
Over the past twenty years, discussions of Carolingian monasticism have underscored the enforcement of claustral purity and the effort to remove unwanted laymen and secular influences from within sacred walls. Unafraid of sullying the reputation of these pure monks, Lynda Coon’s recent manuscript delves into the dirty discourses of gender and sexuality present within ninth-century monastic writings in order to expose and highlight the underappreciated role of the body within the cloister.

Coon argues that the Carolingian monastic body resembled that of Christ in the manner that it was offered as a divine sacrifice upon the altar. Utilizing contemporary gender theory, she further establishes that these virginal bodies were not all equal, but rather arranged according to a hierarchy of masculinities (11). Coon explores how the politics of this gender hierarchy played out within claustral space and amongst secular visitors through an analysis of the Rule of Benedict, Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel and Hildemar’s commentaries on the Rule, the architecture of Corvey and Fulda, the Plan of Saint Gall, as well as the works of Hrabanus Maurus. Drawing together this wide body of material, she punctuates her discussion with illustrations surrounding the preference of Carolingian monks for the aesthetic of “bricolage,” the cut-and-paste style popular in the literary and architectural constructs of the ninth century (48). She further points out and places emphasis upon the importance of the foursquare in visual art and the newly established architectural design of the cloister (224). Ultimately, Coon concludes that the ninth-century monastery was a highly gendered space in which monks could assert their superior monastic virility over their secular counterparts.

Coon’s analysis is divided into seven chapters, the first two of which introduce the work of Hrabanus Maurus and other Carolingian writers. Her analysis begins with an examination of the Benedictine Rule, a source that was increasingly enforced in the legislative texts of the period. The Rule, she argues, establishes the mouth as the central orifice in the construction of a hierarchical gender pyramid among monks, as it either had the power to raise a brother through
the utterance of divine words or to degrade him by acting as a leaky, vaginal point of entry for worldly contamination (81, 87). She continues this discussion with an examination of how the ninth-century commentaries upon the Rule emphasized the need to transform one’s inner body into a pure and sacred cloister by guarding all corporal entry points (100). The connection between claustral and bodily purity is further highlighted through her analysis of Carolingian sacred space, both at Corvey, Fulda, and in the Plan of Saint Gall. Just as the mouth and other orifices must continually be guarded, the entry points to the cloister itself are spaces of high vigilance. Thus, the architecture of monasteries reflected and reinforced the gender practices established in the Rule (215).

One of the strongest points of this book is Coon’s open acknowledgement of the presence of secular laymen within the cloister. Underscoring the fact that the Rule, the commentaries on the Rule, and the Plan of Saint Gall all provide instructions and space for outsiders’ accommodation and reception within the monastery, she distinguishes between the discourse of separation and the realities of ninth-century life. This allows her to concentrate on the manner in which monks asserted their superior masculinity over secular men, rather than attempting to demonstrate how they barred the cloister from all guests. Furthermore, Coon’s discussion of the continuities between ancient and early medieval ascetic conceptions of the body goes a long way toward undermining the idea of a complete Carolingian reformation. Appreciating the ninth-century tendency to borrow and build upon previously existing ideologies underscores the often-overlooked connection between this period and the one that preceded it.

Despite these strengths, however, some might question Coon’s overly sexualized reading of these monastic sources. Tying the monastic beating rod, a virga, to the classical metonymy for the phallus and interpreting beatings as a form of sexual subjugation wherein one is feminized by the penetration of the rod may be taking the literal meaning of the Rule too far (87). Similarly, interpreting the altar as a metaphorical birth canal, though an interesting idea, requires further citation of textual evidence (94). Using the descriptions of intimate love between men in the cloister in order to demonstrate the existence of a full-blown monastic queer subculture that provided a space to articulate same-sex desire, may also be taking too much license with common literary tropes for expressing friendship (250). At times these types of interpretations of
the Latin cause one to wonder if Coon may have been a bit too eager to find corporal connections and meanings in some of the texts.

These reservations aside, this book provides an intriguing glimpse into the highly gendered world of the Carolingian cloister and will no doubt be of interest to all scholars studying early monasticism and the history of the body and space. Future work could benefit from extending this discussion of the monastic body into other Carolingian sources, particularly ninth-century hagiography.

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