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Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Hull Dialogue

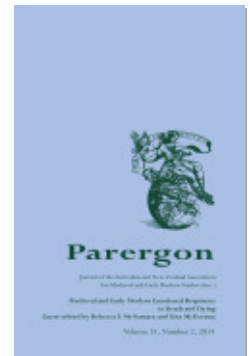
ed. by Virginia Blanton, Veronica O'Mara, and Patricia Stoop (review)

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while Part 4 focuses specifically on Frederick Barbarossa and his relations with the papacy. Part 5, 'Medieval History in Modern Perspective', includes three historiographical pieces defending Kantorowicz against accusations of Nazism and a rumination on 'The Medievalist as Hero' in contemporary popular culture. The essays reflect Benson's characteristic wit and clarity of style, which rendered his dense and precise scholarship highly readable. To take one example: 'Urbs et orbis' (pp. 3–19) examines the significance of this classical Roman topos in twelfth- and thirteenth-century political thought. It begins with an anecdote about Benson's wife purchasing an upscale shopping bag, inside of which is inscribed the legend 'URBU ET ORBI'.

Scholars in Benson's speciality areas will find much of value here. Of note are several lectures and unrevised articles from the 1980s that were probably intended for inclusion in Benson's book on Frederick Barbarossa, left unfinished at his death. Complementing these is an important early piece, 'Imperator oconomus Ecclesiae: Notes on a Decretistic Theory of the Imperial Office'. This appeared in an unpublished 1955 *festschrift* but until now it was only accessible in typescript in the archives of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*.

More generally, the volume has plenty to offer political and legal historians and those interested in broader questions about medieval political culture and the semiotics of power. Finally, Benson's witty, erudite, and sometimes poignant reflections on being a medieval historian in the modern world make this book an engaging read for any medievalist.

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Blanton, Virginia, **O'Mara**, and **Patricia Stoop**, eds, *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Hull Dialogue* (Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts, 26), Turnhout, Brepols, 2013; hardback; pp. xxxiii, 367; 19 b/w illustrations, 6 tables; R.R.P. €90.00; ISBN 978250353972.

This volume contains seventeen papers originally delivered at the 2011 Hull conference on Nun's Literacies in Medieval Europe. Most readers will find some of the material (and some of the contributors) unfamiliar, as this comparative volume ranges widely across northern Europe (especially Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and England) from the eighth to the early sixteenth centuries, so the editorial introduction is particularly welcome.

The first section, 'Literacy and Nuns: Finding and Interpreting the Evidence', opens with Helene Scheck's consideration of a Carolingian manuscript and the evidence for its study over several centuries by French and German women religious literate in Latin. Bruce L. Venarde discusses a different kind of literacy in Petronilla de Chemillé, first abbess of Fontevraud, who in the twelfth century used 'the written word as a strategic tool' (p. 20). Alison I. Beach writes on Mathilde von Neuffen, one of five twelfth-century

scribes at the double monastery of Zwiefalten whose names are known, arguing that she was one of many women involved in book production there. We then take a chronological and geographical leap into late medieval England, with Marilyn Oliva's analysis of nuns' French, English, and Latin household accounts, and Veronica O'Mara's discussion of the late medieval English nun, which gathers together the scattered evidence for a large number of female scribes.

The second section, 'Language and Literacy: Latin and the Vernacular', highlights the lack of Latin literacy among English nuns, with contributions devoted to Sweden, Austria, and the Netherlands, but nothing on England. Monica Hedlund writes on (Continental) nuns' Latinity, with particular reference to the Swedish Birgittines; Cynthia J. Cyrus studies literacy in several Viennese women's houses, and Thom Mertens writes on fifteenth-century Middle Dutch books of hours and other liturgical texts, and their use by a variety of women religious.

The third and longest section, 'Literate Nuns: Reading and Writing in the Convent', initiates more of a dialogue between England and the Continent, with three contributions on English and four on Continental nuns. Lisa M. C. Weston writes on the embodied 'habits of literacy' (p. 149) among seventh- and eighth-century Anglo-Saxon nuns, while Stephanie Hollis writes on Romsey Abbey and the legendary that it owned in the fifteenth century (now London, British Library, MS Lansdowne 346), as possible evidence of an 'early medieval tradition of literacy' (p. 171). Virginia Blanton writes on the six extant legendaries in Latin, Anglo-Norman, and English 'owned by or gifted to late medieval English nuns' (p. 188). Turning back to Europe, Alfred Thomas writes on the German, Czech, and Latin literacy of Bohemian noblewomen, and Regina Schiewer studies the *St Georgener Predigten*, an early thirteenth-century Cistercian sermon collection in German clearly aimed at literate and learned nuns. Jonas Carlquist addresses the extent of the Vadstena Birgittine nuns' learning, with particular reference to mealtime readings of devotional texts in Swedish translation, and Ingela Hedström pursues this subject more generally, showing that the Vadstena nuns' daily activities required not only reading, writing, and access to books, but also scribal activity, especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The final section, 'Authorship and Nuns: Writing by the Nun for the Nun', is significantly the shortest, with two contributions: Wybren Scheepsma on Griet Essinchghes, an early sixteenth-century Windesheim nun, and her work on the sister-book of Diepenveen, and Patricia Stoop on sixteenth-century sermons from a Cistercian abbey near Brussels.

This fascinating collection advances our knowledge of medieval nuns' literacy, but shows that it is still uneven.

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