



Book reviews

Anticipating Sin in Medieval Society. Childhood, Sexuality, and Violence in the Early Penitentials. By Erin V. Abraham. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. 2017. 194 pp. €75. ISBN 978 94 6298371 7.

Early medieval handbooks for penance and confession are highly interesting and important sources for investigating social and cultural history. This engaging book, written in a refreshing style, is further evidence of their value. The author tackles three major themes with the help of these sources. She looks into the information they contain about youth and childhood, about sexuality and marriage, and finally, about violence. The book begins without much ado with an introduction to the sources and an indication of the contents of the chapters that follow. Neither here nor elsewhere in the book does the author provide the reader with an explication of the motives to undertake such a study, or with a historiographical or theoretical positioning of her work. In this way the book provides an interesting and often convincing reading of the sources, but it remains unclear how far it builds on existing studies, making it difficult to assess which elements of interpretation are really new. At some points the author hints at her opposition to a 'dominant narrative', as where she writes about such a narrative constructing 'a single, rigid program of sexual repression developed by homophobic and misogynist churchmen' (p. 174), but such a narrative does not appear in recent, not even in less recent scholarly studies of the subject.

In Chapter 1 the main sources are briefly and adequately introduced and there is a description of some general characteristics regarding the communities they were written for and the ways in which they were put to use. The study relies mostly on an analysis of nine penitential books, most of which are 'Irish' (Finnian, Columbanus, Cummean, possibly the *Ambrosianum*, the Bigotian penitential and the Old Irish one). Two were probably composed in Anglo-Saxon England (Theodore and the penitential attributed to Egbert of York) and one is early Frankish (the Burgundian penitential). The preponderance of Irish texts in this corpus is nowhere explained, while a discussion of other contemporary texts, such as the *Paenitentiale Oxoniense II* or

the *Excarpsus Cummeani*, would certainly have been fruitful for the themes discussed in the ensuing chapters.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on children and youths. They discuss parental care, stages of childhood, the question of whether and when children were seen as capable of sinning, and forms of sinful sexual behaviour amongst the young. Sexuality is also the topic of the two ensuing chapters. The first of these deals with matters pertaining to marriage, such as periods of abstinence within a marriage, adulterous liaisons, regulations for including and excluding marriage candidates (incest legislation) and the circumstances in which a marriage could be dissolved. Chapter 5 centres on sexuality outside of marriage: autoeroticism, bestiality and sexual relations between members of the same sex. The last chapter discusses a theme that has not received as much attention as sexuality, although it concerns one of the central issues of penitential books: violence. As in the other chapters, the author here stresses the importance of penance as a social phenomenon. The composers of penitential books did not only provide for spiritual cleansing through the performance of penance, but also gave room for forms of reconciliation that were not necessarily religious, such as offering material compensation for a killing or a wounding.

The book aims at studying the penitentials in a wider context, 'situating them within the broader discourses with which they were engaged' (p. 14). The way of addressing the question of whom these texts targeted as an audience is intelligent and convincing. The discussion of their relationship with other texts, however, is not always as persuasive. I can see that authors of penitential books knew Isidore of Seville or John Cassian, but I would like to be presented with more evidence that they actually knew Augustine's *Confessiones* or the work of Ambrose of Milan. That penitential authors worked in a world in which Gregory the Great was regarded as an authority is evident and it is surprising, therefore, that his responses to a set of questions put to him by Augustine of Canterbury, the so-called *Libellus Responsionum*, only receives scant attention in this book. It is mentioned only once, whereas this text was often transmitted together with (or even integrated into) penitential books and therefore clearly functioned in similar contexts.

The blurb of the book praises it for its 'new, more accurate translations'. It is rather disappointing therefore to encounter curious translations and problems with Latin. The translation offered here for Theodore's judgement of a man having sex with his wife *in tergo* is more explicit regarding the description of the deed itself than the translation found in the useful edition of penitential books by John T. McNeill and Helena Gamer published in 1938. But I think their

rendition that somebody acting thus 'ought to do penance as one who offends with animals' is more accurate than Abraham's, 'as though he did that thing with animals' (p. 98). Theodore's judgement that someone who had sex with his mother should never 'change' (*mutare*) except on Sundays, does not refer to a changing of clothes (pp. 30 and 157), but to the modification of penance through commutations, which were part and parcel of the penitential system. It is furthermore peculiar to read Latin terms that do not occur in the sources in the way they are found here, such as *aetas infantes*, as in the title of Chapter 4, *fratres naturalis* (p. 129), or *profanus incestus* (p. 130). The *Collectio Hibernensis* is referred to as the *Collectio Canones Hibernenses* (p. 62 and bibliography, p. 180). More careful editing could have avoided these (and other) slips. The contents and the fresh approach of the book would have deserved more care.

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La fin de l'Empire romain d'Occident: Rome et les Wisigoths de 382 à 531. By Christine Delaplace. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes. 2015. 373 pp. €21. ISBN 978 2 7535 4295 2.

Christine Delaplace's book is nominally about the Visigothic settlement in Gaul and Spain but in reality it uses this foundation as a stepping stone to examine a variety of topics relating to the fall of the western empire. The first part of the book consists of the introduction, which is primarily concerned with historiography. This section does an excellent job of outlining the general interpretations and reinterpretations that the fall of Rome has undergone in the past two centuries. Indeed, the presentation of historiography is a strength throughout, as the monograph never fails to fit its views into the larger scholarly context.

The second part of the book takes a *longue durée* approach in introducing the key concepts it will rely on later. The first chapter is entirely about the importance of embassies, particularly in late antiquity. There is a long list of scholarship addressing this topic but most of it focuses on the unique case of Romano-Persian relations and a more western viewpoint is valuable. After this, it goes on to discuss the nature of client kingdoms (Chapter 2) and what it considers to be a misrepresentation of their mutually beneficial nature. The third chapter is focused on terminology, with the changing meaning of terms like *foedus* coming in for particular scrutiny.