

Noëlle-Laetitia Perret, Hans-Joachim Schmidt (ed.), *Memories Lost in the Middle Ages. Collective Forgetting as an Alternative Procedure of Social Cohesion/L'oubli collectif au Moyen Âge. Un autre processus constitutif de la cohésion sociale*, Turnhout (Brepols) 2023, 362 p., 32 fig., 1 tab. (Memoria and Remembrance Practices, 4), ISBN 978-2-503-59693-8, DOI [10.1484/M.MEMO-EB.5.126159](https://doi.org/10.1484/M.MEMO-EB.5.126159), EUR 105,00.

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This volume offers a series of works on the issue of »memories lost« and »oblivion« in the Middle Ages (and in early modern times), combining in-depth case studies from the fields of history and art history with more theoretical reflections, produced by scholars from other sciences. As recorded by Hans-Joachim Schmidt in the introduction (11–16), there has always been a contrast between remembering and forgetting, and »oblivion is unavoidable, common, necessary and occasionally useful« (12). On the one hand, the issue concerns the cleansing of the past, the *damnatio memoriae*, on the other, it addresses the involuntary loss of memory. As affirmed by Maurice Halbwachs and more recently by Jan Assmann and his fellow scientists, collective forgetting is part of the construction work of social cohesion. In the introductory papers, Karen G. Langer and Julien Bogousslavsky (»Lost memories. An Approach by Neurological Science«, 17–29) explain us the phenomenon of forgetting from a medical perspective, while Muriel Katz, Manon Bourguignon and Alice Dermitzel (»La politique d'effacement des crimes dans le cadre des systèmes dictatoriaux. À propos de la fonction du pacte dénégatif entourant la disparition forcée de personnes«, 31–66) observe the example of the »perverse negative pact« created by South American dictatorships aimed at disintegrating social ties and establishing »state lies«. Dietmar J. Wetzel (»Contested Memories. Aspects of Collective Remembering and Forgetting«, 67–79) reflects on the evolution of concepts of collective, individual and social memory, ending with Jan-Christoph Marschelke's theory of a new »transcollective memory«. Gerald Schwedler (»L'oubli au Moyen Âge. Sélection, transformation et rejet du passé«, 81–106) brings us to the Middle Ages, examining the attitudes of the medieval authors towards history and memory, with examples such as the *Annales regni Francorum*, a case of »lying with truth«. Lukas Clemens (»Fragments of Antiquity in Medieval Processes of Oblivion«, 107–117) treats the specific issue of material rests of Roman civilization, fallen into oblivion in the later Middle Ages and then rediscovered in the fifteenth century. Nicolas Reveyron (»Poétique de l'oubli«, 119–165) presents a highly interesting in-depth study on the etymology of »oblivion« and »forgetting« in



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the Middle Ages and on the metaphors used by the authors of the time. Hans-Joachim Schmidt (»The King of Sicily's Testaments. Hidden, Falsified and Forgotten, 167–183) presents the cases of the (true or presumed) testaments of Kings Henry VI, Frederick II and Peter III of Aragon, noting a specific procedure of »putting in oblivion« of those wills. Isabella Lazzarini (»Records and Oblivion. Strategies and Events of Cancellation of the Documentary Memory [Some Example, Late Medieval Italy]«, 185–203) gives a series of examples of »selecting of the past« from Northern and Central Italy between fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. Olivier Ribordy (»Oubli collectif et renouveau intellectuel. Impacts de la *Ratio studiorum* jésuite«, 205–249) brings us a very relevant case of the Jesuit »official« perception of history (definitive redaction in 1599), seen as »concerted, strategic or collective forgetting« (249), with the specific issue of its influence on René Descartes. Antonella Ballardini (»Appropriation et effacement. La chapelle du chœur du pape Sixte IV dans l'ancienne église Saint-Pierre«, 251–294) offers a study of art history on this (no longer existing) chapel, built in 1479 as an example of a selection of the elements from the past. Andreas Rehberg (»Collecting and Drawing against Oblivion. Panvinio, Ceccarelli and Chacón and their Search for the Genealogical-Heraldic Identity of the Families of Rome«, 295–324) observes the *Antiquaria romana* of the second half of the sixteenth century, with an in-depth study of the heraldics aiming to exhort (and invent) the past. Martial Staub (»The Poverty of »Civism««, 325–345) reflects on the concept of poverty in the medieval society. In the conclusions, Noëlle-Laetitia Perret (»Conclusion. L'oubli collectif: un nouveau paradigme pour la recherche en histoire?«, 347–358) summarizes the contents of the book, listing its main issues and affirming that history itself can be seen as the sum of multiple forgetfulness that give meaning to it.

We are dealing here with a far-sighted and ambitious interdisciplinary (and international) project. Though, might it be because of my backwardness of views, I find that the best part of the volume are the (mostly splendid and exhaustive) case studies from the fields of medieval and early modern history and art history. Contemporary, I have some doubts about the introductive parts of the book. First of all, the concept itself has a missing element: it derives from the thought of Maurice Halbwachs and embraces the works of the scholars of mnemohistory, omitting completely the cultural semiotics of Juri Lotman and his fellow scholars. The theory of cultural memory of Lotman (see the recent edition by Marek Tamm [2019]) affirms that every social group or society creates its own memory through »selection«, »invention« and »cancellation«, and in my opinion, it is not possible to treat the issue of memory without mentioning it. The other doubt I have concerns the introductive papers that are not well linked to the main corps of the volume and offer summarized presentations of issues that the other disciplines such as neurosciences, modern history and social sciences deal with in a much more in-depth way. I would have preferred a volume focalized only on the medieval and early modern history and art history, with more



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case studies with wider geography and chronology. In fact, the final results of the book remain abstract and generic. The advantage of this volume is, of course, focalizing attention to a somehow neglected issue. There is a long series of monographs and miscellaneous works on *damnatio memoriae* (see for example Gerald Schwedler, *Vergessen, Verändern, Verschweigen* [2020], or *Damnatio memoriae w europejskiej kulturze politycznej* [2016]) but less on the wider phenomenon of Oblivion (see *Mémoire et oubli au temps de la Renaissance* [2002]) and on the »involuntary loss of memory«: however, this volume deals with that last issue only in few occasions (in the paper of Lukas Clemens). This volume is worth reading for the series of in-depth studies it contains, but it is, in my opinion, disappointing for the general concept it tries to convey: over-theorizing leads to superficiality.

Mittelalter – Moyen Âge (500–1500)

DOI:

[10.11588/frrec.2025.1.109384](https://doi.org/10.11588/frrec.2025.1.109384)

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