

Politics and Power in Early Medieval Europe: Alsace and the Frankish Realm, 600–1000

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It is difficult to write a regional history for most areas of early-medieval Europe because convention and common form in writing tend to level off regional difference. Either one can read the local landscape in every way and in as much detail as can be managed, as Alan Everitt did so effectively for the history of Kentish settlement, or one can draw on the mass of information that gathers around the political centre and leading institutions in order to see how general developments manifested themselves in the particular region. The latter is the approach taken by Hans Hummer, as he makes plain in the title of his impressive book. He begins with a geographical description of Alsace and the Vosges, but moves quickly on to a very big picture, namely the definition of the early-medieval period. For Hummer, the early middle ages begin in the seventh and end in the eleventh century. This was a period that was, 'neither merely a survival of late classical forms, nor a prelude to the bureaucratization of the high middle ages' (p. 7). Rather, it was marked by a distinctive symbiosis of familial, ecclesiastical, and royal interests. What brought it into being was the spread of monasteries which became the basis of family power and local domination. What brought about its end was monastic reform which turfed the family out of the monastery and forced lords to live in secular strongholds. For this, the history of the leading Alsatian family, the so-called Etichonids, provides a striking paradigm. In the tenth century the power and memory of the family still resided in the network of monasteries it had founded and endowed in the late-seventh and early-eighth centuries. Hagiography from the premier foundation of Mt St-Odile (Hohenbourg) portrays the founder figure, Duke Adalrich, as violently lording it over the monastery. His tomb, incidentally, is still to be visited there, and is perhaps the

only identifiable resting place of a secular, non-royal, leader of the seventh century anywhere in Francia, and possibly beyond. By the twelfth century, descendants of the now largely forgotten family lived in craggy strongholds such as the castle above Eguisheim. Monastic reform meant not only a change of residence, but also the erasure of memory and tradition. Cut off from the old extensive networks, agnatic lineages came to the fore, and with them a new consciousness for a new age. This is Hans Hummer's take on the 'feudal transformation' debate.

Hummer's basic premise is that too many historians have been reluctant and blinkered readers of monastic sources; reluctant in that this is the only material available in many cases, so that it is necessary to use it to try and get at the more interesting and important lay world beyond. This approach is, in Hummer's view, both fruitless and wrong-headed. Monasteries were fully integrated into society. There was, in this sense, no world beyond, and the patronage of family monasteries enabled kin groups to institutionalize their consciousness and wealth. What follows is a careful and insightful account of how the Etichonids built their hold over Alsace on the back of monastic patronage. The rise of Carolingian power is explained in the same terms. In Alsace, the Carolingians 'developed mechanisms of control focused on monasteries rather than counts' (p. 61). In the central section of the work, Hummer goes into detail about how the Carolingians affected the working relationship between monasteries, patrons, and clients in the ordering of precarial grants, the census payment (an annual rent), and the collection of dues known as *nona et decimal*. Hans Hummer is a fine scholar and his careful account of the relationship between monastery and patron from the eighth to the tenth centuries is clear, useful, and stimulating. He must, however, rely heavily on material from the monastery of Weissenburg, which actually points northwards to the Speyergau and Wormsgau rather more than south towards Alsace proper. Weissenburg likewise forms the basis of a chapter on 'The Politics of Old German', largely because Otfrid, the author of the *Evangelienbuch*, was a monk of Weissenburg. This was a rather disappointing discussion that appeared to be leading up to a single point: that within the single cultural enterprise, the Carolingians had room for regional variants that bound ethnic difference into the common political culture, but that this difference could also become a means of political identification. This discussion seemed itself to be winding up to the following examination of how Louis the German took control of Alsace, but what a long winding it was, and what a missed opportunity to talk about language in what is linguistically one of the most fascinating areas of Western Europe. As early as the seventh century it was commented on how speech changed as one traversed the Vosges.

Two chapters discussing the Carolingian politics of the ninth century are as good an analysis as one can find anywhere, and again Weissenburg material is prominent. Much thought is given to the dating and composition of Weissenburg's cartulary, which is put in the context of Loius the German's attempts to acquire influence over the monastery's clients in Alsace. The discussion allows Hummer to reiterate the importance of ecclesiastical institutions. Their 'vast proprietary wealth and their extensive network of patron families dominated the social and political landscape of early-medieval Europe' (p. 207). Hence these institutions were at the heart of the succession contests of the ninth century, and they were active participants as they sought to protect their precarial interests. By this time they were very adept at doing so, and since they underpinned the local order, that sense of chaos and political confusion that comes from narratives of high political conflict belies considerable stability and calm in the locality. These thoughts set up Hummer's final chapter on 'The tenth-century transformation', which, as already mentioned (but which we would by now guess anyway), was brought about when monasteries began to emancipate themselves from lay domination. A final, and rather striking, point about the transformation comes in the Conclusion: agnatic lineage and castle power arrived at the same time in very different places with very different amounts of royal or ducal authority (that is in DUBY's Mâconnais and Schmid's Swabia or Alsace). The only thing these areas had in common was, 'the advent of radical monastic reform which profoundly challenged the compact of monastic and family rights that had animated lordship since the seventh century' (pp. 256-7). This is a neat conclusion which encapsulates the whole argument.

As one who habitually reads monastic sources trying to glimpse the world beyond, this reviewer is troubled by Hans Hummer's conviction that monasteries were, to adapt Marshall McLuhan, not just the medium but the message itself. Hummer is building here on the work of Barbara Rosenwein on the relationship between

Cluny and its patrons, and especially on Matthew Innes's analysis of the political structures of the mid-Rhine area in the Carolingian period. Innes too thinks that influence over monasteries provided the Carolingians with an entrée into local society, although his position is more nuanced and he is more aware of other elements. Also prominent in Hummer's thought is Patrick Geary's argument that monastic reform effectively brought about a loss of social memory, engendering the need for new narratives of family history. There is great virtue in all of this work which punctured the old and tired public/private dichotomy in structural analysis, but Hummer's unremitting reiteration of the central proposition raises issues in several areas. First and foremost, relying so heavily on ecclesiastical, and especially monastic, sources will invariably result in the impression that society revolved around ecclesiastical institutions. So before we take these sources at their word we should spend more time hammering at other materials—chronicles, legislation, place names, archaeology, and, not least, the glimpses of lay activity in the ecclesiastical sources themselves—to see if any different note is struck. Second, the proposition rests on assumptions about the proprietary nature of monasteries, but not all monasteries were the same, and not all founder families managed to stay in control of their foundations. It is commonly said that it was the 'Columbanan' monastic movement that led to the spread of the proprietary monastery in Francia, but Columbanan texts actually attempted to distance foundations from families, insisting on the complete freedom of the monastery. This impulse would trouble the devout from time to time even before the 'transformation of the tenth century'. Third, Hans Hummer is excellent on patrons and clients, but he stops short of showing how these relations actually translated into power. Or, to put it another way, was the monastery the sole source of a family's power? Obviously not: families gave land to the church because they were powerful and rich. They may have used the influence stemming from their involvement to consolidate their local domination, but first they had to have something to donate. So one would have liked to see a more extensive investigation of the sources of social, economic, and political power. Hummer cites numerous donations and precarial arrangements, but he never asks how the land was organized. Classes below donor level do not appear in this account; the nature of farming units is never discussed. Why not draw on polyptych material here? Finally, one must doubt the extent and effectiveness of the monastic reform of the tenth century. It was certainly not universal in Alsace, and even when monasteries acquired greater autonomy, they remained in close alliance with lay clients. Although it is indeed striking that regions in which there were differing amounts of royal or ducal power shared a common experience in the building of castles and development of agnatic lineages, there were common denominators other than monastic reform. Of these the most obvious is the increasing cash in circulation from the early-eleventh century. It may partly have been because people were richer that they could afford to build stone castles as alternative residences. The loss of social memory is not restricted to the period around the first millennium as Patrick Geary argued. We are aware of those few families which maintained a group consciousness up to this point. This is not to deny that most families had probably lost it well before. All in all, one wonders whether monastic reform was capable of triggering such a widespread transformation.

Despite the fact that Hans Hummer is over-committed to monasticism as the key social, political, and economic agency in the early middle ages, he has still produced a first-rate work. He brings Alsace into the narrative of Carolingian politics with great skill. He is excellent on the development of precaria and the census. He brings out the extraordinary survival of the Etichonid family in a way that no one has done before. He pushes one to react against his view of the early middle ages, but that is just another way of saying that he has written a most thought-provoking book.

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