

REVIEW

Forgeries and Historical Writing in England, France, and Flanders, 900–1200
By Robert F. Berkhofer III. The Boydell Press, 2022. Pp. xi, 348.

Reviewed by Paulina Zagórska (Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University Poznań)

Forgeries and Historical Writing in England, France, and Flanders, 900–1200 presents extensive research into medieval forgeries, both in terms of scope and depth. The book is based on three case studies – forgeries perpetrated at three monasteries notorious for fraud: *Liber Traditionium* compiled at Saint Peter’s, Ghent in order to win a dispute with the competing Saint-Bavo’s; a dossier produced by Saint-Denis to secure its monastic freedom; and a cartulary produced at Christ Church, Canterbury in answer to profound shifts in royal and ecclesiastic power following the Norman Conquest.

The book is organized into three parts. Part I (“Understanding medieval forgeries”) lays foundations for the study, introducing a number of questions regarding medieval forgeries, covering such topics as their significance for medievalist studies, the insight they allow into medieval communities of practice, contemporary understanding of forgery, contexts in which forgeries were committed, and even semantic and etymological considerations. Following an outline of history of diplomatics, Berkhofer (2022: 21) chooses to base his analysis on a broad conceptualization of forgery as a “spectrum” of “textual modifications” ranging from “original documents, fully genuine in form and accurate in content” to “blatant inventions *ex nihilo*”. This flexibility is dictated by the aims of the study; Berkhofer is interested in communities of practice, how the three monastic communities saw themselves, conceptualized their own past, and constructed their identity.

To this end, in Part II (“Twice told tales”) we are presented with three cases of forgery fabricated at Saint Peter’s, Ghent, Saint-Denis, and Christ Church, Canterbury, each organized in the same way: first, we are told the constructed version of the story (i.e., what the monastic communities wanted the audience to

Review

believe), followed by a presentation and discussion of the context in which that version was concocted, in order to revisit the constructed version and understand not only how forgery was committed, but also *why*. Such an approach to forgeries – as inventions, artifacts, props created for story-telling purposes – is a brilliant, innovative idea, which offers an insightful and entertaining take on the topic. Berkhofer's detailed analysis identifies significant similarities between the three "twice told" stories. First of all, each story goes back to the very foundations of each institution in order to highlight their centuries-long history and traditions. Secondly, in each case the fraud was committed using the same techniques, i.e., recycling genuine documents in such a way as to suggest links between events, and filling in the gaps with forged documents whenever such a link was missing. Next, in all three stories recent past was more likely to be appropriated than distant events, which stems from the fact that the forgeries were connected to contemporary disputes over land and power, for which past historical events might not have always been seen as relevant. This is followed by a convincing demonstration that regardless of specific circumstances, medieval forgeries are a product of transition in terms of power, law, internal organization, etc.; by resorting to forgery, the three analyzed communities either tried to resist change, or accept it, but on their own terms. Finally, Berkhofer speculates that these consistencies may indicate that we are dealing with "forging communities" which exchanged people, ideas, and techniques. Berkhofer also observes that the very training of monastic scribes, largely based on imitative copying, made forgery relatively easy.

The final part, Part III ("Forgeries and histories in the twelfth century"), takes a step back to discuss late medieval forgery – how it was perpetrated, detected, and prevented, with a list of techniques including erasure and overwriting, reliance on genuine documents for models, translation, and association with authority by inserting forgeries into genuine documents (religious and secular), each illustrated with examples and evaluated in terms of effectiveness and efficiency. His discussion ends at the 12th century, when changes in documentary practices and technologies (such as the rise of *inspeximus* and *vidimus*) led to increased scrutiny of archival records, necessitating a shift in forgery practices; this shift was also partially caused by changing patterns in historical writing.

The big question of the book concerns the titular difference between forgeries and historical writing – should the former be seen as the negative of the latter in terms of usefulness for historical research? Indeed, for a long time, spurious documents were shunned by historians interested mostly in facts, and as such rigid about their sources. Consequently, until the early 21st century forgeries were largely neglected in historical research along with copies, annotations, marginal notes, corrections, and so on. Over the past decade or so there have been

Review

quite a few successful attempts at working with such “unorthodox” sources, especially in terms of their significance for medieval documentary cultures. In terms of historical linguistics and literacy, the project by University of Leicester and University of Leeds, *The Production and Use of English Manuscripts, 1066–1220*, which catalogued and studied manuscripts containing English, is worth mentioning. However, apart from individual papers, Berkhofer’s book is amongst very few elaborate, extensive studies devoted specifically to forgeries. Drawing on earlier scholarship in diplomatics and history, Berkhofer demonstrates that forgeries are unique, valuable source material which allow scholars an insight into a number of questions regarding medieval monastic houses, ranging from their everyday business and organization to such deep issues as identity and self-image. Ultimately, this goes to show that a flexible, open-minded approach combined with the ability to adopt the historical perspective (here – of putative stakeholders) is crucial in reconstructing the past, thus elevating forgery to a form of a historical narrative – “rewriting the past” – created with a specific goal in mind. Even though forgeries are obviously untrustworthy in their factual layer, they are able to provide more elusive, subtle historical details than chronicles or charters. *Forgeries and Historical Writing in England, France, and Flanders, 900-1200* is a strong opening to the *Medieval Documentary Cultures* series, setting the bar high for upcoming volumes.

Funding details

This work was supported by the National Science Centre (NCN) under grant (2016/21/N/HS2/02601), “12th century impressions of Old English in forged documents as a source for the reconstruction of early Middle English”, 2017–2022.