

## **Heresy and Dissent in the Carolingian Empire: the Case of Gottschalk of Orbais**

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Empires throughout world history have more often than not seen themselves as part of some cosmic grand narrative, set on earth to enact the will of the god or gods, spiritual or secular, they claim to serve. The Carolingian Empire was no exception. Committed to expanding the boundaries of Christianity beyond the frontiers while combatting cultural entropy within through the ceaseless correction of errant belief and practice, the Carolingians may well have saved at least some of western Europe's classical inheritance 'by the skin of our teeth' (to use Kenneth Clark's formulation). But they also created an authoritarian and intolerant political and religious culture that ground down those who could not or would not fit in. Matthew Bryan Gillis's impressive book is a study of one of those dissenters from Carolingian orthodoxy, the monk, poet, and theologian Gottschalk of Orbais, who became also its most famous victim. By telling the story of Gottschalk's life, ideas, and subsequent condemnation and imprisonment for heresy, Gillis has created a compelling and necessary drama not only of authority and resistance but of internal conflict and self-fashioning that illuminates aspects of early-medieval history far beyond its immediate focus.

If the 'Carolingian Renaissance' was committed to reinvigorating what remained of classical Latin – and especially Christian Latin – culture, then the heart of Gottschalk's trouble was that he took the inheritance, and in particular that from St Augustine of Hippo, too seriously. He developed out of Augustine's writings a theology of twin predestination, that God had before Creation itself not only determined that portion of humanity who would be saved but had also already damned the rest to eternal torment. This led to his being condemned at the Synod of Mainz in 848 and again at Quierzy a year later as that most rare of early-medieval beasts, 'a heretic in the flesh' (p. 1). Like many intellectuals who have naively believed that the truth will always defeat power, the fact that Gottschalk's views were a more thorough and accurate interpretation of the great bishop's later writings than those produced by his enemies was not enough to save him from a savage beating, being compelled to burn his own writings, and life-long imprisonment in the monastery of Hautvillers. But Gillis's book gives us a much broader and more inclusive view of Gottschalk's career and significance, revealing how the personal disaster of his condemnation for heresy was only part of a life-long pattern of questioning and resistance to the authoritative norms of ninth-century Carolingian religious culture.

Given how much remains obscure about Gottschalk, even down to his birth and death dates (estimated to be from the first decade of the ninth century to 30 October of either 868 or 869), a full biography would be an impossible task. Instead, the book takes a chronological approach not to the life but to the 'case' of Gottschalk, a term with overtones both of a 'case-file' of crimes and misdemeanours and of a psychological 'case-history', both of which play a part in Gillis's story. That story begins with Gottschalk's eruption into the public life of the empire in 829, at an earlier Synod of Mainz, where he successfully accused his own abbot, Hrabanus Maurus of Fulda, one of the most powerful men in the empire, of illegally forcing him into monastic vows, of violently tonsuring him, and depriving him of his liberty. This primal scene of Gottschalk against Hrabanus, monk against abbot, fictive son against symbolic father, the demand for obedience against that for freedom, was to be replayed periodically throughout the next four decades.

Over the following six chapters Gillis shows us Gottschalk at the key stages of his public and intellectual life for which textual evidence survives, sometimes sweeping through a decade and more, sometimes slowing to a single year. The effectiveness of this approach is that it allows space for the heretical Gottschalk gradually to emerge against a landscape of political, religious, and intellectual turmoil within the Carolingian Empire of Louis the Pious and the kingdoms of his successors. Gillis makes a strong argument that his flinty message of twin predestination could also offer clarity, order, and hope to both lay and ecclesiastical supporters living through the hard times of the 840s and 850s. Even after his condemnation Gottschalk's theological claims continued to receive significant if underground support throughout the Carolingian world. What also comes across clearly is just what a difficult person Gottschalk was, not only as he was represented by his enemies but in his own surviving writings. Often tiresomely didactic, argumentative, and demanding – his aggressive and garrulous style was a conscious strategy to exhaust his opponents into silence – he could yet be oddly charismatic, gathering friends and followers throughout his life. Gillis especially brings out how protean he was as a writer, endlessly fashioning masks and dramatic voices to make his points, posing at various times as St Augustine, St Anthony, or Lazarus; as martyr, miracle worker, sinner, and exile.

Nevertheless, within this changefulness Gillis does identify an essential shape and coherence to Gottschalk's career, centered on his consistent refusal to accept the authority of the Carolingian Church and in particular its established hierarchy of abbots and bishops in any matter that ran counter to his own theological position. Although we are provided with several effective close readings of key texts by Gottschalk and a clear sense of what his ideas were, the heart of Gillis's project is to shift our attention away from what he calls the 'traditional focus on theological arguments' towards a more historical understanding of 'the intensely personal and political nature' of the debates (p. 181). While ideas about grace, salvation and damnation, and the correct meanings of the Augustinian texts were undoubtedly important, what this book reveals is that what lay at the very centre of the arguments and why they inspired such controversy, was an intensely personal battle over authority. Gottschalk fought the most powerful religious leaders of the Carolingian world, particularly in the shape of his original adversary, Hrabanus Maurus, and from 849 onwards

Archbishop Hincmar of Rheims. He questioned their right, as irredeemably reprobate sinners, to speak about matters theological, to interpret the patristic texts, and – most shocking of all to the Carolingian establishment – to exercise the power of correction over others. Gillis gives us a Gottschalk who had struck a blow at the very heart of the cosmic mission of the empire.

The Carolingian programme of *correctio* held as its self-evident truth that all human beings, no matter how sinful, were created with the potential to win divine grace, led by the good shepherds of the Church hierarchy. Gottschalk not only treated this as an error, he openly disdained it and its defenders in public, repeatedly and aggressively refusing to accept the authority of the bishops and abbots who sought to discipline him. The irony was that for all his dissent Gottschalk was in many ways a typical product of the Carolingian project he fought so hard to undermine. He had been brought up in one of the major intellectual communities of the Frankish world, the monastery of Fulda, where he may have been Hrabanus's star pupil. As so often with top-down efforts at renewal based on education, the generation who received that education were not supposed to think for themselves, merely to be more receptive to the messages of their elders and betters. As an independent mind, Gottschalk refused to give the approved answer to the all important question, 'Whom does the deity favour?' But as Gillis points out, he remained 'squarely Carolingian' (p. 236) in his horror of sin and theological error, in his demands for humility and penance, and in the fact that he kept on asking that question at all.

It was his perceived faithlessness to the world that had made him that begins to explain why Gottschalk was so harshly treated, beaten, humiliated, imprisoned, and forced into silence, 'the harshest recorded punishment of a Carolingian theologian' (p. 144). Florus of Lyons recalled with horror several years later how Gottschalk 'cruelly and mercilessly had been torn to pieces nearly to death' (p. 144). While he was far from alone in departing from strict orthodoxy in the Carolingian world, yet he was the only one to be pursued as a heretic and treated with such savagery. To the Carolingian establishment, Gottschalk was more than just an irritating monk, a know-it-all, as Hrabanus called him, who had read too deeply in Augustine for his own good. He was a pollution, a disease, a madman, a monster, who through his deliberate courting of *scandalum*, of public confrontation, had attacked the foundational assumptions on which the covenant between the New Israel of the Franks and God had been built.

This is a very 21st-century book, with a self-aware narrative that sets out to reveal the dark side of Carolingian civilisation. In stark counterpoint to the perspectives that crystallised during the final decades of the last century, which saw the Carolingian political order as, if not wholly benign, nevertheless striving towards forms of consensus, stability, and order, Gillis's dominant themes are ones of anxiety, fear, and turmoil. Pushing this a little further, there is an unmistakable sense that running beneath the surface of the 'case of Gottschalk of Orbais' powerful irrational impulses were emerging from the very first exchanges, discontents that the protagonists were unable to recognise completely. Readers need not be full-blown Freudians to see threading through the narrative a family conflict that contributed to the obsessive and violent feelings that Gottschalk unleashed in himself and others. That this 'family' was fictive and monastic rather than biological in no way reduced the emotional pressures generated. The pattern was set in 829 in the original conflict between Gottschalk, the oblate with the damaged boyhood, and Hrabanus, the one-time *custos puerorum* at Fulda, accused in 807 of 'tormenting the young with frequent invectives and abuse' (p. 31), who had become abbot, literally 'father', of the monastery. These metaphorical familial anxieties ran both ways. The vicious beating Gottschalk received in 849 was not just about immediate pain and punishment but, as Gillis following the recent work of Lynda L. Coon suggests, was a kind of enforced infantilisation, a symbolic reduction of his status from adult monk back to novice, back to that of an obedient child.<sup>(1)</sup>

It is easy to give too much weight to these subterranean patterns and Gillis himself is too careful a scholar to make anything of them. But it might be worth thinking a bit more about the language of family that structured so much of Carolingian secular and ecclesiastical politics. What roles did those good, loving, and all-knowing 'Fathers' of both the Roman Church and the Trinity, Augustine and God Himself, play within Gottschalk's complex psycho-drama? His constant hearkening to their absolute wisdom and authority

against the wayward patriarchal authority of Hrabanus and Hincmar might have had deeper and more mysterious roots than can be uncovered by even the most patient historical investigation. What of Gottschalk's language of sons that threads its ways through many of his writings, not least his most famous poetic work, *Ut quid iubes* (851)? While some of these seem explicable as the typical early-medieval language of teacher to pupil, others are a bit more odd. Gillis draws attention to the strange reference in the *Responsa de diversis*, written after 853, to his *filiolus*, his 'little son', also named Gottschalk. Was he Gottschalk's biological son, named after his father and mentioned nowhere else, or a follower who just happened to have the same name as the master? Neither explanation is really satisfactory. Or is there something else entirely going on? To the many selves Gottschalk played in his writings, do we need to add that of the good father? What does seem plain after reading this book is that the case of Gottschalk opens a window into the psychological complexity of early-medieval men and women that has not always been appreciated.

If there is one area where Gillis might have pushed his analysis a bit harder it is in the crucial aspect of how the case of Gottschalk relates to the intensification of religious dissent and heresy during the later medieval centuries. Gillis himself formulates the issue clearly: 'Gottschalk's case is critical for rethinking the Frankish empire's place in this longer history, since the kinds of hierarchical practices for controlling religious thought and behaviour existing before and after the Carolingian period clearly predominated in that era as well' (p. 232). He engages explicitly with R. I. Moore's seminal work of 1987, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, although he is rightly cautious about applying its concepts wholesale to the Carolingian ninth century. After all, Moore himself has extensively argued for the eleventh and the first half of the twelfth centuries as the key turning-point from a 'society with persecution' to a 'persecuting society'.<sup>(2)</sup> But Gillis seems to want to distance the Carolingian era from the entire concept of persecution, preferring instead to write of 'coercive reform' (p. 7), which seems both too nice a distinction to be really worthwhile and not wholly opposed to the kinds of ideas Moore has been making for the last thirty years and more. Contrary to several misreadings, Moore's work describes only the emergence of the *conditions* for persecution, of the social and economic upheavals that created a functional need for more active persecution which was not always fully enacted in practice. It is about process, the *formation* of a – the indefinite article is crucial – persecuting society, not its full-blown achievement.

This matters because I think Gillis is much closer to Moore than he imagines himself to be and that a recognition of this clarifies 'the Frankish empire's place in this longer history'. For example, while Moore did identify the Carolingian period as witnessing the re-emergence of certain stereotypes of Jews, noting the works of Agobard of Lyons in particular, Gillis shows that representation of heretics as diseased, mad, and polluting *rustici* – images that Moore saw as central to the 11th and 12th-century imagination – had a genealogy that stretched back into the ninth century. That both sides in the twin predestination dispute tried to fabricate heretical sects to vilify their opponents as 'Hrabanians' or as 'New Predestinarians' (there had never been any heretical 'Old Predestinarians') parallels Moore's analysis of the apparent re-emergence of 'Arians' or 'Manicheans' in later centuries. We are seeing something pregnant with the future beginning to stir and move.

Gillis and Moore also illuminate each other in their understanding of the political element in heresy accusations. Moore has argued consistently that heresy trials were motivated by political machination as much as they were by actual religious difference. This is a central theme in Gillis's book and he makes an excellent case that Gottschalk's two major antagonists, Hrabanus and Hincmar, were at least in part motivated by political manoeuvring and rivalries in which Gottschalk became unwittingly entangled. Indeed, he argues that the original reconceptualisation of Gottschalk's legal case in 829 into heresy was down to Hrabanus's need to reassert his political authority as abbot at Fulda. But the key difference between the case of Gottschalk and the heresies of the later middle ages, as a reading of Moore alongside Gillis makes plain, is the virtual absence of *lay* powers from the former. For Moore, accusations of heresy in the 11th and 12th centuries are primarily the result of interventions not by the Church but by secular rulers and their court *literati*. By contrast, Carolingian kings and emperors remained almost wholly on the sidelines when it came to Gottschalk, turning over responsibility for dealing with him to their ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Although Charles the Bald did express interest in the case, his active role was largely limited to pressing his bishops for some kind of agreed response to ensure the harmony and stability of his realm. Unlike kings of a later age, he did not see it as his duty to punish heresy himself or conceived of Gottschalk's ideas as a challenge to his personal authority. While Gottschalk seems to have been an effective preacher, winning support for his ideas in Italy especially, the Carolingian establishment never seems to have felt any need to represent him as the leader of a broader 'popular' heretical movement to be brought to heel through secular intervention. Rather than looking to the levels or intensity of persecution – or 'coercive reform' – it was in who was enacting it and for what ends that the crucial distinction between a Carolingian 'society with persecution' and a 'persecuting society' may lie.

Regardless of where such ideas might lead, I want to end this review with a note of thanks. It is because Matthew Gillis has written such an excellent book that the reader comes away stimulated to rethink the issues he has raised, sometimes beyond the frameworks he himself has used. This is an important study that scholars of the Carolingian world and of early-medieval religious culture in general will read and use for many years to come. It is a book we should be grateful to have.

## Notes

1. L. Coon, *Dark Age Bodies: Gender and Monastic Practice in the Early Medieval West* (Philadelphia, PA, 2011).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Most recently in R. I. Moore, *The War on Heresy: Faith and Power in Medieval Europe* (London, 2012). The distinction is made clear in R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250*, 2nd edition (Oxford, 2007), chapter five.[Back to \(2\)](#)

The author is grateful to Scott Ashley for his positive review and for his stimulating thoughts about the study's wider implications.

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