

2015 September - No. 18

Medieval Histories

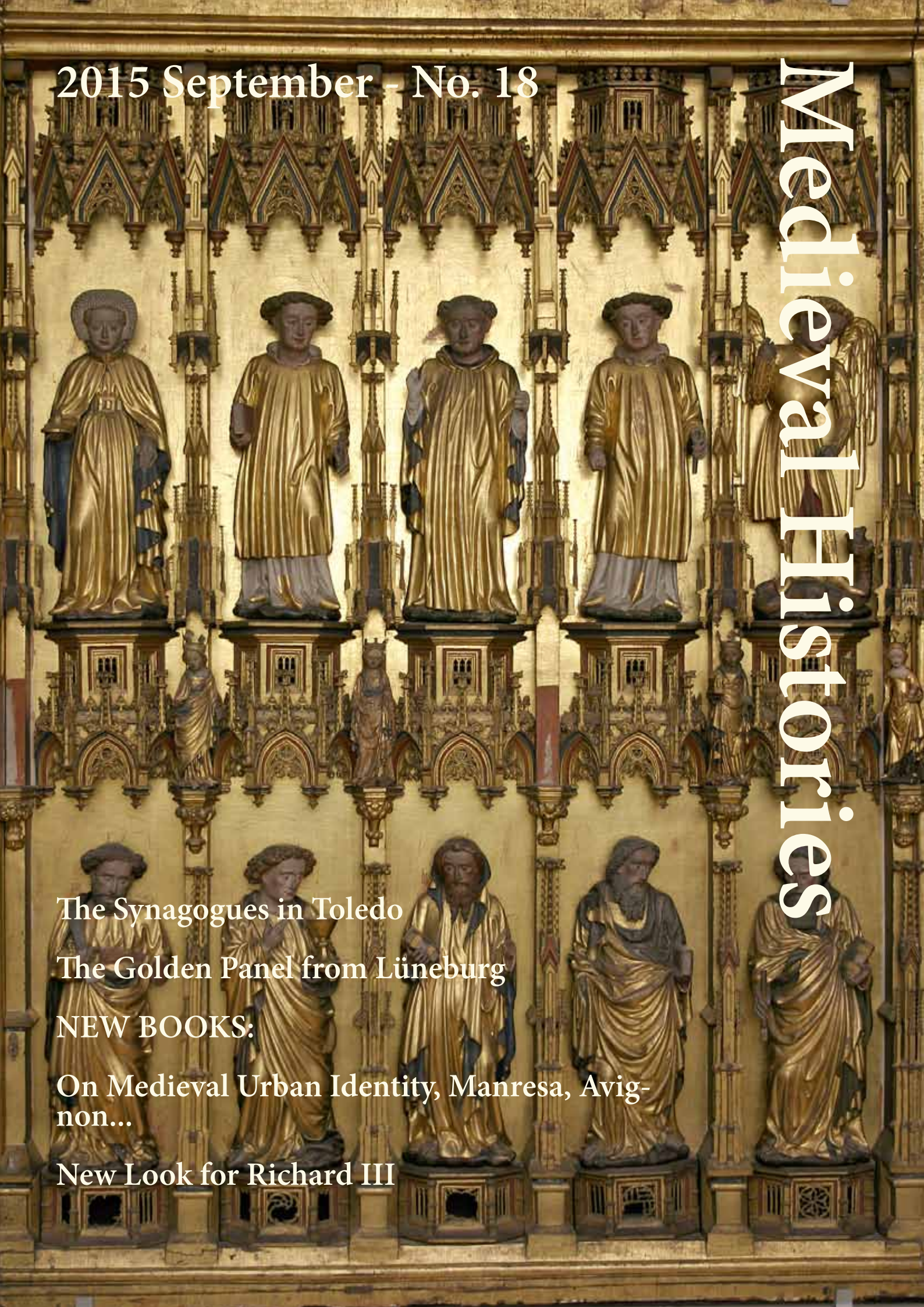
The Synagogues in Toledo

The Golden Panel from Lüneburg

NEW BOOKS:

On Medieval Urban Identity, Manresa, Avignon...

New Look for Richard III



Quote of the Week...

“Our bags are not packed,” says Alin Bardavit Arslan, the wife of Yusuf Arslan, a Jewish real-estate developer in Istanbul. “But these days the suitcases are waiting under the bed to be filled — at a moment’s notice.”

Among the Syrian refugees currently fleeing to Europe, there are no Jews. In 1992 at the beginning on the Passover Holiday the 4,000 remaining Jews were permitted under the government of Hafez al-Assad to leave Syria provided they did not emigrate to Israel. In 2011 there were still about 50 Jews living in Damascus. Now, none are presumably left where Jews have lived since the mythical days of King David.

Many of these Jews are descendants of the Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain in 1492. Some have speculated about whether they would take up the possibility of moving back to Europe to Spain after the law was passed in June 2015, which allows proven descendants of the Sephardic Jews to gain a Spanish (that is: a European Passport).

Another group, however, which is perhaps more interested in the offer might be the 20.000 Jews in Turkey, who are increasing-

ly reporting harassment from the Turkish people and its government. So far, however, only 100 Turkish Jews have applied to Portugal (which passed the law in 2013). It is not known how many will apply to Spain, when the law will go into effect in October.

Hopefully some will return to Toledo and reclaim the Jewish heritage there. And be able to have Santa Maria la Blanca returned to its former glory as a living Synagogue.

Read about the Jewish Heritage in Toledo in this issue of Medieval Histories.

Shanah Tovah 5776!

SOURCE:

Turkish Jews not leaving yet, but eyeing exit amid Erdogan’s hostile rhetoric. By Cnaan Liphshiz



Medieval Histories

- read about new exhibitions, books, research and much more

Editor-in-chief: Karen Schousboe

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Photo (frontpage):

Inner wing from the Golden Panel. Feastday view © Landesmuseum Hannover

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MEDIEVAL TRAVELS:

Synagogue of El Tránsito Reopened

The Sinagoga del Tránsito in Toledo was built between 1355 and 1357 for Samuel ha-Levi Abulafia (c.1320 – 1362), who was treasurer to the Castilian King, Pedro I (the Cruel), until 1356.

In spite of vehement opposition from the Catholic church, Samuel Levi was granted permission to build the synagogue, because the Jews in Toledo had kept faith to the king during his conflict with his brother, Henry (later Henry II of Castile (1368 – 1379). King Pedro probably gave his assent to the building of the synagogue to compensate the Jews of Toledo for the destruction that had occurred in 1348, during anti-Jewish riots that accompanied the arrival of the Black Death in Toledo. However, in 1360 Samuel was imprisoned

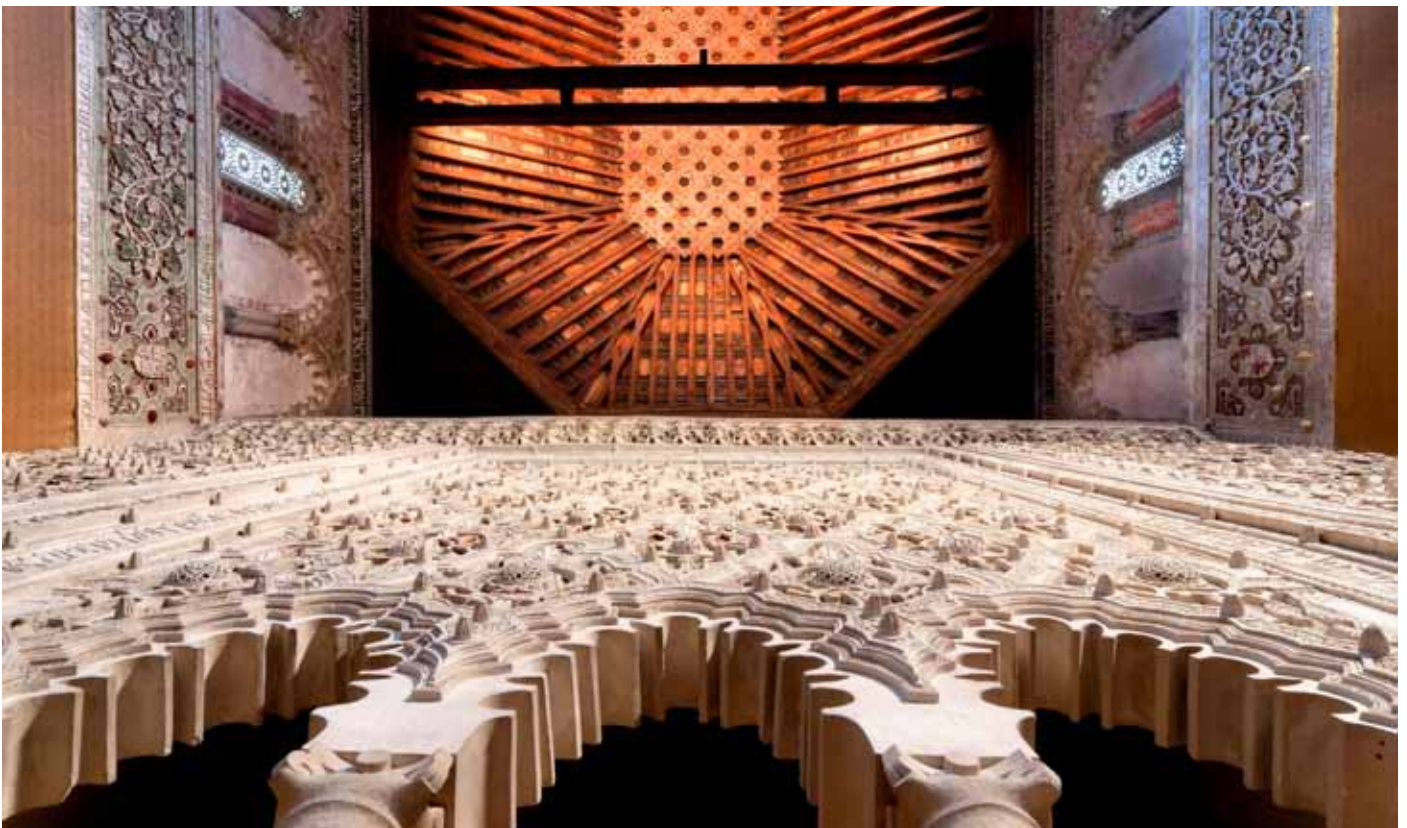
and tortured, while the king seized his wealth. His whole family was executed together with him.

Their palace may still be seen. Although rebuilt and converted into a **Museum for El Greco** it still gives an impression of a luxurious medieval Jewish palace.

Two years after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, the synagogue was converted into a church, . The synagogue was dedicated to the death and transition of Mary, hence the name . Later it was used as a soldiers-barracks. However, in 1877 it was declared a national monument.

The building, which is in a good state of conservation for its age, is currently a mu-

© Museo Nacional de Arte Hispanojudío.





Source: Wikipedia/ Windwhistler

seum for the Sephardic Jews - **Museo Nacional de Arte Hispanojudío.**

The Building

The original building was rectangular (23 x 9 x 17 m) and recalls the great 14th century Castilian palaces. Some is of the opinion that the synagogue was designed by the same architects, who worked on the palace in Tordesillas (later Convent of Santa Clara), which was decorated by Mudéjar artists.

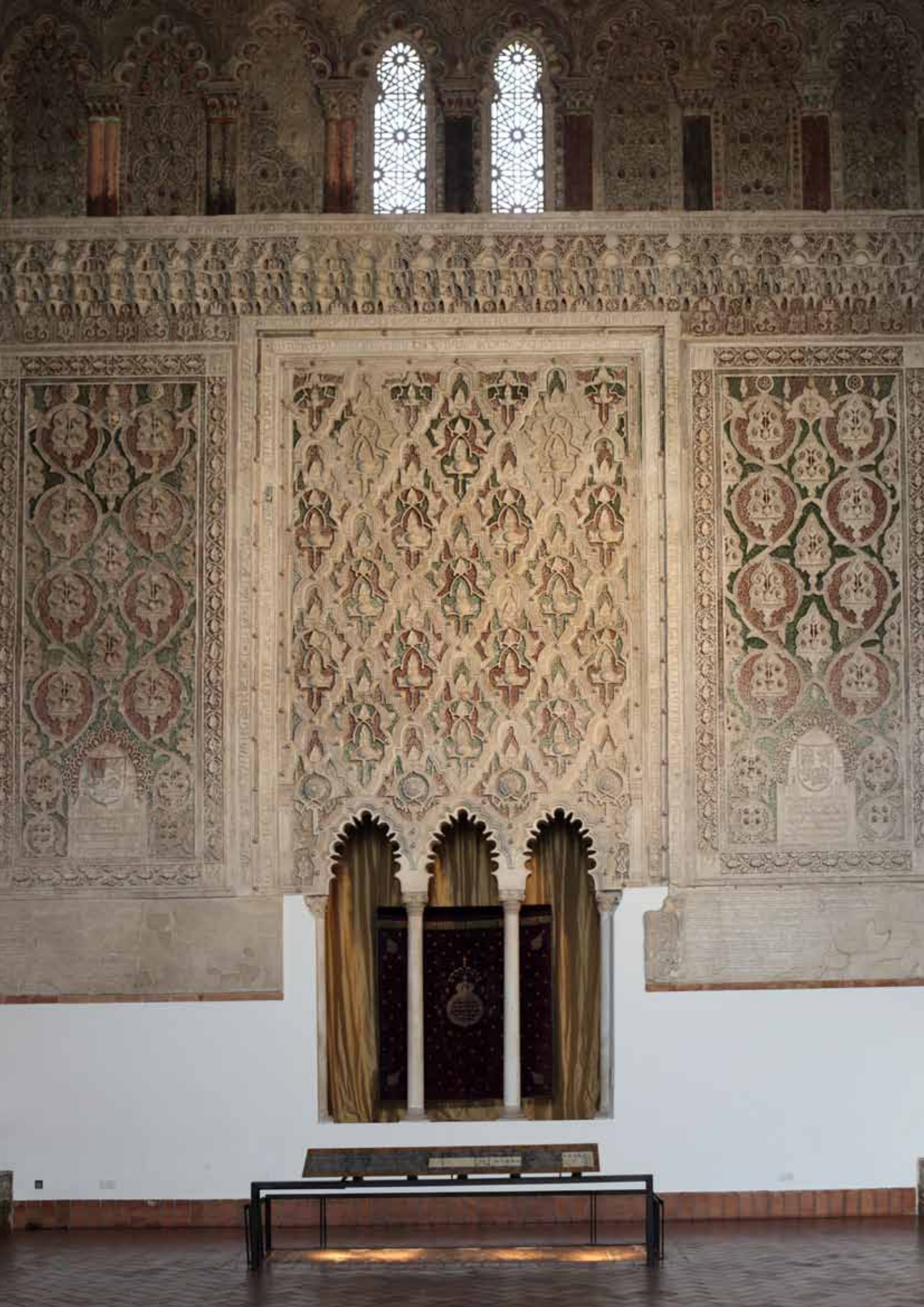
The exterior is quite austere in contrast to the decorative richness of the prayer hall with its plasterwork painted in red, green, black, blue and white.

The decoration is located at the top of the room and especially at the Eastern wall. The plasterwork is polychrome and includes a frieze with quotations from the Psalms plus a lush decoration with stylized leaves, cones and flowers. At the bottom of each strip is a foundation plaque with inscriptions in Hebraic and the arms of the Kingdom of Castille and León. At the bottom of the central panel of the eastern wall is the opening which leads into the Hejal.

The roof is made of conifer and richly painted.

SOURCE:

Sinagoga del Tránsito in Toledo



Other Jewish Sights in Toledo:

Santa Maria la Blanca and Casa del Judío

Even though the Sephardic Jews in Iberia were constantly persecuted from the 6th century and onwards, significant communities continued to set their mark on society until the final expulsion in 1496. Nowhere more than in Toledo.

Madinat al-Yahud

There have been a Jewish community in Toledo in Roman, Visigothic and Muslim Iberia.

However in 1135, when the Almohads arrived in Al-Ándalus, Toledo (now governed by the Castilian King) welcomed a huge group of immigrants: poets, grammarians, philosophers, scientists, doctors and other learned men, some of which became members of the Toledo School of translators, famous for its rescue and translation of philosophical and scientific works from classical Arabic, classical Greek, and ancient Hebrew.

Although persecuted here as well as elsewhere, the Jewish quarter in Toledo came to flourish and cover around 10% of the walled city. There were probably at least ten synagogues at that time. Mentioned in 1391 are nine synagogues: the main synagogue (probably the current Santa Maria la Blanca), the old synagogue, the new synagogue, the synagogue belonging to Shemuel Levi (the Transito) the synagogue of the Cordobians, of the Benzizás, the ben Abidarham (currently found in the Escuela de Artes), Suloquia and Algiada. Recently the remains of the synagogue named Sofer was archaeologically excavated.



Santa Maria la Blanca. Source: Wikipedia

However, in the 14th century the quarter was attacked twice, in 1355 and again in 1391. Later in the 15th century attacks and harassment became steadily more serious until the final expulsion was decreed in 1492.

Santa Maria la Blanca

Moorish architects built this synagogue in the 12th century in the Médujar tradition. It was completed in 1203. In the early 15th century, the synagogue was stormed by a Christian mob led by the Dominican Vincent Ferrer and converted into a church. In later centuries it was alternately used as a carpenter's workshop, store, soldier's barracks and a refuge for former prostitutes.

It is believed the synagogue (probably built on top of a former) was sponsored by Joseph ben Meir Shoshan, who was finance minister to Alfonso VIII of Castille. At his death in 1205 it is recorded that he had rebuilt the synagogue after an uprising against the Jews in Toledo. Another candidate is Abraham ibn Alfache, who served the king as councillor and ambassador.

Casa del Judio. Source: Wikipedia

The original building is irregular, measuring c 26/28 m x 19/23 m. It has survived its turbulent history nearly intact, although the plastered wall-paintings have almost disappeared. Recently, though, traces were found of paintings on the West wall on either side of the front door, which probably belonged to an earlier building phase.

The main attraction is the interior, which is divided into five aisles by four rows of beautiful white horseshoe arches, seven in each row. The capitals are carved with vegetal decorations inspired by Islamic and Byzantine tradition. The red floor is covered with decorative tiles.

The focus of the building is the clam-shaped topped arch at the centre, beneath which was the Torah Ark.



The building notably lacks a women's gallery and the overall effect is much more that of a mosque than a synagogue. It is believed the women would stand on a wooden platform at the foot of the nave.

The building is surrounded by a courtyard to which were attached the residence of a Rabbi, a ritual bath and a study hall complete the compound. The synagogue functioned as the main

Today the synagogue functions as a museum, run by the Catholic Church. However, **in 2013 a request was made to the church to return the building to the Jewish community.** If the Sephardic Jews return to Toledo following the new legis-

lation passed in summer 2015, it may be pertinent to return the Synagogue to Jewish stewardship.

Travesía de la Juderia

The House of the Jew – Casa del Judío - in the Travesía de la Juderia represents a typical Jewish home from the 15th century. The courtyard conserves a multitude of Mudejar plastered latticework while the basement held a mikve.

READ MORE:

La Judería de Toledo y su Legado.
Paralel text In Spanish and English

Other Medieval Synagogues in Iberia

Synagogue in Tomar in Portugal from the 15th century



Synagogue in Segovia from the 14th century



Synagogue in Barcelona from the 13th century?



Synagogue in Ubeda from the 13th century



Synagogue in Cordoba from 1315



Bebimbre, San Pedro





Dr. Bastian Eclercy from Hannover with a historical model of the Golden Panel © Landesmuseum Hannover

Golden Panel from Lüneburg

One of the highlights of Hannover Landesmuseum is the remains of the so-called “Goldene Tafel” which once decorated the high altar of the Benedictine Abbey S. Michaelis in Lüneburg

The Golden Panel was originally a Romanesque golden antependium. Later, this became enclosed in a retable consisting of two sets of double wings, painted by the “Master of the Golden Panel in Lüneburg” around 1431 – 5. Around the Romanesque panel a number of golden reliquaries were placed. Together with the antependium these were destroyed in 1698 by robbers, who melted it all down. Only a few reliquaries are preserved in the Museum August Kestner in Hannover.

However, the wings still exist and are housed in the Landesmuseum Hannover. The panels each measure 2.31 m x 1.84 m. The closed wings shows the Crucifixion

on one side and the Brazen Serpent on the other. The insides of the outer wings and the insides of the inner wings depict 36 scenes from the Life of the Virgin and the Passion of Christ. On the inside of the inner wings were twenty carved and gilded figures of saints and prophets. For the most part these have also disappeared; although one cropped up in the art market in 2007 and was acquired by the Museum.

Since 2012 the Golden Panel has been the object of an interdisciplinary research project, sponsored by the Volkswagen Stiftung (€ 540.000), the Klosterkammer Hannover and the FAMA-Kunststiftung. In collaboration with the Gemäldegalerie of the

Suggested Sessions

- Monumental architecture as princely commemoration? The construction of St. Michael's Abbey in Lüneburg, its furnishings and its functions
- Commemoration and Representation: Charting the commemorative culture of the Welf dynasty
- Inclusion and representation. Relics and the purpose of "spoils" in altarpieces of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries
- Evidences of manufacture: tool marks, under-drawings, transfer of motifs and forms of ornamentation. What might the results of the technical examination tell us about the production of major carved and painted retables?
- North German, Central German, West German or Low Lands? Defining, producing and disseminating sculpted and painted retables during the fifteenth century.

- Ways of Seeing – Presenting the medieval retable in the museum environment

Proposals for 30-minute papers or 5-minute poster presentations should be forwarded to antje-fee.koellermann@landesmuseum-hannover.de until the 30th of September. Requested are the title and a brief summary (max. 2000 characters) in German, English or French.

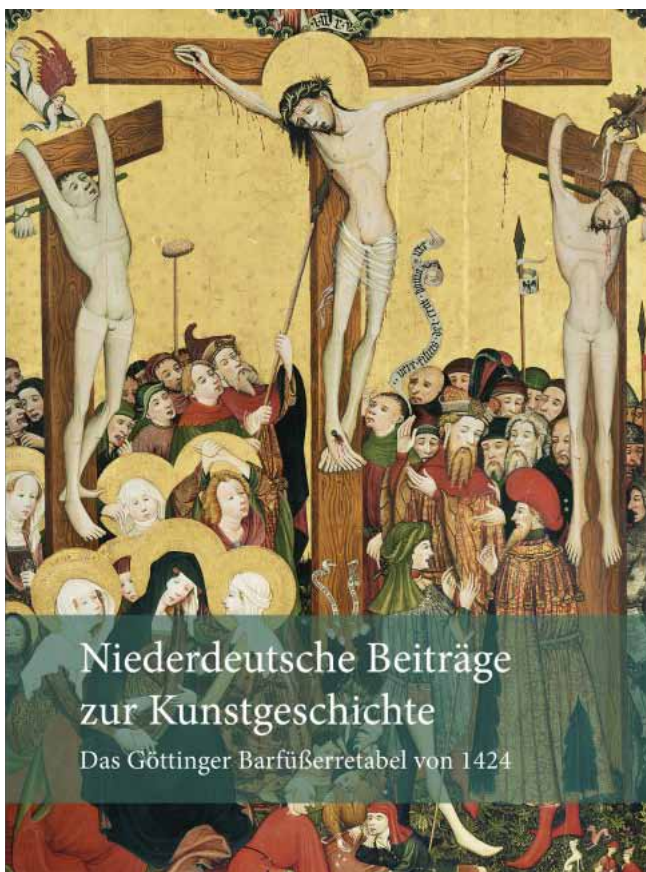
Lectures and posters are intended for publication as part of the **Niederdeutsche Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte**.

The Goldene Tafel from Lüneburg in context

Investigations on technology, shape and significance of altarpieces in northern Europe around 1400.

Hanover 07.04.2016 – 09.04.2016

Niederdeutsche Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte



The prestigious annual series of "Niederdeutsche Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte" is from 2014 jointly published by the Landesmuseum Hannover, the Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum in Braunschweig and the State Museum of Art and Cultural History Oldenburg. The richly illustrated volumes are dedicated to each year present a major work of the Lower Saxon art history was launched last year with a publication of the Das Göttinger Barfüßerretabel von 1424. Next issue: The Golden Panel.

Das Göttinger Barfüßerretabel von 1424

Neue Folge, Band 1

Edited by Cornelia Aman and Babette Hartwig

Michael Imhof-verlag 2014



St. Michael's in Lüneburg. Source: Wikipedia/derHexer

St. Michael's in Lüneburg

St. Michael's in Lüneburg is a prime example of the red-brick hall churches of Northern Germany

St. Michael's is one of the main churches in Lüneburg. In AD 956 the Holy-Roman emperor, Otto I, presented the Benedictine Abbey (to which the church belonged) with the income from customs deriving from the extraction of the salt, which later made Lüneburg both famous and extremely wealthy.

St. Michael's was at that time part of the castle of the Billunger (the reigning ducal

family in Saxony), which was located on a hill in Lüneburg – the “Kalkberg”. This was the family abbey and members of the Billungers were buried there.

However, in 1371 the conflicts between the magnates and the city of Lüneburg over the income from the trade with salt turned into an open rebellion and the people from the city attacked the castle and tore it down. The Abbey was later relocat-

Hans Bornemann (c. 1420 - 1474). He painted the Lamberti-Altar in the Church of St. Nicolas' in Lüneburg with the oldest vista of Lüneburg. To the left is the Kalberg, beneath is the church of St. Michael's and next to it the walled saline. Source: Wikipedia/ The Yorck Project



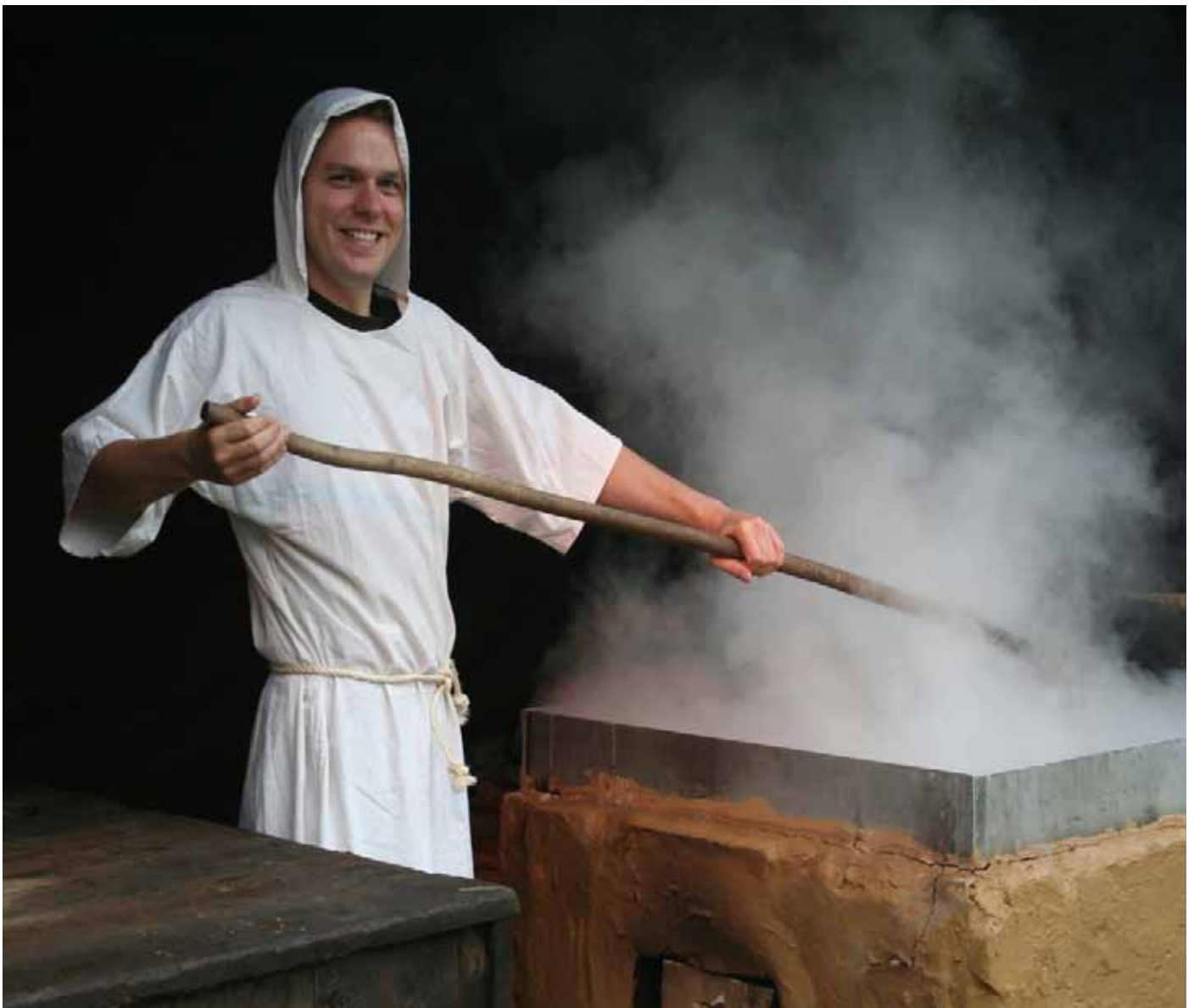
ed from the “Kalkberg” and rebuilt inside the town itself. This was part of the magnates effort to regain the power in the city. In connection with this the remains of the ducal families of the Billungs and the Welfs (who had taken over) were transferred to the new church.

The building of the church was commenced in 1376 and finished in 1412. It measures 53 m long, 26 m wide and 20 m high. The tower rises 79 m high into the air. The church was built in red-brick and stands as one of the more prominent

examples of this traditional form of construction in the area. It is a prime example of the so-called “Halle Kirchen” in Northern Germany and a prominent stop on the European Route of Brick Gothic.

As befitted an important church in one of the wealthy towns in the Hanseatic League, it was fitted with a number of exquisite pieces of art. One of these was the famous Golden Panel (Goldene Tafel), which served both as a retable and house for reliquaries on the main altar.

© *Deutsches Salzmuseum*





The Stecknitz Canal from 1398. At Witzeze © Tage der Industriekultur

Medieval Salt in Lüneburg

Smoking, salting and drying each had their role to play in the medieval conservation of foodstuff. However, during the Middle Ages salt came to play an increasing prominent role, as it was a necessary prerequisite for conserving the masses of herrings, which were caught in the Baltic and along the shores of Denmark and exported to a “fish-hungry” Catholic Europe. This business was the mainstay of the Hanseatic League.

Salt was sourced from a number of sites, for instance salt-pans on the extensive coasts of the Frisian and Danish marshes.

However, at Lüneburg, a salt spring early on created the possibility of building a

truly proto-industrial salt mine. From the 12th century and onwards salt mining was the dominant feature of the economy in Lüneburg. The saline (salt spring) was located between the Sülzwiese and the Kalkberg with the main entrance at the Lamberti platz. Surrounding the salt spring were 54 boiling huts which each held four boiling pans. These were channelled with brine via an intricate set of canals. The salt dome itself was located beneath the Kalkberg, where the Dukes of Billungen built their main castle in the 9th century. From here they governed the Principality of Lüneburg-Brunswick

In the 12th century the so-called salt-gentry were primarily a mixture of nobles

and ecclesiastical institutions, who leased the salt-pans to the craftsmen. The lease amounted to app. half the revenue from the selling of the salt. However, between 1250 – 1320 an increasing number of merchants became salt-pan owners. In 1370 it is estimated half the salt-gentry were commoners from the city. In 1371 a rebellion broke out in the city resulting in the demolition of the castle and abbey of St. Michael (see above).

Traditionally the salt was shipped from Lüneburg via land to Lübeck and further to the autumn herring –markets held along the shores of the Baltic. In 1392 – 1398 - after the hostilities had ceased - a shallow canal was dug between Lübeck to Lauenburg near the Elbe, the so-called Stecknitzkanal. In 1398 the first barges

arrived in Lübeck after a five-week transport along the new waterway. In the 15th century it is estimated 3000 barges were shipped from Lüneburg to Lübeck with more than 30.000 tons of salt. When the barges returned, they were carrying lumber felled in the large forests in Eastern Europe. At that time Lüneburg had long since exhausted its own reserves of wood and was surrounded by the heath (Lüneburger Heide)

Today the **Stecknitzkanal** is a favoured route for backpacking and bicycling.

Deutsches Salzmuseum

Sülfmeisterstr
1 21335 Lüneburg
Germany

Salt Barge Maria Magdalena - Reconstruction from ca. 1500 © Stecknitz Region



Medieval Urban Identity. Health, Economy and Regulation

Medieval Urban Identity. Health, Economy and Regulation

Ed. by Flocel Sabaté

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Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2015

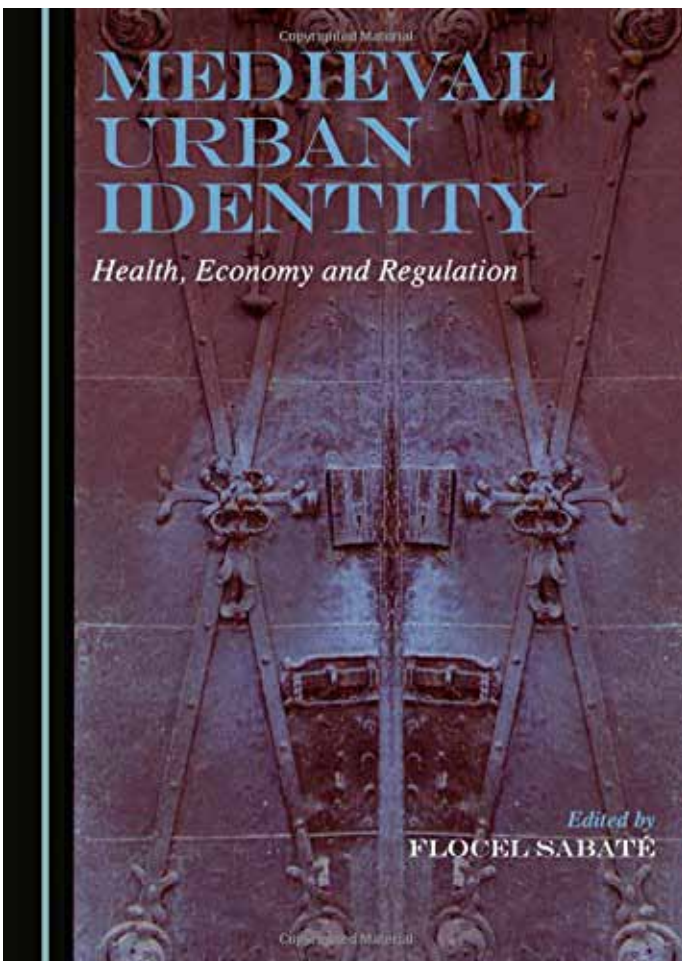
ABSTRACT

The increasing prominence of urban life during the Middle Ages is undoubtedly one of the more transcendental and multi-faceted aspects of this era, having an effect on rules and laws, hygiene, and economic

organisation. This book brings together contributions from a wide range of scholars who adopt a new approach to medieval urban life, using health, the economy, and regulations and laws as frames of reference for gaining a greater understanding of this historical period. Through these vectors, interesting insights are provided into medieval housing, cures for diseases, the work of artisans and merchants, and the relationship between the town and the wider region in which it was located.

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- Inventory of Arab Objects Documented in Catalan Medieval Houses (Late 13th Century—Late 15th Century). By Lluïsa Amenós
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- Tuscan Merchants in Catalonia and Catalan Merchants in Tuscany: A New Double-Perspective Approach to Mercantile Relations in the Medieval Mediterranean. By Maria Elisa Soldani
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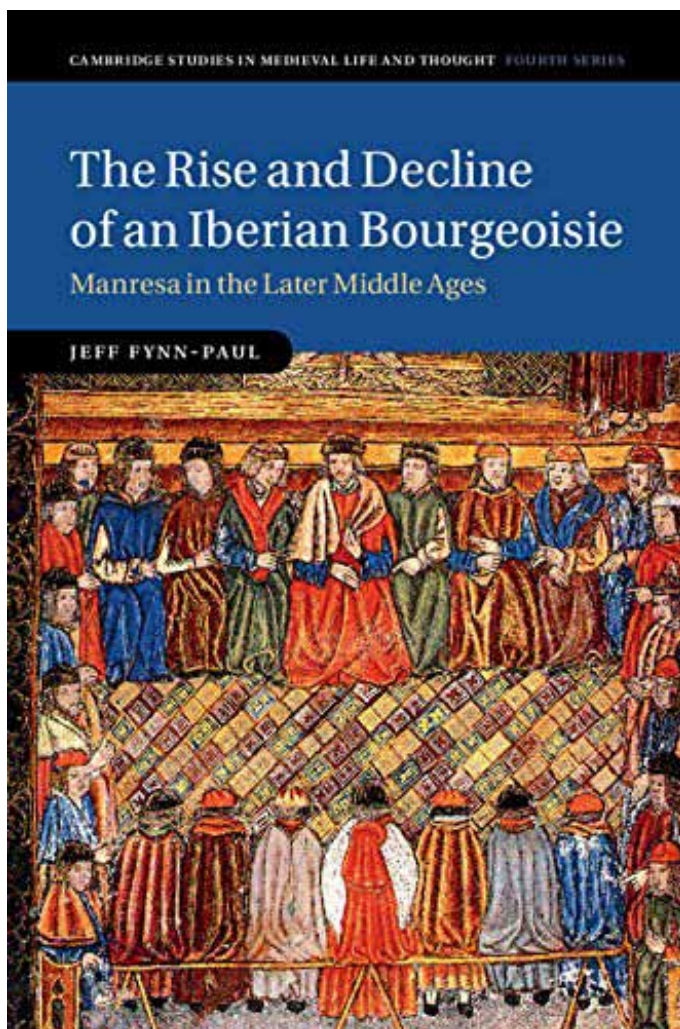
nal Politics in Urban Castile in the 15th Century. By José Antonio Jara

- The Control of the Council Offices in the Late Middle Ages: The Notaries in Burgos. A Conflict of Authority. By Alicia Inés Montero
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ABOUT THE EDITOR

Flocel Sabaté is Professor of Medieval History at the University of Lleida, Catalonia, Spain.

Manresa in the Later Middle Ages, 1250-1500



The Rise and Decline of an Iberian Bourgeoisie: Manresa in the Later Middle Ages, 1250-1500

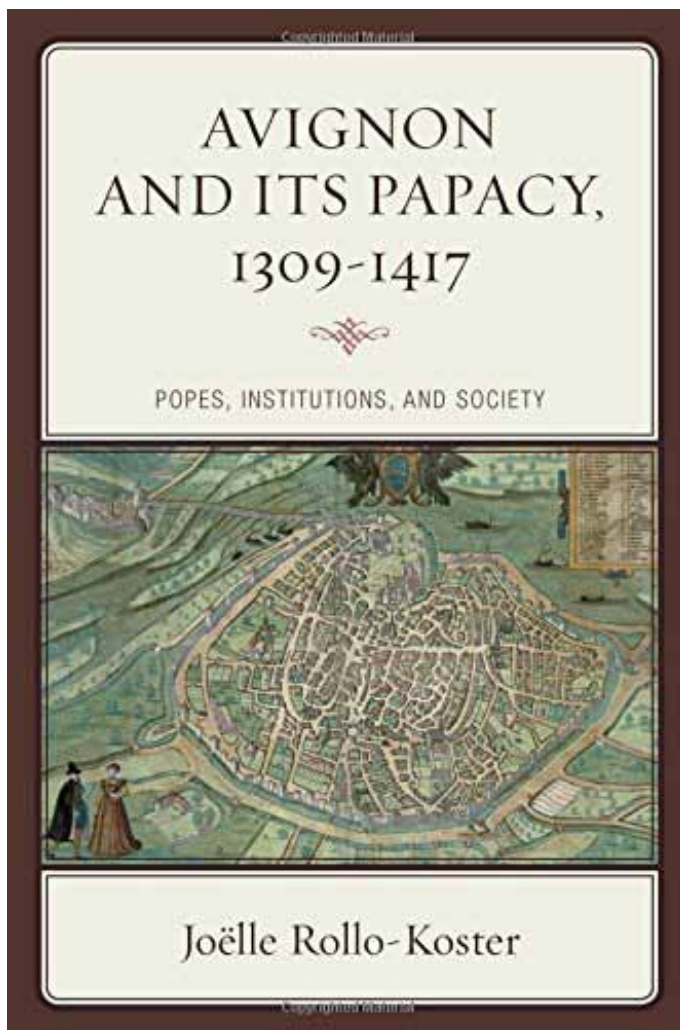
Series: Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought: Fourth Series

by Jeff Fynn-Paul

Cambridge University Press October 2015

The Rise and Decline of an Iberian Bourgeoisie is one of the first long-term studies in English of an Iberian town during the late medieval crisis. Focusing on the Catalonian city of Manresa, Jeff Fynn-Paul expertly integrates Iberian historiography with European narratives to place the city's social, political and economic development within the broader context of late medieval urban decline. The author surveys the economic strategies of both elites and non-elites to a level previously unknown for any medieval town outside of Tuscany and Ghent.

Avignon and its Papacy, 1309-1417: Popes, Institutions, and Society



With the arrival of Clement V in 1309, seven popes ruled the Western Church from Avignon until 1378. Joëlle Rollo-Koster traces the compelling story of the transplanted papacy in Avignon, the city the popes transformed into their capital.

Through an engaging blend of political and social history, she argues that we should think more positively about the Avignon papacy, with its effective governance, intellectual creativity, and dynamism. It is a remarkable tale of an institution growing and defending its prerogatives, of people both high and low who produced and served its needs, and of the city they built together.

As the author reconsiders the Avignon papacy (1309-1378) and the Great Western Schism (1378-1417) within the social setting of late medieval Avignon, she also recovers the city's urban texture, the stamp of its streets, the noise of its crowds and celebrations, and its people's joys and pains.

Each chapter focuses on the popes, their rules, the crises they faced, and their administration but also on the history of the city, considering the recent historiography to link the life of the administration with that of the city and its people. The story of Avignon and its inhabitants is crucial for our understanding of the institutional history of the papacy in the later Middle Ages. The author argues that the Avignon papacy and the Schism encouraged fundamental institutional changes in the governance of early modern Europe—effective centralization linked to fiscal policy, efficient bureaucratic governance, court society (*societe de cour*), and conciliarism.

This fascinating history of a misunderstood era will bring to life what it was like to live in the fourteenth-century capital of Christianity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Joëlle Rollo-Koster is professor of medieval history at the University of Rhode Island

Avignon and its Papacy, 1309-1417: Popes, Institutions, and Society

by Joëlle Rollo-Koster

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2015

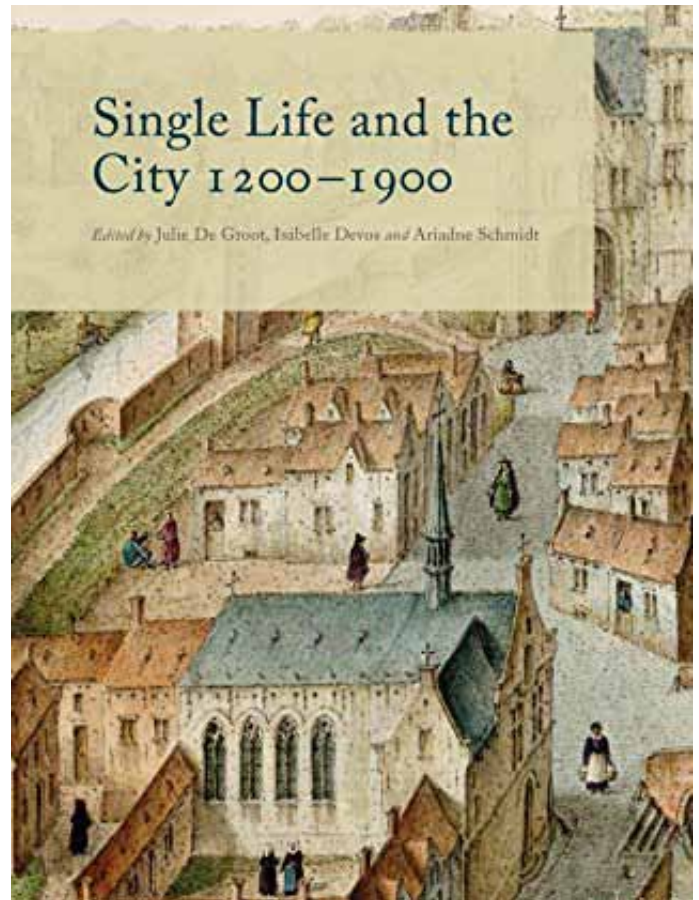
Single Life and the City 1200-1900

Today, singleness is often represented as a new and increasingly popular lifestyle, particularly in the city. However, single people crowded European towns from the late middle ages onward. This book discusses the living conditions of women and men living without a spouse in cities in western Europe, and reflects on differences and similarities in the past.

The collection provides some of the first comparisons of single men and women and sheds light on new groups of single women, such as beguines, prostitutes and heads of households.

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- Working Alone? Single Women in the Urban Economy of Late Medieval Flanders (Thirteenth-Early Fifteenth Centuries); Peter Stabel
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- Maids, Noblewomen, Journeymen, State Officials, and Others. Unmarried Adults in Four Swedish Towns, 1750–1855; Dag Lindström
- Destitute in December. Unmarried Scots Navigating Poverty in Paisley, 1861; Wendy M. Gordon
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- Single People and the Material Culture of the English Urban Home in the Long Eighteenth Century; David Hussey and Margaret Ponsonby
- Rich, Male and Single. The Consumption Practices of Edward Leigh, 1742-1786; Jon Stobart



Single Life and the City 1200-1900

by Julie de Groot, Isabelle Devos, and Ariadne Schmidt (Eds.)

Palgrave Macmillan 2015

Jews in the Medieval Town.

The present volume shows the Jewish communities in Central European towns from multiple points of view. We learn about the progress of their settlement, their relations to the sovereign, how they resettled in the places from where they had been expelled and about their financial business, but also about their culture, rabbinic literature, everyday life, language, burials and their relations to the Christian majority population.

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- Die böhmischen Könige und die erneute Ansiedlung der Juden in den böhmischen Ländern nach den Pogromen des 14. Jahrhunderts By Eva Doležalová
- The Jewish Credit Trade in the Late Middle Ages: Kroměříž and Olomouc (1353–1417) By Lenka Blechová
- Juden und Christen in der Prager Altstadt während des Mittelalters. Koexistenz oder Konfrontation? By Martin Musílek
- Uff daz dieselbe stat user den schulden desterbus komen moge. Zur Wiederansiedlung von Juden in der Reichsstadt Wetzlar in der zweiten Hälfte des 14. Jahrhunderts By Davis Schnur
- Rabbinic Sources about Jews in Medieval Moravia By Tamás Vsi
- Towards the Everyday Life of Jews and Christians as Presented in the so-called Kenaanic Glosses By Lenka Uličná
- Financial Conditions in Early 15th-Century Olomouc in the Light of the Jewish

Register. By Roman Zaoral

- Ein Fund von Brakteaten mit hebräischer Umschrift aus der Nähe von Anenský vrch bei Mikulov (Südmährische Region, Bez. Břeclav) By Petr Schneider
- The Jewish Garden in the New Town of Prague. New lessons learned from the archaeological investigations undertaken by the National Heritage Institute in the Capital City of Prague. By Tomáš Szymbalak, Veronika Staňková and Daniel Polakovi

Juden in der mittelalterlichen Stadt. Der städtische Raum im Mittelalter - Ort des Zusammenlebens und des Konflikts / Jews in the medieval town. Urban space in the Middle Ages - a place of coexistence and conflicts

ed. Eva Doležalová et al. (Nakladatelství Historický ústav, Historický ústav AV ČR v.v.i, August 2015)



NEW BOOK:

Viking Graves and Grave-Goods in Ireland

Viking Graves and Grave-Goods in Ireland

By Stephen J. Harrison and Ragnall Ó Floinn

National Museum of Ireland 2015

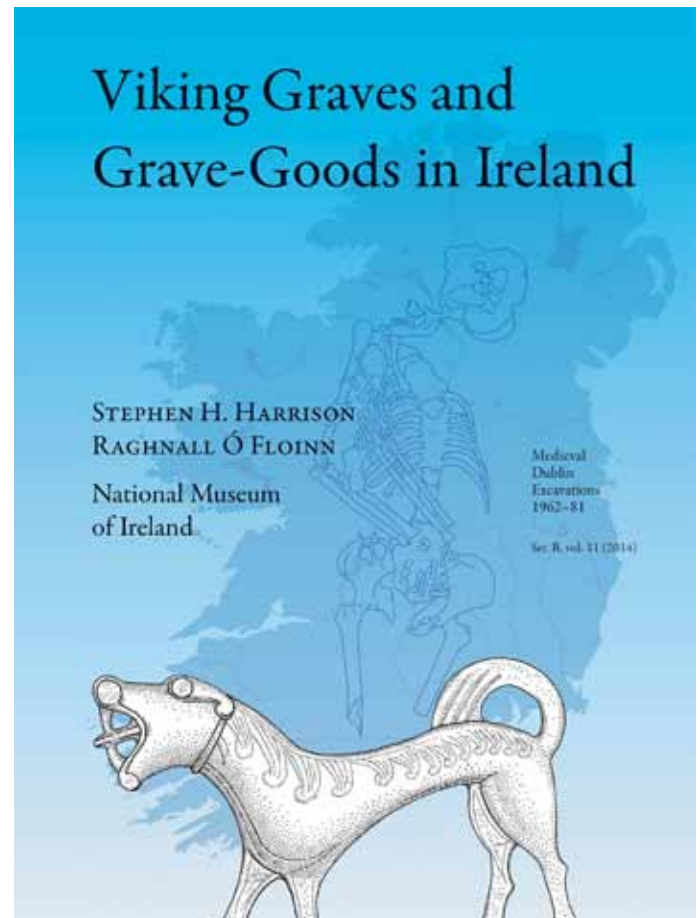
ISBN: 9780901777997

ABSTRACT

This volume is the first comprehensive catalogue and detailed discussion of over 400 artefacts from more than a hundred furnished Viking graves in Ireland, many published for the first time.

The volume includes the first detailed study of the archives of the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy and of the Irish Antiquities Division of the National Museum of Ireland, key resources for those interested in the history of museums in Ireland and in 19th and 20th century collectors and collecting.

The grave-goods (both Insular and Scandinavian) are the subject of detailed examination, with separate sections devoted to weapons, dress ornaments and jewellery, tools, equestrian equipment and miscellaneous artefacts. The volume also contains a discussion of grave distribution, form, orientation, ritual and contents.



While much of the text is given over to the Kilmainham-Islandbridge burial complex - now confirmed as by far the largest cemetery of its type in the Viking west - the monograph also includes details of the Viking graves from elsewhere in Dublin, and from the rest of Ireland.



Medievalism Galore!

- films, games, books and other medieval fun



New Look for Richard III

Richard III has changed his look three times in the last three years. In the latest version he is sporting unkempt mouse-coloured hair. Is that plausible?

Since the first reconstruction of the face of Richard III he has changed looks several times. First he was presented with brown eyes and dark hair. Later, after DNA-analysis had shown that his eyes were blue and his hair blond, he had a serious “make-over”. Last week however, he went to the hair-salon once more. Now he is presented with a mouse-coloured look and rather unkempt hair.

The last bit is probably totally non-medieval. Chances are that Richard III owned several highly valuable combs and that he used them on a daily basis. For medieval men and woman combs were essential to dress the hair, as well as to rid it of lice, fleas and nits; and none of the portraits show him with unkempt or unruly hair. Further, boxwood or Ivory combs with elaborate carved and pierced decorations



Lovers in a Garden, France ca 1500 - 1520. Comb made of Ivory. © V&A

were also fashionable accessories for both women and men from about 1400. It is almost certain that many were made in France but they were probably produced much more widely. Many were decorated with short love inscriptions (in French) or love imagery such as pierced hearts, indicating that they were intended as appropriate gifts from a lover. Others were embellished with delicately carved courtly scenes. Some were according to V&A originally protected in a leather case that could also be decorated with a love theme.

Dying Hair

But did he also colour his hair? This we shall probably never know (a chance find of a Ricardian shopping list documenting this is highly unlikely). However, we do know that medieval people knew of recipes for hair-colouring and also that they probably used them.

In the 11th century Trotula de Ruggiero from Salerno wrote a treatise “De Ornatu Mulierum” (also known as Trotula Minor). In it she wrote about how to stay unwrinkled, remove puffiness from face and eyes, remove unwanted hair from the body, lighten the skin, hide blemishes and freckles, wash teeth and take away bad breath.

She also wrote of hair-dying and from her we know that Agrimonia sp and Buxus sp (boxwood) could be used to colour hair blond, while Black Henbane or Sage was used for colouring hair black. This or a more golden colour might also be achieved by using burnt grapevine ash, crocuses, dragontree, dwarf elderberry, greater celandine, madder, myrtle berry, oat and saffron. Extracts from these plants were often mixed up with liquorice and used as shampoo. Other plants were used as remedies to lengthen hair or making it soft and curly (olive oil). Many of these recipes were handed down through the centuries

in later cosmetic handbooks, of which we know of several from the 15th century. It appears there were lots of medieval hair colors around

Many of these plants are still used in modern herbal remedies, which may be bought at any Boots.

Men

We don't really know if medieval men coloured their hair. But we do know women were known to colour their hair on a vast scale, since male moralists loved to scorn them for it. Later, during the reign of Elizabeth I, high-ranking men dyed their hair and beards auburn to signal their loyalty to the queen. This might be achieved with a mixture of saffron and sulphur powder.

Perhaps, next year Richard III will be exhibited once more as "The Golden Boy". Or

with a more funky hair-do in lilac as photoshopped here (to the right).

SOURCES:

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Comb of boxwood inlaid with bone and decorated with red and green silk from 15th–16th century France (?) © The Met: The Cloisters Collection, 1982/ 1982.357

