

Rulers and Ruling Families in Early Medieval Europe: Alfred, Charles the Bald, and Others

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The appearance of a new collection of essays from Professor Nelson merely needs to be signalled for its importance to be apparent. The seventeen studies collected here range geographically from Spain through centres such as Frankfurt and Rheims to Wessex and Mercia; chronologically, they range from the Visigothic period to the tenth century; they all feature the profound knowledge of, and sensitive response to, the sources, the sharp insights into political structures and the lively but elegant prose that are a characteristic feature of Janet Nelson's work and which have made her la doyenne of early medieval political history. Despite the range of these papers, they share a common set of concerns accurately reflected in the title. Above all, they focus on the insecurity or at best, the constant fluidity, in royal families and what this meant for the structure of these families. This focus is a key feature of Professor Nelson's oeuvre and it is a sign both of that and of her awe-inspiring productivity that this collection could be expanded by the inclusion of her recent papers on Lombard princesses, early medieval masculinity and on Alfred Smyth's *King Alfred the Great*. In their concern with uncovering neglected royal women, the role of gender and the 'rivetingly complex character' of Alfred, these papers would fit well into this collection but must presumably wait for another volume.

One's thanks to Ashgate for publishing this collection are perhaps tempered with mild irritation at the format of the *Variorum* series. The differing typefaces and the lack of continuous pagination detract from the appearance of the book and make it slightly less easy to use than it might have been. It is also a pity that the articles in French were not translated as it is most unlikely that undergraduates will be able to benefit from them. These are, however, cavils. The photographic reprint format also means that there is no cross-referencing between articles except where the author did so at time of writing. This, however, merely means that the reader has to stay on the alert to spot where the author has changed her mind on points (for example, her doubts as to the genuineness of Fulk's letter to Alfred in chapter I are rejected by her in chapter V) and can thus trace her evolving thought.

These studies of families are more than just political history of a narrow elite. Professor Nelson's concerns, for example, with gender and with ideology mean that she covers much more than 'court news. who's in, who's out', to cite King Lear's sublime dismissal of political faction (though she has a keen eye for the *Lear*-like tragedies and tensions generated by court politics). This collection is, among other things, a contribution to the history of the early medieval state, both in its conceptual framework and in its actual institutions. It thus provides a different perspective from that offered by current work of German-language scholars such as Johannes Fried and Hagen Keller which has stressed the absence from this period of politics and political categories as we might understand them. In analysing the rivalries within the royal family and the aristocracy towards the end of Charlemagne's reign, Fried has stated that for contemporaries 'the empire as such was not a value in itself'. Certainly, contemporaries' political categories were not the same as ours but it is premature to proclaim the end of ideology for the reign of Charlemagne. As Professor Nelson shows (chs XII and XIII), arguments and plots about the succession were indeed articulated by interested members of the royal house such as Gisela and Fastrada but were couched in terms of an imperial ideology that was to prove potent. There was more than Hobbesian self-interest; there usually is. Further, some of Nelson's work on Alfred and Charles the Bald here focuses on institutions and personnel and these kings' attempts to inculcate ideas of service and public office in their followings. In looking at what is more conventionally understood as institutions as well as at that key institution, the royal family itself, this collection can be seen as being as much about political thought as about political history. As such it will benefit from being read again when Professor Nelson's Carlyle lectures are published and can be seen as in some ways a prologue to that work. Ever since her massive 1977 article on Hincmar of Rheims, in some ways the high-water mark of a more abstract, Ullmannesque approach, she has integrated the study of thought and action in her analyses and this collection is no exception.

While we await that projected study of early medieval political thought, it might be appropriate here to suggest ways in which this collection's insights and ideas could be supplemented. The very specific nature of the sites in which family tensions unfolded is important. This is more than geography, though as we shall see that is crucially important too. Occasionally the sources let us see this at a surprisingly intimate level that enables us to recapture something of what must have been obsessive scrutinising of the ups and downs of relationships in the royal households. Professor Nelson brilliantly evokes the atmosphere of the Aachen palace in the last years of Charlemagne's reign, a palace with many rooms, including those in which the 'crowned doves', Charlemagne's daughters, exerted their potent influence. Her vivid re-imagining of the sights and sounds of the palace casts a flood of light on the heart of the empire. Elsewhere, the architecture of palaces could be put to sinister use as in the story of how the Lombard king Rothari had his wife, queen Gundeberga, penned up in 'a single room in the palace at Pavia'. We need to know more about and visualise more intensively the shape of palaces both as they existed and as they were conceived, from the gendered spaces of Amalasantha's Ravenna to the Chinese box of Charlemagne's palace at Regensburg as imagined by Notker of St Gall. The details of the stage-set of the court mattered.

The small intimate world of the court reached out into a broader landscape. That places mattered to contemporaries in this way emerges from examination of the career of Aethelwold, disenfranchised prince of Wessex and nephew of Alfred. As Professor Nelson remarks, he began his bid for support in Wessex after Alfred's death by 'seizing the *tun* where his own father was buried' (ch. I, p.60). This was Wimborne in Dorset. Asser noted that Alfred's brother and predecessor king Aethelred 'was buried at Wimborne Minster and awaits the coming of the Lord and the resurrection with the just'). In death Aethelred was thus incorporated in a religious site that was closely associated with the dynasty and lent lustre to Asser's representation of Alfred as the God-fearing culminating point of that dynasty. This was what Aethelwold, Alfred's nephew, was hoping to challenge after Alfred's death. In raising his standard at Wimborne he was surely proclaiming a political resurrection of Aethelred who was now to be remembered, not as the brother of Alfred, but as the father of Aethelwold, a claimant to Wessex. Aethelwold was redirecting the channel of memory and association that flowed through such sites. He was also seizing an important economic centre, and a strong defensive site. Further, the minster at Wimborne did not only offer liturgical or commemorative resources; Aethelwold had seized a nun, presumably from there, and this was surely more than mere violent abduction. It points to a determination to realign familial alliances in Wessex as part of his strategy, just as Louis the Pious' heavy-handed confining of his sisters in convents on his accession in 814 was part of his strategy for establishing his regime as Professor Nelson points out in chapter XII.

Wimborne was a relatively prominent feature on the West Saxon political landscape and Aethelwold's appearance there is unsurprising, and was perhaps even predictable to contemporaries. Political landscapes, however, could be 'activated' in more surprising or sinister ways, ways that reveal how conflicts within royal families could be articulated in sites far from the royal court itself. A particularly striking example of this comes from tenth-century Germany. Here the disaffected prince was the son of the reigning king. The remarriage of his father, Otto I, to the young heiress of Italy, Adeleheid, in 951 was a blow to the hopes of Liudolf whose mother, Edith of Wessex, had died in 946. Angered and worried by the new constellation of his father's family, Liudolf headed for Saalfeld in Thuringia and celebrated Christmas there. Saalfeld was a surprising choice of location. Lying in Thuringia, it was hardly in the heartlands of the Ottonian family; it was no royal mausoleum and cult centre as Wimborne was, though it was a defensible site. What it did have, however, was association with plots and rebellion for it was here, in 939, that Otto I's brother Henry had held a great banquet for his supporters in his rebellion against Otto.

The significance of this was noted long ago by Karl Leyser who offered a vivid translation of Widukind's description of Saalfeld ('in loco consilis funesto') as 'the place of evil council' and who concluded that Liudolf's choosing of this place showed the ritualised nature of rebellion in Ottonian Germany. Unlike Aethelwold in his choosing of Wimborne, Liudolf was not seeking to resurrect a buried family line. The earlier rebellion launched at Saalfeld had been the work of his uncle Henry who was now one of the targets of Liudolf's wrath. Yet Liudolf chose it deliberately and did so as part of an overall strategy of proclaiming his discontent with his father, an attitude he broadcast by leaving his father's court 'with sadness' according to Widukind. This sadness was itself an expression of hostility as was the celebration of Christmas at Saalfeld and the *convivium* with his supporters there. It was all this that made Saalfeld so sinister. If Widukind's testimony shows that Liudolf's actions made an impact it reveals the long-lasting nature of that impact. Widukind wrote some ten years and more after the events and shows that Liudolf's broadcast had been picked up.

Centres of royal power often had very specific political resonance, one might say party political. Wimborne

could function as a centre for the West Saxon royal line but could be seized for a very particular branch of that line. The great royal site of Frankfurt could act as a showplace for Charlemagne's kingship in the magnificent assembly of 794 but, as Professor Nelson argues, the choice of Frankfurt was probably made just as much by Fastrada, Charlemagne's wife, as by the great king himself. She chose it because she had family roots here but not everyone in her husband's entourage relished her influence and thus not everyone would have seen Frankfurt in 794 as a 'neutral' venue of undifferentiated royal power rising above faction. Saalfeld's history and reputation shows how places not associated with the court could be pulled into its conflicts and how these conflicts could be expressed and remembered in these sites. The difficulties of controlling or canalising royal charisma are reflected in the historical landscape.

Kings, their consorts and their children took care to ensure that they were 'presenced' in landscapes. One way of doing this was by commanding prayers and liturgical commemoration in the great abbeys and palaces of these early medieval empires. Professor Nelson notes how Charlemagne, campaigning against the Avars on the river Enns in 791, sent a letter to Fastrada in Regensburg, directing her to have litanies and fasts performed there in order that royal victories could continue. (The role of the queen here is noteworthy, as is the role of the written word as form of communication and Nelson has suggestive remarks on this letter's manuscript preservation.) She also notes how the memory of the Lombard kingdom's royal line was cultivated after its fall at Salzburg by Liutberg, wife of Duke Tassilo of Bavaria and daughter of the last Lombard king. At this exalted level communication between husband and wife and a daughter's recall of her father and mother resulted in public activities.

This does not mean that the political history of this period dissolves into the ups and downs of the family life of a few individuals. Rather, it means that the political life and culture of the period was informed by the rhythms of family life and that events and episodes in the lives of key individuals were the stuff of politics. In this respect, the epic poem *Waltharius*' exciting story of Waltharius and Hiltigund fleeing Attila's court in a risky nocturnal escape is as much an expression of the political thought of the age as the weighty letters and treatises by bishops on the office of kingship. We can see this through brief contemplation of the adventures of Adelheid, wife of Otto I. These adventures claimed Professor Nelson's attention in her previous collection *The Frankish World* (1996) but there remains more to be said about how they were understood and memorialised by contemporaries.

The adventures of Adelheid made a great impression on contemporaries. As the youthful widow of the king of Italy she carried claims to that kingdom and for this she was imprisoned in 951 by Berengar who sought the crown for himself. We have an extraordinarily vivid account of her escape in a poem by the Saxon nun, Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim. Hrotsvitha tells us how Adelheid dug a tunnel out of prison, went on the run by night and by day lay low in a field of corn as the enraged Berengar searched for her. As Professor Nelson pointed out in *The Frankish World* Hrotsvitha, who dedicated the poem to Adelheid's son Otto II, has an acute sense of the importance of claims to power transmitted by women and how such claims could open up the fault lines in a royal family. Hrotsvitha's epic story of Adelheid's great escape is not some free-floating adventure story but a precise reflection of how the court perceived the history of its members and thus the history of the Ottonian Reich itself. Hrotsvitha complained that she had no written sources for her epic but Gandersheim's links with the court suggest that her account of Adelheid's Italian adventures owes much to court traditions. In fact we know from a very different source that the court, and presumably Adelheid herself, took care to see that the Italian escape was known and recalled.

This source is a set of lapidary entries preserved in the necrologies of Trier and Merseburg. Here we can

read the following: '20th April: on this day the empress Adelheid was imprisoned by Berengar; 20th August: on this day the Lord freed queen Adleheid from her imprisonment'. Gerd Althoff has shown that these entries stem from Adelheid herself and from the Ottonian family which wished to recall these dramatic episodes and so that it was from the royal family that these entries were transmitted through centres such as Quedlinburg and St Gall to Trier and Merseburg. These dates were to be known and recalled in the court and in the great centres of commemoration of the Reich at large. This was because they were not simply dramatic episodes in the life of an individual but because they marked key stages in the rise of the Ottonians. As Stefan Weinfurter has forcibly reminded us, Adeleheid personified the kingdom of Italy and her status and remarkable landed wealth offered Otto the key to Italy. Further, Adelheid was a new kind of queen in the dynasty and Otto's marriage to her heralded a significant exaltation of Ottonian kingship. The drama of Adelheid's imprisonment and escape impressed contemporaries who conceptualised their politics in an epic mode very different from the managerial mode of our own culture but the way in which that drama unfolded and was recalled tells us much about the deep structures of tenth-century elite society.

Historians who work on the genealogical ramifications and fluctuating fortunes of medieval ruling families may sometimes uneasily recall the reading habits of Sir Walter Elliot of Kellynch-hall, father of Anne, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. By depicting him as 'never taking up any book but the Baronetage', Austen delineates his snobbery and sterile values, though she herself has a good eye for what that book could say about society and the individual. Professor Nelson's work puts her ruling families in a richer world than Sir Walter and his ilk could ever dream of. I have tried to suggest some ways of adding to her pictures of these families but the person who could reap the richest harvest from her work is Professor Nelson herself and her next book is to be awaited with impatience.

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