Introduction: making early medieval societies

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As a title, ‘Making early medieval societies’ is, at best, oxymoronic: to many, it will just seem like wishful thinking. In the default view, ‘the Middle Ages’ is when societies fell apart (at least in the Latin West, which is the focus of this book). Medieval times begin with the fall of Rome; they end with the chaos of the Italian Wars, or, more locally, the Wars of the Roses. In between, order is occasionally and temporarily restored, as in the Empire of Charlemagne – but disintegration is never far away. The Carolingian Empire collapsed after three generations, and, according to a highly influential school of thought, civil society was cut back to the bone at the hands of feuding warlords. Seen in this light, the whole medieval period stands introduced by Augustine, bishop of Hippo, who died in 430 with barbarians at the gates of his city. In the *City of God*, Augustine cast an apparently bleak eye on what held the social order together. Two people who did not speak the same language had less in common with each other, he opined than a man and his dog: only through the massive exercise of force had the Roman Empire been able to bring ‘peace’ to the world. The State, Augustine famously asserted, was robbery on a grand scale.¹ What price, then, ‘making early medieval societies’?

While most twenty-first century medievalists would object loudly to this stereotyped view of their period, tacitly, we consent. Of course we know that the very idea of the ‘Middle Ages’ is no more than a messy set of polemical claims disseminated by various interest groups in Western Europe from the self-styled ‘Renaissance’ onwards;² and that the standard periodization of European history (ancient-medieval-early modern) has been disrupted by the emergence of ‘Late Antiquity’ in the second half of the twentieth

¹ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XIX. 7 on peace; IV. 4 on the State as robbery. My thanks to the contributors for their several suggestions; none of them should be held responsible for the shortcomings of what follows.
The rise of global history may help us to see still more clearly the parochialism of the whole schema. For all that, ‘medievalism’ is still pervasive, and nowhere more so than where the early Middle Ages are concerned. Few historians celebrate their arrival. Indeed, the past ten years have witnessed a pulse of energy in asserting that the end of the ancient world was a violent catastrophe. Those who dissent cast the process in terms of ‘downsizing’ or ‘abatement’ – but even this more neutral language colludes in the notion that the Middle Ages were in some way second best. In the absence of the State (whether Roman or Carolingian), early medieval societies in the West are seen to have coped more or less well. ‘Degradations’ from imperial order might even be ‘possibilities’, but that is about as far as most early medievalists are prepared to go. The mood here is post-imperial, perhaps in Britain especially: we are after empire, so were they.

The problem is, we have not weaned ourselves away from a conception of history where the State is central, the source of all meaning and goodness. In the nineteenth century, when medievalists pioneered the establishment of History as a discipline for the training of citizens, this worked to the advantage of the Middle Ages. The fall of ancient Rome was seen in terms of progress towards the modern nation-state. However rough and ready, the barbarian kingdoms were seen as an advance on imperial tyranny. It was not long, however, before traditional prejudices reasserted themselves. In most conventional histories of the State, the Middle Ages

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come off badly: the epoch is defined as the period in which public justice falls into private hands. ‘Feudal anarchy’ reigns, as predatory lords roam the continent. This story of the privatization of justice shores up, in a very basic way, our sense of modernity.

The fable of privatization, if we may call it that, can be invoked whenever one chooses to initiate ‘a medieval period’. Two junctures are most commonplace: the fifth century, after the fall of Rome, and the tenth century, after the end of the Carolingians. Fashion veers one way, then the other, as to which juncture is more popular. In the past generation or so, scholars have run from one side of the boat to the other, as it were. The renewed vigour of the ‘Fall of Rome’ debate coincides precisely with the draining away of energy from the debate over the ‘Feudal Mutation’ around the Year 1000. Holding both periods in the same field of vision, so as to compare the plausibility of the privatization fable, seems to be beyond us: the attempt to do so is one of the key impulses behind this book.

To query this fable is not to pretend that imperial and post-imperial Europe were the same as each other – but it is to insist that the State, whether Roman or Carolingian, looked a lot bigger when it was no longer there. The whole notion of a ‘medieval privatization of power’, whenever it is deployed, trades on a fantastical image of imperial public majesty, a fantasy that took hold after the formal collapse of empire, and that has lasted ever since.

We should adjust for this distortion in any discussion of public and private spheres. In the ancient and medieval world, after all, the sphere of ‘the private’ was greater than even the wildest contemporary right-wing scenario. Thus family, economic, and religious life were ‘private’ enterprises. They fell into the domain of the household. ‘The public’ was strictly and narrowly defined as that which pertained to official business of State. Government in this period was a crude, lean mechanism


9 See, for example, Cheyette, ‘Some Reflections’; and M. Innes, State and Society in the Early Middle Ages: the Middle Rhine Valley, 400–1000 (Cambridge, 2000). Both offer a critique of the Year 1000 debate, but in both accounts, ‘privatization’ in the earlier period is taken as unproblematic: ‘medieval society’ is seen to take shape in the sixth and seventh centuries, after the fall of Rome and with the seizure of public power by incoming Germanic elites.

designed to maximize the benefits of surplus extraction, and to minimize the amount of ‘governing’ involved. When the Roman State in the West ceased to function, it makes little sense to describe this as a ‘privatization’ of power, because most power in this world was already ‘private’: the Roman father’s word was absolute.11

In this book, then, our starting point is not governmental power, but the prior and basic question of social order. What was it that held societies together? How did these social bonds change? To ask and to answer these basic questions, we turn for inspiration to social anthropology; that said, readers should be warned at once that we are working with a minimally theorized notion of ‘the social’. We are more interested in the language of our sources than in constructing our own taxonomies, and accordingly have taken a broad, unfussy view as to what constitutes a ‘social bond’. As one similarly minded scholar puts it, ‘Between coercion and chance lie the associations that are to some extent chosen’.12 These do include family relations, to the making and remaking of which people in this period devoted much of their energies; these also, emphatically, include religious ties. Indeed, given the etymology of religio, the element of ‘bonding’ in religious association would have been obvious to Latinate contemporaries, in a way that modern audiences still struggle to recapture.

All of this lands us necessarily squarely in the domain of ‘the private’ as defined before the eighteenth century. We do not, however, look entirely to collapse ‘the public’ or ‘the institutional’ as categories into a notional pre-modern world of exclusively personal conflicts and exchanges.13 Both the family and religion had coercive, public, and hence political and institutional dimensions. The State, necessarily, enters into the discussion. What we need to make possible is a history where the rise and fall of systems of government is the symptom, not the cause of wider shifts in social order.

Is this to reinvent the wheel? At least two kinds of account have long put the social order ahead of the State: one, the weaker version, comes broadly speaking out of varieties of social and economic history, the

11 See K. Cooper, ‘Closely Watched Households: Visibility, Exposure and Private Power in the Roman Domus’, Past & Present, 197 (2007), 3–33; and below in this volume. Work in progress by Hannah Probert (Sheffield) will follow the development of pater potestas into the early Middle Ages.


other stronger version out of cultural history. In the weaker version of the story, what happens in our period is that the State withers away, while the ruling elite continue, their pattern of life largely uninterrupted. This view can take different forms. A classic version is the Pirenne thesis, which views the fall of the Roman State in the fifth and sixth centuries as a non-event. Ancient networks of exchange across the Mediterranean, Pirenne insisted, were not disrupted by the political changes in the western half of the Empire.14

A different application of the same basic idea is to be found in close studies of elites. John Matthews’ Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court, for example, in particular as read by one medievalist, conjured a view of aristocratic power stretching back to the Roman Republic and forward into the medieval centuries.15 On this account, the real motor of history is not political power, but the social, cultural, and economic power of what may be a very ancient regime.

Pirenne and Matthews share the conviction that late ancient/early medieval society is impervious to the epiphenomenon of political change: thus the weaker version. The stronger view is that the creation of different forms of social relationship actually overpowers the State. The classic example of this is Edward Gibbon’s History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Gibbon, notoriously, went so far as to argue that Christian superstition—a form of fanaticism or hypocrisy—corroded the entire fabric of the Roman social order, so that the State in the West stood no chance of surviving.

The great modern exponent of this tradition is Peter Brown. In his first collection of essays composed in the 1960s, Religion and Society in the Age of St Augustine, Brown looks to render vivid to readers ‘[t]he sudden flooding of the inner life into social forms’. ‘This’, he continues, ‘is what distinguishes the Late Antique period, of the third century onwards, from the classical world’.16 Christianity here does not consume the Empire: where Gibbon decries superstitious otherworldliness, Brown sees ‘the holy’, a force strong enough to supplement, or indeed create, institutions

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14 H. Pirenne, Mohammed and Charlemagne, tr. B. Miall (New York, 1939); Pirenne of course also argued that the Carolingian Empire made little difference to the social order of the Latin West: only the rise of towns after the first millennium created a new network of exchange. See his Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade, tr. F. D. Halsey (Princeton, 1925); and for comment, J. Dhondt, ‘Henri Pirenne: historien des institutions urbaines’, Annali della fondazione italiana per la storia amministrativa 3 (1966), 81–129.
in this world. But Brown shares absolutely with Gibbon the determina-
tion that religion is a social phenomenon, independent of the State.

These are all highly familiar directions of travel – and yet medievalists
have not followed them through. Our suspicion is that an overturning of
basic assumptions is within reach. Stereotypically, the Middle Ages wit-
nessed a contraction of the social, a move away from a cosmopolitan
world of strangers into the ‘face-to-face’ association of people who
know each other. We ask whether the picture can be inverted.
Throwing off the Roman State, new forms of association, newly extended
trans-regional bonds, flourished in the Latin West. The same may be true
in the post-Carolingian context. As a student of upper Lotharingia and
Champagne has recently remarked, the end of empire ‘was more likely to
be a consequence not a cause’ of changes in the nature of social relations
on the ground. With a degree of reluctance, we offer the slogan, ‘The
Middle Ages: Thin State – Big Society’.

Conflict, cohesion, and the anthropological turn

‘Big Society’ in our period was replete with conflict. We make no attempt
to efface this. On the contrary, our focus is on the function of conflict in
the forging of new social bonds. This a fundamental feature of modern
sociological discussion. Georg Simmel argued consistently that society
depended for its existence on conflict. We take our own cue from Max

Roman Studies, 61 (1971), 80–101; a theme developed in his The Cult of Saints: Its Rise
and Function in Late Antiquity (London, 1982), and subsequently The Rise of Western
18 C. West, Reframing the Feudal Revolution: Political and Social Transformation Between
19 For the benefit of some possibly bewildered readers: ‘Big Society’ was an election slogan of
the Conservative Party in the UK elections of 2010. On the one hand it signalled a retreat
from the extreme position of Mrs Thatcher that ‘There is no such thing as Society’. On the
other, it served to rebrand the familiar Conservative nostrum that the State should scale
back in the provision of public services. ‘Big Society’ was thus a euphemism for ‘privatiza-
tion’. The phrase went on to acquire a degree of academic notoriety, as the UK Arts and
Humanities Research Council was seen to have encouraged research into ‘Big Society’. See
www.thebigsociety.co.uk; and www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/bob-brecher/ahr-a-
nd-big-society-reflections-on-neo-liberal takeover-of-academy. My thanks to Caroline
Humfress and Tom Lambert for helpful discussions here.
515. Cited by, for example, P. J. Geary in ‘Vivre en conflit dans une France sans état:
typologie des mécanismes de règlement des conflits, 1050–1200’, Annales E.S.C.
(1986), pp. 1107–33, trans. and repr. as ‘Living with Conflicts in Stateless France: a
Typology of Conflict Management Mechanisms, 1050–1200’, in Geary, Living with the
Dead in the Middle Ages (Ithaca, NY, 1994), 116–24, with the discussion in Brown and
Górecki, Conflict in Medieval Europe, at pp. 17–18.
Gluckman’s classic study, ‘The Peace in the Feud’, published in the opening issue of Past & Present, and then again the same year in Gluckman’s Custom and Conflict in Africa. Gluckman’s message, which drew on the research of Evans Pritchard, was one of reassurance. African ‘tribal society’ might seem to be riven with conflict and liable to self-destruction in an endless cycle of violence between feuding families. Such conflicts, Gluckman showed, far from being random or relentless, had their own carefully modulated rhythm: custom ensured that conflicts were self-limiting, and even generative of social cohesion.

Gluckman’s insights, and those of the ‘Manchester School’, have themselves been generative of a half century of discussion by students of the early medieval feud and of violence in general (as Stephen D. White surveys with brio below). In 1959, his colleague in History at Manchester, Michael Wallace-Hadrill, published a study, ‘The Blood-Feud of the Franks’, in which he adduced Gluckman’s study to argue that there was an element of restraint in the apparently untrammelled savagery of the Merovingians, as narrated by Gregory of Tours. The extent to which Wallace-Hadrill actually drew inspiration from direct collegial contact with Gluckman is debated. Two things are clear, however. First, Gluckman actively hoped that medievalists, with whom he will have studied prior to becoming an Africanist, would take notice of his observations; and second that Wallace-Hadrill’s essay, however casually, did just that. Medievalists went on to produce specific studies of feud among the peoples of early medieval Europe; more broadly in the 1980s, they took a now well-observed anthropological turn, in landmark volumes on dispute settlement and on community formation.

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24 Gluckman, Custom and Conflict in Africa, p. 4.

25 See, for example, K. Leyser, Rule and Conflict in an Early Medieval Society: Ottonian Saxony (London, 1979), esp. p. 102.

26 S. Reynolds, Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900–1300 (Oxford, 1984); W. Davies and P. Fouracre (eds.), The Settlement of Disputes in Early Medieval Europe (Cambridge, 1986); followed by the same editors’, Property and Power in Early Medieval Europe (Cambridge, 1996); and The Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages (Cambridge, 2010), in which J. L. Nelson’s ‘Introduction’ reflects on the group’s engagement with anthropology (pp. 1–17).

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Charting the whole relationship between History and Social Anthropology in the past two or three generations is beyond our remit. A synoptic view would be that we have been through at least two stages of the romance comedy plot: the couple meet, there are complications... While we await the resolution, we can spell out some of the costs and the benefits of a social anthropological approach as we see them.

A first danger is that the anthropological turn will serve only to reinforce stereotypes of the Middle Ages by lending an exotic primitivism to the period. We may appeal to, say, the Nuer of the Sudan to help us imagine medieval Europe as an alien social world, but when we posit that medieval allegiances were ‘tribal’, all we have done is to create an inverted image of what we perceive modern society to be. There is an ideological investment here of which we should beware, and medievalists have been highly alert to this.

Some scholars, indeed, have gone further in identifying a full circularity of argument in the use by medievalists of social anthropology. In one view, anthropological theories of ritual are derived, ultimately, from the ritual specialists of the medieval Church: these ‘theories’ can never attain analytical perspective on the period from which they descend.

Sometimes the circularity is patent. Anthropologists (especially, it seems, of Africa) come to their material with an explicit sense of medieval Europe as a useful point of reference for understanding their material. This exported European cultural baggage is then re-imported by medievalists as a form of ‘external’ perspective. What Richard Rathbone has called ‘The Analogy’ between tribal Africa and medieval Europe can be an object lesson in false glamour.

A third, perennial, danger is that historians in the thrall of anthropology lose track of time. In our envy of the anthropologist’s participant observer status, our ‘ethnographies’ of medieval societies, while ‘richly textured’,...
can fail to include any account of change, or indeed any analytical component. Ironically, the most stringent warning here has been issued by an anthropologist. Empirical observation, Paul Dresch cautions, avails us nothing unless we also notice the cultural frames that give meaning to any of the social dramas we see unfolding. Dresch takes medievalists to task for their fascination both with Gluckman, and with Pierre Bourdieu. Gluckman, in his view, was driven by an unexamined set of ‘common sense’ assumptions; by contrast, Bourdieu, while methodologically more articulate, nonetheless sustains an equally unreflective account of humans as self-interested strategists. This view of agency leaches culturally and historically specific content when it is applied.  

All of that said, there are some real benefits to the History–Anthropology encounter (as Dresch would not dispute). Social anthropology decentres the State, and refocuses attention on the family and religion. These were topics expressly excluded from the purview of History at the moment of its professional inception in the nineteenth century – not coincidentally, the zenith of the European nation-state across the world. By contrast, the disciplinary origins of Anthropology reside in the era of imperial ‘abatement’ in the mid-twentieth century. In Britain, the first Departments of Anthropology were established after the Second World War, when the failings of the European nation-state were all too clear, not least to governments themselves. Max Gluckman and his colleagues had the explicit brief from the British government to answer the question, whether it was safe to move to ‘indirect rule’ of the colonies. This required the applied study of kinship groups in segmented warrior societies. ‘There is no such thing as the power of the State’, Radcliffe-Brown announced, as his colleagues set about devising a new typology of political life.  

Meanwhile, French ethnographers, above all Claude Levi-Strauss, also started with kinship, albeit from a different perspective. The French tradition focussed on exchange rather than conflict. ‘Society’ for

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34 M. Fortes and E. E. Evans Pritchard (eds.), African Political Systems (Oxford, 1940) signals in their Editor’s Note (p. vii): ‘We hope this book will be of interest and use to those who have the task of administering African peoples’. There follows A. R. Radcliffe Brown’s preface, with its refusal of State power as a useful category (p. xxiii).
Levi-Strauss began with the incest taboo. The prohibition on marriage within kin groups led to the exchange of women between different families. ‘Social’, as opposed to ‘natural’, relations developed from here. This distinction between nature and culture of course had its problems. Notoriously, two different schools for the anthropology of kinship developed: while the French approach remained centred on alliances between families, the English anthropology of kinship insisted that the family line and its maintenance was the key locus of meaning. In the event, after a generation of intensive discussion, anthropologists abandoned ‘kinship’ as a useful category of analysis: it was no longer seen to hold the key to social organization. Only recently, with fieldwork conducted not only in former colonies, but in IVF clinics in Britain and the United States, has kinship returned to the anthropological table.

Historians have been slow to respond to these vicissitudes—but any discussion of kinship has the enduring merit of taking us into the tissue of social relations, and away from the State as the starting point. Engagement with anthropology has also lent energy to the history of religion. Before the era of professionalization, historians had discussed religion as a matter of course—witness, however hostile, Edward Gibbon—but a consequence of History’s conscription by the nation-state was to inhibit this. Religion fell foul of ‘the omission [from historical study] of those parts of human experience which are not related to public affairs’, and this was still an issue at the turn of the 1960s. Victorian History’s loss was Anthropology’s gain: since the late nineteenth century, the study of religion had been integral to the analysis of the social organization of ‘primitive’ peoples. This was expressly theorized in the French tradition founded by Emile Durkheim, and even the more pragmatic Anglo-Saxon tradition did not beg to differ. Thus Gluckman’s Custom and Conflict in Africa led readers from Evans Pritchard’s work on feud...