

Van Egmond, Wolfert S., *Conversing with the Saints: Communication in Pre-Carolingian Hagiography from Auxerre* (Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy, 15), Turnhout, Brepols, 2006; hardback; pp. 230; R.R.P. €60.00; ISBN 2503517609.

Conversing with the Saints is essentially an English translation of Wolfert van Egmond's PhD thesis at the University of Utrecht. One tends to come to PhD theses-turned-books and to translated works with certain trepidations born of experience. In this case, one concern was completely unfounded: Betsy van der Hoek's translation is almost entirely lacking in awkwardness, the English indeed better than one has come to expect of many books whose authors' first language is English. As far as turning a thesis into a book goes, the problem is perhaps exacerbated by the fact that this is one of those theses which was conceived to contribute to a larger research project, which doubtless had considerable impact on the thesis's shape and direction. As a book, an attempt to be a complete and cohesive entity, it leaves the reader largely unsatisfied.

The book claims to be about communication as recorded in hagiography. In this respect it is more or less a failure. The actual survey of communication is somewhat cursory, particularly with reference to the Merovingian works. Constantius's *Vita Germani* fares a little better. The attempt to discuss literacy in the texts is feeble: for instance on p. 40, a discussion of 'the instances of writing' has as its principal evidence the fact that 'one of the clerics accompanying Germanus took it upon himself to read'. There is absolutely no acknowledgement that the acts of reading and of writing are two vastly different things and the use of one as evidence for the other is problematic to say the least.

Far more interesting and fruitful is the discussion of ritual in the texts. While I would question the notion that ritual is necessarily always a tool of communication, there is some very thorough and original analysis of the ways ritual is described and deployed in the hagiography. This ranges over such things as the classical *adventus* ceremony, the mass, exorcism and marriage. What I found most valuable, and in itself a reason for this book to be considered important, is the discussion on pp. 189ff of the relationship between the ritual of baptism and the celebration of Easter. Van Egmond makes the fascinating suggestion that there was a real urge to ensure that catechumens were 'fully persuaded' (p. 190), as opposed to fully instructed, before being baptized. He sets out a case for a complex and detailed process of preparation to ensure the engagement of catechumens with their new faith.

The related argument put by van Egmond, that the normal occasion for baptism was Easter and that anomalous baptismal occasions were often linked to emergencies or resulted in baptized persons behaving inappropriately for Christians, is particularly compelling. It also, to my mind, opens up very interesting possibilities for new layers of understanding of the Easter dating controversy, particularly in the British Isles, whose association with Auxerre through the persons of Germanus and Albanus is pointed out by van Egmond.

A good part of the book is given over to dating and geographically locating the texts. Some very good points are made, but one has the frustrating impression that van Egmond gives up just as he is about to come to the really significant part of the discussion. For example, in his introductory survey of the Carolingian hagiography, he is content to leave us with the somewhat confusing assemblage of opinions on Heiric: 'After [877], there is no more mention of Heiric in the sources. It is generally assumed that he died in 876 or 877. Some, however, put his death after 883 because they believe certain additions to the *Collectanea*, which could not have been made any earlier than that year, were made by Heiric himself' (p. 15). Sadly, neither here nor in the accompanying footnote does van Egmond make the least attempt to suggest how Heiric could be recorded as doing something in 877 if he had died in 876, or what his own view is on the 883 additions. More problematically, on p. 129 he quotes the *Vita Aunarii* describing a miracle involving a young boy, who 'remains to this very day bound in obedience', claiming that '[s]ince the text does not say that the boy had since become an old man, this makes a completion of the *Vita* after the seventh century extremely unlikely'. To my mind, the boy had most likely become an old man, and this is why his continued devotion was remarkable. In any case, such speculation is hardly a sound basis for a dating argument.

This thesis almost certainly fulfilled all the requirements for a thesis: it contains good and thorough research amongst primary sources, it demonstrates the ability to analyse those sources, and it contributes new material to scholarship. As a book, it works much less well: it skips from provenance to content and back again. Ultimately, van Egmond's concluding point is well made: there is much scope for further useful research here. It is to be hoped that van Egmond is doing that research: he has demonstrated the ability to engage beneficially with the material, and if he did so in a sustained way would doubtless provide us with much food for thought.

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