The Destruction and Recovery of Monte Cassino, 529–1964. By **Kriston R. Rennie**. Italy in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021. Xiv + 246 pp. €117.00 hardcover.

Kriston R. Rennie has written a fascinating and important book. Rennie takes as his topic the spectacular promontory archabbey of Monte Cassino in central Italy. The book is not a linear history of either place or persons. Rather, Rennie has constructed what might be called a narrative of rupture. This book is a new look at the history of an idea, grounded in the perceived endurance of an ecclesiology of place. The author, a faculty dean at the University of Northern British Columbia, takes the reader through a riveting intellectual history of an iconic place. Rennie examines a place of cenobitic monasticism and uses it to tell a story of how an architecture of enclosure induced expansive and eventually international ideas.

Founded at Monte Cassino in the first half of the sixth century by Saint Benedict of Nursia and his sister Saint Scholastica (as legend has it), Rennie reviews the abbey's traditional historiography as grounded in themes of redemption, adaptability, and final lapidary truths. According to the traditional view, the various depopulations and destructions of the abbey complex over the course of fifteen centuries never extinguished the metaphorical power of the mountaintop monastery. Rennie shows that a "destruction tradition," embedded itself in the historical arc of the monastery, and gave rise to a "central organizing principle" conditioned by "violent breaks with the past" (16). Further, "after every episode of destruction," the author argues, "the abbey's authenticity was reconstituted, its meaning and value reanimated into a cohesive and arguably stronger whole (16).

For the Benedictine monks at Monte Cassino, closure was never an option. This is the puzzling aspect that Rennie investigates so well; indeed, the author breaks a new historiographical pathway in recounting the abbey's history. Apostolically speaking, the monastery never had to be rebuilt. But Monte Cassino was different—at least in its emerging narrative.

Monte Cassino always saw itself as "St. Benedict's monastery," even though the translation of his relics there remains scientifically disputed. The monastery was the target of many aggressors from the sixth through the twelfth century. Unlike the religious concept of Salvation History, which is often viewed in a straight line from this world to eternity—Monte Cassino's history is really one of disruption, destruction and rupture—and this is Rennie' essential and unique focus. In many ways, the classic chronicle of martyrdom, resurrection, and redemption play into the accepted linear narrative.

The mountaintop abbey knew its share of disruption: a sack by the Lombards in 577, which necessitated a 140-year displacement to Rome. A Muslim sacking of the abbey occurred in in 883, with the abbot slain and the abbey burned. This was considered the abbey's "second destruction" (100) and was as significant as the Lombard attacks. The monks were again displaced, and the abbey razed.

Then, in September of 1349, a great earthquake devastated the abbey. The human toll of the earthquake was devastating because it happened during the time of Mass, trapping and killing many in the ecclesiastical buildings. As per Rennie's thesis, such trials only solidified lay and clerical resolve to rebuild, update, and reinforce the abbey confines.

The last great destruction of the abbey came from the bomb bays of Atlantic Allied bombers when they obliterated the monastery from the skies during the period of November 1943–May 1944. The entire complex was reduced to rubble. Seven monks and one layman died. Three weeks prior to the bombing, the Germans packed over one hundred cargo trucks with the abbey archives and transported the patrimony to the Vatican City State. After its complete obliteration, it was decided not only to rebuild but also to again "reanimate."

Rennie's work on the post-World War II rebuilding and reanimation of the abbey is probably his best and most compelling chapter. What the author has noticed is that the "destruction tradition" (which is actually used as a "rebuilding tradition") espoused by the abbey's chroniclers is far less than linear. In reality, the abbey often laid derelict after destructions—in its first case, for 140 years. The destruction tradition was never scientific. In fact, all it amounted to was simply a hagiography written in stones.

Rennie's research on how the post-World War II Monte Cassino repositioned itself globally is the culmination of his work. The "destruction tradition" now met a new purpose in a new context. Playing out in two parts, a new "valorization campaign" insisted that a rebuilt Monte Cassino would not only help to reconstruct the godly mountaintop but could also act as a lens for the reconstruction of Italy itself. Italy would not only be pulled back into the Europeanist sphere but also placed within the orbit of a new United Nations. During the war, the victorious UN placed cultural patrimony into the mix of discussion for the burgeoning "international community." (The 1943 Italian Armistice specifically protected archives as cultural patrimony—the first armistice to do so.)

Preserving Monte Cassino was preserving Civilization—Western Christian Civilization, a goal that fitted nicely into both the Atlantic Charter and the Four Freedoms. St. Benedict and his monastery were "a glory that shines not only to Italy but the entire Church," Pope Pius XII wrote in 1947. By the 1960s, in the tide of Vatican II, the abbey became necessary not only for Italian identity but also an essential element of European global identity. In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI wrote that the abbey was a place of peace and a place to build peace "in families, in communities, among people, and throughout humanity" (201). Monte Cassino had been "reanimated" as a beacon for global peace. This was the latest iteration in the golden chain of history compelling renewal and reconstruction. Rennie's erudite and magnificent work tells us something new—not about the destruction-reconstruction narrative of Monte Cassino, but rather about its dormition, its brokenness, and society's historical yearning for redemption.

Charles R. Gallagher, S.J.
Boston College
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