

STATE AND SOCIETY IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

The Middle Rhine Valley, 400–1000

MATTHEW INNES



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CONTENTS

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	x
<i>A note on nomenclature and citations</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiv
1 INTRODUCTION	
Region, sources and scope	I
Early medieval politics: problems of approach	4
2 MONASTICISM, SPIRITUAL PATRONAGE AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE	13
Gifts to the church: patterns and potential	13
Spiritual patronage and gifts to the church	18
Funerary ritual, inheritance and gift exchange	34
Gifts of land and social power	40
The implications of monastic landholding	47
3 LAND, KINSHIP AND STATUS	51
The elite: kinship, land and inheritance	51
Lorsch's founders	51
The family of Otakar	61
The family of Hraban Maur	65
Land as property	68
The exploitation of land and the organisation of estates	77
Vertical integration: social status	82
Vertical integration: kinship and lordship	85
The relationship between land and power	93
4 LOCAL POWER: COLLECTIVE ACTION, CONFLICT AND CONSENSUS	94
Patterns of public action	94
Cities, monasteries and collective action	95
Rural settlements	105

Contents

Scribes as guardians of legal tradition	111
Counts and public meetings	118
Local political leadership	124
Violence, ritual and dispute settlement	129
The texture of local power	139
5 LOCALITY AND CENTRE: MECHANISMS OF EXTRACTION	141
Approaching early medieval government	141
Military service	143
The army tax	153
Royal levies	156
6 POLITICAL POWER FROM THE FIFTH TO THE ELEVENTH CENTURY	165
Introduction	165
Roman to Merovingian	165
The Merovingian middle Rhine	172
Forging the <i>pax Karolina</i>	180
Maintaining the <i>pax Karolina</i>	188
The politics of division	195
The zenith of Carolingian politics	210
Crisis, conflict and consolidation	222
The transformation of the early medieval polity	241
7 CONCLUSION: STATE AND SOCIETY IN THE EARLY MEDIEVAL WEST	251
Structural characteristics of early medieval politics	251
Public and private, state and society	254
Interpreting the early medieval west	259
<i>List of primary sources</i>	268
<i>Bibliography of secondary works</i>	274
<i>Index</i>	307

FIGURES

1 The Carolingian Rhineland	<i>page</i> xv
2 The Carolingian middle Rhine valley	xvi
3 Lorsch's patrons, March 766	20
4 Fulda's patrons, January–February 813	24
5 Lorsch's founders: kinship and property	52
6 Otakar: kinship and property	60
7 The family of Hraban Maur: kinship and property	64
8 Maintaining Worms' walls, c. 900	163
9 The middle Rhine valley, c. 500	171
10 Descendants of Lorsch's founders	264
11 Descendants of Hornbach's founders	265
12 Ancestors of Conrad I	266
13 The Carolingians	267

INTRODUCTION

REGION, SOURCES AND SCOPE

On the morning of 18 January 838 an earthquake hit the middle Rhine valley. One local observer recorded this prodigy for posterity in his account of his time. Disruption occurred ‘at St Nazarius and in the regions of Worms, Speyer and Ladenburg’.¹ The geographical focus of this study coincides neatly with the epicentre of the 838 earthquake, and, just as tremors must have been felt well beyond this immediate area in 838, so on occasion in what follows we will also move beyond the Rhine valley. Our observer, probably writing at Mainz, identified the region in terms of four important centres. Worms and Speyer were both seats of bishops, under the jurisdiction of the archbishop of nearby Mainz: all three bishoprics stood on the site of Roman cities on the Rhine’s west bank; Mainz and Worms were vibrant urban centres already in the ninth century, although Speyer remained a backwater until royal patronage in the eleventh century effected a transformation. East of the river, Ladenburg likewise stood on a Roman fortified site, but lacked a bishop. It was, nonetheless, an important local centre which was described by some Carolingian observers as a city: hence in the description of the 838 earthquake it was acknowledged as a central place which supplied an identifying label for its rural hinterland.² The final place mentioned as being affected by the earthquake was the resting-place of St Nazarius, the royal abbey of Lorsch, which was situated around 10 kilometres east of the Rhine, opposite Worms. Its inclusion here reminds us of the living power of dead saints, and the significance of monasteries as social centres, in the Carolingian world.

This region – the Rhine valley between Bingen and Speyer – is

¹ *AF*, s.a. 838, p. 28.

² The choice of labels in the 838 annal coincides with the basic geographical units into which the region was divided, each styled a *pagus*. See below, pp. 118–24.

State and society in the early middle ages

referred to by German historians as the middle Rhine. Its current division between three *Länder* mirrors its fate through much of its history, but in spite of the recurrent utility of the Rhine as a geographical and on occasion political boundary, in social terms the region can be seen as a historical unity. Topographically, it was dominated by the Rhine itself. The fertile lands of the valley were the social, political and economic heartland of the surrounding areas. To both west and east, the valley is bounded by escarpments which rise dramatically. On the eastern bank, a strip of between 10 and 30 km in width – much of which is still heavily wooded today – leads abruptly to the forested hills of the Odenwald. From the Rhine, the natural routes east lie along the Main and the Neckar: in the early middle ages the valleys of both rivers were tendrils of population and communication reaching eastwards. To the west of the Rhine valley lies, similarly, a fertile band bounded by sharply rising wooded uplands, which form a natural barrier between our area and the Moselle valley. The Nahe, which meets the Rhine at Bingen, cuts into this block, which was also traversed in the early middle ages by the old Roman road from Metz to Worms. Despite this, westwards contacts in the early middle ages were limited, perhaps even more so than those with the regions to the east: the main thoroughfare was the Rhine itself, the journey downriver leading northwards to the political and economic centres of the Frankish world. The cities of the river's banks, the villages in its valley, and even those settlements perched in the woods and hills, all looked towards the Rhine.

The middle Rhine is a viable region for study thanks to the monks of the abbeys of Lorsch and Fulda. Lorsch, which we have already visited, was both wealthy and politically significant, the mausoleum of the east Frankish kings in the ninth century. Fulda, although situated around fifty kilometres east and a little north of our region, likewise enjoyed rich holdings in the middle Rhine and an intimate and important relationship with Mainz: it was, after all, the resting-place of Mainz's first archbishop, Boniface. Extensive compilations of legal deeds detailing the acquisition of rights over land in the middle Rhine in the eighth and ninth centuries survive from both Lorsch and Fulda. These monastic riches – over 4,000 Carolingian charters are transmitted in total – make the region uniquely well documented.³ To them can be added material from other abbeys with interests – albeit less extensive – in the region. The monks who preserved these legal deeds also recorded the payments and services extracted from the peasants who worked monastic land, in documents known in historian's jargon as polyptychs. The most precious of all these registers

³ For full references to the sources discussed in this section, see the bibliography of primary sources.

Introduction

outlines the burdens imposed on the inhabitants of royal estates in the area; compiled in the middle decades of the ninth century, it was blithely copied amongst a series of surveys of monastic property by a twelfth-century scribe.⁴ This vast documentary database is complemented by the survival of a portion of what was clearly once a much larger epistolary tradition. The selection of the correspondence of Boniface, collected at Mainz after his death, is the best-known letter collection from the region. More valuable for the social historian are the surviving letters of Charlemagne's biographer, Einhard, most concerning the affairs of his monastery at Seligenstadt on the Main; they give a priceless glimpse of the social and political life of the region in the 820s and 830s. There is relatively little from the middle Rhine in the way of narrative sources, either historiographical or hagiographical. The account of ninth-century politics known as the 'Annals of Fulda', from which the description of the 838 earthquake with which we began was taken, gives a regional perspective on the great political events of the ninth century, and the occasional local insight. There is also a series of saints' lives associated with the circle of Boniface. The most useful and vivid narrative undoubtedly comes, again, from the pen of Einhard. Like his letters, his account of the coming of the relics of Marcellinus and Peter from Rome to the Main valley and eventually to Seligenstadt puts flesh on the bare bones of social structure evident from the charters. Archaeology, both the traditional fare of cemeteries with grave-goods, and more recent excavations of settlements, likewise adds to our understanding of early medieval society.

For the historian of the early medieval middle Rhine, scarcity of sources is hardly a problem. It is vital, though, to realise that the surviving evidence has an essentially Carolingian horizon, and preserves the interests and perspectives of a small but closely knit elite. We must remain acutely aware of the influence that these sources – and those who wrote them – have over our image of the society which they both record and represent. A society which has left primarily documentary sources, like the Carolingian middle Rhine, will look dramatically different from one which has left literary narratives, but the difference may be more apparent than real.⁵ In that received views of early medieval society still largely

⁴ CL3671–5, whose true nature was first demonstrated by K. Glöckner, 'Ein Urbar des rheinfränkischen Reichsgutes aus Lorsch', *MIÖG* 38 (1920), 381–98. For its date towards the middle of the ninth century, see M. Gockel, *Karolingische Königshöfe am Mittelrhein*, VMPIG 31 (Göttingen, 1970), pp. 27–40. I have not been able to obtain a copy of E. Menzer, 'Das Lorscher Reichsurbar', in W. Wackerfuß (ed.), *Beiträge zur Erforschung des Odenwaldes* 5 (Neustadt, 1992), which argues on philological grounds that the polyptych dates from the middle of the eighth century. Even if the name-forms used are early, there are real historical problems in assigning the document as a whole to such an early date.

⁵ Cf. T. Reuter, 'The "Feudal" Revolution', *P&P* 155 (1997), 177–95 at 192–5.

State and society in the early middle ages

rest upon royal legislation and literary narrative, the reconstruction of politics and society from documentary material is historiographically important: it allows the development of a new perspective. This book takes the opportunity the richness of the middle Rhine offers to study social power in the early middle ages. The results are of global significance because they demonstrate that the familiar sources to which scholars habitually turn, the well-thumbed products of the royal court, are in need of radical reinterpretation.

EARLY MEDIEVAL POLITICS: PROBLEMS OF APPROACH

If we are to interrogate our sources successfully, it is vital to pose the right questions. There is a range of issues about politics and power in the early middle ages on which extant scholarship, addressing the canon of standard sources, has been unable to elicit a meaningful response. How was royal power articulated and exercised in the localities? What was the relationship between kings and local power? In a world where kings were dependent on local elites to carry out their will, what can we identify as constituting royal power? How can we differentiate royal power from aristocratic power?⁶

The very act of posing these questions underlines the peculiarity of early medieval polities. Nonetheless, a long tradition of scholarship has sought to describe early medieval politics in familiar terms, delineating the roles of officials whose power rested on wholesale delegation from the centre. Thus nineteenth- and early twentieth-century pioneers attempted to reconstruct the ‘Germanic’ constitution.⁷ In reaction to this, German scholarship of the inter-war period and later argued that aristocratic power was autogenous, originating in neither delegated royal powers nor popular institutions, but in relationships of personal dependence between lord and man. Lordly rights over dependants – so they argued – were the basis of the Frankish polity, and kings enjoyed jurisdiction over royal land and royal dependants alone.⁸ This approach has exerted a deep influence, and offers a fascinating perspective on the

⁶ Cf. P. Fouracre, ‘Cultural Conformity and Social Conservatism in Early Medieval Europe’, *History Workshop Journal* 33 (1992), 152–60.

⁷ Classically G. Waitz, *Deutsche Verfassungsgeschichte*, 8 vols. (Berlin, 1876–96).

⁸ The best statement is T. Mayer, ‘Die Ausbildung der Grundlagen des modernen deutsches Staats im hohen Mittelalter’, *Historische Zeitschrift* 159 (1938–9), 457–87; the ground-breaking local studies were O. Brunner, *Land und Herrschaft*, which was first published in 1939 (a later edition is now available in translation as *Land and Lordship: Structures of Governance in Medieval Austria*, trans. H. Kaminsky and J. Melton (Philadelphia, 1992)) and W. Schlesinger, *Die Entstehung der Landesherrschaft*, first published in 1941; second edn Darmstadt, 1964.

Introduction

development of the medieval state from an entity held together by personal relationships within the elite to a territorially defined administrative unit. It has not, however, dealt a fatal blow to legal-constitutional approaches to political structures, because it involved a championing of the Germanic heritage of early medieval institutions which cannot find support in the surviving evidence; the counts and counties of the Carolingian world cannot be derived from allegedly archaic forms of personal lordship whose very existence is shadowy and open to question. As a result most research has turned towards something not unlike nineteenth-century constitutionalism, often without being fully aware of the fact.⁹

When scholars have gone hunting Carolingian government, they have had a clear idea of the kind of beast they were tracking: a hazy silhouette, glimpsed from afar, but recognisably of the same species as the modern state. F. L. Ganshof, the doyen of twentieth-century Carolingian history, used royal decrees (capitularies) to fill in the details of tangible and centralised governmental institutions. Despite the enduring value of his work as a guide to Carolingian legislation, his picture of Frankish institutions can be challenged. This is not only because of the inevitable messiness of actual practice when compared with royal wishes. Ganshof's Frankish state was built up of local institutions (counts, counties and so on) which were defined by the delegation of regalian prerogative. His reading was based on an interpretation of the term *bannus*, found in the capitularies, as a right of command which was invested in royal officials. The actual uses of the term are relatively rare, and tend to concern obedience to specific royal orders, making it difficult to see the *bannus* as a fundamental constitutional principle.¹⁰ We cannot assume that the basic structures of politics were either brought into being, or legitimised, by kings, even in theory. Ganshof's picture of an institutionalised governmental hierarchy nonetheless remains more or less unchallenged as a representation of what Carolingian rulers wanted to do. Those historians who have bravely stalked the thickets of local documentary evidence seeking Carolingian government have used it as a guide. Tracking a beast resembling the modern state, they have returned empty handed, unable

⁹ A good recent example of modern criticism of the Germanist thesis, and the return to constitutionalism which has tended to follow, is A. C. Murray, 'The Position of the *Grafo* in the Constitutional History of Merovingian Gaul', *Speculum* 64 (1986), 787–805.

¹⁰ F. L. Ganshof, *Frankish Institutions under Charlemagne* (Providence, 1968), esp. pp. 11–12, where the *bannus* as a legal principle is extrapolated from far more specific uses in the sources. For more recent views of political theory as far more concerned with the moral and personal, see J. Fried, 'Der karolingische Herrschaftsverband im 9. Jahrhundert zwischen "Kirche" und "Königshaus"', *Historische Zeitschrift* 235 (1982), 1–43; H.-W. Goetz, '*Règnum*. Zum politischen Denken der Karolingerzeit', *ZSRG GA* 104 (1987), 110–90.

State and society in the early middle ages

even to point to a strong scent or a footprint. Rather than halting to reconsider their assumptions about their quarry, they have tended to see Carolingian government as a rare, short-lived and soon extinct import prematurely introduced into a harsh and hostile landscape.¹¹

In other words, the basic assumptions which inform the Ganshofian view from the capitularies remain unquestioned. Indeed, they thrive in certain historiographical traditions, particularly those which have eschewed the study of the localities in their own right. In one strand of recent Francophone scholarship, for example, the evident power and effectiveness of Carolingian kings has been taken as a tell-tale sign of the existence of a highly institutionalised state infrastructure, inherited from the Roman Empire (using similar logic, historians of tenth- and eleventh-century England have argued from the evident organisational strength of royal government for a ‘maximum view’ of structured state power).¹² Both optimists and pessimists share the assumption that the Carolingians were attempting to forge a unitary polity run via the routine delegation of royal power through administrative institutions. They reach differing conclusions largely because they study different sources, but they share a similar view of the Carolingian state, while disagreeing over whether it was hale and hearty or pale and pathetic. Both often share an almost Prelapsarian image of a Carolingian Eden, where peaceful peasants frolic freely under the protection of strong justice-loving kings and deep-rooted public institutions. In such a scheme of things, the Carolingian period ultimately becomes little more than an interesting blip in the long run of European history, a short-lived predecessor to, and antithesis of, the ‘feudal’ age of private, normatively brutal, aristocratic power.¹³

This is not to deny that there have been important developments in our understanding of Carolingian politics in the past half-century. Broadly speaking, the most innovative work on early medieval politics has proceeded on two fronts. First, prosopography – the identification of networks of kinship – has allowed a much deeper understanding of the

¹¹ A position exemplified by J.-P. Poly and E. Bournazel, *The Feudal Mutation* (New York, 1990).

¹² For French scholarship on the Carolingians, see J. Durlat, *Les finances publiques de Dioclétien aux Carolingiens* (284–888), Beihefte der *Francia* 21 (Sigmaringen, 1990). For England, see J. Campbell, ‘The Late Anglo-Saxon State: The Maximum View’, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 87 (1994), 39–65.

¹³ As is evident in such high-quality work as H. Keller, ‘Zum Charakter der “Staatlichkeit” zwischen karolingischer Reichsreform und hochmittelalterliche Herrschaftsausbau’, *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 32 (1989), 248–64; or T. N. Bisson, ‘The “Feudal” Revolution’, *P&P* 142 (1994), 6–42. The classic statement of the ultimate insignificance of the Carolingian period was that of Bisson’s teacher, J. R. Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State* (Princeton, 1970), pp. 10–12.

Introduction

interests and motivations of the aristocracy.¹⁴ Second, and more recently, political ritual has been shown to have played a central role in the transmission of political rules and the mobilisation of political support: kings used ritual to manipulate early medieval ‘consensus politics’. In the most challenging recent work, these two strands of research have come together to put our reading of high politics on a new level of fluency: the rich and complex lexicon of early medieval public life is beginning to be decoded.¹⁵ We are now far more aware of the importance of the interaction between the royal court and local politics, and the processes of group formation which created the basic units of early medieval society.¹⁶ Nonetheless, we are no closer to explaining how armies were equipped and put in the field, and tribute and services extracted from rural society.

In fact, even in the best current scholarship, something not unlike the Ganshofian institutionalist approach holds the field by default.¹⁷ This is shown most clearly in the flourishing series of local studies, whether written in the German tradition of *Landesgeschichte*, or the French regional *thèse* inspired by the *Annales* school’s championing of history ‘from the bottom up’. In that such work provides a local perspective it has the potential to qualify the view from the royal court. Indeed, regional studies have played an important role in further underlining the centrality of local elites to the political system, thus merging with the work of the prosopographers.¹⁸ But the empirical data local studies

¹⁴ Where I have used the term ‘aristocracy’, it is in recognition of the social fact of a dominant group which was born powerful and was conscious of the fact; I do not mean to suggest in my use of the term that the early medieval elite was closed, static or defined legally, merely that it was based on the inheritance of extensive landholdings. For more on the problems of definition, see pp. 82–5.

¹⁵ Compare two recent biographies of early medieval rulers, J. L. Nelson, *Charles the Bald* (London, 1992) and G. Althoff, *Otto III* (Darmstadt, 1996); see also the work collected in Nelson, *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge, 1986) and *The Frankish World, 750–900* (Woodbridge, 1994) and in Althoff, *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter. Kommunikation im Friede und Fehde* (Darmstadt, 1997).

¹⁶ G. Althoff, *Verwandte, Freunde und Getreue. Zum politische Stellenwert der Gruppenbindungen im früheren Mittelalter* (Darmstadt, 1990); S. Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900–1300* (Oxford, 1984); J. M. H. Smith, *Province and Empire: Brittany and the Carolingians* (Cambridge, 1992).

¹⁷ Thus, for all their merits, the best two treatments of Carolingian government: J. L. Nelson, ‘Kingship and Royal Government’, in *NCMH*, pp. 383–430; K.-F. Werner, ‘*Missus–marchio–comes*. Entre l’administration centrale et l’administration locale de l’empire carolingien’, in W. Paravicini and K.-F. Werner (eds.), *Histoire comparée de l’administration (IVe–XVIIIe siècles)*, Beihefte der Francia 9 (Munich, 1980), pp. 191–239.

¹⁸ Studies of the middle Rhine, in either a prosopographical or a *Landesgeschichte* tradition, are F. Staab, *Untersuchungen zur Gesellschaft am Mittelrhein in der Karolingerzeit*, Geschichtliche Landeskunde 11 (Wiesbaden, 1975); Gockel, *Königshöfe*; K. Bosl, *Franken um 800. Strukturanalyse einer fränkischer Königsprovinz* (2nd edn, Munich, 1969). French scholarship has concentrated on France and the Mediterranean and, following Duby, on the post-Carolingian period (partly because of the relative lack of Carolingian documentary evidence in France at least): the classics

State and society in the early middle ages

have uncovered have continued to be processed within an institutionalist understanding of royal power. This is clearly evident in a series of recent works which investigate the key figures in the Frankish polity, the counts. In 1973 H. K. Schulze, working from the charter evidence from the provinces east of the Rhine, pointed to the ubiquity of counts, and of territorial divisions into geographical units styled *pagus* and roughly equivalent to the later English county; here were the royal institutions and officials which constituted the Frankish state. Ulrich Nonn's 1983 study of the upper reaches of the Rhine similarly investigated *pagus*-labels and the appearance of counts in the charter evidence, arguing that the Carolingians divided up regional political units led by *duces*, and implemented a system of *pagi* and counts. Both works were based upon constitutionalist assumptions about the nature of local power: both Schulze and Nonn saw understanding Frankish government as a matter of identifying administrative institutions through which royal agents exercised delegated royal power. Once they found counts and *pagi*, they made no attempt to investigate what royal officials actually did.¹⁹

Michael Borgolte's controversial work on Carolingian Alemannia (roughly modern Switzerland and that area of southern Germany immediately to the north) marked an important attempt to get closer to the realities of early medieval society. The system of regular *pagi* run by counts which can be identified in parts of Alemannia was not, he argued, a reflection of an unchanging Frankish polity, but a state of affairs consciously created by Carolingian rulers in the course of eighth-century reconquest. In some outlying areas, complexes of aristocratic power which looked very much like autogenous lordship rights could be identified as late as the ninth century, whilst elsewhere efforts to reshape society in terms of counts and counties could be detected. In spite of heavy criticism, the broad outline of Borgolte's work is convincing. Yet even Borgolte ultimately fails to explain how political power was exercised on a local level. Despite accentuating the importance of aristocratic kinship networks – something which his predecessors had also

Footnote 18 (*cont.*)

are P. Bonnassie, *La Catalogne du milieu du Xe à la fin du XIe siècle* (Toulouse, 1975) and P. Toubert, *Les structures du Latium médiéval* (Paris, 1973); the best Carolingian local study is C. Lauranson-Rosaz, *L'Auvergne et ses marges (Vélay, Gévaudan) du VIIIe au XIe siècle: la fin du monde antique?* (Le Puy-en-Velay, 1987).

¹⁹ H. K. Schulze, *Die Grafschaftsverfassung der Karolingerzeit in den Gebieten östlich des Rheins* (Berlin, 1973); U. Nonn, *Pagus und comitatus in Niederlothringen. Untersuchungen zur politischen Raumgliederung im früheren Mittelalter*, Bonner Historische Forschungen 49 (Bonn, 1983); Nonn, 'Probleme der frühmittelalterlichen Grafschaftsverfassung am Beispiel des Rhein-Mosel Raum', *Jahrbuch für westdeutsche Landesgeschichte* 17 (1991), 29–50.

Introduction

acknowledged – he took the actual power of counts as a given, resting on varying combinations of delegated royal rights and family power. Although his work has placed our understanding of counts on a new footing, we still have little idea about what being a count actually involved; here we once again turn back to Ganshof's reading of the capitularies.²⁰

In other words, in spite of much important new work on early medieval politics, the basic framework within which findings are assimilated and interpreted has remained remarkably stable.²¹ Yet this framework is based on assumptions about the delegation of power from the top down, and the ruler as the sovereign source of legitimate power, which are looking increasingly dated. What is needed is a shift of paradigm, the creation of a new interpretative framework to replace the often unspoken institutionalism which underpins our thinking about early medieval politics.²² Rather than searching for institutions, we need to study the generation and transmission of power: that is, to examine the structures of social action, and the political strategies which it was possible to pursue within these structures (remembering, of course, that even the most basic structures were not static but were reproduced and so subtly altered over time).²³ A series of recent studies which have exploited the potential of the documentary evidence to analyse the exercise of power in the localities point the way forward. So far, this kind of local documentary work

²⁰ See M. Borgolte, *Geschichte der Grafschaften Alemanniens in fränkischer Zeit*, VF Sonderband 31 (Sigmaringen, 1984), and the companion prosopography, *Die Grafen Alemanniens im merowinger- und karolingischer Zeit. Eine Prosopographie* (Sigmaringen, 1986). Also Borgolte's 'Die Geschichte der Grafengewalt im Elsaß von Dagobert I bis Otto dem Großen', *ZGO* 131 (1983), 3–54. For criticism, H. K. Schulze, 'Grundprobleme der Grafschaftsverfassung', *Zeitschrift für Württembergische Landesgeschichte* 44 (1985), 265–82; and Schulze, 'Die Grafschaftsorganisation als Element der frühmittelalterlichen Staatlichkeit', *Jahrbuch für Geschichte des Feudalismus* 14 (1990), 29–46; the most constructive discussion is T. Zottz, 'Grafschaftsverfassung und Personengeschichte. Zu einen neuen Werk über das karolingierzeitliche Alemannien', *ZGO* 97 (1988), 1–14. Of Borgolte's work on counts, the essay which comes closest to describing the mechanics of local power is 'Die Alaholfingerurkunden. Zeugnisse vom Selbstverständnis einer adeligen Verwandtengemeinschaft des frühen Mittelalters', in Borgolte and D. Geuenich (eds.), *Subsidia Sangallensis I. Materialien und Untersuchungen zu den Verbrüderungsbüchern und zu den älteren Urkunden des Stiftsarchivs St. Gallen* (St Gallen, 1986), pp. 297–354.

²¹ Cf. R. E. Sullivan, 'The Carolingian Age: Reflections on its Place in the History of the Middle Ages', *Speculum* 64 (1989), 267–306.

²² For paradigm-shifts, how they occur and their relationship to empirical research, see T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962).

²³ For power as the object of historical enquiry, see M. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power I: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760* (Cambridge, 1986). Power as strategy, and the structuring of social action, is a recurrent subject in recent social theory: see e.g. P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge, 1977). But for all the recent stress on agency and the renegotiation of the social process over time, we should not underestimate the extent to which action is historically delimited.

State and society in the early middle ages

has concentrated on illuminating the workings of early medieval society, although the obvious implications for our understanding of political structures have been highlighted.²⁴ By examining the ways in which societies handle conflict, we can observe the surge of currents of power; the documentary evidence allows us to plot the connections through which power flowed, and the objectives for which that power was harnessed. This study investigates the circuits of power in the ‘small worlds’ which made up the Carolingian Empire as a means of reformulating our views of political power in the early middle ages.

Local power was problematical, something that needed constant maintenance, and if we ignore this basic fact we inevitably misunderstand the Frankish polity. The more we look at local leaders, the more it becomes clear that legalistic constitutional ideas about delegated rights of command simply do not explain the realities of power. In the localities, we meet forms of political leadership which were inherently personal, resting on one-to-one obligation and the recognition of transcendent moral qualities. Power, deeply unequal in its distribution within a profoundly hierarchical society, rested in reciprocity. It depended on informal channels of moral obligation and social pressure, not constitutional positions.²⁵ In such a world, power could only be negotiated and shared; only when power is institutionalised can it be delegated and controlled. One central concern of this study is the process by which power came to be presented in formal, legal terms, separated from the web of personal relationships involved in its exercise. In analysing the transformation of power there is a series of diagnostic questions which must be borne constantly in mind. Were political leaders more than particularly influential social actors, their power immersed in normal patterns of social action? Could they exercise

²⁴ Cf. W. Davies, *Small Worlds: The Village Community in Early Medieval Brittany* (London, 1989), esp. pp. 201–10; also W. Davies and P. Fouracre (eds.), *The Settlement of Disputes in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1986).

²⁵ The pathbreaking study of reciprocity was, of course, M. Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. I. Cunnison (New York, 1967); most recently, see A. Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-while-Giving* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and New York, 1992). For reciprocity and political leadership see M. Sahlins, ‘Poor Man, Rich Man, Big-Man, Chief’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1962–3), 285–303; useful additional material in M. Godelier and M. Strathern (eds.), *Big Men and Great Men* (Cambridge, 1991); and see W. G. Runciman, *A Treatise on Social Theory II: Substantive Social Theory* (Cambridge, 1989), esp. pp. 78–9, 185–6, 323–6. On reciprocity as the foundation of emergent political systems see H. J. M. Claessen and P. Skalník (eds.), *The Early State* (The Hague, 1977). On reciprocity in early medieval political and social structures, C. J. Wickham, ‘Problems of Comparing Rural Societies in Early Medieval Europe’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6 (1992), 221–46; J. Hannig, ‘*Ars donandi. Zur Ökonomie des Schenkungs im früheren Mittelalter*’, *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 3 (1986), 149–62; B. H. Rosenwein, ‘The Family Politics of Berengar I, King of Italy (888–924)’, *Speculum* 71 (1996), 247–81.

Introduction

their power as of right, or did they rely on their personal standing to carry out their official role? Was the act of ruling seen as something separate and distinct from the everyday functioning of society?²⁶

The political structures of the early middle ages need to be analysed in their own right and on their own terms. We cannot go on seeing early medieval polities as simply inchoate or less developed forms of the ‘perfected feudalism’ of the high middle ages, or degenerate and messy continuations of ancient society. On the most general of levels, European society throughout the first millennium AD was traditional and agrarian, and so political power was closely tied to control of the land and those who worked it. Generalisations of this scale, however, do not make for penetrating analysis, and the moment we try to be more specific about the construction of political power, we are faced with manifest and important changes. In the Roman world, political power was mediated through the infrastructure of the state, and in particular through the city and the nexus of administrative and fiscal law. By the twelfth century, political power was rooted in jurisdictional rights which were understood as a form of property, the legal and proprietorial combining to define control of land and people.²⁷ The intervening period cannot satisfactorily be reduced to either a hangover from antiquity or a melting-pot out of which high medieval society emerged. In both schemes there is more than a hint of the Dark Ages paradigm which has not quite been exorcised yet – for is not the characterisation of five centuries of gradual synthesis an effective writing off of any independent value to those centuries? Historical development cannot be seen as a simple progression from chaos to order, irrational to rational. Unless we recognise that the early middle ages have their own legitimacy as a historical period we fall victim to a self-fulfilling teleology, describing it in terms of what came before and after and thus positing a natural and seamless transition from one to the other. In other words, we must take care before we characterise the early middle ages in terms of a simple polarity between the heritage of the ancient world and the birth of a new, medieval society – a polarity prolonged by the tendency of specialists to discuss the period in

²⁶ Cf. K. Polanyi, ‘The Economy as Instituted Process’, in Polanyi, C. M. Arensberg and H. W. Pearson (eds.), *Trade and Market in Early Empires: Economics in Theory and Practice* (New York, 1957), pp. 243–69; and S. N. Eisenstadt, ‘The Study of the Process of Institutionalisation’, in Eisenstadt, *Essays on Comparative Institutions* (New York, Sydney and London, 1965), pp. 1–68.

²⁷ If one defines ‘feudalism’ as a system of social organisation, in which power is articulated in terms of a hierarchy of proprietorial and jurisdictional rights, here we have it – and it has no necessary or causal connection with the prevalence or otherwise of specific forms of tenure, personal lordship or military organisation. On account of the confusion caused by the different senses of the word ‘feudalism’, I have not used it in this study.

State and society in the early middle ages

terms of unreflective and one-dimensional categories of ‘continuity’ and ‘change’.²⁸ The early middle ages were both dynamic and distinct, characterised by a particular relationship between ‘state’ and ‘society’ which was radically different from what went both before and after. The peculiarity of this relationship, indeed, was such that our modern categories of ‘state’ and ‘society’ tend to collapse into each other when encountering with early medieval evidence.²⁹

What follows is divided into two parts. In the first, consisting of chapters 2–5, I adopt a broadly ‘horizontal’ approach, focusing on the ‘source-rich’ Carolingian period and analysing the fundamentals of social and political organisation. I begin by attempting to explain precisely why the Carolingian period is so well documented, examining the relationship between monasteries and lay society. I go on to examine the nature of landownership and the relationships between kinship, social status and the land; the texture of power, the places at which collective action took place, and the activities of those who ruled this society; and, finally, the ability of the political centre to impinge on the locality, to raise armies and tap the agrarian surplus. None of these discussions, however, stays wholly rooted in the Carolingian period, or presents a picture of stasis; they glance forward and back, and attempt to locate the vivid Carolingian evidence in longer patterns of development. I then present a diachronic analysis of the process of political change. Within this analysis, I offer a history of middle Rhenish politics from the late Roman period to the eleventh century – not a conventional political narrative so much as an analysis of changing political structures and the key points in their evolution. In conclusion, I identify the key characteristics of the political structures of the early medieval west, and trace the implications of those structures and their peculiarities.

²⁸ See G. Halsall, *Settlement and Social Organisation: The Merovingian Region of Metz, 500–800* (Cambridge, 1995).

²⁹ Hence it is only in my concluding analysis that I reintroduce the term ‘state’: to do otherwise would be to court confusion. I should underline that I am not claiming to discover ‘the state’ in my period, but analysing the peculiarities of the organisation of political power in the early middle ages, as the conclusion makes clear.