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Review: Richard Hodges, Light in the Dark Ages: The Rise and Fall of San Vincenzo al Volturno (Ithaca, 1997)

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Light in the Dark Ages: The Rise and Fall of San Vincenzo al Volturno. By Richard Hodges (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1997) 232 pp. $49.95

Until now, the history of the southern Italian monastery of San Vincenzo al Volturno has relied primarily on a single text—the *Chronicon Vulturnense*. Its twelfth-century author recorded that the monastery was founded under the aegis of the Lombard duke of Benevento c. 700 A.D. but did not enjoy any particular distinction or prominence until Joshua, its abbot—a contemporary of Charlemagne—took advantage of Frankish patronage and built a monumental abbey church. Sacked and partially destroyed in 881 by Muslims, who recognized it for the wealthy institution it had become, the monastery's fortunes plummeted until its community managed to gather the necessary resources to restore it in the eleventh century.

Hodges, an archaeologist and medievalist, is naturally suspicious of such textual sources. Noting the propensity of medieval chroniclers to use terminology "derived from the world of antiquity" without adjusting for the drastically altered world of medieval Europe, he set out in 1981 to excavate the site of San Vincenzo al Volturno to gather physical evidence that might lend "scale" to the chronicler's claims. The book that has emerged from this project is something of a hybrid, reflecting the dual focus on the archaeological and textual records.

Chapter 1 places this specific study in the broader context of modern efforts to understand early medieval monastic history. Chapter 2 carefully summarizes the information contained within the *Chronicon Vulturnense* to provide something of a baseline from which to evaluate the physical evidence. The next six chapters are dedicated to assessing the significance of the site's archaeological record period by period, most of them treating the various phases of the monastery's expansion and reconstruction. The final chapter takes a step back to assess the broader significance of this dual, textual–archaeological approach. As Hodges puts it, "By combining the evidence of the two sources we arrive at a version of Italian and European history that takes into account both the physical remains and the way the monks wished their contemporaries to see them" (201).

No stranger to "Dark Age" digs, Hodges is best known (among textual medievalists like myself) for the archaeologically based reevaluation of the Pirenne thesis that he co-authored with Whitehouse, which used a series of remarkably informative excavations at the sites of Carolingian trading posts in northwestern Europe to rewrite our understanding of the commercial basis of the so-called Carolingian renaissance.[1] Oddly, the trading posts, which produced nothing in the way of written evidence, were fecund when it came to archaeological evidence. The exact reverse is true of the San Vincenzo al Volturno project,

1 Richard Hodges and David Whitehouse, *Mohammed, Charlemagne and the Origins of Europe* (Ithaca, 1983).

the physical remains of which are much more pedestrian than its written record. The relative "uneventfulness" of the archaeological evidence at San Vincenzo al Volturno probably accounts for the fact that the thesis of Hodges' most recent book is nowhere near as provocative as the one that he and Whitehouse offered in the earlier one.

The fact that the archaeology of San Vincenzo al Volturno seems only to confirm the traditional picture of the central role that Italian monasteries played in the ephemeral extension of Carolingian power on the peninsula does not mean that Hodges' book is not useful; it is as important to confirm accurate conceptions of history as it is to debunk misleading ones. It simply means that the reader should not expect to find any paradigm shifts of the magnitude of those presented in *Mohammed, Charlemagne and the Origins of Europe*.

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The Clock and the Mirror: Girolamo Cardano and Renaissance Medicine. By Nancy G. Siraisi (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997) 361 pp. $49.50

This erudite study explores the world of one of the foremost physician–professors of sixteenth-century Italy. Siraisi explains that hers is not so much a complete biography of Cardano as an analysis of his place in Renaissance medical scholarship and practice. Men like Cardano thought of themselves as reforming or renovating medical knowledge, while continuing to be engaged with traditional medical texts; insistent on the value of experience, they still defined themselves in relation to the world of scholarship. In *The Clock and the Mirror,* we see Cardano fashioning for himself a medical vision that was both highly individual and deeply attuned to Renaissance culture.

In Part I, "Cardano's Medical World," Siraisi sets out the issues that dominated Cardano's medical writings: the mediation between ancient writers like Galen and contemporary ones like Vesalius; the juxtaposition of learned authorities with Cardano's experience from practice; and the certainty that the lessons learned from Cardano's own personal history were widely applicable to diagnosis, prognosis, and medical theory. We know nothing of Cardano's practice beyond his own writings, but Siraisi uses them deftly to present Cardano's interpretation of the often difficult task of establishing his place in the profession.

In Part II, "Theory and Practice," Siraisi teases out from Cardano's writings his relationship to established medical theory. Strongly influenced by Galen, like all his contemporaries, he was also critical of many aspects of Galen's work. His idiosyncratic readings of ancient and contemporary texts, coupled with his own experience, led to highly original notions of regimen, particularly for the aged.