

Book Reviews

S. Carocci, A. Fiore (eds.), *Building and Economic Growth in Southern Europe (1050-1300)*, The Medieval Countryside 26. Petrifying Wealth 2. Turnhout: Brepols, 2024, 268 pp.

Rodulfus Glaber's assessment of the early 11th century "building spree," synthesised by the image of the whole world donning a newly crafted "white garment of churches," has become justly famous. Be it because of its stark imagery or because we use it during our lectures to debunk the triumphalist narration of the so-called "renaissance of the 11th century," Rodulfus' description holds an undeniable truth: the 1000s on (written) sources seem to report a higher presence – or indeed an increased perceivability – of permanent stone and masonry building. So much so that a recent ERC project, fittingly titled *Petrifying wealth*, has devoted new attention to this phenomenon.

The book edited by Sandro Carocci and Alessio Fiore is both part of this renewed interest in permanent building endeavours in the high and early late Middle Ages and a sort of "spin-off" of the ERC project. While the latter focuses mainly on stone and brick building as an investment in self-representation within the context of the general re-framing of power nuclei after the 10th century, the present volume builds and elaborates on the economic side of such investment. In other words, it tries to assess the relationship between the spread of stone and brick buildings and economic growth.

Indeed, it has long been held that the investment in stone and brick building was a consequence of economic growth. More affluent principalities, lordships and communities (both lay and ecclesiastic) used the economic resources they accumulated thanks to the late 11th (or even possibly 12th) century economic growth to bolster buildings and infrastructures. The present volume turns such narration upside-down, suggesting that the investment in permanent building could have had more of a bilateral effect on the economy as a whole. While it may still be true that more permanent and ambitious buildings could have been the consequence of an increase in economic performance, especially due to an increase in raw labour force (and the development of new tools to control and mobilise it), it is worth noting that the 'building spree' included key functional, productive

and infrastructural elements, that could bolster and reinforce the budding economic “renaissance” of the high Middle Ages.

The editors have tried to thematise the papers into three main sections. In the first one, fittingly devoted to the agrarian world, the papers delve into the deep anthropization of the countryside in the high Middle Ages. Lorenzo Tabarrini and Víctor Farías Zurita outline the rise and spread of centralised and coherent rural estates (respectively in central-northern Italy and in Old Catalonia) in which the development of functional buildings played a pivotal role for the commercialisation of rural production and the control of rural workforce. Giovanna Bianchi focuses on archaeological remains of cereal storage systems, highlighting the cross-play between royal and local power and the way in which changes in power dynamics impacted actual buildings. Josep Torró and Fabrizio Pagnoni explore with new perspectives the well-known relationship between the rise of local powers and water management, by stressing the material, technical and economic aspects of canal building in two key study areas: eastern Spain in transition from Islamic to Christian control and the Po Valley respectively.

In the second section, Jordi Morello’s paper on flour and fulling mills in late eleventh and thirteenth century Catalonia seamlessly helps the reader transition from water management to the world of manufacturing. Morello’s use of chartography outlines the different levels of specialisation and the spatial relations underpinning the spreading and increased complexity of the milling systems in Catalonia. Maria Elena Cortese’s paper on iron working further nuances the picture outline of the book highlighting how investment in productive building could bolster specific economic sectors but also calls for a careful analysis of the (political) role of the actors involved in such investment. The last paper of the second sector is Alessio Fiore’s analysis of the changing characteristics in urban dwellings. By focusing on residential properties Fiore suggests that the changing pattern in this often-overlooked economic sector could be an indicator of broader changes in the economy as a whole.

The last two papers of the book, grouped in the third and last section are devoted to transport infrastructures, i.e. the system that made much of the high Middle Ages economic growth – and indeed the spread of stone and brick buildings – possible. Rather than being content with the traditional analysis of bridges and roads as an expression of communal prosperity, Paolo Tomei delves deeper into the thick political, social and economic context of northern Tuscany. He convincingly argues that bridges (and the petrification of bridges in particular) were part of a complex, experimental and “polyphonic” political system. Pinuccia Simbula’s paper outlines the slow and sometimes problematic transition from scattered and extemporary harbour

structures towards more permanent masonry ones. The divide between the earliest examples of such development (Genoa, Pisa and some lesser settlements) and the rise of a fully functional widespread port network should help nuance the sole pre-eminence that international sea-borne trade has sometimes enjoyed. Finally, Sandro Carocci's closing remarks highlight the central themes of the book, chief among them the plurality and diversity of the actors involved in the rise of stone and brick building and the key chronological questions. Yet, while the division is broadly functional, many questions and topics and indeed the most fruitful and stimulating ones seem to cross the boundaries of the thematic sections. Far from being a weak point of the book, this confirms the need for further in-depth analysis of the "economic side" of the rise of stone and brick building.

First of all, buildings (especially productive structures and infrastructure) and their chronologies of diffusion and deployment can be used as proxy indicators of growth, thus helping better frame its own chronology, still highly debated. The example of mills and iron-working structures, or even the case of residential building studied by Fiore, provides interesting perspectives in this regard. The spreading of more complex and permanent productive buildings can be both a sign of a changing pattern in production and consumption, and a further stimulus to economic growth and only a careful micro-historical analysis can help us decode their role in this complex "feedback" mechanism.

Secondly, as Sandro Carocci shrewdly highlights in his concluding remarks, historical analysis must not fall victim to the fetish of progress and linearity. The rise of stone and brick building can undergo diverse phases of expansion and contraction that could be a reflection both of the economic and political context. The case of granaries perfectly shows how the changing role of royal power in the Italian peninsula after the Ottonian dynasty had a profound impact on the characteristics, typology and role of cereal storage, influencing local dynamics at a political and economic level.

The tension between royal and local, lay and ecclesiastic, urban and rural powers is also one of the key transversal themes of the book. Parting from the old and traditional narration of seigneurial powers as either culturally uninterested or even opposed to economic growth and investment, all authors have shown that both aristocracies and ecclesiastical institutions were indeed deeply involved in the development of networks of buildings. While this notion is not new per se, if one thinks about phenomena like the ubiquitous presence of rural fortifications and, of course, of milling implants, the papers collected in the present volume seem to suggest a degree of intentionality in the action of 'traditional' actors that goes beyond the mere exploitation of economic

growth or affirmation of political power. Also, in line with a recent revival in studies devoted to power bargaining between rural communities and lords or urban powers, local communities take a more prominent role in the narration of economic growth and thus of the rise of stone and brick building in Southern Europe.

Finally, a note that could project the results of this volume towards further research. While the fine-grain analysis of the interplay between political, social and economic dynamics in the rise and spreading of stone and brick building must remain a key interpretative frame for future studies, a more in-depth analysis of the interaction between building and economic growth could prove fruitful. Be it because of the objective difficulties in assessing pre-statistical economic growth, or because of the overall framework of the ERC project *Petrifying Wealth*, the volume just scratches the surface of the impact of this phenomenon on high Middle Ages economic growth. This volume could thus be the stepping stone for further explorations of a subject that could still yield interesting and significant contribution to our knowledge of the high Middle Ages society.

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