

Warren C. Brown, Marios Costambeys, Matthew Innes, and Adam J. Kosto, edds., *Documentary Culture and the Laity in the Early Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. ISBN: 9781107025295. Pp. xvi, 389.

Among the many documents arrayed in *Documentary Culture and the Laity in the Early Middle Ages* is a deed from 494 documenting the sale of a single almond tree on its plot of land. Many of the documents examined by the contributors to this volume are similarly limited in scope. But by considering the almond tree deed alongside other documents, recording the fortunes of (for example) a red cow, a water-wheel axle, and a list of cheeses, the scholars who have contributed to this project succeed in crafting something much greater than the sum of its parts: a fresh, compelling assessment of an elusive problem.

The volume is the fruit of a working group which has sought, over the course of a decade, to reassess the problem of the lay archive in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. The problem, in essence, is that direct evidence for lay participation in documentary culture is very limited: ecclesiastical archives dominate the surviving material. Though early medievalists over the past few decades have argued for the possibility that the laity participated widely in a robust documentary culture, the relative scarcity of direct evidence unconnected with ecclesiastical institutions has made the argument a difficult one. How accurate are literary sources which seem to imply that documentary culture was widespread, vibrant, unexceptional? How representative are the (literal) scraps of evidence for document use among the laity?

In seeking to assess the degree to which laypeople used documents between c. 500 and 1000, these essays join forces to confront a number of assumptions about laypeople and literacy. They demonstrate clearly that the lay-clerical dichotomy is not stable in this period, and they question whether it is a useful framework for categorizing documents. In most of the contexts discussed here, the clergy and laity appear to have participated in a common documentary culture, applying similar expectations to their use of documents. The volume also takes on the literacy-orality issue central to much groundbreaking scholarship on literacy and documentary culture. The period under examination here is traditionally considered to be solidly within the realm of orality—an oath-swearing world where the written word was secondary to the ritual gesture. These essays, however, explore the complex ways in which orality and literacy complemented each other, revealing the ways that documents could legitimize as well as be legitimized by ritual acts.

If the general argument of the volume—that laypeople participated heavily in a robust and multifaceted documentary culture—is not entirely unexpected for anyone keeping tabs on recent work in the field, its particular findings and theoretical contributions are bold and striking. The examination of documentary culture offers an interesting perspective on questions of post-Roman continuity and change. Several of the studies suggest that although institutions which created demand for documents changed in late

antiquity, the documentary forms themselves could persist for other reasons. Peter Sarris, examining the Late Antique and Byzantine East, argues that documentary practices persisted in the post-Roman world partly because of the continuity of unequal social and economic relationships, which tended to create a paper (papyrus) trail. Nicholas Everett, focusing on Spain and Italy c. 400–700, notes that the ‘vulgarization’ of Roman Law resulted in a continuous dependence on documentary practices and even increased their importance for individual laypeople. In an interesting assessment of the *gesta municipalia*, Warren C. Brown suggests that the system, created to keep track of tax obligations, was appealing to landowners because it strengthened the validity of their documents; for this reason, some of the *gesta* procedures outlived the archival system that created them.

The mosaic image that emerges from the case studies in this volume is that of a world in which document use was diverse, complex, and shifting, but never marginal. One contribution of Adam J. Kosto’s study of Christian Iberia, c. 700–1000 is the identification of “low-value” and temporary-use documents which reveal the saturation of documentary culture down the social hierarchy, challenging assumptions about record-keeping and social status. This study and several others also illuminate the process by which documentary forms became more institutionalized toward the end of the period under study. In Francia, the traditional narrative of ecclesiastical takeover of documentary culture appears most valid; Hans Hummer’s study of cartularies reflects usefully on the development of a Carolingian “memorial ethos.” Still, the situation is complex: Matthew Innes highlights the differences between West and East Francia in terms of document use.

The case studies also prompt insightful reflections about archives and the historian’s relationship with them. The authors suggest that assessments of lay document use in the post-Roman period have taken too minimalist a view partly because the forces that caused documents to survive or perish have not been considered carefully enough. Many of the essays grapple with the apparent discordance between the many references to documents in literary sources and the extreme scarcity of the documents themselves. The problem of the archive is highlighted in Matthew Innes’ excellent reconsideration of the cartulary of the abbey of Cluny. The study traces a core of lay documents predating the abbey’s foundation on their journeys within and outside the cartulary, revealing the forces acting on these documents at each stage.

The essays make a strong case for considering the motives that shaped not only document production, but also document preservation at every step on the way to the historian’s desk, cautioning against the assumption that the documents we have are random and representative survivals. A recurring theme in the essays is the illicit manipulation of documents that frustrates efforts to study them. Forgeries (and anti-forgery legislation) testify to the utility of documents while also bedeviling historians’ efforts to study them. Similarly, the loss of documents does not always result from random misfortune, or expiration of their utility: as Antonio Sennis shows in his study of Italian sources between the ninth and eleventh centuries, destruction of documents

was also a sophisticated way of participating in documentary culture. Various mechanisms of legitimization also reveal the value of documents. The *gesta municipalia* persisted as one of several methods to legitimize existing documents by producing a second layer of documentation; Marios Costambeys discusses the development of new mechanisms for validating documents in ninth-century Italy.

In addition to its substantive conclusions about lay document use and post-Roman shifts in documentary culture, the volume is a useful reminder that documents are not passive and neutral repositories of information, but active and manipulative. Having taken on the problem of the lay archive, the contributors propose that the real limitation is not the scarcity of evidence, but the scarcity of trust scholars of the post-Roman period have been willing to place in it. This bold argument and the rigorous case studies that inform it constitute an important contribution to the study of documentary culture and ought to inspire interesting conversation on the topic.

ELIZABETH ARCHIBALD
PEABODY INSTITUTE, JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY