Review of Lives, Identities and Histories in the Central Middle Ages

Research on identities, broadly conceived, is a flourishing field of study that renews itself by exploring new questions or reevaluating old ones and investigating on a micro- and macro-level the intersections among individuals, society/societies, and literary compositions along with all the minute components that each of these three broad categories encapsulates within them. In their edited volume, *Lives, Identities and Histories in the Central Middle Ages*, Julie Barrau and David Bates embark on showing the multifariousness of medieval identity construction through a range of diverse sources and genres that include biblical exegesis, hagiographies, theological treatises, legal and historical texts, and pictorial representations. This was an effort to demonstrate the richness and depth of how gender, social, ethnic, legal, and theological identities were (self-)understood, (self-)defined, constructed, construed, and blended in central Middle Ages western Europe, in particular Normandy and England. In their introduction, Barrau and Bates explain the rationale of this volume, which constitutes a tribute to the academic contributions of Elisabeth Van Houts with the essays' additional objective to reflect this prominent scholar's academic interests.

The volume is divided into two parts. The first part, “Entwined Lives and Multiple Identities,” comprises eight chapters. Miri Rubin examines the *Life and Passion of William of Norwich* from the perspective of the saint's mother and of other female/mother figures in the story, showing the shifting of a mother's identity from a caring and protective persona to one that fails to prevent a boy's abduction and murder. The role of women and the power of female identity in the commemorative practices for the dead encompasses Fiona J. Griffiths's chapter. In her analysis of Peter Abelard's request to be buried at the monastery of Paraclete, in which his wife, Heloise d'Argenteuil, also known as Heloise du Paraclet, was the abbess, Griffiths underlines the correlation between memory, death, and women. She shows the clerics' efforts to regulate this feminine space by taking on themselves the commemoration of the dead and suggests the continuous role of women in memorial practices within Western Christendom. Mathieu Arnoux reads narratives as opposed to legal records and charters to explore the relationship between economic growth and distribution of wealth to the society through the two opposite cases of William Rufus (William II of England) and Wulfstan, bishop of Worcester. Drawing on the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* and the *Vita Wulf...*
from among William of Malmesbury’s many writings, Arnoux scrutinizes the role of rulers and bishops and of parameters that deal with the use and administration of power and moral stature that are instrumental for the improvement or deterioration of people’s lives in times of famine, showing how their different conducts affected the well-being of the people. Julia Crick inquires into another aspect of economics, that of economic exchange between southwest Britain and northern and southern areas through maritime roads, and highlights the role of the Flemish settlements for the flourishing of trade in the southwest coast of Britain. Looking further into the intersection between economic distribution and social betterment, Elma Brenner investigates the “relationships between Cistercian communities and lay society in Upper Normandy between 1100 and 1300” (p. 80). Financial affairs between the monastic communities and the laity were established to support charitable work, proffer spiritual services, or attend to their monastic communities’ financial sustainment. While Rubin discusses the dead body of William of Norwich and the way it served as a memory of the failure of motherhood that led to William’s murder, Patricia Skinner deliberates about the marked or scarred body of Walchelin the priest through his vision as narrated by Orderic Vitalis. Skinner interweaves memory, trauma, and physicality to explore the triad, monstrosity, hybridity, and acceptance in the Middle Ages as well as inner trauma and identity construction, as seen by the similarities between Orderic’s and Walchelin’s lives. Skinner eloquently shows how Orderic’s narration of Walchelin’s vision functioned as a vehicle for both Walchelin and Orderic, in order for the former to reinvent himself with his new scarred appearance in an effort to prevent repulsion and marginalization and for the latter “to come to terms with his own past as an oblate” (p. 105). With the inclusion and analysis of new charters issued by Empress Matilda, Nicholas Vincent advocates for the way new evidence can add hues to a historical person’s identity, despite how well such a historical figure has been examined. In his analysis of the conduct literature, David Crouch analyzes the construction of female identity and femininity in a social environment, as well as female agency in medieval society, showing that different sources can narrate diverse narratives about the role and position of women.

The second part, “Historians, Lawyers and Exegetes: Writing Lives and Identities,” comprises seven chapters. Pierre Bauduin inquires into how Normans’ identity developed in Ademar of Chabannes’s chronicle to raise issues that deal with handling and reworking sources, making additions to and changing the work through various iterations, and altering aspects of his narrative on the basis of new information they were relaying to him. Bauduin presents the correlation between the transmission of information, manipulation of the sources, and an ever-changing text, along with which the protagonists’ identities were also shifting, raising the issue of credibility. Bates suggests a holistic approach to authors who composed chronicles about the Normans by examining not merely their works but also them as persons whose identities and personalities developed during the period of the events they wrote about. With Barrau’s chapter, we look into how medieval exegetes interpreted the book of Ruth to make its short story and the biblical persona of its protagonist relevant to their medieval audiences. Barrau explains that the book of Ruth was interpreted hermeneutically in ways that addressed issues related to heresy, moral integrity, dogmatic theology, and pastoral concerns while simultaneously being deployed as part of Christian anti-Jewish polemics. In other words, we see the interpretive plasticity of a biblical female figure that was adopted and adapted in a medieval milieu. In a similar vein, Anna Sapir Abulafia probes Christian and Jewish medieval exegeses of the biblical story of Esau and Jacob from the book of Genesis to display how medieval Christians and Jews defined themselves both on their own and vis-à-vis each other, opting for the mother–daughter image rather than the
fraternal rivalry image to delve into Christian–Jewish relations and suggesting convincingly that we examine them through the lens of supersessionism, which for the author remains still in force as one of the ways to interpret and comprehend them. With Leonie V. Hicks’s essay, we return to the discussion on the identity of the Normans, now through Wace’s two narrative poems, Roman de Rou and Roman de Brut. Hicks engages in a gendered reading of Wace’s two poems by focusing on topics of dynastic succession, old age and its impact on authority figures, and “ruptures in the ordering of marriage and having children” to showcase the shifting of identities among the Anglo-Norman nobility (p. 248). Transitioning from the making of the collective to the making of the individual identity, John Hudson engages with a stylistic analysis of Glanvill and its content, also in juxtaposition with the Dialogue of the Exchequer, composed by the royal treasurer and bishop of London, Richard fitz Nigel, and the Ordines to discuss the identity of the author of Glanvill, the purpose of his work, its context, and its readership. Finally, George Garnett tackles the issue of a retrospective reading of history and rehistorization through the works of the Benedictine monk Osbern and his contemporary, also a Benedictine monk, Eadmer of Canterbury, discussing the (re)use of earlier sources in the (re)making of history.

The breadth of the sources, the expansive range of topics per chapter, and the investigation of medieval identities from diverse perspectives highlight this volume’s importance for the study of identity construction in medieval society in social, political, legal, and religious contexts. However, in some cases, the lack of an organic flow between chapters disrupts the multifacetedness of a presentation of a larger topic that more than one author addresses in this volume. For example, Vincent’s essay could have been positioned along with the essays of Arnoux, Crick, and Elma Brenner since they all discuss economic history from several angles, displaying the various ways through which reading economic history can inform multiple approaches to issues of social prosperity, trade and urbanization, and religious institutions and social work, to name a few. Or, to give another example, Hicks’s essay could have been included alongside those by Bauduin and Bates, for they share in their thematics on the identity of the Normans even if each chapter approaches this topic via different sources and perspectives.

In addition, including a conclusion or an afterword chapter would have added to the volume’s scope, as it would bring together all the essays of this volume to highlight its contribution further and raise questions for future research. Finally, the exclusion of a bibliography either at the end of each chapter or before the index section seems to be more a choice of the publishing house than of this volume’s editors. However, such an addition would facilitate readers in locating the primary and secondary sources used per chapter more easily.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned remarks, these observations neither affect the quality of the volume as a whole nor diminish its contribution to the field. In all, this volume provides invaluable insights into the multifarious ways of constructing medieval identities.
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