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Dominique Barthélemy, *The Serf, the Knight, and the Historian*, translated by Graham Robert Edwards. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009. Xii + 356 pp. Notes. \$ 29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8014-7560-3.

Review by Jeffrey Bowman, Kenyon College.

*The Serf, the Knight, and the Historian* is a translation of Dominique Barthélemy's 1997 *La mutation de l'an mil: a-t-elle lieu? Servage et chevalerie dans la France des Xe et XIe siècles* with new introductory and concluding chapters. This book is a series of closely interrelated challenges to the model of Feudal Revolution or Feudal Transformation (*mutation féodale*). Since the early 1970s, historians have described a tumultuous period in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. Regional monographs from different parts of France (and elsewhere in Europe) traced similar cataclysmic forces: political fragmentation, the rise of an oppressive seigneurial class, the multiplication of castles which aided this new class in its predatory projects, and the proliferation of new forms of servitude. Conjoined to these were widespread millenarianist sentiment and sporadic movements of popular resistance such as the Peace of God movements. By the late 1980s, the scholarly consensus was that the decades around the year 1000 were particularly harrowing. It is a complex model, incorporating social, political, intellectual, religious, and legal phenomena. In *The Serf, the Knight, and the Historian*, Barthélemy makes a forceful case for rejecting the model. Here and elsewhere, Barthélemy is unapologetically polemical; but he is also level-headed, learned, and ultimately convincing. The English title hints that the publisher suspects that Anglophone readers will have less enthusiasm for the polemical tone of the original. Although the book is clearly focused on dismantling a model, even readers who are not partisans in this particular debate will find much to admire.

In the first chapter, "Revisiting the 'Feudal Revolution' of the Year 1000," Barthélemy describes the emergence of the model that he has set out to destroy. This amounts to more than a review of scholarship, because Barthélemy's method throughout the book is to juxtapose the work of historians of different generations and schools, asking what assumptions, preoccupations, and choices of evidence have led them to formulate such divergent pictures of the period. In other words, if change was so systemic, so disruptive, and so geographically widespread in this period, how is it that generations of earlier historians simply failed to notice it? Barthélemy hints that the initial interpretive misstep on the part of several historians was to interpret too literally the use of particular terms in medieval records.

Changes in eleventh-century Angevin charters are the subject of chapter two. Between 1040 and 1060, traditional record forms changed abruptly. New terminology appeared and records began to incorporate newly discursive narratives. Barthélemy rejects the claims of historians like Georges Duby and Pierre Bonnassie who suggest that these changes in vocabulary, voice, and form reflect dramatic social and political change. There are no straightforward correlations between documentary changes and social realities. The proliferation of a new term (*miles*, for example) does not indicate the emergence of a new class and the concomitant reshuffling of political order.

In chapter three, "Voluntary Serfdom at Marmoutier in Touraine," Barthélemy examines sixty-five acts by which free men or women voluntarily accepted servile status. These curious records have been

interpreted as signs of increasing seigneurial pressure on peasant proprietors. In these acts of “voluntary serfdom,” historians have seen the degradation of individual property-holders at the hands of powerful institutions. Barthélemy’s account is more sanguine. He encourages us not to be preoccupied with particular categories of social identity (like *servus*), but instead to strive to see the range of connections and options available to individual actors. There were many shades of serfdom and the transactions recorded at Marmoutier might in some cases reflect an improvement in someone’s conditions. In other words, Barthélemy does not see individuals being forced into a degrading servitude so much as the monasteries and their neighbors negotiating and lay people cultivating possibly advantageous affiliations with the monastery. Acts of self-enservment could be promising opportunities rather than desperate last resorts. Chapter four also deals with serfdom, particularly “rites of serfdom.” Here too Barthélemy advocates a nuanced appreciation of different varieties of semi-liberty, including the influential ministerials.

In the three chapters that follow, Barthélemy’s focus shifts from serfs to social and political elites: knights. In chapter five, he explores the meaning of the word *miles*, again rejecting arguments that growth in the use of the word marked the emergence of a new form of knighthood and insisting that the terms *nobilis* and *miles* did not refer to separate groups. In chapter six, he bolsters the argument for continuity by showing that ideas about knighthood around the year 1000 were in many respects similar to Carolingian antecedents. In chapter seven, “Knighthood and Nobility around the Year 1000,” Barthélemy explores social gradations, expectations about knightly behavior, and variation in documentation in different regions. He challenges the claim made by some historians that the knights of eleventh century came from more modest backgrounds than their tenth-century predecessors.

In chapter eight, “The Peace of God in the Days of the Millennium,” Barthélemy addresses the intellectual and religious aspects of the Feudal Revolution. The traditional model argued that churchmen and groups of lay people organized Peace councils in response to the violence and disorder around them. Crowds of lay people were fueled by millenarian expectations. With regard to the Peace councils themselves, Barthélemy suggests that neither their organization nor their legislative agenda were particularly revolutionary. Here too, he points to Carolingian precedents. It is a mistake to overstate the degree to which these councils reflected popular concerns or to suggest that they were fundamentally anti-seigneurial. The logic of saintly patronage apparent in the Peace movements reaches back farther to late antiquity as described by Peter Brown. Feverish millenarianism was confined to a circumscribed, monastic context. Most people were not concerned with the millennium of Christ’s incarnation or that of his crucifixion. Apocalyptic, millenarian thought was kept mostly in the cloister and not diffused in the wider world. This was, in Barthélemy’s phrase “an experts’ apocalypse,” with little purchase on the popular imagination and little impact on political order. Fascinating though they are, we should not take Rodulfus Glaber and Ademar of Chabannes as reliable guides to popular opinion.

In a short final chapter, “New Perspectives on France around the Year 1000,” Barthélemy reviews scholarship that has appeared since the French edition of the book. Barthélemy’s is no longer a lone voice in the wilderness. Much recent work has followed him in at least qualifying and in some cases flatly rejecting the key tenets of *mutationnisme*. Recent accounts of the period’s social, political, or legal orders tend to describe the interaction of knights, churchmen, peasants, and serfs in terms of negotiation and calculation, rather than predation, crisis and chaos.

Barthélemy does a remarkably thorough job of dismantling the model of Feudal Revolution. He describes an eleventh-century political order that is scalar and hierarchical, but not rigidly so. He argues powerfully for a new chronology of the high Middle Ages . . . or, more accurately, for the restoration of an older chronology favored by historians like Marc Bloch who saw important continuities from the Carolingian world to the eleventh century. For Barthélemy, we must wait until the twelfth century to see fundamental shifts in political and social order. Barthélemy is engaged, but he

is also generous. One of the rhetorical achievements of the book is that Barthélemy can be so programatically critical of a generation of prominent French medievalists (most notably Georges Duby, Pierre Bonnassie, and Pierre Toubert) without in any way lessening the palpable respect Barthélemy displays for their accomplishments. In short, Barthélemy achieves what he sets out to do. He dismantles the model of Feudal Revolution and leaves something rigorous and viable in its place. It is hard not to conclude that the *mutation féodale* is, as Barthélemy argues, a caricature whose usefulness has all but vanished. This alone would be enough to make *The Serf, the Knight, and the Historian* essential reading for anyone interested in the history of France in the Middle Ages, but it is worth noting two other accomplishments that make this volume interesting to historians whose research interests do not include the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Barthélemy displays an authoritative command of the relevant primary sources and a subtle appreciation of the currents of historiographic tradition. The “historian” of the volume’s title refers not only to the beleaguered *mutationnistes* whose model the author assails, but more broadly to generations of French historians who have treated the period from the eighteenth century on. For Barthélemy, a deep understanding of the evolution of historiographic traditions might and must inform our understanding of the medieval past. Balancing these two foci (the world of the year 1000 and strains of French historiography) is a difficult task, but Barthélemy accomplishes it with grace. The reader comes to see, for example, how Michelet’s breathless account of the terrors of the year 1000 can help us understand the assumptions and enthusiasms of more recent scholarship.

A second signal accomplishment lies in the Barthélemy’s discussion of the interpretive principles that should govern our approach to medieval records. The book’s final chapter promises new perspectives on “France,” but the significance of this chapter and of the collection more generally extends well beyond the dynamics of change and continuity around the year 1000. In Barthélemy’s account, the model of the Feudal Revolution became dominant in large part because scholars overestimated the stability and the coherence of the vocabulary medieval scribes used to categorize tenure and social status. Transformationists have shown a misplaced faith in the rigor and lucidity of the terms used by medieval scribes to describe social status. They argue that a marked modulation in vocabulary (the abandonment of the word *mancipium* or an upsurge in the use of the word *miles*) must signal seismic social transformation. For Barthélemy, on the other hand, references to violence or to serfs, require “decoding.” Barthélemy points out, for example, that a single cartulary might refer to the same person with different titles or designations. The realization that the meanings of particular terms are fluid and imprecise fundamentally changes how we see the period. The accumulated examples offer a sobering lesson about how little confidence we can have in the semantic precision of the terms used by medieval scribes. Barthélemy convinces that ambiguity of these terms does not permit us to impose an order upon them that did not exist.

*The Serf, the Knight, and the Historian* is an important and inspiring book. As the long obituary of a model that dominated our understanding for several decades, it is essential reading for historians of the central Middle Ages. At the same time, Barthélemy’s probing explorations of the principles that should govern the interpretation of records and of the deep currents of historiographic tradition should interest even those who have not followed the career of the *mutation féodale* with keen interest.

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