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Pieter-Jan De Grieck has provided the academic world with a valuable study of Benedictine historiography in the Southern Netherlands between 1150 and 1550. He justly laments the lack of scholarly interest in late medieval religious historiography, and nuances the traditional view of a Benedictine order in decline. De Grieck's book, based on his doctoral thesis, is divided into two parts. The first part sets out the general context of Benedictine life in the Southern Low Countries, its history and its historiography, while the second part focuses on the historical writings of two members of St Martin's abbey in Tournai. The repertory of Benedictine abbeys in the Southern Netherlands and the overview of Benedictine historiographical production are very useful.

The first chapter introduces the reader to Benedictine monasticism, including the tensions inherent in its ideals and realities. This is followed by a well-annotated synthesis of the history of the Benedictine order in the Southern Netherlands and the religious reform initiatives this area experienced (Chapter 2). Here De Grieck traces the evolution of both the material situation of the abbeys and their practices concerning religious discipline, as well as the roles they played in the world. Whereas the Benedictine order was characterized by dynamism and expansion in the period between 1050 and 1150, the centuries thereafter saw hardly any new foundations. The Benedictine order fell into a period of stagnation, which has caused many modern scholars to believe that it was also a period of decline. De Grieck shows that although many sources (often written by reformers, who had a vested interest in depicting the situation as negatively as possible) inform us about the deplorable state of monastic observance in the later Middle Ages, one cannot talk about a general decline. Instead, one must consider that a considerable number of local reform initiatives in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were successful, such as those at St Jacob's abbey in Liège, St Hubert's in the Ardennes, St Martin's in Tournai and St Ghislain in the province of Hainaut. In particular, the good reputation of the Brabantine abbey of Affligem stood out as a model from the thirteenth century onwards. Its regular life was praised by authors like Jacques de Vitry, Nicolaus Mis and Thomas of Cantimpré and it is known that the southern German abbey of Niederaltaich sent monks to study the observance in Affligem (84-85). The success of these reform initiatives depended on the qualities of local abbots, as a hierarchical

Benedictine structure was not present. De Griek demonstrates that the Benedictine abbeys in the Southern Low Countries were (relatively) autonomous, in comparison with other European regions. Papal orders promoting the organization of provincial chapters to take the abbeys out of their isolation had limited success. Reform in this period usually meant a return to the observance of the Cluniac *consuetudines*, since most abbeys in the Southern Netherlands had adopted the customs of Cluny at the beginning of the twelfth century.

In the fourteenth century, wars, famine and epidemics severely limited the possibilities for spiritual and material prosperity. Observant movements responded to these crises, backed by bishops and secular rulers; the dukes of Burgundy, for example, were "fervent defenders of a strict monastic discipline" (97). The spread of observant reform in the Benedictine abbeys of the Southern Low Countries owed much to St Jacob's abbey in Liège. After the abbey was hit by the plague in 1401, Abbot Reinier of Sainte-Marguerite (1408-1435) led his monks back to regular life. The bishop of Liège supported his initiatives. The reform-minded network that started at Liège should be seen against the background of the reform movements that affected most religious orders from the middle of the fourteenth century onwards and strove towards the recovery and renewal of religious observance. Its spread was facilitated by the regular organization of provincial chapters imposed by the general church councils of the fifteenth century. From the beginning of the sixteenth century, the observant congregation of Bursfeld started to influence Benedictine life in the Southern Netherlands. Although only four abbeys in this area actually joined the congregation in the sixteenth century (Gembloux, St Andrew's in Bruges, Affligem and Ename), manuscript evidence demonstrates that many more abbeys were inspired by the observance of Bursfeld. Many abbeys followed the practices of Bursfeld, without officially joining the congregation.

In contrast to general opinions about the decline of Benedictine life in the later Middle Ages, De Griek's conclusions are that "the reform activities and the building activities demonstrate that the Benedictine order was not in the least in a profound crisis" (120). The abbeys did not lose contact with society, but remained powerful institutions. De Griek justly points out the continuity of Benedictine life in the Southern Low Countries: of 43 abbeys, only 3 abbeys disappeared between 1100 and 1600. Considering the reforms within the Benedictine order, he observes that the influence of reform-minded religious of other religious orders was substantial: "The gap between reform-minded branches of different orders was obviously smaller than the gap between reformed and non-reformed religious of the same order" (123). Furthermore, he concludes that resistance to reform efforts was widespread and that reform initiatives could only be successful when supported by a pope, bishop or secular ruler. This is the same in other religious orders, but De Griek unfortunately does not connect his findings with existing literature on the subject.

The third chapter comprises an overview of the historiographical production of Benedictine monks, which includes annals, adaptations or continuations of the popular universal chronicle of Sigebert of Gembloux, institutional historiography, and regional and dynastic historiography. Of the 43 Benedictine abbeys in the Southern Netherlands, 27 have left a total of 138 historical narratives (of which nine are in the vernacular). The two most productive periods were between 1150 and 1200 and between 1450 and 1500. No order chronicles, that is, chronicles that focus on the Benedictine order in general, have survived. De Grienck explains this by pointing towards the autonomy of the Benedictine abbeys: neither provincial chapters nor congregations had been successfully implemented in the Southern Low Countries. Still, half of the texts are institutional and concentrate on the abbey of their author, mostly in the form of *Gesta abbatum*, or *fundationes*. These narratives about the foundation were generally written between 50 and 100 years after the abbey was founded, when the memory of its founders was at risk of being forgotten. Benedictine historians often struggled to find a suitable format to bring together monastic and secular history into one narrative. These efforts mostly resulted in knotty texts, like Jan of Stavelot's *Chronique liégeoise*. Others, like Gilles Li Muisis, treated monastic and secular history in different writings more successfully.

Historiography helped to secure the stability and continuity of the monastic community (130) and was instrumental in corroborating the internal cohesion of an abbey and defending its position in society. However, the writing of history was central neither to Benedictine life, nor Benedictine reform programs. Historiography was generally written when the identity of a community was threatened. It could function as justification in a conflict, for example with a lord or bishop. De Grienck acknowledges that there is a link between reform efforts and written culture: when an abbey was reformed writing activities frequently got a boost, but this did not necessarily include the writing of history. Contrary to the findings of Constance Proksch (1994) concerning the German lands, in the Southern Netherlands, no real Benedictine *Reformchronistik* appeared: historiography was not used to advance and corroborate reform (228) and observance was seldom a theme in historical writings. If internal crises of the abbey were described they were not meant for an audience outside the abbey. This is evident in the case of Adriaan of Oudenbosch. This member of St Laurent's abbey in Liège took Jan of Stavelot's *Traitiet des fondateurs de saint Lorent et des abbeis* out of the codex that contained his history of the prince bishopric and city of Liège "because it is not expedient that outsiders know what is held there"--*quia non expedit ea, que ibi habentur, extraneos scire* (219). On the other hand, Thomas le Roy did write a vernacular version of the history of St Martin to promote the abbey among the inhabitants of Tournai (391).

De Grienck shows that the impact of the Benedictine historiography was limited: most of the texts only survive in one medieval manuscript and none, except Sigebert of Gembloux's universal chronicle, were printed before 1550. Moreover, from the fifteenth century onwards, most historical texts were written on paper in a cursive hand, not on

the more expensive parchment. This indicates the limited prestige of such texts. However, the knowledge contained in the historical texts was used for other narratives, and therefore did leave the walls of the abbey in different ways.

The second part of the book offers two case studies of St Martin's abbey in Tournai. It focuses on the historiographical production of two of its members, Gilles Li Muisis (Chapter 4) and Mathieu Grenet (Chapter 5). St Martin's abbey was situated in--and thus maintained close relations with--the city of Tournai. Gilles Li Muisis (1272- 1353), who became abbot of St Martin's in 1331, belonged to one of the leading bourgeois families of the city. His continuing relationship with the city's elite is obvious from his writings. Although he acknowledges that a monk should ideally keep himself away from secular affairs, he was very much involved in the world. He even participated in poetry events organized by the lay bourgeoisie of Tournai. Moreover, he often interfered in secular affairs, because he felt obliged to use his moral authority outside the walls of the monastery. It is interesting to note the discrepancy between his depiction of the city in his poetry and in his historical writings: in his poems the city is solely depicted as a place of sin, pride and greed, whereas in his historical writings he is proud to relate the splendid deeds of the inhabitants of Tournai. When Li Muisis became abbot, his main goal was to manage the monastery's financial affairs. As a young monk he had witnessed the decline of St Martin's abbey due to poor abbatial administration. He believed that spiritual and material wealth were reconcilable, provided that the material wealth was employed for the good of the people through hospitality and charity. However, when wealth was used to benefit the monks' own lifestyle, as he witnessed in his own time, it became harmful. It would cause spiritual prestige to diminish and, with it, the interest of the outside world *and* the donations that had enabled the material wealth of the abbey in the first place.

Between 1346 and 1348 Li Muisis became blind and started composing his literary works by dictating them to a secretary in order to avoid idleness and emptiness, as he states in his prologue. Besides this, it is obvious from his writings that he also wanted to justify his own reign as abbot and his actions as a crisis manager. The year 1349 marked an important turning point in the writings of Li Muisis. The deaths caused by the plague had a great impact on his historical writings: he viewed the plague as the punishment of God for the spiritual decline in his times. Thereafter his writings became very moralistic and he cited the Bible more frequently. Whereas the salvation-historical perspective was hardly perceptible before 1349, it became central after the plague. He complained about the monks dressing as noblemen, and also about the greed of the city's clergy, who kept the laity in anxiety in order to secure their own income. Only the mendicants were placed in a more positive light by Li Muisis. They were learned and instructed the populace through their preaching; in the inner court of St Martin's abbey the Franciscan Gerardus de Muro was even said to preach in an "excellent" and "very wise" manner (357).

Chapter 5 proceeds with a survey of St Martin's abbey in the late fifteenth century. It concentrates primarily on Mathieu Grenet, but also on Thomas Le Roy and Arnold of Solbreucq. These three members of the abbey participated in a poetry contest in 1482 where they drank, ate, and recited rhymes with the bourgeois elite of Tournai. Two of the participants happened to leave the abbey shortly after this event. For that reason, De Griek formulates the hypothesis that disciplinary measures were taken against the three participants, but his arguments (418) are not convincing. Mathieu Grenet became prior of Saint-Amand-lez-Thourette near Machemont, and the fate of Thomas Le Roy after 1482 is not known. However, Arnold of Solbreucq entered the Cistercian abbey Le Jardin, as he was probably discontent with the regular observance of St Martin's. It is not logical that a monk who was punished for his participation in a poetry contest would leave his abbey for a stricter one. This Arnold of Solbreucq would later, as abbot of Gembloux, become "one of the key figures" in the propagation of the customs of the Bursfeld congregation in the Southern Low Countries. (414)

De Griek has edited a part of Mathieu Grenet's work (Appendix 4), in which the latter describes the conflict arising after the election of Jean Flameng as abbot of St Martin in 1489. Jean's uncle Nicolas Flameng put him forward without consulting the monks. This was problematic as Jean Flameng was neither a monk, nor was he known in the city of Tournai. Through his machinations, Nicolas Flameng had secured the approbation of both the pope and the king of France for the election of his nephew, without the members of St Martin's abbey knowing. When they found out, the monks, backed by the citizens of Tournai, revolted and chose another abbot. The conflict turned violent and it took years before Jean Flameng was finally accepted as abbot of St Martin. This episode demonstrates the way in which the people of Tournai were concerned with and involved in the affairs of St Martin's abbey: they insisted on having an abbot who was known to the city and its inhabitants, but did not manage to overrule the decisions of the pope, the king and the previous abbot.

It is striking that neither Li Muisis nor Mathieu Grenet offer any substantial information about the state of the Benedictine order in general. Essential values of monastic life are not mentioned. In this case, one may wonder whether De Griek's case studies are well chosen, as the title of the book promises an investigation into monastic identity. On the other hand, they seem to demonstrate convincingly that there was hardly such thing as an overarching Benedictine identity in the Southern Netherlands in the period under study. Although various monasteries all abided by the Rule of Benedict, *the* Benedictine identity is a problematic concept. For the Benedictine foundations central to this study, the abbey of the author and the city in which it was situated were more essential as markers of identity.