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Review: Naissance d'une cité: Laon et le Laonnois du Ve au Xe siècle by Jackie Lusse

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Reviews

On the whole, this is an attractive edition, a welcome addition to the Hellenism series, and an important contribution to the scholarship of late-medieval Greece. This book will be of great interest to all scholars specializing in the affairs of medieval Greece, Asia Minor, military campaigns, and the creation of hagiography around a popular figure. Byzantinists owe a debt of gratitude to John S. Langdon.

MARIOS PHILIPPIDES, University of Massachusetts, Amherst


This fine, new translation of Lašamon’s Brut is the first to retain the subtle and unusual metrical patterns that characterize the original Middle English. Such careful attention to the peculiarities of Lašamon’s diction not only replicates the antiquarianism that gives the original Brut its distinctive power and linguistic interest, but, inasmuch as Lašamon’s text is itself a translation, it offers the only means for retaining some of that power and interest in a Modern English form. Allen generally succeeds in matching the subtle and fluid patterns of near-rhyme, consonance, and weak alliteration that characterize Lašamon’s meter—“So help me, Apollin, for my faith is all in him” (for “swa helpe me Apollin for min i- læfe is al on him” [l. 1485])—although she does permit some odd inversions (“as if with wine replete” [1762]) and occasionally stumbles into some awkward diction (“he made response . . . with really moral words” [1661]; “sappy sticks” [10137]). The translation comes with a very full apparatus; but significant lacunae in the bibliography make it much less useful than it might have been (important studies by Tatlock, Kossick, Sundén, Hiiker, Oakden, Stroud, and Wyld are missed), and the notes, which present a wealth of source-study, contain some irrelevancies (“J. R. R. Tolkien makes [the term ‘middle-earth’] familiar again to many readers” [1.3592]) and some important omissions (Madden is not cited carefully enough for all the material that seems derived from his edition, e.g., ll. 3904, 5495–5501, 6434, 7331, 9300, 10325, 13427–29). At $45 the hardcover version of this text is much too expensive for the kind of student it could serve, but, at $12.95, a recently issued paperback (Everyman’s Classic Library) will be a welcome teaching text in any classroom.

CHRISTOPHER CANNON, Girton College, Cambridge


The framework of this study, which appears to be based on the author’s thèse de 3e cycle, is the medieval diocese of Laon, whose limits were quite stable and well documented from the fourteenth century onwards. But, as the title clearly sets forth, the concern here is with the early Middle Ages, and the written sources for that period are indeed few and far between. We know that a fire in 1112 destroyed many of the archives that then existed, although a number of royal diplomata survive from the ninth century onwards, and there are some episcopal and monastic records as well. Flandroard’s Annals is of some limited use, and so is Hincmar of Reims, who, in the context of a quarrel with his nephew, also named Hincmar (who was then bishop of Laon), recalled in 870 that the diocese had been created by Bishop Remi of Reims around 500. Hincmar’s Vita sancti Remigii tells us more. Remi himself came from a family rooted in the pagus laudunensis (Lusse firmly disallows Hincmar’s use of the term comitatus laudunensis—which
has led some historians to make Remi's father, Emile, a “count of Laon”—as an anachronism), and he entered holy orders in Laon before taking charge of the church at Reims. Laon's powerful defenses made it a principal royal residence in the tenth century, during the struggles between Carolingians and Robertians; Charles of Lorraine made his last stand there. Readers of Georges Duby's Three Orders will remember Bishop Adalberon, who played an important role in rallying support to Hugh Capet and whose long episcopate (976–1030) closes the period under study here. So the written sources show us that in Carolingian times Laon was both an episcopal seat and a fortress whose fortunes were closely linked with the church of Reims (to the east) and the emerging center of royal power in the Ile de France (to the southwest). The problem Lusse sets himself is to explain the origins and development of this ecclesiastical polity, which did not derive, as most French medieval bishoprics did, from a Gallo-Roman civitas capital. Since most of this process took place before the ninth century, when the number of usable written sources drops to close to zero, one might well demand how such a history can be studied at all. Lusse indeed refers to moments of discouragement when he doubted it himself. What he has done has been to take three other types of sources offering serial data which, prudently analyzed, can reveal topographically and chronologically significant patterns that can be built into a model of how settlement developed and Christianity spread. Archaeology and place-name study are used conjointly in the first part of the book to address the first question. Part 2 seeks to identify the parishes founded before 1000 by studying church dedications. In part 3 Lusse examines what the written sources reveal about rights, authority, and land ownership.

Historians often find archaeological data difficult to use except for purposes of illustration or anecdote—what does one group of potsherds or graves tell us? Lusse, who clearly has had sound archaeological training, understands that one can only reason on the basis of a considerable body of data, analyzed critically on its own terms. One can identify all the sites within the test area (the diocese) where pre-Roman settlement traces have been found and locate them on a map (his map 2); one can do the same thing for Gallo-Roman settlement sites (his map 5) and for early-medieval sites (his map 14). The validity of the patterns that emerge are subject to all kinds of caveats. Were the sites properly identified and dated, for example? Granted that they were, the resulting pattern reflects what has been discovered, not the whole picture of what once was (he judiciously points this out on p. 10). But if one also charts the plausible pre-Latin place-names (map 3), the Gallo-Roman place-names (map 7), the purely Germanic place-names (map 16), and the composite toponyms offering a Germanic personal name and a suffix in -acum (map 17) or toponyms ending in -curtis or in -villa (map 18), one can then compare another set of patterns (of course, there is another set of caveats regarding the reliability of this type of evidence, and once again Lusse seems aware of the dangers). The evidence from these sources can then be assembled and presented diachronically (map 20 for the archaeology and 21 for the toponymy), and a statistically significant number of coincidences and convergences appears.

When one superimposes these patterns on a geological map of the diocese and factors in the environment (map 22), the picture that emerges goes roughly like this. Before the Roman conquest, settlement was concentrated in the Aisne River valley to the south and on the hilly plains around Laon; during the Roman period settlement expanded considerably along the two other major river systems and onto the more hospitable parts of the plateaus, leaving vast areas of forest especially in the north (the Thierache and the Ardennes) but also in the south (Saint-Gobain forest) and some marshy areas little settled, if at all. There was a significant extension of settlement during the Frankish period, most of it probably pre-Carolingian, then a final great period of land clearance during the feudal period, by the end of which the landscape had taken on the basic structure that it still keeps today.
The study of road systems (map 8) adds another analytical tool. Lusse finds that the Romans imposed a network of strategic roads on a largely undeveloped countryside, and new settlement in subsequent centuries grew up in function of this. The story of Christianization fits neatly into this pattern, if one can accept the principle of “hagiostratigraphy” (see p. 157): that church dedications came in chronological waves, with scriptural figures such as Peter and Paul popular in the earliest times, followed by Gallo-Roman saints (Martin of Tours being by far the most popular), Merovingian saints (especially Remi, but there are a good score in all), and finally exotic saints like Mary Magdalene or Nicholas. Once again there are many caveats in the use of this type of evidence; once again Lusse seems to have looked carefully at the whole body of dedications (he offers a complete list of parishes—annexe II—where he breaks the dedications down into those that probably date before 1000, those that are certainly later, and those that are hard to date). Taking then only the cases where the evidence of early foundation is strongest, he concludes (p. 190) that there may have been 40 churches (but probably no more than ten parishes) when Saint Remi founded the diocese, with 150 to 200 more created by the end of the millennium. Then all the evidence from the three types of sources discussed above is assembled with whatever evidence there is from written sources in a table (pp. 221–25) and a map (no. 33) in an attempt to identify the villages that would have existed in the diocese ca. 1000. Lusse regards 68 cases as “certain or very probable”; if one adds the “possibles,” the grand total is 137. This is not, the author is the first to insist, history written in stone; but in this reviewer’s opinion it is a plausible model, which offers a basis to look again at what can be gleaned from the written sources.

These sources reflect the joint domination of Laon and the surrounding countryside, in the ninth and tenth centuries, by the royal dynasty and the church. Thirty-three royal estates are attested within the diocese in written sources, some of them located in the areas of earliest settlement along the Aisne in the south, but others clustered on the edges of the game-rich forests (map 35). This distribution seems to suggest that the royal patrimony was built partly on extensive fiscal lands dating back to late-imperial times and partly from an appropriation of the extensive undeveloped lands by the Frankish conquerors. Although much land was donated to the episcopal church, to the two older monasteries in Laon itself and the handful of others in the diocese (map 32), and to abbeys outside the diocese favored by the royal dynasty like Saint-Denis, the Carolingian sovereigns were very well positioned in the Laonnois, and the later ones often resided in Laon itself (these stays are charted, pp. 235–40), no doubt because of its formidable defenses in those dangerous times. Both the church of Reims and the Abbey of Saint-Remi of Reims also owned much property throughout the diocese (map 38), much of it inherited from St. Remi himself.

The demonstrated or hypothesized links with the days when Clovis’s coup d’état (long misinterpreted as an “invasion” of barbarians) ushered in a new order provide us, finally, with a plausible explanation for the rising fortunes of the Laonnois that fits the archaeological and literary evidence. The region had been part of a borderland between two powerful and hostile Gallic tribes: the Suessiones to the southwest had taken it from the Remois, but the latter, having sided with Caesar, got it returned to them with his victory. This distant western reach of their vast tribal territory developed slowly with the help of the new infrastructure of roads built by the Roman army engineers; then the shock of the third-century invasions caused the Roman administration to take a new look at the strong natural defenses offered by this abrupt hilltop, which continues to strike visitors to Laon today. The Romans created a castrum there, with a powerful rampart in opus spicatum (none of this is attested in contemporary written sources but a portion of the rampart—7 x 6 meters—was seen and described by the nineteenth-century archaeologist E. Fleury, and excavations in the late 1970s confirmed construction on the site in the
The tone of the book is respectfully objective and ecumenical in describing the basis of Christianity and the development of its medieval institutions and beliefs. Beginning with the life and death of Jesus, Lynch carefully qualifies the Resurrection with “they came to believe . . . he had come to life again; he had been raised from the dead by his heavenly Father” (p. 4). At first misunderstood or persecuted, the believers gained a privileged position in the Roman Empire within a few centuries. This success resulted in what Lynch calls “normative Christianity”: an institutional church with great unifying authority. The church’s hierarchical episcopal organization defined discipline and doctrine based on councils and the Scriptures; its canon law imposed uniformity of belief; and its attitude encouraged the persecution of pagans and the curtailment of freedom for Jews. With the collapse of Rome, Christians continued to look back on normative Christianity as an ideal, compared with the practicing Christianity that developed in different regions of Europe. This idea might have become a leitmotiv for his textbook, but after the next few chapters, Lynch drops the comparison.

Nonetheless, the subsequent description of the history of the church is competent,