

**Jeannie Łabno, *Commemorating the Polish Renaissance Child: Funeral Monuments and their European Context* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 472 pp., 8 tables, 8 b/w plates and 20 plates, ISBN 978-0-7546-6825-1, £70 (hb).**

While the focus of this monograph is child monuments in Renaissance Poland, it is in many ways relevant to medieval memoria research. First of all, Łabno's target period of 1500-1650 coincides in part with the pre-Reformation period covered by the MeMO project. Secondly, childhood studies is a rapidly expanding field and this monograph deals with an important area, *viz.* child commemoration. Thirdly, Łabno offers an introduction to Polish monuments, which are not widely known, partly because of the language barrier: here the author has an advantage that allows her to open up this largely inaccessible field to international scholars.

Poland is unusual among European countries in already having an ongoing inventarisation of monuments by the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IS PAN) and the National Centre for Historical Monument Studies and Documentation (KOBZDZ). Łabno was able to make good use of the many volumes of the KZSP catalogue of church monuments in Poland for her own itemised descriptions of Polish child monuments up to 1650, which take up over a quarter of her monograph. The rest of the book is divided into five main parts, each containing a number of shorter chapters with introductions and summaries that still reveal the structure of her original PhD thesis. In these chapters the author has a lot of ground to cover, especially as the Renaissance kingdom of Poland, its social structure and the religious social situation need explaining for the non-expert reader. The book also contains a helpful glossary; a bibliography; an index; and three appendices with genealogies, a chronology, and a further analysis of the putto-and-skull motif that is to be found as a recurring Renaissance motif on a number of Polish child memorials.

So what makes these child monuments from Renaissance Poland so special, or even innovative? There are many fallacies concerning the commemoration of children in the Middle Ages, some of which have their origins in the 1960 book *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (translated in 1962 as *Centuries of Childhood*) by the French family historian Philippe Ariès. He famously claimed that children appeared on monuments only quite late, *viz.* in the sixteenth century, because 'it was thought that the little thing which had disappeared so soon in life was not worthy of remembrance'. Here is also

partly where the weakness of Łabno's book lies, for she relies heavily on Ariès – in fact, too heavily. There remain various medieval examples of monuments to children across Europe from the thirteenth century on, and some of them are extremely prestigious, but this is a period with which Łabno is no more familiar than Ariès.

Crucially, both Ariès and Łabno ignore theological thinking that underlies medieval memoria culture. Important aspects of this in relation to children are baptism and the fate of deceased children – baptised and unbaptised – in the hereafter. Ariès fell into the trap of assuming that child loss was an almost unavoidable risk that left in parents disinclined to remember such early casualties. Yet this is too secular and pragmatic an approach for the Middle Ages when commemoration meant much more than just remembering the dead that one once knew: an essential part of medieval memoria culture were prayers for the salvation of the souls of the deceased, and naturally children also possessed immortal souls. However, the fate of unbaptised children in the hereafter was theologically controversial, for technically these could not go to heaven nor be buried in Christian soil.

Ultimately Łabno does not much better than Ariès regarding this Christian aspect of commemoration. She touches upon baptism and even cites a Lutheran sermon delivered in Silesia in 1592 at the funeral of a stillborn son of Duke Frederyk IV, in which the Roman Catholic church was castigated for not considering unbaptised children as damned and therefore not allowing them to be buried properly (p. 161). Yet it is not much more than an anecdote in an overly brief discussion of this key issue. The fact that inscriptions on several of her Polish child monuments include the biblical text 'Suffer the little children to come unto me' also suggests that doubts remained about the fate of children in the hereafter, but Łabno does not seem to grasp the full significance of this text. She also follows Ariès in equating memorials and remembrance with affection, which is a dangerous thing when status was often a key factor in the commissioning of monuments. This leads to sweeping statements such as: 'Given that in sixteenth-century Poland there was a genre of child commemoration, this suggests that children were highly regarded and valued by Polish society of the time. Conversely, given that there was no such genre of child commemoration elsewhere in Europe at that time, this suggests that children were not so highly regarded *by the societies* of other European countries' (p. 148). It must be admitted that there is to this day no comprehensive survey of child monuments in England, France or Germany, which makes it difficult to draw comparisons with confidence. Even so, Łabno ignores or underplays the work already

carried out by other scholars on child monuments elsewhere in Europe. Consequently she presents the Polish memorials as a new phenomenon – a claim that she modifies only in her conclusion where she admits that ‘Perhaps the Polish situation is not as unique as it appears to be at present’ (p. 251).

Łabno’s book is valuable in offering an introduction to monuments in Renaissance Poland that might otherwise remain largely unknown, and the methodology displayed in her catalogue is commendable. The memorials themselves are often very moving, especially the inscriptions which still evoke the grief felt by the bereft parents. Although the author pays insufficient attention to the existence of earlier child monuments in Europe or to the key issues of medieval memoria culture, by bringing together these Polish examples she has nonetheless made an important contribution to childhood studies. Moreover, the very flaws of her study highlight the need for a Europe-wide inventory of tomb monuments that would allow scholars to conduct comparative research into theological and social attitudes as well as stylistic developments.

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