

Reinhard Hennig  
University of Bonn

Ellen F. Arnold, *Negotiating the Landscape. Environment and Monastic Identity in the Medieval Ardennes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 301 pp.



A historical study of two monasteries in the medieval Ardennes may at a first glance not be very attractive reading for ecocritics. Yet Ellen F. Arnold, historian at Ohio Wesleyan University, explores medieval views about nature and the environment not only through historical source material such as charters and annals, but also by way of the huge variety of hagiographic—and thus literary—texts that these monasteries produced. Her study therefore also provides insights into the relation between literature and the environment during the Middle Ages.

The Benedictine monasteries Stavelot and Malmedy were both founded by Saint Remacle in 648. Between the 9th and 12th centuries, several saints' lives, collections of miracle stories and other hagiographic texts were written there, all of which refer in various ways to the monasteries' natural environment. As Arnold demonstrates, forests feature particularly strong in these narratives, which can probably be explained by the monasteries' location in the densely wooded region of the Ardennes. The texts depict the forests in differing and sometimes even contradictory ways. In stories about the monasteries' foundation, forests are typically described as a dangerous wilderness full of threatening creatures—despite the fact that the Ardennes had been settled and transformed into a cultivated landscape long before the 7th century. In other narratives, following the antique pastoral tradition, the same forests could appear as a locus amoenus, a 'pleasant place,' characterized by beauty and an abundance of natural resources.

Since the monasteries constituted not only spiritual communities, but also large economic enterprises, the monks used their natural environment as a material resource base. As a consequence, Arnold notes, these monasteries were frequently involved in conflicts with neighboring landowners who challenged them for resources such as firewood or pastureland. Interestingly, these conflicts are mirrored not only in legal documents, but also in literary sources. Despite referring to a rather distant past, texts such as saints' lives often clearly reflect conflicts of the time in which they were composed. Thus they fulfilled an important function in the construction of collective memory, which served the interests of the monastic communities at the time of textual production through creative reconstruction of the past—often including the rewriting of older texts and the forgery of documents.

Forests, rivers, vineyards and other landscape features served also as spiritual resources. Places that had been visited by saints such as St. Remacle during their lifetimes could become sacred themselves. As Arnold shows, such sacred places could even be actively created by the monks centuries after the respective saint's death, for

example through the transportation of his relics to and from these places, during which new miracles would occur. Written texts played an important role in the fixation of such lieux de mémoire as parts of local religious traditions.

Paradoxically, of all things it is the miracle narratives that provide the most detailed information on medieval views on nature and the environment. Despite the supernatural intervention of the saints (respectively God) in all of these narratives, the starting point—usually an emergency situation—is always narrated in a realistic fashion and often explicitly connected to distinct, identifiable places. This intended “verisimilitude effect” (13), as Arnold calls it, was necessary in order to generate the belief that not only the described problems themselves, but also their unlikely solution through the saints’ intervention had indeed occurred. Thus miracle stories offer more valuable insight into ‘normal’ people’s social and environmental everyday life and the problems these people were frequently confronted with than, for example, medieval epic literature. Then again, miracle narratives were highly standardized and often simply copied from older miracle collections. This intertextuality opens up new dimensions for interpretation through the different ways in which miracles from the hagiographic tradition were selected and adapted to new environments and specific places. As Arnold demonstrates, there was no strict distinction between hagiographic and legal or historiographical texts, but rather a frequent blurring of genres: “Just as religious stories could incorporate legal language to add authority or historicity, charters also reflected the language of religious sources in order to add a sense of sanctity” (119). This means that medieval descriptions of nature and environment even in apparently non-hagiographic sources can be of religious significance.

Lynn White Jr.’s seminal thesis that the Christian Middle Ages constitute the historical root of today’s ecological crisis is based on the assertion that medieval Christianity had a solely exploitative relation towards nature. This thesis (reprinted on the first pages of Cheryl Glotfelty’s and Harold Fromm’s *Ecocriticism Reader* from 1996) has long dominated ecocritical perspectives on the Middle Ages. *Negotiating the Landscape*, however, demonstrates impressively that there was not one single medieval view of nature, but that such views differed considerably depending on the respective environments in which people lived. Even in one and the same place, such as a medieval monastery, extremely divergent and sometimes contradictory descriptions of the surrounding nature could coexist. I can therefore only agree with Arnold that, instead of premature generalizations, more case studies are necessary in order to get a more detailed insight into the broad variety of medieval ‘environmental imaginations.’

*Negotiating the Landscape* is a very well-founded study of hagiographic literature’s value as a source for environmental history. At the same time, the book also opens up new perspectives for the gradually growing field of medieval ecocriticism; hopefully, Arnold will further pursue environmental issues in the Middle Ages with a wider thematic scope. Arnold’s current study is focused on the monks’ aesthetical perception of nature, on resource utilization and resource conflicts. However, hagiographic texts may also offer an insight into many other issues as well, such as medieval perceptions of environmental change, environmental risks or environmental

pollution. Therefore, *Negotiating the Landscape* can be regarded as a pioneering case study that hopefully will inspire further research on the rich and long neglected source material that medieval hagiographic literature constitutes.