамберга, Германия. Организаторами конференции выступили Александру Анка, Штефан Биссенекер, Лаура Брандер, Хайко Хилтманн и Кай Лоренц. ISBN 978-3-923507-29-0, © University of Bamberg Press Bamberg 2008, 460 страниц. С предисловием Штефана Биссенекера. Оригинальное название „Und sie erkannten, dass sie nackt waren.“ Nacktheit im Mittelalter“.

Ключевые слова

обнаженность; нагота; средневековый; Средневековье; искусство; литература; Германия; монография; символизм



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The German-language monograph “And they realized that they were naked. Nudity in the Middle Ages” edited by University of Bamberg Press comprises results of an interdisciplinary conference of the Centre for Medieval Studies held in Otto-Friedrich-University Bamberg, Germany. Together with the introduction written by Stefan Bießenecker “What means nudity?” (the most essential question discussed by the participants of the conference), the monograph is a solid collection of 19 academic papers, written by German-language scholars. The contents of the monograph are the following:

1. Stefan Bießenecker. What means nudity?
2. Reinhard Köpf. Naked facts. Observations on the nudity of the figures of Adam and Eve at the Bamberg Cathedral
3. Stefan Trinks. Nudity on the Spanish pilgrimage route - antiquity as antidote.
4. Maurice Sprague. Memories of Paradise, Temptation, and the Fall.
5. Kai Lorenz. *davon er so hart erkam, das er nackend usz dem sloffe springen*. Reflections on the representation and function of nudity in Heinrich von dem Türlîn's “Diu Crône”.
6. Susanne Moraw. Virtue and Sin. Nudity in Late Latin Antiquity.
7. Hans Peter Pökel. Nudity and shame in the Islamic Middle Ages. The naked female body and the gaze in the works of Al-Gahiz.
8. Mirko Gründer. Nudity as metaphor. The medieval image of a naked person in the light of Hans Blumenberg's Metaphorology.
9. Johanna Rahner. A naked God? Theological perspectives on nakedness in the Middle Ages.
10. Veronika Sattler. Nudity on the margins. The representation of nudity in Gothic margin illustrations.
11. Christian Nikolaus Opitz. *Imagines provocativas ad libidinem?* The naked (female) body in secular wall painting of the late Middle Ages.
12. Julia Weitbrecht. *Die magd nakint schowen / Ir reinen lip zerhowen*. Exposure and sanctification in legends about female martyrs.
13. Laura Brander. Naked seduction and abstinent virgin. Function and Instrumentalization of Nudity in the context of courtship, encampment, and wedding night.
14. Andreas Hammer. Nudity at the Border. Narrative circumscriptions of the rites of passage.
15. Silke Winst. Body and identity. Gender-specific encodings of nudity in the courtly novel around 1200.
16. Andrea Grafetstätter. The performance of nudity in medieval drama.



17. Andreas Goltz. Naked Theoderic. A persecutor on the road to damnation.
18. Heiko Hiltmann. Of bare breasts and bare swords. Offensive Forms of Female Breast Exposure using the example of the "Eiríks saga rauða".
19. Mihai Grigore. Of phallus, dwarfs and resurrection. Reflections on the discussion about the masculinity of Christ.

This list of entries shows the direction of the research and the scope of questions discussed at the conference: What actually means nudity? What did it mean for people in the Middle Ages? What functions did it play in the art and literature of European and Arabic Middle Ages?

In this article we will deviate from the usual scheme of a book review and, instead of a general overview of the topics and main conclusions, we will comment on the ideas expressed by the authors of the monograph that we personally found most interesting.

In his introduction (Pages 9-14) Stefan Bießenecker challenges some traditional views of Middle Ages as the times when people didn't feel ashamed or embarrassed when exposing their naked bodies in public places, the times when they easily shared beds with strangers, by citing the real medieval cases that demonstrate quite the opposite (Bießenecker, 2008). He proves that sharing bed with strangers was avoided, when possible, because of sexual abuse that occurred regularly when boys and young men had to share beds with grown-up males. Bießenecker then shows that people in the Middle Ages didn't even sleep totally naked as it was earlier believed. Therefore, he argues, the very conception of medieval people's attitude to shame, nakedness, acceptable exposure and dressing and undressing should be reconsidered. One of the problems here is different semantics of the words "nudity" and "naked". To prove that the idea of nakedness is a social construct, he quotes the famous Russian traveler Afanasiy Nikitin, who reported in his famous book "Voyage Across Three Seas" (1466-1472) that the inhabitants of India are all naked. However, Nikitin clearly means "naked" in the sense of "inadequately or not appropriately clothed", for then he describes various shoulder and loin cloths that people in India wear.

Bießenecker proves the assumption that there must have been different types and degrees of nudity concepts by enumerating different terms in the Latin, German and French languages that demonstrate a range of nudity from "totally naked" to "half naked", from "stripped" to "not properly clad" or "lacking articles of cloth appropriate for one's social status" (Bießenecker, 2008).

Reinhard Köpf in his work "Naked facts. Observations on the nudity of the figures of Adam and Eve at the Bamberg Cathedral" (Pages 15-30) speaks about the figures of Adam and Eve on the portal of Bamberg Cathedral. Those figures are considered to be the first monumental nude figures of the European Middle Ages. The author says that previous interpretations of these two naked stone figures is all about metaphoric juxtaposing of the sinful and naked first humans and fully clad



saints on the other side of the cathedral, thus bringing back to the congregation the idea of sin and redemption. Other interpretations refer to current political events (Köpf, 2008). What this article clearly lacks is the author's own view. Köpf repeatedly underlines that there are many layers of perception, that there is much room for interpretation, but nowhere, not even in the summary, does he express any new and unconventional ideas, leaving the reader with the feeling that they were through 15 pages being beaten around the bush.

The same unambiguity and a certain lack of scientific courage characterises the major number of works in this monograph. One might expect a certain degree of daring and un-conventionalism from the young scholars (for the conference was pronouncedly organised for young scholars), But alas, many works are disappointingly timid and are satisfied with cautious hints at "many layers" and "multiple interpretations". Or – one more sin that we regard even worse – make general conclusions based on only one or a few meagre examples. Moreover, some conclusions seem so predictable that one could guess what the author is going to arrive at just from the title. Take, for instance, the line from the Bible "And they realized that they were naked" in the episode of how the first human couple was banished from Paradise – this line served as the title of the monograph. The textual and graphic representation of this Biblical episode is analysed in several entries of the monograph, and the authors arrive at a too predictable conclusion that nakedness in the medieval works of art indicated a loss of virtue, a fall from grace and a general human sinfulness in the face of God.

This is not true for Maurice Sprague's "Memories of Paradise, Temptation, and the Fall" (Pages 67-87) that studies middle German Johanniter Manuscript. The manuscript is a brilliant example of parody in medieval literature, so the scholar gives a detailed analysis of the text with its parody of social, moral, and ethical norms. For this purpose, descriptions of carnality, i.e., sex scenes, episodes of undressing and nakedness are employed by medieval authors. Sprague singles out functions of nudity in the text, illustrating his points with verses from the Johanniter Manuscript. He comes to the conclusion that this manuscript is a carefully selected anthology of short texts that have a high degree of intertextuality, alluding to the works of famous authors who wrote in the Middle High German language (Sprague, 2008). Some texts can be unmistakably seen as parodies of the works of Gottfried von Strasbourg and Hartmann von Aue, with episodes of sex and nakedness serving the function of parody and creating the comic effect.

The article we liked, perhaps, most is Kai Lorenz's analysis of Heinrich von dem Türlin's "Diu Crône". This over-lengthy medieval heroic poem is often disregarded by scholars as a mere parody on Arthurian epics, a sort of anti-Wolfram joke having no much artistic value in itself. Lorenz diligently goes through the text singling out episodes related to nakedness and expands on their role and function in the text (though, perhaps, with more words than necessary – we can't but keep in mind Anton Chekhov's famous aphorism about brevity being the sister of talent).



The scholar argues that nakedness in the poem is manifested through different plot tropes, such as:

- double nakedness, when two or more characters are depicted naked simultaneously;
- a naked victor, when the protagonist emerges victorious but completely naked from the fight;
- nakedness that is presented both as a sign of the hero's moral integrity and as a comic relief etc. (Lorenz, 2008).

The article offers no conclusion and ends rather abruptly, but it does provide an interesting insight into the style and artistic devices of this under-studied medieval German poem. Kai Lorenz shows that nakedness as a literary device was masterfully employed by the author of the poem, Heinrich von dem Türlîn, the device with the help of which the medieval poet creates both a parody and a heroic legend (Lorenz, 2008). What the scholar didn't see in the text is a sexual bait that, to our mind, is laid there right in the way nakedness is presented in the poem. We are of the impression that besides other functions, the nakedness in the poem deliberately sets sexual overture to allure the reader. The author not only enjoys showing Sir Gawein's beautiful naked body, he stimulates the readers' imagination by depicting Gawein's awareness of his own nakedness and his reflections on what to do about it. But this is our own interpretation, which we are in no position to impose on the reader of this review. Anyway, Kai Lorenz's analysis explores medieval material from a new and fresh angle and is generally an exciting reading.

We recommend the monograph for all people interested in medieval history and culture and likewise for the researchers of corporeality, history of sex and related questions.

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