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Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: READING  
THE TENTH CENTURY*Timothy Reuter*

THE PRESENT volume covers a period in European history best described as the ‘long tenth century’, stretching from the 890s through to around 1020/30. Though this volume covers Byzantine history of the period and also Islamic history so far as it impinges on European territory, the emphasis in this introduction will be largely on what was or would become the Latin west. I shall try to sketch what currently seem the main concerns of historians working on the period and what are generally seen as its salient features, though any such attempt will probably date far faster than the substantive chapters which follow. The ways in which historians make and have made sense of the period as a whole have been determined by a range of inputs. Before we can look at the general trends which are currently held to characterise the period (and the extent to which they actually do) we need to examine these inputs. The most important of them is the nature, real and perceived, of the available source-materials. But two others are almost as important. The first comes from the traditional and non-traditional interpretative schemata and periodisations which the community of professional scholars has brought to bear. The second, perhaps even more important, is the fact that the members of this community for the most part work and have worked within specific historiographical traditions.

It is widely held that the long tenth century is a period more lacking in sources and reliable and precise information on ‘what actually happened’ than any other period of post-Roman European history, with the exception perhaps of the seventh century. It is not just the very evident brutality of much of the period that has caused it to be termed a ‘dark century’ (*dunkles Jabrbundert*) or an ‘obscure age’ (*secolo oscuro*), or an ‘iron age’ (with the overtone, so chilling for modern professional scholars, that words and thoughts are silenced in the face of armed force).<sup>1</sup> It is also the difficulty historians often encounter, for

<sup>1</sup> See Zimmermann (1971), pp. 15–21, on the history of these terms; Lestocquoy (1947), White (1955) and Lopez (1962) are early attempts at re-evaluating the period as a conscious reaction against them.

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example, when trying to establish precise sequences of events or office-holders. At least in parts of the post-Carolingian core of Europe there seems to have been a decline in pragmatic literacy and a reversion to oral and symbolic means of communication. As we shall see, this was by no means a universal feature of the long tenth century; but to the extent that it did really exist it meant that human interaction often took forms which have inevitably left relatively fewer traces in the written record, and those often indirect and difficult to interpret.

Nevertheless, notions of a dark or obscure or ‘iron’ age are problematic. Though they go back a long way, they exercised their most formative influence during the period when a Rankean primacy of political history still dominated medievalists’ consciousnesses. When there is at most one substantial narrative dealing with the high politics of a region, writing about ‘what actually happened’ seems even more difficult and uncertain than it is in any case, and the results thus dark or obscure. Many regions of Europe are in this position for most of the long tenth century: east Frankish/German history is unusual in having the accounts of Widukind of Corvey, Liudprand of Cremona and Adalbert of St Maximin running in parallel for much of the middle third of the tenth century.

Even this dearth of narratives is a difficulty found mainly in the west, Latin and Islamic, rather than the east, where the tenth century is no more obscure than any other period of Byzantine history and rather less than some. Outside the Mediterranean world there are indeed regions for which we have virtually no contemporary narratives at all. The emergent realms of Rus’, Hungary, Bohemia and Poland, naturally, as well as the Scandinavian kingdoms, have no contemporary indigenous accounts, only later, mythologising origin histories: the *Tale of Bygone Years* or *Russian Primary Chronicle* for Rus’; the late twelfth-century Anonymus and later derivatives like Simon de Kéza and the *Chronicon pictum* for Hungarian history; the early twelfth-century court writers, Cosmas of Prague and Gallus Anonymus, for Bohemian and Polish history; Saxo Grammaticus, *Heimskringla* and its precursors for Scandinavian history. The savage positivist source-criticism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has left few historians willing to use such works as ‘primary sources’ except in a state of cautious desperation or for the citation of an occasional phrase to add rhetorical colour. Even when it is evident that their authors must have drawn on earlier works now lost to us, it is normally impossible to tell precisely where they are doing this, while the analysis of these works as later representations of an earlier past has in many cases barely begun. Once the information offered by these high-medieval versions of earlier pasts is seen as the product of later construction rather than the echo of past reality, the political history of these regions has to be written in a much more tentative and

uncertain fashion, drawing mainly on casual and largely decontextualised fragments of information found in narratives from the Frankish, Anglo-Saxon and Byzantine world and in Arabic and Jewish travellers' tales. Some parts of western Europe are almost as badly placed, most notably the kingdom of Burgundy and the principalities of Catalonia and Toulouse, at least as far as any reconstruction of *histoire événementielle* is concerned: few European rulers of any period can have left as little trace in the record after reigning for nearly sixty years as has Conrad the Pacific of Burgundy.

Yet the long tenth century is also an age of great historians, writers who offer rich and juicy texts with a wide narrative sweep and much significant detail: Widukind of Corvey, Adalbert of Magdeburg and Thietmar of Merseburg working in Saxony; Flodoard and Richer in Rheims; Dudo of Saint-Quentin in Normandy; Adhémar of Chabannes and Radulf Glaber in central France; Liudprand of Cremona in Italy (and north of the Alps); Benedict of Soracte in Rome; Sampiro in León. Some sections and some versions of the enigmatic complex known collectively as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, notably the strange compilation by the ealdorman Æthelwold written around 980, would also qualify. There are also impressive works of more local compass, such as the Lotharingian episcopal *gesta*, or Flodoard's lengthy and archivally based history of the church of Rheims. Most important of all, and not only for the sheer bulk of what survives, is the large corpus of saints' lives and miracle-collections from this period: it was a golden age of hagiographic production.

Traditional attitudes, however, are slow to change. Modern medievalists' relationship with 'hagiography' is revealed by the fact that whereas almost all the major 'historiographical' works of the period are available in good modern editions, most 'hagiography' still has to be consulted in old and often very inadequate editions. A nineteenth-century distinction between historians, who deal in facts, and hagiographers, who deal in fictions, was perhaps appropriate to an era of scholarship in which it was important to begin by establishing the who, the what, the where and the when, all matters on which 'hagiographic' texts are often imprecise or inaccurate. But it now needs to be transcended: it is by no means clear that the distinction reflects anything significant about the intentions and practices of tenth-century authors: many 'historians' also wrote 'hagiography'.<sup>2</sup>

Yet few even of those conventionally thought of as historians rather than hagiographers have left us straightforward and unproblematic texts. The acid-bath of positivist source-criticism may have dissolved the later mythologising histories of the European periphery almost completely, but it has also left the smooth surfaces of writers like Widukind, Richer and Dudo deeply pitted, so

<sup>2</sup> Lifshitz (1994).

much so that Martin Lintzel could write about the ‘problem of truth in the tenth century’ (meaning the problem of having any confidence at all in the relation between our surviving accounts and the course of an increasingly inaccessible past reality ‘out there’), and more recently Carlrichard Brühl has felt able to dismiss both Widukind and Richer as *romanciers*.<sup>3</sup> Few historians at the end of the twentieth century are still willing to offer this kind of robust empiricism without qualms; but though the aspects of these sources problematised by Lintzel and Brühl are not the only ones, they are real enough, for elements of saga, of epic, of the preacher’s *exemplum*, of folk-tale, seem to greet us on many pages of these works, and they will rarely submit to a straightforward positivist unpacking of their meaning.<sup>4</sup>

Historians of a positivist frame of mind have traditionally contrasted the uncertain and subjective information derived from narratives with the firmer data to be won from record evidence, which in this period means from charters. Many series of royal diplomata from this period now exist in complete and satisfactory modern editions: those issued by or in the name of the rulers of east Francia/Germany, of Burgundy, of Hungary and of Italy are available complete, and those of the west Frankish rulers almost so, while as far as surviving papal letters and privileges are concerned it is for this period alone that we possess a comprehensive edition of everything surviving.<sup>5</sup> Even for those regions where the picture is still incomplete – Anglo-Saxon England, the Spanish peninsula, Byzantium – the gaps are being filled. Below that level the picture is less favourable. Although the period is characterised by the exercise of ‘quasi-regal’ power by figures with less than royal status – archbishops, bishops, dukes, margraves – the charters they issued were not numerous, and in most regions have hardly begun to be collected in modern editions;<sup>6</sup> an exception is the collection of the *placita* of the kingdom of Italy, accounts of judicial decisions given by a court president acting (or ostensibly acting) in the ruler’s name.<sup>7</sup>

The bulk of non-royal charter material surviving from this period consists of what we would nowadays think of as either conveyancing records or accounts of dispute settlement. Normally such documents offer a miniature narrative of a conveyance or settlement with a list of those present at the transaction; in many areas of northern Europe they were treated, so far as we can tell, as a mere record of the transaction with no inherent legal force, though both England and Italy show that this did not have to be the case. It is precisely during the period covered by this volume that the narratives in many parts of

<sup>3</sup> Lintzel (1956); Brühl (1990), pp. 465–7, 589–93.

<sup>4</sup> Reuter (1994).

<sup>5</sup> Zimmermann, H. (ed.), *Papsturkunden 896–1046*.

<sup>6</sup> Kienast (1968) provides a convenient guide to the charters produced for secular princes; there is a complete edition for Normandy in *Recueil des actes des ducs de Normandie*.

<sup>7</sup> Manaresi, C. (ed.), *I placiti del ‘Regnum Italiae’*.

Europe, especially in France, become less miniature and more detailed, and it has indeed been argued that such loquacity has misled historians into thinking that the things they describe in such detail were really new around the millennium rather than simply coming to be recorded for the first time.<sup>8</sup> Both their geographical distribution and the quality of the editions they have received are very uneven. The archives of the Mediterranean regions – Italy, both north and south, and parts of Spain (especially Catalonia and Castile) – are very full, if not always very fully known or exploited. In northern Europe such collections of material as have survived have normally done so in the form of cartularies put together by religious institutions, often in the century and a half after the period covered by this volume, when such institutions were taking steps to put their property ownership and administration on a more ordered and rational basis, and so to arrange selected and edited versions of their archives in book form. Large and unmediated archival deposits are rare, the large tenth- and eleventh-century archives of Cluny being an unusual exception.<sup>9</sup> In particular, many of the north European centres active in producing archival material in the eighth and ninth centuries, from Redon to St Gallen, either ceased to do so altogether in the tenth century or else did so at a greatly reduced rate.

Little of this material has been edited both comprehensively and recently. Nor has its nature always been properly appreciated by historians. The history of diplomatic has been one of a preoccupation with distinguishing the genuine from the false. The question of authenticity is an appropriate and important point from which to start when dealing with royal and papal charters, because such documents, at least in theory, were in themselves adequate to guarantee the claims contained in them, and this made them worth forging, both at the time and later. But it does not go far enough, even for them. Every charter tells a story, and even if we can establish that the charter is indeed what it purports to be, the authenticity of the charter in a formal legal sense is in itself no guarantee of the authenticity or completeness or meaningfulness in a historical sense of the story which it tells. Most such stories are indeed manifestly incomplete, and historians have barely begun to study the narrative strategies of charter-writers and of those who commissioned their activities. This is all the more significant with the advent, already noted, of a much more garrulous style of charter-writing, including complaints (*querimoniae*) and concords (*convention-tiae*) which set out the whole history of a dispute. The fact that these miniature histories are found embedded in what look like legal documents does not make them any less subjective or their interpretation any less problematic.

In some, though not all parts of Latin Europe there was a temporary downturn in charter production in the early part of this period, though the view of the

<sup>8</sup> Barthélemy (1992a).<sup>9</sup> *Recueil des chartes de l'abbaye de Cluny*.

period as an ‘obscure age’ has itself obscured the fact that this downturn was reversed almost everywhere by the later tenth century, to be followed by steady growth. But there was a quite genuine and long-lasting downturn in legislative activity almost everywhere in Latin Europe; it was one of the most evident contrasts between the Latin west on the one hand and Byzantine or Islamic political culture on the other, for those few contemporaries who were familiar with both.<sup>10</sup> For most of the west during this period little or no legislation survives, even in those regions where rulers appear to have been powerful and impressive figures, and this is not to be attributed to large-scale losses of what once existed. The Carolingian capitulary tradition had virtually died out by the end of the ninth century (after 884 in west Francia, after 898 in Italy, after 852 in east Francia). The Ottonians and their entourages knew what capitularies were, but confined themselves to very occasional *ad hoc* edicts.<sup>11</sup> Collections of Carolingian capitularies, notably that of Ansegis, continued to be copied in the tenth and early eleventh centuries, both in west and in east Francia in particular, but it is far from clear what use might have been made of such manuscripts in practical life.<sup>12</sup> Anglo-Saxon England is the great western European exception to the tenth-century legislative drought; here, collections of Carolingian capitularies transmitted from the continent provided some of the inspiration which enabled the kingdom to catch up with, absorb and develop the lessons of Carolingian government in a long series of law-codes, notably those of Æthelstan, Æthelred and Cnut.<sup>13</sup> Paler forms of imitation of the Carolingians can be seen in the laws of Stephen of Hungary from the early eleventh century.<sup>14</sup> The Byzantine development was, as one might expect, smoother and more continuous: the tenth-century rulers continued to legislate as a matter of course, without break or decline.<sup>15</sup>

The church also legislated less: councils, where they did meet, were more likely to leave only protocols of judicial decisions or charters solemnised by the fortuitous presence of numerous imposing witnesses than they were to produce legislation in the form of canons.<sup>16</sup> Equally, the great Carolingian tradition of episcopal capitularies had comparatively weak echoes in the practice of tenth-century bishops.<sup>17</sup> This picture of inactivity is particularly true of the

<sup>10</sup> See Nelson’s analysis of John of Gorze’s account of his visit to the Cordovan court, below, pp. 126–8.

<sup>11</sup> *MGH Const* 1, no. 8, p. 17; *DH II* 370.

<sup>12</sup> Mordek (1995); Ansegis, *Collectio capitularium*, ed. Schmitz, pp. 189–90.

<sup>13</sup> Edited in *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, ed. Liebermann; on the Carolingian sources for such legislation see Wormald (1978), pp. 71–4. <sup>14</sup> Stephen, King of Hungary, *Laws*.

<sup>15</sup> See Shepard, below, pp. 553–4; on the contrast with the west in this respect see Leyser (1994b), pp. 160–1.

<sup>16</sup> This is the conclusion of Schröder (1980) for west Francia; the situation elsewhere was similar if less extreme.

<sup>17</sup> *Capitula episcoporum* III contains a few tenth-century specimens; the overall distribution of texts and manuscripts is to be surveyed in vol IV, which has not yet appeared.

early tenth century; from around 950 onwards there was something of a recovery. Although this recovery was hardly a rapid one anywhere, the great sequence of reforming councils initiated by Leo IX's councils at Rheims and Mainz in 1049 was not preceded by a long legislative drought in the way that the otherwise comparable revival of conciliar activity in the early Carolingian period had been.<sup>18</sup> Our picture is still an imperfect one, for though such secular laws as have survived, in Byzantium and in the west, have generally been well edited, conciliar legislation is only now receiving the attention it deserves.<sup>19</sup> In particular, we lack a comprehensive edition of the texts produced by those councils at which the 'legislation' of the Peace and Truce of God movements was promulgated.<sup>20</sup> But we also lack a modern edition of almost any of the collections of canon law regularly used in the long tenth century, or of the great collection produced at the end of it by Burchard of Worms, which largely superseded these earlier collections.<sup>21</sup>

Almost all of the surviving letter-collections of the period (and not many tenth-century letters have been preserved outside collections) can be seen in a context of canon law. It is not an accident that the most important ones are associated with important reforming clerics – Rather of Verona and Liège, Gerbert of Rheims, Fulbert of Chartres, Dunstan of Canterbury – and that they contain many letters dealing with practical matters of church law.<sup>22</sup> Letters should not be seen in this context alone, however. The impulse to preserve them in collections, which would become stronger and more widespread in the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, was not simply a product of the period's concern with *memoria* and of a desire to preserve the memory of the people with whom they were associated. It also stemmed from the need for models to be used in the training of clerics: significantly, Dunstan, Gerbert and Fulbert were teachers as well as lawyers. The Latin poetry of the period was also located in this rhetorical-didactic tradition: an art of the schools rather than of the court, which it had been at least to some extent in the preceding period.<sup>23</sup> Here again we have a contrast between the Latin west and the court-centred cultures of Byzantium and Islam.

As with the earlier medieval centuries, one feels that the material remains of

<sup>18</sup> Hartmann (1989) pp. 47–50.

<sup>19</sup> *Concilia aevi Saxonici 916–1001*, I: 916–961; for commentary see Schröder (1980), Vollrath (1985), Wolter (1988), and the chapters in the forthcoming *History of Medieval Canon Law* edited by Wilfried Hartmann and Kenneth Pennington.

<sup>20</sup> See Hoffmann (1964) for details of the printed sources; much of the manuscript work remains to be done.

<sup>21</sup> Hoffmann and Pokorny (1991) is now the starting point for any work on Burchard's collection.

<sup>22</sup> Rather of Verona, *Epistolae*; Gerbert of Aurillac, *Epistolae*; Fulbert of Chartres, *The Letters and Poems; Memorials of Saint Dunstan*, pp. 354–438. The connection is most evident in the case of Fulbert: see, e.g., *epb.* 28, 36, 56, 71. <sup>23</sup> Godman (1987).



the long tenth century ought to have made more impact on historians' consciousnesses and interpretations than in practice they have done. Excavation has played a major part in reshaping post-Carolingian urban history, not least through the very detailed investigation of Viking York and Dublin; Peter Johanek's chapter shows how this has affected our view of the period. Our view of post-Carolingian settlement patterns owes in general much less to archaeology: this is certainly true of villages, which, as Robert Fossier argues below (in common with many other though by no means all scholars), first start to take on definitive form and permanent location in this period. It is perhaps less true of the dwellings of the dominant aristocratic strata of post-Carolingian society, also seen as 'settling down' in the course of the long tenth century, but although the development of the aristocratic dwelling, often a fortified site, has been extensively studied and has been linked to shifts in family structure in this period, we are still far from having a clear view of where and how the non-urban aristocracies of northern Europe lived.<sup>24</sup> Historians of the tenth century should undoubtedly pay more attention to archaeology than they have, though the absence of substantial syntheses and the gaps in the publication of excavations as well as the divergences between national archaeological traditions (even more marked than the historiographical divergences to be examined shortly) will continue to make this difficult in the foreseeable future.

Some kinds of material remains have escaped historians' general neglect of non-written sources, most notably those traditionally studied by art historians: painting, sculpture, goldsmithery and ivorywork, architecture. The study of manuscripts, both as material objects and as repositories of images, has received at least as much attention as the study of the written sources of the period. So have the surviving remains of metalwork and wood- and ivory-carvings, in the form of book-covers and other carved panels, of liturgical combs, and above all of reliquaries and items of regalia. Much of this record is lost, however, and some of its context is irrecoverable. Virtually no secular buildings and very few ecclesiastical ones have survived unchanged and intact from the tenth century. The wall-paintings and tapestries which once decorated them, and which would probably have told us even more about the culture and self-image of the period than do illuminated manuscripts, have vanished almost without trace, except for an occasional survival like the church of St George on the Reichenau with its almost intact cycle of wall-paintings. Ecclesiastical vestments have survived in quite substantial numbers, but the tapestries recording the deeds of kings and aristocrats are known only from a handful of casual written references. Many of these kinds of material survival have attracted the attention of cultural and political historians as well as of his-

<sup>24</sup> See below, pp. 18–19.



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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: reading the tenth century*

9

torians of art, because they fall or can be seen as falling into the category of 'signs of lordship and symbols of state', to use a phrase invented by the German medievalist Percy Ernst Schramm. Like their counterpart in written sources, the (often anecdotalised) record of symbolic action, they have seemed to offer a way in to the mindset of the period's elites which might otherwise be closed to us by the sheer inarticulacy of more direct evidence.<sup>25</sup>

The source-materials available for the study of a period are far from defining the ways in which that period will be studied. Claudio Leonardi begins his chapter on intellectual life by remarking that the era between the late Carolingian scholars and *litterati* and the early scholastics of the later eleventh century is often thought of either as post-Carolingian or as pre-Gregorian, and is thus denied an identity of its own.<sup>26</sup> Analagous remarks could be made about the prevailing interpretation of other aspects of the period. There is, of course, some justification for such terminology and the interpretative schemata which lie behind it. Much of tenth-century Europe – though hardly the Byzantine and Islamic spheres – saw itself as in a sense post-Carolingian: it simultaneously perpetuated and looked back nostalgically to an order once glorious, now in decline. The heirs of the direct successor-states looked back to a supposedly golden age of Frankish unity, which seemed all the more golden for the absence of any clear and precise memories of it. Carolingian nostalgia was at its strongest in regions where the Carolingians had been largely absent, like the south of France, and it grew once real Carolingians were no longer around: it was Otto III, not Otto I, who took the first steps towards the canonisation of Charlemagne.<sup>27</sup> The post-Carolingian core of Europe retained a residual sense of pan-Frankishness long after kingdoms (not, as yet, nations), had started to develop their own sense of identity. In the large arc to the north and east of the former Frankish empire, from England through to Hungary, it was as much the written and unwritten myth of the Carolingian polity as experience of the contemporary hegemonial power, the Ottonians, that provided a model for development, whether in the form of imitation capitularies in the Wessex of Edgar and Æthelred or in the adaptation of *Lex Baiuvariorum* to serve as the basis for early Hungarian law. Equally, although the 'Gregorian' and 'pre-Gregorian' terminology may have been subjected to powerful attacks in recent years it can hardly be escaped altogether.<sup>28</sup> The apparent universality of the charges laid by the church reformers and historians of the mid- and late eleventh century and echoed by historians of the nineteenth and twentieth at least gives a degree of unification to our perceptions of tenth- and early eleventh-century Europe, united by sin, by

<sup>25</sup> For the work of Schramm see Bak (1973); for work on political ritual see Althoff (1990); Koziol (1992); Althoff (1997). <sup>26</sup> Below, p. 187.

<sup>27</sup> Folz (1950), pp. 47–114; Remensnyder (1995). <sup>28</sup> Tellenbach (1985, 1993).

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ecclesiastical abuse, and by attempts by a small radical minority to overcome these failings.

Two other models currently offer broader versions of the divisions just mentioned. Much German-language historiography – and formerly French historiography as well, as witness Marc Bloch's distinction between the first and the second feudal age – sees the mid-eleventh century as having marked a crucial change from an 'archaic' society to that 'old European order' which prevailed from the late eleventh to the late eighteenth century.<sup>29</sup> This may be seen as a more secular and sociological rewriting of the schema 'pre-' and 'post-Gregorian': church reform was on this view merely symptomatic of more general changes in the eleventh century towards greater rationality and greater social differentiation.<sup>30</sup>

An alternative view, which would stress political more than other kinds of development, is to see the period as initiating, as far as Latin-speaking western Europe is concerned, a very long era during which Europe would be shaped by competing dynastically oriented territories, many of them the ancestors of the modern nation-state, even though that term is hardly applicable to the tenth century. Geoffrey Barraclough defined the long tenth century as the 'crucible of Europe', the period in which large-scale supra-regional empires finally disappeared, to be replaced by the smaller kingdoms familiar from later European history.<sup>31</sup> Certainly much of Europe's political geography can be seen to have begun in this period, a fact which was taken as the basis of a large international conference in 1968 on the 'origins of nation-states' in this period.<sup>32</sup> Yet even as an interpretation of political history alone it fits some parts of Europe much better than it does others. It clearly works well for the northern and eastern parts of Europe, where present-day polities very evidently emerged from pre-history in a recognisable form in the course of the tenth century. German medieval historiography has also devoted much attention to the 'beginnings of German history', which are now generally placed in the course of the long tenth century rather than the ninth, even if they are no longer defined in terms of a significant date like 911 or 919 or 936.<sup>33</sup>

Yet it is German medievalists who have sought to establish the 'beginnings of French history' and place them in the same period;<sup>34</sup> it is far less of a defining moment for French historians, for whom something recognisable as France had already been around for some time by the tenth century. Indeed it is in the French historiographical tradition that a quite opposite view has been developed. Rather than the 'birth of Europe' rhetoric, this offers the tenth

<sup>29</sup> Brunner (1968); Gerhard (1981) For Bloch's distinction see Bloch (1961), pp. 59–71.

<sup>30</sup> Murray (1978), esp pp. 25–137.

<sup>31</sup> Barraclough (1976); cf. also the titles of Calmette (1941), Fossier (1982) and Fried (1991).

<sup>32</sup> Manteuffel (1968). <sup>33</sup> Brühl (1990); Ehlers (1994). <sup>34</sup> Ehlers (1985).