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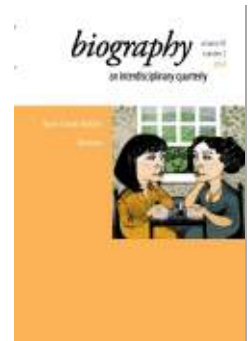
Translating Europe in Ælfric's Lives of Saints by Luisa
Ostacchini (review)

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Translating Europe in Ælfric's Lives of Saints

Luisa Ostacchini

Oxford UP, 2024, 272 pp. ISBN 9780198913733, \$105.00 hardcover.

Luisa Ostacchini's *Translating Europe in Ælfric's Lives of Saints* is not a book about biographies so much as a book about a biographer—a serial biographer—and his effort to create a sense of belonging to a local as well as global community through his re-collections of saintly lives. The title accurately reflects Ostacchini's thesis that Ælfric (c. 955–1010) is translating Europe for his imagined English audience in order to induce in them a feeling of local unity through a shared Christian heritage from an imagined Europe. In this sense, the book bolsters a concept of Christendom in early medieval England usually attributed to a slightly later era, such that one might argue for Ælfric to be considered one of the founders of that geo-religious construct. This makes perfect sense for Ælfric's historical context, for it is often in turbulent times, such as the late viking era of Ælfric and his communities, that thinkers and writers strive to find a vision of unity amid divisions and tensions.

Readers who want to know about the lives of these saints themselves should turn to Ælfric's *Lives of Saints* in the Dumbarton Oaks edition and translation in three volumes to which Ostacchini refers, or make liberal use of the index in this book to find the particular saints' lives of interest. However, for those who want to understand how a biographer works to shape not just one life at a time but a series of lives building toward a bigger picture of the community of the living and the dead, *Translating Europe* is ideal. The book also provides insight into how a sense of place, local in relation to global, is constructed; in this case, the emergent idea of "Europe" is brought into relation with "Englishness," amid the exoticization of lands that lie outside the bounds of European Christendom.

In a previous *Biography* issue, I reviewed *Holy Men and Holy Women* (1996), an edited volume on early English saints' lives, and noted the welcome turn in scholarship toward recognizing intentional authorial shaping of these seemingly generic prose lives beyond mere translation from Latin to English or cut-and-paste collocations. As Ostacchini's book demonstrates, we have come a long way since 1996. Ostacchini is able to see both the forest and the trees in the work of a single biographer stitching together lives to create a single tapestry spanning multiple walls, not unlike the Bayeux. Ostacchini rightly claims that despite the many previous studies of Ælfric's collected writings, scholarship that she expertly cites, no one has really looked at how the *Lives of Saints* hangs together as a single book, instead of as discrete stories read or told on their various feast days (5).

The key word in the title that unlocks the author's thesis is "translation"—here a multivalent term referring not just to linguistic and interpretive work of the bilingual (Latin to English) translator, but also the movement—or "translation"—of saints' bodies, the geographic movement between the isle of Britain and continental Europe, the cultural translation of religious practices, spiritual movements of the

soul, as well as a range of metaphorical uses. The center of the study is what Ostacchini calls “this relationship between place and translation” (3). Throughout, the author stays very grounded in both the physical dimensions of geographic distance and connection but also the imagined landscape that Ælfric overlays on that geography.

The structure of *Translating Europe* tackles each of these layers of translation. Chapter One, “Translating Europe,” introduces Ostacchini’s thesis on the uniqueness of Ælfric’s project as a unified whole, establishes the sociopolitical context for his vision as a second-generation Benedictine reformer living in the viking-induced turmoil of King Æthelred’s reign, and defines the relations between England and Europe (“the continent”). Ostacchini then summarizes Ælfric’s structure in order to explore how he consciously and selectively reshaped his sources, both adding and omitting geographic details to produce a vision of unity within England through a European union, via the highly localized yet universal communion of saints.

Chapter Two then takes the latter up in “Translating the Saintly Body,” examining when a saint’s remains are relocated to establish a place for their intercessory work on behalf of their pilgrims. Ælfric carefully curates these locations for his English audience to emphasize the unity of this network of saints, primarily by highlighting the familiarity of western European sites such as Milan, Ravenna, Sicily, Spain, and Francia, with Greece as a borderland beyond which are various exoticized foreign peoples, while Scandinavia and Ireland are “conspicuously absent” (41). Chapter Three, “Translating People,” turns to missionary saints and their journeys across geographic and social boundaries that enhanced knowledge exchange. Chapter Four, “Translating Rome,” focuses on that city’s special relationship within western Christendom and to England in particular, but with a fascinating analysis of the competing and overlapping conceptions of “Rome” in Ælfric’s hands: ecclesiastical, imperial, geographic, and hagiolatric (saintly veneration). An admirably concise conclusion sums it all up:

Throughout the *Lives of Saints*, Ælfric translated and adapted the European characters, places, and histories from his Latin sources in ways that emphasized ideals of community, cooperation, and collective identity. In doing so, he reflected both the ideal of unity promoted by the English Benedictine Reform and the reality of considerable heterogeneity that characterized the late tenth-century English monastic landscape, despite the reformers’ best efforts. Ælfric achieves this emphasis on unity through adapting his Latin sources in subtle but consistent ways. Further, I have demonstrated that it is only when we look at the *Lives of Saints* as a unified whole that the cumulative effect of these stylistic and narrative alterations becomes clear. (199)

Each chapter provides detailed analyses of Ælfric’s selective omissions and expansions from the full range of saints’ lives found in the collection, evidence used

thematically and illustratively rather than moving temporally or geographically through each saint's life. Consequently, some saints get more attention than others because of their peculiar geographic twists in Ælfric's hands, from borderland foreign saints Dionysius, Basil, and the Maccabees, to the more familiar Frankish Martin, and the important local English saints Oswald and Swithun. For readers in other fields of study, the sheer amount of evidence analyzed may prove overwhelming unless one is prone to skimming, but for specialists in early medieval English literature and culture, such details are vital. Most importantly, this book points the way forward for new research (207): to follow Ostacchini's lead in looking at the *Lives* as a unified collection, mine it for other ideas subjected to Ælfric's self-conscious editing, and apply the same method to other texts and writers.

One comes away from reading *Translating Europe* not so much with a new understanding of the lives of saints in early medieval culture as with a very intimate portrait of Ælfric as a biographer and as an idiosyncratic individual speaking into his own time and place, as well as into our own. For this journal, then, this book is an admirable study of a serial biographer.

Work Cited

Jolly, Karen Louise. Review of *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints' Lives and Their Contexts*, edited by Paul E. Szarmach. *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1998, pp. 74–79.

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