

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Ellen F. Arnold.** *Negotiating the Landscape: Environment and Monastic Identity in the Medieval Ardennes.* Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. 312 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4463-2; \$65.00 (e-book), ISBN 978-0-8122-0752-1.

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Set in the seventh-century through twelfth-century Ardennes, Ellen F. Arnold's *Negotiating the Landscape* analyzes the relationship between the allied Benedictine monasteries of Stavelot and Malmedy and their environment. Arnold explores the shifting views of monastic identity, religious narratives, and the landscape. Using a variety of sources from the monasteries' archives, including several hagiographical writings, miracle stories, property deeds and charters, and the Abbot Wibald's letters (1146-54 and 1156-57), she offers what in many ways resembles a microhistory. In the most general sense, *Negotiating the Landscape* presents the idea that monastic relationships with the environment are paradoxical and described according to the needs of the narrative in which the description is placed. But the book contributes to the dialogue about medieval monastic relationships with the environment in several other ways. Arnold effectively argues against the longstanding idea put forth by Lynn White, in her article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," that in using God's demand in Genesis that man shall "have dominion over nature," the medieval church carelessly exploited nature and destroyed forests; she also expands on Jacques Le Goff's theory, in his chapter "The Wilderness and the Medieval West," that the wilderness served as the monks' isolation from society.[1] She aims to "erase" the line Le Goff draws between secular and religious writing, claiming that the "hagiographies, histories, and even the occasionally forged charters are just as *imagined* as vernacular romances" (p. 26). Lastly, the work shows that monastic identity was both negotiated by and dependent on the monastery's relationship with the forested landscape by

which it was surrounded.

In the first chapter, Arnold exposes the difficulty in accurately translating the Latin text. She describes how variations of the words used to describe the surrounding forest—"saltus, silva, nemus, forestis, etc."—add to the complexity of assessing the monastic perspective of the wilderness. The author follows suit, tending to also use "nature," "forest," "environment," "wilderness," and "landscape" interchangeably. Consequent with the linguistic ambiguity are the roles played by the wilderness in the monks' narratives—it is at times a setting plagued with dangers while at other times one that is both sacred and deserving proper management and preservation. The domesticated landscape provided many resources, including salt. The second chapter focuses more on the ways in which the monasteries maintained, cultivated, and preserved the woodlands as well as exploited the resources therein. In this case, the landscape is viewed as bountiful and productive, a benevolent gift abounding with the necessities of monastic living. Chapter 3 investigates the practical logistics involved with the management of lands in a world of neighbors, feudal rights, and secular agendas. Spiritual rights to the land were articulated through "monastic memory," which included various aspects of saints' lives, miracle stories, and especially the narratives proclaimed in the *Vita Remacli*, a tenth-century hagiographical account of the monk Remacle (p. 111). In addition to spiritual authority, the abbots asserted political and legal authority, sometimes "blurring the line between legal and spiritual decree," which led to a number of conflicts with secular

neighbors and also to tension between the two monasteries themselves (p. 119). The fourth chapter assesses the written record with which each monastery claimed ownership of lands and attempted to allay various boundary disputes. Physical sites became associated with miraculous events and connected to the lives of monks and saints, thus sacralizing the landscape. Arnold claims that the monks wielded the powers of narrative and memory to show that they and their saints were privy to a special kind of religious authority over the natural world (p. 172).

The last chapter is the strongest, as it pulls together the many loose strings left behind in the previous chapters and recaptures the essence of the study. Arnold revisits the concept of monastic identity and shows how the monasteries integrated the landscape into a political, economic, and spiritual narrative, which ties together identity and the natural world. The narrative constructs the idea of responsible Christian ownership of land and highlights both the role of the monastery and the moral obligations—environmental, religious, and economic—of those who were subject to the monks because of the places they inhabited. The abbots were spiritual leaders as well as stewards of the land and temporal landlords. Arnold says: “By consciously connecting religion to the local landscape, the monks labored to tie themselves and their saints to the local, daily experiences of the people of the Ardennes” (p. 176). The final chapter is followed by several valuable resources, including a time line of monastic events, a handlist of sources with brief descriptions, a rich set of endnotes, an extensive bibliography, and a well-assembled index.

Arnold makes it clear that it is not a simple task to describe the medieval monastic relationship with nature and that this relationship is one that is characterized by a state of flux. Though a source of isolation, like a monastic desert, the woodlands were also a source of sustenance for the monastery and the monks within. This landscape was equally a source of conflict and a locus from which enemies emerged. She admits that her analysis of the monasteries of Stavelot and Malmedy is by no means universal, claiming that each monastic house, when explored more deeply, would have its own story to tell of its relationship with nature (p. 211). Despite the somewhat wordy chapters and seemingly tangential flights, the study is pulled together sufficiently by the end, thus making a genuine contribution to the scholarly community and its current body of literature. Arnold provides a model of study that may be effectively utilized in the archives of another medieval monastery which dealt with vast ownership of natural environments. Her “environmental exegesis,” which calls for the inclusion of the ideas, goals, stories, and worldview of hagiographers into medieval environmental history, serves as an apt example for others interested in monastic identity and its role in the natural world (p. 13).

#### Note

[1]. Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203-1207; and Jacques Le Goff, “The Wilderness and the Medieval West,” in *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 47-59.

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