

## Europe after Rome: A New Cultural History 500-1000

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**Reviewer:**

Lynette Olson

*Europe after Rome: A New Cultural History 500-1000* should be read completely by all early medievalists, who will then endeavour to assign relevant portions on student reading lists (an example is given near the end of this review) while urging the best and most interested students to read the whole thing. It is a carefully crafted study and survey: a 'cultural history' as the subtitle proclaims and 'a comparative ethnography of the early Middle Ages' as the introduction explains, addressing the problem: 'how did the men and women who lived between 500 and 1000 order their own worlds in social, cultural and political terms?' Analysis follows 'three interpretative threads': early medieval diversity, mindfulness of the Roman paradigm of power and dynamism. There are two chapters on the environment, the first about language and literacy, which of course relate to cultural historiography as well as history, and the second about the practical conditions of early medieval living. These are followed by two chapters on social relationships, the first about friendship and kinship, the second about gender relations. The next two chapters concern the social relations of production to power: of land and movable wealth with due attention to the gift economy. The final pair of chapters add the ideological dimension of the nexus between kingship and Christianity and of the Roman inheritance. These chapters, we are told in the introduction, 'function like transparent overlays', which is an excellent plan that would have benefited from reiteration in the conclusions to each chapter and in the epilogue. This review should be taken as a creative engagement with a book that is admired, even where criticisms of its approach are made.

Smith's book is a great and welcome corrective to the prevailing narrative of medieval history as a whole, centred as that narrative is on what was happening in France. To some extent this focus has reflected the outstanding contributions of French medievalists to scholarship. British scholars have made their own outstanding contributions of course but have tended to do so in their own compartment (within which in

living memory 'early medieval' meant Norman). This compartment Professor Smith has resolutely broken down in her study which encompasses the British Isles in Europe, and if Britain and even more Ireland had distinctive features in the early Middle Ages, so did other regions of Europe. This is her theme of diversity. Those who have felt uncomfortable with what the dominant narrative of medieval history leaves out will enjoy this book. Whether they will be prepared to jettison that dominant narrative is another matter.

This is a work, as the epilogue points out, for 21st-century Europe, but the shadow of 19th- and 20th-century European history and historiography lies heavily on it, with results that may be surprising to readers who, like the present reviewer, are not Europeans. Perhaps we are less oppressed by the darker side of the recent history of what is never our own country as we study what, if again like the present reviewer we live in European settler societies, is the early history of our culture. Professor Smith is writing against the European ideology of nation building (p. 256). While the interests of modern European nationalism have been served by, and coloured the interpretation of, early medieval history, a Europe divided into several kingdoms, and European culture, had their origins in the early Middle Ages. It is not a question of teleology but of roots. *Of course* the period is interesting in its own right, but its interpretation is not aided by allowing it only a (mainly) Roman past. The awesome implications of Christian conversion for the formation of European culture, representing as it does the interplay of Christian, Roman and indigenous elements as people made their own Christianities (cf. p. 224), have had to await the emphasis on cultural history for the treatment they deserve, to which this book makes a notable contribution, including a very useful map on p. 221. Both past and future must be acknowledged.

*Europe after Rome* is a history of all the people of early medieval Europe, including the female half throughout, and not just in chapter four, 'Men and Women'. My marginal notes to that chapter are often 'yes, but' because with all its merits this chapter does not quite do justice to the *relatively* better opportunities of women to access wealth and therefore power in the early Middle Ages than in the better organised period which came afterwards. On the one hand, the short paragraph here quoted says it all: 'Not even powerful early medieval kings such as Rothari and Charlemagne could bring social reality fully into line with prescriptive norms. In practice, women characteristically lived their lives in the interstices of ideology and convention. As we shall see, that gap was often considerable, a cause of vulnerability for some but of opportunity for others'(p. 122). Yet on p. 147 we are back to 'the disparities, sometimes negotiable, sometimes not, between women's experiences and men's opportunities'. In particular, the prevalence of the reverse dowry over the dowry is not recognised, even though an example of the latter is given at the bottom of p. 131: when Count Stephen wanted to marry the daughter of Count Regimund, the two counts 'reached agreement about the marital endowment Stephen would provide, and the couple were formally betrothed'. Men were prepared to pay to marry in the early Middle Ages. The chapter makes the point that women were valued in the period. Its reference to women's finery but not men's on p. 118 could reinforce modern gender stereotypes, whereas it is made amply clear later on in the book that men had finery of their own (p. 175). A little further on, the account of Leudast 'catching the eye of Charibert's queen, Marcofeva', manages to trivialise her role, for he is first said to have become count of Tours 'by winning the attention of King Charibert (561-7) and then his brother King Chilperic (561-84)' whereas his rise began when Queen Marcofeva put him in charge of her stables. These matters may seem trivial, but they add up to a slightly misleading impression. We need to emphasise that the early Middle Ages are one of the most interesting periods in women's history.

This is a book for those who already know what happened in early medieval history, or are prepared to go elsewhere to find out. Events and their dates have been relegated to a fine chronology at the end of the book, 'standing staring all together, / Like garden gods', with a smile one quotes Byron and notes a few occasions in the text where references to what happened must be intruded (pp. 171, 201 and 271, the last unsurprisingly being the Frankish-papal alliance in the mid-8th century). The book is full of illustrative details, some of them quite wonderful, generally dated and referenced (although one would like to know the source for the Spanish writing tablets on p. 43), but one has to read it through to find them. Examples are the link between horses and display on p. 175: in the late 8th-century Pope Hadrian I was to ride only the best in procession, but it is hard to outdo the account of Boniface of Canossa on the way to his bride Beatrix in the

early 11th century, who shod his horse with easily cast silver shoes so that (quoting from the primary source) 'this way the people might find out who he was'! Among the details readers may discover items of specific use to their own research, either directly or comparatively as in the case about to be given. For this reviewer the Bavarian poem about St Peter from c.900 (pp. 283, 285) brought to mind a poem about St Samson of Dol in Brittany composed about the same time which declared: 'For the Lord sent patriarchs and prophets, / Sent apostles, teachers, to scatter the seeds / Of life always everywhere throughout the whole world. / From those no one is acknowledged to have come to us / Except that Samson finally had come by order of the Lord; / Gaul the teacher had not yet taught us uncultivated ones / The coming of Peter by which he blessed the right of Rome.' Discussion in this part of the book highlights how exceptional is my piece of evidence to the attention to Rome which 'signalled a strong desire for attachment to authoritative narratives of Christian origins and apostolic authenticity in the absence of locally available proofs' (p. 288). In Dol they had the latter - yet more early medieval diversity.

While the early medieval Western focus on Rome as a Christian cult centre and acknowledgement of the pope as the most authoritative bishop in Christendom are beyond dispute, my most weighty criticism of this excellent book lies in its treatment of that city in the final chapter, 'Rome and the Peoples of Europe'. It is not just that the city of Rome was geographically marginal in the period (as it was from more than one perspective: the extent to which Rome was influenced by Byzantium deserved consideration); nor that it was also politically marginal. 'For the three weeks of Conrad's visit, Rome functioned as Europe's political centre' (p. 279) in the early 11th century, but this was not the normal state of affairs, however much Otto III might have earlier wished to the contrary, as the bases of power in Europe lay in the north. Rome's peripheral position in the foregoing respects is indeed acknowledged in the book. The real problem is that, paradoxical as it might sound, Rome was *ecclesiastically* marginal. Rome reacted to developments elsewhere in the Western church. It only added *filioque* to the creed at the end of the early Middle Ages. It was appealed to as a standard by the initiative of others elsewhere in the church. And, most significantly, the reform movement began further north. Monastic reformers, clerical and lay, placed their protégés directly under papal control. Church reformers, clerical and lay, sought to improve diocesan affairs, and eventually reform reached the papacy, which only then became the nerve centre of the church. In the circumstances one may ask if Rome (and we are assured in the epilogue that aside from the book's subtitle it is the city that is meant) is the best centralising feature to emphasise amid early medieval diversity, and if it does justice to the dynamism of other regions of Europe.

By and large, however, one can only praise and profit from the fine analysis offered by this book. Its interdisciplinary evidence and approach are good to see, although it was written just a shade too early to make use of the genetic evidence which has such profound implications for the period (if this data is indeed correctly interpreted as indicating relative stability rather than mobility of populations). One welcomes the statements that early medieval Europe was 'document-minded' (p. 43 - the whole of chapter one is a welcome addition to the reading list for my tutorial about Rosamond McKitterick vs. the traditionalists on the extent of Carolingian literacy), that Justinian's plague was indeed bubonic (p. 61), that the argument for female infanticide is unconvincing (p. 70), that feuds were intra- as well as inter-family (p. 111) and that Germanic kingship at the beginning of the Middle Ages was not sacral: 'If early Germanic-speaking peoples had ever regarded their kings within a cosmological context, the huge upheavals and transformations of the 4th and 5th centuries had been far too disruptive to sustain such beliefs' (p. 247). Each chapter includes a helpful map of places mentioned therein. Proofreading is virtually immaculate (only a stray 'the' was spotted on p. 195). The book ends with a superb bibliography (the only improvement that can be suggested would be to list the journals devoted to the early Middle Ages) which deserves the highest praise of all.

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