

Negotiating the Landscape: Environment and Monastic Identity in the Medieval Ardennes

Review Number:

1522

Publish date:

Thursday, 12 December, 2013

Author:

Ellen F. Arnold

ISBN:

9780812244632

Date of Publication:

2013

Price:

£40.00

Pages:

312pp.

Publisher:

University of Pennsylvania Press

Publisher url:

<http://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/book/15026.html>

Place of Publication:

Philadelphia, PA

Reviewer:

Michael Wolfe

This is not the usual kind of book review that I usually write. Instead, in the spirit of the IHR's intention to create a forum for serious, collaborative engagement, please consider me an *agent provocateur* who will try to stir things up for the sake (I hope) of our mutual edification. Ellen Arnold sets her sights on a number of very ambitious goals in her fine new book, based on her 2006 dissertation at the University of Minnesota, about monastic attitudes and behaviors in relation to their local landscape. Hers is a case study of how the monks in the abbeys of Stavelot and Malmedy viewed the formidable tangle of forests and waterways of the Ardennes region over the period from their foundation in 648 by St. Remacle to the mid 12th century when their most noted abbot, Wibald, died. These abbeys are located in the vicinity of present-day Belgium and Luxembourg. Dr. Arnold quite rightly follows the lead of historians, such as Elspeth Whitney and Richard Hoffman, who over the past 20 years have moved the discussion far beyond Lynn White Jr.'s originally provocative thesis that medieval society sought dominion over nature. More nuanced views, inspired by the work of Americanists such as Donald Worster and William Cronon, now posit a multi-level, more dialectical relationship that privileges negotiation with the natural environment, not its conquest, hence the title of this book.

My first question regards this notion of negotiation, which largely revolves in Dr. Arnold's study around the relationship between people, in this case the monks, and a place, in this case the Ardennes. However, as the study proceeds it appears the monks mainly negotiated over those lands where they contested rights with

other groups of people, be they woodsmen, peasant cultivators, local nobles, the Imperial court, the bishops, or other monastic houses. Indeed, so many of the cartulary and hagiographical source materials which Dr. Arnold uses reflect for the most part views from the late 11th to the mid 12th centuries, a time during which the monks of Stavelot-Malmedy attempted not so much to negotiate their relationship with the Ardennes but rather with the fast-changing world beyond the forest. This leads me to ask if the story Dr. Arnold is telling here is not just about nature per se but even more about the efforts of a set of eminent Benedictine houses to reinterpret their history and identity in a bid to forestall signs of their waning prestige and fend off growing calls for reform, from first the Cluniacs in the 10th century and later the Cistercians, to its mission and position in post-Carolingian Europe. Neither of these Benedictine reform movements figure much in the narrative, at least overtly. This becomes especially clear at the end of the book in chapter five, though it might have been brought out earlier in the study to underscore what seems to have been an essentially instrumental use of nature – both textually and economically – to advance or protect the monks' interests and place in the world, not just the Ardennes.

While invoking the Annales School and devoting attention to social and economic factors, Dr. Arnold primarily embraces a cultural approach to her topic, though whether that springs from her main source materials – charters, *vitae*, and miracle stories – or her own predilections is not clear. I suspect it's a combination of the two. In her introduction, she makes a point of distancing herself from eco-criticism, which makes sense given its overtly engaged stance, but I wonder if her monks weren't creating their own, religious-inflected medieval form of eco-criticism. Dr. Arnold frames her study around the twin poles of how nature shaped culture, and culture in turn shaped nature. More specifically, she asks how the monks' religious identity influenced how they acted in the landscape, and how features of that landscape – the trees, the rivers, the animals – correspondingly affected this identity. Identity and landscape meet in a place she calls 'the environmental imagination', unpacking it using a hermeneutics she calls 'environmental exegesis'. I, for one, would have liked a more sustained and precise, even technical discussion of how this approach works, though glimpses of that come through in those sections of the book dealing with interpreting charters and her literary analysis of evolving versions of the saints' lives and miracle stories.

The imaginary landscape dominates the book far more than the actual ecosystem of the Ardennes. This becomes clear in chapter one, which explores the monks' view of their local environs as at once a dangerous, untamed wilderness (*locus horribilis*) and a pastoral paradise (*locus amoenus*). Long biblical and classical literary traditions informed these *topoi*, and the monks regularly invoked them in a mixed and blurred manner, not a simple dichotomous one, she argues. Nevertheless, the next two chapters on the relationship between these religious interpretations and the local landscape as a site for economic production and social conflict contrast these dualist views of nature that pit the spiritual over against the secular. Cartulary sources figure prominently, as one would expect, in these sections, and while Dr. Arnold does examine the question of boundaries and perambulation narratives, the reader never gets a true sense of any of the actual places over which the monks held jurisdiction, nor up against precisely whose property their holdings abutted. Again, her reliance on the rich Urbar of Prüm to extrapolate how the monks at Stavelot-Malmedy managed their domesticated landscape suggest her sources just cannot vouchsafe this kind of granular consideration of the actual landscape in the Ardennes. She also leans a good deal on Oliver Rackham's innovative studies in the forest archaeology of medieval Britain to explain the sylvan management practices of the monks. Yet other studies of medieval forests in northern France and the Low Countries exist in sufficient number, going back at least to the 1990 issue of the *Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques* (edited by Philippe Braunstein), to provide some of the missing context on ways to approach the actual landscape under consideration. Finally, I also wonder if more discussion about the subjects of labor and wealth, drawing on work of George Ovitt or even Peter Brown's recent book *Through the Eye of the Needle*, might have deepened her discussions about value and conflict in relation to the local landscape. In part, I think my questions here goes back to Dr. Arnold's deeper interest in the cultural meaning of landscape, since chapter three is as much about memory and identity as the social and political dynamics fueling conflicts in the forest.

The last two chapters of the book return squarely and go even more deeply into the cultural meanings of

imagined landscape and monastic identity. In chapter four, the conflicts now occur in the monastic imagination through reinterpreting the past to address present interests and challenges. Dr. Arnold draws an explicit connection between, for example, the Rogation Days stories and contests over wilderness resources, while the fascinating tale of the 'Fighting Forest of the Amblève' shows how a story of martyrdom from the days of Charles Martel served as a coda for rivalries between the two abbeys set against the background of political fragmentation and conflict in the 11th century. Saints' lives, too, such as the *Passio Agilolfi*, further demonstrate the instrumental use of landscape motifs to defend and advance monastic interests. The final chapter serves as an extended conclusion that integrates elements discussed earlier in the study with the abiding themes of religious landscape and monastic identity. Sections of this chapter read much like an introduction as she works her way through recent scholarly work. It is also here that Dr. Arnold makes a passing reference to the 'inscription' of the landscape by the monks. That is, of course, a technical term usually associated with Paul Ricoeur's theory of representation, which might well be expanded upon by reference to the notion of 'environmental exegesis' discussed at the start of the book. Even so, this final chapter is the strongest of the lot and ties up many but not all of the various strands in Dr. Arnold's complex set of arguments. At the end, it finally became clear, at least to me, that the imaginary landscape she explores was largely a product of that century of transition between 1050 and 1150, as the monks of Stavelot-Malmedy dealt with their future mainly by looking backward into their past and the deep forest of the Ardennes.

My final question concerns where Dr. Arnold thinks other scholars should take up the next stage of investigation into the subject of medieval environments and identity. Here she seems torn between underscoring the unique experience of the monks of Stavelot-Malmedy and the desire to present her findings as a model for investigating localized senses of place elsewhere in medieval Europe. It's the classic problem in microhistory of typicality, and I wonder again if she might be able to bridge the span between the local and the general by an expanded discussion of her hermeneutics, one that might help us all arrive at what the poet Marianne Moore described in her poem entitled 'Poetry' as 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them'. In sum, this is a very good book to think with. I want to thank the IHR as well as Dr. Arnold for the opportunity to look for and find real toads in these forest glens, and I want to invite others do the same.

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