

Steven Vanderputten, *Monastic Reform as Process: Realities and Representations in Medieval Flanders, 900–1100*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013. 264 pp. ISBN 978-0-8014-5171-3. € 55.00.

Church history gravitates around a nexus of practices and ideologies that promote, profess, and, occasionally, even deliver reform. Despite the undeniable centrality of *imitatio Christi* to images of Christian perfection, magnets of Christian reform have been quite diverse: Eden, the Apostolic Community, the Desert Fathers, to name a famous few. But the inspiration of the past as a model of reform is so pervasive in the history of medieval Christianity that it is often used to set premodern Western societies apart from their allegedly forward-looking heirs. Ironically, before the false juxtaposition of (religious) reform and (social, political, intellectual, and economic) progress began to hold sway on Western imaginations, the *absence* of reform was used as a cudgel against ecclesiastical authorities. Accordingly, the Protestant Reformation is often depicted as a unique and dramatic event, a phoenix rising from the ashes of an institution that strayed too far from its original design, or, in other words, was not adequately reformed until a belated and reactive Catholic Reformation. Conversely, failed attempts to pursue Apostolic ideals in earlier times won accolades from some observers and was dubbed as heretical by others – religious differences of opinion often augmented and shaped by linguistic, ethnic, and political identities.

Invested to varying degrees in denominational and nationalist polemics, generations of monastic historians in particular have shown that, rather than being an alien term, *reformatio* was, in fact, a cherished value throughout the Middle Ages. (And, here, monastic historians tread much more solid ground compared with those seeking proof of earlier Renaissances, for instance). However, as Steven Vanderputten ably shows, attempts to demonstrate the relevance of reform and trace its history have tended to focus on the universal at the expense of the particular, and emphasize the cohesiveness of reform ideologies (neatly divided into waves) over the contingencies of reform processes, even at the regional or individual level. Until quite recently, few scholars have managed to resist the tempting view of reform's synchronized ebbs and flows, working, as they were, within a paradigm that obscured the local-political biases shaping their sources. Historians have thus mistaken the centrality of reform as a theme in monastic texts, images, and material remains for proof of an ideological horizon shared by all those involved in its promotion, be it among secular or especially regular milieus.

To challenge this somewhat naïve view, *Monastic Reform as Process* traces the history of several Benedictine foundations in the County

of Flanders between the tenth and the twelfth centuries. Advancing chronologically and with masterly command of the available sources, Vanderputten proposes his own version of reform, inspired in part by modern political theory and sociology, in part by literary criticism, and without in any way diminishing from the significance of reform as a key discourse shaping monastic memory and identity. Essentially, this book examines how contemporaries responded to the inherent tensions between structure and agency, as they emerge from a wide variety of sources. Vanderputten's inclusivity, in combination with his careful analysis of chronicles and *gesta*, account books, bequests, liturgical texts, saints' lives, and their accompanying illuminations, provides a far more complex and thus compelling account than we have been accustomed to reading, even beyond the particularities of each monastic foundation. The prosopographies of the region's abbots (meticulously laid out in an appendix), the building campaigns they undertook, the libraries they assembled, the regimens they prescribed, and the patronage networks they sought to enter all speak to the changing circumstances in which they operated, complicating an accepted chronology. They also deeply challenge the common tendency to pin reforms entirely on charismatic individuals.

To be sure, abbots had a major stake in prayer factories. Yet, there were numerous ways to leverage the social and political capital they generated, which could, moreover, be limited. Who benefited from monasteries' appeal, how, and to what ends, depended on a variety of factors, as Vanderputten thoroughly explains. From the detailed perspective he develops, the success or failure of what appears to be a coherent program of reform, albeit only from a distance, was, in fact, a productive if occasional overlap between the *discrete* interests of abbots, bishops, and lay rulers. The overlap itself was hardly a forgone conclusion. Both bishops and secular rulers strove to consolidate their authority over routinely contested territories, a prerogative that could be synergetic as well as antagonistic, even before considering the forces affecting their ability to operate or their attitudes towards monasticism specifically. For their part (and most germane to this book's argument), abbots, both before and after, recognized waves of reform, periods pregnant with charisma, and so forth, pursued a dichotomous and hierarchical worldview in which they and they alone were to act as the community's contact with the secular world. And they did so for the spiritual benefit of all parties involved. In short, none of these agendas necessarily chimed with one another, at least not before each stakeholder was convinced that his or her interests could be met by reforming local monasteries. It is in this sense that reform can be

more accurately and adequately understood as a multifaceted negotiation, not a flash-point event.

As a meticulous and concise regional history of Benedictine monasticism, this book will surely please many. From a broader perspective, however, Vanderputten has achieved even more. In a methodological sense, he has shown how monastic history can be integrated more deeply (by which I do not mean collapsed) into medieval political history, especially in a period that is more sparsely documented. Furthermore, his conclusions would resonate strongly with religious historians working on later and more richly documented foundations, where local and regional contexts complicate idealist or top-down views, *inter alia*, of the history of the Dominican Order, the Observance Movement, and the Jesuits, by broadening the scope of stakeholding in the success, failure, and function of reforming religious orders.

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