

BOOK REVIEWS

Backman, Clifford R. *The Decline and Fall of Medieval Sicily: Politics, Religion and Economy in the Reign of Frederick III, 1296-1337*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xx + 352pp.

Davids, Adelbert, ed. *The Empress Theophano: Byzantium and the West at the Turn of the First Millennium*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Xvi + 344 pp.

Skinner, Patricia. *Family Power in Southern Italy: The Duchy of Gaeta and its Neighbors, 850-1139*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, xii + 322 pp.

The three books reviewed here have a few things in common—they are works on medieval history published by Cambridge University Press that contain material of interest to historians of women and feminist scholars. Two, however, are not histories of women, and I would argue that none are particularly feminist. Finding a way to write coherently about the three has proved challenging. The most interesting result of reviewing them has been that they have challenged me to articulate my vision for the writing of feminist and women's history. The danger of this line of questioning is that it asks the books to be something they are not, and something they did not set out to be. In this review I will describe the works listed, and then indicate the direction in which I think medievalist-feminists might proceed.

In his book on late medieval Sicily, Clifford Backman describes the decline of Sicily from an economically strong and politically stable Norman kingdom of the twelfth century to a near parody of political, economic and social disaster by the end of the fourteenth. Sicily would recover from this dark period during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but Backman suggests that it was as a result of this low point that historical opinion about a romantic, impoverished and corrupt nation was born. The parameter of Backman's study is the reign of Sicily's Catalan king Frederick III, during which Backman believes that a variety of social, demographic, spiritual, political and economic problems "came to a head" (p. xv). Because he wishes to avoid a reductive approach (Benedetto Croce's theory that Sicily has been a victim of persistent foreign meddling beginning with the Normans, or the idea that Sicilians are simply doomed to failure are two historiographic modes he points to, p. xii), Backman discusses a wide range of topics: population, topography, religious culture, trade activities, political intrigue, etc., and he does this well. The book is fluently written and enjoyable to read.

Women, however, are literally marginalized in Backman's work. Specific analysis of women's position in this period is relegated to the penultimate chapter titled "In the margins: slaves, pirates, and women." The most important thing Backman has to say about women in Sicily in this period is that here is a significant opportunity to write about Sicilian women for anyone who wishes to take it. They were important and interesting. Because they, like most medieval women, left few personal records of their lives, and because they lived under the tight constraints and watchful eye of a highly patriarchal society, they are "shadowy figures, crouched quietly in doorways" (p. 285). The skills and methods that scholars like Susan Stuard, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber and Barbara Hanawalt have brought to bear on other medieval women could serve medieval Sicilian women as well. Backman himself has started to open this door and shed some light, eroding the very margins to which he consigns women. From Backman's retelling of a parable of Sicily as the ravaged beggar woman who is the only prize of the invader King Robert of Naples, to continued discussion of Frederick III's queen Eleanor (who had a great deal of personal, economic and particularly religious influence), to the unnamed but significant daughters of "new" families seeking authenticity through marriage to established ones, he establishes very clearly Sicilian women's important and often active role. At one point Backman characterizes Sicily as a "nation of widows"—to emphasize, perhaps, the desolation and poverty of a place where many of the men had died in war and of disease—but one would like a greater opportunity to think about what a nation of widows would really look like. The women who make their appearance throughout the book suggest that women's history is essential to national, or societal, and yes, even political history. The study of gender itself is marginalized as a methodology in this monograph; here, too, it appears that Sicily would offer fertile ground.

Patricia Skinner's book, *Family Power in Southern Italy* focuses on the growth and decline of several powerful families in the duchies of Gaeta, Amalfi and Naples from the ninth to the twelfth centuries, particularly the Docibilan family of Gaeta. Skinner studies the "traceable land owning or mercantile families" who served as points of contact between the three duchies, because looking at families rather than individuals, she argues, widens the potential of the study (p. 5). Skinner makes the point that families have not been much studied because, although active and wealthy, they did not govern. Using a solid social historical (and quasi-feminist) perspective, Skinner thus argues for a study of family as a way to understand reality. However, these families were not the majority, being wealthy and politically influential, even noble. Especially in this period, when and where power was very localized, it seems to me that studying family might be, in fact, the best way to understand rulership. This offers a terrific opportunity to look at the impact of female family members on political life. Throughout her

book, Skinner does mention various important women—mainly mothers and grandmothers—but her very methodology might serve to obscure women’s roles. Skinner’s is a prosopographical study, relying on genealogical methods and family profiles. She especially examines lead names over generations in order to reconstruct families and identify their important members. Because women’s names were never among the lead names, it would appear on the surface that women were unimportant. Women’s power seems directly linked to their documentation, as does male power. To continue to pursue early medieval women through this route, then, would be unprofitable, unless new analytical models are applied.

Perhaps the title is ambiguous, but when I started reading this book I hoped to learn about new paradigms for understanding female power within the medieval family. But not very far into this careful study, which wrings all sorts of information out of apparently minimal sources, I wondered “what does family mean?” It appears that Skinner has fallen into the trap of defining family as a father, sons, brothers and uncles, occasionally connected by a woman wealthy or fertile enough to receive some attention. This is disappointing. Skinner has a responsibility to follow her sources’ lead, but in repeating their paradigm, she has missed an opportunity to ask hard questions of those very sources, such as how ideas about gender have influenced public (i.e., documented) presentations of family. Is this assessment unfair? Skinner is not unaware of women’s history, and has done a good job of naming a variety of women important to the growing power of Gaetan noble families. Those who want to read her analysis of women in Gaeta can leap over most of the first half of the book to the brief section entitled “Role of Women in Tenth-Century Nobility”, where she examines illustrious female ancestors of her subjects (p. 140). In particular she explores the significance of the limited practice of matronymic identification by natural children, children of widows, or children who didn’t know the identity of their fathers (p.141).

Women’s activities included sharing in the family wealth (but not governing), and building local alliances. The one very well documented woman, the Neapolitan Pitru (late tenth century), exercised the full extent of power available to her—apparently supplanting her husband to the degree that he temporarily joined a monastery—carrying out lawsuits, exploiting wealth and land, and managing her family’s proprietary church. In discussing women who served as guardians for minor sons, Skinner points out that “It is a favorite historical motif to blame the decline of a dynasty’s power on the perceived weakness of a female ruler or regent, but the widows of dukes had a crucial role to play in ensuring that their children succeeded to the duchy” (p. 143). This motif has been questioned again and again, and I think by now is seen as a key element in representations of political mothering.¹

Adelbert Davids' *The Empress Theophano* is a collection of seventeen essays on topics about and surrounding the Empress Theophano, wife of Otto II and more importantly mother of Otto III, "the Byzantine princess who became one of the greatest medieval sovereigns in the west" (p. xii). Apart from examining the life of Theophano, the essays address the general issues facing royal and foreign brides, comparison between the tenth century east and west, the influence of Byzantium upon the west, especially in art and liturgy, and even ventures into the economic world in an essay by L.F. Genicot ("The human and economic context").

One can learn a lot about Theophano and her world from these essays. But the essays are often redundant, compelled to spell out details of questions of Theophano's origins or the circumstances surrounding her marriage to Otto II (perhaps set forth most clearly in the posthumously and previously published essay by Karl Leyser, "*Theophanu divina gratia imperatrix augusta: western and eastern emperorship in the later tenth century*"). Some of the essays seem to have little to do with Theophano at all, but rather focus on, for example, the comparable foreign marriage between Maria Lekapena and Peter of Bulgaria (by Jonathan Shepard), or Byzantine influence in the west (codicological, artistic, liturgical, etc.) contemporary with or even linked to Theophano's arrival in the west.

The preface of the collection (presumably by Davids) gives very little help, and seems mainly to want to pursue the question of Theophano's instrumentality or agency. This reductive either/or proposition is irksome. "Whether Theophano is a suitable symbol for feminism in the 1990s is a matter for debate: she is certainly an intriguing woman" (p. xiv). It is not clear to me what a suitable symbol for a feminist might be. I'm not even sure of the appropriateness of such a question: when early theorists of women's lives such as Christine de Pizan and Mary Wollestonecraft are open to criticism, how can Theophano compare? This might seem a picky point, given that this preface serves seventeen very different articles. But given that there are seventeen to be tied together, the preface becomes important since the reader expects it to set the tone for a unified work. In this respect, for this volume, better questions might be asked—or different essays chosen, for there is very little here that directly addresses feminist historical concerns. This does not mean, however, that the volume is useless for medievalist feminists.

Karl Leyser's essay, which explains some of the differences between the concept of emperorship in the east and the west argues that the "oddities" of female rule in the west (i.e., Theophano's regency, and her self-designation as "imperator") are allowed by incoherent protocol and a weak conception of emperorship as compared to eastern ideology (p. 27). In other words, women can take political power during times of chaos simply because (and only because) there is a

vacuum. This is not an unfamiliar argument. But two essays which follow, by Odilo Engels and Judith Herrin, offer interesting counterpoints which might allow for a more sophisticated understanding of female rulership in the west. Engels' work, "Theophanu, the western empress from the East," is a previously published essay now appearing in translation without notes, but with an annotated bibliography. One might groan at Engels' initial question—"How, in the so-called dark Middle Ages, did a lady cope with a man's world of ruffians and fighters, who looked down on reading and writing as effeminate abilities?" (p. 28). This seemingly romantic vision of the Middle Ages quickly turns to a discussion of constitutional questions, and focuses on the nature of the relationship between Theophano and her powerful mother-in-law Adelaide. Political alliances were the source of difficulty between Theophano and Adelaide (pp. 34-35)—a much more interesting analysis than the usual reduction of two women's lives to a competition for the affection of Otto II. The actions and alliances of the two women open the question of the nature of guardianship (pp. 36-37), and for me, highlight the importance of women like Theophano, Adelaide, and Adelaide's mother-in-law Matilda in formulating ideas about the nature of rulership (p. 44).

Judith Herrin's essay, "Theophano: considerations on the education of a Byzantine princess," addresses the very important question of cultural transmission through brides, and tries to get at how they were prepared for these jobs. Herrin points out that Theophano would have been educated not only to represent family but also Imperial interests (p. 64). Because Theophano is absent from Greek sources, Herrin examines how princesses in general were prepared to assume (eventually) the role of empress. The most important things for an empress-to-be to learn were her role in court ceremonial, the Greek vernacular, and the ideology of Byzantine culture. This included the essential role of the empress to the court; modeled on the emperor's role, there was always to be an empress, even if only the emperor's orphaned daughter (pp. 72-72).

Herrin suggests that Theophano was so trained because of Theophano's later behavior once married to Otto II, including the naming of her daughters after her own mother, grandmother, and great-grandmothers. This is problematic, since two of her children, Adelaide and Matilda, could have easily been named for her husband's mother and grandmother. For more evidence of Theophano's education, she points to her subsequent training, especially ideological, of her notoriously Grecophile son, Otto III. Overall, I wanted more specifics about how Theophano's actions as Ottonian empress reflected her education as a Byzantine princess. Herrin credits Theophano's background with her determination to rule as empress and later regent; in Constantinople, female regency had been unavoidable, and "established an image of the female ruler that ran counter to the general seclusion of women" (p. 83). I am not sure whether she means this

general seclusion of women to be a Byzantine phenomenon or a more widely European one. However, I immediately thought of Theophano's mother-in-law, Adelaide, who seemed equally determined to rule, and other women such as their contemporary Elvira Ramirez in Spain, and later women such as Matilda of England or Blanche of Castile.² The underlying question this and other essays prompt is what was it that encouraged medieval women to think that they could rule and had a right to rulership? Herrin argues that for Theophano, it was her education and precedent, both in the greater service of Imperial success. All of the essays in this volume—by their very nature, even if they are not actually about Theophano or even about women (see Genicot and Van der Alast, "The palace and monastery in Byzantine spiritual life c. 1000")—admit to the significance of women's history, if at a very elite, individual level. But none of the essays, it seems to me, are informed, at least explicitly or successfully, by a feminist perspective.

What would a feminist want to know about Theophano? About noble Sicilian or Gaetan women? How to make their histories "charged with meaning"?³ I have an explicitly academic and personal interest in this question, as I, too, work on elite women. What methodologies, what models serve to tell the story of these important women, at the same time recognizing their special status among and relationship to all women? First of all, I hope there will be more analysis of the meaning of motherhood in medieval political life. Motherhood is a relatively new field of study for medievalists, inaugurated by Clarissa Atkinson's important work *The Oldest Vocation*, and the essays collected by John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler in *Medieval Mothering*. Neither of these works addresses Ottonian or Byzantine women. Second, I think that more attention needs to be given to the problems of studying political or "public" history, women, and gender. Skinner's work in particular suggests this, for while she includes women where she can, she allows herself to be led by her sources in such a way that precludes asking certain questions about their absence and offers no analysis of gender. Other modes, like Backman's, give women their own chapter but do not consider their essential role as women in all chapters of history.

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¹See, for just one example, my article "Berenguela of Castile's Political Motherhood: The Management of Sexuality, Marriage, and Succession," in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, (Garland Press, 1996). See studies of Blanche of Castile, and others.

²For Elvira, see Roger Collins, "Queens-Dowager and Queens-Regent in Tenth-Century Leon and Navarre," *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John Carmi Parsons, (New York, 1993).

³Adrienne Rich, "Resisting Amnesia, History and Personal Life," in *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (New York, 1986), pp. 146-147.