

Monasticism in the Latin West in the Middle Ages

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Alison I. Beach and Isabelle Cochelin (eds), *The Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West*, 2 volumes: vol. 1, Origins to the Eleventh Century; vol. 2, The High and Late Middle Ages (Cambridge: CUP, 2020. £290.00. vol. 1: pp. xvii + 645; vol. 2: xv + 646–1217. ISBN: 978-1-107-04211-7).

In this highly significant multi-authored history of medieval monasticism in the West, the contributors present the latest understandings of recent scholarship on the topic. The editors note that the individual studies exemplify the intellectual turn from seeking to write grand narratives. Instead the studies foreground divergent examples of monasticism, explore concepts previously under-utilised to generate deeper understanding, and allow fresh insights to problematize previously accepted perspectives. In their introduction Beach and Cochelin note that the tradition approach to telling the story of monasticism ‘begins with Antony as the father of monasticism. Antony’s form of monasticism is generally classified as eremitical, soon followed by the emergence of communal, or cenobitic, monasticism at the initiative of Pachomius and then Basil. The wisdom and ways of these few great men was subsequently handed down ... into a succession of (primarily and sometimes exclusively) male orders, even though the hierarchy and even the list of orders varies’ (p. 4). Furthermore, they note that there had previously been a tendency to view monasticism as static and having a fixed teleological outcome. Their critique is not only is such an approach ideologically-driven, but more significantly

it flattens the diversity and loses the vitality and colour of the totality of the movement. Furthermore, a key contribution is the inclusion of women and female forms of monasticism into the story. The approach is that of fully fledged integration, not simply a few separate chapters or comments.

The arrangement of the material is largely chronological and the authors explain the structure in the following manner. ‘The two volumes are organized into two sections. Volume I covers origins to the eighth century (Part I) and the Carolingians through to the eleventh century (Part II). Volume II covers the long twelfth century (Part III) and the later Middle Ages (Part IV)’ (p. 9). The first volume comprises thirty-three essays in total. The first several essays reach back to late antiquity to trace the precedents and links with developments in the Medieval period. Albrecht Diem and Claudia Rapp, in their essay ‘The Monastic Laboratory: perspectives of Research in late Antique and Early Medieval Monasticism’ (pp. 19–39), note the way in which specific examples of monasticism emerge from a social context and they reflect the structures of the larger world of which they are part. They assert that the value of ‘historicizing’ all aspects of monastic life better accounts for the developments in monasticism itself, it calls into question notions of stable structures, and opens up new perspectives on a phenomenon that is continually in flux (p. 38). In the next essay, Anne-Marie Helvétius and her collaborators re-read monastic traditions from their origins to 750. In part, the purpose of the essay is to call into question

models of the development of monasticism that view early examples of the phenomenon as preparatory to the triumph of the Rule of Benedict. By re-reading sources as diverse as tax records, epistolary texts, epigraphic remains and hagiographical works it is noted that ‘the monks of the seventh century were unaware of the typology that structures our current understanding of textual sources’ (p. 44). David Brakke in his essay ‘Heterodoxy and Monasticism around the Mediterranean Sea’ (pp. 128–143), notes that ‘some of the earliest known monks were also heretics or charged with being so’ (p. 130). He notes that the use of labels that called into question the orthodoxy of those whose ‘teachings or practices struck bishops or leaders as too extreme’ (p. 131). He highlights the tensions in monastic ideas between continuity and innovation, humility and perfection, and stability and transformation, which not only led to conflict but could result in accusations of heresy (p. 142).

In part two the focus shifts to the Carolingian institutions and developments in monasticism to the eleventh century. Felice Lifshitz in the essay ‘The Historiography of Central Medieval western Monasticism’ (pp. 365–381) was once a story told with great simplicity. It commenced with the emergence of the sixth century rule of Benedict, then in response to laxity the order of Cluny was founded in 910 to restore strict observance. This became for the following three centuries the norm and standard of monastic life (p. 365). In line with other essays in the volume, Lifshitz calls this model into question. Instead the diversity of monastic life is brought to the foreground, and examples of monastic practices and reform from beyond the confines of Cluny are given a strong voice (pp. 369–374). In this section Jean-Pierre Devroey discusses ‘Monastic Economics in the Carolingian Age’ (pp. 466–484). The limitations of sources is discussed at the outset. Notwithstanding this, Devroey discusses monastic enclosures and further notes the ways in which ‘the wealth of monasteries also had to respond to legitimate

political demand and this compelled the system to develop the means to manage, produce, and distribute surplus products and labor’ (p. 483).

The second volume commences with a historiographical discussion of approaches to Monasticism in the twelfth century. Here John van Engen, in concord with earlier perspectives in volume I notes the diversification of the study of monasticism in the long twelfth century. He traces numerous developments in historiography, especially after the Second World War, which sought to decentre and destabilize the existing central narrative of the history of monasticism in the long twelfth century. Rather than notions of stability, approaches ‘turned ever more toward “reform” as the real driver of the story, and especially in the explosion of new religious orders and the spiritual cultures they generated—again, rightly or wrongly, that world of Bernard of Clairvaux’ (p. 657). In the following chapter, Lauren Mancia provides a helpful discussion of the sources for studying twelfth century Monasticism (pp. 667–696). The focus of Constant Mew’s essay falls upon ‘Monastic Theologies, c. 1050–1200’ (pp. 697–709). While the theologically influential approach of Bernard of Clairvaux is discussed and acknowledged, Mew notes that such a theological schema ‘would be disturbed by the influence of more radical scholastic questioning of such conventional categories, as promoted by Abelard and Gilbert of Poitiers’ (p. 708). The final section of the volume covers ‘Forms of Monasticism in the Late Middle Ages’. The essay by Eva Schlottheuber and John McQuillen on ‘Books and Libraries within Monasteries’ (pp. 975–997) presents a wealth of information and is a source of fascination to every bibliophile! Here there is a discussion of different types of books, and their varied locations in the spaces within community buildings. There is also an appreciation of issues of codicology and what such phenomena can reveal concerning production and provenance of volumes—especially those displaced from their original place of production. Equally fascinating is a description of

digital databases being used to reunite 'leaves from dismembered and dispersed manuscripts' (p. 996).

It is difficult to do justice to this magisterial work and its sixty-four seminal essays. Despite the variety of topics and range of material covered, the work coheres successfully as a whole. Perhaps maybe even somewhat ironically, what unites the essays and gives it its coherence is the repeated observation that there is no 'grand narrative' or predetermined teleological endpoint in writing such an account of monastic

history in the medieval Latin West. So it is the sense of the diversity and disunity of the story that gives the two volumes their strong sense of unity! Yet, it is that very recognition of the variety and creativity among the numerous forms of monastic expressions of spirituality that provides the rich and fascinating stories that the authors uncover in these essays.

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