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Benjamin Pohl and Laura L. Gathagan, eds., *A Companion to the Abbey of Le Bec in the Central Middle Ages (11th-13th Centuries)*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018. xv + 408 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$197.00 U.S. (hb) ISBN 978-9004-34993-3; \$197.00 U.S. (eb) ISBN 978-9004-35190-5.

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Calling a collective work “a companion” creates the expectation of a series of commissioned essays that offer a balanced overview of a number of carefully chosen aspects of a particular subject. The volume under review is actually a hybrid, as some of the fourteen chapters appear to be specifically designed to be part of a companion volume whereas others are obviously not, and some are in between. Nonetheless, the collection as a whole offers an illuminating introduction to a number of issues related to an abbey that was “arguably the most influential monastic center in the Anglo-Norman world of the 11th to 13th centuries” (p. 1). Without any reason being given, the well-established name of the abbey and its location, “Bec,” has been replaced in this volume with the more cumbersome “Le Bec” (from the French “le Bec”). I will keep to the established English usage.

The first two chapters provide a chronological framework for the history of the abbey in the central middle ages. Jean-Hervé Foulon’s essay (chapter one) is a highly illuminating discussion of the abbey’s foundation and its early history. The narrative sources for the early history (listed in an appendix, pp. 36-37) date from the first half of the twelfth century and reflect the concerns of that time. Foulon goes beyond these sources and, gathering together scattered pieces of information, produces a reconstruction of the developments until the time of the death (1078) of the founding abbot, Herluin, who was a retired Norman knight. Foulon shows that Herluin initially created an eremitic community, but it was then transformed into a cenobitic community—that is, a monastery in the customary sense—because of the interests of his secular supporters. Herluin got invaluable help in this transformation from the Italian-born scholar Lanfranc, later archbishop of Canterbury. Foulon provides new dating for Lanfranc’s involvement: arrival at Bec around 1046-47 (instead of 1042) and made prior from around 1049-50 (instead of from 1045) (pp. 27-30). Véronique Gazeau (chapter two) discusses the role of the abbots of Bec from 1034-1281, emphasizing especially the role of the first two, Herluin and Anselm, as models for their successors. Among other things, she offers a survey of how the seventeen abbots included within the timespan came into office. She underscores the fundamental influence that Anselm exerted on the life of Bec’s community, including the developing of the abbey’s patrimony and the organizing of its school.

The two chapters that follow each offer an extended discussion of an individual related to Bec. Sally N. Vaughn's essay on Anselm of Bec and Canterbury (chapter three) is the longest in the collection (thirty-seven pages) and this can be seen as justified, given that Anselm is not only a key person in the abbey's development but also a world-class thinker. However, Vaughn does not offer an introductory overview of Anselm's contribution but instead defends a certain way of interpreting his contribution. For her, Anselm is above all a teacher who teaches not only by word but also by example, presenting himself as a model to be imitated. There is assuredly some truth in this, but it is ironical that Vaughn accuses many modern Anselm scholars of being like the blind men examining the elephant, each forming a one-sided picture of it (p. 58). The other of Bec's "famous sons" (p. 6) chosen for highlighting is Robert of Torigni, abbot of Mont-Saint-Michel and a renowned historian. Benjamin Pohl's essay (chapter four) focuses on Robert's early career as a monk and then prior of Bec. The essay is quite entertaining, with numerous illustrations and vivid quotations from primary and secondary sources, but the outcome is largely negative: the evidence cannot support the picture that (partly outdated) secondary literature offers of Robert in his Bec period.

Three chapters (six, seven, and ten) concentrate on manuscripts that were either produced at Bec or were owned by the abbey. Jenny Weston's essay (chapter six) deals with two related topics: the identification of surviving manuscripts that are connected to Bec, and what we know about book production at the scriptorium of Bec. Among other things, Weston discusses the style of script and the initials used at Bec, providing a number of illustrations, and points out that the accuracy of text was highly valued at the Bec scriptorium; aesthetic considerations played a minor role. Laura Cleaver's essay (chapter seven) deals with the possessions of the library at Bec based mainly on two twelfth-century library lists. Cleaver reminds us that the lists included only those items that were kept in the library; the books kept elsewhere, like Bibles and service books, were not included (p. 178). These chapters are rather unexciting, but they are good companion material. As an appendix, Weston provides an inventory of the twenty-six currently known surviving manuscripts that have been attributed to the abbey of Bec or its scriptorium (pp. 161-70). Cleaver correspondingly appends a new edition of the twelfth-century library lists (pp. 190-205). These appendices are useful, but they have not been coordinated. Instead of using Cleaver's edition, Weston gives references to the earlier editions of the same lists. Cleaver, for her part, fails to reference the items in Weston's inventory. Five of the surviving manuscripts are discussed in more detail by Elizabeth Kuhl in her essay on education and schooling at Bec (chapter ten). She calls these manuscripts Bec's "florilegia" and devotes the main part (pp. 254-74) of her contribution to a "case study" of them. Only one of them is actually a florilegium in the traditional sense, consisting mostly of excerpts from patristic writings. The other four should rather be characterized as "personal miscellanea" (p. 272): they seem to be projects of individual monks built up over a lifetime and contain both compiled material and the compilers' own work. It is interesting that this kind of miscellanea were produced at Bec in the twelfth century. One of them was apparently prepared with teaching in mind and includes abridged versions of some texts in rhetoric and dialectic.

One of the well-known things about Bec is that in the eleventh century it hosted a famous external school, that is, a school open to anyone willing to pay. There is no chapter on the school of Bec in this volume. The title of Kuhl's essay (chapter ten, see also above) speaks of "education and schooling," but her concern is the internal school in the twelfth century. There are references to the external school in several other chapters. Foulon says that the external school started functioning "at an unknown date, perhaps around 1060" (p. 31). Gazeau speaks of

the school “[s]tarting in 1059,” and even though it was Lanfranc’s initiative, Anselm “should be seen as the school’s most important organizer” (p. 43). Here, Foulon and Gazeau are correcting an older view according to which Lanfranc started an external school already in the 1040s. However, the very same older view is cited approvingly in a number of later chapters (see Pohl, p. 108; Weston, p. 150; Gasper, p. 214; Brenner, p. 315). I am not sure what to make of this. Is it the case that the editors have not understood what Foulon and Gazeau are trying to achieve?

Two chapters (five and eight) focus on notable areas of scholarly pursuit at Bec. Elisabeth van Houts’ essay deals with the writing of history at Bec (chapter five). She points out that the abbey was a notable historiographical center in the twelfth century and offers an overview of the different genres of historical writing—annalistic, biographical, and dynastic—at Bec. She also provides a lengthy discussion of the role of rhetoric in history writing: the needs of the time quite often affected the way in which the past was remembered, and it seems that several Bec authors were fond of creating fictional letters attributed to ancient or distant writers. Giles E. M. Gasper’s essay (chapter eight) discusses theological works written at Bec, concentrating on Lanfranc and Anselm. Regarding Lanfranc’s contribution to the eucharistic controversy, Gasper follows Margaret Gibson and emphasizes the legalistic and pastoral aspects of Lanfranc’s approach.^[1] He leaves aside the rhetorical dimension in Lanfranc’s contribution, noted by van Houts (pp. 133-35). Gasper’s discussion of Anselm’s theology is rather cautious, as he makes little effort to describe the subject matter of Anselm’s treatises or what makes them distinctive. Nevertheless, he appeals to a modern fideistic interpretation of Anselm’s theology without mentioning that it is controversial.^[2]

Steven Vanderputten’s essay (chapter nine) deals with two topics connected by the word “custom.” The first abbots of Bec had managed to keep the abbey relatively independent in relation to both ecclesiastical and secular authorities. The later generations wanted to defend the independence of the abbey by appealing to Bec’s “custom” (*consuetudo*). The theme of Bec’s independence surfaces in several other chapters as well (including one, two, three, and five). The latter part of Vanderputten’s essay deals with Bec’s customary, that is, the abbey’s handbook, and its development. Leonie V. Hicks discusses various issues related to the life at the abbey of Bec and its priories from the point of view of the concept of space (chapter eleven). The short essay by Elma Brenner (chapter twelve) deals with medical knowledge and practice at Bec. Anselm is known to have had an interest in medicine, but the evidence relating to this is incidental. Brenner also describes the measures that various abbots took to make the abbey a healthier environment for its inhabitants.

The last two chapters (thirteen and fourteen) deal with the abbey’s interaction with the outside world. Julie Potter’s essay on the nature and meaning of religious patronage (chapter fourteen) is among the most illuminating in the volume. Potter describes the highly complex friendship network that the abbey of Bec maintained and that was the key to its continuing prosperity and significance. The network involved notable people and institutions in Normandy and beyond, including noble families, bishops, monasteries, and the royal families of England and France. What the abbey of Bec could provide for its friends were things like prayers for the living and the dead, burial places, hospitality, and an extensive network of connections. Richard Allen’s essay (chapter thirteen) offers a very detailed survey of the abbey’s ecclesiastical friendship network in Normandy and elsewhere. Among other things, he provides a map indicating which bishops were commemorated in Bec’s necrology, the inclusion into which implied that the

monks would pray for the deceased every year on the anniversary of his or her death. The interaction of the abbey with the benefactors is also discussed in several other chapters (see especially one, two, eleven, and twelve).

There are some peculiarities in the bibliography. The list of “Edited Primary Sources” begins with a number of entries starting with a quotation mark, like “Catalogus Librorum Abbatiae Beccensis.” That is how machines alphabetize, but humans would look for this entry in the same place as *Catalogus librorum abbatiae Beccensis* (see p. 368 and p. 369). As both entries refer to the same text in the *Patrologia Latina*, this is also an example of deficiencies in consistency. The list of secondary sources is divided into three categories: “Secondary Sources,” “Secondary Sources (Unpublished),” and “Online Sources”; among the online sources there are also many printed works that have been made digitally accessible. Because the references in the footnotes do not indicate the category to which a cited secondary source belongs, the reader may have difficulty in finding the correct entry in the bibliography. The “General Index” is rich in content, even though “[m]odern authors and concepts have been omitted” (p. 399). However, one looks in vain for classical and patristic authors like Aristotle, Ambrose, Boethius, Cicero, Galen, Jerome, Origen, Seneca, and Vergil, and medieval authors like Bede, Isidore, and Peter Lombard (they all appear in the volume). This may tell us something about the editors’ interests.

In conclusion, this collection of essays has both strengths and weaknesses. It addresses a large range of topics and contains several strong essays. On the other hand, even though there are many cross-references between the different chapters, there is also lack of coordination and a number of inconsistencies. I wouldn’t recommend this volume to someone who needs to learn about the school of Bec or the chronology of Lanfranc’s life, because different chapters include conflicting information on them. Among weaknesses I also count the volume’s deliberate narrow focus on “the Anglo-Norman world,” even though there is a wider perspective in some chapters.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Laura L. Gathagan and Benjamin Pohl, “Introduction”

Jean-Hervé Foulon, “The Foundation and Early History of Le Bec”

Véronique Gazeau, “The Role of the Abbots of Le Bec (1034-1281)”

Sally N. Vaughn, “Anselm of Le Bec and Canterbury: Teacher by Word and Example, Following the Footprints of His Ancestors”

Benjamin Pohl, “Robert of Torigni and Le Bec: The Man and the Myth”

Elisabeth van Houts, “The Writing of History at Le Bec”

Jenny Weston, “Manuscripts and Book Production at Le Bec”

Laura Cleaver, “The Monastic Library at Le Bec”

Giles E.M. Gasper, "Theology at Le Bec"

Steven Vanderputten, "Custom and Identity at Le Bec"

Elizabeth Kuhl, "Education and Schooling at Le Bec: A Case Study of Le Bec's Florilegia"

Leonie V. Hicks, "The Use of Space and the Religious Life at Le Bec"

Elma Brenner, "Medical Knowledge and Practice at Le Bec (c. 1050-c. 1300)"

Richard Allen, "The Ecclesiastical Patrons of Le Bec"

Julie Potter, "The Monks of Le Bec and Their Benefactors: The Nature and Meaning of Religious Patronage"

NOTES

[1] Margaret Gibson, *Lanfranc of Bec* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

[2] Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, trans. Ian W. Robertson (London: SCM Press, 1960).

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