

Book Review

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BOOK REVIEWED: STEVEN VANDERPUTTEN, *MONASTIC REFORM AS PROCESS: REALITIES AND REPRESENTATIONS IN MEDIEVAL FLANDERS, 900-1100* (ITHACA, N.Y.: CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013), XI + 247 PP. ISBN: 9780801451713.

The monastic houses of Europe changed a great deal between the tenth and twelfth centuries, undergoing various stages of reforms, as they have been described by historians since the late nineteenth century. These changes did not occur suddenly and cannot be attributed to any single event or person, but rather, they were a product of 'institutional continuities, and gradual processes of institutional change' (p. 189). This should not come as a surprise to any historian, and yet too often the word 'reform' has been misused to the point that it invokes concepts of momentous upheavals, and sudden reconfigurations of structure and observance.

Vanderputten's contention in *Monastic Reform as Process: Realities and Representations in Medieval Flanders, 900-1100* is that the concept of reform has more often than not overpowered historians' analysis of the events as recounted by the sources, leading them to approach a reforming monastery with preconceived ideas of what that reform might actually entail. As he himself points out, this is no novel claim, and has been explored by, among others, John Nightingale, Julia Barrow, and Isabelle Rosè in recent years. The book's introduction is indeed a very useful overview of the historiography of the monastic reforms of the tenth to twelfth centuries. By framing reform in terms of a process, applying institutional studies theories to his analysis, Vanderputten achieves a surprising degree of depth and understanding of the workings of monastic reforms. The book's greatest strength comes

from its precise geographical scope, encompassing the reformed monasteries of Flanders (Saint Bertin, Bergues-Saint-Winnoc, Marchiennes, Saint Amand, Saint Bavo, Saint Peter, and Saint Vaast), which allows the author to demonstrate the great importance of minute details and thorough analysis of all the evidence. Using an impressive collection of primary sources, including charters, architectural structures, archaeological findings, manuscripts and illuminations, Vanderputten convincingly argues that reform is a gradual process that should not necessarily be seen as engendering great overhauls and dramatic new beginnings.

The stress on periods in between reform is especially compelling, as the author draws on memory discourse and analyses changes in monastic memorial practices to show how it is the 'accumulated investments' built up during these periods that come to bear on the actions of reform agents. Borrowing from the field of sociology, he describes the process of 'social forgetting' which occurred during these periods, often not recorded by contemporaries, or for which the material has been lost or ignored. Instead, the period is described using 'preconceived ideas about how monastic communities evolved between reforms' (p. 51). As a case study, in Chapter 6, Vanderputten offers the problem of the gendering of the institutional identity of the monastery of Marchiennes after Abbot Leduin of Saint Vaast replaced the female community of Marchiennes with a male community as ordered by Count Baldwin and Bishop Gerard of Brogne in 1024. This is an interesting example, particularly from a methodological point of view, as Vanderputten combines the use of the text and iconography of Douai, BMDV, 849 – a collection of hagiographies, sermons, and Gospel extracts – although the evidence for the community to consider a female patron saint problematic is somewhat speculative and not entirely convincing. Nevertheless, it illustrates well Vanderputten's point about the more proactive involvement of the monasteries' abbots in the eleventh-century reforms than had previously been the case.

In reflecting on the nature of this evolutionary process, Vanderputten reveals a number of misconceptions in historiography regarding the true actors of reform. Indeed, he distinguishes not only between the reforms of the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries as being cumulative evolutions of monastic institutions, but also recognises the individuality of those institutions and of the leaders and agents who brought forward the reforms, speaking of three generations of reformers, and the individual agenda of each. Accordingly, there is a focus on individuals and specific events, such as the translation of relics, or the rebuilding of a church, as showing reform agency, but also to show how the agency of some reformers has been overstated or misunderstood. A prominent feature in the book is the attention paid to the political backdrop and heavy influence of the counts of Flanders particularly in the tenth century, in using reform as a tool 'in service of lay objectives [which] reflected on the lack of freedom enjoyed by abbots to develop their own reformist agency' (p. 48). Conversely, the author shows how the eleventh-century reforms were characterised by the development of abbots' agency over their communities. In this respect, Vanderputten makes an important contribution to the existing scholarship by arguing that the so-called New Monasticism should be viewed in terms of the assertion of leadership by monasteries' abbots, and how they related to their communities and the outside world, rather than limiting the analysis to the way they interpreted the Benedictine rule.

Some further reflection on the use of the word 'reform' itself in contemporary sources, as carried out, for example, by Julia Barrow in her 2008 article on 'Ideas and Applications of Reform' (in *The Cambridge History of Christianity. 3: Early Medieval Christianity, c. 600- c. 1100*, ed. by Thomas Noble and Julia Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 345-62, 725-30), might have been useful in explaining how the word is misused by scholars today. Furthermore, Vanderputten does not make much of the female communities of Flanders, which is a pity (though he does indicate in a footnote that he has discussed them elsewhere). Even so, his work, which includes a very useful index, maps, and bibliography as well as a list of abbots of the reformed monasteries of Flanders in the first appendix, is an excellent reminder of the need to question even the most common historical notions. It is also a much needed warning to historians of the danger of forming and blindly applying premade models to the study of history, thus risking overlooking the finer points which characterise the contemporary experience of political and religious movements. By challenging many of the established narratives surrounding monastic reform in Flanders, Vanderputten provides a much more nuanced alternative to reading the sources and perceiving Flemish monastic history, and in turn, a new way of looking at monastic reform movements in general.