

# REVIEW OF “THE SAINT AND THE COUNT: A CASE STUDY FOR READING LIKE A HISTORIAN” BY LEAH SHOPKOW

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For anyone to effectively study history, they must first understand the process of identifying and interpreting sources with all their nuances, flaws, and limitations. In her book “The Saint and the Count: A Case Study for Reading Like a Historian,” Leah Shopkow walks students through a case study from a historian’s perspective. Using the twelfth century hagiography “The Life of Saint Vitalis” by Stephen of Fougères, Shopkow introduces readers to the types of sources a historian might encounter, as well as less tangible ideas like context, positionality, and bias. “The Saint and the Count” provides a practical exercise in critical thinking and interrogating a historical source “against the grain” to achieve a more complete and meaningful understanding.

The opening chapter of “The Saint and the Count” sets the stage for understanding how contemporary readers might understand Stephen of Fougères’ hagiography, in this case through biblical parallels which encourage the medieval reader to associate St. Vitalis with familiar representations of holiness. Shopkow introduces readers to the differences between primary sources and what she refers to as “ancient sources”, a source written after the recorded event but well before the modern day. She also differentiates between documentary and narrative sources and explains the importance of understanding types of sources and their limitations. The chapter also addresses missing sources- aspects of life which no one recorded, sources lost due to disaster or time, and the challenges and uses of oral histories. Importantly, Shopkow addresses the bias inherent to historical records, not intentionally, but due to their original intent, the limitations of the author, or simply because of what survives. Shopkow concludes this introduction with her own summary of the life of

St. Vitalis within the context of the sources available. This “worked example” lays the foundation for the questions she addresses in the rest of the book.

Chapter two addresses the sourcing heuristic of “The Life of St. Vitalis” by examining its author, Stephen of Fougères. Shopkow further elaborates on the importance of source type presented in the first chapter, noting that Stephen of Fougères wrote his account roughly eighty years after the events took place. She also presents two critical concepts: context and positionality. To situate these concepts for readers, Shopkow outlines the life of Stephen of Fougères within the church, the political and religious situation in England, and discusses what Stephen hopes to achieve in writing his hagiography. These factors illustrate Shopkow’s assertion that “Authors were not writing in a vacuum. If they wanted audiences to respond to their work, they had to meet at least some of the audiences’ expectations and desires.”<sup>1</sup>

Having presented her readers with the ‘backstory’ of “The Life of St. Vitalis,” Shopkow then turns to hagiography and genre. Here, she addresses how the medieval reader viewed Stephen of Fougère’s work in the context of saint’s lives. In more general terms, she addresses ideas of change and continuity, encouraging the reader to consider how ideas change and evolve over time to better understand what a source conveyed to its original audience. This chapter asks the important question ‘What is typical or unique about a source?’ and teaches students of history to read “against the grain” to “better understand people’s experiences and concerns in a given time or place.”

Chapters four and five delve further into understanding a source’s original context while identifying subjects which modern readers might find challenging. Chapter four deals with miracles and questions of veracity experienced by contemporary readers and how Stephen of Fougères addressed these concerns. Here she teaches modern readers to take perspective with ideas which might seem foreign or absurd and use them to better understand both the subjects and the author’s beliefs, concerns, and understanding of the world in which they live. In chapter five, Shopkow discusses issues of violence, culture, gender roles, the role of government, and property ownership. The author explains how medieval ideas of these subjects differ from our modern understanding and emphasizes the importance of context when interpreting historic sources. Both chapters highlight the importance of understanding a source from its author’s perspective rather than passing judgment on historic ideas and events from a modern position or morality.

Shopkow concludes her book with the hazards of translation and some additional questions we might ask to better understand accounts of historical events. While Shopkow acknowledges that her approach to history is not all encompassing, she creates an effective model for students to approach historical sources to better understand previous centuries. Critically, she reminds us of the pitfalls of applying modern understanding, expectations, or morality to historical events. While many sources teach us history, few teach us how to read and interrogate these accounts. “The Saint and the Count: A Case Study for Reading Like a Historian” equips student historians with the tools to succeed in their future efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> Shopkow 2021, pg. 58.