
Book Reviews

Albrecht Diem, *The Pursuit of Salvation: Community, Space, and Discipline in Early Medieval Monasticism*. With a critical edition and translation of the *Regula cuiusdam ad uirgines*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2021. 687 pp. ISBN: 9782503589602. €145.00. Open access online.

This is a weighty tome. As Diem notes in the introduction, this volume combines an edition and translation with sufficient additional material for two or even three monographs. I cannot do it justice in a 1,500-word review but will try to indicate the scope of this work and its importance. Important it undoubtedly is. Although Diem's focus is on a single relatively brief work, the *Regula cuiusdam ad uirgines*, he uses this as the foundation on which to build a complex, thoughtful, and illuminating discussion of early medieval monasticism as a whole. In doing so, Diem challenges a range of long-held theories and assumptions. Although some scholars may disagree with specific elements of his case, all who work in this area will need to grapple with it going forward.

Diem has earned his place as a foremost scholar of early medieval monasticism, which shows in his detailed knowledge and in his relaxed presentation. Both are in evidence in the introduction, where he begins with a reference to a performance of Don Giovanni, from where he proceeds to a frank discussion of his own processes as a scholar, and his recommendations for approaching this book. He invites readers to engage with its different sections in any order they wish, eschewing the authorial desire to control the reading experience, and acknowledging that they will come with a range of interests and needs.

Diem's topic is the disputes among early medieval theologians about matters of salvation, damnation, the role of monastic discipline, and the

agency of monastic communities. These disputes are constantly to the fore. Although the *Regula cuiusdam ad uirgines* is his ostensible focus, he sets it into conversation with a very wide range of other materials, to illustrate the author's decision-making processes, as well as the text's reception. This is a constantly intertextual discussion, and Diem displays his familiarity with the intricacies of monastic materials in the process.

The first section of this book is made up of Diem's edition of the *Regula cuiusdam ad uirgines*, with a facing translation. This is accompanied by an introduction that details how the text was preserved and survives to us, a summary of witnesses to its early use, a discussion of the manuscript tradition, as well as the various unsatisfactory previous editions, a stemma, and an explanation of his editorial choices. Diem describes his translation as inclining to the literal rather than the smooth, and in places the English is awkward. However, the approach throughout is careful and precise. This edition and translation of the *Regula* are already a significant contribution to the field, rendering an important text both more secure and more widely accessible.

The main body of the book is divided into four parts (Community, Space, Discipline, and Salvation), each of which contains two chapters of varying lengths. These constitute what Diem sees as the key themes or concerns of the *Regula cuiusdam ad uirgines* and its author. As he notes, division in this way leads to some repetition of material between sections; however, each section works well as a self-contained discussion, which means that readers can focus on the aspects that most interest them.

Chapter 1, the first part of the section on community, addresses the fundamental question of the *Regula's* authorship. Diem systematically considers various candidates, before making his case for Jonas of Bobbio. This case is primarily philological—Diem points out various semantic and stylistic parallels with known works of Jonas and documents these in considerable detail in an appendix. He concludes, “The authors of the *Vita Columbani* and the *Vita Iohannis* and of the *Regula cuiusdam ad uirgines* speak the same language to such an extent that they can only be the same person” (181). As Diem notes, however, the concept of authorship is problematic for a medieval monastic rule, which could be a product of collaboration. In particular, he notes that members of the female community likely had a role in its development and that it probably codified what was already practiced. Nonetheless, Diem does not follow through on the implications of this insight. From this chapter on, he treats Jonas as the undoubted author of the *Regula*, and

many of his broader conclusions are dependent on this identification. As a result, the women in religious communities are elided from the picture, and Diem treats the text as “genderless” to a surprising degree.

Chapter 2 connects the *Regula* to Jonas’s *Vita Columbani*, where Diem sees the same principles playing out in narrative form. Diem also situates each of these texts in a conversation with Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues* and argues that Jonas is producing a critical response to Gregory’s eschatology. To make this case, he offers a close reading of the section of the *Vita* describing miracles at Faremoutiers, which he argues amounts to “a highly sophisticated and original monastic theology” (232). The overall impression is of a “panicked religious community” (236)—there is a constant sense of danger and threat, even within the monastery. This is a central theme in Diem’s analysis, that Jonas created a highly anxious theology that emphasized the need to strive without ceasing lest the monk or nun should fall at the final hurdle. As he notes, this is unusual, and many texts from the time take a far more hopeful approach.

Chapter 3 brings us into the section on space and situates the *Regula cuiusdam ad uirgines* as a supplement to Caesarius’s rule for nuns. Diem notes that Jonas assumes the texts will be read together and that he does not need to detail the aspects of monastic life that were sufficiently described in the earlier work. Chapter 4 pushes this point further, showing how Jonas both appropriates Caesarius’s ideas about enclosure and disagrees with him in a productive manner. Diem relates Caesarius’s ideas to the semi-Pelagian controversy in a somewhat labored fashion but demonstrates clearly that Jonas did not regard enclosure as securing grace; his nuns must remain vigilant and striving. The monastery appears as a battleground rather than a safe space.

Section 3, on discipline, consists of a brief chapter (5) introducing the *Regula Benedicti* to the mix and outlines Jonas’s apparent discontent with its program. Chapter 6 is far more lengthy—a detailed examination of the *Regula cuiusdam ad uirgines*, chapter by chapter. This section builds on the connections and comparisons Diem has already identified, to show how Jonas was responding to a variety of earlier monastic texts and either building on them or disagreeing with them according to his own particular agenda. Diem pays close attention to the words Jonas uses—for example he notes that one section of the text is filled with “s” sounds: “It sounds as if the *Rule* is hissing at the nuns who hear the *Rule*” (356). This awareness of how the nuns themselves would have heard and experienced the text adds a wonderful

dimension to the analysis, and the book is accompanied by an audio file of the *Regula* being read aloud.

A much shorter final part is devoted to the theme of salvation. In chapter 7, Diem makes the case that the short treatise known as *De accendo ad Deum* was at one point part of the *Regula cuiusdam ad uirgines* and that Jonas is its author. Diem's case is admittedly insecure. He notes several stylistic and semantic links and that the *Regula* ends abruptly. However, he is on stronger ground in arguing for the importance of this piece, insisting that it was "one of the most sophisticated contributions to early seventh-century monastic theology" (565). Finally, in chapter 8, Diem examines the theological program of this treatise and grapples with its complex depiction of the relationship between grace and free will.

Diem writes about these challenging topics in a straightforward and refreshing style. He brings himself into the discussion in a light-hearted fashion. For example, in commenting that a section was not in Jonas's usual eloquent mode, he wonders whether he "had simply spent the day marking undergraduate prose before writing this chapter" (465). On the danger that individual members of a monastic community might lay claim to shared items or treat them negligently he comments, "Everyone who ever shared a student apartment with strangers knows both problems all too well" (475). In the conclusion, he speaks about his debate with the editors over the cover image and uses this as a segue into more traditional musings about Jonas's significance. The result is a volume that is enjoyable to read, despite its daunting length. The appendices, extensive bibliography, and full indices add to its utility. It feels at times like Diem had more he wanted to say; the conclusion ends with a challenging but brief discussion of the term *asceticism*, for example, and he does not follow through on all the implications of his controversial challenge to the model of "Columbanian monasticism." What he has said, however, will be a boon to the field and an essential resource for generations to come.

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