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Elizabeth Dachowski, *First Among Abbots: The Career of Abbo of Fleury*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008. xii + 299 pp. Map, table, notes, bibliography, and index. \$69.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8132-1510-5.

Review by Adam J. Davis, Denison University.

Occasionally, a person's future seems almost predetermined by the name he is given at birth. In the mid-tenth century, when the young Abbo took the monastic habit, becoming a monk at Fleury, Abbot Wufald pointed out how close the name Abbo was to the root of "abbas," the Latin word for abbot. At the time, Wufald could not have known that Abbo, then just a boy, would eventually become abbot of Fleury and be considered "first among abbots." A Merovingian foundation, Fleury was located on the Loire River, just east of Orléans. A wealthy and learned monastery reformed by Cluny in 930 but independent of it, Fleury played a central role in shaping the relationship between the monarchy and the monastic movement in West Francia. The Carolingians were important patrons of Fleury, as were Hugh Capet and his Robertian ancestors, making Fleury a crucial lynchpin in the transition from Carolingian to Capetian rule. Fleury also played a significant role in papal politics. Pope Gregory V called Fleury "the first monastery in Gaul." Some of Fleury's prestige was based on its claim to possess the relics of Saint Benedict. But during the late tenth century, Abbo's sixteen year abbacy also did much to enhance the political and religious status of Fleury. Indeed, one can only wonder whether the abbey would have been as influential in regional, royal, and papal politics had it not been for Abbo and his companion and hagiographer, Aimoinus, who in his *Vita sancti Abbonis*, sought to glorify both Fleury and Abbo, and forever link them together.

Elizabeth Dachowski's *First Among Abbots: The Career of Abbo of Fleury* is the first book-length study of Abbo to be published in English. It is a far more scholarly and critical treatment of Abbo's life than Patrice Cousin's *Abbon de Fleury-sur-Loire: Un savant, un pasteur, un martyr à la fin du Xe siècle*, published in 1954. Dachowski is also more concerned with Abbo's political role than Pierre Riché's *Abbon de Fleury: Un moine savant et combattif (vers 950-1004)*, published in 2004, which focused on Abbo's scholarly achievements. After being schooled at Fleury as a boy, Abbo went on to study the liberal arts at Paris and Reims. As his poems, letters, and scholarly writings on such diverse subjects as the reckoning of dates, Latin grammar, syllogisms, astronomy, oaths, and the tripartite division of Christian society demonstrate, Abbo became one of the most learned men of the tenth century. One of the great strengths of Dachowski's book is her commitment to studying Abbo's career as an organic whole, including his role as an intellectual, administrator, and political figure. She studies Abbo's writings to consider the relationship between his thought and his actions. Her work persuasively shows the extent to which regional, monastic, royal, and papal politics were intertwined. Nor were the power struggles of the late tenth century merely abstract concepts. If one needed a reminder of the brutally physical form in which these power struggles manifested themselves, one need only read Dachowski's riveting description of the beating Abbo and several of his men received at the hands of the associates of Bishop Arnulf of Orléans. Several of Abbo's men were killed in the melee, and for recompense, the bishop offered Abbo the chance to beat the men responsible, an offer Abbo refused. In 1004, Abbo himself was killed in a riot outside the Gascon priory of La Réole, a dependency of Fleury. Abbo was visiting the priory to enforce the monastic rule, and it is clear that Abbo and the other northern monks were viewed by the Gascons as unwanted outsiders. Aimoinus depicted the Gascons responsible for Abbo's heroic death as barbarians. Dachowski uses Abbo's fascinating career as a window into the tumultuous French political

and ecclesiastical world of the late tenth century.

When political historians invoke the name of Abbo, they often do so to illustrate how the early Capetian kings used monastic revenues and the prestige associated with the monastic reform movement to consolidate and extend their authority. Likewise, historians argue that monastic leaders like Abbo elevated their own status by aligning themselves with royal authority. Dachowski's book serves as an important corrective to this static view of the interplay between royal and monastic powers during the late tenth century. She rightly warns against viewing the growth of Capetian power as inexorable. Nor were the interests of the early Capetians always aligned with the reformed monastic movement. Indeed, early in his career, Abbo opposed Hugh Capet and Robert the Pious, asserting monastic rights against royal and episcopal claims. The interests of reformed monasticism were often at odds with royal interests because the kings were so closely aligned with bishops, the monks' chief rivals. Abbots like Abbo had to compete with bishops for the favor of the early Capetian kings. For instance, when a conflict erupted between the abbey of Fleury and the nephew of the bishop of Orléans over the rights to an estate, King Hugh Capet initially supported the abbey. However, when Melun came under attack from Count Odo of Chartres and the king needed the support of the bishop of Orléans, the king suddenly threw his support behind the bishop's nephew and asked Fleury to pay the customary payments on the estate.

Among the conflicts that arose between Fleury and early Capetian kings, Dachowski also discusses the far more significant conflict involving Bishop Arnulf of Reims. When Hugh Capet discovered that Arnulf had betrayed him by turning the city of Reims over to the forces of his uncle, Charles of Lorraine, the king's chief rival, Hugh immediately had the bishop imprisoned. Arnulf's crime was adjudicated at the Council of Saint-Basle of Verzy in 991, and since the Capetian king exercised power over almost every bishopric represented at the council, it is not surprising that the bishops supported the king by deposing Arnulf and replacing him with Gerbert of Aurillac. Abbo and a few other abbots, however, supported Arnulf at the council on procedural grounds. As Dachowski suggests, Abbo's support of Arnulf of Reims was hardly a way to ingratiate himself to the king.

In later years, according to Dachowski, Abbo increasingly accommodated himself to Capetian political needs. As Abbo made clear in his *Apologeticus*, a strong monarchy was needed to protect the church. It was the bishops, not the kings, who appeared to threaten reformed monasticism, and Abbo was eager to weaken the royal-episcopal alliance while strengthening the bonds between Fleury and the king. Perhaps, too, as Abbo became an increasingly powerful figure, the Capetian kings became more careful to curry the favor of the abbot. Abbo's reputed influence with the pope, for instance, surely made him valuable in the eyes of King Robert the Pious, who wanted the pope to recognize his marriage to his cousin, Bertha. Dachowski argues that Abbo altered his political strategy and increasingly aligned himself with the Capetian kings during the later years of his abbacy. Yet any evolution in Abbo's thought or political strategy is difficult to prove given that his writings cannot be dated definitively.

From Abbo's writings, it does seem clear that he argued strongly for papal primacy, which was central to the goals of reformed monasticism. In order for reformed monasteries to claim independence from local politics, there had to be a strong and trustworthy papal authority. For this reason, Abbo disagreed with bishops like Arnulf of Orléans, who argued at the Council of Saint-Basle that since the papacy was corrupt and unreliable, bishops were needed to discipline fellow bishops. In his *Collectio canonum*, Abbo made a strong argument for papal primacy, and responded to the arguments of his chief intellectual adversary, Gerbert of Aurillac (the future Pope Sylvester II), pointing out the problem of corruption among bishops, including bishops chosen by their predecessors or chosen due to political considerations. But Abbo also experienced crushing disappointment with the papacy first-hand. On his first trip to Rome to have the privileges of Fleury confirmed, Abbo found that Pope John XV would not even see him unless he had some kind of bribe to offer.

One of Dachowski's central arguments is that Abbo desired to transcend the world of politics and division, and that this is what made him so popular as a mediator in various kinds of disputes. Abbo believed that a trial could not be fair if the same people served as accusers, witnesses and judges. According to Dachowski, Abbo showed concern about fairness and proper procedure, and strove to achieve a balance between competing political interests. Yet as Dachowski's book vividly illustrates, Abbo was hardly a non-partisan referee for most of his career. From the bitter opposition he faced as a candidate for abbot at Fleury (which sent him to England in exile) to his murder at the priory of La Réole, Abbo immersed himself in politics. And while his *Apologeticus* may have been conciliatory, as Dachowski suggests, in that it did not name the names of his enemies or mention many specific accusations or events, it nonetheless contained intensely polemical arguments on behalf of reformed Benedictine monasticism, asserting that monks are morally superior to laymen and secular clerics.

While Dachowski at times suggests that Abbo was even-handed and above the political fray, in other places she admits that he "showed shrewd political maneuvering" (p. 179). When Abbo served as an intermediary, in one instance between the pope and the Capetian king, and in another, between the pope and Fulk Nerra, the count of Anjou, he did not just present their respective arguments to the pope, but (unbeknownst to them) urged the pope to reject their arguments. In 997, Abbo was so determined to obtain a charter from Pope Gregory V granting Fleury extensive privileges that he had a charter forged (purportedly from Gregory IV, 150 years earlier), thereby supplying legal precedence for the abbey's desired privileges. Dachowski's Abbo is noticeably more crafty and Machiavellian than the Abbo portrayed by some earlier scholars, and yet, curiously, she insists that Abbo sought to transcend politics. In discussing Abbo's intellectual career, she writes that he "truly sought an escape from the cares of the world in his studies" (p. 223). But as Dachowski herself shows, some of Abbo's writings were very much connected to his work as a reformer, and there is little evidence that he tried to shy away from the world of politics.

Despite some of these inconsistencies, Dachowski's biography of Abbo is extremely valuable both in reconstructing the career of this fascinating abbot, reformer, and scholar, and in illuminating the intertwining regional, monastic, royal, and papal political struggles of the late tenth century. By reading Aimoinus's *Vita sancti Abbonis* "against the grain" and comparing it to works by Abbo and other contemporaries, Dachowski offers a number of original interpretations with important implications for our understanding of this period.

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