

requirements for the participation in the activity of the Spirit that is capable of granting anticipation of the world to come already in this world.

The value of this book lies in its successful attempt to bring together historical events and theological doctrine. It differs from other studies on Isaac in that it vividly reconstructs the historical and theological context in which Isaac was living and writing. Thus, besides the works of Isaac, the study takes into account many other extant texts issuing out of the East Syriac mystical tradition as well as the sources used by Isaac. Intriguingly, such a critical approach enables us to perceive why Isaac was dealing with certain subjects and even why he pronounced differently on the same issue and why he could disagree with Theodore of Mopsuestia, the Theologian of the Church of the East *par excellence*. Most importantly, Kavvadas is at pains to demonstrate that despite the unsystematic character of Isaac's teaching, behind his writings stands the clear theological view of an original thinker who masterfully employs the various sources available to him. With that in mind, one can better understand the single manifestations of his thought.

This book is nicely written but requires constant concentration and specialised theological knowledge on the part of the reader, and for that reason can hardly be recommended as undergraduate reading. The author provides on nearly every page original quotations from Isaac in Syriac that are conveniently accompanied by German translations. Some slight imperfections (imprecise transliteration from Syriac, typos, an undeveloped subject index) do not diminish from the overall quality of the work and the author deserves great praise for producing a penetrating study of Isaac of Nineveh that not only represents progress in our knowledge about Isaac and his time but can also be used for a comparison with the Byzantine mystical tradition and Sufism.

MARBURG UNIVERSITY

GRIGORY KESSEL

Religious women in early Carolingian Francia. A study of manuscript transmission and monastic culture. By Felice Lifshitz. Pp. xii + 349. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014. \$55.00 978 0 823 25687 7
JEH (67) 2016; doi:10.1017/S002204691600110X

This book presents a detailed case study of manuscript evidence for the agency of religious women living in the Anglo-Saxon cultural province in Francia, primarily in the Main Valley, in the decades around 800 CE. The agenda of the book is unabashedly feminist. Lifshitz argues that a handful of local manuscripts betray evidence that 'the Christian culture of that region was thoroughly gender-egalitarian' (p. 3). Not only were the texts copied in and produced for female religious communities in Karlburg and Kitzingen, but the editorial choices made by the scribes suggest that women created these manuscripts with the aim of defending their place in Christian culture at a time when the ecclesiastical reforms of the Carolingians were becoming increasingly hostile to the gender-egalitarian norms introduced by Anglo-Saxon missionaries, long recognised in the correspondence of Boniface and his circle. The first three chapters set the scene. Chapter i introduces the institutional framework for gender relations in religious communities in eighth-century Francia and the impact of the Carolingian reforms on this *status quo*. Chapter ii charts the religious landscape of the Main Valley by surveying

male and female religious houses in the region in the early Carolingian period. Chapter iii describes in detail two clusters of books produced by women in this region, which provide the principle evidence for the study: the Gun(t)za and Abirhild manuscripts, all of which Bernhard Bischoff dated to the latter half of the eighth century. Part II, comprising five chapters, examines the contents of these manuscripts and argues that the women who produced them deliberately chose to copy texts that aligned with their gender-egalitarian views or, even more strikingly, excised misogynist statements from otherwise valuable patristic commentaries and other such texts. These texts included Augustine's commentary on the Psalms, Gregory the Great's Gospel homilies, apocryphal acts of the Apostles (many of which featured women in important supporting roles), passion narratives of female martyrs, Isidore of Seville's *Synonyms* and florilegia like the *Liber scintillarum*. In example after example, Lifshitz's main point rings clear: '[W]omen's manuscripts from the Anglo-Saxon cultural province in Francia showed how their books reflected and defended both women's integration into intellectual, cultural, political, and religious life (syneisactism) and gender egalitarianism' (p. 193). This is a long, challenging and occasionally self-indulgent book that would have benefited from a firmer editorial hand, but this does not diminish its importance as a ground-breaking and meticulously researched work of feminist scholarship that convincingly employs manuscript evidence to argue for the agency of early medieval religious women in a climate of reform that was growing increasingly hostile to their value and purpose in the Christian tradition. Historians of early medieval monasticism, manuscript studies and gender studies will all discover important insights in this book.

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO

SCOTT BRUCE

A companion to Alfred the Great. Edited by Nicole Guenther Discenza and Paul E. Szamarch. (Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, 58.) Pp. xiv + 469 incl. 1 plate and 15 figs. Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2014. €168. 978 90 04 27484 6.

JEH (67) 2016; doi:10.1017/S0022046916000865

The introductory chapter to this collection of essays sets out its main aims as 'to guide readers through the field and [to] add new scholarship in the study of Alfred, his times, and the artistic and literary productions associated with the king and his court' (p. 1). In broad terms Discenza and Szarmach have successfully achieved those aims by bringing together an excellent array of leading scholars in the field of the Alfredian educational and cultural renaissance. What is more, they have produced a wide-ranging collection which will be particularly useful to any student of the vernacular texts (mostly translations) arguably produced in the sphere of the West Saxon king.

The volume presents thirteen studies divided into three main parts (Context, Alfred as author and Alfrediana). This division, logical as it may be, is slightly undermined by the weight of the central section, which comprises more than half of the articles (seven). Moreover, all but the three opening pieces, which provide wider historical and artistic studies, focus on the vernacular translation of Latin texts (those most necessary for people to know) of the late ninth