Making Early Medieval Societies: Conflict and Belonging in the Latin West, 300-1200

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Editor: Kate Cooper
Conrad Leyser
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This collection of ten articles was inspired by an interdisciplinary conference held at the University of Manchester in 2005 on ‘The Peace in the Feud: History and Anthropology, 1955–2005’. The event marked the 50th anniversary of the publication of Max Gluckman’s seminal Custom and Conflict in Africa, which included a chapter on ‘The Peace in the Feud’, originally published as an article in Past & Present earlier in the same year. Through study of traditional African societies, Gluckman argued that seemingly endless cycles of vengeance and violence were in fact held in check by custom, suggesting that ‘conflicts in one set of relationships, over a wider range of society or through a longer period of time, lead to the re-establishment of social cohesion’.(1) Gluckman explicitly sought to engage medieval historians since they grappled with the same question of how order could be maintained in societies with weak governing institutions. His challenge was met by J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, who cited Gluckman in his important ‘The Bloodfeud of the Franks’ (1959). It has long been supposed that the two met while both held chairs at the University of Manchester in the 1950s. Though their purported encounter has been somewhat mythologized as a key stimulus in the eventual ‘anthropological turn’ in early medieval studies in the 1980s (2), Gluckman’s influence on medieval historians of feud and violence over the last half-century is undeniable. The present volume was thus conceived in the spirit of continuing the conversation between history and anthropology, though readers may be surprised to find no contributions from anthropologists themselves. Certainly, the imbalance is to be attributed in part to the untimely passing of several of the original conference’s participants, including Mary Douglas, to whose memory the book is dedicated. Yet one also detects a mild frustration that the conversation has been too one-sided, perhaps because many anthropologists no longer see the relevance of Gluckman’s approach. As noted in the book’s introduction, ‘History seems forever to be “drawing” on Anthropology. Why not the other way round?’ (p. 15).

Making Early Medieval Societies is indeed a compelling case for further dialogue. The essays here employ a variety of historical and anthropological approaches to explore conflict management, the power of tradition and the applicability of the ‘peace in the feud’ in the Latin West between the fourth and 12th centuries. The papers, as Conrad Leyser outlines in a succinct introduction, challenge several well-worn historiographical
models concerning violence and the state, in particular the ‘fable of privatization’ (p. 3), the notion that public authority fell into private hands in the wake of imperial collapse (especially in the fifth and tenth centuries), thus prompting periods of excessive violence, ‘feudal anarchy’ and the rest. This enduring paradigm has been much contested, but the ensuing debates over the nature of the state which dominate discussions of power in early medieval Europe have arguably run aground. As a way forward, this book revisits Gluckman’s fundamental questions, taking as its starting point not the state, but the social order: what were the bonds which held communities together through turbulent times? How could conflict be harnessed as a force for social cohesion? The collective result is a bold, innovative and highly enjoyable study of conflict and custom which offers stimulating new perspectives on some of the biggest questions faced by historians of the early Middle Ages.

Kate Cooper (‘Property, power, and conflict: re-thinking the Constantinian revolution’) kicks things off with a bottom-up approach to the emergence of the imperial Church and the question of a privatization of power in the late Roman period. The Eusebian myth of early Church unity has only recently begun to be unravelled, and Cooper argues that bishops’ authority was constructed not on an institutional basis, but on the back of their roles as local patres. As community leaders, bishops gradually became the arbitrators of local disputes. The vitality of early Christianity stemmed from rival bishops’ efforts to foster networks of followers. In this light, the theological controversies which followed Constantine’s reforms offered mechanisms for local leaders to test their followings, and continued engagement in such conflicts made it possible to imagine the Church as an institution by the end of the fifth century. Ecclesiastical institutionalization is further pursued by David Natal and Jamie Wood (‘Playing with fire: conflicting bishops in late Roman Spain and Gaul’) in a thought-provoking examination of two episcopal battlegrounds, the Priscillianist controversy of the 370s–80s and Pope Zosimus’ attempt to impose his authority over the Gallic bishops in 417. The authors fruitfully draw on ‘scale theory’, approaching the social order as a complex network of relationships operating on different levels (or ‘scales’) within a system, between which certain actors can ‘jump’ to advance their causes. This type of analysis makes it easier to track the interaction between the simultaneous processes of Roman political fragmentation and trans-regional ecclesiastical integration. In both the Priscillian and Zosimus episodes, bishops (individually and collectively) exploited networks across a range of scales in order to strengthen their own positions. Continuous episcopal rivalry thus generated an increasingly institutionalized Church and a shared group identity. This fascinating study is the most anthropology-driven chapter in the collection, although some sources have not been treated as critically as they perhaps ought to have been (notably, those concerning the supposed episcopal prerogatives of the church of Arles, which must be considered in light of later metropolitan disputes in Provence).

Chapters three and four examine how two of our most important post-imperial authors sought to shape their new worlds. Helmut Reimitz (‘After Rome, before Francia: religion, ethnicity, and identity politics in Gregory of Tours’ Ten Books of Histories’) argues that Gregory of Tours resisted ‘Frankishness’ as much as he did ‘Romanness’. Though later readers would extract a ‘History of the Franks’ from his Histories, this was not his intention. He was engaged in a wider debate regarding the structure of the post-Roman social and political order, and within this conversation he advanced a vision of a Christian community. But Gregory, Reimitz suggests, mistrusted the emerging association of the Franks with both Church and regnum (the earliest extant royal document containing the term rex Francorum, rather than simply rex, dates to 585, i.e. the time Gregory was writing). The contradictions and incoherencies of the Histories are thus symptoms of his unease with identity: ‘In his eyes, the social and political structures of the Roman Empire belonged to the past while Frankish identity should have no future’ (p. 78). The conceptualization of a Christian future is also explored by Martin J. Ryan in his chapter on Bede and social change (‘“To mistake gold for wealth”: the Venerable Bede and the fate of Northumbria’). Bede’s writings acknowledge and respond to the remarkable changes in Anglo-Saxon society that occurred during his lifetime, and Ryan views his oeuvre as nothing short of ‘an attempt to remake Northumbria’ (p. 82). For Bede, violence and the accumulation of wealth could be legitimate if they served Christian purposes. Read as a whole, his works delineate a reform programme for the coming generation. A recent volume on Bede and the Future edited by Peter Darby and
Faith Wallis tackles similar questions, but presumably appeared too late to be taken into consideration.(3) This paper’s inclusion here, however, invites us to consider Bede’s reform agenda in an especially broad context, and readers are sure to benefit from comparison of the anxieties of Ryan’s Bede and Reimitz’s Gregory.

Paul Fouracre (‘The incidence of rebellion in the early medieval West’) asks why rebellion was so infrequent in this period given all the opportunities afforded by weak governing institutions. His response – based principally on Frankish evidence, though with instructive comparisons elsewhere, especially Visigothic Spain – stresses the durability of the political systems established in the sixth century, the nature of which made it hard even to conceive of overthrowing authority. Fouracre carefully examines the vocabulary of conflict, distinguishing between the language of small-scale political revolt and the much rarer term *rebellio*, which denoted a more profound challenge to authority. In the sixth century, dissent was channelled through conflicts between kings, thus making rebellion less likely; by the seventh, regional magnates were thoroughly integrated in a single political community which revolved around the palace. The distribution of power was frequently contested, but it was renegotiated through factional conflict rather than serious challenge to the political order. This characteristically insightful study shows why seemingly fragile early medieval polities (Francia in particular) were seldom in danger of imminent collapse.

Marios Costambeys (‘Disputes and documents in early medieval Italy’) traces the relationship between documentary change and social transformation in ninth- to 12th-century Italy. In contrast to the proliferation of ‘dispute-focused’ narrative charters in West Francia around the millennium – a change which has fed the great ‘feudal transformation’ debate – Italian documents evince precisely the inverse development, moving away from recording the dispute process towards a standardized rhetoric of peace and harmony. Costambeys unpicks the increasingly formulaic character of Italian charters, arguing that this shift was the creation of a newly professionalized, bureaucratic notariate. Success in disputes increasingly relied on scribes’ abilities to innovate with established documentary forms, but access to this culture was restricted to institutions and elites. The suggestion here, then, is ‘not that the production of legal documents responded to social change; it is, rather, that the documents were themselves instruments of that change’ (p. 154).

Chapters seven and eight investigate how early authorities were recycled and redeployed in the expansion of the institutional Church in the ninth and tenth centuries. Riccardo Bof and Conrad Leyser (‘Divorce and remarriage between late antiquity and the early middle ages: canon law and conflict resolution’) revisit the famous attempt by the Carolingian king Lothar II to annul his marriage to Teutberga. Retracing lay and Christian attitudes towards marriage from the ancient world onwards, the authors systematically dispel the notions that marriage was ‘Christianized’ in this period or that there was any ‘normative’ Church position on its dissolution before the ninth century. They follow the fascinating journey of one particular canonical pronouncement from its origins in early fifth-century North Africa to its deployment by Hincmar of Rheims in his famous treatise on Lothar’s divorce. Gospel and canonical traditions on marriage were ambiguous and highly malleable, and even though marriage had become fundamental to the new Carolingian social order, Hincmar’s priorities, they argue, were to build consensus and keep the peace. This meticulous source excavation continues into the next chapter with Conrad Leyser’s lucid exposition of the reception of Pope Gregory the Great’s letters (‘The memory of Gregory the Great and the making of Latin Europe, 600–1000’). Arguing that the ecclesiastical framework of the Carolingian Empire had been built on Gregory’s texts, Leyser plots the construction of an ‘episcopal Gregory’: the appropriation of his memory as a resource for episcopal autonomy. He shows how Gregory’s letters gradually found their way into late Carolingian canonical collections as churchmen turned to him for guidance on the nature of episcopal office, not least on the question of whether it was ever permissible for a bishop to transfer from one see to another. In the wake of the demise of the Empire in 888, this increasingly self-confident cadre of bishops looked to Gregory again: in his letters they found a survival manual for a post-imperial world, a blueprint for a Church without empire. Indeed, Leyser advocates nothing less than a wholesale reassessment of the history of the post-Carolingian Church: ‘The *libertas ecclesiae*, around which zealots were to rally after the first millennium, became imaginatively possible in the tenth century’ (p. 201).
The last two chapters consist of thoughtful reflections on much-debated paradigms of change in the 11th and 12th centuries from two of the period’s most influential commentators. R. I. Moore (‘The weight of opinion: religion and the people of Europe from the tenth to the twelfth century’) worries that historians of the ‘feudal transformation’ have marginalized crowds and popular religion in the same way contemporary authors did. The appearance of ‘the people’ in sources around the millennium cannot be explained simply as either the stirring of public opinion or as empty ecclesiastical rhetoric. Holy power was ‘power exercised from below, dependent not on appointment, consecration, or ordination, but on popular reputation and the ability to command or exploit it’ (p. 207). Clerics increasingly sought to harness the supernatural and to exclude laypeople from the process of defining it, but the people were always present and potentially dynamic; Moore warns that we would be wise not to leave them out of the picture. Stephen D. White (‘“The peace in the feud” revisited: feuds in the peace in medieval European feuds’) returns to the volume’s original impetus with a spirited survey of medievalists’ engagement with Gluckman’s model. He queries how deeply historians have actually applied the ‘peace in the feud’; rather, they simply have challenged the notion that feuds were interminable and unmanageable. Many historians in fact have questioned Gluckman’s assumptions, drawing instead on the work of other anthropologists. Taking stock of a more recent ‘emotional turn’ which has led some to characterize the ‘feudal transformation’ as a crucible of uncontrollable violence and incessant feuding, White suggests that Gluckman’s real legacy is to have provided ‘an analytical and rhetorical tool for dispelling the myths about vengeance and violence that still have a hold on the history of medieval Europe’ (p. 238).

White’s chapter acts as a fitting conclusion to the volume, for the papers collected here all to some degree employ Gluckman’s logic to challenge preconceived, tenacious narratives of the early Middle Ages. This lends the book an admirable coherence: the chapters hang together remarkably well and each ties clearly and explicitly into the volume’s key themes. The scholarship is up-to-date, and the papers have not suffered from the evident lag between their original airing in 2005 and final publication here. Cooper and Leyser are to be congratulated for marshalling a set of high-quality essays which collectively offer a powerful framework for rethinking how the social order was continuously reinforced in times of crisis and weak or dysfunctional states. In this aim, the book is an undoubted success. Another stated objective is to explore the notion of a ‘medieval privatization of power’ across the period’s two classic ruptures – the fall of Rome and the demise of the Carolingians. There is perhaps more discussion of the former with regard to this point (a reflection of recent trends in late antique scholarship), but the rich potential of this kind of comparative analysis emerges clearly when the book is contemplated as a whole. What contributors here uncover about the formation of new social bonds in the wake of the end of the Roman Empire will be of considerable interest to historians examining the transition from Carolingian to post-Carolingian Europe. Going the other way, several chapters indicate that scholars may need to think much more carefully about the Carolingian reception of ancient and late antique texts: as Leyser cautions, Gregory the Great’s Register is ‘a product not of sixth-century papal administration, but of Carolingian and post-Carolingian memory and myth-making’ (p. 182). All of this is to say that the book’s broad chronological horizon is most welcome and sure to open up further avenues of research and debate. This lustrous collection promises to be of immense value to specialists and students of early medieval social and cultural history, as well as to those looking for fresh perspective on the interaction between history and anthropology.

Notes

2. See I. Wood, ‘‘The Bloodfeud of the Franks”: a historiographical legend’, Early Medieval Europe, 12 (2006), 489–504, which is based on a paper also presented at the Manchester conference. Back to (2)
4. On similar themes, see also now C. West, Reframing the Feudal Revolution: Political and Social Transformation Between Marne and Moselle, c.800–c.1100 (Cambridge, 2013). Back to (4)