In 1049 the great reform pope, Leo IX (1049–54), embarked on an ambitious itinerary north of the Alps to root out simony and clerical corruption. In the midst of a pressing schedule of councils, this former bishop of Toul paid a visit to his homeland, to ‘sweet Alsace’ as his biographer called it. There, Alsace’s famous son dispensed blessings, relics and papal privileges to a number of reformed monasteries throughout the region, among them Altdorf, Hesse and Woffenheim which, as Leo proudly recalled, had been founded by his own kin, the so-called lords of Dabo and Eguisheim. In his grants to two other monasteries, Lure and Hohenburg, the pope was strangely oblivious to even deeper ancestral ties. For if Leo had emerged from the line of Dabo and Eguisheim, he and his near ancestors also were the direct descendants of a more ancient kin-group, the Etichonids, who had arisen in the seventh century, produced an illustrious line of dukes in the eighth century and been the patrons of Lure, Hohenburg and at least nine other Alsatian monasteries, but who had been transformed around the millennium into a new family, the lords of Dabo and Eguisheim.

Eclipsing Leo’s view of his recent Etichonid heritage was a profound revision in his ancestors’ lordship in the late tenth century, a revision which marked the transformation of a distinctive political order in early medieval Alsace stretching back to the seventh century. As kin-groups such as the Etichonids founded and patronized monasteries, whose unique burden it was to replicate the permanence of the divine order on earth, they had encouraged the growth of institutions whose proprietary endowments formed the material basis of stable and enduring networks of lordship. Indeed, the kin-groups that rose to prominence

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during the early medieval period, whether their dominance was realized on the local, regional or supra-regional levels, were those that successfully cultivated a local basis of power in this way. With the advent of radical monastic reform in the tenth century, the Etichonids’ identity, which was closely bound up with their patronage of monasteries, was swept away.

As the pope’s activities might indicate, the cultivation of lordly power in early medieval Alsace also was integrally connected to the larger story of power in early medieval Europe. Alsatian monks and lords never operated in a vacuum; their rights and privileges were inextricably tied to the legitimizing authority of popes, kings and emperors. These representatives of the political centre in turn sprang from families whose power and influence was based on the kinds of associative networks pervasive in Alsace, so that the extension of broader political authority was predicated on the possibilities inherent in monastery-based lordship. Thus, if the formation of the lineage of Dabo and Eguisheim was tied to the emergence of reformed cloisters, and if the fate of the Etichonids had been bound to an archipelago of earlier foundations in Alsace, the prestige of these ecclesiastical institutions likewise was dependent upon the grants dispensed by popes and kings, both of whom in 1049, it turns out, were kinsmen to one another and had arisen from families deeply implicated in the patronage of local monasteries.

Needless to say, the problem of power has long occupied the attention of early medieval historians. Some have devoted themselves to elucidating the formal political, military, judicial, legal and ecclesiastical structures through which Frankish officials, especially those of the Carolingian Empire, the most ambitious and successful political unit of the early middle ages, attempted to rule. Others have found this view incomplete, even unsatisfying. The notion of a system of governance directed from the political centre, they caution, can give off the impression that early medieval kings simply delegated authority to subordinates and exercised power through discrete public institutions. Attention to actual practice, as opposed to prescriptive exhortations, appears to reveal that early medieval kingdoms lacked the salient feature of a state: a routine administration coordinated by a ruler and his representatives. Thus, a countervailing

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tradition has long called attention to the limitations of early medieval ‘government’. 3

Skepticism about maximalist views of governmental organization and the attractions of social history have combined to generate an alternative vision of the past that has emphasized less formal conduits of power. Over the last couple of decades, some historians have shifted the focus away from the agency of kings to the primacy of local context, from formal institutional and political history to custom, kinship, gift-exchange and compromise justice. Influential has been the work of the so-called Bucknell group in Britain4 and of a group of American social historians dubbed with some exaggeration by French medievalists as the ‘new school of American medieval history’.5 According to this view, power was exercised most regularly at the local level, and it is there, social historians have argued, that we must look if we wish to grasp the essential stability of medieval society.

While this fruitful work has succeeded in evoking the vitality of medieval organization independent of formal politics, it in turn has raised additional issues for scrutiny. The close examination of the local social context has brought historians face to face with local institutions, local power brokers, their ties to one another and the relevance of royal authority for the perpetuation of political order. Consequently, the formal elements that social historians have been tempted to set aside as epiphenomenal have reasserted themselves as integral to the formulation of power. Governance in early medieval Europe might have been less abstract by comparison with bureaucratically ordered societies, but its political landscape included formal institutions (especially ecclesiastical ones),


political offices and law codes; and its kingdoms possessed a central focus in the person of the king and his court. The authority wielded by kings might appear at times to have been weak and uneven, but it was active, it was both feared and revered, and it was exercised often enough with jarring ruthlessness to ensure a measure of compliance.

It is now less evident that social analysis of non-prescriptive sources, the so-called ‘documents-of-practice’, can recover the hard, as opposed to propagandistic, reality of medieval society. In these postmodern times not only have such sources turned out to be as rhetorically charged as prescriptive texts, albeit in a different way, but when we examine the circumstances surrounding their production, we often discover that they appear to be the debris left over from struggles for power at the highest levels of early medieval society. This does not mean that documents of practice cannot be used to do traditional social history, but it is to say that the circumstances that provoked documentation often provide clues to the contact points between high politics and local affairs.

The accumulation of research emanating from Germany has made it eminently clear that royal power cannot simply be marginalized as a contaminating artefact. Long preoccupied with issues of political constitution, German medievalists have investigated with ever greater subtlety the relationship between the long dominance of the aristocracy and the evolving manifestation of royal power. As a part of the effort to work out the composition of the aristocracy, they have developed the prosopographical methods and source-critical techniques that have made it possible to work out the connections that run from the highest levels of authority to the lowest. This sophisticated work has established the crucial place of kingship in the maintenance of aristocratic power at all levels.


Introduction

Over the last decade some investigators have begun to confront anew the problem of political order in the Frankish world by integrating the rich work of social historians on kinship, property-holding and dispute resolution with the scholarship on the aristocracy. In essence, these historians argue that the crux of the matter is in the details: because an abstract government did not exist, insights into the operation of politics in the early middle ages must be won from close analysis of local contexts. These studies demonstrate that the investigation of a particular locality can never simply be constituted as the study of a discrete region, disconnected from wider politics, but necessarily entails the investigation of power ecumenically. This approach has essentially revealed that the flow of royal power was both enabled and regulated by local networks of power.

I shall draw pragmatically from the wisdom of statists and processualists to delineate the outlines of political order in early medieval Europe, with Alsace as my focus. Although the Carolingian era looms large in the following pages, the study is not limited to that period. The weight of scholarship has established the seventh and eleventh centuries as the proper termini for the early medieval era, both of which pre- and postdate the Carolingian period proper. The prodigious research on late antiquity has made it abundantly clear, implicitly or explicitly, that Henri Pirenne was right, if for the wrong reasons: the seventh century rather than the fifth marked the end of antiquity. I will begin then not with a Roman

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order that had ceased to exist, but with a close treatment of the late Merovingian period when a fundamentally different order based on networks of monasteries and kin-groups coalesced.

This early medieval order held sway until the eleventh century, when it underwent profound transformation. The literature here is enormous and sharply debated, but suffice it to say for the moment that although historians disagree on the extent of change, a range of studies written from a variety of perspectives has established that Europe experienced deep and abiding change between Carolingian times and the emergence of the high medieval monarchies and an autonomous Church by the twelfth century. It is important to stress that, although these changes may not have been unconnected to the transformation of the Carolingian world in the tenth century (at least in some areas), they fit only uneasily with the narrative of the collapse of the Carolingian Empire in others. In many areas, such as Alsace, the posited transformations noticeably postdated the end of the Carolingian era.

If the seventh and the eleventh centuries mark off the early middle ages as a distinct epoch, then we should be able to account for its coherence with positive evidence. That is, the early medieval period should not simply present a convenient space to trace out the vestiges of a dying Roman order or the emergence of monarchical government in the twelfth century, as is often the case with those working on either side of the period, and even by some working within it. The rulers, prelates

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13 See now Simon MacLean, Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century: Charles the Fat and the End of the Carolingian Empire (Cambridge, 2005).
Introduction

and aristocrats of the early middle ages created and perpetuated a coherent political order which – whether they realized it or not, but which we, who have the advantage of hindsight, can nonetheless see – was neither merely a survival of late classical forms nor a prelude to bureaucratization in the high middle ages. In early medieval Alsace, this order flowed from a distinctive symbiosis of familial, ecclesiastical and royal interests.

Aspects of early medieval society that we might conceive of as sociological – custom, networks of kinship and friendship and gift-exchange – are crucial for understanding the formulation of this political order. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that these ‘informal’ processes were not necessarily more fundamental than other factors, because the networks that bound people to one another, so far as we can access them, were often mediated by formally constituted institutions. Any treatment of associative networks should blend what we retrospectively distinguish as formal and informal modes of organization. Although I shall use such terms as ‘local’ and ‘central’, ‘political’ and ‘social’, and ‘family’ and ‘monastery’, I do not use them to represent oppositions whose dialectical interaction somehow can be seen to drive historical change. They are merely analytical, meaningful for differentiating the larger Frankish polity from its constituent parts and for identifying patterns of activity in terms that we as outside observers might recognize. Indeed, they are useful for helping us to understand that the distinctions we reflexively draw between local and central power, social and political history, and formal and informal processes are difficult to sustain in an early medieval context. Under the pressure of analysis, general and local order often turn out to be two sides of a coin, political and social life are often indistinguishable, and the relationships between families and the monasteries they patronized were extraordinarily fluid and in any case mutually reinforcing.

I also will de-emphasize the distinction between lay and ecclesiastical interests, as many early medievalists have been doing more systemically. Scholars long have pointed out that almost all the sources that survive from the period were preserved by ecclesiastical institutions and so reflect ‘church’ interests. A typical strategy for overcoming this bias has been to abstract from the sources the (lay) society that must have existed beyond the monastery. While there is some justification for trying to fill out the wider world encoded in the sources, at least for understanding the

15 Chris Wickham, The Mountains and the City: The Tuscan Appennines in the Early Middle Ages (Oxford, 1988); and Wendy Davies, Small Worlds: The Village Community in Early Medieval Brittany (Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1988). On the tendency to overlook the ecclesiastical agency behind the documentation, see David Herlihy’s review of Wickham’s Mountains and the City, Journal of...
contingencies of power, it is by no means clear that one can understand the long continuity of aristocratic power without moving ecclesiastical institutions, which were responsible for our sources, into the centre of the story, not simply as objects of aristocratic activity but as something integral to the structuring of power. In the early middle ages, lay and ecclesiastical spheres were coordinating, rather than subordinating, entities, populated by the same class of aristocrats linked together by networks of friendship and kinship. Monasteries were founded by families who sent their sons and daughters to staff their foundations as monks and nuns and even to administer them as abbots and abbesses, so that the webs of kinship that formed the matrix of this society encompassed both religious and lay persons. Monasteries never simply advanced their own interests; they remained wealthy and vibrant only so long as they attended the interests of their lay and royal patrons.  

Finally, because a central bureaucracy did not exist in the early medieval period, any investigation of political order needs to be approached from the local context. This strategy is not to be confused with the regional monographs pioneered by Georges Duby in France or by the practitioners of Landesgeschichte in Germany, many of whom have pursued detailed analysis quite consciously at the expense of broader political history.  

The popularity of both types of regional history may have its origins in anxieties about political centralization in the modern period, in the search for intimacy and belonging in an increasingly impersonal and bureaucratized world. Nor is it to be confused with centre-periphery studies. These can be useful for investigating the relationship between the Frankish empire and its marches but are less helpful for understanding a system of internal order mediated by local frameworks. Rather, the local arena is simply the place where one is best able to view the interplay of Frankish politics at all levels.

Interdisciplinary History 19 (1989), pp. 662–4. The tendency is also evident in the research on memorial sources, a primary goal of which has been to elucidate (lay) aristocratic groups, see Gerd Althoff, Adels- und Königsfamilien im Spiegel ihrer Memorialüberlieferung (Munich, 1984); and more recently Uwe Ludwig, Transalpine Beziehungen der Karolingerzeit im Spiegel der Memorialüberlieferung, MGH Studien und Texte 25 (Hanover, 1999).


19 See for example, Julia Smith, Province and Empire: Brittany and the Carolingians (Cambridge, 1992).
Introduction

ALSACE AND THE VOSGES

The unique political geography of Alsace lends itself to a fruitful analysis of the issues of centre and locality posed in this book. The region was advantageously located in the middle of Frankish Europe and open to influence from the surrounding centres of power: to the north lay the Frankish heartlands of the mid-Rhine and Ardennes regions, to the east, the powerful dukedom of Alemannia, to the southwest, the Merovingian kingdom of Burgundy, and to the west the Meuse-Moselle basin, which formed the heart of the ninth-century kingdom of Lotharingia (see map 1). Consequently, the Alsatian territories stood at the nexus of several critical frontiers within early medieval Europe whose frequent ruptures have exposed the inner workings of the Frankish order to the inquiring eyes of investigators. We shall examine these divisions more closely as they present themselves but, briefly, during the seventh century they ran along the frontier between the Merovingian kingdoms of Austrasia and Burgundy, and along the upper-Rhine frontier between Austrasia and Alemannia, a subordinate but frequently rebellious dukedom. In the Carolingian period, Alsace hosted the revolt of Charlemagne’s grandsons against their father Louis the Pious (814–40) and subsequently became a bone of contention along the frontier between the eastern and western Frankish kingdoms. On the other hand, Alsace was at various stages either left largely to its own devices, as was the case during the late Merovingian period; free from disturbance and fully integrated into the Carolingian Empire, as was the situation during the long reign of Charlemagne (768–814); or open to direct royal control, as happened during the late Carolingian and Ottonian periods. In sum, the area is ideal for investigating the interactivity of local networks, royal power and episodic centralization throughout the early medieval period from a variety of perspectives.

The pagus Alsatriae, the ‘district of Alsace’, first emerged in the immediate post-Roman period, probably in the sixth century. The term ‘Alsace’ derives, as best as philologists can decipher, from an old Germanic phrase, ali-land-sat-ja, which meant ‘one who sits in another land’.

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presumably referred to the Alemanni who lived on the left bank of the Rhine, but the term appears first only in the seventh century, in Fredegar’s chronicle. The *pagus* extended from just south of Weissenburg in the north to the Burgundian Gate in the south, and