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Review of *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland*, by L.M. Bitel

Joseph F. Kelly

John Carroll University, kelly@jcu.edu

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jure up their personal daimon and get control of it by magical procedures" (p. 160), a meaning not found in the philosophical interpretations of the saying. Betz suggests more broadly that the magicians' reading "may have been just as influential in the history of religion and literature, being transmitted, as befits magic, through literary underground channels" (p. 171). Similarly, in his discussion of specific sayings in the Hermetic tractate "Poimandres," Betz shows how the Hermetic tradition drew upon one of the traditional interpretations of the Delphic saying to change "its function from a 'maxim' to a 'kerygmatic call' and an 'appeal' to the potentially divine man to realize his divinity" (p. 110). In each case, the understanding of the saying depends primarily upon the interpreter's concept of the self that is to be known. Betz concludes that the history of the transformations and reinterpretations of the Delphic saying reflects in miniature the history of Greek theology. In both essays, he succeeds in conveying a sense of the complexity, diversity, and dynamism of that broad tradition. Betz's essays on apocalyptic perform a similar service; he considers a wide range of material that enriches our picture of the context of the more familiar Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts.

In his discussion of the Mithras inscriptions of Santa Prisca, Betz depicts the comparison of Hellenism and early Christianity as being concerned with "the forms and concepts of hellenistic mystery religion which is present in Mithraic form in the inscriptions of Santa Prisca and in Christian form in some parts of the New Testament writings" (p. 74). In a sense "hellenistic mystery religion" functions for Betz as an ideal type that will facilitate the comparison of specific historical examples. He wants to steer a course between simplistic theories of dependence and equally simplistic assertions that there are no connections at all between early Christianity and Hellenistic religions. But in the Mithras essay, as in others, Betz restricts himself to a careful analysis of details without fully sketching the big picture of which they form a part. Betz's attraction to detail can thus be both rewarding and frustrating. It is rewarding when it produces hard-won and secure insights about particular points, but it can be frustrating, particularly for the nonspecialist, when it hints at, but fails to develop, a broader series of generalizations. The promise of the sweeping title of the collection is never fully realized by the individual papers themselves. Perhaps the subsequent volumes that Betz plans will take up that question.

EUGENE V. GALLAGHER, *Connecticut College*.

BITEL, LISA M. *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990. xvi+268 pp. \$28.95.

This sociological study provides a variety of new insights into the internal and external relations of Irish monks and monasteries. Lisa Bitel works largely with the hagiographical collections of the post-1000 era, although she occasionally uses earlier material. Her approach is sound; the monastic *vitae* cannot be considered historical works, but they can be considered accurate reflections of the institution which produced them—this on the widely accepted premise that the hagiographers wrote for the community. Bitel avoids any discussion of the authorship of the *vitae*, and she does not seriously analyze any particular text. Presumably she wished to avoid getting bogged down by collateral questions,

but, since she juxtaposes, without explanation or justification, texts that are separated by several centuries, some discussion is in order.

More significant is her failure to distinguish whether the elements of a *vita* provide a historical account or have a historical base or were created de novo by the hagiographer. Some points are obvious; for example, when Comgall uses his saliva to cure a blind man (p. 176), the reader knows that this is not history, but what about accounts of visits or foundations of monasteries? The presence of an account in a *vita* suffices for Bitel's sociological purposes, but the possible historicity of an account should also be considered.

With these reservations aside, this is a very good book. Bitel emphasizes the place of the monasteries in a medieval tribal society, one that downplayed individualism. The group provided security but also made demands; for example, virtually everyone in the Middle Ages was a client to someone else. Interwoven with this was the family. Bitel well illustrates how the monasteries were often family institutions but, more important, how they became family institutions to the brothers and sisters, and within this familial context clientship flourished, for example, in the division of labor.

The monastery may have been largely self-sufficient, but there were outsiders. Membership in the monastic family sometimes caused problems for the monks and their blood relations; furthermore, since the monks owned land, the chief source of wealth and status in the Middle Ages, they had to deal constantly with the secular lords. Bitel has a particularly good chapter on the relationships of the Irish monasteries to their secular overlords and clients as well as their sense of responsibility to Christian society.

Certainly Bitel's most impressive achievement is in locating the social significance of seemingly petty things, such as food. In "The Politics of Hospitality," she tells how the abbot Molaise wished to embarrass his guest Columcille, so he gave him pork to eat on a fast day. "If Columcille refused to eat he brought insult and disgrace to his host; if he ate the pork, he broke the period of abstinence" (pp. 194–95). Columcille compromised and ate a small portion of the meat—presumably God understood his situation. The reader may occasionally wonder whether all these points were as significant as Bitel claims, but any reader of Jane Austen or John Marquand, inter alios, realizes how in traditional societies, everything does indeed have significance.

This book has considerable value to the student of medieval Irish church history; it will also appeal to students of medieval monasticism. Other scholars will surely follow Bitel's lead, but this should remain the general study for some years to come.

JOSEPH F. KELLY, *John Carroll University*.

HAMBURGER, JEFFREY F. *The Rothschild Canticles: Art and Mysticism in Flanders and the Rhineland circa 1300*. New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1990. 335 pp. 225 black-and-white, 12 color plates. \$50.00 (cloth).

I still have the scribbled pencil notes from ten years ago when I first looked at the two tiny volumes (118 × 84 mm) that make up MS 404 in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, known as *The Rothschild Canticles*. Purchased from the Rothschild Collection in 1968, the manuscript had subsequently been mentioned only briefly in art-historical literature, although the great M. R. James had written a splendid description of it when it passed through