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Kriston R. Rennie, *Freedom and Protection: Monastic Exemption in France, c. 590-c. 1100*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018. xi + 243 pp. Map, notes, bibliography, and index. \$120.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781526127723.

Review by Richard Allen, University of Oxford.

In a work that is at once wide-ranging and tightly focused, Kriston R. Rennie sets out to examine the development and practice of monastic exemption between the sixth and eleventh centuries. Broadly speaking, Rennie's aim is to explore how monastic institutions attained and exploited the freedoms and protections granted by various popes during this period, while in a narrower sense he looks to shed light on how the issuing of such exemptions evolved from the margins to become a centralized practice in which, quoting H.E.J. Cowdrey, the papacy emerged as "the guarantor *par excellence*" of monastic freedom (p. 20). French--that is, west Frankish and Capetian--monasteries are the focus of his attention, a choice that allows Rennie to exploit a rich and important collection of diplomatic, canonical, and narrative material, and to set his arguments within a long tradition of historical scholarship whose roots stretch back to figures such as Alfred Blumenstock, Paul Fabre, Jean-François Lemarignier, and Ferdinand Lot. The result is an important and interesting contribution to this tradition, which, if it must at times be necessarily a work of synthesis, nevertheless manages to reexamine convincingly the ways in which monastic exemptions became embedded in the wider religious, legal, and political culture of the early Middle Ages.

In terms of structure, the work itself is comprised of six concisely-written chapters, which are preceded by a useful introduction in which Rennie sets his aims in their wider historiographical context. As he points out (pp. 14-15), if scholars have paid much attention to the mechanics of monastic exemption, their work has very often focused on individual abbeys (Luxeuil, Bobbio, Fulda, Cluny, to name but a few) and their associated reforms. Jean-François Lemarignier's survey of monastic exemption in Normandy is a notable (and seminal) exception to this rule,[1] but the duchy saw few papal exemptions issued in favor of its abbeys before 1100 (a point to which we will return), with the result that his findings are largely of relevance to the period in which the preeminent role of the papacy in exemption had already been established. For Rennie, the important question is how such circumstances came to be, with the answers helping to shed light on issues ranging from the concept of papal power (both at the centre and at the margins), to the nature of the transactional relationship that underpinned exemption privileges.

Rennie begins exploring these issues with two complementary chapters, the first of which

examines the historical and conciliar framework of monastic exemption in the fifth to eighth centuries. It is no mean feat to condense into fewer than twenty-five pages what is at once a large and complex historiography (spanning English, French, and German traditions), but Rennie handles the task well, while simultaneously managing to contextualize his main contention—namely, that the pattern and character of exemption under Frankish rulers “proved central to developing notions of spiritual and physical protection under the popes” (p. 27)—within it. If his findings cannot be said to uproot years of historical thinking, they do nevertheless add nuance to long-standing and influential interpretations of the evidence (most notably that of Eugen Ewig). In particular, Rennie uses the canonical and diplomatic evidence to good effect to highlight the ways in which exemption shifted from a local prerogative under the Merovingians to one of the tenants of the centralized powerbase of the Carolingian kings.

This local/central shift is also at the heart of the second chapter, which examines the development of exemption practices during the same period from the perspective of Rome. Much time is spent reviewing the well-known work of Gregory I (590–604), whose understanding of his papal mission helped shape thinking for centuries after his death. Rennie does not go so far as to propose the existence of a centralized papal “policy” towards exemption at this time. But his skillful handling of the conciliar and epistolary evidence shows how promises of protection (*tuitio*) not only became increasingly reliant “on the pope’s goodwill, pragmatism, and contemporary spiritual concerns” (p. 67), but also resulted in a shift, evident in the exemption privileges of the seventh and eighth centuries (Bobbio (628), Rebais (637), Malmesbury (c.701), Farfa (705), etc.), in which monasteries were increasingly brought within Rome’s jurisdictional orbit.

The subtle mechanics of this shift, and the ways and environment in which exemption came to be (re)defined in the early Middle Ages, are the focus of Rennie’s next three chapters. With regards to the crucial developments of the ninth century, in which nearly fifty privileges were issued for French abbeys, special attention is given to the example of Corbie, which received a series of exemptions between 855 and 903. Rennie argues that the abbey’s singular relationship with the papacy played a key role in developing what Egon Boshof called a “Roman tradition” (*traditio Romana*) of protection, in which the papacy began to harness the political, ideological, and rhetorical power of the exemption privilege to bolster “its arsenal of political governance” (p. 81). Rennie singles out Benedict III (855–858) and Nicholas I (858–867) as key figures in this development, the latter of whom he convincingly argues has not always received the attention he deserves (in particular with regards to his impact on the canonical tradition).

But if many abbeys now turned to Rome for protection, they did not do so, as Rennie is careful to note, “outside existing ecclesiastical and political structures” (p. 150). Indeed, if the founding of Cluny in 910, and the issuance of its privileges of 931 and 938, represented a transformational moment in the development of monastic exemption, any survey of the subsequent decades reveals that replicating such circumstances elsewhere was not always straightforward. Using the example of Abbot Abbo of Fleury (998–1004), Rennie shows in his fourth chapter how attempts to secure papal protection could still run up against the competing claims of local politics and local rulers (in particular bishops). In many instances, these claims were being played out to the backdrop of the fragmentation of Frankish royal power, and while the extent and impact of this fragmentation has long been a source of contention, the late tenth and early eleventh centuries were witness to profound socio-political change. As Rennie points out, this change was very often accompanied by the issuance of exemption privileges, which, by binding individual

monasteries ever closer to Rome, rather than to their local rulers (both lay and ecclesiastical), had the potential themselves to upend established norms.

Whether this upending of norms was at once inevitable *and* intentional is the focus of the book's penultimate chapter. Rennie's reading of the evidence is one that foregrounds the organic development of monastic exemption at this time, in which he concludes that its increasing prevalence was not the result of deliberate, centralized papal policy, but rather the next stage in a long-running process in which successive popes merely "capitalized on a growing trend, level of interest, and demand" (p. 158). However, as a simple glance at the useful list of privileges given in an appendix (pp. 193-198) shows, this demand was by no means universal. That Rennie somewhat sidesteps this issue is a shame, for any history of papal involvement in France during this period should not only rightly focus on those regions and abbeys which embraced (or tried to embrace) the papacy as a guarantor of liberties, but also those that did not. Normandy stands out as a notable example of the latter, and while Jean-François Lemarignier's abovementioned work remains influential, his claims (now over eighty years old) are by no means uncontested. (Fécamp's papal exemption of 1016, the only one issued for a Norman abbey during this period, was accepted by Lemarignier as genuine, but others, including Julius von Pflugk-Harttung, Philipp Jaffé, and Neithard Bulst, have not been so sure. [2])

It would, of course, be unreasonable to expect Rennie to delve into a detailed discussion of such things, especially when much ink has already been spilled on the reasons behind Normandy's wary engagement with Rome at this time. That said, synthesizing a large body of existing scholarship is hardly a skill Rennie lacks. Moreover, choosing not to acknowledge, even in passing, the lack of papal privileges for some regions means that Rennie's conclusions on whether the notable eleventh-century increase in exemptions marked a "papal victory," the subject of the book's final chapter, feel incomplete.

This point aside, Rennie has produced a valuable and engaging book that should be of interest to a wide audience. It is based upon a thorough yet nuanced reading of the evidence, and its main finding--namely, that the power of the exemption was not "the exclusive discovery or rediscovery of the reforming era" (p. 182), as much of the existing historiographical narrative would have it, but rather one developed and understood over many centuries--is novel enough to be noteworthy. And, if nothing else, *Freedom and Protection* sheds new and interesting light on important questions that have not always received, particularly across such a long and early period of study, the scholarly attention they deserve.

NOTES

[1] Jean-François Lemarignier, *Étude sur les privilèges d'exemption et de juridiction ecclésiastique des abbayes Normandes : depuis les origines jusqu'en 1140* (Paris, A. Picard: 1937).

[2] *Acta pontificum Romanorum inedita*, ed. J. Pflugk-Harttung, 3 vols. (Tübingen, F. Fues: 1880-86), i, p. 10- 11, no. 13; *Regesta pontificum Romanorum...ad annum post Christum natum MCXCVIII*, ed. P. Jaffe, 3 vols. (Leipzig, Veit: 1885-1888), i, p. 509, no. 4015; N. Bulst, *Untersuchungen zu den Klosterreformen Wilhelms von Dijon (926-1031)* (Bonn, Ludwig Rohrscheid Verlag: 1973), p. 152-154 and p. 268.

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