

The Politics of Memory and Identity in Carolingian Royal Diplomas: The West Frankish Kingdom (840-987)

Review Number:

1326

Publish date:

Thursday, 27 September, 2012

Author:

Geoffrey Koziol

ISBN:

9782503535951

Date of Publication:

2012

Price:

£80.00

Pages:

661pp.

Publisher:

Brepols

Publisher url:

Place of Publication:

Turnhout

Reviewer:

Kathryn Dutton

This dense, lengthy and – by the author’s own admission – ‘very difficult’ book (p. xi) tackles complex questions of power in one of the most contested and formative periods of Frankish history, between the death of Louis the Pious and the formal accession of the Capetians as kings of West Francia. By examining diplomas as ‘performatives’ rather than being ‘used within performances’ alone, Geoffrey Koziol sets out a ‘harder edged and more wide-ranging’ (p. 3) analysis of, *inter alia*, the documentary, ritualistic, public, aristocratic and sacral aspects of Carolingian power after the Treaty of Verdun. Koziol argues that diplomas were instrumental, a painstakingly calculated conduit for royal power and more than a means by which kingship could simply be projected or petitioners could conveniently secure their privileges. The result is a careful and comprehensive reconsideration of the diploma and Carolingian kingship, though one which requires hard work on the part of the reader. Not all Carolingianists or charter scholars will agree with all of Koziol’s conclusions, and will no doubt feel that his argument could have been condensed and more rigorously structured. Although the study is avowedly ‘less history than a semantic excavation’, readers might be disappointed to once again see on occasion what Marjorie Chibnall described as the author ‘clarifying his thoughts as he writes’, as he did in his seminal but challenging study of ritual.⁽¹⁾ Nevertheless, what Koziol offers is bold, thoughtful – poignant at times – and stimulating.

The book (563 pages of text, excluding apparatus) is split into two parts – ‘Instruments of power’ and ‘The footsteps of kings’. The first and largest contains seven chapters, beginning with diplomas as ‘performatives’, then moving on to examine their functions and significances at the beginnings of reigns

(divided into 'accession' and 'succession' acts), their particular significance in court politics from Charles the Bald's reign onwards, their role in monastic reform, and forgery during the period. The second part's three chapters strike a different tone, addressing diplomas as 'stories'. Here Koziol argues that diplomas can be regarded, in spite of their formulaic nature, as one of our best sources for understanding the Carolingian dynasty and their Robertian rivals as individuals through their assertion of ancestry and identity, and meditates upon this with particular reference to Robert I and Charles the Simple.

The central premise of the book is that diplomas must be understood as 'performatives', namely, 'that any given diploma was issued in order to institute, publicise, and memorialise a crucial alteration in the political regime' (p. 3). Thus, Koziol pushes the work of scholars such as Gerd Althoff and Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, to take just two examples, further: Althoff's 'structured public setting' encapsulated in diplomas is only part of the equation, and Bedos-Rezak's contention (not cited explicitly but underlying the argument) that '[T]hrough its discursive and material forms, the diploma projected an image of orthodox kingship, sanctified by God, open to appeal from their subjects, generous where appropriate and, above all, in control of events' places too much emphasis on image at the expense of instrumentality.⁽²⁾

Diplomas are thus characterised as 'memorials of struggles for power', and accordingly 'were often fashioned as weapons in those struggles' (p. 7). This is clearest in Koziol's discussion of accession and succession, which engages with issues of continuity, personnel, legitimacy and regnal vulnerability, subjects which have long been of interest to medievalists more widely. In the 'accession' chapter, an instructive case is that of the series of diplomas issued by Charles the Fat following the West Frankish aristocracy's invitation to the kingship after the death of Carloman. Rather than seeing the 11 diplomas issued for beneficiaries on the margins of West Francia and Lotharingia simply as the result of these beneficiaries taking the opportunity to have their privileges confirmed by their new king whilst in the region, Koziol argues that these texts encapsulate the solidification of new political formations; it is the lay patrons, acting as intercessors, who are picked out as key. Thus we see Charles forging crucial alliances with regional powers such as Bernard, count of the Auvergne and Count Aledrannus of Chalon, whose family controlled key ecclesiastical appointments and who, not incidentally, was uncle to the rival claimant to the throne, the five-year-old Charles the Simple. Neither simply confirmations or rewards, these grants were no less than Charles's route to power: they show him granting 'expectancies', appointing bishops and patronising the Church prior to his anointing; here diplomas are 'props' in a 'staged process in which Charles can be seen playing the part of West Frankish king, until he arrives at the location of a formal recognition assembly having accumulated so much momentum that he can hardly be resisted' (p. 81).

Diplomas not only smoothed routes to power but also maintained connections with the past, and chapter three on 'succession acts' is one of the most compelling of the book. Elsewhere, historians routinely examine *acta* for evidence of continuity in attitudes, patronage and administrative personnel, but here Koziol suggests that verbatim copying of predecessors' diplomas by successors 'was less repetition than a form of mimesis and quotation pointing to the sources of a king's legitimacy' (p. 99). The manifestations of this are fascinating: Lothar II, for example, is shown to have used diplomas as a substitute for anointment upon acceding to the kingdom of Provence. By contrast, Louis the Stammerer's subscription of his father Charles the Bald's magnificent 'golden bull' for Compiègne in the week of his own anointing – in which Louis' 'smaller, cramped, black monogram' is 'vastly outshone' by Charles' – speaks of his subordination and a failed attempt to oust his father's court aristocracy. Louis' identity was quite literally overshadowed by that of his father, but it was from here that his legitimacy necessarily derived.

A valuable part of the book is the discussion in chapter six of monastic reform, in which Koziol lays out the interconnections between monasteries targeted for reform by kings seeking to establish their power in the 930s. The discussion concludes with fundamental reflections on why the West Frankish kingdom remained essentially, albeit loosely, unified in spite of the palpable fragmentation of society in the tenth century. Reformed monasteries, with their scattered, trans-principality estates and frequently marginal situations, acted as a kind of 'glue'.

In chapter seven, Koziol presents the clearest synthesis I have seen of the systematic falsification of history

under the Carolingians in documentary and annalistic contexts, setting the often ‘outrageous’ forging of diplomas against a specifically Carolingian ‘political habitus’ of ‘turning lying into a tool of policy’ (p. 324) to argue that the importance of forging such documents lay not in their use as legal proof after the fact, but to achieve victory by performatively ramming them down rivals’ throats, to use Koziol’s own phrase. His arguments are sometimes hard to follow, but the thinking applied to documents such as Archives départementales de Saône-et-Loire H177, no. 4 – a ‘small, ugly scrap of parchment’ masquerading as a diploma of Boso, and revealed to be a forgery concocted by Abbot Geilo of Tournus for Louis III and Carloman, confirming estates of the politically important abbey of Tournus, while simultaneously demonstrating Boso’s illegitimacy by taking on the scrappy appearance of a private charter – is remarkable. This chapter is essential reading for anyone concerned with medieval charter forgery.

Part two of the book attempts something brave: an exploration of the individual identities of (two different) kings through their diplomatics, the places they attached to and which consequently became *lieux de mémoire*, and how this echoed through the tenth century and beyond. After a good overview of different approaches to the notoriously problematic history of emotions, Koziol argues that it is possible ‘to discern a critically defensible individuality in the early Middle Ages’ (p. 405), citing in particular the work of Janet Nelson in the field. It is clear that Koziol is possessed of an enormous compassion for his subjects, working hard to rescue them from their traditional image as cynical and self-serving, indeed urging historians not to do them an injustice by allowing ‘learning scepticism to disallow their sincerity’ (p. 551); here, memories – as enshrined in diplomas – were beliefs, and fundamental ones. Some historians may question this approach, but Koziol is surely doing the discipline a great service by attempting to inject some humanity into our methodology.

Chapter eight contains an extraordinary reading of Robert I’s sole surviving diploma, issued for Saint-Denis on 25 January 923. Koziol argues that the document reveals that Robert (and the influential and erudite clerics around him) considered himself king by means of a very specific pseudo-Isidorian sense of necessity. Koziol exposes a sense of manifest destiny, supported by saintly intercession, in Robert’s achievement, to the degree that in the ‘extreme and edgy language’ of this diploma he could ‘scoff at the judgment of final damnation’ (p. 454), all the more powerful as God’s judgment was still to happen in the Battle of Soissons, anticipated in the diploma itself. This discussion is balanced and mirrored in chapter nine, in which Koziol argues that Robert’s rival Charles the Simple promoted his kingship (and indeed imperialistic majesty) through the use of a peculiarly Lotharingian reading of Gelasian dualism, perhaps a consequence of the political values inculcated in Charles by his mother Adelaide and manifest in his diplomas largely because of his personal control of their creation. Koziol’s reading of the documents underlying these assertions is astonishingly shrewd, and it is therefore a pity that this chapter in particular is at times fragmented and difficult to follow.

Koziol closes with an important discussion of the vicious competition for power which possessed the Carolingians and Robertians throughout the tenth century, framed within a meditation upon the importance of Charles the Bald’s foundation at Compiègne versus that of the longer-established Saint-Denis. Both were *lieux de mémoire* in the very specific sense of dynastic memories (and thus identities, ambitions and legitimacy) being attached to them, rather than their own commemorative functions. Chapter ten and the epilogue (a conclusion, one understands, is impossible) draw together the main themes of the book, and reiterate Koziol’s insistence that if we are to try to understand the Carolingians and their rivals from the inside out, it is to the diplomas that we must turn.

There are two problematic areas in *Memory and Identity*. The first lies in its structure and style. The diploma is only defined in detail on page 53, after an entire chapter of discussion; conclusions are scattered across nearly every page, rather than being drawn together explicitly at the ends of chapters. While Koziol makes it abundantly clear in the opening pages that the study cannot be structured along traditional lines, its looseness, discursiveness and occasionally florid style will doubtless frustrate many. For readers not familiar with the detailed outlines of the century and a half dealt with in the book, the discursive style employed is at times confusing. While not a book designed to set out the standard contours of the period’s political history, at times further clarification is needed, particularly as so many individuals come into the text. Although

Koziol revels in language, no mean feat when it comes to diplomatics, there are minor irritations for the reader, such as the maddening use of ‘ambasciate’ (which is nowhere explicitly defined), some slightly awkward shifts between the past and present tenses, and errors and inconsistencies in punctuation and the spelling of proper names. Koziol’s style is often colloquial – though not inappropriately so – but some might balk at phrases such as ‘a schizophrenic on psychedelics’, used to describe the scribe tasked with producing diplomas for Odo (p. 215). As Koziol himself notes, diplomas are not easy to reproduce within the confines of the format of a book, and thus the photographs (black and white) included are of little use. Nevertheless, the URL provided (which redirects to <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usml19/> [2]) provides useful photographs for reference, though sadly without a facility to zoom in.

The second problem is more fundamental, but is also an opportunity, for it will doubtless trigger valuable debate. Treating diplomas as ‘performatives’ with such intensity could be argued by many to over-privilege the evidence, pushing the discipline of diplomatics too far. Koziol’s insistence that every diploma must be an extraordinarily densely packed repository of ideology, memory and identity, and that tenorial conveyances were always connected with political intrigue, is undoubtedly for the most part true, but on occasion one wonders whether he makes one connection too many. The discussion of Charles the Simple’s diplomas in chapter nine sometimes wanders too far into speculative territory, perhaps putting too much emphasis on the possible but unverifiable influence of his mother Adelaide upon Charles’ diplomatic. In the same chapter, discussion of Charles’ intimate involvement in the production of his diplomas builds on the work of German historians who have identified some distinctive traits in the king’s diplomas, yet also alludes to but skims over the considerable variety in formulae and expression found in the king’s corpus of *acta*, which leads one to wonder whether Koziol is picking and choosing certain diplomas to fit his argument that Charles had ‘a remarkably consistent and coherent view’ of his own kingship (p. 483).

Writing from my own perspective of the 12th century, historians of the High Middle Ages will find much here to inform their approaches to charters and similar documents, particularly those issued in disrupted circumstances, whether during the reign of King Stephen or in turbulent ‘territorial principalities’ such as Anjou, Poitou and Brittany. Royal, comital and ducal *acta* from these contexts often defy diplomatic analysis, not least because of beneficiary production, and one consequence of Koziol’s study is confirmation that every word in a charter ought to be considered deliberate and significant. Too often, the voice of a ruler is taken out of their *acta* by historians exercising justifiable and rigorous caution, but Koziol’s work should encourage us to think more bravely, and with even greater rigour. The same applies to issues such as rulers’ choices of residence; much work has been done on why certain saints were favoured, but as chapter ten’s discussion of Compiègne shows, unpicking the minutiae of why rulers preferred or promoted some locations above others reveals much about identities, mentalities and priorities.

One of the supreme strengths of this study is Koziol’s ability to bring together and understand fully the relevant historiographical traditions, particularly the work of German historians, and this is particularly useful for historians who share his concerns and questions but who work on different periods. It is a pity, however, that Koziol’s exploration is at times extremely opaque, for this will potentially discourage precisely the kinds of scholars who will find the book most inspiring and useful – research students, in particular, and those wishing to test Koziol’s methodology in other periods and areas – from engaging with it fully.

Memory and Identity is Koziol’s magnum opus, and its uncompromising approach, sheer size and complex structure make it a challenging read. Regardless of whether they agree with Koziol’s methodology entirely and his explanations of individual events, Carolingian specialists will find much to sink their teeth into, both conceptually and with regard to key moments of the history of West Francia. Scholars of charters more widely and those concerned with the practice of power and authority in the Middle Ages will also find *Memory and Identity* stimulating, though tough. *Memory and Identity* confirms Koziol’s reputation as one of the foremost scholars of the early Middle Ages, and no-one should be surprised that it is a book which demands close and repeated reading, and one which will stimulate vigorous debate.

Notes

1. Marjorie Chibnall, 'Review of Geoffrey Koziol, *Begging Pardon and Favour: Ritual and Political Order in Early Medieval France*', *English Historical Review*, 110 (1995), 686–7.[Back to \(1\)](#)
 2. Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, 'Ritual in the royal chancery: text, image, and the representation of kingship in medieval French diplomas', *European Monarchy: Its Evolution and Practice from Roman Antiquity to Modern Times*, ed. Heinz Duchhardt, Richard A. Jackson and David Sturdy (Stuttgart, 1992), pp. 27–40, at p. 39.[Back to \(2\)](#)
-

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1326>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/34187>

[2] <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usml19/>