

## Reviews

Margot E. Fassler, *The Virgin of Chartres: Making History through Liturgy and the Arts*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010. xiii + 612 pp. +16 colour plates. £35/\$65. ISBN 978 0 300 11088 3.

The 'making history' referred to in the subtitle and preface of this thought-provoking book derives from a tantalising formulation of Michel de Certeau (p. vii).<sup>1</sup> De Certeau's tidbits often appear obscure to the uninitiated, but Fassler is here able to spell out what it might mean to 'make history' in one well-documented case. Fassler argues that in the Middle Ages history was not only being made through the composition of chronicles but also through the media of liturgy and art. This form of history does not resemble a modern academic one. It involved evoking and re-enacting a cyclical, non-linear version of the past. Though Fassler asserts that this process was at work in many locations in Western Europe, she focuses on medieval Chartres, which preserves the raw material for this investigation: perhaps best known for its cathedral with its Bible in stone and stained glass, Chartres also has ample evidence for its rituals and music. Because for Fassler history is made on a local basis, the emphasis geographically is the city itself, and Fassler rarely departs from its bounds (and, for the better part of the book, the cathedral grounds). Chronologically, her focus centres on the period from the tenth to the twelfth centuries, though Fassler nods to the earlier and later periods to provide context for this critical period of Chartres' historical development. One senses that some of the early modern material could well have laid the foundation for another book, but this section only plays a small part in the work.

Those familiar with Fassler's scholarship will recognise her ongoing project to move the liturgy to the centre of discussion in medieval circles, a difficult mission complicated by many medievalists' lack of knowledge of basic liturgical terminology, if not their immediate aversion. The length and detail of Fassler's work suggests that, having found a juicy example, she wished to make as convincing and well-documented a case for liturgy's relevance to a medieval understanding of history as possible. This is not the first work Fassler has written that tackled the liturgy in Chartres, and interested readers will want to consult two previous publications.<sup>2</sup> More critically, Fassler has previously spelled out explicitly her assumptions of what liturgical time is and described at length the kinds of sources that she employs

<sup>1</sup> Michel de Certeau, 'The Historiographical Operation', in *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York, 1988), 56–113, here 69 (not cited in the book).

<sup>2</sup> Margot Fassler, 'Mary's Nativity, Fulbert of Chartres, and the *Stirps Jesse*: Liturgical Innovation circa 1000 and its Afterlife', *Speculum* 75 (2000), 389–434; and *eadem*, 'Liturgy and Sacred History in the Twelfth-Century Tympana at Chartres', *The Art Bulletin* 75 (1993), 499–520.

to examine the liturgy.<sup>3</sup> While not strictly necessary to the arguments at hand, all these contributions add to the work in this book and may help readers to puzzle out why Fassler, for instance, refers to a *Styrps Jesse* rather than to the more familiar Jesse Tree.

The bulk of the work, written in twelve chapters, has Fassler reading the history of Chartres through a liturgical lens. This results in a unique vantage point on the history of the cathedral and a challenge to scholars who would ignore the testimony of the liturgy or relegate its importance to the to-ing and fro-ing of the clergy. The focus of its worship was the cult of the Virgin Mary and a relic of her chemise. If Mary is the reason for the devotion, the 'hero' of the book (inasmuch as there is one) is the liturgist Fulbert of Chartres. The strength of the work is Fassler's often eloquent reading of the evidence of the liturgy and arts from Chartres. One may point to a few examples – Fassler's discussion of the Marian sequence *Hac clara die* (pp. 51–2), Fulbert's sermon *Approbate consuetudinis* (pp. 81–9), and the stained glass window Notre Dame de la Belle Verrière (pp. 214–23) – but the exegesis of sources is at a uniformly high level and bound to provide a template of how to describe the medieval liturgy. Though a musicologist, Fassler more than delivers on her promise to provide interdisciplinary analysis: in the same passage, she will weave an interconnected web of references among liturgical manuscripts, music, ritual and sculpture. Although Fassler has a flair for describing artwork, she also provides a wealth of images (many in colour) for the reader to gaze upon. She also refers readers to Alison Stones's online site with images from Chartres.<sup>4</sup> The original Latin texts are cited frequently, either in the main text or the notes, and provided with lucid translations. The volume bursts forth with information and Fassler supplements the main text with eight appendices ranging from inventories of manuscripts to musical transcriptions to obituaries. It is impossible to summarise her findings in full, but among the many valuable discussions in the text is Fassler's confirmation of Els Rose's argument that apocryphal texts circulated in the same world as canonical Scripture and their stories were often disseminated by means of the liturgy (pp. 82–3).<sup>5</sup>

Anyone perusing the notes and bibliography of this book will be impressed with the care that went into assembling sources for this study. Fassler's bibliography will become a treasure chest for anyone doing future work on Chartres and by drawing upon it alone scholars could construct a more general history of the city. The research went far beyond the printed word. At several points, Fassler mentions the many scholars and local archivists with whom she consulted. With so much to be gained from her references, however, I do wish that their presentation had been improved. Most notes are sandwiched between the main text and the appendices,

<sup>3</sup> Margot Fassler, 'The Liturgical Framework of Time and the Representation of History', in *Representing History, 900–1300: Art, Music, History*, ed. Robert A. Maxwell (University Park, PA, 2010), 149–71 and notes on 239–47.

<sup>4</sup> <http://images.library.pitt.edu/c/chartres/>.

<sup>5</sup> Els Rose, *Ritual Memory: The Apocryphal Acts and Liturgical Commemoration in the Early Medieval West (c. 500–1215)* (Leiden, 2009).

which means that one must constantly flip through the book to access them. Confusingly, she also includes parenthetical references to some primary sources in the main body. What is more, Fassler has opted for abbreviated references in the notes, which means that one must then consult her bibliography. In too many cases, the notes do not provide the most relevant pages in articles or books. As a result, readers may neglect her interesting and often extensive observations and the sources that undergird them as well.

As with any innovative book, Fassler's investigation leaves some questions open. One that certainly merited more extensive consideration is the essential issue of audience. To grasp the multifaceted programme of liturgy and arts at Chartres implicitly requires Fassler to construct an ideal-type consumer of liturgy, savvy enough to navigate the multiple connections she maps out: 'It was through the daily singing of the Office that all learned men and women perceived scripture, as well as the most important commentaries upon it, and the related lives of the saints. These materials ... formed within worshippers a sense of how to understand time past' (p. 62). Yet only a small fraction of the interpretations laid out in this book could have occurred to those who visited the cathedral. A Fulbert of Chartres was able to create and appreciate the web of connections among the different media in his cathedral, but what chance did an ordinary believer have? Or for that matter, a canon who was slow-witted and only able to carry out the functional demands of the liturgy? In this context, it would have been helpful to explain who the 'learned men and women' or 'learned Chartrains' (p. 251), who presumably could figure out aspects of the programme, actually were. That the Chartrains could have gained a detailed understanding of segments of the architectural programme assumes a benevolent clergy willing to lead them by the hand; some of the canons might have been inclined to spell out the meanings of what people saw and heard, but this hardly would have applied to them all. It might be argued that the liturgy and art in the cathedral was intended to overwhelm the visitor, not only to teach the content of religious truths or stories. This sense of wonder communicated through media might have allowed the bishops of Chartres to build up their power along with the cathedral and ensured the flow of funds that came from pilgrims' purses.

The sculpture and stained glass of the cathedral may well have served as Gregory I's books of the unlearned, and I agree with Fassler's assertion that Chartrains would have been familiar with some of the characters depicted in the cathedral (pp. 283–4). Yet even here one runs into problems. As anyone who has ever visited the cathedral will attest, it is impossible with the naked eye to see clearly many of the pieces of stained glass, much less to make sense of what they depict. The difficulty is compounded when one considers that a substantial portion of the audience would have been pilgrims and would only have had limited opportunity to examine the cathedral's artwork. When one goes beyond a literal grasp of what is depicted in various scenes, it is hard to believe that most people would have plumbed the meaning of the imagery: even Fassler concedes that her liturgical reading of the jamb statues, which drew upon the commentary of Rabanus Maurus on Matthew 1, would have been construed only by certain members of the clergy (pp. 272–3).

When it came to the chanted Latin, by the tenth century a minority would have had the linguistic capacity to follow along. Even those who understood the Divine Office did not necessarily contemplate it deeply: resting places in chant may have given singers a chance to reflect on meaning (p. 127) but they equally could have provided them with a rest or allowed their minds to wander. I have no doubt that the medieval laity had its own imaginations (p. 283), but there is no telling to what extent they let them run free when regarding the cathedral and its liturgy. It is possible that they formulated their own idiosyncratic interpretations of what they gazed upon or heard rather than embracing the 'standard interpretations' she describes so well. The multiplicity of possible interpretations that Fassler acknowledges people might have experienced upon seeing the jamb statues (pp. 280–81) might well have extended to other aspects of the liturgical programme. In passing, I should note that despite Fassler's novel and erudite discussion of the jamb statues – and her serious effort to explain the number of female figures that are featured in it – given the incomplete and muddled nature of the evidence, Adolf Katzenellenbogen's argument that they depict temporal and spiritual power working in harmony possesses the virtue of simplicity and compellingly links this artistic programme to the Investiture Controversy.<sup>6</sup>

As in any microhistory, Fassler must resort at times to informed speculation to fill in the gaps in the sources. The text is littered with formulations that refer to what may or must have happened, what likely or surely happened, or what can be assumed or imagined to have happened. These statements do not invalidate the main claims of the argument, but they do call into question the precision of our reconstruction of how history is made. They also make one wish that Fassler had been more explicit in teaching her audience the limitations of the sources with which she deals, especially since many readers will have little experience with liturgical evidence. Occasionally the speculation is stretched too thin. As Fassler rightly notes, controversy reigns as to the extent of the 'School of Chartres', but no evidence whatsoever exists of Chartrain scholars contributing to the cathedral either financially or intellectually, 'although this does not mean that they did not contribute' (p. 197). Why then spend several pages speaking about the connection between scholars and the cathedral? Chartres may have had an ideal set-up to sponsor theatrical events that would somehow relate to the artwork in the cathedral (p. 336), but since the sources are silent on this point, it would perhaps have been best to omit it. One suspects that there was more to say about the intriguing relationship between the liturgy of the Holy Land and Chartres, which is raised once in detail (pp. 147–51), though it is referenced throughout the work. I was fascinated by Fassler's argument that the Chartrain liturgy was transmitted to Jerusalem, as it might have taught us more about how local liturgies were transported and reinterpreted in new territories – especially as western Europeans themselves adapted to the Middle East. But it is unclear from Fassler's discussion whether there was anything specific about the

<sup>6</sup> Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *The Sculptural Programs of Chartres Cathedral: Christ, Mary, Ecclesia* (Baltimore, 1959), 27–36.

liturgy at Jerusalem that mirrored Chartres in particular, rather than liturgical trends present more broadly in France. (Was it only the presence of Fulcher of Chartres that guarantees the liturgy of Chartres was performed in Jerusalem?) These questions will undoubtedly become easier to answer with the texts Amnon Linder has unearthed, which have only scratched the surface of liturgical practice in the Crusading movement.<sup>7</sup>

Because Fassler self-consciously moves away from adopting a modern historical view, it may be churlish to wonder more about how contemporary events impinge upon the liturgical worldview she sketches. The suggestion that the thirteenth-century sequence *Mater matris Domini* reflects the anti-Jewish attitude of its age seems to me an excellent point meriting further commentary (p. 344). It will be unfulfilling for some readers to have Fassler promise to speak about political connections with the cathedral (p. viii), only to shrug towards the end and admit that more work has to be done on this front (pp. 337–9). Fassler carefully delineates the cathedral's donors in the mid-twelfth century and their jostling for the French monarchy (especially on pp. 157–65 and 508 n. 4), but this historical interlude is cordoned off from the rest of the account and does not have a clear pay-off because she cannot establish that the donors had any documented role in formulating the liturgy or art of the cathedral. I consider it plausible that battles for power among French clans may have been one of the reasons that Mary's lineage emerges as a major theme in Chartrain art (pp. 42–51), but a sceptic might counter that the aristocracy was always preoccupied with lineage and so this theme was not a special concern during the construction of the cathedral. Provocative is the suggestion that the young King Louis VII served as a model for a sculpture of Herod (p. 299), although I tend to doubt that the bishop would have wanted to alienate a powerful noble and his family with such an insulting association. More compelling is that the Marian liturgy of Chartres was intended to respond to the violence of the late tenth century (pp. 51–2), though this point too would have benefited from further evidence and elaboration. At this point or elsewhere in the book Fassler might have considered Barbara Rosenwein's argument that some nobles in the Church funnelled their aggressions into a form of liturgical warfare against those who threatened them violence.<sup>8</sup>

Anyone who approaches this book based upon the 'making history' of the title with the expectation of an extended foray into medieval historiography will be disappointed. Fassler views it as self-evident that history in the medieval period was viewed in a liturgical framework: 'The ways in which medieval Christians were able to use the liturgy as a history book are many' (p. 64). This is an argument that requires careful demonstration (if not a volume of its own) but here is presented as a given. Too little space is devoted to how coherent this ostensible liturgical vision

<sup>7</sup> Especially on this point, see Amnon Linder, *Raising Arms: Liturgy in the Struggle to Liberate Jerusalem in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Rosenwein, 'Feudal War and Monastic Peace: Cluniac Liturgy as Ritual Aggression', *Viator* 2 (1971), 129–57, though here with reference to Cluniac monks.

of the past was or if anyone accepted it. It was of course possible to incorporate a thorough knowledge of liturgical texts into a more traditional linear history, all the more so since, as Fassler stresses, cantors were often chroniclers. The extent to which liturgical language flowed through medieval histories is a trend that has been little studied and is unlikely to be soon since editors regularly neglect liturgical references in critical editions.<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that Fassler denies the presence of a non-liturgical brand of history, but if they are indeed two schools of how to construct the past, then how did they relate to one another?

Some of the evidence meant to convey the methods of the 'history makers' of Chartres is not fully digested. The broad liturgical time that is operative in this work allows Fassler to collapse interpretations of Scripture and liturgical texts originally produced over the span of centuries, especially in the first two chapters of the work. The lurking problem here is that though these texts were theoretically available to the clergy of Chartres, we have an imprecise idea of how much they informed biblical interpretations centuries later. How deeply influenced, for instance, were Chartrains by Jerome's take on the Bible? This claim might have been demonstrated by citing textual borrowings from Jerome in Chartrain authors. One wonders too how much conscious manipulation of artists of Chartres led to deviations from Scriptural texts – for example, was an altar added to a sculpted presentation in the temple (pp. 235–6) because the artists wanted to conjure a 'liturgical sense' (as Fassler asserts) or because they thought an altar was in the original story? One cannot assume that the designer of this image consulted Scripture before planning it rather than relying on a faulty (or imaginative) memory.

This book is valuable even for those who do not subscribe to the argument that frames Fassler's observations or individual details of the demonstration. Reading her descriptions of medieval liturgy and arts will immerse the reader in the resources available for medieval Chartres, whether or not one agrees that contemporaries took full advantage of them. Fassler has opened the eyes of medievalists to the riches that flow from a close reading of liturgy and related media. It is to be hoped that other scholars will follow her lead with the evidence from Chartres and other locales and in the process further test out the avenues for study Fassler introduces here.

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<sup>9</sup> Leonid Arbusow, *Liturgie und Geschichtsschreibung im Mittelalter* (Bonn, 1951) is still fundamental on the connection between liturgy and historical writing.