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## Review of 'Le cloître des ombres' by Jean-Claude Schmitt

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Heinrich Speich examines flexible forms of alliance between Fribourg and Bern, which were called “Burgrecht” and are set out in a series of documents in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These regulated relations between the two cities during the period in question and facilitated good neighborly relations despite competition. To this end, the covenants contained more detailed information on the “justification of the covenants, mutual assistance obligations, reservations, jurisdiction, arbitration, exclusion of liability in private matters, duration of the covenant and the modalities of renewal and invocation” (90). Speich therefore attributes to these alliances a more intense impact than comparable agreements.

Harm von Seggern takes an incident in the eventful history of the Hanseatic League, the arrest of Hanseatic merchants by the English King Edward IV in 1468, as an opportunity to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of this international alliance of long-distance merchants and cities. The unusual activity of the English king was triggered by an attack by the Danish king on English merchant ships that had been on their way to Prussia. This measure quickly triggered activities on the part of various Hanseatic authorities, who initially tried to settle the matter by letters, then also in court and diplomatically. The resulting diplomatic offensive, which even attempted to enlist the support of the emperor in favor of the merchants, was soon successful, but also created new disputes due to the special treatment of the people of Cologne. The arguments put forward to resolve this dispute made it clear that the Hanseatic League was an association that resembled a chameleon. It had many sides, but above all it enabled merchants to communicate with princes and rulers.

Paolo Ostinelli provides a masterful literature-based insight into the significance of alliances for the historical development of Lombard cities as early as the twelfth century, which can claim a pioneering role for European cities. Martin Kintzinger introduces the aspect of failure into the discussion without, however, concentrating on the failure of alliances. Jean-Daniel Morerod and Grégoire Oguey present a series of armorial alliances from the area of western Switzerland c. 1300. They were concluded by the bishops of Lausanne and Basel and the nobility in the Jura and were primarily directed against the ambitions of the House of Savoy. It is difficult to decide whether the alliances were as aggressive as their language or whether they were primarily intended as a deterrent. Klara Hübner concludes the volume with reflections on the materiality of relevant sources. She begins with the Swiss “Federal Charter” of 1291, which was given its own museum. And she concentrates on examples that make clear that the documents were intended to impress beyond reading, which was achieved through magnificent lettering, size, seals, and other features.

In toto, the book contains interesting articles about urban alliances in Switzerland as well as in surrounding regions in the later Middle Ages. But it seems necessary to underline that these types of alliances and their dynamics were not the only ones in medieval times.

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JEAN-CLAUDE SCHMITT, *Le cloître des ombres*, with the collaboration of GISÈLE BESSON. (Bibliothèque des histoires.) Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2021. Pp. 468; black-and-white figures. €29.50. ISBN: 978-2-0729-3146-8.  
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As a symbol for evil, the demon has always held an enigmatic fascination. The “fallen angels” [*daemones*], members of the heavenly cohort who rebelled against God, became engaged with the remaining angels in an ongoing battle between evil and goodness, and this division of the spiritual world had a decisive impact on the European mind. The *éminence grise* of historical anthropology, the French scholar Jean-Claude Schmitt, rediscovered the beguiling *Liber revelationem*, which reveals this medieval preoccupation with the demonic. Written around 1200, the text describes revelations from Abbot Richalm of Schönau (d. 1219) concerning

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unexplainable and diabolic events that happened in the Cistercian cloister of Schönau, situated in the hills of Baden-Württemberg, Germany. *Le cloître des ombres* seeks to describe the ancient trope of “contempt of the world” [*contemptus mundi*], the quintessential monastic human condition, here illustrated by the life of Richalm, who probably lived a large part of his life in the monastery. Living together with other fellow monks, the *Liber revelationem* presents Richalm as an ordinary human being prone to the preeminent monastic sin, which is the sin of *acedia* [sloth], commonly described in literature as the devil who visits the somnolent monk to destabilize or to distract him during activities of reading.

The Latin text of the *Liber revelationem* has been translated into French by the author in collaboration with Gisèle Besson and is placed after a detailed introduction that implements a historical anthropological approach. Together the introduction and the translation provide a fascinating insight into the daily routines of a monastic community obsessed with demons; the historical anthropological approach introduces debates about sacredness, individuality, and community, and the broader question of (orthodox) belief in relation to superstition. The book appears to be directed towards a broader public or students, since most of the historical information provided in the introduction is quite elementary. For specialists, access to the text of the *Liber revelationem* itself will provide substantial evidence to question the hermeneutical boundaries of what “religion” meant in medieval society. With his conceptualization of religion as a kind of sea that surrounded medieval people in its formlessness and ubiquity, Schmitt demonstrates how notions arising from religious belief such as superstition and paranormal visions must be taken seriously when studying the monastic experience. He asserts that it is one of the curious qualities of the text to show how, within the supposedly safe monastic space, a permanent worry about possible appearances of demons preoccupied the lives of the monks.

The *Liber revelationem* contains the following chapters: a prologue and dialogue (chapters 1–83); past revelations from Richalm to the anonymous monk “N” (chapters 84–133); chapters written by “N” concerning revelations by Abbot Richalm, as well as a short biography (chapters 134–37); an appendix containing a poem written by Richalm and some corrections by “N” concerning the nature of Richalm’s revelations (chapters 163–173); and, finally, a long poem written by “N” in memory of Richalm (chapter 174). In the dialogue portions, Abbot Richalm informs monk “N” about another monk—an anonymous priest (*ille talis frater*), who was also his confessor—who has been tormented by demons. All three monks were priests, which seems to be important for understanding the cultural-historical context of the community, since the *Liber revelationem* reveals how the diabolic encounters were often connected to an underlying fear among monks that sacred rituals would be performed incorrectly. For example, in one passage Richalm tells his confessor: “Yesterday, he said, when I celebrated Mass, the demons made me forget *Glory to God in the Highest*, because they attacked and tormented me to such an extent that I forgot it completely” (286, reviewer’s translation). Schmitt suggests, more generally, that the text is preoccupied with the belief that the sacerdotal sacrament is prone to diabolic encounters, and that the unction may perhaps even make one able to hear voices of demons (29). In short, the religious outlook of the text reveals a community that sought to exorcise the anxiety about demons through rituals, vividly described in a (constructed) dialogue.

Schmitt explains that structural differences between medieval and modern societies created differences in how the human and social bodies respond to conditions of physical and mental health. Richalm is portrayed in the *Liber revelationem* as someone who has effusive psychological responses to the mystifying events that are happening to him. We read how Richalm’s tears flowed in abundance, a sign of benediction as a response to the restrained form of life in almost complete silence, while demons tried to harden his heart so that he would weep less. These so-called “techniques of the body,” part of ascetic life, were permanently threatened by demons. Acts of purification were therefore recommended; for example, washing hands and

mouths before Mass and making the sign of the cross after vomiting. The *Liber revelationem* also describes how daily life was shaped according to the strict codes of conduct deriving from the *Rule of Saint Benedict*. As a result of this strictness, part of the monks' religious experience was defined by anger, anxiety, and powerlessness. We have, for instance, the question anxiously posed by "N" to Richalm about what to do when he feels the need to blow his nose while singing the Holy Office. Schmitt explains how these feelings of anxiety could culminate in anger, or, alternatively, were written down and transformed into visions describing how demons could attack the monks' integrity, health, and security.

Until now, the *Liber revelationem* has been mostly ignored in scholarship for obvious reasons. Nothing remains of the original manuscript containing the text. After Swedish troops stayed in the cloister of Schönau during the Thirty Years War, the few remaining monks stored the remaining copies safely in one of the neighboring libraries in Tyrol, including the oldest manuscript containing the *Liber revelationem*, dating from the second half of the fourteenth century. Furthermore, the Latin text has only been published once, and quite badly, in 1721 by Bernard Pez, who was the librarian of the famous Benedictine Abbey of Melk (Austria) at the time. Clearly, Besson and Schmitt have done a great service by providing a good and accessible translation. Then, we have the question of authorship: plausibly the inspirator of the original text is Richalm. However, in the introduction Schmitt argues that, except for a few passages, Richalm should *not* be considered the author of the text, but rather the person who dictated his visions to another anonymous monk, self-named *ego* [I] followed by the letter "N." This initial should probably be interpreted as referring to *novicius* [novice] or, less convincingly, to *nemo*, which literally means "no-one" but implies that "anyone" could have written the text. For the interpretation of the text Schmitt suggests that the question of authorship is less relevant than its dialogue form springing from oral culture. The dialogue form shows how fellow monks viewed relations with evil spirits as not limited to the private experience of Richalm alone, but as part of the spoken world and the common good of their community.

Surprisingly, given that Schmitt works on the influence of images on mentalities, the introduction only incidentally refers to the visual imagery of demons in medieval art. Perhaps this restraint can be explained by the very nature of the *Liber revelationem* itself and the complexity of its editorial tradition, where the "porosity between the visionary image and the material image" is "remarkable for the doubt which is expressed vis-à-vis the truthfulness of the images and the legitimacy of their cult" (153, reviewer's translation). Indeed, the text represents a source of plentitude to examine the monks' vivid encounters with demons in a culture that perceived the physical body and its senses as an augmented form of reality, indispensable for enlivening the gift of spiritual vision to understand revelation.

Demons were feared so greatly by monastic communities in part because they were considered spiritual beings who were capable of continuous metamorphosis, which made them harder to distinguish as representatives of evil. The angels as good spirits, however, adopted a recognizable iconology throughout the history of European art in their representation as anthropomorphically formed creatures with wings, wearing colorful robes. As Schmitt writes, it is the tragic paradox of the monastic microcosmos of Schönau that, desiring to live in the company of angels, the monks were delivered to demons without respite.

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