

fewer supervised, creates an important new understanding of the early modern almshouse and thoroughly puts paid to the Trollopean images that continue to linger in our imaginations.

Nicholls's final chapter is a case study of the inner workings and funding of the almshouse in Leamington Hastings, Warwickshire. This is good local history, but again an opportunity is lost. Rather than interweaving this almshouse into the greater picture painted earlier, it rests in isolation and rather awkwardly at the end, leaving the reader to do the intellectual heavy lifting of contextualization and the drawing forth of significance.

Despite doing a great service to the historiography of almshouses and our understanding of the accommodations of the poor, the book stumbles. In places, such as the motivations behind the foundations, it surveys a range of causes, but provides no trends nor indication of change over time. Elsewhere, there are leaps of logic—asserting, for example, that Nigel Goose's calculations were “probably unrealistic” (44), or that the marks in a parish register were “presumably from where the vicar ... had been checking the register to establish when and where” a particular woman was born (151). There is also a troubling lack of precision of language. I am very aware of my intellectual indebtedness to the work of Keith Wrightson and Philippa Levine; therefore, Nicholls's statement that “Wrightson and Levine agree with Botelho” struck me at once as backwards. Small as it seems, this and other issues compound over time to sometimes overshadow the good work that is here. They also highlight the difficulties and complexities behind such research. The variables are many, the considerations and implications vast and far-reaching, and the historiography undernourished. In short, no single book can yet capture it all. Still, Nicholls clearly shows the importance of almshouse culture, as well as the complexities and insecurities that swirled around putting a roof over one's head.

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This collection of eight essays makes a useful contribution to scholarship on the *First Life of Samson* (identified with the acronym *VIS*), and to the study of the Insular milieu in the early medieval period generally. The volume's editor, Lynette Olson, leads the reader through the arguments about the date and stages of composition of *VIS*, and its relation to an earlier life, termed the **Vita primigenia* (or *primigenia*). Olson broadly agrees with Richard Sowerby in thinking that the *Vita primigenia* was composed probably by a member of Samson's family in a monastery founded by Samson in Cornwall; it was then reused by a monk writing in Dol to create the *VIS*.

Sowerby draws attention to the way that Samson's family features prominently in the *VIS*, and how the hagiographer has to work hard to accommodate this with the norms of ascetic renunciation of family. Sowerby suggests that the treatment of nepotism in the *VIS* may have been the result of a need felt by monasteries and churches founded by Samson and headed by members of his family, to defend themselves against the charge of nepotism. Sowerby argues that this theme in the *VIS* could only have stemmed from the earlier **Vita primigenia*, because for a monk writing at Dol in the late seventh or early eighth century such issues would not have been a concern. Sowerby suggests a date of around 600 for the **Vita primigenia*.

Joseph-Claude Poulin also addresses the question of the dates of the *VIS* and the **Vita primigenia*, with analysis of traces of reworking in *VIS*. His essay is in French, with a summary in

English. Poulin stresses borrowings in the *VIS* from Julianus Pomerius' *Vita contemplativa* (composed at the end of the fifth or the start of the sixth century) and also a homily by Gregory the Great reused in a pseudo-Bedan homily; he uses these to date *VIS*, arguing that the *Vita contemplativa* was unknown in Gaul until the start of the ninth century, although this is perhaps not definitive evidence for dating purposes. Poulin closes his essay with a series of questions. Whereas other contributors to the volume seem to form a consensus on a seventh-century date for *VIS*, Poulin dates it to the later eighth century.

Caroline Brett's essay discusses the implications of the fact that both the author of *VIS* and the author of the **Vita primigenia* borrowed from the *Vita Paterni*, written by Venantius Fortunatus before 600 AD. Paternus was an ascetic who became bishop of Avranches, not far from Dol, and Brett highlights the similarities between the careers of the two ascetic bishops, Paternus and Samson, who were contemporaries and met each other. She explores the historical implications of the geographical proximity of the Gallo-Roman ascetic bishop and the immigrant British ascetic bishop; and she makes a convincing case for the composition of *VIS* after the "Columbanian revolution" (91) in Frankish monasticism that led to royal patronage and land grants to monasteries, citing Dol's foundation Pentale as an example of a royal grant. Because it was composed after the introduction of the new practice of royal patronage of monastic foundations, *VIS* was written from this new perspective, and in the long term this enabled Samson's foundations to be more successful than were those of Paternus, whose *Vita* was composed before the "Columbanian revolution."

Ian Wood relates the evidence about Columbanus, Gildas, and Uinniau/Ninian with the evidence for Samson to make a very useful contribution to our understanding of the early medieval history of Brittany. Wood draws attention to details about Columbanus's arrival on the Continent to say much about the presence of Britons and British ascetics on the Continent in the sixth century, suggesting that Columbanus headed for the gulf of Morbihan because of the Britons there and Gildas's cult there. Whereas Brett compares Samson with Paternus, Wood compares Samson and Columbanus as two "spiritual advisers of Merovingian royalty" (112).

Constant Mews highlights the episode in *VIS* in which Samson was consecrated bishop by Peter, James, and John, the apostolic founders of Rome, Jerusalem, and Ephesus respectively. Mews makes the point that this choice of personnel at Samson's consecration symbolized the universal church of East and West. She relates this to the eighth-century text *Ratio de cursus*, written to defend Irish and Gallican liturgies on the basis that they derived from the apostolic authority not only of the church of Peter but also that of Mark and John. Mews also notes the link made in the *Ratio de cursus* back to Cassian and the monks of Lérins, and thence to the desert fathers. She presents a historical context for the *Ratio de cursus* and gives an English translation of it.

Jonathan Wooding traces a coherent narrative of monastic initiation in *VIS* as Samson moves toward greater degrees of isolation. Samson starts out as a monk in a community that has secular contacts, then goes to live in an eremitical community, and then withdraws further to live as a hermit in a cave, in a location that recalls the desert fathers Antony and Paul; finally, Samson embarks on *peregrinatio*. Wooding also explores the geographical contexts of this narrative.

Karen Jankulak explores the fact of the absence of a cult of Samson in Wales; she examines in detail possible references to Samson in Wales, and charts the historiographical use (and abuse) of saints' dedications.

This volume advances scholarship on *VIS* and will prompt further study; anyone interested in the early medieval history of Brittany or the wider Insular milieu will find it valuable.

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