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PART I

Context

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1 | Introduction

This book explores the transformation of northwest Europe from the era of the first post-Roman ‘European Union’ under the Carolingian Frankish kings to the so-called ‘feudal’ age. The major strand underpinning the narrative is the comparative analysis of trajectories of social change in Britain, France, Belgium and the western Netherlands, to the mouth of the Rhine, between c. AD 600 and 1150. The study is pursued primarily through the analysis of material culture: the archaeological remains, standing buildings, and objects conserved by choice from the early Middle Ages. Unlike textual sources, which were mostly created by, and for, the leading strata of early medieval societies, analysis of the physical trappings of the lives of people allows for the consideration of the roles of the full spectrum of the early medieval population on developments. The material culture evidence provides a broad context into which exceptional insights from textual sources can be placed.

For much of the period between the seventh and twelfth centuries AD, the populations of Britain, France and Flanders enjoyed a symbiotic relationship in terms of exchange of ideas, fashions and commodities, and they held a common religious affiliation to Roman Christianity, which promoted the notion that all the kingdoms and principalities in these regions formed part of the lands of ‘Christendom’, despite political rivalries. During these centuries radical changes occurred across northwest Europe in the organisation of the rural world. Towns and complex communities of artisans and merchant-traders emerged, and networks of contact between northern Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle and Far East were redefined, with long-lasting consequences into the present day. This period also saw significant population growth, and kingdoms and empires were created and also fragmented.

The social and political changes that occurred in northwest Europe during the centuries of the later first and early second millennia AD have mostly been explained as a consequence of the aspirations, intentional actions and failures of leaders of societies, whether those with de facto power or ideological influence, namely political and ecclesiastical elites. Such ‘top-down’ models of social change and evolution have certainly

been favoured by historians, anthropologists and archaeologists over the last quarter of the twentieth century. This has been particularly true in explanation of the emergence of kingdoms, imperial hegemonies, common religious mentality, concepts and practices of lordship, and the social status, ties and rights of the agricultural populations of northwest Europe, between the later eighth and twelfth centuries. Yet detailed textually led studies of early medieval agricultural communities, notably free farmers, and specialist producers and traders, have also demonstrated a far more complex relationship between elites and wider free populations in the promotion of social change (Davies 1988; Innes 2000; Le Jan 2000; Bonnassie 2004; Bruand 2008). Developments in anthropological, sociological and archaeological theories have also encouraged detailed research on societies at regional and local levels, and on people living in specific topographical situations, such as coasts, and serving specific social roles: for example, specialist artisans and merchant seafarers (Tilley 1994; Coates 1998; Loveluck and Tys 2006; Loveluck 2012). One of the principal aims of this book is to explain how the power and intentions of elites were confronted by the aspirations and actions of the diverse rural peasantry, and artisans and merchants in rural and urban settings, producing both intended and unintended social changes. Hence, the past emphasis on the role of elites as catalysts promoting the development of towns, trade and the reorganisation of the rural world is placed in the context of stimuli coming from other agents of change from within and beyond the territories that they ruled.

Separate consideration of social development in Britain and the ‘West Francia’ of the early Middle Ages (broadly modern-day France and Belgium) has been especially prevalent amongst archaeological studies, despite the close proximity of the geographical areas. Similarities and differences in the development of early medieval societies in these regions have tended to be addressed more in synthetic works of social and economic history in the last thirty years (Fossier 1984; Bartlett 1993; McCormick 2001; Brown 2002; Verhulst 2002; Smith 2005; Wickham 2005), whereas the rarer comparative archaeological studies have focussed either on specific themes, such as rural societies and towns (Chapelot and Fossier 1985; Carver 1993; Hamerow 2002a), or on studies framed within modern national borders (Besteman, Bos and Heidinga 1990; Gilchrist and Reynolds 2009; Chapelot 2010) or on developments over a *longue durée*, often linked to social evolutionary models (Hodges 1982; Randsborg 1991; Cunliffe 2001). Some recent research projects in western Europe have begun to address comparative themes of enquiry, with historians and

archaeologists from different countries contributing to thematic research networks. For example, the networks on *The Transformation of the Roman World* and *Les Éléites au Haut Moyen Âge* and their series of publications. Nevertheless, a comprehensive comparative assessment of recent archaeological research exploring linkage, similarity and diversity of social traits and changes in early medieval Britain and West Francia has not been conducted in recent decades. This book, therefore, attempts a review of the evidence from Britain and its nearest Continental neighbours together, to try to understand common trends of development and regional differences in these northwest European societies, so interlinked between AD 600 and 1150.

Analysis in subsequent chapters takes a thematic approach, based primarily on archaeological evidence, including structural, artefact and biological remains, as well as standing buildings and objects such as relics and manuscripts, considered more for the processes and relationships that went into producing and procuring them than for their content. At the same time, the contextual light that textual sources can throw upon actors who created settlements and particular lifestyles will also be considered, as will textual evidence for social and economic relationships that cannot be gleaned from material evidence. However, perceptions based solely on textual sources, and frameworks of analysis driven by them, will not be used to impose ‘orthodoxy’ of interpretation on archaeological evidence that shows clear signs of not agreeing with them. Hypotheses constructed from, often partial and biased, textual sources have continued to play an influential role in archaeological interpretation of early medieval remains in the past fifty years. Chasing the perceived archaeological correlations of what textually led paradigms apparently suggest has sometimes considerably underestimated the complex changes evident in the material culture. This study aims to arrive at an appreciation and understanding of the complexities of the social transformation of northwest Europe between AD 600 and 1150, allowing for the dynamic of the material culture evidence in its own right, informed by complementary textual evidence but not a slave to it.

In terms of methodology, various theoretical approaches to the interpretation of early medieval societies and their character are examined. Different paradigms suit different scales of question and analysis, and all have strengths and weaknesses, so no single approach is advocated above others. The book does seek, however, to begin to bridge the apparent gap in interpretative frameworks between those espoused by archaeologists from the late 1970s to 1990s, and those currently in vogue. The former can be

characterised as approaches which interpreted archaeological remains within explanatory frameworks derived from social anthropology and human geography. Principal among such approaches was the interpretation of archaeological remains within the context of very structured and fixed models of social evolution, which had defined concepts and expectations of social behaviour depending on defined stages in evolutionary cycles (Polanyi 1957; Friedman and Rowlands 1978 among others). The application of such models by Richard Hodges in researching the growth of towns and trade in the early medieval period provides a seminal and very influential example of the application of these approaches over the last thirty years (Hodges 1982, 1989, 2000). The models produced were powerful tools that revolutionised aspects of our understanding of material culture and potential mechanisms and motivations for developments in early medieval Europe. They were also applied over timescales which lasted centuries – Braudel's *longue durée* – thus a limited range of excavated 'type' sites could be fitted into the models and anthropological theory 'filled in the blanks'. However, the way that archaeological remains have been set within models of social evolution has produced unilinear views of how early medieval societies developed and operated, along fixed trajectories (Saunders 1995, 31–53; Brookes 2007, 28–30). The impact of divergences from expected 'norms' of behaviour has been minimised, as exceptions to general rules. In recent years, however, with new archaeological discoveries, the number of exceptions to expected rules has reached the scale where the usefulness of the general social evolutionary models has to be questioned. Their operation at the 'grand narrative' level has to be confronted with detailed data from different regional trends and landscape situations, and also individual site and artefact 'biographies', to see whether they still have a useful role at particular levels of analysis (Tilley 1994, 16–17; Hodder 2000, 21–2; Jones 2002, 83–5).

The reduction of people often to elite-dominated 'automata' within social evolutionary models also reduced the search for signs of complexity and human action that did not accord with the models. The existence of exchange for profit between the fifth and ninth centuries has been one practice minimised by them, even though profit-driven commodity movement and transactions have been noted by economic historians (McCormick 2001, 2007, 2012a; Verhulst 2002; Bruand 2008). The demonstration of people and groups able to act outside expected norms of elite–client social control has also been limited, and only shown emphatically recently (Ulmschneider 2000, 70; Loveluck and Tys 2006, 153–4; Loveluck 2012). The postmodernist approaches of the past two decades

have been a reaction to the ‘normative’ and restrictive outlooks promoted by the application of social evolutionary models. Within the context of research into the medieval period, postmodernist approaches have tended to focus on specific themes and analysis of the small scale, down to the level of intra-family relationships and individuals as agents of social change, whether over the short or long term. Hence, we have seen detailed studies of the use of social and symbolic space, and interpretation of social practices within ‘mental templates’, defined by Bourdieu under the concept of *habitus*. Material culture kits have been related to particular types of household or social group and to specific actors within medieval societies by gender, age, social role and group identity. Links between the use of space, collective ideas of social memory, possession of land, and identity have also been key themes investigated at the levels of household and community, and also in wider studies of specific reflections of identity and belief, such as burial practices (Galinié 2000, 61–78; Chouquer 2000; Effros 2002; Williams 2003; Hadley 2004, 301–23, amongst others).

Changing fashions in the use of theoretical paradigms might suggest disavowal of one set of approaches over the other. Yet, in reality the setting of archaeological evidence within ‘grand narrative’ models of social evolution and the examination of how human societies worked from the perspectives of the household, gender, age and multiple levels of social identity are, in fact, attempts at explaining human action or agency at different levels. The ‘grand narrative’ models analyse on what can be termed the ‘macro-level’, and the postmodernist approaches have predominantly analysed aspects of social action on the ‘micro-level’ or from specific perspectives. Hence, a gap in levels of interpretation has appeared, not wholly filled by different scales of agency theory espoused in the last decade. At the macro-level, the models of social evolution and the substrata of anthropological ‘laws’ on which they work do not allow for exceptions to what they define as expected ‘norms’. In contrast, postmodern analyses at the micro-level highlight such a high degree of variation and complexity that interpretation at a general level often appears impossible (Jones 2002, 69–70). The exceptions, perhaps, have been studies incorporating aspects of Bourdieu’s ideas on social space and *habitus*, where recurrent social practices do allow some multi-scale analysis of identity and the agency of different actors in social change (Galinié 2000).

In the chapters that follow, the ‘pros’ and ‘cons’ of the respective macro- and micro-level approaches are reviewed in the light of the substantial body of new archaeological evidence that has been discovered in the past quarter century. The chronological span of attention covers six centuries

and the geographical area considered covers five modern European countries, so this work could automatically be considered as one of macro-level analysis and a study of the *longue durée*. The study cannot cover all discoveries and work in progress from the different constituent countries. Nevertheless, an attempt has been made to review a large enough sample of evidence to provide enough detail for interpretations not to be based on a perceived superficial level of analysis. The thematic discussions analyse integrated material culture profiles, created when possible from structural, artefact and biological remains. These are used to develop an appreciation of lifestyles, funerary and monumental practices in different types of settlement and community, and in various geographical regions and social settings. Due critique is also given to circumstances governing the representativity of the evidence for purposes of comparison, particularly in relation to the interpretation of settlement data, where attempting to assess the limits of inference from refuse deposits and the ‘waste streams’ that created them is critical (Schiffer 1987, 66–8; Loveluck 2004, 90). Comparison between material culture profiles or ‘signatures’ is undertaken at inter-site, regional and supra-regional levels, to analyse any recurrent social practices that could be regarded as the habitual markers of different actors in early medieval societies (Bourdieu 1994, 23–4). The aim is to demonstrate the different extents to which ‘mental templates’ of action and practice were defined by rank-based roles, non-rank-based roles or other factors that governed degrees of access, movement and opportunity, such as geographical location and mental outlook. In a sense, the perspectives derived from the thematic and multi-scale analyses that follow provide a kind of ‘middle-range’ level of interpretation and explanatory hypothesis, against which macro-level models and micro-level studies of human agency can be situated.

2 | The social fabric of Northwest Europe,
AD 600–1150: paradigms and perspectives

**The Age of the Carolingians, AD 600–900: diversity
and connectivity**

The rural world: lordship, status and independence

At the social and economic levels of action, the period between AD 600 and 900 in northwest Europe saw the transformation of the world of ‘Late Antiquity’. A key theme for historians has been change in the organisation of the rural world, in relation to the degree of freedom of people involved in agricultural production, and the reorganisation of that production around the ‘bipartite’ estate in northern Francia, and around concepts of landholding and organisation influenced, if not led, by the Christian church in Anglo-Saxon England. The trend of a diminishing level of slavery has been observed in Francia, with a greater level of freedom on the part of rural peasant proprietors through the Carolingian period, only for them to succumb again to significant erosion of that freedom with new duties and taxes imposed during the development of the *seigneurie banale* or what have been called ‘feudal’ mechanisms of local lordship, from the later tenth and eleventh centuries (Bonnassie 1991a, 294–313; Wickham 1992, 237–8; Devroey 2004, 253–5). Increasingly, however, historical studies have stressed the dynamism of the ‘peasantry’, and the internal complexities, disparities in wealth and degrees of freedom that the collective descriptive label could hide (Davies 1988, 91–102; Bonnassie 1991a, 296–303; Wickham 1992, 234–44, 2005, 542–3 and 828). Indeed, many of the new ‘middling’ social actors of the tenth and eleventh centuries no doubt originated from the richer free peasantry, including members of the group characterised by their military role – the *milites*, and many burgesses and merchants of growing towns (Bonnassie 1991b, 208–11; Bartlett 1993, 51).

Critical to ideas of change in the rural world of northwest Francia, primarily advanced by historians and historical geographers, has been the perceived reorganisation of agricultural production through the development of the ‘bipartite’ estate, in the geographical area between the Rivers

Loire and Rhine, during the seventh and eighth centuries (Toubert 1990, 53–86; Verhulst 1990, 88–91). This involved the definition of a ‘reserve’ or *demesne* at the heart of an estate, worked by the household of the estate owner and by tied tenants of linked *manses* or farming households. The tenant peasantry additionally paid rent in kind and, increasingly, in coin, for possession of their manses (Devroey 2006, 522–6). The study of the development of these bipartite estates has been achieved primarily through analysis of major monastic and royal estates for which there is documentary evidence of their management, in the form of estate inventories known as *polyptychs*, and idealised estate management guidance documents. Most of these come from very specific areas of West Francia, notably the Île-de-France, the Aisne, Oise and Marne valleys, Picardy and Flanders, i.e. its northeast region (Devroey 1985, 91–3). The assumed wider use and promotion of such a method of agricultural and social exploitation must, however, be balanced with evidence for smaller units of agricultural production in the Loire valley and southern France, including those of major monastic landlords, such as St Martin of Tours and St Victor of Marseilles; and also by the wide extent and large number of free peasant allodial land properties (Sato 2004, 32–5; Faith 2010, 175–201).

The size of allodial lands owned by free peasant proprietors seems to have varied but their frequency and widespread geographical occurrence was not inconsiderable, and it is sometimes difficult from evidence of land and other transactions to distinguish them from local notables and the lesser aristocracy, in terms of their ability to buy, when such transactions become visible in textual sources. Detailed documentary studies, conducted in the last half century, have demonstrated the probable primacy of the free peasant *allod* and linked household as the most numerous method of land exploitation in West Francia, between the eighth and tenth centuries, even in Picardy and Flanders (Davies 1988, 98–9; Bonnassie 1991a, 296–300; Fossier 1991, 42 and 78; Chapelot 1993, 168). This is not to deny the importance of the bipartite estate as a mechanism of agricultural production and social control. Such estates, however, also have to be contextualised in landscapes that were probably characterised, overall, by free-peasant allodial holdings alongside a potentially smaller number of large bipartite estates (Wickham 1992, 234). Nevertheless, the high visibility and attention paid to the bipartite estate in textual studies of rural change between the seventh and tenth centuries is inevitable, due to the bias in survival of evidence about them. Consequently, care has to be taken not to skew interpretations further towards the importance of these large tenurial units in archaeological studies, which can be tempting given the