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Samantha Kahn Herrick, *Imagining the Sacred Past: Hagiography and Power in Early Normandy*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, U.K.: Harvard University Press, 2007. xiii + 256 pp. Map, genealogical tables, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 0-674-02443-5.

Review by Constance B. Bouchard, University of Akron.

Medieval writers told and retold the history of their own past in order to make it relevant and useful for their own present. The study of this creative memory has in the last fifteen years or so become an important aspect of historical scholarship. Hagiography, the “lives” of saints and holy martyrs, once dismissed as mere superstition, has become an especially fruitful focus of study. When churches were important political players and when a ruler’s Christianity was an aspect of his prestige and leadership, then it was crucial that saints and their holy activities be understood in ways that supported current rulership — or, alternately, that chastised current rulers for not following what the hagiographer considered the appropriate path. Saints’ lives, therefore, may not tell us a great deal about the activities of actual men and women who lived and died in late antiquity and were later revered as saints, but they tell us a great deal about the way that those who wrote and rewrote these lives in the High Middle Ages conceptualized the relationship between power and the holy.

Normandy has proven an especially fruitful center for the study of the ways that the sacred supported or undercut political power. Vikings settled there in the early tenth century with the consent of the French king, ending the period of the worst Viking raids on the continent (and giving the duchy the name it still carries, Normandy, “land of the Northmen”). The region had long been thoroughly Christian, the home of important bishoprics and monasteries, and as the one-time Norse raiders settled down and intermarried with the local population, they also adopted Christianity. The accounts of the establishment of the Viking leader Rollo and his followers in the region, as written a century later, stressed that he was eager — once baptized — to repair the damages the Northmen had done to local churches and to support his new territory’s religious heritage.

Felice Lifshitz and Leah Shopkow especially have studied the ways that eleventh-century Norman writers conceptualized their history and the part that the one-time Vikings played in both politics and religion.^[1] Samantha Herrick here joins the ranks of these scholars with a close study of the “lives” of three Norman saints: men who seem to have been little revered, if at all, before the eleventh century, but whose deeds indicated, at least for those who wrote down these deeds, the proper way for the powerful to behave.

This rather slim study (half the book is taken up with the appendices, notes, bibliography, and index) treats in turn the ways that Saints Taurinus, Vigor, and Nicaise were remembered in the eleventh century. All supposedly lived at the time of the Roman Empire, when Gaul was first being converted to Christianity, yet they only came to be revered in the eleventh century. Indeed, although their names appeared in local martyrologies since at least the ninth century, Herrick argues ingeniously that they did not have “lives” composed or develop liturgical cults until two or three decades into the eleventh century (chapter one). Two of these saints were said to have been the first bishops of two of the principal Norman sees: Nicaise of Rouen and Taurinus of Evreux. Bishop Vigor, though not the founding bishop of Bayeux, still was said to have played a central role in Christianizing the region. All three were remembered as being instrumental in turning pagan Gaul into a land of Christians, an account with clear parallels to the conversion of the Vikings settled in tenth- and eleventh-century

Normandy.

Professor Herrick does an excellent job of situating her close analysis of the ways these three saints were remembered within both the history of Normandy and also the broader and rapidly-growing field of memory studies. Although not central to her own arguments, her treatment of the ways that numerous churches tried, in the ninth to eleventh centuries, to claim apostolic origins is especially illuminating (chapter six). The accounts of the saints on which she focuses come alive to the extent that one would have liked to have seen included the texts of the three saints' lives, or at least a version thereof, for none are well known or even particularly accessible. Since she knows intimately the manuscripts in which the earliest versions of these lives are found — these manuscripts are discussed extensively in the appendices — perhaps she is planning to edit them as a future project.

Her principal argument (set out in chapter two) is that the dukes of Normandy were attempting to consolidate their power in the early eleventh century, especially in the frontier regions where the three saints were supposed to have lived, and that by patronizing their churches and promoting their cults the dukes sought to forge a link between their own authority and the sacred past of the duchy. The saints and their relics could also serve as mediators between the dukes and their principal political rivals, the counts of Blois-Chartres, as Herrick suggests happened when the cult of Saint Taurinus was established at Chartres. Although the close discussion of the politics of the early eleventh century certainly supports such conclusions, one is left somewhat disappointed, for the creation of lives for these three saints, and the widespread copying (and in some cases rewriting) of these lives in the next century or so, has implications well beyond the particular quarrels and plans of the dukes in the 1020s and 1030s.

More satisfying are the themes that Herrick draws out of the individual lives of these three saints (chapters three through five). Efforts to associate these bishop-saints with the original apostles gave a fundamental spiritual authority to the sees with which they were associated, providing a Christian past longer than the Christian pasts of other sees, and, even more importantly, linking their origins to the origins of Christianity itself. Accounts of property acquisitions by ancient bishops supported current monastic claims to property, both against laymen and against other churches. Discussions in these lives of the power of conversion and of the cycle of religious ruin and restoration certainly resonated at a time when old churches were being refounded or reformed and when the conversion of the Viking Rollo and his followers remained a topic of lively interest. Stories of destruction followed by renewal, a renewal and accompanying conversion of non-Christians carried out by men with intimate connections to Christ's apostles, explained the turmoil of the late ninth and tenth centuries while proposing an appropriate role for the Norman dukes.

This book is an excellent example of what a good first book can be: a close analysis of a discrete body of (underappreciated) primary sources, sources which when properly understood shed important light on a current set of scholarly questions. The book is clearly written and well documented, though one does wish the notes could have been at the bottom of the page. Anyone studying the ways that medieval writers created a useful past for themselves through imaginative historical writing will enjoy Herrick's clear and lively prose and benefit from her insights. My major criticism, which will doubtless be rectified in future works, is that a discussion of the lives of other eleventh-century Norman saints (referred to in passing on p. 4) or the rewritten lives of these saints in the twelfth century would have further strengthened her points.

NOTES

[1] Felice Lifshitz, *The Norman Conquest of Pious Neustria: Historiographic Discourse and Saintly Relics, 684-1090* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute, 1995); Leah Shopkow, *History and Community: Norman Historical Writing in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1997).

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