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Jennifer C. Edwards, *Superior Women: Medieval Female Authority in Poitiers' Abbey of Sainte-Croix*. 336 pp. 40 black-and-white illustrations. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. \$93.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780198837923.

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Jennifer C. Edwards's important monograph, *Superior Women: Medieval Female Authority in Poitiers' Abbey of Sainte-Croix*, centers on the abbesses of Sainte-Croix de Poitiers and the subordinate canons of Sainte-Radegonde. The origins of both institutions date back to the sixth century, when Radegund of Thuringia (c. 525–587), estranged and escaped wife of Clothar I, dedicated herself to monastic life and founded both communities. In seven chapters, Edwards knowledgably surveys nine centuries of monastic history, beginning with Sainte-Croix's foundation in 558 through the Grands Jours de Poitiers of 1519, which mark the chronological end point of the study.

The introduction provides an unusually comprehensive overview of the relevant literature both in female monastic and women's history. Chapter one centers on the abbey's sixth-century foundation and early years under Radegund. The close reading of her three *vitae* and the different aspects they emphasize reveal much about the intentions of abbesses who legitimized their authority with them. Chapter two then looks closely at the main strategies of which Radegund availed herself to secure her monastery's authority in the long term, namely relics and networks. Edwards discusses these strategies through three examples. The first two center on the difficult relationship of early Sainte-Croix and Maroveus, bishop of Poitiers, who was jealous of Radegund and her abbey's wealth and influence. He opposed Radegund's acquisition of the relic of the True Cross and later refused to officiate at Radegund's funeral. The third example centers on the 589–590 conflict about Sainte-Croix's abbacy. At the time, two nuns of royal blood led a rebellion against Abbess Leubovera. The use of Ste-Croix's networks of bishops and kings allowed the abbesses to prevail in these different crises and to affirm their authority. Edwards shows that rather than relying on local networks, the abbesses' support network tended to be geographically distant and included illustrious individuals such as Gregory of Tours and the Merovingian kings Childebert and Guntram. This would remain true also for later times: Sainte-Croix's enemies tended to be close to home and its protectors in Gaul/France and Rome.

Chapter three engages with the period following Radegund's death and focuses on the royal network that continued to support Radegund's two monastic foundations through the tenth century. During this period, Sainte-Croix and Sainte-Radegonde continued to grow within the religious landscape of Poitiers and the broader Church. In addition to the memory kept alive

through Radegund's *vitae*, both communities developed crucial visual language for depicting their foundress, who remained essential for the legitimacy of abbatial authority. Chapter four turns to discuss the growing number of conflicts regarding abbatial superiority over the canons that rose between the eleventh and fourteenth century. Sainte-Croix abbesses prevailed also in these conflicts thanks to their good relationship with the papacy. Chapter five further discusses the links between memory and authority. During the thirteenth century, the canons used Sainte-Croix's weakness due to prolonged vacancies of the abbacy for their own advantage. The canons altered the traditional narrative of St. Radegund which they articulated in their church's new stained-glass windows. The windows created a new biography that shifted Radegund's power from Sainte-Croix to the canons.

If the windows seem only a subtle challenge to abbatial supremacy, the canons' claims would not remain so. Chapter six centers on the open conflicts between canons and abbesses during the fifteenth century. At that time, the narrative of conflict changed, and the canons availed themselves of a new line of argument, claiming that it was "against nature" to be subject to a woman (p. 201). However, even if the tone grew misogynistic, reality did not. And this demonstrates, as Edwards observes, "the importance of looking beyond prescriptive texts that condemn or circumscribe women's power and testing the reality of such claims in practice" (p. 202). The most threatening challenges to abbatial authority did not come from the canons or an allegedly misogynistic society, but from within the nuns' convent. The final chapter engages with select conflicts around abbatial elections that visited Sainte-Croix time and again throughout its existence. Edward's lively description of the contested and violence-provoking struggle between Jeanne de Couhé and Marguerite de Vivonne in 1491 for Sainte-Croix's abbacy shows just how much worldly politics was involved and how much was at stake for local noble families who sought to place their daughters on abbatial thrones of wealthy and powerful abbeys.

As a whole, this book is essential reading for scholars and students interested in both monastic and gender history. The introduction already is notable, especially in regard to Edwards's impressive command and survey of the relevant literature--which is a great tool for anybody eager to know what they should read in order to get to know the field. All in all, Edwards's *Superior Women* is an important study which contributes to the history of female monasticism and the still widely underestimated authority that monastic women habitually wielded throughout the Middle Ages. The focus on the strategies used by Sainte-Croix' abbesses, namely to cultivate a wide network of powerful supports--both lay and ecclesiastical--and the skilled use of relics, artefacts, and representations of their foundress, St. Radegund, to bolster their own authority, makes the monograph also a contribution to the field of the cult of saints. The skillful connection of the themes of authority through memory, and last but not least, Edward's command of nine centuries of both the history of Sainte-Croix and of western France, make this book very enjoyable and instructive reading. A comprehensive appendix is the only thing missing. It would have been desirable to have a list of abbesses and canons and other important players with dates, especially since these are not readily available online. But this is a minor point of criticism and it does nothing to diminish the great importance of the monograph.

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