Weeds and the Carolingians

Why did weeds matter in the Carolingian empire? What was their special significance for writers in eighth- and ninth-century Europe and how was this connected with the growth of real weeds? In early medieval Europe, unwanted plants that persistently appeared among crops created extra work, reduced productivity, and challenged theologians who believed God had made all vegetation good. For the first time, in this book weeds emerge as protagonists in early medieval European history, driving human farming strategies and coloring people's imagination. Early medieval Europeans' effort to create agroecosystems that satisfied their needs and cosmologies that confirmed Christian accounts of vegetable creation both had to come to terms with unruly plants. Using diverse kinds of texts, fresh archaeobotanical data, and even mosaics, this interdisciplinary study reveals how early medieval Europeans interacted with their environments.

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Weeds and the Carolingians

Empire, Culture, and Nature in Frankish Europe, AD 750–900

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Esse autem omnia quae fecit deus bona valde: mala vero non esse naturalia.

Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram Liber Imperfectus* 1, ed. J. Zycha (Vienna, 1893), 460.
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Preface

It took far longer than expected to write this book: weeds turned out to be a tangled subject. Consequently, my attempts to impose some order on it came to rely on the help of many friends and colleagues, on attentive audiences at academic presentations, as well as on the support of several institutions. My research was made possible by an American Council of Learned Societies fellowship, and a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation fellowship: I am deeply appreciative of both. I also owe a great deal to my employer, the University of Michigan, which allowed me time off to research the history of weeds in the first millennium AD, and to the Office of the Vice President for Research for supporting the publication of color images. Cathy Pense Rayos and Birgit Bucher helped me way beyond the call of duty in securing images, too. Thanks are due to groups of listeners at the University of Illinois, at Princeton University, at the University of Colorado, at Cal Tech, and at Yale University, who both egged me on and pointed out weaknesses in earlier versions of my weed studies.

For their willingness to read half-germinated drafts of chapters, for their saintly patience, and for suggesting numerous improvements, I must single out Alison Cornish, Deborah Deliyannis, Rich Hoffmann, Megan Holmes, Peggy McCracken, Laura Motta, Ellen Muehlberger, Tom Noble, and Marijke van der Veen. Vincenzo Binetti read a version of one chapter and encouraged me to iron out some of its wrinkles. My Michigan History colleagues Sue Juster, Val Kivelson, and Helmut Puff deserve a separate thank you for gamely including my writings in our reading circle, and for their helpful critiques. Thanks also to Noah Blan and David Patterson for teaching me much about Carolingian history. Cambridge University Press’s three anonymous referees plowed through (and harrowed) the book with both acuity and kindness, proposing several ways to make it better. I am also indebted to Liz Friend Smith for overcoming her initial skepticism and loyally supporting the project as it evolved over several years. Finally, Hans Hummer was exceptionally generous with his time and wisdom, and swiftly read the entire
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manuscript at a critical juncture, producing a rich harvest of observations on how to turn it into a more coherent text.

I dedicate this book to someone who had nothing to do directly with its production, beyond listening occasionally to my ruminations on weeds. Yet long ago Jack Ullman showed me the great interest in unexpected histories, and the great beauty of historical landscapes. He also introduced me to early medieval Europe’s past. More than forty years on, a book that examines some of the complexities of first-millennium agroecosystems is also a tribute to his infectious passion for comminglings of environment and history.
Abbreviations

CISAM       Centro italiano di studi sull’alto medioevo
MGH        Monumenta Germaniae Historica
PL          J. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina*