

Sources

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Tammy J. Eschedor Voelker, Editor

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All Things Medieval: An Encyclopedia of the Medieval World. By Ruth A. Johnson. Santa Barbara, Calif.: Greenwood, 2011. 2 vols. acid free \$180 (ISBN: 978-0-3133-6462-4). E-Book available (978-0-3133-6463-1), call for pricing.

Rather than focusing only on the written record—the letters, diaries, public documents, and other primary sources traditionally used by historians in telling the story of the past—this volume takes a close look at the things our forebears left behind, such as tools, clothing, weapons and so on. It is, therefore, a catalog of artifacts from the period known as the Middle Ages, approximately 550 AD to 1450 AD.

Coverage is wide ranging, with the 116 entries discussing not only man-made things but the raw materials from which they came (“Iron,” “Salt”), manufacturing processes (“Glass,” “Jewelry”), and in some cases, activities and events (“Crusades,” “Dance”). Most entries are several pages in length, with subheadings breaking up the text into easily digestible segments. Cross-references appear in boldface type and each article concludes with a further reading list. Crisp black and white photographs of objects discussed complement the text.

Unfortunately, there are some serious weaknesses apparent with this set, not the least of which are the minimal qualifications of the author. All that can be ascertained from the biographical blurb is that “Johnson is an independent scholar with a research specialty in medieval literature and languages. She is the author of *A Companion to Beowulf* (Greenwood, 2005).” No mention is made of her academic credentials and the possible lack thereof is reflected in her writing style. Much of the verbiage here consists of statements of the obvious, as in the entry for “Sieges” in which she posits that “the purpose of a ram is simple. It is a strong tree trunk that hits a wall, gate or door repeatedly until the object is smashed” (663). In other instances, she makes vague references, assuming that the reader is familiar with the subject. In the article on “Jewelry,” she mentions that “there are treasure hoards like the one found at Sutton Hoo, and there are more modest finds” (402). A few words explaining that Sutton Hoo was the site of an Anglo-Saxon ship burial would have been most helpful. The overall impression is that there is too much emphasis on the “what” and not enough on the “why” and “how.”

On a firmer footing is the 2-volume *Encyclopedia of the Medieval World* by Edward D. English (Facts on File, 2004). English is an associate professor of medieval history at the University of California at Santa Barbara. He also serves as Executive Director of Medieval Studies at that institution and at one time was an editor of a scholarly journal on the subject. That is the type of background that tells a reference book reviewer how suitable an author or editor is for the work at hand. Furthermore, at 944 pages with 2,000 entries, this set not only covers a broader field but meets a higher standard of academic rigor. While there are a number of other reference works currently in print regarding the Middle Ages of Europe, the Facts on File set by Professor English is, by virtue of its scholarship, readability, and price, is recommended for purchase by all public and academic libraries.—*Michael F. Bemis, Librarian, Minnesota Correctional Facility, Oak Park Heights*