

Laura Cleaver, *Illuminated History Books in the Anglo-Norman World, 1066–1272*, Oxford (Oxford University Press) 2018, XX–222 p., 60 ill., ISBN 978-0-19-880262-4, GBP 65,00.

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Richard Allen, Oxford

If modern historians have long been interested in the ways in which history was written (and subsequently understood) in the Middle Ages, the process of editing and studying the various historical works that have come down to us has resulted in a scholarly landscape in which texts are often inadvertently portrayed as independent from the manuscripts that contain them. Such is the contention of Laura Cleaver, who, in a well-researched and thoroughly-illustrated book, aims to place these material objects in the wider social and political contexts in which they were produced, and thereby »to explore how they were made and what they represented to contemporaries« (p. 3).

This Cleaver sets out to achieve by examining illuminated works of history, including some cartularies, written in the Anglo-Norman world, a geographical entity that expanded and contracted along with the successes and failures of its ruling dynasty, from the conquest of England in 1066 to the death of Henry III in 1272. The resulting corpus of manuscripts is, by the author's own admission, a relatively narrow one, and includes works by some of the best known historians of the region and period (Orderic Vitalis, Robert of Torigni, William of Jumièges, John of Worcester, Henry of Huntingdon, Gerald of Wales, and Matthew Paris, to name but a few).

As such, those with an interest in the Anglo-Norman world will find much here that is already familiar. Cleaver's approach is nevertheless one that manages usefully to reorient the reader's attention towards the visual and physical elements of the manuscripts she studies, even if the very nature of these manuscripts, and the not insignificant amount of scholarship already dedicated to them, means that the work's main findings are sometimes buried within a good deal of summation and underpinned by not a small amount of speculation.

In terms of structure, the book is comprised of four main chapters, which are accompanied by sixty black-and-white illustrations. Cleaver uses the preceding introduction (p. 1–20) to establish her corpus of some 150 manuscripts, which are listed after the main bibliography (p. 217–219), within their wider historical context, and to acknowledge the difficulties and limitations of working with them. Readers are thus forewarned that some celebrated authors of the period, such as William of Malmesbury, whose historical works were widely copied but almost never illustrated, will receive considerably less attention than richly-decorated manuscripts of which a lone copy survives (p. 11–12).

Matters are further complicated by the fact that many works of history written during this period contain a fairly limited selection of decorative elements. This is particularly true of circumstances in Normandy, whose surviving history books are explored in Chapter 1 (p. 21–55). Focusing on the period between 1066 and 1204, Cleaver examines the ways in which historical texts by authors such as William of Jumièges, Orderic



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Vitalis and Robert of Torigni were written and illustrated. That these authors and their works have not lacked for scholarly attention means that this chapter is at times quite descriptive. That said, Cleaver musters the evidence in such a way as to illustrate neatly the collaborative effort needed to produce the resulting manuscripts, which required the investment of various actors (scribes, illuminators, artists, patrons), who were sometimes separated both temporally and geographically from the original author. This finding is by no means revolutionary, but Cleaver's analysis serves as an important reminder of the multi-dimensionality of these objects, and in particular of the means by which their non-textual elements, such as the famous illustration found in the Saint-Évroult copy of the »Gesta Normannorum Ducum«, in which a monk is shown presenting a manuscript to an enthroned king, were used to help tell stories of the past, and to emphasise both to the reader and to any would-be benefactors »the importance of the relationship between author and patron for the creation of a text« (p. 23).

Such themes are further developed in Chapter 2 (p. 56–113), which uses various case studies to illustrate the evolution of the use of imagery in historical texts, from the famous Henry I dream illustrations in the »Worcester Chronicle«, via the symbols of Ralph Diceto to the detailed (and in many cases self-executed) motifs and illustrations of Matthew Paris. Cleaver pays particular attention to page layout and the content and location of imagery, arguing that symbols and illustrations were designed to help readers connect chronologically distant events, and thereby impose interpretative frameworks onto the past. That these decorative features did not often survive in later copies is attributed to their complexity.

The apparent reluctance of institutions and individuals to invest the time and resources in illustrating the historical manuscripts they produced is a problem further encountered in Chapter 3 (p. 114–155), which looks at illustrated cartularies and a small number of images of diplomatic material (charters, seals, etc.). Unsurprisingly, the famous cartulary of Le Mont Saint-Michel (Avranches, Bibl. mun., ms. 210) is one of the handful of documents studied in detail. The amount of ink already spilled in relation to this one manuscript is considerable, and Cleaver does well both to condense a large amount of existing scholarship and to situate her arguments within it, but one is still left wondering how much can be learned from what is, in a Norman context, a unique document. The same might be said of the two surviving versions of the »Abingdon cartulary-chronicle« (British Library, Cotton MS Claudius B VI and Cotton MS Claudius C IX), and while none of Cleaver's conclusions (e. g. that such manuscripts were created with patrons or claims to property in mind) can be said to be unreasonable, they are hardly remarkable.

If there is something more serious to quibble with, it is that these conclusions often depend on a good deal of speculation. Take, for example, the abovementioned »Abingdon cartulary-chronicle«. Despite its contents suggesting work on the manuscript started well after the death of Abbot Hugh (1189/1190–c. 1221), Cleaver contrives to argue that production »may have begun« during his abbacy; that »it is possible« the cartulary was seen by Henry III (1216–1272) during a visit to Abingdon; that this means »it seems likely« that the cartulary was produced with »potential lay benefactors [...] in mind«; and that its existence »might have inspired« the creation of the »Domesday Abbreviatio« (p. 142).



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The study of medieval history is, of course, one that requires a certain amount of informed conjecture, given the frequent gaps in the historical record, but to hang so much off so little does not help Cleaver's wider cause, especially when the above example is only one of many (this reviewer counted nearly fifty uses of the expressions »it is possible«/»raises the possibility« to qualify various arguments throughout the book). That such speculation is necessary reveals the pitfalls of working with such a limited corpus of documents. After all, while it is by no means unreasonable to suggest that the Abingdon monks illuminated their cartulary in an effort to appeal to benefactors, one cannot help wondering whether such things, especially in the 13th century, were also being driven by wider trends in manuscript production. Sadly, while Cleaver goes to some length to acclimatise anyone who might otherwise be unfamiliar with the Anglo-Norman world, the reader is given little sense of the ways in which iconography developed across manuscripts of all genres during this period.

Despite these faults, there is still much to commend. The work is, in general, well written, and Cleaver manages elegantly and concisely, much like the genealogical diagrams she examines in Chapter 4 (p. 157–196), to link together each separate chapter into a coherent whole. As already mentioned, the book is thoroughly-illustrated, although it is a shame that there are no colour reproductions of some of the finer illuminations and drawings. It should also be admitted that this is a book that recognises its limitations. As Cleaver herself concedes, the intention is not to be exhaustive, and she freely acknowledges that many of the volumes she studies »will benefit from further scrutiny by scholars trained in a range of disciplines« (p. 200). The end result, however, is one that, if it generally succeeds in showing that history could be conceptualised in the Middle Ages through more than just the written word, ultimately raises more question than it answers.



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