

**Grégory Combalbert, Véronique Gazeau (eds.), New Research on the Abbey of Le Bec in the Middle Ages. Sources, History, Archaeology, Leiden, Boston (Brill) 2024, XV-283 p. (Anselm Studies and Texts, 7), ISBN 978-90-04-70197-7, DOI [10.1163/9789004701984](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004701984), EUR 145,59.**

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The present volume contains the redacted papers presented at a two-day workshop at the monastery of Le Bec in April 2016. The workshop was held while another volume of papers concerning the history of Le Bec was in production and then published as *A Companion to the Abbey of Le Bec in the Central Middle Ages*, edited by Benjamin Pohl and Laura Gathagan (2018). The *Companion* and the present volume between them offer an inspirational survey of the multi-disciplinary research on one of Normandy's most influential medieval Benedictine monasteries. An international group of historians, art-historians, archaeologists and theologians have contributed new insights into the intellectual and social life of the Bec monks in the Middle Ages. The abbey of Le Bec was founded in the 1030s by the knight Herluin and subsequently supported by the dukes of Normandy and the Anglo-Norman elite. However, right from the start the monks, supported by the dukes of Normandy, jealously guarded their independence from their diocesan bishop, the archbishop of Rouen. Jean-Hervé Foulon has added to his substantial oeuvre concerning the liberties of the abbots of Le Bec an important contribution on the abbot's pastoral power, which he has persuasively shown was never subject to either duke or archbishop. His argument in this respect is supported for the reign of Henry I as duke of Normandy (1106-1135) in an important study by Judith Green. She judiciously shows how it was possible for the king-duke to balance a personal friendship with Abbot Boso and charity with his temptation to interfere in abbatial elections. Not only did princes face such a balancing act, but the priors and abbots too had to judge whether to welcome gifts without submitting themselves to the will and authority of their benefactors. The importance of benefactors is highlighted in a case study of the foundation of the priory of Saint-Philibert-sur-Risle by Julie Potter. The same priory is the subject of the study by Grégory Combalbert of a forgotten privilege by Bishop John of Lisieux for Saint-Philibert. The earliest leaders of the abbey, Prior Lanfranc (d. 1089) and Abbot Anselm (d. 1109), who went on to become archbishops of Canterbury, were responsible for building up Le Bec as a school and intellectual powerhouse as well as (after 1066) the launching pad of many English bishops and abbots recruited from Le Bec. If documentary sources for the study of the abbey of Le Bec are scarce due to the loss of many of its charters and books during the French Revolution, this is not the case for the many chronicles, histories, and saints' lives

Mittelalter – Moyen Âge (500-1500)

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written by its monks. A fresh study of one of the understudied narratives for Le Bec, the so-called *Chronicle of Le Bec*, by Fabien Paquet, is a particularly welcome addition. He convincingly argues that the first section of the chronicle dates from the time of Abbot Roger (1149–1179) while a second section was added in the thirteenth century probably by William de Bougeville (d. 1275). These conclusions are based on a meticulous analysis of the sole surviving manuscript (Rome, Vatican Library, Reg. lat. 499) as well as the early modern edition by Luc d'Achery (deeply unreliable) and copy by Dom Thibault. Related to the study of the past, is the study of the Bible and canon law. Here it is important to signal the article by Fabrice Delivré analyzing the contribution of the monks of Bec to the study of canon law by dissecting the evidence of the two twelfth-century library catalogues. Whereas the actual legal manuscripts have disappeared, it is admirable to see how much can be reconstructed from the titles mentioned in the library catalogues, especially when they are compared with surviving manuscripts bearing these titles from other Norman (and English) institutions. Delivré's study is a most significant one, not least because of the wealth of scholarly details in the lengthy footnotes. An important conclusion confirms what Thomas Bisson, most recent editor of Robert of Torigni's *Chronographia*, pointed out, namely that the *Liber pauperum* of Vacarius did not enter Bec until the abbacy of Abbot Roger (1149–1179). As far as archaeology and the material culture of Le Bec are concerned, there are three significant contributions. There is the lavishly illustrated study of the seals of the abbots and the abbey by Michaël Bloche, who points out that the earliest sealing clauses are first mentioned in charters of the 1180s. However, one century earlier in the 1080s Anselm had become the first Norman abbot to have a seal. As for buildings, it is well known that few remains of the medieval abbey have survived due to its extensive damage during the Hundred Years' war and the destruction at the time of the French Revolution. Despite these massive losses Lindy Grant admirably pieces together evidence from fragments and conjures up the world of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century splendour of Le Bec, all on the basis of textual evidence married with some material evidence. The shaft and one capital remain from the twelfth-century chapter house, and from the thirteenth century we have some tracery of the south wall of the south transept as well as a tympanum with the Virgin and Child that sits above a small portal leading from the south transept to the cloister. In 2015 and 2018 archaeological digs took place at the abbey. In a fascinating contribution, Gilles Deshayes reveals what discoveries were made, especially of the twelfth-century chapterhouse and of some of the burials that had taken place there. A comprehensively historiographical introduction by the editors sets the scene for the chapters of this book and Pierre Bauduin rounds off the volume with a splendid conclusion.



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