

Book reviews

G. Krutzler, *Kult und Tabu. Wahrnehmungen der Germania bei Bonifatius*. Vienna/Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2011 (Anthropologie des Mittelalters, 2), 439 pp. ISBN 978-3-643-50251-3. € 34.90.

The book under review originated as a Ph.D. thesis written at the University of Vienna and focusses on the ways in which sources connected to the activities of Boniface depict the Germanic peoples among which this Anglo-Saxon missionary was active. The study concentrates mainly on the Hesses, the Thuringians, the Saxons, the Frisians, and the Bavarians. The intriguing correspondence of Boniface forms the backbone of the documentation in this study, which is enriched by an impressive array of other sources: textual, archaeological, linguistic, and toponymical. The textual sources discussed range from the period of antiquity to the eleventh century. The author identified three main themes which were at the heart of the otherness that Boniface and his correspondents observed among the populations in the Germanic lands where the missionary was active. First of all, the pagan character of their religion was emphasized, possibly relating to formal pagan cults, but more generally referring to less formal forms of religious behaviour. The second main theme that can be inferred from Boniface's correspondence regards the consumption of particular kinds of food. The third theme concerns patterns of choosing a wife.

It is the investigation of what we know about these three themes – religion, food, and marriage – that form the cornerstone of this study. Particularly regarding the theme of forms of religious behaviour that Boniface encountered, a lot of recent research suggests that our sources do not describe actual practice among the Germanic peoples, but rather construct a particular view of pagan religion that relies mainly on existing literary *topoi*. This study seems to result from a feeling of unease with this particular approach. It, therefore, assesses the literary as well as other source material in order to establish whether we can say anything about the actual religion of the Hesses, Thuringians, Saxons, Frisians, or Bavarians in the eighth century. What becomes clear is that our sources do not permit us to distinguish between these peoples as far as their religiosity is concerned. Because of this lack of specificity, this study at times reads like old-fashioned research into Germanic religion as such, bringing together sources from a great variety of backgrounds in order to reconstruct 'the Germanic religion'. The fact that the author regularly refers to outmoded literature, such as the *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* by Jan de Vries

or the *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* without questioning their method or approach, underlines this impression.

The discussion of specific topics is, moreover, very uneven. Is it really necessary to devote 16 pages to an analysis of the Etruscan and Roman ways of divination by means of reading the entrails of an animal, the *aruspicia*, especially when it is not even certain that the use of that term by Boniface or his biographer Willibald refers to such a practice and not to divination in general? The analysis of sources more closely related to Boniface's activities is covered in a mere 4 pages, where glosses in Old High German are discussed, which are, however, neither precisely dated nor located. The author then concludes that the existence of such rituals in the Germanic world is made plausible because of the general adherence to such rituals using sacrificial animals as it is documented by the history of religions (*Religionsgeschichte*). Strangely, there is no discussion in this context of headings 13 and 16 of the famous *Indiculus Superstitionum*, the document most probably listing topics for further discussion in Bonifatian circles about questionable religious practices. These tersely formulated indications of discussion topics might reveal something of such a ritual, although possibly related to the brain of an animal. Canon 23 of the *Paenitentiale Oxoniense II*, a text that is related to missionary activity in the eighth century, moreover censures eating the entrails of animals while these are still alive and, in the following canon, censures foretelling the future, thereby suggesting an association of these two canons. I would have preferred to read a careful analysis of these texts instead of the ample discussion of Roman practices.

Whereas the feelings of unease regarding the prevailing view on descriptions of paganism in early-medieval sources as a purely literary construct without any relation with actual practice is understandable, this study is not careful enough in its analysis of the sources that can be closely related to Boniface and his surroundings to argue convincingly that we are able to say something specific about actual forms of religious behaviour in the Germanic lands in the eighth century. Unfortunately, the same conclusion must be reached regarding the two other main topics discussed in this book: dietary and marriage patterns. This study, while adducing a lot of material, unfortunately lacks a sophisticated methodological discussion of the rich mass of sources presented here to be able to reach firm and convincing conclusions.

Rob MEENS
University of Utrecht