The Dilemmas and Fruits of Interdisciplinarity

Interdisciplinarity has been a buzzword for decades now in the humanities, but often remains only a buzzword. Insofar as it is taken seriously, the methodological implications depend very much on how it is practiced. When interdisciplinary work is interpreted to mean taking the findings of another discipline to contextualize the subjects of one’s own, as when archaeology is drawn on to inform history or, as here, history to inform art history, it always carries with it the danger of circular argumentation when those conclusions are translated back into the other discipline. After all, what can art historians tell the historian when their interpretations are, at least partially, derived from the historical context itself?

This was the conundrum with which I was faced as a historian when asked to review Diane J. Reilly’s book—the first full-length treatment of the early-eleventh-century Saint-Vaast Bible. This Bible, as Reilly points out, stands in the tradition of Carolingian and, later, Romanesque Giant Bibles, but boasts certain oddities: the (original) absence of the Gospels and Psalter, the inclusion of the Passio Machabaeorum (a fourth-century Latin paraphrase of Maccabees 4), and, most particularly, the choice of illustrations. Reilly argues that the pictorial program of the Saint-Vaast Bible is a conscious creation by the monks reacting to new conditions created by the reform of the abbey by Abbot Richard of Saint-Vanne in 1018 and supervised by Bishop Gerard I of Cambrai-Arras (1012-51).

The reform and its connection to local power structures form one of the themes of Reilly’s book. The other is how art was used by the eleventh-century elite to shape contemporary perceptions. Reilly’s approach to interpreting the illustrations of the Saint-Vaast Bible is therefore avowedly political. In this approach, she is helped by the relatively extensive writings left behind by or connected to Bishop Gerard I, particularly the eleventh-century history of Cambrai-Arras called the Gesta episcoporum Cameracensium and the account of the 1025 Arras heresy trial, the Acta synodi Atrebatensis. In addition, Reilly draws on the mid-eleventh-century pontifical, Cologne Dombibliothek 141, which dates either to the pontificate of Gerard or his immediate successor Liébert. Using these sources, Reilly attempts to reconstruct an ideological background against which she can interpret the Saint-Vaast imagery.

The bulk of Reilly’s argument is spelled out over five chapters. The first two examine the Saint-Vaast scriptorium and the more general context of Giant Bibles, both earlier and later. It is here that Reilly convincingly demonstrates that the Saint-Vaast Bible was the product of a coherent vision, carried out by a few scribes working around, very roughly, the second quarter of the eleventh century. She is also able to identify a second campaign of c. 1040-90. Reilly is then able to link this Bible to the revival of choir and refectory reading at Reims, and subsequently in Flanders, through the influence of Richard of Saint-Vanne at, amongst other places, Arras. All this
argumentation is convincing. Reilly’s story of a Saint-Vaast scriptorium responding innovatively to its reform context makes sense.

"Reform," however, is a term of many meanings (most of them modern). While it is probably a safe assumption that the introduction of a new regime might affect the liturgy and lectionary to some extent, the precise ideological content, and much less the effect of such changes, present scholars with a rather different question. Three chapters form the meat of the interpretative work of the book in that they deal directly with the Bible illustrations, placing them in the context of contemporary political and reform thought, first in regard to bishops, then to kings, and finally to queens. The first of these chapters, "Priestly Prophets," concentrates on two miniatures, of Jeremiah and Ezra, made by the same artist (the Ezra Master). The illustration of Jeremiah is the first to depict him in episcopal garb, and Ezra is shown alongside a king in a scene identified by Reilly as 1 Ezra 7, where he works in cooperation with King Artaxerxes. Like Jeremiah, both Ezra and Artaxerxes are given Christian attributes. Reilly argues that these miniatures conform to the ideology of episcopal authority propagated by Bishop Gerard I and Richard of Saint-Vanne, as reflected in the Cologne pontifical and the Acta synodi Atrebatensis, as well as in the competing charters of immunity for Saint-Vaast, which seem to indicate tension between Gerard and the then-abbot Leduin. It is certainly true that sources attributable to Gerard emphasize episcopal authority, but it is not clear to what extent this emphasis was unique to him or how it interacted with monastic reform. After all, a monastery had an obligation to its bishop anyway, although precisely what this obligation meant naturally varied greatly (Lobbes, for example, was subject spiritually to Cambrai but temporally to Liège) and open to negotiation, as Leduin’s conflict with Gerard demonstrates. Reilly sees the position of Gerard and Richard as unusual because she contrasts it with Cluny, which she takes as the benchmark of “reform.” This assumption is misleading, however, and relies on the outdated approach of Kassius Hallinger, the scholar who effectively invented both the notion of a coherent Gorzian reform, as well as Richard of Saint-Vanne’s alleged “Lotharingian mixed observance,” as counterparts to Cluny’s centralizing and autonomous tendencies. In fact, “reform” normally came in cycles, accomplished by centers (like Gorze) and circles (like Richard and his pupils) which enjoyed a period of popularity before fading without ever making any claim to institutionalization as an autonomous monastic order. It was Cluny that acted in the bizarrely aggressive new way that Adalbero of Laon would satirize in his Carmen ad Robertum regem (c. 1025) and, as Reilly herself points out, even Cluny had only recently insisted on full immunity from episcopal oversight with any success. In effect, by underestimating Cluny’s novelty, Reilly overestimates that of Gerard and Richard. It can be doubted, therefore, precisely how strong or unusual a message the Ezra Master was in fact trying to impart.

The fourth chapter, "Kings, Princes and Politics," is somewhat stronger, in part because a larger corpus of images is available to discuss. These include several images of Solomon which, in a series of subtle interpretations, Reilly shows as depicting him as an Old Testament model of Christological priest-kingship guided by the virtue of divine wisdom. Each of these were painted by the Ezra Master, who also depicted Moses not traditionally, as the founder of the levitical priesthood, but instead as the man who established Israel’s ruling hierarchy, and showed Joshua as the receiver of divine teaching rather than in his more typical role as a warrior. Finally, trying to demonstrate that these themes were not the individual whims of one artist, Reilly argues that another artist working at the same time, the Acts Master, illustrated Acts with a reference to Luke addressing Theophilus that matches the theology of Gerard I very closely. Here again, Reilly strains her argument somewhat, since it can be legitimately doubted that monks really would have had so detailed a knowledge of Gerard’s thinking. Nonetheless, the overall argument holds, because linking the iconography to Gerard specifically is not in fact necessary, since the ideas that Reilly claims the illustrations expressed were more widespread than she allows. Even the more specific elements of the Saint-Vaast imagery echo widespread ideas. While no artistic precedent may be found for Moses envisaged as prototypical ruler rather than priest, a number of indications that this was a favorite reference point of Henry II’s kingship survive. The other aspect that Reilly touches on, but does not consider closely enough, is the potential audience of the Bible and how it was supposed to work. She assumes an educated audience, which is fair enough given the monastic context, but she rarely lays out how the manuscript was supposed to work on that audience. (She cites Timothy Reuter to concede that its effects may have involved a self-referential clique, but does not expand on the implications this information might have for interpreting the work.) If an illustration required detailed knowledge of Gerard’s ideas, how effective could it have been in wider circles? Reilly’s attempt to link the Bible to the details of local power relations inadvertently weak-
ens her argument: it would be more persuasive if she saw it in a wider context.

Precisely how an interpretation of the Saint-Vaast Bible might look without reference to Gerard’s writings becomes clear in the subsequent chapter, “Lessons for a Queen.” The ideas presented here are necessarily vaguer, but all the more convincing for it. The chapter deals with the frontispieces of the Song of Songs, the Passio Machabeorum, and the Book of Esther, interpreting them in terms of shifting ideas about marriage and, further, queenship. The Ezra Master was responsible for the first known image that introduced the Song of Songs, the iconography of which Reilly argues he took from the works of Rhabanus Maurus, but which she interprets as commenting not on the marriage between Christ and Ecclesia (as argued by Rhabanus) but on marriages among the laity. She develops that thought with reference to queenship, in particular to the marriage of Henry I of France to Anne of Kiev in 1051. The chronology does not really work here, since the conditions of the 1050s were very different from those of Saint-Vaast’s immediately post-reform period in the 1020s, but her more general argument about how the imagery might comment on arguments about the carnal or mystical nature of marriage is more promising. To pursue this thread, Reilly turns again to the Cologne pontifical, which she places before the background of aristocratic and royal marriage politics and the attempts of the church to bring it under its remit. The image introducing the apocryphal Passion of the Maccabees, on the other hand, emphasizes a rather different subject: the role of the mother as keeper of family piety. The image (by the Acts Master) depicts Antiochus as he insists that Eleazar’s sons eat forbidden meat. In the story, the sons’ mother, Salomone, encouraged them to suffer torment rather than break religious law, and Reilly shows how the artist broke with his Byzantine models to give Salomone prominence. In this way, argues Reilly, he made Salomone into a model of Christian motherhood and queenship: the Maccabee family had already become an ideal of rulership, and mothers, and queens in particular, were seen as responsible for the piety of children and charges, just as Salomone was responsible for that of hers. (Reilly does not go into the fact that Antiochus shares some of the attributes of Christian kingship that she used to read significance into the images of Solomon, including infilae and the lily scepter.) The only actual depiction of a queen in the Saint-Vaast Bible is that preceding the Book of Esther. By the time the Saint-Vaast Bible was created, Esther was already a standard model of queenly behavior, in particular as an intercessor on behalf of the church, a role referred to in the queens’ coronation ritual in the Cologne pontifical. Reilly links this ideology with the presence of queens in the charters of French kings, as well as with the famous Orléans heresy trial of 1022. Altogether, as Reilly argues, the images in the Saint-Vaast Bible highlight the various, albeit carefully circumscribed, responsibilities of a queen as wife, intercessor, and mother.

The final chapter of Reilly’s book deals with the second program of illustrations, which was added in the mid to late century. Most of the illustrations are straightforward depictions of the text being transmitted from, for example, God to Ezekiel or John to Christ. The exception is the illustration introducing Ecclesiastes, which Reilly ties thematically to the decades-previous earlier program, which emphasizes the preeminence of divine wisdom. In addition, she shows how the artist’s decision to link the Liberal Arts, Cardinal Virtues, and Christ as Wisdom harks back to Carolingian interpretation of the book (notably by Rhabanus Maurus) as condemning heretics, and thus interprets the art against the background of the Arras heresy trial of 1025. Again, the chronology is somewhat off and although it is certainly true that the account of the heresy trial would have still been around in the diocese when the illustration was made, it is not as certain that the memory of it was very vivid: after all, the second redactor of the Gesta episcoporum Cameracensium, who was working in the 1050s, ignored it entirely.

Reilly ties up her discussion by exploring the problem of why, although individual motifs from this manuscript were picked up by later Romanesque Bibles, the program in its entirety never was. She takes this fragmentary reception as best explained by the peculiar context of the program’s creation in early eleventh-century Arras. It is not clear to what extent this step is necessary, however, since any production must perforce be a product of its time. A potentially more fruitful question would examine the audience of the manuscript, both intended and actual. While the monks were certainly products of their time, they also presumably knew that their Bible was not supposed to be. They undoubtedly reacted to recent political developments, but at the same time their Bible remained a primarily theological, not political, text. In this respect Reilly’s repeated invocations of Rhabanus Maurus, an author whose works she describes as well known at Arras, becomes important. Alongside Reilly’s political interpretation of the art, it might also have been useful to have had a closer look at which theological texts were available to the monks and to offer an interpretation of
this Bible in light of those works as well.

All in all, this book is thought-provoking. Reilly perhaps pushes her argument too far in positing the Saint-Vaast Bible as such an unusual and particular product rather than placing it within a wider picture, but compared to her overall achievement this reservation is just a cavil. I began this review with a question about interdisciplinary circularity, but there is another kind of interdisciplinarity—where a historian looks to another discipline not for new information or sources, but for new questions and inspiration. In this respect, Reilly’s book performs a fine service.

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