



Livia Cárdenas, *Die Textur des Bildes: Das Heiltumsbuch im Kontext religiöser Medialität des Spätmittelalters*, Akademie Verlag: Berlin 2013. VII + 428 pp.

Livia Cárdenas's book *Die Textur des Bildes: Das Heiltumsbuch im Kontext religiöser Medialität des Spätmittelalters* is the first comprehensive study on the so called relic books (*Heiltumsbücher*) that were composed and printed during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century in the cities of Southern Germany and modern Austria. The relic books presented the relic collection of a certain city that was shown for the public in *Heiltumsweisung* (display of the relics) on a certain day of the year. In the relic books, the images (woodcuts) and texts presented the procedure of display and enabled the reader to participate in the showing of the relics.

Cárdenas's study goes through the relic books from the first one of Nuremberg printed in 1487 to that of Halle printed in 1520 including all the known versions and editions of the books and discussing, in addition to these two cities, the books from Bamberg, Würzburg, Vienna and Wittenberg. Cárdenas's book includes also a catalogue of the *Heiltumsbücher* used in the study with detailed descriptions. She underlines the importance of images in the relic books, and the title *Textur des Bildes* refers to the fact that according to Cárdenas, the texts and images in these books form an inseparable entity of interaction that she names *Textur*. She considers this interplay typical for the relic books, but even for a phase in the print culture and the devotional life of late medieval and early modern German society.

For someone not previously familiar with relic books, such as myself, the reading of the book can be at times demanding. Cárdenas goes through the historical conditions in which each of the books was created and how the books developed in time. She also analyses what kind of changes took place both in the texts and images of a certain book, but also how the books of a certain city affected others and how the same images could be used again

and again. In addition to this, she discusses, for instance, the interplay between the images and texts, the development of images and their meaning and the changes in lay devotional culture shown in the creation and use of relic books.

In all of its abundance, Cárdenas's study can overwhelm the occasional reader, but it is a rich source for those interested in visual culture, the concept and meaning of image in the later Middle Ages, the development of early printing, lay devotional life, relic cults and the interplay between different groups in late medieval towns. As Cárdenas demonstrates, the relic books were important in creating and maintaining the self-esteem of a city and its inhabitants (e.g., Nuremberg and Bamberg), but also underlining the importance of persons, such as Frederick III the Wise, Elector of Saxony (r. 1483–1525) in Wittenberg or Albrecht (Albert) of Brandenburg (1490–1545), Elector and Archbishop of Mainz and later also of Magdeburg, in Halle. However, the *Heiltumsbuch* (the definition of the word itself is still debated) was primarily an important medium in the devotional life of the wider public.

Nineteenth-century scholars considered relic books or lists of relics (the Nuremberg relic books from the year 1487 consisted only of six leaves) as the forerunners of modern collection or exhibition catalogues. However, Livia Cárdenas notes that despite certain structural and analogical similarities between the relic books and the modern catalogues, the genealogical and historical differences between them are greater and their meanings different. According to her, the most important difference is the fact that in modern catalogues images should correspond to the real object as naturalistically as possible so that the viewer can compose the museum or collection presented in images in his or her mind. Cárdenas argues that in relic books the most important thing was not the realistic nature of the images – as a matter of fact in some cases the images differed rather drastically from the real relics – but the fact that the images and texts together reinforced the existence of the collection of relics. When comparing the relic books to catalogues, she emphasizes the religious meaning of relic books, and she suggests that the images (though not always naturalistic) were those that defined the relic collection in a lasting way and made it permanent and comprehensive.

From my point of view, the most interesting part of Livia Cárdenas's book is her analysis of the role of *Heiltumsbücher* in the devotional life of the laity. Cárdenas suggests that the relic books made meeting the holy relic independent from the time and place of the display. Through the book, the relics became accessible to all the believers and the possibility to see the relics became continuous. The relic books also changed the previous tactile

devotion that had considered seeing and touching the relics important, into more contemplative devotion that was accessible to all, not only to those that could come to the city on a certain day to 'meet' the relics.

Furthermore, Cárdenas argues that the relic books did not only make the devotion more internal but also more private. Though relic books were openly published for a large anonymous audience, they made possible the very private experiencing of the relics while reading and viewing the book in any place and time the reader wished. Instead of in a large crowd of citizens, the relics could be experienced in the privacy of one's own house. This kind of use of the relic books also intensified lay devotional culture. Cárdenas suggests that relic books worked as a kind of bridge between old and new forms of devotional life and that the materiality of relic books created a space that could replace that of the church and its liturgy in the lives of the laity.

Die Textur des Bildes by Livia Cárdenas is without doubt an important contribution to medieval and early modern (art) history, and I have touched only on some aspects of it. It can be recommended for those interested in the history of early printing, but also those interested in the history of saints' cult and lay devotion. Furthermore, it is also a very beautiful book with more than one hundred and fifty images from the relic books and worth reading almost solely because of them.

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