

Religious Women in Early Carolingian Francia: A Study of Manuscript Transmission and Monastic Culture

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This book offers an investigation into the Anglo-Saxon cultural province of Francia during the eighth century (more specifically the area between the Middle Main and Tauber valleys), which, to borrow the author's own words, 'argues that the Christian culture of that region was thoroughly gender-egalitarian and in many ways feminist' (p. 3). At its heart lies a case study of a select corpus of 'women's manuscripts' from Southern Germany (most of which are now kept in the Universitätsbibliothek Würzburg), which is the result of nearly 20 years of research, as the author herself points out in the preface. The author sets out to scrutinise the intellectual and cultural milieus responsible for the production, use and transmission of these manuscripts in a Frankish female monastic context. A concise essay on 'medieval feminism', which helpfully unravels the history of feminist research on the Middle Ages by identifying both its uses and limitations, prefaces the main body of the study. Whilst admitting to employing 'the term *feminism* unapologetically [...] in a very limited and conservative sense, that is, [...] a resistance to patriarchal ideas, particularly as they concern women' (p. xix), the author succeeds in avoiding excessive labelling and skilfully evades the pitfalls of anachronism and deductive methodology which have sometimes characterised similarly oriented studies in the past.

Structurally, the book is divided into three large sections, each of which contains between two and four chapters. The first of these sections, 'People, places, things', serves as an introduction to the geographical, prosopographical and documentary subjects of the subsequent analysis. The first chapter within this section is dedicated to exploring more widely the gender relations in those parts of Francia that experienced the strongest Anglo-Saxon cultural and literary influence. It reveals that, during the seventh and eighth centuries, this region accommodated a significant number of syneisactic communities, which allowed for, and even facilitated, regular correspondence and interaction between religious men and women, several of whom were previously married and active in the secular world. It also includes a brief summary of the Carolingian reform movements throughout this region and the specific ways in which these affected women in clerical positions. The second chapter introduces the reader to the Anglo-Saxon cultural province of Francia and its development from before c.704 until the end of the eighth century. This chapter is extremely useful, as it allows for a better understanding and contextualisation of the book's analysis by introducing the main protagonists, institutions and geographical loci, including a brief excursus on the foundation of Würzburg.

As such, one wonders whether it would have been slightly better situated at the very beginning of the section. Chapter three then turns to the manuscripts and their potential producers/owners. The arguments and hypotheses presented here provide the entire basis for the narrative that is developed in impressive detail throughout the remainder of the book, which is why they deserve to be reviewed in greater detail.

Based on a well-selected range of examples, the author first demonstrates that women, both aristocratic and clerical, played a crucial role in the commissioning, production and transmission of manuscripts during the period under consideration. With regard to the Anglo-Saxon cultural province of Francia, an important catalyst for this cultural and literary activity is identified in the women's pronounced interest in (and use of) certain 'genres' of texts, written by both male and female authors. Particular emphasis is laid on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles. Two groups of manuscripts are prioritised here. These were identified by Bernhard Bischoff as the 'Gun(t)za and Abirhilt Manuscripts'. They are thought to have originated from the Main valley and they exhibit conspicuous signs of Anglo-Saxon influence. Ten of the books from amongst the Gun(t)za and Abirhilt Manuscripts are related explicitly to the entries that survive – in a very poor state of conservation caused by almost complete erasure – in an early ninth-century book list (Basel, Öffentliche Universitätsbibliothek F III 15a, fol. 17v), which previous scholarship has ascribed to the monastery of Fulda (in present-day Hesse). The author rejects this attribution. Instead, she argues that the list is not a library catalogue of the monastery of Fulda, but a copy of a different library catalogue (copied by a Fulda scribe), one which contained the book holdings of the female community of Kitzingen, where some of the volumes identified with the entries on the Basel book list have previously been argued to have originated.

The palaeographical rationale for this re-attribution from Fulda to Kitzingen is based on an alternative reconstruction of the list's mostly-erased contents, particularly in relation to its first line and supposed title. The traditional reading *Isti sunt nostri libri*, which has been contested before, is overruled in favour of *Kitzinga libri* (or some variant spelling). This is a keen and intriguing reinterpretation of the manuscript evidence, and it provides an important fulcrum upon which the book's subsequent analysis turns. Given the gravitas of this specific piece of evidence and its potential ramifications both within and without the context of the present study, the brevity of the actual palaeographical discussion (a single paragraph) comes as a bit of a surprise. In addition, the colour plate of MS Basel F III 15a, fol. 17r (n. p., after p. 192) does not provide the reader with sufficient means to scrutinise and revisit the palaeographical evidence him/herself, meaning that he/she has to rely on the author's interpretation alone. It is possible that alternative scanning methods (such as UV, infrared, interferometry, etc.) were used in order to cement the author's identification of individual letters, but if this is the case it remains unstated. Having consulted a high-quality reproduction of the folio in question, the reviewer remains undecided, simply because the extent of erasure exhibited by the list's first line allows for a variety of potential reconstructions; that presented by the author is just one possibility. In the reviewer's opinion, it would have been preferable to have seen included a more robust rationale for this new interpretation, since it underpins all which follows. However, if one gives the author's ascription the benefit of the doubt and accepts the reading of *Kitzinga libri* (as shall be done here), most of the subsequent narrative falls neatly into place. Chapter three is concluded by a laudable and detailed discussion of all the manuscripts identified with the entries on the book list.

Chapter four commences the book's second section, which offers four inter-related examples of textual analysis, scrutinising the key contents of manuscripts from the Basel book list (including one miniature, which the author demonstrates to have functioned as a cultural and spiritual text in its own right). The first of these is devoted entirely to a new contextualisation and re-interpretation of the Kitzingen Crucifixion Miniature, a much-discussed piece of early medieval art, which the author presents compellingly as 'an exegetical work by a female theologian-artist' (p. 85). Employed as a centrepiece within Kitzingen's liturgical routine (for example, on Good Friday), this miniature and the manuscript in which it is preserved functioned effectively as a multimedia commentary on the Pauline Epistles. The author's interpretation of the miniature and its context is both radical and convincing. Following a deep reading of the miniature's different pictorial contents that betrays impressive knowledge in art history as well as Scripture, the author argues that it is in fact the Apostle Paul (rather than Christ) who is placed at the visual and semantic centre of the scene, thus acting as agent and mediator between Christ (whom he impersonates) and the Kitzingen

nuns. When located in the context of communal meditation and liturgical practice, the illuminated copy of the Pauline Epistles constituted a crucial object and material focal point for the formation and articulation of Kitzingen's spiritual identity. According to the author, the women of Kitzingen were actually encouraged to imagine themselves as part of the miniature. One such example is provided by the image of the seven survivors depicted next to Noah in his ark, whose conspicuous (and perhaps deliberate) lack of gender-specific features seems to allow for the empathy of both men and women. As such, the miniature offered the members of the Kitzingen community a powerful tool of contemplation and exegesis, which supported and facilitated specifically 'feminine' (if not 'feminist') mentalities.

This intriguing trail of thought is continued and expanded throughout chapters five to seven, which likewise reveal the women of Kitzingen as engaging actively and critically with patristic authority and gender ideologies. As the author demonstrates, '[t]he simplistic stereotype of "patristic misogyny" is useless for grasping the nuances of ideas about women and gender in medieval Europe' (p. 110), and her lively depiction of the community's theologian-artist (the 'Kitzingen Anonyma') and her sisters offers additional credibility to this statement. Chapters six and seven in particular show that the texts read (and probably copied) by members of the Kitzingen community are united through what might best be called a feminine consciousness, which places the women in direct dialogue with both their male contemporaries and the spiritual (and predominantly male) authorities of old. Whether this consciousness actually facilitated homoerotic activities (or at least fantasies to that end), as seems to be hypothesised in the excursus 'Homoeroticism and transvestism in the *Passio Eugeniae*' (pp. 164–70), is left to the reader to decide. The final part of the author's manuscript and textual analysis is a discussion on the Kitzingen Homiliary, which combines a variety of texts originally aimed at different genders, and the author credits these texts' popularity both at Kitzingen and elsewhere precisely to this sense of gender neutrality. From these texts the women of Kitzingen derived important lessons and general guidance for their daily monastic life, lessons which contrasted the vanity of earthly life (affecting religious men and women in equal measure) with the everlasting glory of heavenly existence.

The book's third and final section comprises two chapters that summarise the preceding textual analysis in a series of overarching conclusions, which are supported by additional examples. They demonstrate that the life of the Kitzingen nuns, like that of the denizens of other male and female religious communities, was centred on prayer and liturgy, despite the claims made in previous scholarship of a general prohibition of women in liturgical practices. The author skilfully turns such claims on their heads, arguing that '[n]o one considered nuns or virgins to be impure beings', but that women such as those at Kitzingen, especially those who obtained higher orders, 'were considered the epitome of purity and were never specifically devalued in connection with the mass or alter service' (p. 185). These women's engagement in a wide range of spiritual and liturgical activities is presented as characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon cultural province of Francia during the period investigated by the book, a culture which left its traces in manuscripts such as the Würzburg lectionary. The texts contained in this lectionary are shown to have offered interpretations of individual saints that were not geared explicitly towards a specific gender, but which offered interpretative potential to male and female communities alike. The book's analysis is completed by a pointed discussion of the role of religious women in the production and transmission of manuscripts. Generally, any such discussion will be affected by the relative scarcity of the surviving material (or rather the comparatively small number of books hitherto identified as being produced and/or transmitted by women specifically), but the evidence collected and interpreted by the author generates important stimuli that encourage scholars to rethink some of their 'gendered' notions concerning book production and textual transmission in the early medieval West.

All in all, the book reviewed here emerges as a fine and well-argued piece of scholarship that sets out, and successfully so, to push boundaries and force its readers to question long-established scholarly consensus. By advocating an openly feminist approach, which is well situated within the recent history of feminist scholarship and historical, cultural and literary theory, the author provokes rather than avoids debate. She readily acknowledges that discussions as complex and emotionally charged as, for example, those associated with women's participation in medieval liturgical practice are unlikely to be resolved anytime soon, and that 'a scholar's own lens may be the determining factor in how the ambiguous evidence is interpreted' (p. 192).

The lens chosen for this book is no exception, of course, and this is made obvious in the author's 'feminist' readings of texts and images such as, for example, the Kitzingen Crucifixion Miniature, the Passio Eugeniae and the Kitzingen Homiliary. Whilst these are compelling to some readers, including the reviewer, others might perhaps find them rather teleological. To the mind of the reviewer, the book would have profited from more detailed engagement with the palaeography of the manuscripts discussed throughout individual chapters, specifically as to the criteria that allow (or do not allow) us to identify 'female' scribal hands from those of their male contemporaries. Whilst the reviewer has no doubt whatsoever in the author's palaeographical and codicological abilities, it probably would have been advantageous to have more clearly presented the discovery processes (the 'detective work', so to speak) to the readers. This is true particularly, but not exclusively, for the discussion of the Basel book list discussed above. Ultimately, however, these points of criticism do not detract from what is a commendable achievement. There can be no doubt that the book was informed by several decades of carefully conducted research, which are presented in a concise and well-structured narrative that makes for an enjoyable reading experience.

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