

# Marginalia

The Journal of the Medieval Reading Group



## Apocalypse

Thematic Issue, October 2010

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## *Editors' Foreword*

Joanna Bellis, *Pembroke College, Cambridge*  
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Anxiety about the imminent obliteration of the human race, or 'end times', is a staple of human experience. The central importance of the apocalypse in the cultural imagination of the middle ages is testified by the sheer number of vivid (sometimes lurid) depictions of it in the texts and images that have come down to us. Moreover, the apocalyptic preoccupations of the medieval Christian world find a modern mirror in a succession of uniquely 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century concerns: nuclear oblivion, overpopulation, the greenhouse effect and, most recently, climate change. The interest of this topic to students of the medieval period is reflected in the unprecedented number of submissions we received in response to this year's call for papers. This tenth issue of *Marginalia* brings together articles on the theme of 'Apocalypse' by graduate students working in a number of disciplines and from academic institutions across the world.

Albrecht Dürer is responsible for some of the most iconic of all images of Apocalypse. Denise Alexandra Hartmann's contribution examines Dürer's work on this theme alongside that of Lucas Cranach the Elder. Her paper situates both artists within their contemporary cultural contexts and explores the extent to which Cranach reimaged Dürer's imagery for a post-Reformation world.

Victoria Flood offers a thoughtful reinterpretation of an understudied text – Thomas of Erceldoune's reply to the Countess of Dunbar – along with a theorization of the operative significance of the often undervalued medieval genre of prophecy. Her paper argues that the Erceldoune prophecy is more interesting than it has been considered to be by placing the text in relation to contemporary sociopolitical and economic conditions and concerns on the one hand, and Biblical precedent on the other. Flood employs a sophisticated view of historical relevance in order to argue that this prophecy is less tied to a certain event or propagandist agenda than it is connected to a contemporary cultural attitude towards history, and therefore 'universally applicable, rooted in the use of quasi-apocalyptic imagery and sense of universal decline'.

Marisa Mandabach's article is a comparative analysis of an intriguing figure in Hieronymus Bosch's 'Hell' panel in the *Garden of Earthly Delights*: the bluebird that sits atop a cistern-throne, eating and excreting the souls of the damned into a translucent blue bubble. Drawing on a wide range of images that depict diabolic defecation as an infernal punishment, Mandabach's interpretation of this tantalising late-medieval image and its analogues offers a wider

comment about creation and recreation, its parodies and travesties, and the artist's place as imitator. This article makes a fascinating introduction for non-specialists, especially those interested in the emerging field of 'fecopoetics', which was discussed in Virginia Langum's review in the last issue of *Marginalia*.

Dustin MacKinley Frazier offers an identification of a previously unknown figure on the Franks Casket, a magnificent Anglo-Saxon object that he calls a 'byword for scholarly puzzles'. His comparison of the conquest of Jerusalem (AD 70) as depicted on the casket's rear panel, with its description in Josephus's account, offers new insight into the identity of the small boy who appears carrying a cup beneath Titus's throne, which has important implications for our understanding of thematic narrative of the casket as a whole.

Nienke Van Etten's paper addresses the influences and uses of apocalyptic imagery in medieval Ireland with particular reference to The Cross of St. Patrick and St. Columba at Kells. Her paper pays particular attention to the complex web of historical and theological circumstances that may have informed the making of this cross.

As always, the articles are accompanied by a range of reviews of recent publications in the field.

We would like to thank all those who have helped bring this issue of *Marginalia* to publication. This issue is the first to be launched in a new format and we are particularly grateful to Danica Summerlin for lending her formatting and layout skills to this end. Thanks are also due to the speakers and attendees at the various meetings of the medieval reading group throughout the last year for their friendship and scholarly input. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the help of the various graduate students and the academic members of our advisory board who participated in the process of peer review for this issue and who gave so generously of their time and talents.