Abstract

My PhD offers a reassessment of the representation of English bishops within episcopal vitae composed between 1093 and 1214. It argues that the depiction of episcopal sanctity was shaped by the expectations of the community for which these texts were written and the hagiographer’s specific causa scribendi (reasons for writing). Through an investigation of four distinct Latin episcopal saints’ lives, I investigate the relationship between hagiographical function, episcopal identity and patronage by setting each text within its specific institutional and historical context. The vitae I have selected are: Faricius of Arezzo’s life of Aldhelm (c.1093-1099), William Wycombe’s life of Robert Bethune (c.1148-1150) and Gerald of Wales’s lives of Remigius (c.1198-1199) and Hugh of Avalon (c.1210-1214).

One aim of my thesis has been to establish the precise hagiographical function of each text. As such, each chapter begins by providing a textual history of the particular vita in question, and situates the source within its historical and cultural environment. By reflecting upon the local circumstances surrounding the production of these texts, we establish how different twelfth-century religious communities sought to interpret the episcopal office in the light of their own spiritual values and concerns. The thesis also demonstrates that these texts were all written for a particular purpose, including didactic instruction, propaganda, and to construct the way a community remembered its past and/or to promote an institution’s cult. Yet, we also show how each author employed different techniques and hagiographical models to achieve his objective. By investigating the ways in which episcopal
vitae were composed in their specific localities and how bishops were represented in these texts, we can look afresh at the wider religious environment of the twelfth century.
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