

H-France Forum

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Constance Brittain Bouchard, *Rewriting Saints and Ancestors: Memory and Forgetting in France, 500-1200*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. xvi + 362 pp. Map, figures, notes, appendices, bibliography, and index. \$79.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8122-4636-0.

Response by Constance Brittain Bouchard, University of Akron

It is very gratifying to receive such positive reviews from four scholars whose work I have long admired, and I very much appreciate the careful attention they gave the book. I was initially bemused to note that, although the book begins where I myself began as a scholar, with cartularies and chronicles of the twelfth century, H-France chose three Carolingianists and a Merovingian-era specialist to review the book. None of them had very much to say about the first three chapters, though it was encouraging of Thomas Noble to say that these opening chapters should be “required reading” for graduate students—I myself would have benefited from them back in the day.

In fact, I realized, it made sense for the reviewers to focus on what the book argues about the early Middle Ages because the most seriously revisionist section is that on the Carolingian era, its churches, its ascendant dynasty, and its gaps in the evidence. After all, a person doesn’t need to write if the only purpose is to agree with what others have already said. In working on this book I especially found myself asking why the received narrative of the eighth and ninth centuries did not match what I found in the primary sources. Why do almost all scholars assume that the age of Charlemagne was a golden age for western monasticism? Why do we now try to combine accounts of Charlemagne’s ancestry that give every sign of having been written in competition with each other? How can I be the only person ever to notice that no contemporary source mentions the deposition of Childeric III? I also had some revisionist points to make about the Merovingian era, in that I suggest that most saints “discovered” then had not really existed, but few scholars will argue with me there.

The purpose of reviews is to critique, which of course the four reviewers do, but it was good to see that all four “got it.” That is, they understood that my purpose was not to correct historical accounts so much as to discuss how medieval thinkers would have liked to have events remembered—and as Abigail Firey especially points out, to highlight how much our own narrative of medieval history is shaped by those medieval authors. Where the reviewers critique it is generally to give a different interpretation of what certain developments suggest, rather than to say that I totally missed the point.

My most controversial assertion has proven to be, as I had anticipated, that the Carolingians in general and Charlemagne in particular were very bad news for western Frankish monasteries. I presented this argument at the Midwest Medieval History Conference four or five years ago and was met with incredulity. The idea that the emperor was good for organized government, and therefore good for monasticism, is hard for many historians to overcome. Susan Wood may be the only previous scholar to make the case that the early Carolingians, as mayors of the palace and then as kings, treated monasteries as their personal property in a manner both unprecedented and injurious to the monastic life.[1] Even though the old topos of the Merovingian kings as semi-pagan has quite rightly been rejected, it is apparently still hard to see them as more supportive of western monasteries than the succeeding dynasty.

John Contreni, for example, cites the large number of Continental monasteries overall founded between the mid-eighth and mid-ninth centuries as evidence that the early Carolingians continued support of monasteries in regions once ruled by the preceding dynasty. But almost all of those foundation were in

eastern Francia, not the western regions where the Merovingian kings had founded and supported houses of monks. He says that I myself list fourteen monasteries founded in Burgundy/southern Champagne during the ninth century, but to reach fourteen he has to include houses dependent on the bishop of Langres in the ninth century but founded much earlier. And I do not argue that the whole ninth century was devoid of monastic foundations, only the first half, the age of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious. With the exception of one hermitage, there were no documented new foundations in the region for nearly a century and a half after Flavigny's foundation in 717, until nuns were established in the old church St.-Sauveur of Nevers in 849 (pp. 241-43). There were a handful of episcopal regulations for and gifts to monasteries that bishops controlled, but nothing like the generosity of great nobles in the second half of the ninth century (of which Cluny's 909/910 foundation was the culmination).

Thomas Noble, though more persuaded than Contreni, asks about the legislation inspired by Benedict of Aniane. Probably I could have said more about Benedict, but I do not see this monastic reformer as undermining my argument. His efforts to "reform" monasticism, which had their principal impact after Charlemagne's death, were particularly aimed at establishing the Benedictine Rule at all houses, instead of the mix of rules of earlier centuries, and had nothing to do with new foundations or even generous gifts. Indeed, his desire to "reform" can itself be seen as the product of difficulties monasteries had faced during the previous three generations.

Noble also puts his finger on something with which I struggled: exactly how to find an overall explanation for the monasteries' conflicts with the bishops, bishops' challenges from the Carolingians, and monasteries' problems with the Carolingians. The Le Mans forgeries are symptomatic of all three: the bishops tried to control the monks of St.-Calais, the monks tried to free themselves from episcopal oversight, and the kings rejected the bishops' claims out of hand in favor of their own domination of the monastery. The liveliness of this story is part of the reason the Le Mans medieval walls ended up on my book's cover. Whatever the glories of the Carolingian Renaissance, there was nothing like the religious enthusiasm marked by rapid spread of new foundations and generosity to old ones as developed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries—or, in different form, in the sixth and seventh centuries.

Abigail Firey makes central to her review something the others discuss less prominently, the extent to which I focus on gaps in the evidence as well as the evidence itself. This was of course deliberate on my part. Part of the reason the early Middle Ages used to be called a Dark Age was because of its shortage of records, but some of the gaps really are gaps, not just a failure of records to survive. Although Contreni suggests the gap I found in monastic records from the mid-eighth century to the mid-ninth was primarily an artifact of Flavigny's history, I rather argue that such a lacuna exists in the records of most Burgundian houses, as well as at monasteries in the diocese of Le Mans and at other houses of west Francia (pp. 152-75).

In addition, I had thought the failure of all contemporary accounts of Pippin the Short's coronation and papal blessing to note that he had to get a previous king out of the way first was more interesting than the reviewers apparently found it (pp. 95-97). Here the failure at the time to mention the deposition of the last Merovingian must have been deliberate, given how many near-contemporary sources discuss Pippin's coronation—unless deposition was unspeakable or, even perhaps, that Childeric was not actually deposed at all.[2] Incidentally, I did not intend to suggest, as Contreni says I do, that scholars had missed the thoroughness with which Carolingian publicists tried to denigrate the preceding line of kings and to laud the new ones—such analysis has been well underway for over fifteen years.[3] Perhaps I did not make myself explicit enough. I intended to argue that choosing a non-Merovingian as king itself was a radical change, not just something that had to be done, and that this transfer of royal authority created a radically different series of rituals and conceptions of dynasty (p. 95).

Yitzhak Hen raises some important issues I did not address except in passing, such as the role of liturgy in shaping perception and memory and the gendered nature of creating a useful past. He also points out

that for all sources, not just cartularies, it is important to take the codex in which a text is found into account, not just the text itself. These would indeed have been worthwhile additions to the book, ones that I regretfully set aside in most cases (though some codicology and even some architecture and artifacts *did* survive the cuts). This book kept threatening to become the thousand-page wonder that makes modern academic presses stagger backwards in horror, even though I took out and repurposed half a dozen chapters as free-standing articles.[4] I'm still amazed that the book ended up as a snappy 350-page monograph.

Let me close by saying again how much I appreciated the reviewers' full and highly positive comments, especially since they had been studying the early Middle Ages for years before I came sashaying in with my "twelfth-century ways." It was also intriguing to find out that some people (not early medievalists!) actually believe history had a three-century gap ("Phantom Time"), as Firey relates. There may be lacunae in what people of the time recorded, or in what survives from their era, but they were real people, not phantoms. Memories may be changeable and hard to grasp, as in the evocative title of Patrick Geary's seminal work,[5] but the medieval writers we are trying to understand had very real goals, ideals, and plans, even if we can only just glimpse them.

NOTES

[1] Susan Wood, *The Proprietary Church in the Medieval West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 211-30.

[2] I discussed this in more depth in "Childeric III and the Emperors Drogo Magnus and Pippin the Pious," *Medieval Prosopography* 28 (2013): 1-16.

[3] For example, Roger Collins, *Charlemagne* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998); Yitzhak Hen, "The Annals of Metz and the Merovingian Past," in *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 175-90; and Rosamond McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and eadem, *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[4] Constance B. Bouchard, "Queen Theuchildis of Sens," *Medieval Prosopography* 26 (2005): 1-12; eadem, "Images of the Merovingians and Carolingians," *History Compass* 4 (2006): 1-15; eadem, "Episcopal *Gesta* and the Creation of a Useful Past in Ninth-Century Auxerre," *Speculum* 84 (2009): 1-35; eadem, "High Medieval Monks Contemplate Their Merovingian Past," *Journal of Medieval Monastic Studies* 1 (2012): 41-62; and eadem, "Reconstructing Sanctity and Refiguring Saints in Early Medieval Gaul," in *Studies on Medieval Empathies*, ed. Karl F. Morrison and Rudolph M. Bell (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), pp. 91-114; eadem, "Childeric III."

[5] Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

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