Orderic Vitalis (1075–1142) was one of the most important historical writers of the later 11th and 12th centuries, whose works illuminate a broad range of questions regarding the political, military, religious, social, and economic history of Normandy, England, and the French kingdom during his lifetime. As a consequence, Orderic has received enormous scholarly attention since the origin of professional historical scholarship in the 19th century. However, the volume of studies certainly has increased rather dramatically over the past four decades since the publication of a critical edition and translation of Orderic’s »Historica Ecclesiastica« in 1980 by the late Marjorie Chibnall, to whom this volume is dedicated.

The 17 essays in this volume have their origin in two reading groups held at the University of East Anglia and the University of York in 2010 that stimulated further gatherings in 2011 and 2013. Two of the editors, Daniel Roach and Charles C. Rozier, introduce the volume with a historiographical survey of the scholarship dealing with Orderic’s works, an overview of his career and a description of the editorial history of Orderic’s »Historica Ecclesiastica« as well as of his interpolations of other historical texts, including the »Gesta Normannorum ducum« by William of Jumièges.

Four of the first five essays in the collection are concerned primarily with Orderic Vitalis, himself, both as a writer and as an official in his monastery of Saint-Évroult in Normandy. Elisabeth van Houts, in one of the most perceptive essays in the collection, examines the autobiographical content of the »Historica Ecclesiastica« in the context of Foucault’s concept of »self-writing«. Van Houts highlights the different ways in which Orderic at different points in his life treated his own »exile« to Normandy when his father, Odelerius, sent him at the age of 12 as an oblate to Saint-Évroult, where the young Orderic had no connections and did not even speak the local language. Charles Rozier turns from Orderic’s personal journey to his career within the monastery of Saint-Évroult, and fills in the likely duties that he performed as librarian. Rozier also shows that Orderic likely also held the office of cantor, and probably was accomplished in writing musical notation.

These two studies bracket Jenny Weston’s detailed paleographical examination of Orderic’s 17 known autograph manuscripts, and her subsequent identification of a heretofore unknown manuscript (Rouen, BM, 540), that she confidently ascribes to Orderic as well. The fifth essay in the collection, by Mark Faulkner, takes the reader back to Orderic’s childhood in England and investigates whether

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Orderic ever learned to read and write in English, and how well he maintained his knowledge of English later in life. Through an analysis of place names in the »Historica Ecclesiastica« that are known to be in Orderic’s own hand, Faulkner concludes that Orderic came to Normandy without having learned to read and write in English. Faulkner also argues that Orderic’s knowledge of his native language dissipated over the course of the six and half decades in Normandy. The fourth essay, by Daniel Roach, is less about Orderic, himself, than an examination of the information that he had about affairs in southern Italy. Roach argues that movement by Normans between southern Italy and their ancestral duchy, particularly within the context of the trade in relics, provided many avenues for Orderic to learn about those far off lands.

The next five essays in the collection are concerned with Orderic’s decisions about his sources and the choices that he made about what to include in his historical works. The essay by Vincent Debiais and Estelle Ingrand-Varenne considers the implications of »external« documents in Orderic’s »Historica Ecclesiastica« of which there are more than 100, with a particular focus on epitaphs, which are found most densely clustered in book five of the text. Debiais and Ingrand-Varenne identify several purposes for these »external documents« including Orderic’s effort to appeal to an external authority, and his effort to provide variety for stylistic purposes. The two authors argue that rather than diversions, a criticism leveled by some early investigators of the »Historica Ecclesiastica«, Orderic actually fully integrated these external documents into the flow of his narrative. The next essay by Thomas Roche can be seen in some ways as contradicting the findings of Debiais and Ingrand-Varenne in that Roche is rather critical of scholars who use the charters imbedded in Orderic’s text as »sources«, rather than considering these documents as »textual material« to which Orderic applied literary devices. In this context Roche asserts that as a monk Orderic considered texts to be »nothing but a processed fabric covering community-wide projects« (p. 146). After his consideration of Orderic’s discussion of charters, in particular, through this prism, Roche cautions against seeing the »Historica Ecclesiastica« as a mine of information. Indeed, Roach’s caution is important, but his essay seems to take an either/or position regarding historians’ use of charters included by Orderic, and also does not account fully for Orderic’s own understanding of these texts as juridical documents, with real legal and political meaning in their own time.

The next essay by Véronique Gazeau, perhaps ironically, mines the »Historica Ecclesiastica« to see what Orderic Vitalis has to say about the cult of the saints. Gazeau points out that Orderic discusses about a dozen saints of the early church and the Frankish period, with a particular interest in warrior saints. However, there was some difference in Orderic’s approach to his discussion of saints in England as contrasted with Normandy. In the former, Orderic was concerned with Anglo-Saxon martyrs, missionaries, and warriors, while in his discussion of Normandy Orderic focused on Frankish-era saints. William M. Aird also »mined« Orderic’s text in an effort to discern the monk’s views of proper behavior by secular officials. In particular, Orderic devoted considerable attention to negative
qualities of King Henry IV of Germany and King Philip I of France, both of whom were notorious, at least among their enemies, for sexual misconduct. In addition, Orderic described in detail the foibles of numerous lesser magnates, including those with relationships with his monastery of Saint-Évroult for the purpose, Aird argues, of using his history as a didactic text.

The final essay in this group, by Emily Albu, considers the question of Orderic’s tone throughout the »Historica Ecclesiastica«. In contrast to Marjorie Chibnall’s view of Orderic as having an essential positive understanding of the world, Albu argues that Orderic’s negativity, of the type also illuminated by Aird, reveals the author’s overriding pessimism. After reading Albu’s essay, this reviewer is more inclined toward Chibnall’s conclusion on the basis that Orderic never seems in his text to have lost his faith in God as the ultimate font of justice, and that Orderic distinguished between the earthly and heavenly cities. A useful comparison here, and one not addressed by Albu, is Walter Goffart’s examination of the tone of Gregory of Tours, who similarly distinguished between a pessimistic account of the world but offered an optimistic view about salvation through God’s grace. Given Orderic’s familiarity with Gregory’s work, it is certainly a possibility that he was influenced by the 6th-century author.

The next five chapters of the text are concerned with Orderic’s participation in the life of the monastery of Saint-Évroult. In the first study of this group, Giles E. M. Gasper turns his attention to Orderic as a theological thinker rather than as a historian. Gasper points to Orderic’s emphasis on the sins of the present as contrasted with a golden past. However, Gasper argues, Orderic was not particularly interested in the contemporary intellectual and theological effervescence spreading throughout much of the Latin West, but rather reserved his attention to Norman monastic writers such as Anselm of Bec. Gasper sees Orderic’s reflections on the path of his own life as an effort to connect his personal experiences with transcendent monastic values. Élisabeth Mégie turns her attention to the role that Orderic envisioned for the first two books of the »Historica Ecclesiastica« that were a later addition treating early Christian and Roman imperial history. Earlier studies had postulated that Orderic was attempting to place his text within the framework of the world history that was a dominant historical model before the First Crusade. By contrast, Mégie argues that Orderic added the first two books of the »Historica Ecclesiastica« in order to foreground the role of God in human history. She ties Orderic’s emphasis on the punishment of the wicked to the author’s overall conception of human history as a paired couplet of sin and salvation. In contrast to Albu’s argument that Orderic had a particularly negative tone in his work, Mégie makes the case that the addition of the first two books serves to highlight Orderic’s optimism that God had always and would always offer salvation for the good.

In the next essay, Sigbjørn Olsen Sønnesyn investigates what Orderic thought his text could add to the edification of the studiosi, whom he claimed to wish to edify. She argues that Orderic meant his
text to be read by his fellow learned monks through the prism of the liturgical cycle and the lectio divina, so that they would understand his ostensibly secular history as providing moral knowledge about how to live better as a monk. Sønnesyn makes a compelling case that this may have been one of Orderic’s aims, but the essay as a whole seems to veer rather strongly into an either/or track, and does not take sufficient account of the necessity for even Orderic’s studiosi to have an understanding of the world of politics and economics that allowed their monastery to thrive. By contrast, Thomas O’Donnell takes a pluralistic approach in his investigation of Orderic’s rhetorical strategies in the Historica Ecclesiastica. O’Donnell focuses on the nexus of identity, history writing, and the monastic common life in Orderic’s work, and argues that the supposed diversions in the narrative of the »Historica« actually reflect the character of this text as a history, foremost, of the community of Saint-Évroult. In this context, O’Donnell shows that Orderic’s work was a tool for spiritual renewal as well as moral instruction and political gamesmanship. In addition, O’Donnell offers a very different interpretation of Orderic’s autobiographical comments in the »Historica« than that offered by van Houts, discussed above. Rather than reading the final commentary on his life, written circa 1141, as evidence for Orderic finally feeling that he could re-experience his own life freely, O’Donnell sees this passage as evidence of Orderic attempting to sublimate himself within his monastic community.

The last essay in this group, by Kathleen Thompson, considers Orderic’s account of the history of the monks of Tiron and their leader Bernard, who abandoned his own community rather than accept Cluniac rule, made his case before Pope Paschall II in Rome, and finally established a new community at Tiron with the support of Bishop Ivo of Chartres. Through a comparison of Orderic’s treatment of the community at Tiron with the Vita of Bernard, the other major contemporary textual source for the history of this monastic community, Thompson is able to show that Orderic did not draw on the Vita but rather had oral sources of information from Chartres that preserved an earlier and less partisan account of Bernard’s career.

The final two essays in the volume consider the reception of Orderic’s text by his contemporaries and also in the later Middle Ages. Benjamin Pohl focuses on Orderic as a historian and Orderic’s own conception of his role in preserving the past for future generations. Pohl notes that this is a well-studied question, but offers a new contribution by considering Orderic’s understanding of what it meant to preserve memory in the context of a monastic community. Pohl concludes that Orderic and his work enjoyed a high reputation at Saint-Évroult in his lifetime, and that Orderic’s text even found its way into the daily divine service. The final essay in the volume, by James G. Clark, traces out the Nachleben of Orderic’s historical works, including the »Historica Ecclesiastica« and his interpolations in other texts, in Normandy, the French Kingdom, England and Flanders. Clark shows that although Orderic’s name may not have been known widely during the later medieval period, his works did provide material for a number of later authors.
The volume is rounded out by two appendices. The first by Anne-Sophie Vigot provides a preliminary report on the excavations being undertaken at Saint-Évroult that were carried out in 2013–2014. The second appendix, by Jenny Weston and Charlie Rozier provides an annotated catalog of manuscripts that contain autographs of Orderic’s additions to other texts. Each of the articles in the essay is provided with a full apparatus of notes, and the volume is equipped with a select bibliography, and an index.

Overall, this volume brings together much of the most recent research on Orderic Vitalis and provides the reader with a valuable corpus of information as well as elucidating a number of the methodologies that currently are in vogue for the analysis of historical texts. However, there are two glaring omissions from this volume, which did play a central role in Marjorie Chibnall’s own research on Orderic, namely his treatment of political and military affairs. Because these two topics dominate so much of Orderic’s narrative, the collection of essays, although certainly valuable in its own right, provides a skewed impression of what Orderic thought was worthwhile to preserve for posterity. It is to be hoped that future conferences and volumes dealing with Orderic will fill this substantial lacuna.