Within the last four decades, Guibert de Nogent has emerged from near obscurity to become one of the best-known medieval thinkers of the period around 1100. Karin Fuchs’ new book on Guibert’s ideas about miracles and wonders, the first monograph-length work devoted entirely to a specific facet of the abbot’s writings, indicates just how far interest in him has risen among modern historians – and how much written material Guibert left behind for historians to work from. Following on the heels of Jay Rubenstein’s 2002 intellectual biography¹, Fuchs’ work casts light onto the abbot of Nogent’s incorporation of supernatural and extraordinary accounts into his historical and polemical writing. Guibert was no aloof intellectual, but rather an engaged – and often outraged – social critic. Hence, his ideas about the miraculous reflect on medieval devotional practices as well as contemporary debates, in which he participated, about the cult of relics and veneration of saints.

Fuchs concentrates on the four works in which Guibert chiefly incorporated miraculous material: his history of the First Crusade, his work in praise of the Virgin Mary, his treatise on relics, and his memoir, the Monodiae. All were written between 1107/1108 and 1119/1120, at the height of Guibert’s intellectual maturity and productivity. In five chapters, Fuchs considers scholars’ treatment of his work; Guibert’s understanding of devotional praxis concerning the miraculous; how he employed miracle stories in his writing and established their authority; and the reception of those stories by both contemporary and later writers.

Guibert’s writing about miracles was neither systematic nor tied to place-bound hagiographical reportage. This fact, Fuchs’ argues, makes it extremely useful for analyzing how miracle stories circulated orally, gained legitimacy, and were vetted by authorities (p. 2f., 10f.). For Guibert personally, miracles had almost by definition a moral-didactic quality, and presented occasions for learned excurses, proofs, and criticisms on a range of theological questions and contemporary social issues, including the eucharistic debate. The abbot of Nogent was also conservative. He concerned himself less with rigid classification of miracles and more with the interpretation of signs, above all how to discern legitimate wonders from frauds, and how to interpret supernatural phenomena properly (p. 43–49). To this end, Guibert parsed his witnesses and authorities very carefully, and insisted on rigorous evidentiary standards for determining the veracity of oral and written narratives. It is obvious that Guibert considered himself an official arbiter of miracle stories.

circulating in the social and intellectual ambit of Nogent-Laon-Soissons. He rejected many tales as spurious, re-wrote some, and confirmed others, including those from his personal experience. Fuchs permits us to imagine Guibert relating and debating stories that circulated among the clergy gathered for synods, waging a one-man campaign to discredit accounts of (to him) dubious authenticity or provenance (p. 77–92). No doubt it was often a losing cause.

Fuchs furnishes evidence that this was the case in the book’s final, most important chapter. Here, she closely investigates the intertextual relationships of two miraculous narratives: Guibert’s denunciation, in his De sanctis et eorum pigneribus, of the wonder-working milk-tooth of Christ claimed by the monks of Saint-Médard of Soissons; and the story of an oxherd from Grenoble who, when struck by a »holy fire« while plowing on a feast-day devoted to Mary Magdalene, successfully implored the Virgin Mary for aid. In the first instance, Fuchs does yeoman’s work in untangling the diverse traditions of »san-médardien Wunderbücher« (p. 206–226) produced between the late eleventh and mid-twelfth centuries, which detailed the miracles of its various saints and relics, including those of Pope Gregory, Sebastian, and the notorious milk-tooth. Her analysis demonstrates that Guibert was familiar with an early account of the milk-tooth; this later served as the stimulus for his theological critique in De sanctis. It appears the monks of Saint-Médard were not insensitive to his criticism. They produced, in the context of outbreaks of disease that descended on Soissons in the second quarter of the twelfth century, a collection of miracles (Fuchs’ so-called »BHL 7546 group«) centering on their saints Gregory and Sebastian – with no mention of the milk-tooth to be found (p. 213–221). To be sure, Gregory and Sebastian had prophylactic powers specifically against disease, so the omission from the »BHL group« of the milk-tooth, with no such reputation, is not a huge surprise. However, a manuscript of this group from Anchin (BM Douai 854, fols. 88r–96r, edited in an appendix) bears an apologetic tone not found in the earlier collections, and Fuchs suggests that this indicates the monks of Saint-Médard had heard and were responding to Guibert’s criticisms about the tooth. It should also be mentioned, however, that the monks of Saint-Crépin of Soissons had cast doubts of their own on their cross-town rivals’ claims concerning Gregory. The defensiveness of the Anchin manuscript may have been in response to these attacks, rather than Guibert’s. In any case, miracle stories featuring the milk-tooth did not disappear, but were incorporated some years later into a »polished« miracle collection from Marchiennes, now housed at Brussels, Bibliothèque royale 8714–8719. The monks of Saint-Médard did not, in the end, abandon their claims about the tooth.

Guibert included the story of the oxherd of Grenoble (p. 235–246) in his De laude sanctae Mariae, in part to counteract a second, earlier version of the same narrative that had already been circulating for several years. In this, as with his criticism of the milk-tooth, he achieved partial success. Guibert’s retelling found its way into nearly as many later collections of Marian miracle stories as the original, but did not replace it.

Through her analysis of these and other miracle narratives, Fuchs has achieved two aims. She has broadened our knowledge of Guibert’s storytelling influence, and deepened our understanding of the
abbot’s involvement with a circle of peers who actively debated the major theological and social issues of their day. His writings, once thought to have reached a limited audience, now appear to have been widely known in northern France. Fuchs does not offer a complete inventory of the dissemination of miracle stories reported by Guibert, nor does she need to. Ongoing research will certainly turn up more. For example, Guibert’s account in De sanctis, of the boy from Soissons who saw the Christ-child on the altar during Mass (p. 59f.), found its way into the »À« version of the Vita Norberti archiepiscopi Magdeburgensis. Similarly, his story in Monodiae 2.1 of the mythical King Quilius, the »founder« of religious veneration at Nogent, was adapted for use in a twelfth-century chronicle produced at Tournai. Fuchs has nonetheless made an excellent contribution to our knowledge of the oral and written networks through which miracle stories passed in the archdiocese of Reims, of the clergy and laity who disseminated them, and, above all, of the frustrated abbot who tried, sometimes in vain, to elevate the authentic miracles of God, Mary, and the saints above those that did not meet his own rigorous standards of proof.