

Peaceful Kings. Peace, Power, and the Early Medieval Political Imagination

Review Number:

1148

Publish date:

Saturday, 1 October, 2011

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ISBN:

9780198208709

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£65.00

Pages:

336pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

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‘When medieval men and women thought and wrote about power in the early Middle Ages – what it was, what it should be, what it had been – peace was never far from their thoughts’ (p. 271). Thus writes Paul Kershaw in the last paragraph of this important work on the ideas behind rulership but it explains perfectly the previous 270-odd pages. A work on rulership, or kingship, in the Middle Ages will always follow a well-trodden path, yet Kershaw has explored this topic through the largely ignored theme of peace, thereby avoiding overlapping with, but also complementing, other studies such as Gerd Althoff’s work on the importance of gestures and ceremonies, Janet Nelson’s analysis of political ideas and kingship, and Patrick Wormald’s exploration of kings as lawgivers and lawmakers.⁽¹⁾

In his introduction, Kershaw explains that the purpose of the study is ‘attempting to offer an analysis of early medieval ideas of what peace was, and how the central figure of the ruler created and maintained it’ (p. 15). This is hence not a study of the peacemaking processes themselves or of the more practical application of ideas to dispute settlement and conflict resolution. Kershaw sets out the framework of the book by asking why early medieval kings articulated their authority in terms of peacekeeping and, in particular, why there was so much talk about peace ‘in a world often characterized by endemic violence’ (p. 2).

The first chapter explores what was meant by peace, from the writings of Bede to its roots in the Roman past and its survival in Christian thought, especially that of Augustine. Here, Kershaw follows a well-established tradition among scholars of medieval political thought, taking up three themes: the classical, the scriptural and the ‘Germanic’.⁽²⁾ Most interesting, to this particular historian anyway, is his treatment of the second of

these themes in this chapter and throughout the book. Kershaw points out that many scriptural passages offered instances of peace that early medieval people 'would have found readily comprehensible within the terms of their own lives' (p. 52), with accounts of war and peace making frequent appearances in the books of the Old Testament. In particular, he highlights the importance of Solomon as the ideal ruler: 'just judge, anointed and divinely chosen monarch, warrior, prophet, peacemaker, builder, exorcist, and a king renowned for his wealth and famed, above all, for his wisdom' (p. 57). The centrality of Solomon is, rightly, a recurring theme of the book as a whole, linking the ideas and writings of Vandal Africa in the 5th and 6th centuries to those of the court of Louis the Pious in the 9th.

Chapter two is in many ways the most interesting chapter in the book for no other reason than that it often deals with geographical areas that are lesser known to students and less frequently studied by scholars. This chapter deals with the post-Roman period, 'a world of sustained uncertainty in which peace was a significant commodity' and shows how rulers attempted to project 'images of themselves as the embodiments of good rulership, as keepers of the peace' (p. 76). Here, the Vandal kingdoms, Burgundy, Ostrogothic Italy and Visigothic Spain serve as interesting case studies before the book arrives at the more familiar Merovingian Francia.

Chapter three covers the age of Charlemagne, analysing and discussing the theme of peace and the increased focus on 'ideal forms', including ideal kingship. He notes that 'peace was part of Carolingian claims to power from its birth' (p. 133) and that by the end of the 9th century 'peace had become Charlemagne's legacy to his descendants ... part of the Carolingian myth of themselves' (p. 136). The author shows how through the works of a number of writers, including Alcuin, and the central event of Charlemagne's coronation on Christmas Day 800, the Carolingian ruler came to be identified as a great and peacemaking emperor. Its meaning was 'simultaneously resonant of Byzantine titulature and the language of acclamations ... but also part of the home-grown language of Christian rulership fostered in court circles' (p. 165). In this period, Kershaw argues, Solomon emerges as the dominant figure in political theory, possibly because of a deepening concern among scholars with the scriptural past (p. 144–5). Yet, in the next chapter (four), he shows that it was Louis the Pious not Charlemagne who came to be associated with Solomon. Louis' long and complex reign resulted in writers offering both lessons and praise for the king as peacemaker. This particular chapter also offers useful discussions of well-known events such as the baptism of Harald Klak, Fontenoy and the Strasbourg oaths in a context of peaceful rulership. In the second part of the chapter, Kershaw deals with the reign of Charles the Bald and the writings emanating from his court and those surrounding it, presenting the king as a new Solomon.

In the penultimate chapter we arrive in Anglo-Saxon England, where Kershaw detects some distinct differences to the Carolingian world. Primarily these concern the available sources as there are few political tracts from the 8th and 9th centuries (p. 241). Generally, Solomon also seems to make less frequent appearances in the Anglo-Saxon sources (even though King Alfred himself clearly emphasised the importance of wisdom) or, at least, Kershaw's selected extracts and discussion make it appear so. This is the shortest chapter in the book and could perhaps have benefitted from an expansion in the time frame to the early 11th century for a fuller discussion.

The concluding section of the book traces some of the enduring links between peace and rulership in the medieval and early modern periods. In particular, the author highlights how the 10th and 11th centuries saw the survival and development in the east Frankish kingdom of many of the themes discussed in the earlier chapters. Kershaw explains the enduring theme of peaceful rulership as lying in the 'constant necessity for kings to have their authority recognized and their regimes acknowledged on some level as legitimate' (p. 269). His conclusion also clarifies the arguments of the previous chapters with a brief overview at the end.

This is an impressive and scholarly account of an interesting subject, which adds significantly to the current debate about kingship in this period. The book is loosely based on the author's PhD thesis and it shows the progression, development, and maturity of his thoughts over a period of ten years. Kershaw demonstrates an excellent command of the evidence and each chapter is wonderfully illustrated with extracts and quotations from a variety of sources. The chapters also contain generous footnotes referring to lesser known but widely

available research in continental Europe. The bibliography is, for limits of space, select and it would perhaps have been useful to have the primary sources listed separately, yet it lists the most important works and there is much here in English that will be useful to a student.

There is much to praise in this book. However, while the prose is beautiful it is not always clear. At times, it is a bit dense and it was occasionally hard to follow where the argument was going. The author has not always signposted his ideas clearly to show how and where his views differ to those of other scholars. Furthermore, if I may offer one thought on the content, it is a shame that the discussion on the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (or on what would become England) is so short. For instance, the conclusion, which discusses the later developments of peaceful rulership in the east Frankish kingdom, could have been usefully compared with a similar discussion of this development in England during the 11th and early 12th centuries. Here, authors writing about the reign of Edward the Confessor provide much evidence of Solomonic ideals and thus of the enduring relationship between the idea of peace and rulership. Nevertheless, these are perhaps churlish criticisms of a book that will provide medieval historians with much food for thought and is a useful work of reference for seasoned scholars.

Notes

1. For some examples, see Gerd Althoff, *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter: Kommunikation in Frieden und Fehde* (Darmstadt, 1997); idem., *Family, Friends and Followers. Political and Social Bonds in Early Medieval Europe*, tr. C. Carroll (Cambridge, 2004); Janet L. Nelson, 'Kingship, law and liturgy in the political thought of Hincmar of Rheims', *English Historical Review*, 93 (1977); idem., 'The political ideas of Alfred of Wessex', in *Kings and Kingship in Medieval Europe*, ed. A. J. Duggan (London, 1993); Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century* (Oxford, 1999); idem., *Legal Culture in the Early Medieval West: Law as Text, Image and Experience* (London, 1999).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For one example, see J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'War and peace in the early Middle Ages', in his *Early Medieval History* (Oxford, 1975), 19–38.[Back to \(2\)](#)

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