

glimmers of ascetic reading in early works like the *Book of steps* and figures like John the Solitary, and it climaxes in the reforms introduced by Abraham of Kashkar (c. 500–88) at Mount Izla, which legislated ascetic reading as part of the monastic regime. Michelson draws on a variety of sources, including and most productively the *Life of Rabban Bar 'Edta*, and he produces convincing evidence for women who engaged in ascetic reading and taught it to others. During the second stage (chapter v), ascetic reading practices gained their theological and spiritual justification and context in Evagrius of Pontus' spiritual programme as found in Syriac translations of his works. Above all, Babai the Great (d. 628) placed ascetic reading in a Syrian Evagrian framework that found its goal in *theōria*, the vision of God. This spiritually transformative mode of reading differed from and came into conflict with the exegetically motivated reading practised in the schools. Michelson gives welcome attention to precisely how Syriac translators and Babai revised Evagrius' thought as found in his works that survive in Greek. The late seventh century saw the third or 'maturation stage' of East Syrian contemplative reading (chapter vi), when the combination of Evagrian spirituality and ascetic reading spread and proved its fruitfulness for monastic formation. 'Enanisho' of Adiabene's publication of his anthology of monastic literature, *Paradise*, was a landmark moment, for it became the canonical collection of nonbiblical works for ascetic reading. It received a popular commentary by Dadisho', who provided monks with a guide to reading it and other literature. Dadisho' urged his readers, in Michelson's words, 'to resist competing forms of reading, such as scholasticism, and even hymnody' and instead to read 'so that they might "depart" to a vision of Paradise' (p. 236). The final chapter recapitulates the book's narrative and its implications, looks forward to authors like Isaac of Nineveh and John of Dalyatha, and proposes lines of further study.

This summary scarcely does justice to the rich detail of Michelson's history, which is meticulously annotated and clearly written. Readers who are not familiar with Syriac literature will find in Michelson an informative guide who is equally at home in institutional history and monastic spirituality. *The library of paradise* is the rare book that can legitimately be called groundbreaking and should interest historians in several fields – monasticism, reading and books, Syriac literature, the Church of the East and others. It will profit contemporary readers with contemplative goals as well as those of us who, with due respect to Dadisho', have more scholastic aims in mind.

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Natural light in medieval churches. By Valadimir Ivanovici and Alice Isabella Sullivan. (East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 450–1450.) Pp. xiv + 365 incl. 108 colour and black-and-white ills. Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2023. €145.978 90 04 52795 9; 1872 8103
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Although it was over forty years ago, I still remember vividly a morning eucharist in the church of the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield in Yorkshire, where I was studying for ordination to the priesthood. The preacher was my teacher and spiritual director whom I greatly respected. Fr Cedma was elderly, frail and

retiring, and only occasionally preached to the community. It was the Sunday before Advent, the last Sunday of the Church's year. His text was from the prophet Jeremiah, looking back over the past to the forgiveness of God and forward in hope to God's future. At that moment he hesitated, then slipped sideways to the floor and lay motionless. We sensed that this was final, and he had indeed died, immediately, from a heart attack. There was an intense silence and in that silence the sun emerged from the Yorkshire clouds and flooded the church with light. For those of us there, it was the light of God's presence transforming that moment.

This book contains twelve studies which explore different ways in which natural light shines in churches to make God present to the worshipper and so enable an encounter with the divine.

The papers collected here were presented at a workshop held in 2020 in Berlin. Each essay describes and presents the example of a medieval church building – or group of buildings – and shows how those who planned and carried out the design used the natural light of the sun to evoke a sense of the presence of God. There are over a hundred illustrations and these, alongside the text, give a vivid picture of the church and the different effects of light within it. They are arranged in two parts, with the first section showing the philosophical, theological and aesthetic background to the use of light, and the second section presenting descriptions of the observations made in specific churches. The methods which produce these observations are varied, ranging from a computer model which calculates the variations of light, to the descriptions of the researcher waiting patiently for the sun to rise so as to see the parts of the church which are the first places which the rays of the rising sun illuminate.

Most of the churches described are medieval churches, built between 600 and 1500 in the area of eastern Europe where Latin, Greek and Slavic traditions meet – or, as the editors express it, between the Balkans and the Baltic. Here theological and philosophical traditions have met to form a rich and diverse culture. There is the biblical affirmation of Christ as light and the ways that light reveals God. Then this idea is also developed in the philosophy of Plato and his successors such as Philo of Alexandria who distinguished between the natural light of the eye and divine light which can only be perceived by the intellect. This led a flowering in the Hesychast theology and spirituality, which flourished on Mount Athos in the fourteenth century, which taught the disciplines of the prayer of the heart with the aim of experiencing the uncreated divine light of the Mount of the Transfiguration. These traditions lie behind the creation of the church as a shared work of founder, architect, craftsman and painter to create a space which evokes a sense of reverence and devotion in the worshipper and so becomes an invitation to encounter the divine light. This brings together the two meanings of church as building and church as community of faith.

The church with its windows and openings uses the light of the sun to bring this presence of divine glory. There are different ways of achieving this, shown by the buildings described. Often, there are domes in the roofs of the Orthodox churches even if these intrude awkwardly into pitched roofs. There is an icon of Christ Pantocrator, reigning in glory, in the roof of the dome, and below that windows in the drum of the dome flood the space with light. So the eye is drawn from

the shadow of the lower levels through ascending spirals of frescoes of saints and biblical scenes to the heavenly realm where Christ is enthroned. In some of the buildings the altar and the windows around it are carefully placed so that when the celebration of the liturgy is taking place the light of the morning sun shines onto the altar. Another approach is shown in a study of eight fifteenth-century churches in Estonia where the reserved sacrament is kept in *oculi* or niches in the wall. These niches are also windows open to the exterior, so that the sunlight shines from the outside onto the monstrance containing the sacrament so that it glows with light.

Other window openings are carefully placed to allow the sun's rays to give light and meaning to the church's worship. Several of the studies present the results of careful observation by researchers which show that there was collaboration between founders, architects and painters to create this space. The site would be carefully chosen not only as a place of beauty but as where the first light of dawn would reach through the windows. They were especially concerned that the sun should enter the church as it rose at significant turning points in the calendar, the summer and winter solstices, or the autumn and spring equinoxes. Sometimes this required precise adjustments during construction when the interior walls had to be re-oriented by a few centimetres so as to receive the first rays of sun and this resulted in the apse being twisted a little to the north of the east-west axis and becoming embedded in the north wall.

There are some carefully calculated effects of the light. In a Romanian church dedicated to John the Baptist, on his feast day, which coincides with the summer solstice, during the liturgy, a beam of sunlight from one of the windows moves across the fresco of the resurrection illuminating first the figure of Adam then moving to the hand of Christ grasping his, then on to the other hand of Christ holding a scroll with a text with the promise of the second coming.

Light is also shown through the painting of the frescoes. While modern western painting uses variation in colour to gain its effect, in these churches the effect is achieved through the varying degrees of light. In a church in northern Russia with paintings from the workshop of the iconographer Dionisy around 1500, there are bright colours used in the iconostasis but in the frescoes the painter relies on a small number of pigments, which are mixed with varying amounts of white limestone and then applied in thin layers with broad brushstrokes which gradually become lighter to give a shining diaphanous quality, which is then finished with a final transparent layer to give a glowing theophanic effect. This luminous quality in the painting adds to the character of the church as a place of light.

The final chapter describes research into Catholic mission churches built in California and Mexico between 1500 and 1800. Here too churches are built so that the rays of the sun fall directly on the altar, or other significant parts of the church, at the summer solstice. This glimpse into a different part of the world suggests that the light of the sun was widely used across the Christian world by church-builders to evoke this numinous experience.

The book invites future research to help us understand more about the use of sunlight in other societies and cultures. It also hopes for further studies into darkness, which is for Plato a form of potential light, and how lamps and incense go together with natural light to give a sense both of the movement from dark to

light as well as the mystery of divine darkness. These all give further insights into the rituals and cultures of the societies which created and worshipped in these spaces.

Having begun with a personal memory, I will finish with another personal comment: I have seldom read a book so full of fresh insights, unexpected suggestions and discussions which have given me a new understanding and fresh appreciation both of the church buildings and of the meanings they express.

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Charlemagne and Rome. Alcuin and the epitaph of Pope Hadrian I. By Joanna Story. (Medieval History and Archaeology.) Pp. xxiv + 403 incl. frontispiece and 91 colour and black-and-white ills. Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. £100. 978 0 19 920634 6

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A magnificent carved inscription containing the poetic epitaph (most probably by the English scholar Alcuin) for Pope Hadrian I (773–95) was produced in Francia soon after the pope's death. It was installed in the new memorial oratory for Pope Hadrian in the south transept of St Peter's basilica in Rome in about 796, and was one of the few early medieval inscriptions to survive the demolition of the Constantinian basilica by the Counter-Reformation popes and their architects. Joanna Story's focus throughout this book is on the power of the material object itself; she argues that this lay as much in the historical associations of place as in the meaning of its verses.

The first chapter of this book meticulously documents the symbolic role in Counter-Reformation Rome played by both the memory of Charlemagne and the fortunes of the inscription and the oratory it adorned as the old basilica was being steadily destroyed. Although Hadrian I's oratory was demolished, the inscribed epitaph was preserved. As Story demonstrates, the inscription had a particular resonance for the Counter-Reformation popes. Subsequent chapters explore the sources documenting Hadrian's career and death, though it is mistaken to suppose the existence of an 'electoral college' in 773 or that Stephen III's efforts in 769 (p. 107) to alter the procedure for papal election changed matters in Rome. This is quite clear from the accounts of the subsequent papal elections for Hadrian I onwards. A chapter is devoted to the composition and language of the poem used for the Hadrian's epitaph, credited on stylistic grounds to Alcuin, and the contexts of its manuscript copies. Story demonstrates how these manuscripts became a space for commemorating Frankish kingship and the Carolingian relationship with Rome as well as the memory of the pope himself. She also documents Frankish involvement in *memoria* for Hadrian I, spreading the news of his death and organising rites of mourning.

A solid core of the book is provided by the chapters devoted to charting the compilation of pilgrim itineraries and epigraphic syllogae of inscriptions in Rome, their contribution to the creation of a virtual Rome, and the development of epigraphy in early medieval Rome and Francia. There are especially valuable and precise discussions of letter forms and letter cutting. These inscriptions demonstrate Story's