Saxony and its inhabitants hold an important, if often ambivalent place in modern scholarship on the “rise” of the Carolingians and the creation of their empire. Conflict with the Saxons was vital to both processes, but the Saxons themselves often feature only in a passive (albeit resistant) role as the targets of political and religious expansion across the Rhine. In a way this is a reflection of the contemporary sources – or at least the narratives presented by chronicles, histories and annals, all written from a Frankish perspective. Rarely have modern scholars attempted to provide a Saxon perspective, and where they have it has still usually been interpreted via the Frankish sources. Yet Saxon perspectives are available, albeit sources which contain them only emerged in the century after the conquest and conversion. *Conquest and Christianization*, Rembold’s first monograph, does not aim solely at redressing this balance – although it does go a long way towards doing so. Rather, the author’s aim is to put the focus on Saxony and shed new light on the methods by which it was incorporated into both the political and religious structures of the Carolingian empire.

A long Introduction to the monograph serves to establish Rembold’s methodology along with the wider context in which she places her work. The work closes with a very short Conclusion which briefly summarizes the main points. Between these, *Conquest and Christianization* is divided into two parts, each consisting of two chapters. While the two parts overlap at times, broadly speaking one deals with each element of the book’s title. Part I, “Politics of Conquest”, takes an external perspective, considering two key events in Saxony’s integration into the Carolingian realm; the Saxon Wars and the *Stellinga* revolt, which are mostly addressed in Frankish sources. Part II, “Conversion and Christianization”, meanwhile, takes a more internal perspective, focussing particularly on Saxon accounts of the post-conquest integration process. Rather than serving to reinforce outdated ideas about the distinction between the “secular” and the “sacred” in early medieval Europe, this division into two parts neatly demonstrates the ambiguities involved in the integration of a peripheral region into the Carolingian empire.

Chapter One, “The Saxon Wars”, is the one which will be most familiar to a non-specialist audience, and certainly has the largest historiography behind it. But Rembold has much to offer that is refreshingly original. Rather than simply re-telling the narrative of the Wars in a new format, Rembold aims to deconstruct older interpretations. More attention than
usual is given to the alliances that formed a vital part of the Wars, taking the account beyond a simple narrative of “Franks vs Saxons” and a Saxon elite that attempted to side with the conquerors at the expense of the lower orders. Similarly, while two fairly distinct phases of the wars have long been identified, Rembold goes further than most in demonstrating that this was more than just a chronological distinction marked by the cessation of hostilities between 785 and 792. The earlier phase of the Wars was marked by harsh reprisals in the form especially of massacres and forced mass baptisms, while in the later phase reprisals more often took the form of hostage taking and deportations. This portrayal of the Saxon Wars is more nuanced than most previous examples, with two particularly important points emerging: opportunism, rather than grand strategy, played a key part in the conduct of those on both sides of the conflict; and even before the end, the Franks viewed the Saxons as subjects of both Charlemagne and God. The latter point in particular resurfaces throughout the remainder of the study.

Rembold’s deconstructionist approach is even more evident in Chapter Two, “The Stellinga”, which addresses the revolt of that name and the group after which it was named. Contrary to most previous commentators, Rembold does not take contemporary descriptions of either the event or those involved at face value. As a result, the notion of the revolt as a pagan uprising of the lower orders that sought to overturn the conquest of Saxony is completely and convincingly laid to rest. Rembold demonstrates that, while the label “pagan” still had currency as a form of denunciation in the mid-ninth century, there is no reason to suspect those involved in the Stellinga were pagans, or even wanted to apostatize from Christianity. Instead, the promises made to them by Lothar I about returning to their old customs probably referred to a pre-Carolingian system of law and judgement, the disruption of which had left many Saxons feeling isolated or unrepresented in their own governance. Rather than being staunch pagans, the members of the Stellinga were more like members of a guild who, far from attempting to break away from the Carolingian realm, actually aimed at further integration, albeit on the Saxons’ own terms.

In Chapter Three, “Founders and Patrons”, Rembold moves on to the establishment of Christianity in Saxony. Here she goes beyond the narratives of mass baptisms accompanying Frankish military victories and examines – in as much as can be done – what was actually happening “on the ground”. The missionaries and their associates feature heavily here, but once again Rembold proves unwilling to take at face value either the contemporary sources or the interpretations of modern scholars. Where these would paint a picture of planned establishments of bishoprics, monasteries and ordered religion, Rembold instead shows us that the first generations of missionary bishops and monastic founders – often one and the same
people – did not have a plan: regions were converted when it was politically expedient, and bishoprics and monasteries were founded as local circumstances allowed. The idea of a planned establishment of Saxon Christianity as it existed in later centuries only emerged with subsequent generations, and particularly from the tenth century onwards. This is not to say that Christianity in late eighth- and ninth-century Saxony was weak or superficial – quite the opposite. Rembold is able to reveal a vital and flourishing, if experimental Christianity. Although we lack direct evidence for the participation of ordinary people in this Christianity, it is clear from the sources that the new religion had a profound impact on daily life right from the beginning, and paganism as a way of life did not survive long into the ninth century.

It is to this impact that Rembold turns in Chapter Four, “Religion and Society”. Despite the odds stacked against it, not least the long and bloody nature of Charlemagne’s conquest and the rural nature of the region which made lines of communication and commerce difficult, Christianity thrived in ninth-century Saxony. Here Rembold bolsters her re-interpretation of the **Stellinga** with evidence from the archaeology, which shows that Saxons were already beginning to follow Frankish burial trends by the beginning of the ninth century. At the same time, hagiographical texts show a particular concern for pastoral responsibility and Christian instruction, both often grounded in the idea of the Saxon conversion under Charlemagne. A case study of the vernacular **Heliand** and **Genesis** highlights a clear Saxon interest in Christian history and a desire to interpret this history for a specifically Saxon audience. Rembold utilizes the Saxon hagiographical texts to describe a Saxon “micro-Christendom” that was at once both part of the wider Carolingian Christian realm and its own particular development of Christianity, in a similar sense to the “micro-Christendoms” that developed around the Mediterranean during Late Antiquity, as described by Peter Brown. Here Rembold offers something incredibly important to those seeking to understand the complexities of Carolingian Christianity.

Rembold’s monograph is a crucial addition to the field of Carolingian studies. Her re-assessment of early medieval Saxon culture builds upon a number of recent articles seeking to challenge older interpretations, but an Anglophone monograph-length study on the subject will surely prove indispensable. *Conquest and Christianization* also represents an excellent example of how the peripheral regions of the empire can be studied in their own right. Over the course of her study, Rembold shows herself to be a master of various genres of literary sources, from annals and hagiography to charters and even vernacular poetry, utilizing sources few may be aware of but many more will be now. But perhaps even more importantly she brings these genres together, along with archaeology, in support of robust and compelling
arguments about the nature of Carolingian Saxony during and especially after the conquest. The unspoken challenge laid down by this and other studies of the peripheries is to work out the ramifications of such regional peculiarities for our understanding of the Carolingian realm as a whole.