

**Gerald P. Dyson (ed.), *Priests and their Books in Late Anglo-Saxon England*, Woodbridge (The Boydell Press) 2019, X–286 p., 9 b/w ill., 5 tabl. (Anglo-Saxon Studies, 34), ISBN 978-1-78327-366-9, GBP 60,00.**

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According to the fourth council of Toledo (633) priests in Visigothic Spain were given a small *libellus officialis* on their ordination, apparently to guide them in administering the sacraments and in instructing the people on various doctrinal matters, for, as the decree reads, »ignorance is the mother of all errors and ought to be eliminated especially in a priest of God«. No such an instruction survives from pre-Conquest England, but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Anglo-Saxon priests were also guided by books in their pastoral work.

In his »Priests and Their Books in Anglo-Saxon England«, Gerald P. Dyson collects some of the evidence from 10th- and 11th-century England, and his sound analysis thereof leaves no room for doubt that priests in late Anglo-Saxon England could read and use books to guide them in their office, and some of them even owned and produced their own material. This should come as no surprise, since several scholars in the past decade or so (foremost among them Carine van Rhijn and Steffen Patzold) have rendered similar conclusions for early medieval continental Europe. But, how are we to recognise priestly books from among the surviving continental and Anglo-Saxon manuscripts?

In an important paper titled »Célébration épiscopale et célébration presbytérale: un essai de typologie«<sup>1</sup>, the liturgist Niels Rasmussen suggested that both the material aspects and layout of a manuscript, as well as its liturgical content, can help us determine a manuscript's destination and function. Liturgical books, according to him, were produced for monastic, episcopal and priestly use, and only by examining their external form and liturgical content can one determine to which of the above-mentioned categories a certain manuscript belongs.

Following Rasmussen, I have suggested in the past two more criteria that can be added to Rasmussen's double yardstick. First, the content of the entire manuscript and not just its liturgical section can disclose the manuscript's functional destination. Second, the combination of two or more types of liturgical books in one manuscript indicates a destination far from an ecclesiastical or a monastic centre. A good example which elucidates these observations is a small liturgical manuscript from Brussels (Brussels, Bibl. Royale, ms. 10127–10144).



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<sup>1</sup> Segni e riti nella chiesa altomedievale occidentale, t. 1, Spoleto 1987 (Settimane di studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'alto Medioevo, 33), p. 581-560.

The modesty in the preparation of this volume, its small and handy form (similar to a Penguin paperback), and the peculiar character of the short sacramentary which it accommodates, containing the prayers for only eleven major feasts of the liturgical year, combined with a lectionary, an antiphonary, several *ordines* and various other ceremonial instructions, and juxtaposed with a plethora of canonical and doctrinal material, all suggest that it was produced for a priest of some small community. Dyson accepts the four criteria suggested by Rasmussen and myself with two caveats – first, he is worried that some *de luxe* books used by priests would be overlooked »due to preconceptions about appearance«; second, he is worried that these criteria »takes too narrow a view of what makes a priestly book«, and therefore, once again, some books that do not fulfill these criteria may be left out (p. 5–6). Although neither Rasmussen, nor myself, have argued that the above-mentioned criteria are a one-on-one equation, and we were both well aware of the fact that a simplistic reading may flatten our observations into a circular argument, Dyson’s warnings are in place.

The first three chapters of the book are derivative, and in them Dyson surveys the types of priests and their pastoral role in Anglo-Saxon England (chapter 1), the state of clerical literacy and education (chapter 2), and the production and availability of books for priestly use (chapter 3). Although, there is very little that is new in these chapters, Dyson judiciously summarises previous scholarship on the matter, and presents the argument very convincingly indeed.

The following chapters are, to my mind, the most significant and original contribution of the book. In them Dyson turns to the evidence, and most importantly to the manuscript evidence, in an attempt to elucidate which kind of books exactly did priests in Anglo-Saxon England own and use. Hence, he discusses the evidence for preaching and the use of homiliaries (chapter 4), surveys the books that priests may have used when performing the mass and the Divine Office (chapter 5), and ponders upon penitentials and *computi* that were specially designed to assist a priest in executing his pastoral role (chapter 6). In these chapters, Dyson relies on a plethora of sources to build his argument, before identifying some manuscripts (or fragments of manuscripts) that meet his criteria.

All in all, Dyson’s »Priests and Their Books in Late Anglo-Saxon England« is a welcome addition to the burgeoning literature on the pre-Conquest English Church and its clergy. It provides a compelling reading of the manuscript evidence from late Anglo-Saxon England, and it clearly illustrates why the image of 10th- and 11th-century English priests as poorly educated and ill equipped for their job is no longer tenable.



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