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978-1-107-13880-3 - Making Early Medieval Societies: Conflict and Belonging in the Latin West, 300–1200

Edited by Kate Cooper and Conrad Leyser

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Making Early Medieval Societies

Making Early Medieval Societies explores a fundamental question: what held the small- and large-scale communities of the late Roman and early medieval West together, at a time when the world seemed to be falling apart? Historians and anthropologists have traditionally asked parallel questions about the rise and fall of empires and how societies create a sense of belonging and social order in the absence of strong governmental institutions. This book draws on classic and more recent anthropologists' work to consider dispute settlement and conflict management during and after the end of the Roman Empire. Contributions range across the internecine rivalries of late Roman bishops, the marital disputes of warrior kings, and the tension between religious leaders and the unruly crowds in Western Europe after the first millennium – all considering the mechanisms through which conflict could be harnessed as a force for social stability or an engine for social change.

KATE COOPER is Professor of Ancient History at the University of Manchester. Her most recent book is *Band of Angels: The Forgotten World of Early Christian Women* (2013). Other publications include *The Fall of the Roman Household* (Cambridge, 2007) and the collection of essays, co-edited with Julia Hillner, *Religion, Dynasty and Patronage in Early Christian Rome* (Cambridge, 2007).

CONRAD LEYSER is Fellow and Tutor in History at Worcester College, University of Oxford. He is the author of *Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great* (2000). Other publications include the collection of essays, co-edited with Lesley Smith, *Motherhood, Religion, and Society in Medieval Europe, 400–1400* (2011).

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Edited by

Kate Cooper

University of Manchester

and

Conrad Leyser

University of Oxford



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107138803

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First published 2016

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Cooper, Kate, 1960– editor. | Leyser, Conrad, editor.

Making early medieval societies : conflict and belonging in the Latin West, 300–1200 / edited by Kate Cooper and Conrad Leyser.

LCCN 2015032436 | ISBN 9781107138803 (hardback) |

ISBN 9781316503607 (paperback)

LCSH: Civilization, Medieval. | Church history – Middle

Ages, 600–1500. | Social structure – Europe – History – To

1500. | Conflict management – Europe – History – To 1500.

LCC CB351 .M234 2016 | DDC 909.07–dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015032436>

ISBN 978-1-107-13880-3 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-316-50360-7 Paperback

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In Memoriam Mary Douglas

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Preface and acknowledgements</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>List of contributors</i>	xii
Introduction: making early medieval societies CONRAD LEYSER	1
1 Property, power, and conflict: re-thinking the Constantinian revolution KATE COOPER	16
2 Playing with fire: conflicting bishops in late Roman Spain and Gaul DAVID NATAL AND JAMIE WOOD	33
3 After Rome, before Francia: religion, ethnicity, and identity politics in Gregory of Tours' <i>Ten Books of Histories</i> HELMUT REIMITZ	58
4 'To mistake gold for wealth': the Venerable Bede and the fate of Northumbria MARTIN J. RYAN	80
5 The incidence of rebellion in the early medieval West PAUL FOURACRE	104
6 Disputes and documents in early medieval Italy MARIOS COSTAMBEYS	125
7 Divorce and remarriage between late antiquity and the early middle ages: canon law and conflict resolution RICCARDO BOF AND CONRAD LEYSER	155
8 The memory of Gregory the Great and the making of Latin Europe, 600–1000 CONRAD LEYSER	181
	vii

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii	Contents	
9	The weight of opinion: religion and the people of Europe from the tenth to the twelfth century	202
	R. I. MOORE	
10	‘The peace in the feud’ revisited: feuds in the peace in medieval European feuds	220
	STEPHEN D. WHITE	
	<i>Bibliography</i>	244
	<i>Index</i>	279

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface and acknowledgements

This volume traces its roots to a conference held in 2005 at the University of Manchester, ‘The Peace in the Feud: History and Anthropology 1955–2005’. We met to celebrate a fiftieth anniversary. In the spring of 1955, the Professor of Social Anthropology at Manchester, Max Gluckman, delivered a series of lectures on BBC Radio’s Third Programme, entitled ‘Custom and Conflict in Africa’, exploring how the tensions endemic in a number of African traditional societies were held in check by the power of tradition. Gluckman’s book by the same name came out later in the year. His aim, he averred, was to study ‘how men quarrel in terms of certain customary allegiances but are restrained from violence through other conflicting allegiances which are also enjoined on them by custom. The result is that conflicts in one set of relationships, over a wider range of society or through a longer period of time, lead to the reestablishment of social cohesion.’¹ There was a paradoxical ‘peace in the feud’, Gluckman argued: while the forces of vengeance and violence were perhaps intrinsically destructive, they could be harnessed to socially constructive purpose.

Gluckman explicitly sought to attract the attention of historians of medieval Europe, and his challenge was met with a ready response from his Manchester colleague, Michael Wallace-Hadrill. In 1959, the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* carried an article by Wallace-Hadrill, ‘The Blood-Feud of the Franks’, which offered a re-interpretation of revenge violence in Merovingian Gaul precisely along the lines suggested by Gluckman. The nature of Wallace-Hadrill’s collegial contact with Gluckman has not been documented, and it has yet to be established whether we are to imagine sustained face-to-face conversations in a Manchester common room or a more intermittent exchange conducted largely via print and broadcast.

Whatever its medium or extent, the Gluckman/Wallace-Hadrill encounter at Manchester remains one of the more influential moments

¹ M. Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (Oxford, 1955), p. 2.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x Preface and acknowledgements

of mid-twentieth-century intellectual history, for it gave new life to the close relationship that had persisted between anthropologists and medieval historians in the English-speaking world in the early days of anthropology as a free-standing discipline. Many pioneering anthropologists, such as E. E. Evans-Pritchard, had taken their first degrees in History at a time when the study of medieval charters was seen as the foundation of any historian's training.

As a result of the 2005 conference, an increasingly hardy band of colleagues began to meet and to exchange drafts. Our attention was drawn back to Gluckman's central questions: how does a social order hold together when centralized structures of authority are weak, or absent altogether? How do societies harness conflict to reinforce social order? We hope our readers will agree that the conversation between historians and anthropologists is still very much alive.

We remain grateful to the several sponsors of the original Conference, 'The Peace in the Feud', held under the auspices of the Manchester Centre for Late Antiquity. At the University of Manchester, these were: the Centre for Inter-disciplinary Research in the Arts, the School of Arts, Languages, and Cultures, the Faculty of Humanities, the School of Social Sciences, the Wellcome Trust Unit, and the Manchester Museum, which hosted the Conference Dinner in the shadow of a large dinosaur skeleton. Sponsorship came also from Jean Monnet Centre, and from Blackwells, who published Gluckman's *Custom and Conflict*. Our abiding thanks to the conference speakers whose contributions are not represented in the pages which follow: Philippe Buc, Stuart Carroll, Guy Halsall, John Hudson, Maia Green, the late J. D. Y. Peel, David Pratten, the late Terence Ranger, Richard Rathbone, Lyn Schumaker, Chris Wickham, and Ian Wood. Further thanks are due to Philippe Buc, Maia Green, and to Stephen D. White, who led postgraduate workshops, as did Richard Rathbone, whose conversations with the editors at Cumberland Lodge in the mid-1990s were a lasting source of inspiration.

In the making of the volume, we have had support from the John Fell Fund at Oxford University and the Lightbody Fund at Worcester College, which enabled us to meet to discuss drafts. We are beholden to Hannah Williams, for unstinting and indispensable editorial support, extending over many years. Our thanks also to successive editorial teams at Cambridge University Press, latterly under the genial guidance of Elizabeth Friend-Smith. Finally, we wish to thank the volume's contributors for exceeding our most ambitious hopes of scholarly collaboration, and for having the patience, grace, and sheer staying power to wrestle the intensity and excitement of face-to-face discussion into print.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface and acknowledgements

xi

All of those who were present at the Conference will remember the closing remarks of Mary Douglas. Her own contribution to the conversation between History and Anthropology needs no introduction. It is to her memory that we dedicate this volume.

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KATE COOPER, University of Manchester

MARIOS COSTAMBEYS, University of Liverpool

PAUL FOURACRE, University of Manchester

CONRAD LEYSER, Worcester College, University of Oxford

R. I. MOORE, Newcastle University

DAVID NATAL, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften

HELMUT REIMITZ, Princeton University

MARTIN J. RYAN, Brighton

STEPHEN D. WHITE, Emory University

JAMIE WOOD, University of Lincoln