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EDITORIAL BOARD

Joan Cunningham (Ph.D. Public Health: Epidemiology) is a cancer epidemiologist, recently retired from the Medical University of South Carolina. She holds an MSc (Biology: aquatic eco-embryology) from the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada and Ph.D. (Public Health: epidemiology) from the University of Texas School of Public Health (Houston). Her work focuses on racial disparities in breast cancer, and non-pharmacological mitigation of cancer treatment side effects. She also gives invited lectures on cancer epidemiology to the graduate program at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, Texas.

Amanda Haste (Ph.D. Musicology; Dip.Trans.IoLET) is a British musicologist and academic translator whose research interests include identity construction through music and language. She is a member of the Chartered Institute of Linguists and teaches courses in Translation and in English for Specific Purposes at Aix-Marseille University, France. Her research has been published in leading journals and books by major editors, and she co-authored *Constructing Identity in an Age of Globalization* (Paris: Ex Modio, 2015); and her awards include the Louise Dyer Award for research into British music, and the Elizabeth Eisenstein Essay Prize (2018).

Jordan Lavender (Ph.D. Spanish Linguistics) teaches Spanish and Latin American History at Pomfret School in Pomfret, CT and has conducted research on the use of minority languages on Twitter in Spain, bilingualism in the linguistic landscapes of Azogues, Ecuador, and forms of address in Ecuadorian Spanish, based on ethnographic research in both online and offline contexts.

Annie Rehill (Ph.D. Modern French Studies, MFA) specializes in the literature and history of Francophone Canada, focusing on intercultural expressions and implications. Most recently she has studied Métis literature and art. Previous work in ecocriticism centered on representations of the Canadian *coureur de bois* figure, and on Francophone Caribbean writings. Her publications include "Le Travail dans la nature canadienne: L'Équilibre (et le déséquilibre) humain tel qu'il est représenté par Louis Goulet et Joseph-Charles Taché" (2018); "An Ecocritical Reading of Joseph-Charles Taché's *Forestiers et voyageurs*" (2018); *Backwoodsmen As Ecocritical Motif in French Canadian Literature* (2016); and "Inscriptions of Nature from Guadeloupe, Haiti, and Martinique" (2015).

Shelby Shapiro (Ph.D. American Studies), the General Editor of *The Independent Scholar*, served for many years as the English-language editor of *Tsum punkt/To the Point*, the magazine of Yiddish of Greater Washington, as well as for its predecessor publication. He is currently Associate Editor of *Records of the State of Connecticut*. His Ph.D. dissertation dealt with acculturation and American Jewish women in the Yiddish press; he is a Yiddish-English translator, and his research interests include Jazz and Blues (having presented jazz radio programs for nine years), the labor movement, the First World War, and immigrant anarchism.

Patricia Silver (Ph.D. Anthropology) is a sociocultural anthropologist whose research has centered on the Puerto Rican diaspora in the U.S. states. Her publications have appeared in *American Ethnologist*, *CENTRO Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies*, *Identities*, *Global Studies in Culture and Power*, *Op. Cit.: Revista del Centro de Investigaciones Históricas*, *Southern Cultures*, *Memory Studies*, and *Latino Studies*. Her book, *Sunbelt Diaspora: Race, Class, and Latino Politics in Puerto Rican Orlando* was published in 2020.

Tim Woolley (Ph.D. Theology) is a British Methodist minister and adjunct lecturer at Cliff College, tutor for the Methodist E-Academy and the Oxford University Department of Continuing Education, and research associate of Wesley House, Cambridge. He researches 19C British Methodism, the Holiness Movement, Revivalism and Nonconformity and has co-written *Mission Shaped Intro* (2nd ed.) for Fresh Expressions of Church and *Talking of God and Worship: Leading and Preaching* for The Methodist Church in Britain.



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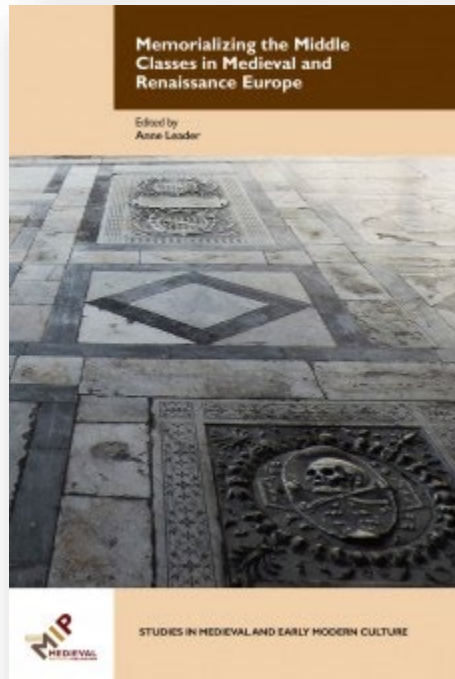
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Memorializing the Middle Classes in Medieval and Renaissance Europe

Anne C. Leader (ed.)

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["Memorializing the Middle Classes in Medieval and Renaissance Europe" by Anne C. Leader \(wmich.edu\)](https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/memorializing-the-middle-classes-in-medieval-and-renaissance-europe/9781580443456)

Review by Shelby Shapiro. Review was first published online 18 May 2022 and will appear in Volume 9 of *The Independent Scholar*.

Memorializing the Middle Classes in Medieval and Renaissance Europe meets at the junction of history, archaeology, and classics, examining memorial culture to investigate the entry of what is described as the "middle classes" into the reaches of high society, in a highly nuanced manner. The authors in *Memorializing the Middle Classes* all present compelling cases in an awesome display of very specialized areas of knowledge. All are worth reading and pondering. This is not a book for casual reading; those unfamiliar with the language of church architecture, for example, should have dictionaries at hand.

The book consists of twelve chapters; in which the authors take readers from Pisa to Breslau/Wroclaw, Florence, London, Northern Italy, Castile/Flanders/Burgundy, Tuscany, Venice, Strasbourg, Cyprus and Bruges. Just as varied as the locations are the forms of

memorialization: sarcophagi, epitaphs, altars, sepulchres, tombs, particular image types, chapels, panel paintings, and food offerings (obits). But the essays in this book deal with more than the "what", "how" and "where": concentrating on social mobility, these papers deal with the "who."

The authors focus on instances of mixed memorialization: sites in which space is shared among different social strata. These scholars investigate how the resting places of the dead serve the vital social needs of the living. Thus, a merchant family memorializing in the same way as a noble family expresses, if not actual equality, than aspirational equality. Rich in artistic, archaeological and historical details, each chapter presents case studies of social mobility as experienced in those societies among particular groups of people.

Review: Leader – *Memorializing the Middle Classes in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*. First published online 18 May 2022. To be published in a forthcoming issue of *The Independent Scholar*.



The *dramatis personae* are the monarchy, the nobility, the Church, and what the authors have defined as “middle classes”—neither nobles, monarchs or church personnel, nor peasants or artisans. Even though the phrase “middle classes” is used, this represents a time before the formation of classes as we know them. The word and concept of an elite or status group captures their social position perhaps better than the rather vague “middle.” In these societies, monarchs, nobles and knights (willingly or not) shared power or employed members of the elites as diplomats, high members of the church, tax collectors and other administrative figures. Wealth could serve as a means of becoming a member of the nobility. The glue holding these societies together was, however, various forms of dependence, duty, and obligation, and not economic relations. Marxian ideas about the relationship of various actors to the means of production as the basis of societal organization are of little use in societies which did not define themselves in economic terms. Struggles in these societies did not take an economic form; rather, they concerned status, prestige and influence. While merchants engaged in trade, those in the ruling positions avoided it, even if they had bought their way into the nobility through their commercial activities.

The authors of these papers move from analyzing artifacts or assemblages of artifacts to understanding or interpreting them in a relational manner: what does it mean for the burial site of person (or family) x to be in proximity with that of person (or family) y ? What connections can be drawn between the particular features of the funerary monuments to x and y ? What do these forms of memorialization say about the existing and possible relationships?

This book connects well with the work of sociologist Norbert Elias. The deep dive into the minutiae of funerary iconography, the placement of tombs, sarcophagi and memorial plaques in relation to those buried inside and outside a church, is similar to the analysis of the architecture and layout of Versailles by Elias in *The Court Society*.¹ By careful attention to the geography of Versailles, placement of particular rooms for those in charge of various tasks, and their distance from others, along with contemporary records (including those living at Versailles), Elias made a very

convincing case for a topology of shifting power alliances within the court of Louis XIV. This combination of attention to the layout and the perspectives of those involved at the time worked to make *The Court Society* particularly persuasive. Non-nobles and non-aristocrats handled administrative functions, such as tax collection and foreign relations. Nobles filled all manner of service functions (other than handling finances) for their master, including being in charge of his night shirts and day clothes. Where you lived and what you did, your proximity to the top, expressed shifting power relationships. Those who have read *The Court Society* will immediately see how social patterns outlined by the authors in this book were also current in the France of Louis XIV.

Editor Anne Leader’s “Introduction” sets forth the main themes and briefly discusses each paper. In “Recycling for Eternity: The Reuse of Ancient Sarcophagi by Pisan Merchants, 1200-1400,” Karen Rose Matthews discusses one feature of funerary commemoration—burial in ancient sarcophagi—and what this form of recycling signified. She outlined the geography of burial practices in Pisa: in cathedrals and churches, on the grounds of churches. As significant as placement was their encasement: old sarcophagi. By using old sarcophagi—especially “Roman objects from distant locales” (p. 31)—they demonstrated their wealth and position, as well as associating themselves with bygone glories:

“The openness of ancient Roman sarcophagi as *spolia* [ancient Roman spoils] meant that they could be filled with a variety of associations, alluding to multiple pasts simultaneously. The elite merchant families that used them as burials purchased and owned a piece of the Roman past, and their personal acquisition of Roman spoils paralleled the widespread use of ancient Roman objects in the most important religious monuments in Pisa.” (p. 42).

Those familiar with Hobsbawm and Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition* will recognize the mechanism at work.² This is especially true of the many instances of new nobles acquiring coats of arms, many of which implied a longer lineage than actually existed.

¹ Elias, Norbert, *The Court Society* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1969, 1975, 1983).

² Hobsbawm, Eric and Ranger, Terence (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1984).



In "Nuremberg Merchants in Breslau (1440-1520): The Commemoration as Assimilation," Agnieszka Patala examines the memorialization practices of a particular group in Breslau/Wroclaw—merchant families who originated in Nuremberg—whose memorials and memorial placements not only celebrated their success, but served as a means of identity, staying together as Nurembergers in death as in life. She presents a geography of memorial, noting where people were buried, entombed, or placed on church walls, floors, etc. She notes the practice of a family having multiple sites.

"Anne Leader's "The Sepulchralization of Renaissance Florence" presents a geography and topography of memory. She notes the multitude of burial places: under Church floors, on walls, in tombs, on Church grounds, and elsewhere. Sometimes the final resting place was a distance from the home parish of the decedent—which meant the prestige of a long funeral procession."

"The desire of individual Florentines to commemorate themselves transformed their cityscape. Stone monuments kept the dead ever present, at least in theory, on the minds and in the prayers of the living. Poignantly however, many markers designed for permanence, have not survived.... [O]thers were sold off by impoverished descendants to newcomers eager to take on the rights to a prestigious burial spot, like the butcher-turned-baker Bellacci family . ." (p. 96).

Christian Steer takes readers across the Channel in "Under the tombe that I have there prepared': Monuments for the Tailors and Merchant Tailors of Medieval London." This paper significantly complicates the view of guilds as precursors to labor unions. While there were both craft and merchant guilds, Steer examines the membership of the Fraternity of St. John the Baptist (founded 1327) and the Merchant Taylors' Company (chartered 1503). Most of the Fraternity's members worked in other areas or were members of the royalty, nobility, and knights. From 1398-1445, when it was known as the Fraternity of St. John the Baptist, "almost 68 [percent of members were not themselves tailors." (p. 109) Among their number were nobles and knights, marblers and merchants. Among its members was the first Speaker of the House of Commons, Thomas Chaucer, son of Geoffrey Chaucer. These organizations, in addition to setting prices and wages, provided mutual aid and spiritual support. They

also served as the springboard to administrative offices. Steer and other authors note the popularity of various religious orders, which would recite prayers in the name of those deceased for specified periods of time, serving the dead and the living—the latter through the prestige of being able to afford this particular luxury, and (more importantly) because this represented good works which could only redound to the benefit of those doing the memorializing when they appeared for holy judgment. Providing memorial and burial spaces and services acted as an important method of revenue production for the churches and orders involved. Scholars of this period have special problems, due to the destruction of religious artifacts during the Reformation, and the loss of artefacts during the Great Fire of London in 1666.

In "'Middle-Class' Men Who Would Be Nobles in Fifteenth-Century Castile, Flanders, and Burgundy," Ann Adams and Nicola Jennings consider the cases of men who entered the nobility, and "used material display as part of carefully crafted commemorative strategies in their bids to be remembered as noble" (p. 157). One of them started off life as a "new Christian," that is, a Jew who converted in the face of persecution and restrictions. He ended up in royal service.

Ruth Wolff's "Tombs and the *imago doctoris in cathedra* in Northern Italy, ca. 1300-1364" discusses a repeated motif of "a male figure resting on a throne-like chair (*cathedra*) with armrests and backrest, and a desk in front of him with an opened book. The figure's right-hand is always raised in a gesture seen as a sign of teaching . . ." (p. 130). It turns out, however, that not all of those whose tombs had this decoration were teachers or doctors of law. Some worked as notaries or physicians; another, the son of the poet Dante Alighieri, had written a study of his father's "Divine Comedy." (pp. 141-146).

Sandra Cardarelli considers the opposite problem in "Remembering the Dead, Planning for the Afterlife in Fifteenth-Century Tuscany: The Case of Cione di Ravi": downward mobility. The title says it all in Meredith Crosbie's "Noble Aspirations: Social Mobility and Commemoration in Two Seventeenth-Century Venetian Funerary Monuments." The decedents had purchased their way into the nobility; they arranged for their monuments to be placed opposite those from old noble families. Crosbie analyzes the placement of various aspects of the plinths, obelisks and carvings of the new and old nobility inferring an equality of status.



In the final chapter, “The Knight and the Merchant: Familial Commemorative Strategy in the Wake of the Flemish Revolts ca. 1482-1492,” Harriette Peel examines four memorials in a single church: two commissioned by a salt merchant (Jan van de Velde), the other two from a ducal courtier, Lodewijk de Baenst. The families were not related. Nevertheless, they were “stylistically, compositionally, and iconographically alike . . .” (p. 297).

Throughout the book, the writers keep their collective eyes open on issues of gender. While noting that for the most part, women are not named in funeral inscriptions, being identified in terms of their kinship to a father, husband, etc., nevertheless they were not absent from tomb engravings and other means of visual remembrance. In “The Panel Painting as a Choice for Family Commemoration: The Case of Fifteenth-Century Patrons on Cyprus,” for example, Barbara McNulty notes a recurring motif: figures incised with their arms crossed over their chest, indicating that the person so depicted had died. Panel paintings mixed cross-armed figures with others who were still alive. McNulty describes the clothes and colors in these panel paintings. “By making the deceased present for the bereaved, these family portraits not only provided an opportunity for intercessory prayers but also allowed members of the family, especially young girls whose potential for marriage alliances went unfulfilled, to contribute to their family’s social self-fashioning.” (p. 287).

For this reviewer, one of the most interesting chapters is “Commemoration through Food: Obits Celebrated by the Franciscan Nuns of Late Medieval Strasbourg,” by Charlotte E. Stanford, which moves into a totally different realm of commemoration in what Stanford described as “the economy of salvation.” (p. 255). Rather than memorializing through physical forms of remembrance, Strasbourgers did so through food gifts for female religious orders. Today an “obit” refers to an expanded death notice with details of the decedent’s life. In medieval times, an obituary list contained the names of those for whom prayers would be recited. This represents an interesting exercise in the shift of meanings over time—from a list with a particular function, to a mere list. Stanford discusses that function:

“The efficacy of prayer, and especially prayers by holy women, above all mendicant women, was particularly attractive to a small but enthusiastic group of supporters in late

medieval Strasbourg.... The importance of daily prayer has sometimes been overshadowed by scholarly emphasis on masses. While masses were significant—and indeed, could be requested even at convents where hired priests performed the sacraments—the salvific power of nuns’ prayers was also highly desired . . . [N]oted mystics like Mechtild of Magdeburg were credited with having released thousands of souls from purgatory through their prayers.” (p. 256-257).

While memorials referred to women largely in kinship terms, rather than as named individuals, this paper presents an interesting twist.

These papers drive home the intense religious beliefs of those times: religion did not represent something separate and compartmentalized. The rivalries between various religious orders as they sought to supply memorial spaces and services point to tensions and factions within the Church, as riven with contests for power and influence as the societies in which the Church was embedded.

All chapters have plentiful photographs and maps—but none in color! Given the significance of color and the existence of sumptuary legislation—authors note how those depicted are dressed—color plates would have enhanced this study. Given the expense of this volume, that should have been possible. Color or black-and-white, however, reading *Memorializing the Middle Classes* is a fascinating exercise, as we observe how scholars use many tools and methodologies to introduce readers to a world very different from our own.

Shelby Shapiro (Ph.D. American Studies) served for many years as the English-language editor of *Tsum punkt/To the Point*, the magazine of Yiddish of Greater Washington, as well as for its predecessor publication. He is currently Associate Editor of *Records of the State of Connecticut*. His Ph.D. dissertation dealt with acculturation and American Jewish women in the Yiddish press; he is a Yiddish-English translator, and his research interests include Jazz and Blues, the labor movement, the First World War, and immigrant anarchism.