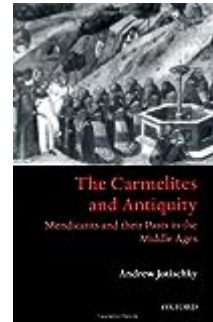




Andrew Jotischky. *The Carmelites and Antiquity: Mendicants and Their Pasts in the Middle Ages.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. xii + 370 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820634-7.



Reviewed by Stephen Allen (Independent Scholar)

Published on H-Catholic (October, 2003)

Creating Usable Mendicant Pasts

Creating Usable Mendicant Pasts

Medieval Carmelite origin myths are comparatively well-known among medievalists. Early accounts of the order's foundation by the prophet Elijah, later histories that make Carmelites out of many of the heroes of primitive monasticism—these tales have been recounted, discussed, and debunked at length. Admittedly, Carmelite writings have not been given the same attention as those by Dominicans and Franciscans, but they have not been ignored. What is less than clear, however, is exactly why medieval Carmelites felt the need to create foundation narratives that today seem inaccurate at best, works of pure fancy at worst. This question forms the subject of Andrew Jotischky's book.

The first chapter of the book provides a brief outline of the Carmelites' actual history from the foundation of the order in the late twelfth century to the time of the Reformation. Jotischky pays particular attention to two major developments of the thirteenth century: the change from the eremetical to the mendicant lifestyle in the middle decades of the century and the near dissolution of the order following the Second Council of Lyons (1274). Both

of these events created major stresses within the order, and both were related to attacks on the order by both secular clergy and other mendicants. The second chapter discusses in detail one of the Carmelite responses to attacks in the late thirteenth century. In 1287, the order changed its distinctive striped habit to a plain white one, and Jotischky shows how this change spurred later Carmelite apologists to find or create historical precedents for the new habit.

In chapter 3, Jotischky examines the *Ignea Sagitta*, a polemical work written by the Carmelite prior-general Nicholas Gallicus around 1270. Although this is not a work of history as such, it does deploy historical arguments in an attempt to call the order back to its earlier, eremetical roots. Jotischky sees this work as a precursor to later, more self-consciously historical texts: "Nicholas raises the same questions of identity and status that would trouble fourteenth-century Carmelites. He was less concerned than his successors with establishing historical lines of influence or identifying a specific historical narrative. Yet he was wrestling with essentially the same questions: What did it mean to be a Carmelite?"

Where did the spiritual origins, and thus the integrity of the order, lie? And how was the order to be located within the Church's mission" (p. 105)? The Carmelite response to these questions, and the deployment of historical narratives to answer them, are the subject of the next four chapters.

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the development of Carmelite historiography from the thirteenth century to the end of the fourteenth, culminating in the work of Philip Ribot in the 1370s. During this period, the Carmelite tradition developed from a simple insistence on a foundation by Elijah to a complicated history in which Old and New Testament figures, and known and invented individuals in the early Church, were marshaled to demonstrate the continuous existence of the Carmelites as a distinct order from the time of the prophets. Much of this historical writing came about as a response to external doubts about the order's legitimacy, especially in the form of attacks by other mendicant orders on the Carmelites in specific and by the followers of Wyclif on mendicants in general. The fifth and sixth chapters of *The Carmelites and Antiquity* continue the account of Carmelite historical writing up to the sixteenth century. This period saw the addition and absorption of even more figures from the patristic era into the Carmelite master narrative and culminated in the compilation and collection activities of John Bale in the 1520s and 1530s.

In chapter 8, Jotischky compares Carmelite historical writing to that of the other mendicant orders. Whereas the Dominicans and Franciscans developed narratives that emphasize the restoration of the state of affairs of primitive Christianity, the Carmelites (and to some extent the Franciscans) emphasized an unbroken continuity with the past. Exactly why this continuity would have been so important to the Carmelites, and why the Carmelites took great pains to "colonize" the past, are the subjects of the last chapter. Here, Jotischky examines medieval perceptions of history and tradition—both secular and religious—pointing out the importance of rhetoric in medieval history writing. He also analyzes in some depth the question of historical truth and how, in the Middle Ages, a traditional narrative could be considered true even if some of its components were known to be false.

This book is a valuable contribution not only to the history of Carmelite thought, which tends to be overshadowed by the history of Dominican and Augustinian thought, but also to the historiography of the Middle Ages. Jotischky's work can be profitably read by those concerned with the history of the mendicants, the history of Biblical interpretation and the traditions of the early Church, and the history of historical thought itself. It is a valuable addition to the *corpus* of studies of medieval religion.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-catholic>

Citation: Stephen Allen. Review of Jotischky, Andrew, *The Carmelites and Antiquity: Mendicants and Their Pasts in the Middle Ages*. H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. October, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8325>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.