

Book reviews

Jerome Bertram, *Icon and Epigraphy. The Meaning of European Brasses and Slabs* (lulu, 2015), 2 vols, 423 pp. + 581 illus., mostly in colour. ISBN: 978-326-23129-3 (hardback).

Vol. 1, text: price £22.50 <http://www.lulu.com/shop/jerome-bertram/icon-and-epigraphy-i-text/hardcover/product-22105925.html>; **vol. 2, illustrations: price £64.50** <http://www.lulu.com/shop/jerome-bertram/icon-and-epigraphy-volume-ii-illustrations/hardcover/product-22106331.html>.

The recent introduction of online publishing and sales services, such as lulu, enables authors to put in the public domain studies which are not inherently commercial and would otherwise die with their authors. This two-volume work is the scholarly work of a present-day antiquary who commendably carries out the majority of his work in the field rather than in a library. In its tone the book is delightfully reminiscent of the standard works of the nineteenth century and earlier, which are the indispensable bedrock of the study of church monuments.

Although not explicitly stated in the title, this important book is confined to medieval examples, which the author interprets as c.1300 until 1550. There are other restrictions in its scope. As Bertram explains (p. 7), the borderlines between flat slabs, low-relief, high-relief and three-dimensional effigies are impossible to define precisely. Here the subject is confined predominantly to flat or nearly flat memorials, whether made of metal, stone or other materials, and whether placed horizontally or vertically, inside or outside a church. Relief monuments are, to a great extent, excluded from this study, although there is occasional reference to them – and indeed other forms of sculpture and two-dimensional art – in order fully to explain the iconography and context of some flat and low-relief examples. Consequently, the main emphasis is on minor monuments which, with the exception of British monumental brasses, have not hitherto received the attention that they deserve.

A great strength of this book is that it has a truly pan-European focus with discussion of examples in Albania, Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Greenland, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Rumania, Russia, Scotland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine and Wales, as well as further afield in China and Outremer (the Holy Land), South Africa and Tunisia. This treatment is much wider than most studies of church monuments that claim to have a European coverage but are actually confined to countries north of the Alps and west of the former Iron Curtain, and even then concentrate on major, well-known examples. Bertram's extensive knowledge of monuments over a wide area offers scope for extensive comparisons between monumental and textual traditions throughout Europe. While a substantial number of the numerous illustrations are from Britain, there are also many from across continental Europe, often of monuments never previously published.

The text volume begins with an introduction. Although relatively short, it has valuable observations addressing definition and purpose, material and technique. In explaining the purpose of church monuments, the author presents a scholarly but easily comprehensible account of the importance of prayers for the soul and how the doctrines of the Communion of Saints and of Purgatory informed the design of monuments. Burial location and therefore location of monuments, both within and outside churches, and the connection with theology are dealt with in a similarly erudite manner, as is the fashion for ever more elaborate monuments which increasingly intruded into worshipping space. There is a brief account of petrology; this is strongest with regard to British stone types, but also makes useful observations on those used for flat monuments in continental Europe. The important subject of surface decoration, including polychromy and inlays of various materials, such as metal and contrasting stone, is dealt with in a

competent summary of the state of current knowledge. This is also true of the brief survey of the use of wood (not just for effigies, but also wooden cross-slabs and floor monuments), ceramic tiles, artificial stone, cast iron and even monuments painted directly onto the walls of churches, with examples cited from England, France, Germany and Italy. Finally, Bertram makes the significant point that memorialisation is only one aspect of commemoration, such as stained-glass windows, wall paintings, screens and other church fittings – a subject of growing interest.

The rest of the text is divided into two main sections, covering epigraphy and iconography, all of it packed with references to illuminating examples. I know of no other book which has such an extensive coverage of inscriptions. This section has chapters on lettering and location, language and prose formula, versification, and the content of inscriptions. This is a field which Bertram has made his own, and it is in my view the most original and ground-breaking part of this book. Too often chapters on inscriptions in books are brief and stereotyped, largely confined to mining biographical information or quoting unusual and amusing texts. Bertram shows that there is so much more to be learnt from them. In discussing formula for monumental inscriptions, he demonstrates that ‘to a surprising extent, Britain remains apart from other nations in the choice of standard phrases, and a noticeable difference exists between the north and the south of the Continent’ (p. 72), especially with regard to the *incipit* and the *conclusio*. The highlight of the epigraphy section for me is the discussion of the origin of the prayer formulae found both on the main inscriptions and the scrolls, the wording of large numbers of which Bertram tracks down to the wording of elements of the liturgy. This is crucial in understanding the full meaning of a monument as chosen by the person commemorated or by his executor and provides a vital insight into the nature of the individual’s piety.

By iconography Bertram means the design chosen for the monument and the ideas and meaning which that design was intended to convey. The individual chapters of this section address non-effigial slabs, the cross and Christian imagery, semi-effigial slabs, fully effigial slabs, architecture and other embellishments, and kneeling and mural compositions. Aspects such as biography, dress, workshop style and authorship are not covered as the author considers them to have been adequately dealt with by previously published studies. In opening this section, he makes the important caveat that ‘it is important to remember that funerary art, possibly more than any other, is by nature imitative and traditional, and that artists or craftsmen copy established forms to please their clients without themselves taking any conscious decision over the composition, or having any clear ideas as to the meaning or symbolism of any part of the design’ (p. 181). This leads to a well-balanced examination of the role of seals and coins in tomb slab design. Other worthwhile sections include that on the significance of religious imagery, used either in isolation or as accessories to one of his main iconographical categories.

Two chapters shine out for me. The first is that on semi-effigial slabs, a fascinating type which since the days of Boutell has not received the attention it deserves. Prototypes date back to ancient funerary art, notably the Roman sarcophagus front and the standing stele. The ensuing discussion covers heads alone, busts in cross-head openings, miniature full-length effigies in cross heads, isolated half-effigies, and concealed effigies, by which are meant monuments giving the impression that the entire effigy lies just below the surface of the stone, perhaps representing the deceased in his coffin. I hope that Bertram is successful in sparking a renewed scholarly interest in this monumental type. The other chapter that breaks new ground is that on kneeling and mural compositions, the juxtaposition explained by the fact that most kneeling compositions are on mural monuments. The latter in particular have not always been sufficiently distinguished from the horizontal monument, especially in anglophone studies, perhaps because they are far less common in Britain than in continental Europe. There is a useful discussion of the varied formats of compositions featuring kneeling figures with a visual focus for their devotions. Some are categorised as donor figures, which are rightly linked to but distinguished from other commemorative media.

Icon and epigraphy is written in a clear, accessible style, with many an insightful aside. Footnotes are sparing, there is just one appendix (a fascinating analysis of prayers and aspirations from English brasses and incised slabs), and the bibliography is a select one with only the major works cited and those largely restricted to books and articles dealing with English monuments, although others referenced can be found in the notes. There are two indexes, one topographical and one thematic, but regrettably no index of the names of those commemorated. This is a book to which I will return to time and again, and it will undoubtedly have a valued place on the bookshelves of those who have a serious interest in medieval church monuments. It will also provide a mine of information for future scholars to build upon.

SALLY BADHAM