

Swarthmore College

Works

History Faculty Works

History

6-4-1997

Review Of "Cultures Of Power: Lordship, Status, And Process In Twelfth-Century Europe" Edited By T. N. Bisson

Stephen P. Bensch

Swarthmore College, sbensch1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

Recommended Citation

Stephen P. Bensch. (1997). "Review Of "Cultures Of Power: Lordship, Status, And Process In Twelfth-Century Europe" Edited By T. N. Bisson". *Medieval Review*.
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/503>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by . It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

The Medieval Review, 1997 Reviews

[The Medieval Review](#) 97.06.04

Bisson, Thomas N., ed. *Cultures of Power: Lordship, Status, and Process in Twelfth-Century Europe*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995. Pp. x, 347. \$46.95 (hb). ISBN: 0-812-23290-9 (hb). \$19.95 (pb). ISBN: 0-812-21555-9 (pb).

Reviewed by:

Stephen P. Bensch

Swarthmore College

sbensch1@swarthmore.edu

This collection of thirteen essays is the result of an interdisciplinary conference convened at Harvard in 1991 on the theme of power and society in twelfth-century Europe. In spite of the breadth of the subject and the different disciplines represented, the papers as a whole retain a conceptual focus that makes reading the volume in its entirety not only possible but profitable, a reaction which conference proceedings rarely elicit. Because the revised papers include up-dated bibliographies, the volume provides a convenient point of reference for those interested in current directions of research and concise summaries of approaches to the history of power. The majority of contributors are senior scholars, bringing a lifetime of research and reflection to their subjects, yet it is perhaps the younger voices that stand out and reshape old problems. Scholarly investigations on the exercise of power in the High Middle Ages are hardly scarce, but traditionally the topic has been reduced to reassuring discussions of institutional growth or abstract speculation on the nature of political action. This collection configures the problem differently by exploring how power was experienced, negotiated, and justified by contemporaries. The twelfth century (here stretching from 1050 to 1225) provides a particularly fertile field for a nuanced, cultural approach to power, since the rituals and traditions of authority inherited from the early Middle Ages had been buffeted by the powerful social and economic shocks of the late tenth and eleventh century while new forms of administrative routine and ceremonial had not yet stabilized. Twisted by powerful cultural currents that swiftly changed directions, twelfth-century writers often appear either inconsistent or unwilling to articulate clearly the ways in which power operated. Until recently historians in search of cultural expressions of power had principally looked toward the pious admonitions to rulers composed by Carolingian authors or to the abstract scholastic syntheses of the thirteenth century. In order to investigate power relationships during the twelfth century, the conference encouraged consideration of theological, artistic, literary, and ritual perspectives as well as the more familiar legal and institutional concerns.

The papers are grouped into three sections. The first comprises four essays devoted to the social structure of the nobility, and above all the challenge posed by the pressure of expansive, aggrandizing knights. All the authors firmly reject precise definitions of medieval lay elites through legal, social, or cultural criteria, medieval or modern. Throughout this section one becomes immediately aware of current reactions against older social and institutional models intended to create sharply defined categories and trace out clear procedures for their interaction; rather, social edges are blurred and informal maneuvers are emphasized over rules. Theodore Evergates begins the section with a crisp summary of recent studies on French knighthood. He returns to Marc Bloch's two classic theses: first, that nobles from knights merged into a single class; second, that only in the thirteenth century did a legally recognized nobility emerge. Detailed regional studies in the past two generations indicate that Bloch erred on both points. During the long twelfth century Evergates insists that a nobility of birth remained distinct from unruly knights dependent on the profession of arms and service. Even though legal distinctions between nobles and knights are difficult to find in the twelfth century, the malleable nature of custom conceals a very real distance, social as well as cultural, between well-born families supplying princes with high-office holders and heterogeneous groups of knights scrambling for patronage and security. The tenacity of older noble families depended in large part on employing

kinship structures with more finesse than previously assumed. While French historians have insisted that male lineages provided the backbone of the twelfth-century nobility, Evergates stresses the ability of noble houses to renew themselves through recycled cadet branches or marital alliances through daughters. Both culturally and socially, the twelfth-century French nobility today appears more stratified and stable than it did to Bloch. Benjamin Arnold continues the exploration of elites by examining the extent to which pressure from the rising *ministeriales* affected nobilities of birth in Germany. Although roughly parallel to the French knights, the *ministeriales* because of their servile status offer a particularly clear example of a nobility of service; their power often exceeded that of lesser knights in France who possessed full legal freedom. Arnold emphasizes the importance of chivalric culture in integrating leading *ministeriales* into the aristocracy, which desperately needed military and administrative support due to the political instability that followed in the wake of the Investiture Conflict. The fact that a significant number of *ministeriales* could establish themselves firmly as members of the nobility despite legal disabilities provides splendid evidence that power in the twelfth century could overcome formal distinctions inherited from the past.

The contributions by Dominique Barthelemy and Georges Duby provide an intriguing coupling for, like bookends, these two authors prop up an impressive series of French regional histories on feudal society from the 1950s to the present. Barthelemy has spearheaded a counterinsurgency movement against the proponents of the "feudal revolution," whose outlines emerged from Duby's early work on the Maconnais. Drawing upon extensive research on the county of Vendome, Barthelemy stresses continuity rather than rupture. Instead of interpreting the ascendancy of castellan families as a threat to traditional order, he finds that barons at the summit of the nobility controlled castellanies but continued in service to the counts in order to maintain cohesive regional power. His main concern in the present article is to demonstrate that petty nobles, the vavassors, did not represent a challenge to the position of established baronial families. Although some petty nobles did help renew older castellan families, they did not directly challenge established forms of power and exploitation but shared in them in minor ways at the village level as they moved away from the castle. The county of Vendome in the twelfth century was a "warm" society, pliable enough to accept minor adjustments to accommodate the vavassors without undermining local power structures. As the only direct access to Barthelemy's work currently available in English, the article has particular value in introducing students to the author's methodological critique of many formal markers of noble status, including titles, naming patterns, and alodial property. Duby also moves away from institutional concerns in his discussion of women in a world which had to express power to coerce, he believes, in masculine terms. Rather than analyzing the formal elements of marriage alliances and the gifts that fleshed them out or the authority exercised by widows or abbesses, Duby stresses the informal means women employed in the *menage*. Both through control of the household servants and pillow talk, they indirectly had access to the *potestas* their culture considered part of a natural order dominated by males. When inheritance occasionally allowed women to head lineages, they were often suspect. Noblemen were lords of women in their households as well as peasants surrounding their castles.

The second set of essays deals with the process and modality of power rather than with those who exercised it. Three of the contributions explore the contested domain between legal procedure and power. Raoul Van Caenegem examines the place of recognized legal procedures in the social disintegration affecting Flanders after the murder of Count Charles in 1127. Political maneuverings, he maintains, rather than the application of abstract norms led to experimentation with new legal procedures, particularly in the bestowal of urban law to Bruges and privileges to Saint-Omer. There was some expectation, Van Caenegem argues, that the entire crisis in Flanders could have been resolved by accepting a politically neutral but legally binding solution: the suzerain had the right to fill vacant fiefs, a right reminiscent of a distant Carolingian order limiting coercion and violence. Good law, however, is not necessarily good politics. The resolution of the succession crisis ultimately depended on a balance of political force. Charles Duggan stresses the creative dimensions of legal forms in a careful investigation of papal judges delegate in England. Appeals to judgment by papal delegates provide a vivid example of the role of new professional elites in the twelfth century. Duggan, however, does not interpret the growing power of professional lawyers exclusively in terms of papal centralization; the

new procedures proved highly attractive at the local level because they allowed appellants to break free from the restrictions of local lordships. With their formal training, judges delegate responded creatively to new, concrete legal situations within the universalizing claims of canon law. Rather than concentrate on judges or legal forms, Stephen White moves even further from the institutional outlines of law by contextualizing the application of an ordeal. The function of ordeals has given rise to a substantial literature since Peter Brown's seminal discussion in 1977, but the debates have generally related the use of ordeals to fundamental shifts in cultural and institutional history. White instead concentrates on the place of the ordeal within the continuum of the disputing process. He concludes that ordeals were often invoked as a maneuver, depending upon the relative standing, both social and legal, of the parties in the dispute; the ordeal was rarely carried out since its outcome was so uncertain. Invoking an ordeal dramatically intensified a strategy of confrontation, and, like Van Caenegem, White does not shy away from interpreting the process as an intrusion of political force into accepted legal procedure. Behind these discussions of legal process lies the assumption that twelfth-century litigants perceived law and politics as operating at least ideally in distinct domains, even when they in fact impinged upon one another. Procedurally law was still imagined as reassuring and traditional even if it could not operate without jarring intrusions of power.

Sacral kingship in England and France is the subject of Geoffrey Koziol's contribution, one of the most sweeping and suggestive of the volume. The rituals of twelfth-century kings provide in his analysis a particularly sensitive indicator of change since they are centered on a figure caught between older forms of sacral rulership and new systems of administrative power. French kings retained in the eyes of contemporary chroniclers an air of sacred aloofness and propriety, reminiscent of Carolingian traditions; English kings, by contrast, heirs of a crown seized by force, found their rituals challenged and disrupted by partisan strife at court. The reformulation and testing of royal ritual, Koziol asserts, came about not so much as a result of the ideological shock wave of the Investiture Contest but by the "spell of chivalry." Relations between the king and barons, knights, and literate servants upon whom he depended imbued the royal court with a chivalric ethos at odds with the presentation of the king as protector of a sacral corporation. Koziol thus places the familiar institutional contrast between the efficient, organized, but ritually insecure English sovereigns with their solemn, sacrally distant, but poorer counterparts in France into an intriguing symbolic framework.

The final section contains five essays devoted to the representation of power in art and literature. John Williams examines the monumental and artistic styles employed to build up prestige and tradition in the creation of a royal capital at Leon in the mid-eleventh century. The royal pantheon at Sant Isidoro of Leon formed part of an ambitious program inaugurated by Fernando I (d. 1065) to anchor his rule and celebrate his dynasty. Rather than interpreting the key symbolic event, the transfer of the relics of Saint Isidore from Seville to Leon, in terms of a recasting of neo-Visigothic traditions, Williams believes the artistic program drew on transpyrenean imperial images, dependent on Cluniac and even Ottonian models. The capitalization of dynastic images brought stylistic and artistic innovation to the Christian realms of Iberia in order to legitimate royal power. The contributions by Laura Kendrick and Stephen Jaeger deal with artistic presentations of power in literature. Both react against current critical trends that desocialize texts, but each adopts a different strategy. By concentrating on the acerbic verses of Marcabru, Kendrick delves into a literary strategy intended to criticize and control a rancorous nobility in the competitive environment of Occitania. Marcabru tries to shame and embarrass nobles who crudely practice love's delights by pointing out that they thereby bastardize their houses and their legitimacy. Proper courtly conduct helps reproduce power. Kendrick goes so far as to advocate that Marcabru may have been a cleric because of his implicit advocacy of ecclesiastical views of marriage. Jaeger as well explores the extent to which romance socialized turbulent knightly urges. He begins by interpreting Peter of Blois' complaint against knightly ways not as a naive reflection of social reality but as a typical rhetorical stance pitting ideals against gross abuses. Within these literary parameters, courtly romances struggled to convey a new system of social values promoting knightly restraint. In each of the three papers, artistic and literary forms provided surprising new frameworks in which to contain and cultivate new manifestations of twelfth-century lordship, yet in each case the actual exercise of power often challenged and slipped out of these new cultural vessels.

The last two contributions to this section confront directly the language and attitudes ecclesiastical writers exhibited when confronting new types of lordship, or, at the very least, power revealed in a new idiom. By scrutinizing a wide range of twelfth-century Latin authors, John Van Engen demonstrates that lordship, created by sin but sanctioned by God, gained increasing acceptance in reflective expressions of social order. Although still vividly aware of unsanctioned coercion, advocates of ecclesiastical order gradually acknowledged that even petty lords had a share in the legitimate use of public powers, as lay rulers appropriated the mechanisms and ideology of the peace movement in the twelfth century. Ironically, by admonishing knights and local lords to exercise power justly, clerics also provided an opening to legitimize coercion that had previously been presented as a royal prerogative. Philippe Buc also explores the justification of lordship but through a different set of sources, the substantial body of Biblical exegeses produced in Northern France. His conclusions differ from those of Van Engen, for he has unearthed considerable resistance among twelfth-century exegetes to encroaching lordship. Significantly power is often discussed in terms of exploitative excesses and unbridled violence, reaching the symbolic extreme of cannibalism. Since kingship itself originated in sin and rebellion against God, twelfth-century commentators, particularly Peter the Chanter, drew the conclusion that with the end of time hierarchies will disappear; only in the thirteenth century did exegetes undermine these egalitarian implications and assert that inferiors and superiors would be found in the world to come. For both authors, however, those who wielded power at the level of the castle or in service to greater lords slipped through the back door into an ideological mansion constructed for kings.

The range of approaches attempted and the conclusions reached in this volume serve not to bound or define the expressions of power but to extend our grasp of the ways in which older customs of deference and command were being transformed by administration and literacy, with their own habits and symbols. The direction of the essays moves away from institutions, kingship, law, and ideology toward nobility, lordship, process, and representation. Yet even in its most experimental and creative aspects, the twelfth century nevertheless appears in these essays less as a watershed than a cultural adjustment to the transformations of the tenth and eleventh century, a background here taken for granted. Reflecting current cultural preoccupations, the authors do not establish causes but convey possibilities. However innovative the actual exercise of power may or may not have been in the twelfth century, its expression took surprisingly novel forms, whether in traditional genres such as exegesis or in emerging vernacular poetry and monumental structures. The variety and localism of these experiments implicitly support the view of a cultural disjunction with the early Middle Ages, which stimulated, even demanded, the creation of new means of commemorating, extending, and criticizing power. Even though recent scholarship is making it increasingly difficult to maintain a sharp social and institutional rupture with forms of power inherited from the Carolingians, the representations of power that proliferated in the twelfth century intensified a cultural awareness of discontinuity. The social and institutional changes discussed in this volume may be less profound than once thought, but twelfth-century lords, peasants, and clerics experienced power in ways quite different from those of their ancestors.