In *Cultivating the City*, Caroline Goodson demonstrates that the increase in urban cultivation seen in both the textual and archaeological record of early medieval Italy was an intentional adaptation to the smaller population and decrease in urban marketing as the Roman bureaucracy slowly disintegrated and power transitioned into the hands of local bishops and lords. Goodson emphasizes that it should not be seen as a sign of “decline” but rather a larger cultural shift toward self-sufficiency. She persuasively argues that urban gardens and cultivation provide an ideal lens to analyze the shifts in economy, culture, religion, and politics as cities in Italy transitioned from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages.

The structure of the work is clear, starting with evidence for urban cultivation in Italian cities and then situating it in the larger context of rural Italian agronomy, marketing, cultural traditions and institutions, and social power. Each chapter covers multiple cities within Italy to demonstrate a broad pattern across the time period she studies, although many cases stop short of the year 1000. While Goodson opens with a focus on urban gardens, she also grapples directly with long-running historiographical debates about the character and development of cities and society in Late Antiquity and the early medieval period. Because, as she writes, a “history of urban gardening serves as a sort of microhistory, a spyhole into urban relationships, household strategies, and the practicalities of getting food on the table, daily” (p. 8).

There is much to admire in Goodson’s approach, which provides a blueprint for how other garden and landscape historians could use highly specific textual and archaeological sources to engage in broader arguments about premodern societies. Goodson deftly interweaves traditional textual analysis of charters, wills, and other donations with archaeological and archaeobotanical evidence to make arguments about settlement patterns, and what those settlement patterns tell us about the role of rapidly changing central bureaucracies and the rise of Catholic Church infrastructure. A standout example is Goodson’s careful study of the existing studies on “Dark Earth,” combined with textual cases, to push back against the idea that Dark Earth deposits signal decline in urban sophistication. Goodson argues that this soil demonstrates far more than decline; it is evidence of human settlement and coordinated cultivation, distribution, and dispersal of resources, especially natural resources. Dark Earth can result from degradation of wooden buildings. It can also result from flood, waste deposits, manuring, and cultivation. Further, Goodson suggests, Dark Earth was deliberately moved to backfill areas for cultiva-
tion. She uses evidence of Dark Earth to argue that the so-called ruralization of cities should not be viewed as inherently negative. Rather, it indicates that early medieval people adapted to the decline in centralized bureaucracy and marketing and shifted to self-sufficient agricultural patterns, which included more intense urban cultivation, which, in turn, shaped ecclesiastical practice. The textual sources Goodson has unearthed record substantial resources in urban gardens, including vineyards, fruit and olive trees, and even water features. Further, her research suggests that urban cultivated spaces were situated near water sources, a particularly tantalizing prospect in light of the other research on water and water infrastructure in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

The paucity of evidence makes Goodson’s argument most difficult to support in the chapters on cultural norms and especially on social power. As a result, she must stretch into monastic sources and consider how classical and late antique Roman agronomy shaped elite Christian attitudes and practices toward cultivation. By necessity, this means a discussion that veers away from the question of urban cultivation and into more specific elements, such as gardening as a form of Christian practice, gifts of land as charity, medicine gardens, and extended discussions of rural agriculture. These discussions do not always feel integrated into the rest of the work, which focuses so heavily on demonstrating how the shift toward urban cultivation developed and how it shaped the rest of early medieval society. This is especially true in the two sections on “pleasure gardens.” Goodson expresses doubts that pleasure gardens “were a new cultural product in the twelfth century” or that they “were influenced by transmission through the Muslim world” (p. 98). First, this detours from the rest of the chapter, which describes urban cultivation in several cities and focuses on close analyses of urban gardens and what was grown in them, mostly before 800. Second, it also does not reflect the scholarship outside of Italian studies or in the later part of her time frame (800-1050) or after. I hasten to add, however, that these short forays do not detract from the broader importance of the work to the field.

Goodson lays out a persuasive argument for the proliferation of urban gardens and cultivation in late antique and early medieval Italy. More important, she demonstrates how and why the proliferation occurred, situating it in the center of the frequent political, economic, and cultural shifts of the period. As a result, the book speaks to wider debates about the character of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, as well as the more targeted study of agronomic change. Goodson’s methodology in Cultivating the City represents an important contribution to garden studies and has the potential to guide other garden and landscape historians to bring the lens of cultivation to larger social, political, and economic debates in the field.
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