

H-France Review Vol. 14 (February 2014), No. 44

Stephen Vanderputten, *Monastic Reform as Process: Realities and Representations in Medieval Flanders, 900-1100*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013. x + 247. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 978-0-8014-5171-3.

Review by Robert F. Berkhofer III, Western Michigan University.

Stephen Vanderputten offers a new approach to the important topic of monastic reform in the tenth and eleventh centuries. This is a well-studied subject, previously dominated by religious and intellectual historians. His subtitle reveals two important parts of his approach: sensitivity to the rhetoric of medieval “representations” about reform and tight focus on reconstructing the micro-historical “realities” of reform at particular houses. Such a simple summary of Vanderputten’s approach risks downplaying its key contribution: explaining critical features of monastic reform that have been understudied because of the framing assumptions of traditional historical scholarship. It is one thing to challenge historiographical orthodoxies and another to build a new interpretation in their place. This book succeeds in both.

To comprehend the significance of Vanderputten’s achievement, one needs to understand both the traditional models he transcends and his own arguments. At root, this book analyzes the institutional and political basis behind reform rhetoric. Such consideration occurs on two levels at once. On the evidentiary level, it seeks to unpack medieval narratives and images of “reform,” which tended to stress foundational reformers and the flawed state of houses being reformed, regardless of local conditions. On the historiographical level, the book seeks to overcome assumptions made by modern scholars of reform, especially the stress on leading individuals, major centers, or supposed reform “movements.”

The historiographical corrective will be of first interest to most readers of this review. In his introduction, Vanderputten puts the target directly into his sights. As he writes, modern scholarship “...shaped its own vision of reform as a unified procedure” (p. 3). He traces this unifying vision back to late nineteenth-century historians, especially Ernst Sackur, who interpreted the tenth- and eleventh-century *renovatio* of monasticism as emerging from large reform “centers.”[1] The next step, highlighted by Vanderputten, was situating this interpretation within narratives about the rise of European nation-states. Such national(ist) historiography needs little explanation for an H-France audience, but it is worth keeping in mind the tendency to assign the origins of nation-states to a medieval past.[2] Such influences on the scholarship of monastic reform in the central Middle Ages became expressed through a model in which there were two “centers” of reform driven by the political patronage of lords: one emanating from Cluny (and covering western Francia), and one coming from the abbey of Gorze (and spreading in the German empire).

This idea of two reform centers achieved the status of a dominant theory in the 1950s in Kassius Hallinger’s influential work *Gorze-Kluny*, which reified these observations into reform “movements”—a conception that had preponderant influence over studies of monastic reform in the late twentieth century.[3] It is no accident that a twenty-first-century scholar from the Low Countries would be so sensitive to this anachronistic, proto-nationalist East-West (or France-Germany) rhetorical split and seek to find a positive way to reassert the intrinsic value of studying monastic reform in medieval

Flanders. Subsequent research quickly broke down Hallinger's Gorze-Cluny model, in favor of one emphasizing two broad phases of reform (in the tenth and the eleventh-twelfth centuries, respectively) which seemed to explain better substantial local "variations" in evidence. However, the tendency to generalize about reform "movements" survived—and this is Vanderputten's larger target. There can be little doubt about the insidious influence of such constructs, for one only has to consider Giles Constable's masterful *Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, dedicated in part to Kassius Hallinger, to realize that even a great historian concerned with the realities of monastic reform could be subtly, yet inexorably, drawn to the idea of describing a reform "movement."<sup>[4]</sup> Vanderputten squarely addresses the limits of these traditional models, and seeks to find an approach to the study of reform that will escape such preconceptions by examining individual agency and what he calls "informal networks" (p. 6).

The book focuses on seven monasteries in Flanders (Saint-Bertin, Bergues-Saint-Winnoc, Marchiennes, Saint-Amand, Saint-Bavo, Saint-Peter, and Saint-Vaast), which Hallinger associated with a "Lotharingian" reform group inspired by Richard of Saint-Vanne, and considered a "mixed" reform in terms of the supposed Gorze-Cluny centers (p. 6). Thus, Vanderputten's case studies press on the weakest point of the older model's geography. Although these seven chapters of the book could have been organized around the seven houses as case studies, Vanderputten instead stresses "reform as process." Here an intellectual debt to political science is explicitly acknowledged, as Vanderputten seeks to shift the explanation of reform from moments of choice to processes of development based on "accumulated investment" (Paul Pierson's term from his *Politics in Time*) or "path dependence," to which Vanderputten also refers (p. 11).<sup>[5]</sup> While this argument is clear and well-reasoned, this use of theoretical jargon may put off some readers. Although the terms are fancy, the idea is basic: monasteries were ongoing collectives, and their ability to reform was limited by prior decisions and continuing local conditions. Furthermore, medieval monks knew this and worked within these limits. This insight leads to Vanderputten's revisionist approach, best understood in his own words: "And rather than looking at reforms of individual institutions as 'flashpoint events,' we need to view them as processes themselves—processes worthy of study in their own right" (p. 11).

Vanderputten highlights these processes over seven chapters. Chapter one explores the memory of early eleventh-century reforms, and how the medieval monastic historians' narrative stress on continuity resulted in change being downplayed. Chapters two and three reexamine the tenth- and early eleventh-century "reforms," which previous scholars regarded as failed, but which he shows may have achieved their self-defined goals. In chapters four and five, Vanderputten shows how traditional explanations of "charismatic" reform leaders (the use of Weber is explicit here) and their "post-charismatic" successors fail to account for their negotiations of the realities (or "accumulated investment") of monasteries' local social, economic, and intellectual structures. The relationship between these structures and the agency of individuals is analyzed in chapter six. Finally, in chapter seven, he examines the largely forgotten reformers of the late eleventh century, who he argues paved the way for the better studied reforms of the twelfth century.

Overall, Vanderputten advances three lines of argument. First, he argues that a confrontation between the "charismatic" leaders and the preexisting features of monasteries was integral to the development of medieval actors' views of reform itself. Second, he explains that the "processes of reformist government" (chapter five) involved working out institutional, economic, and spiritual change over the long term, and that such work largely went unremarked. And finally, he argues that "reformist government" was a cumulative process, built over generations. Thus, reformed identities were shaped slowly and in ways particularly dependent on local factors. The arguments about "reform as process" are convincing, though they necessarily deemphasize the biographical story-telling elements that make traditional histories of reform more readable, if less persuasive about causation. Yet, despite its focus on corporate, collective, and incremental change over time, Vanderputten still unearths plenty of individuals, many of whom were ignored by previous historians.

Of course, much of Vanderputten's argument relies on his use of evidence, both new evidence and the reinterpretation of older evidence. At each of his chosen monasteries, Vanderputten examines the medieval monastic "representations" of reform with a critical eye. His interpretations are based on thorough and close reading of a wide variety of archival sources: narratives, letters, charters, images and objects. His analyses often reveal basic information that some traditional approaches—despite their positivist origins—glossed over. (For example, one appendix lists the abbots of the monasteries and how their careers began and ended, a prosopographical exercise required to speak meaningfully about reform leaders, but previously neglected.) The reading of sources is historiographically nuanced as well. The common framing stories of modern historians are resisted at the same time that the medieval "representations" are demystified. The dominating personality of a great reformer (such as Richard of Saint-Vanne) or the idea of a "program" (which implies a coherent set of reform notions) are revealed as rhetorical constructions—then as now.

An illustration of his approach is useful here. One example, particularly resonant with this reviewer because of my own attempts to read the same source, was Vanderputten's skeptical analysis of the description of Abbot Roderic's career (1021-1042) in Simon of Saint-Bertin's chronicle (pp. 114-7). Among other activities, Abbot Roderic attempted to "reform" the real or perceived abuses by the lay agents of the house. Vanderputten demonstrates that using this account to reconstruct what happened requires caution, because Simon's narrative attributes many "reforms" to Roderic, as a type of the ideal "successor" abbot. Surviving charters, however, indicate that his predecessor, Abbot Leduin, was at least as responsible for the changes as Abbot Roedric. Vanderputten shows both abbots operating within the limitations of preexisting structures. Thus, he avoids the tropes of explanation used in traditional religious and intellectual histories of monastic reform, while highlighting actual links between the various "reforms" and political, social, economic, and cultural circumstances at the ground level. Change emerged over time as part of a "process," rather than as the work of one reforming abbot. Vanderputten therefore moves beyond unitary models of "reform" and shows that reforming ideas and practices were multiple and flexible, and could be applied by different actors for a variety of ends.

Vanderputten's *Monastic Reform as Process* reflects where medieval history must go in the twenty-first century. It is rich in archival research, harnessing emergent digital databases to organize an impressive range of sources effectively which lay beyond the grasp of previous generations of scholars. Yet the author directs his inquiries towards key historical questions which traditional scholarship has raised, but could not answer. The book is an excellent study of monastic reform in medieval Flanders, which addresses issues medievalists care about. Its historiographical corrective should appeal to a wider historical audience. It also represents a significant step forward as an approach to medieval history, conditioned by the new realities of historical study in the twenty-first century.

## NOTES

[1] Ernst Sackur, *Die Cluniacenser in ihrer kirchlichen und allgemeineschichtlichen Wirksamkeit: Bis zur Mitte des elften Jahrhunderts*, 2 vols. (Halle a.d. Saale: Max Niemeyer, 1892-1894).

[2] Highlighted by, among others, Patrick Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[3] Kassius Hallinger, *Gorze-Kluny: Studien zu den monastischen Lebensformen und Gegensätzen im Hochmittelalter*, 2 vols. (Rome: Herder, 1950-1951; reprint Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1971).

---

[4] For example, the first sentence of Constable's last chapter, "The Broader Setting" falls into this unifying metaphor even as its author acknowledges the difficulty of reconstructing medieval reformers' mentalities: "The purpose of this final chapter is to relate the movement of religious reform to other aspects of history of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, not to explain its causes, which were buried too deeply in the hearts of contemporaries for even themselves, let alone later scholars, to understand." Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 296.

[5] Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

Robert F. Berkhofer III  
Western Michigan University  
[robert.berkhofer@wmich.edu](mailto:robert.berkhofer@wmich.edu)

Copyright © 2013 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.