The Favor of Friends: Intercession and Aristocratic Politics in Carolingian and Ottonian Europe

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This is a most welcome volume for a number of reasons. For a start, it is the most nuanced and comprehensive study of the practice of intercession in the earlier Middle Ages, focusing on the ninth and tenth centuries. More to the point, perhaps, it constitutes the first (and to date only) sustained engagement with the diplomas of the Ottonian and Salian rulers available in English. In this respect, the author pursues two related goals: to shed light on intercessory practices in the Carolingian and Ottonian realms, using not only royal charters, but also narrative sources, letters and artwork for this purpose; and to understand how the acts of intercession recorded in diplomas relate to such broader patterns. The focus is therefore on the diplomatic record, but Gilsdorf never loses sight of the bigger picture.

In his first chapter, ‘Understanding intercession’, the author introduces the subject. He draws on an impressively wide range of literature here, from the classic works of 19th-century German diplomatic to modern sociological studies. Gilsdorf’s basic point is that intercession in the earlier Middle Ages was far more than a matter of relaying messages or requests; at its heart lay the belief (and indeed knowledge) that the intercessory process added weight and meaning to entreaties. However, earlier studies of the phenomenon often fell short of the mark, seeking to apply anachronistic categories of ‘political’ and ‘personal’ to such acts, or to subsume them into broader practices of ‘begging pardon and favour’. In contrast, Gilsdorf’s work attempts to understand intercession on its own terms, placing the intervention clauses found in diplomas alongside the broader evidence for third-party advocacy.

It is with the second chapter, on the roles of friends and allies as intercessors, that the study begins in earnest. Working from the ample evidence that associates interceded on each other’s behalf, Gilsdorf makes a persuasive case for treating third-party advocacy as an essential part of broader social bonds – it was not simply the case that friends would assist each other, but also that those who interceded for one another other tended to be (or to become) associates. Intercession was thus more than a reflection of pre-existing bonds; it was also part and parcel of how these were constructed. In order to trace the dynamics of such practices more closely, Gilsdorf mines the rich epistolary sources of the Carolingian period, which illustrate how individuals such as Lupus of Ferrières and Einhard not only requested but also at times enacted intercession. Such advocacy often involved or implied a hierarchical relationship between the parties; the rich and
powerful tended to intercede for their less well-established friends and followers. Nevertheless, as Gilsdorf emphasises, such hierarchical undertones were mitigated by the inherently cooperative nature of advocacy (pp. 76–84). Indeed, in a sense lords gained as much from the process as did their associates, since the former owed their elevated position in no small part to their ability to petition rulers and other powerful magnates.

The third chapter turns from the ‘demand’ to the ‘supply’ end of the spectrum, focusing on the roles of courtiers and royal relatives as intercessors. Here Gilsdorf focuses primarily (though not exclusively) on the evidence of diplomas, tracing how prominent individuals at court intervened for others. That courtiers should be prominent in such contexts requires little explanation; as figures with regular access to the ‘king’s ear’, they were natural advocates. Be that as it may, their activity was by no means static: though chancellors and archchancellors interceded frequently throughout the period, royal chaplains began to appear more frequently under the Ottonians, reflecting their increasing importance in contemporary politics. Yet if court officials often played the part of third-party advocate, it was members of the king’s own family who were intercessors par excellence; as royal kith and kin they commanded a degree of Königsnähe (‘proximity to the ruler’) with which few others could compete. However, it is only members of the king’s immediate family whose familial relationship with the ruler is emphasised; when more distant relatives intercede they seem to have acted as office holders and magnates in their own right (roles which, of course, they often owed to familial patronage). The most active member of the royal household in this regard was the king’s wife and the general trend over these years is towards ever more queenly advocacy. The activity of royal consorts as intercessors thus reflects broader developments, which saw noblewomen take on important roles as abbesses, regents and dowagers in this period.

The fourth and penultimate chapter discusses with the role of bishops as intercessors. Here Gilsdorf traverses much ground to good effect. Following the observations of Timothy Reuter and others regarding the importance of episcopal office in the tenth and 11th centuries, Gilsdorf notes that bishops often took on the role of intercessor. He sees this less as the result of kings co-opting of the episcopate for royal interests, than as an expression of the prominent position of bishops in local society. Since Late Antiquity bishops had been important power-brokers and their position was enhanced in the ninth century, during which, as Steffen Patzold argues, a clearer conception of episcopal office began to develop. In the course of the tenth century many bishops’ clout was further increased by the acquisition of key fiscal and administrative rights. Yet the role of such prelates as intercessors cannot be explained in terms of Realpolitik alone, as Gilsdorf notes. At least as important as political concerns was the nature of episcopal office itself. Bishops were meant to mediate between Christ and man; they were the archetypal beati pacifici (‘blessed peacemakers’) of which Jesus had spoken in his Sermon on the Mount. This explains why bishops appear particularly frequently as intercessors in conflicts, during which they mediated between rebels and kings. As with other acts of intercession, however, bishops were far more than mere go-betweens here – they had to find middle ground, encouraging both parties to compromise. Moreover, once an agreement had been made, they had to ensure that it was upheld. It is for this reason, Gilsdorf suggests, that Archbishop Frederick of Mainz fell from Otto I’s favour in the 950s; because he mediated in cases which had failed to reach to satisfactory solutions (at least from Otto’s standpoint), the prelate earned the king’s ire.

The fifth and final chapter discusses the ‘End(s) of intercession’. Here Gilsdorf ranges widely across early and high Middle Ages, seeking to understand why intercession flowered in the tenth century in order to explain its later demise in the 11th and 12th. He sees intercession under the Ottonian rulers partly as a continuation of earlier Carolingian practices, but also as something of a novelty. Intervention clauses gave expression to the increasing importance of personal bonds of friendship and association in this period, whilst at the same time reflecting (and indeed further developing) pre-existing ideas about royal sacrality and ministry. Gilsdorf then sees the demise of this tradition in part as a consequence of the natural development of intercession: in the course of the tenth century this had become increasingly dominated by royal relatives, which meant that when under Henry II and Conrad II rulers without large immediate families came to the throne something of a void was left, which had to be filled by the king’s wife and offspring. As a consequence, intercession became more limited in scope and less integrative in nature; where once it had
given expression to what Hagen Keller terms the ‘polycentric’ nature of the Ottonian polity, now it failed to do so adequately. Also important were new social, religious and political ideals. Within the church, the rising tide of reform made the intercessory roles of bishops come under closer scrutiny; what had once been an essential part of episcopal ministry might now look suspiciously like simony. Similarly important were shifts in royal ideology: during the ‘Salian century’ and the Stauffer period thereafter a more hierarchical understanding of regalian rights came to the fore, one which chimed less naturally with the acts of begging pardon and favour which had characterized Ottonian politics. It is this which, Gilsdorf suggests, paved the way for the active role of intercessor to give way to the more passive one of witness; intercession formulae were abandoned in favour of the witness-list. Nevertheless, as Gilsdorf notes, this was not the end of intercession tout court; rather, it was a subtle but important shift in the tone of politics, one which would cast a long shadow.

There is much to praise about this book. It is the most comprehensive and subtle treatment of political intercession in the ninth and tenth centuries and should be read with care by all students and scholars of the Carolingian empire and its immediate successors. Gilsdorf has read widely in the extensive literature on diplomatics and royal ritual and his work builds on and adjusts the conclusions of Geoffrey Koziol, Gerd Althoff and others in this regard. Above all, Gilsdorf is to be applauded for covering so much ground (both historical and theoretical) so swiftly; this study says more in 172 pages of main text than many do in twice this space. However, like all good books, Gilsdorf’s raises as many questions as it answers and I should like to spend the rest of this review considering a few of these.

Upon reading Gisldorf’s final chapter I was left wondering whether the act of witnessing, which he sees as fundamentally passive (pp. 168–72), might not be seen in more active terms, as a sign of continued or even growing commitment to the principles of consensual rulership developed under the Ottonians. Thus recent studies suggest that the Salian and Stauffer rulers were at least as constrained by the consensus of their leading magnates as had been their Ottonian forbears, if not more so.(2) Moreover, witness-lists first ‘took off’ in the early years of Henry V’s reign, during which conscious efforts were made to mobilise the consensus of the kingdom’s ruling élite.(3) This is not to say that political ideals did not also become more hierarchical at this point, as Gisldorf argues; rather, we are observing one of those ‘paradoxes of power’ of which Janet L. Nelson has spoken so eloquently: rulers began insisting upon the independence of their authority at the very moment at which this was becoming increasingly circumscribed in practice.(4) This was by no means an exclusively East Frankish phenomenon and interesting parallels can be seen here with the early Capetian rulers to the west – a region about which Gisldorf has surprisingly little to say after the death of Charles the Bald.(5)

Another issue which this book raises is that of how the subtleties of intercession worked in practice. Gisldorf’s bird’s eye view of intercessory practices means that he only discusses specific diplomas in passing. Whilst this is on one level perfectly justified, individual acts of intercession are left rather disembodied as a consequence. Thus, for example, when Gilsdorf mentions the intercession of Margrave Hugh in favour of himself in 994 (p. 130), little is said about the immediate context for this. This was, in fact, Otto III’s first meeting with the Italian magnate, who had been one of his father’s main supporters south of the Alps and whose acquisition of a house and building site at Ingelheim was clearly meant to facilitate his attendance at future assemblies in the north.(6) Yet this is not all: if traditional interpretations of this document are correct (and there are reasons for thinking that they are at least in part), then it is one of the first grants – if not the first grant – which Otto issued independently of the informal regency which had hitherto ruled the realm on his behalf.(7) To present this as a straightforward case of a magnate intervening on his own behalf is therefore not inaccurate, but misses much of what makes this act so meaningful. A similar case is presented by Gilsdorf’s treatment of two diplomas in the name of Henry II, which he cites as examples of the queen’s ‘special position vis-à-vis the king’ (p. 118). Whilst he is doubtless right to note the prominence of Cunigunde in these charters, Gilsdorf fails to mention that Emperor Henry himself is believed to have drafted these documents; what are presented as expressions of typical queenly Königsnähe were thus also deeply personal expressions of affection on the part of the ruler.(8) Indeed, in general there is a somewhat dangerous tendency to downplay the textual and representational nature of intercession as
recorded in royal *acta*; intervention formulae are not direct windows into intercessory practices (as Gilsdorf’s graphs come close to suggesting) and more attention might have been given to the preferences of individual draftsmen in this regard.

There are also one or two points at which Gilsdorf’s otherwise masterful command of the material itself slips. This is most obvious in ‘Appendix two’ (pp. 177–82), which lists those diplomas excluded from consideration in the study, giving reasons for doing so in each case (normally a citation of a secondary authority who has cast doubt on the document’s authenticity). The list produced is extremely detailed and will be an essential tool for future scholars working within the field. There are, however, a few noteworthy omissions. Thus no mention is made of Thomas Ludwig’s recent work on the diplomas for Meißen, which might have affected Gilsdorf’s judgements of D O I 406 and D O III 186, which are now to be treated as interpolated and unauthenticated respectively.(9) In the first of these cases this has little impact on Gilsdorf’s own arguments; in the second, however, it would presumably have influenced his treatment of the document in the main text (p. 132). A further omission relates to a set of diplomas in favour of the bishopric of Vercelli which have been ascribed to the draftsmanship of Archbishop Leo (DD O III 323, 324, 383, 384). Although accepted by Sickel as authentic, a number of scholars have since cast serious doubt upon their authenticity (though others have also been quick to step up to their defence).(10) Less serious, but no less surprising, is Gilsdorf’s silence regarding Franz-Reiner Erkens’ recent work on the forgeries of Pilgrim of Passau.(11) Such slips do not, of course, invalidate the usefulness of this list, but they do throw into sharp relief the author’s own criticism of historians who are unaware of recent charter scholarship (pp. 27–8, esp. 28, n. 81).

Finally, if I may be permitted one final piece of pedantry, Gisldorf’s case for treating Otto III’s grant of Dortmund to St Mary’s, Aachen (D O III 257), as a forgery is not as watertight as it may initially appear (p. 180). Thus, although the diploma in question does not survive in its original format and concerns an estate which is not otherwise attested amongst the holdings of the chapel, this need not be fatal to its authenticity. Indeed, the fact that Dortmund is not recorded as a holding of the *Marienkapelle* might actually speak in its favour – in the absence of concrete evidence that the canons claimed this estate at a later date it is hard to imagine a motive for forgery. In any case, its formulation is above suspicion and the transaction it records sits well with Otto’s other privileges in favour of the chapel, which include a grant of Tiel issued on the same occasion (D O III 258).(12) Moreover, the interest shown in the *memoria* of Charlemagne in both of these documents makes good sense against the background of the emperor’s other efforts to underscore his links with his illustrious Carolingian forbear.(13)

It would, however, be wrong to let such minor gripes overshadow the accomplishment of this book. Whilst it is difficult for someone engaged in work on similar themes to read such a volume without splitting hairs – and there are, as I hope to have shown, some hairs to be split – the overall verdict must be emphatically positive. This is the first monographic treatment of intercession since the 1930s and for that alone Gilsdorf should be warmly thanked. This is an example of charter scholarship at its finest, combining diplomatic precision and rigour with a strong sense of the broader socio-political significance of the practices examined. *The Favor of Friends* establishes Gisldorf as one of the leading authorities on tenth-century Europe and should be read not only by fellow specialists, but also by students of kingship, charters and ritual throughout the Middle Ages. The only pity in this regard is that it comes with such an inflated price tag – a fault which is to be laid firmly at the publisher’s door. Still, if there is any book on the market worth such a sum, this is surely it. Like the work of Geoffrey Koziol and Hagen Keller at its best, Gilsdorf’s study serves as a salutary reminder of just how much royal diplomas and other documentary sources have to tell us, especially in *quellenarmen Zeiten* (‘times poor in sources’).

Abbreviations: Ottonian royal diplomas are cited by number according to the standard conventions, e.g. D O I 246 = diploma no. 246 in the name of Otto I, D H II 27 = diploma no. 27 in the name of Henry II. Full editions can be accessed online at [http://www.dmgh.de/][2], where these abbreviations are also given.
Notes


5. G. Koziol, ‘The conquest of Burgundy, the Peace of God, and the diplomas of Robert the Pious’, French Historical Studies, 37 (2014), 173–214. Neither this nor Koziol’s Politics of Memory and Identity (reviewed by Kathryn Dutton here [3]) seem to have been available to the author before completion of the manuscript. Back to (5)


7. The diploma in question is D O III 147. This grant was enacted (actum) at Ingelheim in late August or early September, but is dated (data) to the Sohlingen assembly in autumn (22 September 994). That this event witnessed the start of Otto’s independent reign (at least in symbolic terms) is suggested by the mention of his age in the dating clause of D O III 148, also issued at this gathering: P. Kehr, Die Urukunden Otto III. (Innsbruck, 1890), p. 158; M. Uhler, Jahrbücher des Deutschen Reiches unter Otto II. und Otto III., II, Otto III. 983–1002 (Berlin, 1954), pp. 173–6; cf. T. Offergeld, Reges pueri. Das Königstum Minderjähriger im frühen Mittelalter, MGH: Schriften 50 (Hannover, 2001), pp. 732–50, who points out the Otto’s independent rule must have begun gradually, but perhaps underestimates the role of the Sohlingen assembly in this process. Back to (7)

8. The diplomas in question are DD H II 368 and 409; on which, see H. Hoffmann, ‘Eigendiktat in den Urukunden Ottos III. und Heinrichs II.’, Deutsches Archiv, 44 (1988), 390–423, at 400–2 and 411. Back to (8)


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