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Review of Sarah Greer, *Commemorating Power in Early Medieval Saxony:
Writing and Rewriting the Past at Gandersheim and Quedlinburg*

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BOOK REVIEWS

SARAH GREER, *Commemorating Power in Early Medieval Saxony: Writing and Rewriting the Past at Gandersheim and Quedlinburg*, Studies in German History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), xiii + 206 pp. ISBN 978 0 198 85013 7. £75.00

Sarah Greer's study is not the first time that the 'fascination type'¹ of canoness houses in Saxony in the Early and High Middle Ages has formed the subject of a book. But Greer's Ph.D. thesis, supervised by Simon MacLean at the University of St Andrews, is the first work on the phenomenon of female monasteries in this area to cover the commemoration strategies of the Liudolfing family and the Ottonian dynasty from 852 to 1024. On the one hand, Greer raises the question of why and how this noble and royal family (including individual members) used religious institutions to gain political power and solve conflicts and crises. On the other, she asks how those institutions profited from the actions of their noble and royal relatives in the secular world. Although Greer does not say so herself, her book constructs an entangled history of religious and secular institutions during the period in question.

In her first chapter, Greer traces the rise of female monastic houses in Saxony from the ninth to the early eleventh centuries on the basis of traditional scholarship. She counts nineteen female convents founded between 800 and 900, and thirty-one between 900 and 1024 (pp. 17-18). She then considers Karl Leyser's, Michel Parisse's, and Gerd Althoff's hypotheses concerning demography, the accumulation of property by women (nuns and widows), and prayer as a form of *memoria* as reasons for the extraordinary and unparalleled number of female

¹ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, 'Faszinationstyp Hagiographie: Ein historisches Experiment zur Gattungstheorie', in Christoph Cormeau (ed.), *Deutsche Literatur im Mittelalter: Kontakte und Perspektiven. Hugo Kuhn zum Gedenken* (Stuttgart, 1979), 37-84.

monasteries in that period, particularly in Saxony.² But because she is not satisfied with these explanations, she tries to find an alternative model. In Greer's opinion, the rise and success of the Saxon female spiritual houses is due to the rather late Christianization of the eastern borders of the Frankish realm, the high percentage of canoness houses compared to Benedictine monasteries, and the inclusion of religious women in historiography and hagiography as both authors and subjects (pp. 24–6, 29).

Greer explores this hypothesis in a comparative study of Gandersheim (chs. 2–3) and Quedlinburg (chs. 3–4). Her investigation of each house's commemorative tradition and involvement in Ottonian politics is based mainly on charters and historiographical and hagiographical narratives rather than on liturgical sources, since few of these survive from Gandersheim and Quedlinburg. Greer distinguishes two phases of constructing the past: the founding phase (Gandersheim: c.852; Quedlinburg: 936), and the mid tenth- to early eleventh-century phase in which the past was rewritten.

Based on her analysis, Greer posits that the Liudolfings and Ottonians were not a collective group that consistently followed a planned and coherent strategy of power and memory in Saxony. According to Greer, each convent reacted individually to the challenges of unforeseen biological and demographic events (such as sudden deaths or the birth of several daughters); of conflicts between the Saxon and Bavarian Ottonian lineages; of conflicts between rulers; and of rebellions by disadvantaged brothers and sons (such as Liudolf and Henry the Quarrelsome). Finally, Greer argues, discourses on elitist hierarchies – the 'Gandersheim controversy', for instance – led to crisis. In her understanding, the Liudolfings' and Ottonians' government was characterized by fluctuation, discontinuity, and contingency. This can be seen, for example, in the continually changing locations of memorial

² Karl Leyser, *Rule and Conflict in an Early Medieval Society: Ottonian Saxony* (London, 1979); Michel Parisse, 'Die Frauenstifte und Frauenklöster in Sachsen vom 10. bis zur Mitte des 12. Jahrhunderts', in Stefan Weinfurter and Frank Martin Siefarth (eds.), *Die Salier und das Reich*, vol. ii: *Die Reichskirche in der Salierzeit* (Sigmaringen, 1991), 465–502; Gerd Althoff, *Adels- und Königsfamilien im Spiegel ihrer Memorialüberlieferung: Studien zum Totengedenken der Billunger und Ottonen* (Munich, 1984).

spaces: each ruler chose his own burial place, and there was no single site for the whole dynasty like that of the later Salians in Speyer. Greer makes it clear that political representatives and monastic institutions (along with their abbesses) used different media and commemoration strategies. It was not only the lay elite who asked relatives in religious institutions to support their propaganda by praising the dynasty in written narratives. In fact, these institutions also instrumentalized their commemorative function in order to intervene in political affairs and gain economic support from the lay elites. But the more the convents intervened in politics, the more they risked becoming embroiled in political conflicts. Greer's investigation clearly demonstrates that commemoration strategies were developed first and foremost during phases of internal family conflict, and not so much in struggles with external groups.

Greer's general hypothesis on the fluidity, discontinuity, and contingency of the dynasty and its commemoration practices is striking. Particularly innovative is Greer's view of the Gandersheim controversy. While in German historiography this long-lasting conflict is judged to have been a disruptive factor in secular and ecclesiastical politics, Greer demonstrates how the Ottonian abbess Sophia profited from the controversy, bringing her institution back to the main stage of power and politics after a period on the sidelines.

Some details in Greer's work need to be annotated, criticized, and corrected, however. Greer has not solved the enigma of Henry I's lack of interest in Gandersheim after he was elected king. As monarch, he neglected the residence of his ancestors in Brunshausen and ignored the competence of the canonesses in constructing memory (pp. 16, 80). In a recently published article,³ I argue that Henry supported Corvey and other houses in Westphalia much more than the eastern parts of Saxony as he sought to expand west into territory that had not been under his ancestors' control. He acquired power in this region only through his wife's inheritance and not from his own family. As for his disregard for Gandersheim's production of commemoration lists, I argue that Henry thought the monks in Reichenau (and not only St

³ Hedwig Röckelein, 'Heinrichs I. Verhältnis zu Kirchen und Klöstern', in Gabriele Köster and Stephan Freund (eds.), *919 – Plötzlich König: Heinrich I. und Quedlinburg* (Regensburg, 2019), 87–103.

Gall!) were much more accomplished and efficient than the Gandersheim canonesses and canons. By studying his itinerary, we can see that he generally relied much more on the secular palaces and lay elites in Saxony than on religious institutions.

Greer laments the lack of liturgical evidence in Gandersheim and Quedlinburg. It is true that less liturgical and memorial evidence has been preserved from these two convents than from other male or female institutions of the period. But some sources are still slumbering in the archives, and it would have been worth tracing the originals, not only the published versions. The most important of these unpublished texts is the *Younger Necrology* of Gandersheim. It survives only in a sixteenth-century copy, but preserves a significant number of memorial notes from the High Middle Ages. Christian Popp and Thorsten Henke are in the final stages of editing this list for publication. A minor, but nonetheless important source is the *Registrum chori ecclesie maioris Gandersemensis*, a *liber ordinarius* from late fifteenth-century Gandersheim.⁴ Christian Popp has tracked down and interpreted the manifold texts and fragments on commemoration from Quedlinburg.⁵ His argument strongly contradicts Greer's assessment of the Merseburg list (p. 13).

Although we cannot be sure which religious houses followed the *Regula Benedicti* in the Carolingian and Ottonian period and which adhered to the rule for the *sanctimoniales*, Greer is right to differentiate between these two forms of female religious institution (pp. 27–30). But Greer's assertion that the canoness houses in Saxony were 'overlooked in scholarship' (p. 26) in the past is absolutely incorrect. Greer ignores the intense research on Saxon canoness houses in Germany undertaken over the last few decades, following the pioneering studies of Leyser, Parisse, and Althoff. I could also draw her attention to the annual meetings of the Essener Arbeitskreis zur Erforschung der

⁴ Christian Popp, 'Liturgie im Frauenstift Gandersheim: Zur Überlieferungs- und Textgeschichte sowie zum Quellenwert des *Registrum chori ecclesie maioris Gandersemensis*', in Klaus Gereon Beuckers (ed.), *Liturgie in mittelalterlichen Frauenstiften: Forschungen zum Liber ordinarius* (Essen, 2012), 113–30.

⁵ Christian Popp, 'For the Living and the Dead: Memorial Prayers of the Quedlinburg Canonesses in the High Middle Ages', in Karen Blough (ed.), *A Companion to the Abbey of Quedlinburg in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2023), 122–41.

Frauenstifte, an interdisciplinary working group whose detailed and in-depth studies of female religious institutions have been published in the fifteen-volume series 'Essener Forschungen zum Frauenstift' between 2002 and 2018.⁶ Likewise, in her discussion of the preponderance of female religious houses in Saxony, I missed the arguments made in two articles by Caspar Ehlers and myself.⁷

On page 51, Greer comes back to the historiographic discourse on Fulda's influence on the early Gandersheim convent. Although she accepts Klaus Naß's refutation of the notion that monks from Fulda founded Brunshausen,⁸ she tries to defend the argument that Fulda influenced the convent during the ninth century with reference to the insular script on the *Salvatortüchlein*, an early textile relic. As I argue in a recently published article,⁹ Fulda is one option for the provenance of the inscription; the other, more likely one is the Lateran Basilica in Rome. Since Greer tries to play down Corvey's influence on Gandersheim, she ignores the fact that St Stephen was patron of the early church in Brunshausen, and further overlooks the

⁶ On Gandersheim, see vol. 4: Martin Hoernes and Hedwig Röckelein (eds.), *Gandersheim und Essen: Vergleichende Untersuchungen zu sächsischen Frauenstiften* (Essen, 2006); on Quedlinburg, vol. 14: Stephan Freund and Thomas Labusiak (eds.), *Das dritte Stift: Forschungen zum Quedlinburger Frauenstift* (Essen, 2017); on memoria, vol. 6: Thomas Schilp (ed.), *Pro remedio et salute anime peragemus: Totengedenken am Frauenstift Essen im Mittelalter* (Essen, 2008); and on liturgy, vol. 10: Klaus Gereon Beuckers (ed.), *Liturgie in mittelalterlichen Frauenstiften: Forschungen zum Liber ordinarius* (Essen, 2012).

⁷ Caspar Ehlers, 'Franken und Sachsen gründen Klöster: Beobachtungen zu Integrationsprozessen des 8.-10. Jahrhunderts am Beispiel von Essen, Gandersheim und Quedlinburg', in Hoernes and Röckelein (eds.), *Gandersheim und Essen*, 11-31; Hedwig Röckelein, 'Bairische, sächsische und mainfränkische Klostergründungen im Vergleich (8. Jahrhundert bis 1100)', in Eva Schlottheuber, Helmut Flachenecker, and Ingrid Gardill (eds.), *Nonnen, Kanonissen und Mystikerinnen: Religiöse Frauengemeinschaften in Süddeutschland. Beiträge zur interdisziplinären Tagung vom 21. bis 23. September 2005 in Frauenchiemsee* (Göttingen, 2008), 23-55.

⁸ Klaus Naß, 'Fulda und Brunshausen: Zur Problematik der Missionsklöster in Sachsen', *Niedersächsisches Jahrbuch für Landesgeschichte*, 59 (1987), 1-62.

⁹ Hedwig Röckelein, 'Reliquienauthentiken des Frühmittelalters aus dem Frauenstift Gandersheim (Niedersachsen)', in Kirsten Wallenwein and Tino Licht (eds.), *Reliquienauthentiken: Kulturdenkmäler des Frühmittelalters* (Regensburg, 2021), 225-53.

inscription on the late ninth- or early tenth-century wooden box used as a reliquary in Gandersheim. The relics of some of the (rare) saints identified by an ink inscription on the exterior of this box were also kept in a monstrance in Corvey, as I demonstrate in my article.¹⁰

On pages 35 and 87, Greer mentions a monastery in Seesen that was founded by the canoness house of Gandersheim. This is obviously an error – one that possibly goes back to Parisse. The monastery meant here, which was founded by Wendelgard and Gerberga II, is the Benedictine house of St Mary's in Gandersheim, not in Seesen. Eberhard's chronicle on Gandersheim is also constantly cited as the '*Reimschronik*'; the genitive 's' is unnecessary. In the bibliography, I missed Theo Kölzer's 2016 MGH edition of Louis the Pious' charters.¹¹ A lot of the page numbers given in the index are incorrect, presumably because the index was completed before the final proofs. Finally, Walbeck and Kalbe are also inaccurately located on the map on page 31. They are both in the Harz, not west of the Rhine and south of the Elbe, as Greer's map suggests.

¹⁰ Ibid. 234–41.

¹¹ Theo Kölzer (ed.), *Die Urkunden der Karolinger*, pt. ii: *Die Urkunden Ludwigs des Frommen*, 3 vols. (Wiesbaden, 2016).

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