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The Carolingian period is one of the most important historiographical themes of the last century. However defining this period, between the mid-eighth and ninth century, has been a challenge for many scholars. The main concern was its position in relation to other historical periods. Within the last forty years historians have begun to consider this one and half century as an independent period, unconnected with those occurring before or after. The development of discussions on several aspects that characterised Carolingian times culminated at the beginning of the 1980s in the publication of two key texts, which incorporated many aspects of the debate. The first was Rosamond McKitterick's *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians* (1983), followed by Pierre Riché's *The Carolingians: A Family who forged the Europe* (1993).¹ In the three decades since, the international debate on the Carolingians has produced multiple works from a variety of disciplines and scholarships. Yet the need for a work that recapitulated the *status quæstionis* on the Carolingian period was clear. For this reason, the 'Carolingianist community' welcomed Marios Costambeys, Mathew Innes and Simon MacLean's *The Carolingian World* in 2011.

As the authors explain in the introductory chapter, the book has several aims: firstly to fill the gap between the previous surveys on the Carolingian period, giving up-to-date descriptions of several aspects of this world; secondly, to identify and analyse the parameters and paradoxes that have emerged from the most recent historiographical debates; thirdly, to engage with new debates; and finally, to explore the Carolingian development of social structures in relation to political events, reflecting on scholars' increasing awareness of the complex interrelationships between political, social and economic phenomena. An initial point of discussion is the debate surrounding the definition of the Carolingian world and whether it indeed existed. The authors explain with accuracy how it was conceived as a consequence of specific political, social and economic structures in a particular geo-historical period. Although, within these geographical and temporal limits, there were different territorial realities and regions with their own identities and autonomies. The authors stress this specific aspect is important to acknowledge when

¹ R. McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians, 751-987* (London, 1983); P. Riché, *The Carolingians: A family who forged Europe*, trans. by M. I. Allen (Philadelphia, 1993) (or. ed.: *Les Carolingiens, une famille qui fit l'Europe*, Paris, 1983).

discussing the Carolingians, but they assert a Carolingian world in 8th and 9th century Europe existed.

Following the introductory chapter, in which a description of the Carolingian world is presented alongside the written available sources for the period, the book is divided into seven chapters and a final brief epilogue. The division among the chapters is particularly interesting. There are three 'political' chapters (two, four and eight), in which the authors describe the salient moments of the Carolingian age. These are contrastingly interspersed between four chapters analysing the culture and society of the period (three, five, six and seven). Even if some might prefer a more chronological structure, this method of organisation offers numerous advantages. Substantially, the thematic division of the chapters allows one to read the chronological political events with a constant eye on how the everyday lives of people were structured, examining both rural societies and elites, and their related economies. In the political narrative the authors stress the importance for the rulers of legitimising their presence as a royal dynasty, which can be seen in every phase of the Carolingian domination, from Pippin III, through Charlemagne, Louis the Pious and his sons and grandsons. Even at the end of the Carolingian era the dynasty was concerned with maintaining its power, discrediting opponents and accusing them of being 'illegitimate', as the example between Charles the Fat and Arnulf of Carinthia reports. For such a scenario the authors stress the importance of marriage as a socio-political tool for making the dynasty. In fact, the blood of the Carolingians was the first prerequisite for the legitimacy of a ruler on the throne. This was certainly linked with a shared mentality which derived from a series of thoughts and beliefs rooted in the culture not only of the eighth and ninth centuries, but of the entire early Middle Ages.

Chapter three, the first of the thematic chapters, follows this cultural theme, although its focus is on Christianity and the religion of the times. This is possibly one of the most important sections of the book as religiosity permeated every aspect of Carolingian culture, in particular during Louis the Pious's reign. The study of this Christianity is a rather difficult subject. Firstly, the authors clarify that it is more accurate to talk about many Christianities as opposed to one. Additionally, attempting to trace the boundaries between them is not an easy operation, but we must consider that the role of the Roman Church and the Pope was quite different to a century or two later. The presence and the spread of a certain idea of Christian culture was certainly one of the effects promoted by the Carolingian rulers. A further difficulty on analysing this subject is to understand when religion was driven by pure political interest and where it was perpetrated with genuine piety and moral aspiration. The three authors approach these difficulties effectively, giving a correct balance to each of these aspects, whilst ensuring the reader keeps the differences in mind.

In the next thematic chapters (five and six), the authors concentrate their efforts on examining society and its structures. It is not an easy topic – as the authors acknowledge – due to the absence of identifiable social analysis in Carolingian sources. Earlier historians tended to understand the society of the early Middle Ages in terms of models derived from the Roman world. As a consequence much previous historical research has paid little heed to people from lower social groups. Since the second half of the last century this trend started to change with the publication of vast surveys on the countryside and peasant society. However, despite these advancements, progress has been halted by the fact that charters, polyptychs and archaeological data have produced different, sometimes contradictory results, leading to various interpretations. The main doubts centred on the countryside and its villages, which are the dominant topics of the fifth chapter. Initially, the authors demonstrate how the term *villa* changed from its Roman origin and use to a multiplicity of interpretations according to different regions of Carolingian Europe. Following new archaeological excavation, we can associate the description of *villa* with villages, which were the social and spiritual centres of the countryside. Nevertheless the Carolingian countryside remains a complex patchwork of properties, villages and other interests. The authors argue that the aristocracy were sited away from the primary agglomeration of rural settlement and that their influence on village life was generally indirect. This highlights another interesting aspect: for in this view the power of the aristocracy in the countryside is resized, giving a more precise identity to the local realities.

Nevertheless, it is important not to underestimate the role of the aristocracy in social and economic patterns. For this reason chapter six is focused on the aristocracy and its impact on society. The description of aristocracy begins with an explanation of its identity in vocabulary and its appearance and lifestyle according to sources. Subsequently, following an accurate description of family structures, a concluding section is dedicated to the importance of relationships between aristocracy and kings. Perhaps in these chapters a connection with Jean-Pierre Devroey's *Puissants et misérables* (2006) would have been useful, especially in relation to the auto-representation of the aristocracy and their rapport with the peasantry, which is the main focus of Devroey's book.² Although, if one were interested in examining these facets, the clear bibliographical references enable easy access to such information.

Deeply linked with these two chapters is the seventh, which examines the Carolingian economy. This connection is not simply thematic, due to the role that both countryside and

² J.P. Devroey, *Puissants et misérables: système social et monde paysan dans l'Europe des Francs (VI^e-IX^e siècle)* (Bruxelles, 2006).

aristocracy had in the growth of an economic system (or better: systems). In fact, as society in every layer was characterised by a multitude of aspects, the economy was equally divided in different forms. It is possible to argue that accepting a multiple economy within the Carolingian world is the most important achievement made in the study of this subject. In the past many authors tried to explain the economy of the eighth and ninth centuries as a phenomenon with specific stable characterisations, however, during the last 30 years archaeologists and historians have become increasingly conscious of the numerous productive and trading structures in place and new data, particularly in the archaeological field, confirms this tendency. There was a dual diversification of the Carolingian economy: on the one hand we have to face a geographical diversity, in which every region had proper rules and proper mechanisms of production and exchange; on the other we have to consider an economy divided between agents, not following a unique common idea of profit. Inside the mechanisms of exchange and production, kings, counts, abbots, bishops, local lords and even singular individuals had different interests and purposes, giving birth to several economic systems. For this reason the analysis of the period's economy has to be executed with consideration for the social structures. The authors decide to manage the chapter in five main topics, respecting the mutable dynamics of the Carolingian economy. Having described the mechanism of exchange, they present the North Sea economy in the light of the new archaeological surveys, strictly connected to the emporia's phenomenon. The fourth part of the chapter is dedicated to the role of the Vikings in the Frankish economy, in particular looking at the relationships between Viking rulers and Frankish aristocrats. Ultimately, the authors analyse Italy and the connections with the Mediterranean economy, which is probably the most difficult region to examine as a result of the existing mixture of culture, rulers, people and rural and urban settlement types. Concluding the chapter, Costambeys, Innes and MacLean define the Carolingian economy as "a series of distinct local and regional networks, overlapping and intersecting to various degrees, but lacking connection to a real central motor driving activity across the whole".³

This book is the new starting point for studies on the Carolingian world, not only for students but for researchers and established academics. Although the authors recognise the impossibility of examining all aspects of the Carolingian world in depth, the study would have benefited from a section dedicated to the monastery networks as well as further analysis of the economy and demographic growth, which are the new directions emerging in international research.⁴ However, the main strength of this volume is the variety of topics analysed with

³ M. Costambeys, M. Innes, S. MacLean, *The Carolingian World* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 377.

⁴ On this aspect see for example J. P. Devroey, & N. Schroeder, 'Beyond royal estates and monasteries: landownership in the early medieval Ardennes', *Early Medieval Europe*, 20 (2012), pp. 39-69.

clarity, which – together with the book's structure – enables a deeper understanding of the complex and recent issues of contemporary historiography. In addition, the presence of accurate and detailed instruments such as genealogical tables, maps and charts facilitate a greater comprehension of the geography, characters and sources of the period. Moreover, Costambeys, Innes and MacLean infuse the analysis of these topics with their own distinctive experiences, bringing their professional opinions to bear on socio-economic, institutional and political issues. For these reasons *The Carolingian World* should be, and probably will be, an important landmark for students and scholars of not only the Carolingian period, but of the early Middle Ages as a whole.

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