

Brown, Catherine. *Remember the Hand: Manuscript in Early Medieval Iberia*. Fordham Series in Medieval Studies. New York: Fordham University Press, 2023, 368 pages, 44 color & 22 b/w illus. [ISBN: 978-08-23298-91-4].

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Catherine Brown has written a breathtaking book. Filled with fascinating ideas and detailed attention to language, *Remember the Hand* centers on illustrated manuscripts and their monastic writers in northern Iberia during the tenth and eleventh centuries. Blending the best of philology and cultural history, through exquisitely intelligent writing Brown guides the reader to savor each word instead of just gobbling down the rich knowledge she so generously has prepared for us.

In *Remember the Hand: Manuscript in Early Medieval Iberia*, Brown signals at the outset the crux of what makes this monograph great: it aims to be at once historical, scholarly, and imaginative. Taking this charge seriously, Brown immerses the reader in the monastic culture of reading and writing, bringing it vividly to life. Her conceptual framework allows us to inhabit the experience of medieval monastics, women and men whose work and prayer were intimately intertwined. Whereas the often-dry nature of scholarship tends to encourage readers to skim for data points, Brown's careful crafting of language has the effect of making us slow down and engage with her enjoyable inquiry into the meanings of words and their settings. Reading this book gave me fresh insights into manuscripts I knew well, and it taught me about others that were new to me; at the same time, the author's regard for words acted as an important reminder of the value of verbal descriptions in my own work.

In her monograph, there is a confidence that rings through in the authorial voice as Catherine Brown speaks directly to her readers, declaring textually, for example, "Let me explain: I noted in the preface that..." (p. 4), while she also takes explicit responsibility for research decisions and methodological focus. This allows us to experience medieval "manuscriptions" hand in hand with the author. She explains the coinage thus: "As *completion* is a noun made upon the verb to *complete*, so manuscript turns the lively verb to *manu-script* into 'a noun of action'. When we engage with these books in the ways their makers anticipated, we're not just reading manuscript, we're reading *manuscription*, an ongoing event that calls repeatedly

for our participation" (p. 4). As I read *Remember the Hand*, I repeatedly found myself assenting aloud with such lines as, "A studious encounter in the Isidorean mode is driven mainly by fondness, inclination, desire, and exertion. Such exertion is certainly necessary here because the books studied in *Remember the Hand* are a thousand years old, written in difficult Latin and in a script that most medievalists are not taught in graduate school" (p. 7). Here is the exact and hard-to-find balance between a scholar's profound knowledge — in this case, of a "dead" language in an odd script — and the crucial fondness for a subject that keeps us going through it all, yet too rarely do we express it in print.

Although her philological training is essential to the undertaking of this study, Brown states that her "inquiry is historical" (p. 3), going to the heart of what makes her book a matter of broad interdisciplinary interest. Evident throughout is her decision to be transparent with translations, as well as her generous recognition that cooperation is the best way to approach research. Just as she pursues a dialogue with the medieval writer of a work in which a particular word appears, we the readers are invited to join her in the task of translating. One footnote example: "Thanks to Donka Markus for help with this very difficult Latin. I have not yet been able to arrive at a decent translation of the remainder. Here is the whole poem in Díaz y Díaz's edition, if you want to try..." (pp. 241-242n100).

My favorite moment in the book comes with her comment on a colophon I know well:

I, Florentius, inscribed this book, at the command of the whole monastery represented in Abbot Silvanus, when I had accomplished twice ten-and-two or nearly five and double-ten years of my little lifetime...
 (ego Florentius exaravi imperante mihi uel uniuersa congeries sacra monasterii Silbani uidelicet abbati. quum iam meae etatulae annorum spatia peregissem bis deni bini aut circiter quini et bisdeni)

Brown clarifies Florentius's opaque expression of his age as "in his twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth year. The

paradoxical combination of properly humble vagueness (twenty-four or twenty-five; what kind of monk keeps track of a birthday?) with unnecessary precision (why does it matter how old he was?) gives this contingent reckoning of time a disarming intimacy” (p. 23). Her skillful translations, here and throughout, do the hard work of turning complex medieval Latin into comprehensible modern English, as when she explains that the term *exarare* means *to write* by way of *to plow*: “Of the words at his disposal to describe his work, Florentius has chosen the dirtiest, sweatiest one...” (p. 24). With this unexpectedly pungent modifier, Brown makes the reader understand instantly the labor inherent in the writer’s word choice — both medieval monk and modern scholar. Further, the immediate textual inclusion of the Latin allows the reader to proceed apace with the translator. One must be grateful that Fordham University Press facilitated this layout, even while regretting that the book has fallen prey to that modern scholarly curse of endnotes rather than handy footnotes.

Delving into images as well as texts, Brown is at her best when she leads us through the labyrinth in which “unworthy Florentius” asks to be remembered (plate 3). To explicate the alphabetic puzzle that displays and disguises the tenth-century scribe’s name, she guides the readers, “Left to right, right to left, up and down, again and again, watch the sentence weave the carpet page: FLORENTIUM INDIGNUM MEMORARE” (p. 19). Later she reveals that this labyrinth is far more complicated than we ever imagined: “[...]the phrase FLORENTIUM INDIGNUM MEMORARE rolls out stepwise as well as in straight lines,” requiring a program “to trace all possible paths of Florentius’s prayer. The result is Borgesian in its vastness: in this grid of 260 letters the phrase is repeated... 354,200 times” (pp. 46-47, emphasis hers). Florentius astounds us afresh, thanks to Brown.

Yet much as I admire the textual genius of this book, I cannot but think that Brown’s analysis of the imagery would have benefitted from greater attention to the

scholarship of such art historians as Kristin Böse, Ana C. Dias, and Peter Klein, whose recent work on early Iberian manuscripts appears too sparsely. The scanty examination of some images leaves Brown’s readers longing for more. The extraordinary Omega page in the León bible of 960, for example, is described thus: “Like the Omega at the end of the *Moralia* (BNE MS 80, f. 501r), this monumental letter is supported by two little figures. Here, however, they hold out goblets, presumably of wine. Tituli above their heads tell us who they are: on the right, ‘Sanctius presbiter’ and on the left, ‘Florentius confessus’. They are toasting, and the text beneath their goblets tells us what they say...” (pp. 88-90, fig. 13). Although the scene does indeed scan as a toast, I had hoped to learn from Brown about this representation through the historical lens of toasting in the early Middle Ages, which does not come into play. Nor does she note the tiny dots above each raised “goblet” — are they bubbles from a sparkling wine, or perhaps scintillations of light emitted from a chalice? Finally, how should we understand the two unnamed figures flanking a sort of tree of life atop the Omega, who hold out open hands toward each other? Though just as *visually* prominent as the pair below, no tituli identify them so they and the tree go unaddressed by the author. In sum, I wanted more of Brown’s brilliance to be turned to images and stone inscriptions, especially the problematic ones of Zamora, as thoroughly as she did for words on vellum.

That greedy desire aside, my deep admiration goes to Catherine Brown for the crystalline clarity with which her prose makes complex ideas seem easy; only the author can count the many hours that have gone into the polishing of each sentence so that the text shines so brightly. A smart and substantive study that is sure to make a profound impact across the disciplines and throughout all areas of medieval studies, this monograph is a pleasure to read. Enlightenment in the form of Catherine Brown’s *Remember the Hand* tastes like a feast.