

*Regina PAPP. Borders, Otherness, and Mentality in Medieval Folk Mythology – The Legacy of Claude Lecouteux (Claude Lecouteux: At the Borders of the Wondrous and Magical, Nature spirits, shapeshifters, and the Undead in the Never-Ending Middle Ages. Edited by Florence Bayard and Astrid Guillaume. Translated by Jon E. Graham. Rochester. Inner Traditions International. 2025. 288 p.)*<sup>1</sup> DOI: 10.15170/SPMNNV.2025.14.15

The author of the volume, Claude Lecouteux, passed away in November 2025, and with him, historical studies lost one of its foremost experts on medieval folk mythology. Lecouteux was professor emeritus of the department of medieval German literature and civilization (Littératures et civilisation allemandes du Moyen Âge) at the Sorbonne University in Paris. His research focused primarily on Germanic mythology and cultural anthropology, with particular attention to mythological creatures, beliefs about the dead and death, and magic. He was an extremely prolific author, with more than 160 publications and around 30 books to his name (e.g., *The Book of Grimoires*, *Dictionary of Ancient Magic Words and Spells*, *The Tradition of Household Spirits*), this volume being one of his last published books.

The collection brings together Lecouteux's previously published studies, edited by Florence Bayard and Astrid Guillaume, who also wrote the preface and introduction. Florence Bayard is a lecturer in the German Department at the University of Caen in Normandy, while Astrid Guillaume is an associate professor at the Sorbonne University. The book is divided into four major sections and contains 17 studies. As the title suggests, the issue of borders is the connecting thread. As the editors put it, the volume is „an invitation to cross the various borders that Lecouteux has explored during his long research career” (p. 1). The concept of „otherness” plays a central role in the author's work. He starts from the premise that we can best understand ourselves and our history by examining and exploring our peculiarities and differences. This is aided by the boundaries that separate and connect the „one” from the „other”, which are the most obvious points of examination. The volume presents the results of professional research in a methodology and subject area that, while not neglected, represents a side branch of research.

The texts in the first part (*From Document to Idea – Making Texts Speak*, p. 10–37.) were not selected by the editors according to specific theme, but rather in an effort to highlight Lecouteux's methodology. This is based on examining the texts of the sources, comparing the information they contain, and searching for details that „preserve the subconscious collective memory” (p. 2). The author calls this process „mental archaeology” (p. 2, 198, 214). Lecouteux does not distinguish between sources based on the medium they are preserved on or the genre they belong to, examining texts written on parchment, stone, bells, amulets, or other talismans alike.

The first text, based on an illustrated stone, describes a bridge that helps the soul to cross over to the afterlife through a mixture of Christian and pagan traditions. The next text examines pagan elements in the *Eyrbyggja Saga*, including returning dead, witches, and legal cases involving them. In further texts, he highlights the importance of fairy tales in examining mentality and compares medieval fantasies with elements of today's fantasy genre, unsurprisingly finding that they are linked in many ways.

The section entitled *Between Magic and Black Magic: Ambiguous Objects and Beings* (p. 38–99) begins with a categorization of the returning dead based on their actions and

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published: *Aux frontières du merveilleux, Appréhender le monde au Moyen Âge*. Éds. Florence Bayard et Astrid Guillaume. Paris. Imago. 2023. 272 p.

characteristics after their return (e.g., the knocker, the strangler, the famished). It then deals with known grimoires and magic books, grouping them together. Depending on their type, they could be used to summon demons or practice healing magic. A similarly powerful mythical object is the bell, which in the Middle Ages was generally – according to the author – sworn upon by more people than the Holy Scriptures, and was present in all areas of life, which is why it is associated with folk beliefs in all areas. Finally, returning to narrative sources, it presents a poem by an unknown author, analysing it and examining the circumstances of its dissemination.

The third unit, *Nature and the Elements – Between Awe and Terror* (p. 100–169), focuses on unexplored, unconquered territories where humans are at the mercy of the elements, and especially the supernatural. In the imagination, forests, waters, and mountains occupy a prominent place among natural formations. In the case of the latter, the text also establishes a typology based on mythical aspects and presents the history of the magnetic mountain at length. Similarly, clouds that obscure the sun and landmarks belong to the supernatural world, and humans are then unwittingly removed from the world they know. But it is not only clouds that are under supernatural control; the weather, to which medieval man was most vulnerable, is also intertwined with mythical powers. Demons and witches were capable of stirring up storms, and people defended themselves against them with rituals, which then passed into the hands of the clergy and became pagan processions.

Finally, the fourth part, *Borders at the Margins of the Known World* (p. 170–225), returns to individual imaginary places: the seas and their islands have countless mythical attributes, and their history is intertwined with great explorers and their wonderful journeys. The next study highlights this very aspect, the importance of examining the landscape that forms the background to medieval knightly romances. The environment is stereotypical, based on the opposition between nature and culture, but its function is to determine the hero's path: in certain places, he must face enemies, while in others, he finds refuge. This leads to the next idea, the coexistence of two worlds. Lecouteux starts from the premise that supernatural beings live in supernatural places and/or times, and that the border between the civilized world and the wilderness is a passageway between them. Crossing the border has serious consequences, so humans rightly consider themselves strangers and intruders in these places. In order to live in peace, they conquer these territories with various rituals, fire, and by walking around and marking the border. Or they learn to live in symbiosis with the „other“, respecting the spirits of nature on whom they depend.

Due to the structure of the volume, it is not unitary; the four large chapters attempt to bring the articles together, but in terms of mentality and mythology, it is not always clear whether a given study should be classified according to its conclusion, source, or narrowly defined topic. The editors have compiled the texts in this way based on their personal views, and while their line of reasoning is understandable, it is also questionable.

The significance of the volume lies, on the one hand, in its deep and accurate interpretations of individual sources and, on the other hand, in its focus on a topic that defines the mentality of the entire Middle Ages in Western Europe. It shows that it is possible to provide a compact synthesis of a comprehensive topic through case studies without compromising professionalism. I consider one of its greatest virtues to be the categorization that also appears in the author's other works. He classifies the returning dead by their behaviour, grimoires by their content, demons by their names and functions, and the coexistence of the two worlds by its rules. He strives to build a system

out of the chaos of mentality and mythology, which provides an excellent foothold for further research.

The book is excellent for researchers of medieval mentalities, folk religion, and folklore, especially from a methodological point of view, but its excellent style and truly exciting topics make it entertaining for everyone.