
Book Review: *Legions of Pigs in the Early Medieval West*

Legions of Pigs in the Early Medieval West, by Jamie Kreiner. Yale University Press, 2020, + 340 pages.

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It is one of the truisms of animal history: Once you start looking for nonhuman animals, you do find them. And there are always so many more than you might think. Contrary to the often-stated claim that it is supposedly difficult to find (early medieval) historical documents about nonhuman animals, Jamie Kreiner shows in her book that even pigs can be found (almost) everywhere: from records about complaining swineherds, municipal statutes, law codes, religious cosmologies, philosophical musings to settlement waste. One of the pitfalls of animal history, however, is that the focus on a single “species” tends to lose sight of the complex cross-species worlds of human and nonhuman beings. For her compact monograph, Jamie Kreiner chose the pig as the “species of choice” but uses the conceptual framework of “ecologies” to approach the myriad and complex ways in which pigs interacted and quite literally messed with the human world. In her short introduction she frames these shared “ecologies” as broadly as possible: “This book is about the relationship between humans and pigs in agrarian life in the early medieval West, but it is also about the practices and ideas that humans developed about their lived environments as a result of their interactions with these animals” (p. 3). To approach this goal, Kreiner combines textual, pictorial, material, settlement as well as zooarchaeological findings. Historiographically, pigs have usually been located in the context of agriculture. Kreiner, however, extends this field to policy making, natural philosophy, and theology in order to highlight the agrarian character of early medieval communities stretching from northern Africa to Iceland.

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In five chapters she carves out various settings of human-pig modes of interaction. The first chapter is devoted to the biological basics of intelligent and adaptable pigs. While it was the adaptability of medieval pigs to their environment that made them a self-sufficient and cheap “walking larder,” it was this same adaptability that ensured that pigs as a collective, but also as individuals, posed various challenges to their human users. The pigs almost always found the weak spot in the fence or refused to listen to the swineherd’s horn. In contrast, chapters 2 and 5 lead the reader away from the concrete lives of pigs and their human domesticators. The aim of these chapters is rather to reflect on the symbolic charge of the pig, both as an object of demonstration in theological explorations of the so-called Divine Plan and as an ambivalent creature in Christian culture, which charged the pig as a symbol of both greed and sacrifice. From an animal history perspective, it is chapter 3 on “Salvaged Lands” and chapter 4 on “Partnerships” that are the most intriguing. In the former, Kreiner draws inspiration from Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s concept of “salvage accumulation” to reflect on pig economies, practices such as pennage and how they changed both landscapes and the socioeconomic fabric. Although jumping fences and destroying the neighbor’s fields seem to have been the favorite pastimes of the early medieval pig of the West, Kreiner tries to tell the story also from a pig’s point of view: They were bred into specific shapes, confined to designated spaces, and since they could not be “used” for secondary products such as milk, wool, or labor—like their companion “livestock” species cows, sheep, or horses—it was the pigs’ lot to be slaughtered for human meat consumption. Chapter 4 on “Partnerships” talks about the socially specific, but still diverse human interactions with pigs and their pork. The human-pig partnership was far from pastorally harmonious. The pigs’ lives were characterized by constraints, force, manipulations, mutilations, and violent death. Interestingly, the actual human practice of butchering is not treated in the book.

Kreiner’s endeavor to use the pig as a lens to explore how people in the early Middle Ages thought about their environment makes for a concise and oftentimes entertaining read. Her focus on human-pig ecologies shows that it makes sense to assume early medieval ecological thinking *avant la lettre*. However, the cases collected are very different in terms of subject matter, time period, and geographical region. This informative and truly interdisciplinary strength of the book can sometimes lead to seemingly under-complex interpretations: How humans and pigs lived and died together was varied or as Kreiner herself puts it: “the closer we zoom in, the more variations appear” (p. 82). It might be difficult to find a historical phenomenon where this is not the case.

Another strength of Kreiner’s ecology-centered approach is that it refrains from entering the discussion of agency. Instead, she uses the cornucopia of her reading and insights to convince all sorts of readers that the lives and deaths of pigs and humans were intertwined on an everyday, but also on a social, economic, and cultural level. It is Kreiner’s art of describing human-pig ecologies and her choice of wording that probably change the reader’s focal point most perceptibly. She regularly puts the pigs in a subject position, when she, for example, emphasizes that pigs “like humans, have histories” (p. ix), that “they occupied an outsized presence in the lives and minds of early medieval

communities” (p. 2), that “[p]igs had carved out some of that space for themselves” (p. 3), and that they even “made an imprint on policies that humans developed, from the local to the royal level” (p. 108). Very often it is Kreiner’s choice of wording that puts the pigs in the position of agents. However, a more systematic semantic analysis of her rich, linguistically diverse text corpus could also have empirically substantiated her point.

Legions of Pigs offers a mostly entertaining read and sparkles with many porcine pearls of information. In the brief epilogue, Kreiner does not try to round her pig herd up for a definite conclusion, but rather offers a brief look to the centuries to come. She notices a tendency in ecological shifts toward less pig-friendly environments: intensive clearing of woodlands and drainage of swamps, as well as more labor-intensive forms of managing so-called livestock animals in stables, changed pigs’ lives in many parts of Western Europe after the 11th century. It seems that the “hour of the pig” really did strike in the early medieval West. ■

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