and was continuously challenged by the rest of the Carolingian family and by Viking attacks. Some causalities are clear; others could be debated, given that the situation in the border region was often more than chaotic, making it extremely difficult to reconstruct patterns of cause and effect.

Chapter vi asks why the Carolingians did not develop a comparable diplomacy with Muslim rulers in North Africa and in Southern Italy. The author claims that Charlemagne was interested in North Africa but that circumstances only allowed for few and irregular exchanges. In Southern Italy, in turn, Carolingian players of the ninth century worked in ideological alliance with the anti-Muslim papacy and had to react to the sack of Rome (846). Other than in al-Andalus, Carolingian players were not confronted with an important political adversary, but with several smaller Muslim polities, who had nothing to offer in terms of material gain or prestige. Since they could easily be eliminated if the necessary alliances were built with other Christian Italian players, Carolingian diplomacy turned towards the Christians, not the Muslims.

One could criticise that the book is sometimes a bit wordy and could occasionally come to the point more directly by avoiding information that does not fall into the book's geographical and chronological scope. But it is to be lauded for the fact that it considers Muslim contexts and uses Arabic sources (most of them in translation). The result is Carolingian-centric, none the less, but in an interesting way: the author manages to show that three very different types of Carolingian-Muslim diplomacy developed between the mid-eighth and the late ninth century: a prestige-driven long-distance diplomacy with the East that eventually petered out; a security-driven frontier diplomacy in the West that adapted itself to the shifting power constellation of two regional powers; finally a lack of diplomacy (not of engagement) in politically dependent or fragmented regions such as North Africa and Southern Italy. This first synthesis of Carolingian-Muslim diplomacy will certainly not be the last word on the subject, but will be of use to every student and scholar engaging in this field.

UNIVERSITY OF KONSTANZ DANIEL G. KÖNIG

Beyond the monastery walls. Lay men and women in early medieval legal formularies. By Warren C. Brown. Pp. xiv + 385 inc. 11 ills. Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023. £29.99. 978 1 108 47958 5

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The first part of the title and the image on the cover of Warren Brown's new book – an old portal leading to a sunny vineyard located in a hilly area in Europe – may mislead readers. It must be clear that this volume is mainly focused on legal early medieval formulas, and that the topics that are covered are strictly connected with the previous works on the documentary culture and the laity in the early Middle Ages that Brown has already published alone and as the output of collective projects. The initial reference in the title to the monastery walls and to what lies outside has much to do with the ways sources from the early Middle Ages have come down to us, and with the goals of this book. The focus is firstly on the culture of document use among the laity for which most of the evidence has been lost, since nearly all the information about early medieval laity derives

from documents generated by Carolingian ecclesiastical institutions in response to the general interest in having a written track of their rights and resources. Churches and monasteries began to assemble their documents into organised archives, whose contents reflected their institutional interests, and which lasted long enough to transmit them and their libraries to the modern period, while early medieval families failed to do the same. Consequentially, we know a great deal more about religious communities than secular society. However, laypeople used or kept written documents, since a culture of record-keeping and letter-writing, inherited from the Romans, persisted in western Europe throughout the early Middle Ages. Moreover, laypeople did things and had concerns that produced documents and written evidence that did not involve churches and monasteries or their agendas. The question that rightly Brown raises is how to find out about them, and how to get at aspects of their lives that are often neglected because of the partial perspective given by ecclesiastical interests in written evidence. One possible answer comes from the analysis of early medieval formula collections and their contents. Therefore, in his volume, Warren Brown convincingly opens a door on lay documentary culture mainly through the formula collection written sometime in the second half of the eighth century at the monastic *scriptorium* of Flavigny-sur-Ozerain in early medieval Burgundy, and that is now preserved in Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Latin Manuscript 2123. Part of the manuscript, a compendium of different kinds of texts that would be useful to a monastery, contains over one hundred models for documents and letters, or pieces of documents and letters, of varying length, nearly half of these reproducing documents that would only have been of use to laypeople. The Flavigny collection is not unique, since others like it survive in roughly forty Carolingian manuscripts that date from the late eighth through the tenth centuries, most of them from the ninth. They appeared just as the Carolingian reforms were getting underway and they stem from areas closest to the centres of Carolingian power. The majority of them are west Frankish, especially from the regions on or north of the Loire; a significant number come from east of the Rhine (Alemannia and Bavaria), but it is not always possible to say exactly where a given manuscript came from. The scribes who put the collections together were interested in knowing how to produce documents that members of the laity around them, of a variety of conditions, might need. The images we gain from the formulas are necessarily constrained: they reflect only those situations or transactions in which laypeople might be involved that the scribes behind the collection thought were likely to produce documents. Nevertheless, the formulas offer us a different set of images, one that adds a great deal to our understanding of early medieval society, and in particular give us lively images of laypeople. The main aim of Warren Brown's project is therefore successfully achieved, and the use of formula analysis convincing. The way that the Flavigny manuscript combines formulas from several traditions into a single collection both allows the author to explore lay society in the area around Flavigny as the compilers of the Flavigny collection imagined it, and to link what he finds to formulas from other parts of the Carolingian world. It should be clear that the Carolingian world explored in Brown's new book is confined to north of the Alps, as the formula's manuscript production and diffusion was apparently

confined to north of the Alps. However, many aspects that clearly emerge from his analysis can shed light also on other early medieval societies heavily influenced by Carolingian rulership and reforms. In his volume the author moves thematically through the following subjects: laypeople and their property; lay families and kinship; laypeople in conflict; the vertical relationships between who had more power and who had less (lordship and patronage), which structured lay society; ideas both legal and practical among the laity about freedom and unfreedom. The last two aspects, in particular, present notable surprises: lordships and vassalage show up, but they do not appear terribly institutionalised, since it is hard to distinguish them from simple patronage and clientage. Moreover, the boundaries between the various possibilities for resolving disputes were fluid, and dispute resolution might operate through networks of personal relationships and/or formal judicial institutions. What formula analysis clearly shows is the extreme fluidity of free and unfree status in early medieval European society that Warren Brown analytically explores and explains: formulas show that each person lived on a sort of sliding scale of conditions and people could move across status boundaries, sometimes repeatedly, selling and buying status for money or negotiating it. What makes this volume particularly valuable is not only the acumen with which the legal formulas are analysed, discussed and contextualised. The book also pays great attention to the material data, to the manuscript tradition, to the history of the manuscripts, and that of Flavigny in particular, as well as to the events linked to the editions and uses made in the past of formula collections. All these aspects make Warren Brown's work even more appreciated by and useful to the academic community.

UNIVERSITY OF VERONA MARCO STOFFELLA

Brides of Christ. Women and monasticism in medieval and early modern Ireland. Edited by Martin Browne OSB, Tracy Collins, Bronagh Ann McShane and Colmán Ó Clabaigh, OSB. Pp. xvi + 215 incl. 25 ills and 14 colour plates. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2023. £45. 978 1 80151 022 6

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Brides of Christ is the latest of a number of important books that have focused on women religious in Ireland. It is an extremely challenging subject because of the paucity of evidence available as is made clear by each of the contributors to this volume. This book opens with a chapter by Tracy Collins, one of the co-editors, that summarises part of her *Female monasticism in medieval Ireland* (2021) in order to 'provide a background context for the chapters that follow' (p. 7). Of the more than 5,000 ecclesiastical sites in Ireland there were at least fifty-one, about 1 per cent, for which there is some evidence of a female religious presence. Collins identifies seven major female religious establishments in the early medieval period. In addition there were 'perhaps ten larger ecclesiastical complexes where there is some evidence of attached communities of female religious' (p. 13), and at least thirty-three other sites with historical references to holy women and/or female religious attached to them. There may have been others but there was no distinctive morphology to the sites of female religious to distinguish them as such and no others are documented. Collins found that