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Annalena Müller, *From the Cloister to the State: Fontevraud and the Making of Bourbon France, 1642-1100*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022. xiv + 272 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$160.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-367-71451-2; \$44.05 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-003-15208-8.

Review by Linda Lierheimer, Hawai'i Pacific University.

One might be forgiven for assuming that the title of Annalena Müller's rich new history of the Fontevraud religious order contains a typo, as I did when I was asked to review it. However, the reversed dating—1642-1100—aptly sums up one of Müller's central points: that our understanding of Fontevraud's history has been distorted by its rewriting during the seventeenth century by those with a vested interest in affirming a specific model of monastic government. Founded in 1100, Fontevraud was a French religious order that included both male and female religious and was governed by an abbess. Historians have shown that the relationships of power among male and female members of the so-called double monasteries of medieval Europe were far from clearcut. [1] Müller argues that in the case of Fontevraud, the myth of "female dominion and male servitude" (p. 3) was invented in the seventeenth century as part of a concerted effort to strengthen the abbess's authority. This book corrects some of the errors perpetuated by this distorted history and shows how it was instrumental in the rise of what Müller calls "abbatial absolutism," as well as of the Bourbon family itself, in early modern France.

Müller begins her story in the 1640s when the abbess, Jeanne-Baptiste de Bourbon, was embroiled in a lengthy legal conflict with the monks of the order. The monks objected to what they saw as her illegitimate claim to absolute authority over all the priories of the order and to attempts to relegate the monks to the status of mere servants to both the nuns and the abbess herself. Each party based its claims on different versions of the past. For the monks, the history of Fontevraud was one in which male members of the order had exercised substantial authority, while for the abbess, the monks had always held a subordinate position. Jeanne-Baptiste commissioned historical narratives which eliminated inconvenient aspects of the order's past and destroyed many of the surviving historical documents that conflicted with her vision for the order. This "revisionist" history, Müller convincingly argues, became the standard narrative and "continues to shape modern perceptions of Fontevraud" (p. 16).

The remainder of the book "flashes back" to retell the history of Fontevraud with the aim of eliminating a "seventeenth-century lens" (p. 4). This retelling is organized around "three distinct stories" (p. 3) that help us to understand the conflict that erupted in the 1640s: part one examines the founding and medieval expansion of the order; part two looks at the role of Fontevraud in

the geopolitics of noble families during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; and part three traces the reform of the order, which was initiated in the fifteenth century but took over a century to fully implement.

The seventeenth-century version of Fontevraud's history fostered by Jeanne-Baptiste de Bourbon involved "reinventing" its founder, Robert of Arbrissel (p. 37). A whitewashed version of the founder presented him as an ascetic saint whose subservience to women was a form of voluntary martyrdom, but the medieval sources tell a different story. Robert was born around 1045 in Brittany, the son of a priest in a time before clerical celibacy became official church doctrine and came of age at the height of the Gregorian Reform. In keeping with the spirit of the age, he embraced the ascetic life of a hermit and itinerant preacher and attracted a group of both male and female followers. The mixed-gender nature of this group led to suspicion on the part of church authorities, who accused Robert and his followers of practicing a type of sexual asceticism known as *syneisaktism* that had been labeled a heresy since early Christian times. The authorities chastised Robert for cohabiting with and sleeping amidst women (a practice he continued even after the establishment of Fontevraud) and ordered him to create a stable community with permanent living quarters for his group. The large number of women among his followers, many from aristocratic backgrounds, explains his decision to place the new community under the leadership of an abbess. Fontevraud's first abbess, Pétronille de Chemillé, was handpicked by Robert to oversee the transition from an informal community to an established religious one. An aristocratic widow, Pétronille's experience and knowledge of the world were essential to placing the new order on a solid footing both financially and institutionally. She completed and obtained papal approval of Fontevraud's original statutes, likely drawn up by Robert before his death in 1116. However, these original statutes do not shed much light on the early administration of the order or the relationships of authority among the abbess, nuns, and male canons.

The next three centuries were marked by perpetual crisis. War, famine, and plague devastated the abbey and its priories and ushered in a period of decline. During the Hundred Years War, the abbey was ransacked by the English and many of the nuns were raped. Even with capable leaders, survival required "nothing short of a miracle" (p. 86). Unfortunately, the abbesses who followed Pétronille were not up to the job of guiding Fontevraud through such difficult times. Jeanne de Dreux, abbess during the famine years of the late thirteenth century, was forced to flee after she was unable to provide for the nuns and canons under her care. This first monastic revolt set the stage for numerous conflicts between Fontevrist canons (later monks) and nuns and their abbesses during the remainder of the order's history.

In the wake of the Hundred Years War, Fontevraud was in dire need of rebuilding and reform. Many of its priories had been abandoned, and monastic discipline suffered in those communities that survived. Into the breach stepped a series of reforming abbesses dedicated to restoring Fontevraud to its former glory. Fontevraud became a keystone of the Bourbon-Vendôme family's strategy to further its power and influence. This strategy involved placing family members in important ecclesiastical offices to expand the family's territorial influence. For almost two hundred years, from 1496 to 1670, years that also saw the sharp rise of the Bourbon-Vendômes from relative political obscurity to occupying the throne of France, the position of abbess was kept within the family, passed down from aunt to niece: "Just as the first-born son would receive an education that prepared him for his future task as the head of Vendôme, daughters were chosen and raised in the cloister to be the future head of Fontevraud" (p. 110). Fontevraud's geopolitical importance increased further during the French Wars of Religion when its priories provided

royalist strongholds throughout France in the face of challenges from both Protestants and radical Catholics to the King's authority.

This marriage of political and religious power provides the backdrop for the reform of Fontevraud that began in the 1450s, the third and final "story" told in the book. Reforming Fontevraud was a complex project that involved reestablishing the order on a solid economic foundation, institutional reorganization, and spiritual revitalization. Reform was initiated in 1457 by Fontevraud's first royally appointed abbess, Marie de Bretagne, who oversaw the writing of a new rule that established monastic enclosure for the nuns, reduced the authority of the canons of Fontevraud's one male priory, and greatly expanded the authority of the abbess over the disparate houses of the order. Administrative reform went hand in hand with the introduction of strict observance and bringing religious life into conformity with Church law. Establishing monastic enclosure where it had not existed in the past set off a massive construction campaign that "set in stone both Fontevraud's reform and Bourbon glory" (p. 174). Starting with the mother house and gradually extending to Fontevraud's seventy-seven religious houses, the process transformed Fontevraud "from a loose network of semi-independent priories into a centralized organization under abbatial rule" (p. 132).

From the start, the project met with almost universal resistance. Marie de Bretagne left Fontevraud to establish a new priory in 1471 when she was unable to win over the abbey's inhabitants (p. 134). A more hard-nosed Renée de Bourbon took drastic measures when both male and female members of the order resisted her attempts to impose reform. In 1504, she expelled the majority of the 150 nuns from the mother house and transferred them to other priories. Two years later, accompanied by a group of armed men supplied by her brother, the count of Vendôme, she deposed the leaders of Fontevraud's male priory, Saint-Jean-de-l'Habit, and stripped it of its possessions. Such resistance was clearly an expression of protest against the expansion of the abbess's authority, which jeopardized the autonomy of the monks and nuns, rather than merely a reluctance to adopt a more austere religious life.

At the local level, overcoming resistance often meant competing with local noble families who had longstanding patronage relationships to individual houses, as is evident in the case of Blessac. Blessac, one of the oldest Fontevrist priories, was founded in 1049 by Ranulphe III d'Aubusson and joined the Fontevrist order in 1112. During the centuries that followed, it continued to have close ties to the Aubusson family. A report produced by abbatial visitors in 1530 detailed serious breaches of monastic discipline, such as nuns socializing with men and wearing expensive clothes, and accused the prioress of living in the convent with Charles d'Aubusson "as if she were his wife." Müller suggests that the "almost textbook-like" charges against the nuns may have been trumped up, especially as Charles was likely the sibling or close relative of the prioress (p. 188). Whether or not the charges were true, the report produced the desired outcome by providing a legal basis for deposing the prioress and installing the Bourbon family in place of the Aubussons as chief patrons.

This meticulously researched and insightful book pushes us to reevaluate the so-called "rise of absolutism" and the concomitant rise of the Bourbons in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France. Müller shows that both women and religious institutions were central to the political strategy of the Bourbons. The inclusion of useful maps and appendices enhances our understanding of these developments and will be useful to future researchers. The history of Fontevraud offers an important reminder to historians not to take sources at face value. Although

religious historians are accustomed to working with hagiographical sources and used to reading these with a critical eye, we may be less attuned to the possibility of blatant falsification of the historical record and often rely on common understandings of the past established by previous scholars.

Beyond Fontevraud, this book challenges the image of heroic reforming abbesses presented in hagiographical accounts by early modern convent historians like Jacqueline Bouette de Blémur, who chronicled the reform of women's Benedictine houses in France during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.<sup>[2]</sup> While there is no doubt that these reformers were at least partially motivated by a sincere desire for spiritual renewal, many nuns (and monks), as Müller shows for Fontevraud, may have opposed reform because it stripped them of their independence and traditional rights, especially the right of election.

This study also challenges easy assumptions about gender and authority in medieval and early modern religious institutions. Müller argues that "Fontevraud's organizational structure is best understood in terms of social rather than gender hierarchies" (p. 51) and that its early organization arose from practical considerations: women in the order outnumbered and had higher social status than the men. While this, I would argue, does not automatically "refute the idea of Fontevraud as an example of an inverted medieval gender hierarchy" (p. 4), the story of Fontevraud—and especially the rebellion of both the monks and nuns against the all-powerful abbess—should push us to think in more complex ways about historical changes in religious authority and the gendered implications of these changes, particularly during the Counter-Reformation era. Although the Council of Trent placed most female convents under the authority of bishops, this book contributes to a growing body of scholarship that challenges any simple understanding of the period as one of increasing control by a male church hierarchy over religious women.<sup>[3]</sup> Müller's study raises questions not only about the relationship between abbatial and political absolutism but also about its connection to a wider tendency towards centralization and enhanced control over monastic institutions in the Catholic Church—and resistance to it—in early modern Europe.

## NOTES

[1] See for example Alison Beach and Andra Juganaru, "The Double Monastery as a Historiographical Problem (Fourth to Twelfth Century)," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West*, Vol. 1, ed. Alison Beach and Isabelle Cochelin, eds. (Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 561-578; and Catherine Peyroux, "Abbess and Cloister: Double Monasteries in the Early Medieval West" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1991).

[2] Jacqueline Bouette de Blémur, *Eloges de plusieurs personnes illustres en piété de l'ordre de St. Benoist, décédées en ces derniers siècles*, 2 vols. (Paris: Warin, 1679).

[3] See for example, Linda Lierheimer, "Gender, Resistance, and the Limits of Episcopal Authority: Sébastien Zamet's Relationships with Nuns, 1615-55," in Jennifer Mara DeSilva, ed., *Episcopal Reform and Politics in Early Modern Europe*, (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2012), pp. 147-172.

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