



This is a repository copy of *Book review: Priests and Their Books in Late Anglo-Saxon England*. Gerald P. Dyson. Boydell and Brewer, 2019. x + 286 pages, £60. ISBN: 9781783273669..

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/168128/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Wallis, C. orcid.org/0000-0002-8373-0134 (2021) Book review: Priests and Their Books in Late Anglo-Saxon England. Gerald P. Dyson. Boydell and Brewer, 2019. x + 286 pages, £60. ISBN: 9781783273669. TOEBI Newsletter, 37. pp. 102-106. ISSN 1694-3532

© 2020 The Author and TOEBI Newsletter. This is an author-produced version of a book review subsequently published in the TOEBI Newsletter. For re-use permissions, please contact the author or editor(s).

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Priests and Their Books in Late Anglo-Saxon England Gerald P. Dyson, Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2019. x + 286 pages, £60.00. ISBN: 978-1-78327-366-9.

This book is a study of the literacy practices of the secular clergy in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and the part they played in the provision of pastoral care. The surviving evidence does not paint a good picture of the secular clergy of the period, with writers in the monastic reform movement describing them as lazy, ignorant or illiterate, however Dyson's study argues that when considered carefully the evidence for the secular clergy, while certainly not as rich as that for their monastic counterparts, reveals a group of functionally literate readers capable of principled engagement with the texts at their disposal. Dyson critiques and builds on the four criteria outlined by Yitzhak Hen to identify the 'humble and portable volumes' (5) that priests would have used: the materiality of a manuscript; liturgical content; the combination of canonical material and liturgical prayers; and the combination of different types of liturgical books in one volume. In doing so, Dyson argues for the inclusion of two additional manuscripts in the group so far identified as books for priests. In current scholarship, books for priestly use in pastoral care have tended to be studied individually rather than holistically, and Dyson's aim is to fill that gap.

The book is divided into two sections, with the first (Chapters 1-3) providing a wider context in terms of the types of people involved, the need for clerical literacy, and how books were produced and supplied to priests. The first chapter provides an overview of the role of the priest in tenth- and eleventh-century England, the various institutions they worked in, the performance of the liturgy, and the technical vocabulary used to name liturgical books. This culminates in a discussion of the books that priests were expected to have access to, and Dyson uses book lists found in Anglo-Saxon and Carolingian episcopal legislation and pastoral letters to gauge the expectations that bishops had of their priests. One of the strengths of Dyson's book throughout is his inclusion of comparative evidence from continental Europe to offer contrasts with, or corroboration of, practices which are less well-evidenced in the Anglo-Saxon record.

This chapter is followed by discussions of the extent of clerical literacy, and how literacy was acquired by learners. A useful distinction by Dyson is his focus on the level of literacy required for a priest to fulfil his role adequately: 'in attempting to assess the ability of Anglo-Saxon priests to use the books prescribed for them, we are not pursuing a definition that would necessitate what one might call elite literacy' (47) (e.g. the levels of ability displayed by writers of 'hermeneutic' Latin). Texts such as saints' lives and chronicles show that opportunities for schooling were perhaps wider than is normally appreciated, though the evidence for education during this period is rather scanty, and this is supplemented by a survey of glossing activity by scribes who identify themselves as priests, as evidence for literacy in Latin and the vernacular. Following this, Chapter 3 turns to how books may have come into the possession of priests, and discusses evidence for places of production in addition to scriptoria in cathedrals and monasteries. Dyson suggests that some unlocalised Anglo-Saxon manuscripts may well be the product of smaller centres such as secular minsters, and that this may have been one of a number of routes (including provision of

relevant texts by bishops for churches under their control) by which priests acquired the texts necessary for their pastoral duties.

The second section (Chapters 4-6) focusses on specific types of text and identifies a number of manuscripts which form case studies for evidence of priestly ownership or use. The focus of Chapter 4 is homiletic texts used for preaching, and it discusses features such as signs of use in three individual manuscripts. The case studies are valuable in demonstrating the different approaches possible in investigating these manuscripts, though they vary in their level of detail and in one or two places some consideration could be given to alternative interpretations of the evidence, or further detail provided. For example, in Chapter 4's second case study (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 85 and 86), Dyson adduces the presence or absence of <ie> spellings in different scribal stints as evidence of changes in the underlying sources of one anonymous homily. While this could certainly be the case, an alternative explanation might be sought in the differing copying practices of each scribe (a litteratim, a translator and a mixer scribe respectively), and further detail would help support Dyson's argument here.

The final two chapters complement each other by considering standalone texts (Chapter 5) and those which are only found in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts in combination with other works (Chapter 6). Chapter 5 focusses on those used for performing the liturgy, and documents the move from earlier periods in which the sacramentary was used alongside a number of supplementary texts, to the innovation of the Missal which combined several books into one volume. Dyson explicitly links this development with the expansion of church building in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and makes a strong case for the utility of such single-volume books to priests serving smaller churches. The case studies demonstrate instances where existing text collections have been annotated for liturgical use (Warsaw, Biblioteka Narodowa I. 3311) or used to collect texts that could supplement an existing liturgical volume (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 41). Penitentials, manuals and *computi* are the topic of the final chapter, and Dyson stresses that the form in which we experience these texts today is not necessarily the same as their original context. He argues that many priests' books have been overlooked (and are yet to be recognised as such) as researchers have focussed on too narrow a set of criteria, and rarely considering the evidence of manuscript fragments.

Some of the most appealing aspects of this book are the breadth of sources used, alongside comparative material from continental Europe, and the range of disciplines brought to bear on the topic, e.g. palaeography, reader reception, and manuscript content and context. However, the lack of any substantial linguistic interrogation of the manuscript contents is a puzzling and (for this reader) frustrating omission. The inclusion of more linguistic evidence could certainly shed interesting light on the relationships between the manuscripts discussed, and potentially on affinities with other contemporary texts (especially if, as Dyson suggests, some of these may have been produced for priests at larger monastic centres). The focus of the book on texts in both Latin and Old English is particularly welcome, in considering the manuscripts used by a readership with a need for bilingual literacy, and this is an aspect which would also repay further study.

Overall, this is an engaging and very readable book which fills an important gap in the existing research, and which provides several interesting avenues for further research.

Christine Wallis

University of Manchester