

H-France Review Vol. 4 (October 2004), No. 103

Bruce Venarde, Ed. and trans., *Robert of Arbrissel: A Medieval Religious Life*. Medieval Texts in Translation. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003. xxxix + 155 pp. Chronology, introduction, map, notes, and bibliography. \$21.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8132-1354-1.

Review by Thomas Head, Hunter College and the Graduate Center, The City University of New York.

In the more than four decades which formed his adult life (ca. 1076-1116), Robert of Arbrissel managed to involve himself in most of the important forms of religious life and practice current in France. He was at various (and even overlapping) times a careerist cleric who rose to the rank of archpriest, a student of theology in Paris, a forest dwelling hermit, a monk who founded several communities, an itinerant preacher. He was reviled by some as a heretic and posthumously venerated by others as saint. On different occasions the audiences for his sermons and religious guidance included a pope, counts and countesses, the impoverished, and prostitutes. He was protected or praised by Pope Paschal II, Count Fulk V of Anjou, and Peter Abelard, a distinctly heterogeneous trio. He was the object of admiration and castigation respectively from Baudri of Dol and Marbod of Rennes, an otherwise homogenous pair of scholarly poets who knew one another and were formed in precisely the same cultural and religious milieu. The object of intermittent, but intense scholarly scrutiny, Robert has remained elusive to historians. One of the most important sources for his life was identified as such only in the 1980s. For once the claim trumpeted on the cover is accurate: "he was controversial in his own lifetime and remains so nearly a millennium later."

Bruce Venarde is passionately intrigued by Robert. That such a figure would cast a spell over a scholar of medieval religious life is understandable. The volume under review is the result of Venarde's wish to share his interest with others. It is an elegantly simple presentation of the major sources for Robert's life and career. The introductions and annotations provided by Venarde are intentionally concise, at times even phlegmatic. He assuredly provides enough information for almost any reader to understand the sources. But he consciously avoids much interpretation of those sources. His goal, simply stated, is that "readers will learn as much puzzling over the unique Robert of Arbrissel as I do" (p. xxix).

The basics of Robert's life are relatively simply told. He was born sometime around 1046 in the borderlands between the Loire Valley and Brittany. In the 1070s he undertook a conventional clerical career which triangulated among the centers of Rennes, Paris, and Angers. It was only in 1095 that Robert abandoned this life to be a hermit. Like a number of other clerics in the waning decades of the eleventh century--and of the investiture controversy--he decided not simply to defend religious reform but to undertake religious innovation. His time as a secluded hermit did not last long. He became a restlessly itinerant preacher, attracting many disciples and occasionally pausing in his travels to settle them into cloistered religious communities. The ideals which inspired Robert were a version of the *vita apostolica*, the urgent sense that contemporary Christians should return to the earliest history of their faith and imitate the life of the apostles in order to serve Christ and gain salvation. Such ideals, still in their formation, were distinctly innovative and even controversial. In themselves, however, they do not account for the extreme reactions which Robert generated. In contrast to contemporary religious innovators--such as Bernard of Tiron (founder of the eponymous community), Stephen Harding (abbot of Cîteaux), or Stephen of Muret (founder of Grandmont)--Robert was particularly attracted and attractive to the socially or institutionally marginal. Women of both high and low social stations were, in particular, drawn to the religious life by his message. Robert's most important foundation was that of Fontevraud, a so-called double monastery of cloistered but interacting male and female communities. What made Fontevraud unusual among religious institutions which combined lives for men and women was that the focus was clearly on the female community and it was an abbess who governed the whole. Fontevraud was a successful innovation -- if not on the spectacular scale of its contemporary Cîteaux--governing over one hundred daughter houses by the end of the twelfth century. Robert was the object of posthumous veneration at Fontevraud, but he was not, unsurprisingly given the time of his death, the object of any attempt at canonization.

Venarde eschews telling any such simple story in favor of providing the materials from which a much more complex picture may be constructed. He opens the volume with a fourteen-page general introduction in which he broadly sketches the religious, social, and, to a much lesser extent, political context in which Robert lived and worked. He then presents four lengthy and eight brief sources in translation, providing each with introduction and notes. The first is a *Life* composed by Baudri of Dol which is an elegiac, but relatively conventional piece of hagiography. Baudri seemingly intentionally emphasized the less controversial elements of Robert's career and gave little attention to his last years and the crucial events in the formation of the abbey of Fontevraud. A second *Life* of Robert was composed by a monk of Fontevraud named Andrew or Andreas. This author focused almost exclusively on the late years, the death, and the legacy of Robert. Only part of the text survives in Latin, the only testimony to the whole being a late medieval French translation. In the 1980s, Jacques Dalarun demonstrated that that translation is a reliable witness to the text, and Venarde supplies an English version here of the whole, carefully distinguishing between Latin and French originals. These *Lives* are followed by four short sources grouped together (somewhat misleadingly under the title "Robert of Arbrissel's Writings"): a letter of spiritual direction composed by Robert for Countess Ermengarde of Brittany, the early statutes for Fontevraud, and two charters witnessed by Robert. The next two sources are heatedly critical letters addressed to Robert by Marbod of Rennes and Geoffrey of Vendôme, two leading regional clerics. These letters form wonderful bookends to the laudatory *Lives*, showing the problems posed for many contemporaries by Robert's practice of the religious life. The volume ends with a miscellany of four other witnesses to Robert's career. Venarde sets forth the principles of his translations clearly (pp. xxxi-xxxii); they are quite readable and, as far as spot-checking can show, accurate. The most obvious problem with the translations is the complexity of the periodic sentence structure beloved by twelfth-century writers. (Many other translators, including myself, have struggled with that difficulty achieving similarly mixed results.)

Venarde strikes a balance between text and context well suited to teaching and classroom discussion. He scrupulously avoids over-determining the interpretation of the sources through the context which he provides. To provide some sense of the relationship of primary sources to annotation, there are roughly forty pages of introduction, eighty pages of translations, and thirty pages of notes. The volume also includes a very useful map and timeline, as well as a conventional bibliography. The lack of an index, a glossary of technical terms, or an annotated set of suggested readings are minor lacunae. The fact that all of the notes are all placed together at the end of the volume, rather than provided as footnotes or grouped following each text, is truly regrettable, although certainly an exigency forced by the financial realities of contemporary academic publishing. The price, however, is in all senses a reasonable one to pay. Of a size and scope eminently well crafted for use in the classroom, this volume provides students and teachers of medieval history with an excellent case study in the history of Christianity.

No balance between text and context in such a volume will please all readers. For my part, I would have preferred a more substantial general introduction, with further material, in particular, on the contemporaries of Robert and Fontevraud. Similarly, no concise annotations of primary sources will be pleasing in all respects to scholars of the field. The quibble which I would choose to pick with Venarde is that he discusses sanctity (or the lack thereof) in an overly precise way dependent on later norms of canonization rather than on early twelfth-century practice. The fact that what has been stated in this paragraph forms my "criticisms" speaks to the overall high quality of Venarde's work.

As noted earlier, Venarde states his goals simply. And, simply stated, he succeeds admirably.

Thomas Head

Hunter College and The Graduate Center, The City University of New York
thead@hunter.cuny.edu

Copyright © 2004 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or

distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 4 (October 2004), No. 103

ISSN 1553-9172