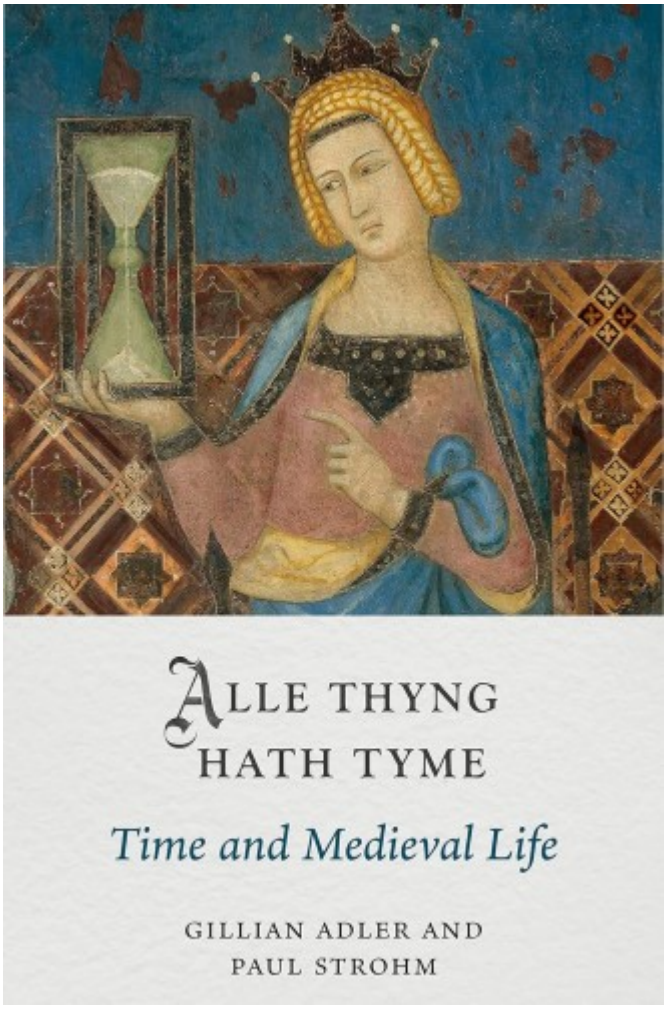
Astrolabes, sundials, candles, and clocks

Gillian Adler and Paul Strohm explore the medieval preoccupation with time.

by Peter S. Hawkins in the April 2024 issue

In Review



Alle Thyng Hath Tyme

Time and Medieval Life

By Gillian Adler and Paul Strohm
Reaktion Books

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From the moment I wake up until lights out, I spend my day checking minutes and hours. Sometimes it's with the help of some version of the analog clock by which I first learned to tell time. More often it's by a furtive glance at my iPhone or computer screen or, on the other generational hand, by checking the agenda in which I still quaintly chart the course of my weeks. This paper calendar alerts me to red-letter days both secular and sacred, from National Secretary's Day to Ash Wednesday. I add to it occasions of personal significance: the birthday of a friend, the anniversary of a death, the weekend arrival of a house guest, a deadline. It notes seasonal variations as well, such as the biannual spring-forwards and fall-backs of daylight savings time, which despite regular warning always come as a surprise. But aside from noting seasonal change, I have little sense of any temporal frame beyond the man-made, the familiar ticktock. I am increasingly obsessed with time—it's running out, it's our most endangered species—and yet am reluctant to probe its meaning.

How idiosyncratic, how early 21st century, is my all-over-the-place experience of time? From what I read in Gillian Adler and Paul Strohm's brief but ambitious book, I have things in common with my medieval forebears.

I am primed for this engaging text by a career-long devotion to Dante, whose *Commedia* is full of time-keeping references and who even in the *Paradiso* (10.139–148) makes one of the earliest literary references to the mechanical clock. As a Christian with a certain education and lifelong religious practice, I also know about the biblical timeline of creation from Genesis to Apocalypse; about the imprint of the liturgical year, at once linear and circular, on days, months, and seasons; about how the strategic ringing of church bells (still routine everywhere in Italy but also audible in downtown New Haven, Connecticut) articulates the sacred in the midst of ordinary time.

What Adler and Strohm offer those with less of a head start is the fact that, like us, medieval people lived among "colliding temporal systems," working with juggled information that came to them from a variety of sources and thanks to a range of devices. I knew about the venerable hourglass, of course, but not about so many other ways they had to tell time: "astrolabes with which to make celestial observations, sundials, dripping water and burning candles, as well as that

transformative medieval innovation, the mechanical clock.” Likewise, many of us (especially of a certain age) live now in overlapping timescapes. We consult both an iPhone and a paper agenda. Those who are liturgically minded keep track of holy days along with secular marked time.

The authors have enriched this accessible scholarly work with gorgeous illustrations that suggest how time was seen and imagined as well as told. Some of these illustrations are textual, as the authors draw especially on Chaucer’s poetry but also on the varied writing of Dante, John Gower, Thomas Usk, and Thomas Malory. Particularly compelling to me are the many medieval images, reproduced in vivid color, that reveal how time was personified in the mid-15th century (as an elderly man or woman), or shown as an attribute of temperance (a lady crowned by a clock!) or as wisdom (with book in hand but portrayed in a room crowded with timepieces, gadgets, wheels, and dials). The familiar renditions of the ages of man, depicting the course of a male life running from cradle to grave, are joined here by a female version of this cycle, running from virgin to wife to widow.

In a chapter called “Lives in Time,” I found the attention accorded to Julian of Norwich particularly interesting. Julian evidently had an acute sense of personal chronology that was unusual for the late 14th century. She states that her visions first came to her in May 1373, specifying month and year, as well as her age: she was in her 31st year. Her initial revelation took place “erly on the morn about the howr of fowr” and lasted the rest of the day. She might well have told time otherwise by resorting to traditional accounting, referring to the predawn sky or to sunrise; she might have noted the liturgical offices of Lauds or Prime. Instead, she specifies a precise “when,” which she no doubt arrived at by hearing bells ring the hour, set off by clockwork in the nearby cathedral tower.

By noting that her May 1373 vision began early in the morning around the hour of four, Julian seems less a medieval mystic living in another world and more like our contemporary, very much aware of the time. Yet what may well differentiate her sense of temporality from our own is the degree to which for her time is significant. It’s meant to warn and instruct, heavy with meaning, and connected to God’s eternity. With the future of the soul at stake, one dare not waste a minute.