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## The Medieval Review, 2011 Reviews

[The Medieval Review](#) 11.03.02

Robson, Michael and Jens Röhrkasten. *Franciscan Organisation in the Mendicant Context: Formal and informal structures of the friars' lives and ministry in the Middle Ages*. Vita Regularis, Abhandlungen 44. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2010. Pp. 414. 44.90 EUR. ISBN: 978-3-643-10820-3.

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Well into its second decade of publication, the series Vita Regularis can rightly boast a fine run of major contributions to the history of medieval religious orders, ranging from monographic studies, to thematic and transregional comparisons, to--more recently--editions of primary sources. These days, any historian working on organized religion in the High and Late Middle Ages ignores this series at his or her peril; in many ways it is the heart of monastic history, not least through its facilitation of exchanges among young, up-and-coming, and established scholars, often collaborating across national and linguistic boundaries.

The series' most recent instalment is the brainchild of two UK-based Franciscan historians, Michael Robson and Jens Röhrkasten, who have cast a wide net in order to explore the structures of (mainly) Franciscan organisation and its impact on various aspects of the brethren's identity and routines. "[O]rganisation," the editors aver, "was a precondition for the preservation of the ideal beyond the initial impetus of a movement or the presence of a charismatic figure" (1). In other words, Francis may have been uniquely influential, but the trajectory of the order he founded (if not so much the ideals that he espoused) was ultimately shaped by forces beyond the *poveretto's* control or even foresight: royal, urban, and papal administrations and their respective agendas and legal structures; the friars' educational and linguistic diversity, recruitment patterns and eventual geographical spread; friaries' urban location and physical environment; the mendicants' modes of communicating among themselves and with the world around them; and so on and so forth.

The volume (and the series) editors' streamlined Weberian approach, which is laid out in a brief Introduction, is not always shared by the authors--a divergence that has led, on the one hand, to a welcome plurality of approaches and voices, and, on the other, to some eclecticism in both form and content, and--most notably--to a felt lack of analytical and even thematic focus. It is one thing to call for applying "a wider definition of organisation" (xx) that transcends a traditional focus on the orders' normative texts; it is quite another to ensure that individual authors cooperate closely in fashioning such a complex new view. Indeed, some of the volume's fifteen contributors successfully resisted conducting a sustained examination of the book's putative subject, while others have done so with a conceptual framework that leaves something to be desired--a problem that tends to afflict thematically driven collections of this sort. This is not to diminish from the achievement of individual chapters, which is often impressive, but rather to point out that those who dealt with the mostly Weberian assumptions behind the modern concept of organisation squarely and, moreover, deliberately juxtaposed them with insights emerging from individual case studies, are few and far between.

Among those broaching the topic of Franciscan (and mendicant) organisation are H.-J. Schmidt's opening essay on the alternative geography offered by the mendicants' division into provinces and the challenge it presented to the church at large; R. Copey's analysis of the practical difficulties facing early Carmelite administration; P. Trio's re-examination of the relations between the friars' mission and friaries' location; C. Andenna's study of the forces constraining female foundations in southern Italy; A. Kehnel's explication of the early friaries' functioning in terms of communicative spaces and communities; L. Viallet's piece on the rise and fall of the Franciscan guardian; J. Röhrkasten's analysis of early Franciscan communication; L.-A. Dannenberg's article on the legal traditions converging on Franciscan organisation; M. Brunner's revisionist chapter on John XXII's misunderstood role in shaping Franciscan government; and G. Melville's thoughts, now published verbatim for the third time in as many European languages, on the innovative structural character of the Dominican Order.

To repeat, other contributions are no less accomplished generally. Nor are the former essays free from faults: rambling and redundancies among them are not uncommon, and typing errors and other infelicities abound (e.g., xx, 73, 79, 107, 117, 277, 284, 309, 322, 380, 384, 385). Further, even those ready and willing to engage medieval organisation more broadly, do so at times without fully developing a pertinent conceptual structure. Röhrkasten's typically meticulous essay on Franciscan communication, for instance, could benefit from problematizing the very term communication (and, for that matter audience/s and agents/actors) rather than treating it as a synonym for administrative documents. The article, like others in this collection, should be lauded for challenging an earlier reliance on normative Franciscan texts when it comes to describing the order's routines, but the notion that "everything of importance in the order had to be put in writing" (317) seems unwarranted, even as the author rightly and readily admits the significance of "informal exchange of news and information" (328) for the order's government and daily routines.

Röhrkasten is almost unique among the contributors in deliberately striving to tease out organisational substructures and mechanisms undergirding early mendicant life in a new key. Less rewarding in this sense are N. Gallagher's and J. Sarnowsky's surveys of, respectively, the early Irish and Prussian Provinces, which, while painstaking in their illumination of the contingencies of early mendicant history, lack a specific analytical discussion that would have helped the reader travel the distance between "foundation" and "organisation". As they stand they imply a major overlap between the two

terms, as well as an equation, at least in Gallagher's case, between the paucity of extant documentation and rudimentary organisation. Whose terms and standards one employs is perhaps a point to flesh out explicitly if these otherwise fine essays are to be expanded into full histories of these still under-researched regions.

Respectively discrete and broad, B. Kane's and B. Roest's learned studies of early Franciscan education offer yet another example of a very fruitful approach to mendicant organisation, tracing as they do career paths, recruitment policies, and educational structures that undoubtedly both influenced and were shaped by the order's development. Yet here again the absence of concrete (or suggestive, or speculative) connections between the order's nascent educational goals and the history of mendicant organisation generally remain a desideratum. If developed, such a discussion could furnish us with a vivid example of the diverse forces operating on medieval organisation.

In sum, although the volume originated, according to the preface (v), in a series of sessions at the International Medieval Congress at Leeds in 2007, its transition into a thematic collection failed to produce the desired synergy or a cohesive framework for interrogating both medieval documents and modern assumptions about organisation. It does not seem that all authors were encouraged equally and rigorously to reflect on a well-defined set of terms or problems, even if only in the shape of a coda to their original studies that would have helped relate them to one another (the editors' Introduction is at pains to do so). The burden of drawing these connections should not hang as an albatross solely from the editors' necks. Both writers and readers must do their fair share. Yet perhaps a more interventionist hand could have avoided authors' understandable tendency to address topics they feel more at home with rather than embark on the task of building longer even if more provisional bridges to a better historical understanding of pre-modern organisation.

Beyond the individual merit of many essays in this volume, the collection as a whole offers important advantages. It clearly underscores three key themes in the study of medieval religious orders: center and periphery, norms vs. practices, and continuity and change in the corporate identity and routines of the mendicants, especially vis-à-vis traditional monasticism. Authors rightly emphasise (but are thankfully not deterred by) the limited and often scarcely accessible records of practice left by most religious orders in this period (the Dominicans being the exception that proves the rule), a situation that all too often lends itself to a reliance on a number of now famous--and overused--narrative accounts of the orders' early history. Refreshing and impressive in this sense is the repeated use of documents of practice such as court records as well as archaeological remains by some of the volume's contributors, as well as the fresh readings given to some staple texts by others. Last but not least, the collection is a real bibliographical treasure-trove for anyone interested in recent contributions to this field. Many of these, not surprisingly, can be found among the numerous references to earlier volumes in the series *Vita Regularis*.