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Kathryn E. Salzer, *Vaucelles Abbey: Social, Political, and Ecclesiastical Relationships in the Borderland Region of the Cambrésis, 1131-1300*. (Medieval Monastic Studies, 2.) Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2017. xxviii + 366 pp. Maps, tables, illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$125.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-2-503-55524-9.

Review by Suzanne G. Coley, University of Southampton.

Salzer's book on Vaucelles Abbey provides an ambitious and useful counterpoint to the predominant trend of thematic approaches to the study of Cistercian monasticism in the European Middle Ages. There has been a tendency to study individual Cistercian houses as examples of a single unit within a broader administrative system. This system has been understood by historians as an attempt to regulate uniformity of life across the Order's daughter houses through the growing influence of the Cistercian General Chapter and the development of formal statutes.^[1] This interest in cultural homogeneity has coloured the study of not just the Order's identity, but also studies of individual Cistercian houses. Older studies often used information drawn from a limited number of examples as representative of the Order as a whole. As a result, the experiences of many houses were overlooked or overshadowed by bigger and more famous houses, predominantly the abbeys of Cîteaux and Clairvaux, and there has been an over-concentration on certain sources, especially the statutes of the General Chapter of Cistercian abbots and the foundational histories of the Order produced throughout the twelfth century.

It is becoming increasingly accepted that scholars have not examined a sufficient number of documents from a large enough pool of houses to produce clear patterns to understand Cistercian identity, organisation, and experience. Salzer's premise is that increasing the pool of examples would allow for a closer examination of how particular monastic houses survived and developed, how they interacted with their neighbours, patrons and opponents, and why some seemed to flourish whilst others fell into decline. This book is a significant piece of literature offering an insightful approach to the consideration of the agency of an individual Cistercian house to direct its own patrimony independently of the wider Cistercian Order. Furthermore, it contributes significantly to the investigation of monastic houses more generally in borderland regions, where areas of political, social, and religious influence overlap significantly. This poses the intriguing question of whether the experiences of these houses can be compared to those which were more centrally located in diocesan and other political and administrative areas.

Vaucelles Abbey was founded in the region of Cambrai in the early twelfth century, a well-populated and multi-lingual border region encompassing parts of France, Flanders, and

Germany. The diocese of Cambrai was an imperial diocese, but it came under the jurisdiction of the French archdiocese of Reims, causing further layers of complexity for the area's many monasteries. During the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the influence of the French royal house and Flanders grew whilst that of the German kings waned. However, the political machinations of these high-ranking authorities were physically distant from the intrigues of local politics in the region, which, unlike many neighbouring territories, was not governed by any single, secular, political force. In summary, the area and its social, political, and religious climate were characterised by political fluidity and overlapping layers of influence. In chapter one, Salzer rightly makes a compelling argument for why this more fluid understanding of society makes most sense in the context of the European Middle Ages (pp. 21-34). It also has a significant impact on the operation and organisation of monastic houses founded during this time.

The book aims to demonstrate how Vaucelles Abbey's successful negotiation of long-term relationships within significant social, political, and religious boundaries created stability and prosperity for the abbey throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The prosperity that Salzer refers to is its economic and social wealth as both an industrious agricultural landowner and as a well-populated house of monks and lay brethren. In concentrating on Vaucelles' more public developments and relationships, its liturgical life is, by and large, omitted from this study, except for a few instances when the abbey's economic and social growth inevitably impacted on its spiritual life. These include Vaucelles' ambitious church-building plans and expansion of its precinct to accommodate prayers for and burial of lay patrons. Nevertheless, readers should not expect to find discussion of the Cistercian spiritual and liturgical life practiced at Vaucelles Abbey. This book focuses on the support of Vaucelles' numerous patrons and the Abbey's efforts to direct its social network and agricultural patrimony whilst balancing its identity and responsibilities as part of the extensive and expanding Cistercian Order. Significantly, the book challenges the concept of Cistercian isolationism by demonstrating the importance of a monastic community's relationship to the wider lay world.

The book's framework is organised around the deconstruction of the various layers of social relationships that affected Vaucelles during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The most important sources for this enquiry are the many extant charters from Vaucelles and the *Fundatio Abbatiae de Valcellis*, an anonymous account of the foundation of Vaucelles and the life of its first abbot, Radulf. These sources demonstrate the abbey's considerable acquisition of lands, rights, and privileges in the regions of Cambrais, Soissonnais, and Flanders, but also highlight its connections with local, national, and international authorities. Chapter two begins by locating the initial foundation within the local political framework of the region of Cambrai in the early twelfth century (pp. 49-88). This chapter is invaluable as an introduction to the complex history of this area. It also sets the scene very usefully for the rest of the book's analysis of Vaucelles' various relationship-building activities by emphasising the overlapping layers of influence of key individuals and institutions who held an interest in this region.

The rest of the book moves to an examination of how Vaucelles used its place in this environment of political and social fluidity to its own advantage. Chapter three is characterised by the most frequent interactions Vaucelles had as an agricultural landowner with its immediate neighbours in the course of adopting and adapting the agricultural and financial practices that characterised this and other Cistercian abbeys (pp. 89-136). Chapters four and five concentrate on interactions with gift and authorial patrons. Both make the important distinction between gift patrons, who made the transactions, and authorial patrons, whose political and social standing was used to

authorise them. Chapter four concerns basic gifts of land and rights made to Vaucelles, providing extensive detail on the patronage of wealthy local families, the Flemish comital family, royal, and imperial gift patrons and monastic and episcopal benefactors (pp. 137-192). Chapter five analyses later gifts, exchanges and purchases which allowed Vaucelles to consolidate its impressive agricultural holdings and privileges into well-endowed granges (pp. 193-251). In addition, Salzer carefully extrapolates instances where the abbey was drawn into conflict with its neighbours and patrons as a result of its consolidation efforts from charters detailing resolution agreements.

There is considerable overlap in the content of these chapters, to the point where the book can feel quite repetitive. However, Salzer's structural decision here builds into her emphasis on the importance of Vaucelles' relationships with a range of individuals and institutions, both lay and ecclesiastical, who had overlapping areas of interest and influence in the region. Chapters four and five should be seen as the focus of the book's examination of Vaucelles' ability to direct its own development in complicated circumstances. Salzer repeatedly and convincingly demonstrates that the monks of Vaucelles expanded their patronage in such a way that it allowed them to solicit useful and desirable gifts and exchanges for themselves whilst under the protection of powerful social, political, and religious allies, entirely independently of any external agency from the Cistercian Order.

The final chapter deals with Vaucelles' relationships with other Cistercian houses, which are largely absent from discussions about Vaucelles' patrimony (pp. 252-293). Despite this, Salzer highlights that opportunities for contact between monks of Vaucelles and other Cistercian abbeys as well as the annual General Chapter of Cistercian abbots gradually increased from the later decades of the twelfth century. This contact resulted from instances where the General Chapter either admonished Vaucelles for indiscretions or when it issued instructions to the abbot of Vaucelles. A key historiographical issue is raised concerning how far the Cistercian Order was able to exert power over its daughter-houses. Salzer's book very usefully focuses on evidence suggesting that contact with its daughter-houses actually influenced the Cistercian Order over time, especially in its attitude towards issues such as holding tithes and lay burials in monastic precincts. This approach highlights that the relationships between the Cistercian Order and its daughter-houses were more complicated than the modern understanding of an "Order" as a powerful directive body might allow. Indeed, Salzer opens this chapter by challenging the modern understanding of the term *ordo* with evidence taken from its usage in Vaucelles' medieval charters (pp. 264-267). She convincingly argues that this term was used with great irregularity in this context, demonstrating that Vaucelles' identity as a Cistercian house, even during the years when the Cistercian Order is commonly seen as most powerful, was individual and developing (p. 264).

Salzer's discussion of the understanding of the relationships between Vaucelles and its patrimony might have been expanded with a more nuanced reading of the historical writings concerning Vaucelles, most importantly the *Fundatio Abbatiae de Valcellis*. Salzer's main use for this account was as validation for charter evidence. However, recent studies into Cistercian historical writing, especially Janet Burton's work on the foundation chronicles of Byland and Jervaulx Abbeys, demonstrate that Cistercian chroniclers expressed ideas about identity and patrimony through literary topoi when writing foundation chronicles.^[2] Burton clearly showed how Cistercian chroniclers created multi-layered identities by carefully selecting their materials to emphasise important themes such as the founding monastery overcoming adversity to secure its survival and prosperity, both at the time of its creation and in subsequent years when facing opponents

to the expansion and consolidation of its granges. Other themes included strengthening Cistercian identities by highlighting its relationships to other Cistercian houses. Of equal, if not greater, importance was the strengthening of local identities in these histories by making patrons into prominent characters who owed obligations to the monasteries. All of these themes are of great interest and importance to the arguments made in Salzer's book. By carefully examining the selection of material and themes within a foundation chronicle, it is possible to gain an insight into a monastic community's attitude towards its identity and its patrimony. This would be a good way of expanding on the book's investigation given the importance Salzer attributes to Vaucelles' interest in balancing its multi-layered patrimony with its Cistercian identity. Particularly pertinent examples of this are the instances when Vaucelles was able to expand its patrimony whilst founding its own daughter houses in England and Wales, and when fulfilling the General Chapter's instructions to Vaucelles' abbots to act as representatives of the Order and managers of women's Cistercian houses (pp. 268-277 and 285-292).

In summary, Salzer should be commended for a book which easily navigates a region of Europe that is characterised by its political complexity and clearly illustrates how such an environment could become the foundation for a Cistercian monastery to establish a high-profile patrimony that bridged significant political, social, and religious boundaries. The book's rigorous cross-referencing of charter evidence offers insight into how relationships between monasteries and their lay and ecclesiastical patrons within a specific region could be created, maintained, and used for long-term profit. Most importantly for the field of Cistercian studies, Salzer's book expands the existing source evidence base for analysing how individual monastic houses identified not just with the Order, but primarily with their local communities. The book begins to draw conclusions about how an abbey's social, political, and economic relationships with their neighbours were important to the daily and liturgical life of a monastery. It is so easy for these kinds of themes to be seen as a backdrop to the study of loftier developments in monastic liturgical practice and spirituality, but Salzer refreshingly places Vaucelles' social relationships, which evidently had a greater bearing on its ability to survive and prosper after its creation than its Cistercian affiliation, as the foundation to developing any understanding of its wider religious identity.

NOTES

[1] Constance Hoffman Berman, *The Cistercian Evolution: The Invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

[2] Janet Burton, ed. and trans., *The Foundation History of the Abbeys of Byland and Jervaulx* (York: Borthwick Publications, 2006); Janet Burton, "Constructing a Corporate Identity: The *Historia Foundationis* of the Cistercian abbeys of Byland and Jervaulx," in Anne Müller and Karen Stöber, eds., *Self-Representation of Medieval Religious Communities: The British Isles in Context* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2009), pp. 327-340.

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