
Richard M. Fraher

Indiana University School of Law - Bloomington

Follow this and additional works at: http://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/facpub

Part of the Legal History Commons, Medieval History Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation


http://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/facpub/2513

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Digital Repository @ Maurer Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by Maurer Faculty by an authorized administrator of Digital Repository @ Maurer Law. For more information, please contact wattrn@indiana.edu.
MEDIEVAL


After a hiatus of two centuries, during which no poet had sung to that note, secular panegyric reappeared in the court of Charlemagne. The genre continued to draw authors during the rest of the Carolingian age. Neither the fact of this reemergence nor its character and significance had received the attention they deserved prior to the publication of the volume under review. Displaying a scholarship as discriminating as it is broad and deep, an unusual felicity and accuracy as a translator, and an unfailing lucidity of style, Peter Godman makes three main points about Carolingian panegyric. First, it was anything but homogeneous. The literary focus and strategy changed from reign to reign and from poet to poet. Second, panegyric sheds considerable light on Carolingian political and cultural history. And, third, the encomiasts appealed to a diverse group of sources as they commented on current events and on their own situations.

Following a helpful introductory chapter on Venantius Fortunatus as a transition figure between late Latin and Carolingian panegyric—a chapter that, aside from its relevance to his larger theme, provides a fresh and cogent reading of Venantius himself—Godman gives us three chapters presenting the Carolingian political poets in chronological order. He concludes by underlining the features of the genre that flowed into the Ottonian age. In Charlemagne's reign, he shows, poets such as Alcuin and Paul the Deacon renewed the secular encomium by praising the ruler as a rex doctus and by annexing that topos to sacred kingship and defense of the faith. In the 790s these religious and literary ideas were fused by Angilbert in the image of Charlemagne as the new David. With his imperial coronation in 800, a number of poets shifted to the invocation of Charlemagne as the new Augustus and turned to Vergil and other golden age poets as their chief models. Louis the Pious and his successors posed more of a challenge to encomiasts, especially those trying to second guess which claimant to the throne would succeed. Theodulphe reflects the dissension among the heirs of Charlemagne. His appeal to the Ovid of the Tristia as a model suggests how that poet of exile could inform an author who found himself banished for backing the wrong horse. On the other hand, Sedulius could praise different contestants generically, and interchangeably, working as he did from the secure base of episcopal patronage, which was growing more important in the mid-ninth century. In the reign of Charles the Bald, John Scottus added a Hellenic twist to the rex doctus theme, no doubt out of self-interest, and Hieric of Auxerre expanded it, recasting Charles as a Platonic philosopher-king.

These highlights, brief as they are, suggest the richness and pertinence of Godman's findings, for political and literary history alike. As he shows so successfully, Carolingian encomium is a valuable source for tracking both contemporary political events and political ideas. With respect to the classical tradition, and this is equally important, Godman strengthens the case for a Carolingian renaissance that did more than merely salvage and disseminate the classics, untouched by human hands. For, as he demonstrates, the political poets drew on the classical legacy with independence and creativity, reshaping the literary form of panegyric itself and making their own individual choices among their classical models. For all these reasons, this book stands as a major, and welcome, contribution to Carolingian studies, which should be required reading for any student of that period.

MARCIA L. COLISH
Oberlin College


Marco Mostert's study of the political theology of Abbo of Fleury is a modestly useful contribution to the literature concerning tenth-century monastic reform. At first glance, a study of the reformer's ideas about society and law seems to promise the reader a unique window through which one might view the interplay of the medieval monastic mindset and the social realities of tenth-century France. On closer examination, this volume provides a much narrower, and much less exciting, vista. Mostert's book is a largely mechanical study of the political and legal vocabulary employed by Abbo of Fleury. Mostert's methodological assumption is that a study of the legal and political terminology used by Abbo is his diverse writings, especially the Passio Sancti Eudmundi, the Liber Apologeticus, the Collectio canorum, and Abbo's letters, would yield "an imaginary text" (p. 19), comprising Abbo's political theology. Mostert's book professes to be a commentary on this imaginary political and social treatise.
There are serious problems with Mostert's assumption that the political, legal, and social terminology employed by an author throughout a heterogeneous medley of writings amounts to the same thing as the political, legal, and social ideas of the same author, arrayed in a single, coherent exposition of his "political theology." Context counts, and the context in which Abbo of Fleury employed his political vocabulary was the fragmented, unfocused range of his occasional writings, composed for specific and transient purposes. As a result, Mostert's study struggles to rise above the level of a mere glossary of Abbo's vocabulary. The introductory chapters, which detail Abbo's career from ca. 940 to 1004, point out that Abbo's early life as a monastic schoolteacher and librarian sculpted the ideas and concerns of the mature, politically active reforming abbot. But, despite the efforts to place Abbo in a broader context, Mostert's portrait of the abbot is unidimensional. Mostert's narrow vision of Abbo's "political theology" results from one of two contingencies. Either Abbo himself failed to consider society, law, and politics in light of any issue beyond the immediate struggle for monastic exemption from episcopal control, or else Mostert fails to connect Abbo's use of political or theological terms to any context save the most obvious and pressing of the abbot's social perceptions and political concerns. One suspects that a more sensitive reading of Abbo's works might have produced a richer yield. Despite these fundamental limitations, Mostert's study makes a useful contribution to our understanding of late tenth-century social, political, and legal ideas by illustrating how the tenth-century monastic reformers adapted conventional medieval notions about clerical and lay society, kingship both ideal and practical, and authority within the church. Unfortunately, even at this level, the book is slightly marred by the Dutch author's difficulty expressing himself in English. For example Mostert refers to the "siege" of Cahors (p. 60) meaning the see of Cahors, and he quotes Abbo's discussion of a papal privilege "which I, though unworthy, have earned to receive" (p. 58). Careful editing might have significantly improved the presentation.

RICHARD M. FRAHER
School of Law
Indiana University