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BOOK REVIEWS

STUART AIRLIE, *Making and Unmaking the Carolingians, 751–888* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), xix + 435 pp. ISBN 978 1 788 31744 3 (hardback), £76.50. ISBN 978 1 350 18900 3 (paperback), £26.09

How did the Franks know that they were living in the Carolingian realm? By analogy with Hopkins's work on the Roman Empire,[1] Airlie sums up the main concerns of his recent study as follows (p. 15): how did the family rhythm of the royal household shape the political culture of the Frankish realm? How was the idea of the specialness of the Carolingians created, communicated, and maintained? What ranks and expectations developed within the royal family over the course of about 150 years when Francia was ruled only by Carolingian kings? These basic questions guide Airlie's analysis of the 'many-headed monster' (p. ix), as the Carolingian family appears to modern researchers, over 318 pages of text. The presentation throughout is both accessible and sophisticated. The book comprises nine chapters, each with three to seven sections, whose detailed contents can only be broadly outlined here.

After 'Weighing the legacy of the Carolingians' (pp. 1–4), the author introduces the methodological background he draws on when researching 'The illusion of natural authority' (pp. 4–9). Adapting Antonio Gramsci, Airlie considers Carolingian royalty as orthodoxy—a system of practices and norms which fed the idea of specialness over space and time. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus takes this exclusive and innate Carolingian royal distinctiveness further. Finally, based on the work of Michel Foucault, 'power' is understood as a fluid social attribute of subjects, groups, or societies—something that is not only repressive, but also discursive, evolving, and productive. The contents of the methodological toolbox

[1] Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge, 1978), 197.

are demonstrated when discussing 'Frankish royalty as inheritance' (pp. 9–13), 'Carolingian specialness' (pp. 13–18), how it is portrayed in the sources (pp. 18–23), and a case study of the reception of the death of 2-year-old Louis, grandson of Louis the German, in 879 (pp. 23–5).

The following chapters present the history of the Carolingian family chronologically and in terms of the different generations of kings—that is, Pippin III (ch. 2), Charlemagne (ch. 3), Louis the Pious (ch. 5), the various royal lines after the 843 Treaty of Verdun (ch. 6), and the loss of uniqueness after 888, with a few glances forward into the post-Carolingian world (ch. 9). However, chapters on the sons (ch. 4), the women and daughters of the royal family (ch. 8), and the imaginary of Carolingian power (ch. 7) open this structure out by surveying the whole Carolingian era.

Yet the chapters on the reigns of specific kings are not regicentric. When Airlie describes the 'Building [of] Carolingian royalty 751–68' under Pippin (pp. 27–52), the sources are already centre stage, as Airlie observes how Pippin's family—his wife, sons, and daughters— were involved in representing the recently gained kingship. The benefits of taking a broader, family-inclusive perspective on events are also evident when it comes to Airlie's reflections on why Pippin sought the throne. Airlie explains that he embarked on the venture in a sticky situation between the claims of his nephews and his half-brother Grifo. Pippin eventually established a new balance of power with the lay and clerical aristocracy. Former Merovingian centres such as Saint-Denis were integrated into his system of kingship, giving Pippinid/Carolingian foundations such as Prüm a new royal quality. Airlie further interprets the rituals involved in these efforts, their transmission, and monastic remembrance (*memoria)* as links between the past, present, and future of Carolingian rulership.

The account of Charlemagne (pp. 53–92) likewise focuses on how Carolingian royalty was shaped not only through the exercise of its power, but also by the limits to its authority. On the one hand, the co-operation between the aristocracy and the king (as senior partner) is highlighted, while on the other, the competition and conflicts within the family are emphasized. Many examples show how these two major dynamics were intertwined, and in addition to well-known events, special attention is paid to lesser-known individuals. To list

but a few, Airlie considers the role of Pippin's widow Bertrada in the carefully orchestrated succession of 767; the Hardrad conspiracy of 785–6; the Carolingian legitimacy paradox of Pippin the Hunchback, who was born royal but who was later stripped of his royalty; Pippin of Italy (died 810); and the status of Charlemagne's daughters on the eve of his reign. Airlie thus integrates the research of recent decades to produce a broad picture when explaining situational reactions, instabilities, and special occasions as well as mid-term trends and long-term developments, always taking into account the views of the elite, the royal family, and the ruler. He concludes that the figure of Charlemagne was enlarged by a projection of his aura throughout the realm, and that he 'cast a much longer shadow than any of his predecessors and most of his successors' (p. 56).

While medieval research in general focuses mainly on relations between the king and his heir(s), the chapter on 'Child labour 751–88' (pp. 93–120) deals with the biological life cycle and the socio-cultural role of 'Born rulers' (pp. 93–102). (The princesses are discussed in chapter eight.) Airlie highlights the early participation of the heirs presumptive in representing the power and distinctiveness of the royal family—for example, by their given names, including in the case of the remembrance of children who had died young (pp. 102–9). The childhood of the princes is further illuminated as a period of networking with current political actors, who were their godfathers or mentors, and with future ones, by learning and playing with the offspring of the Frankish elite.

It is noteworthy that the fifth chapter, entitled 'Louis the Pious and the paranoid style in politics' is the longest in the book (pp. 121–72). I will just make two further points here. First, Airlie's discussion of Bernard of Italy's political vulnerability as the orphaned son of a king who was close to his grandfather Charlemagne, and later as king in distant Italy, is outlined in chapters three to five. For the reader it is an added pleasure that the main questions reappear as leitmotivs throughout the argument, and that Airlie also develops and inter-links the examples in a way that makes them easy to understand and encourages the reader to compare them. Second, he continues to carefully present the results of recent research in reassessing the historical image of Louis the Pious based on events up to the Treaty

of Verdun of 843. Apart from processes of differentiation within the royal family, the chapter also evaluates the evolution of family norms and their political functionalization.

Chapter six casts a dynastic glance at the post-843 kingdoms as 'Lines of succession and lines of failure 843–79' (pp. 173–216). At this point, the 'Carolingian political–familial geography' was 'broader and deeper than rule by brothers' (p. 182). 'Carolingian royalty was socially constructed in that the political elite had to recognize a king, but only Carolingians could be so recognized and their status was inborn, in social terms, and thus an integral and necessary part of their royalty along with the religious aura' (p. 183). This dominant position is illustrated by a horizontal view of 'Rule by brothers' (pp. 179–84) and a vertical view of the kingdoms under 'Rule by fathers' (pp. 184–7). In addition to the lesser-known Pippin II of Aquitaine, the case of Charles the Bald and his 'Radical options' in family politics are put under the spotlight: 'sending some of his legitimate sons . . . into monasteries, deploying fertility magic to re-activate his wife's exhausted body, building an artificial Carolingian (Boso), commissioning counsellors to advise him on disinheriting a son, Charles was the Dr Frankenstein of ninth-century politics' (p. 205).

In my opinion, chapters three, seven, and eight form the heart of the study, while the others provide a deeper and more detailed evaluation of the events and sources. However, the analyses of case studies and long-term developments are well balanced in the argument. For example, the whole book examines how the idea of exclusive Carolingian royalty was disseminated by different carriers of memory. In chapter seven these observations are brought together (pp. 217–42): the comparison of sources from the time of Charlemagne to the tenth century makes genealogies appear dynamic, customized, and goal-oriented (pp. 217–23). Nor were the notions of kinship and the legitimacy of offspring predefined (pp. 224–33), so that succession and pecking orders remained fluid. Even without a claim to the throne, closer or more distant members of the Carolingian family could radiate a special identity or political potential. Eventually, the realm was covered by a royal presence in the form of places of memory and power, or constant prayers for the king, his heirs, and predecessors (pp. 233–42).

The importance of the Carolingian women in this dynastic framework is the focus of the eighth chapter (pp. 243–72). Since it is both impossible and undesirable to summarize all of Airlie's observations here, suffice it to say that he questions the existence of marriage patterns or strategies, but notes some general developments without omitting the remarkable exceptions to these trends. Princes' marriages were predominantly arranged and dictated as political decisions by their fathers, who usually took the state of the succession into consideration. By contrast, the mainly aristocratic women who became queens were irreversibly absorbed into the Carolingian familial and royal identity. Royal daughters had political value, too, and therefore tended to be controlled strictly. Their key role in maintaining Carolingian authority by networking and memory is especially visible in monasteries (pp. 255–72).

The eighth chapter thus generates the background for the ninth and final one: 'The loss of uniqueness: 888 and all that' (pp. 273–318). The crisis is analysed chronologically from 'The incredible shrinking dynasty?' in the 870s (pp. 273–8) to the reign of Charles the Fat and his deposition and death (887–8, pp. 279–91), which finally leads to '888 and the breaking of the dynastic spell' (pp. 292–310). It is tempting to see the short 'Ending' (pp. 310–18) as an account of the slow fading of the Carolingian legacy. Increased dynastic mortality put stress on the established power mechanisms, a development interestingly discussed by historiographers at the time. It was noticed by aristocrats as well, who took their chances, but were forced to act by the rapidly shifting but nonetheless Carolingian-framed political landscape.

This review has attempted to indicate the huge effort which has gone into this monograph. Airlie's key achievement is to structure the presentation comprehensibly while also providing a coherent and well-grounded perspective. He shows how the Carolingians became special as the royal family through processes of familial and political differentiation. Political culture constantly developed between rulers and aristocrats, kings, wives/queens, heirs, and their siblings, while Carolingian dominance was established as a fixed yet dynamic framework. People and phenomena (and chapters) are always linked by spatial and temporal dimensions, for example, when the memory of Carolingians as former kings, donors, abbots/abbesses, or pupils

lived on and was concentrated in different places. Taking this holistic view, *Making and Unmaking the Carolingians* is a new standard work which assembles the international research into a full panoply. It thus demonstrates how the history of dynasties or rulers can be captured with a modern cultural–historical approach. Like Theodor Adorno, who quipped that it is 'the task of art . . . to bring chaos into order',[2] Airlie reveals existing questions, adds new ones, and unpicks some oversimplifications — in discussing appropriate meanings for the terms 'dynasty' and 'family' in the early Middle Ages, for example — without losing the illustrative and entertaining qualities of his accessible language. The book ends by presenting 'the silence around Charles's tomb in Maastricht'—Duke Charles of Lower Lorraine, the last agnatic Carolingian (died 991) — as 'the end of an old song' (p. 318). But as long as studies like Airlie's are written, the echo of this song will continue to enchant modern readers.

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[2] See Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London, 2005; 1st pub. in German, 1951), 222.

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