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Review of Steffen Patzold, *Presbyter: Moral, Mobilität und die Kirchenorganisation im Karolingerreich*

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STEFFEN PATZOLD, *Presbyter: Moral, Mobilität und die Kirchenorganisation im Karolingerreich*, Monographien zur Geschichte des Mittelalters, 68 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 2020), 599 pp. ISBN 978 3 777 22023 9. €196.00

In 2008 Steffen Patzold published *Episcopus* (659 pp.); now he has published *Presbyter* (599 pp.). Several medievalist friends have joked that in a few years we should expect a large volume entitled *Diaconus*. Patzold's two important works on Carolingian churchmen, however, take very different approaches. The subtitle of *Episcopus* was 'Knowledge about Bishops in Francia from the Late Eighth to the Early Tenth Century';¹ and the book detailed how representations and self-representations of bishops changed over this period. Patzold showed that early ninth-century Carolingian bishops created their own vision of what a bishop should be and how he should relate to rulers and the secular world. Reformers were successfully able to spread this new 'knowledge' about bishops via councils, admonitory texts, and hagiography in ways that deeply affected both the Frankish church and its Ottonian successor.

The subtitle of *Presbyter* ('Morality, Mobility, and Church Organization in the Carolingian Empire') indicates its main theme less clearly. Patzold considers a more restricted field of priests than Robert Godding, whose work included urban priests and future bishops.² In contrast, *Presbyter* focuses on 'local priests', defined (pp. 65–6) as men who

cared for a church beyond the bishop's seat and outside religious communities like monasteries or collegiate churches; and . . . were responsible for the pastoral care of the surrounding laypeople, particularly for the singing of Mass, preaching, and for confession and penance.

Patzold considers such men a new type of priest, contrasting them with a Merovingian church organized around cities, private oratories, and groups of priests serving larger rural settlements. His focus is on local priests north of the Alps, with a few comparisons with the rather different circumstances in Carolingian Italy.

¹ Steffen Patzold, *Episcopus: Wissen über Bischöfe im Frankenreich des späten 8. bis frühen 10. Jahrhunderts* (Ostfildern, 2008).

² Robert Godding, *Prêtres en Gaule mérovingienne* (Brussels, 2001).

Many researchers are now studying such local priests, as showcased in a volume which Patzold co-edited with Carine van Rhijn.³ *Presbyter*, in contrast, focuses on refuting a much older scholarly model of the Carolingian local priest: Ulrich Stutz's concept of the *Eigenkirche* and its priest. Stutz, a highly influential Protestant Swiss-German historian of church law, developed his idea of the *Eigenkirche* from the early 1890s onwards (pp. 17–19).⁴ He described it as a church whose owner (whether a layperson, an ecclesiastical foundation, or a bishop) had full control over the property of the church and its endowment, which could be sold, bequeathed, or exchanged as the owner chose. Stutz claimed that owners also controlled the tithes received by the church and chose their own priests, with bishops having no real power to reject candidates for ordination. For Stutz, the Carolingian period was when the *Eigenkirche* was formally recognized in law and became the predominant type of church in the Frankish empire, with many parish churches thus removed from effective episcopal control (pp. 25–8).

Patzold devotes chapter two to what he sees as the 'amazing tenacity' (p. 26) of Stutz's concept in the historiography until the present day. While early medievalists now reject the binaries of Germanic/Roman, state/church, and private law/public law underpinning Stutz's model, his concept is still frequently cited by more general historical works. Many scholars are also still influenced by Stutz's view of the priests appointed to *Eigenkirchen*. He saw such men as poor, menial, and ill-educated dependants of their church-owning lords, who forced bishops to ordain enslaved or freed men despite their unsuitability.

Patzold wants to bury Stutz's model once and for all; in his view, only when we challenge this concept of the *Eigenkirche* can we revise our picture of early medieval priests, churches, and communities from the ground up (p. 20). This determination is the driving force behind *Presbyter* and explains the book's arrangement, caught slightly awkwardly between trying to disprove Stutz's disparaging image of the *Eigenkirche* priest and developing a new model of such men. For example, Patzold spends considerably more time discussing priests' relations to their

³ Steffen Patzold and Carine van Rhijn (eds.), *Men in the Middle: Local Priests in Early Medieval Europe* (Berlin, 2016).

⁴ See in particular Ulrich Stutz, *Geschichte des kirchlichen Benefizialwesens: Von seinen Anfängen bis auf die Zeit Alexanders III.* (Berlin, 1895).

lords, or *seniores* (pp. 451–69) than to their diocesan bishops (pp. 469–74). Carolingian sources say more about priest–bishop relations (which were often tricky), but Patzold wants to emphasize that Stutz’s concept of the church lord misinterprets the evidence (p. 469).

This tension between demolishing an old model and developing a new one is reflected in the sources used for different chapters. Chapters five (on law) and six (on tithes) re-examine normative sources, such as capitularies and council texts, to demonstrate that Stutz was incorrect to claim that owners of *Eigenkirchen* had unlimited powers over them and their priests. Tithes (newly mandated to go to local churches) normally went to the priest rather than to the church’s owner, and there is little evidence of such rules being breached. Church owners could not, therefore, expect any direct income from the churches they had founded.

In contrast to this focus on centrally promulgated texts, chapters four (on the different types of priests), eight (on priests’ families), and nine (on priests’ social relations) draw heavily on recent research on local priests, which predominantly uses charters, to show priests as men thoroughly embedded in networks of local influence. Such recent individual case studies, however, are harder to combine into the type of systematic analysis that Patzold prefers. Sometimes his urge for classification and typologies is very useful, such as when he pulls together the fragments of information known about priests who acted as domestic chaplains to the nobility to create a brief, but reliable picture of such men (pp. 95–101). At other points, however, Patzold’s typologies become overly schematic. He repeatedly stresses the difference between churches with and without baptismal rights (pp. 102–11), since only baptismal churches, in theory, received tithes. Charters north of the Alps, however, rarely mention whether specific churches were baptismal churches, suggesting that this distinction was not particularly significant.

Patzold also does not take enough account of actual liturgical practice. In a world of high infant mortality, and where one of the greatest possible failings of a local priest was to let an infant die unbaptized, families may sometimes have called on the nearest priest for the ceremony regardless of his church’s status. If the infant’s family also attended Mass at the church—another of the criteria for where tithes

were paid (p. 266, n. 98)—any church with a congregation may have easily ‘become’ a baptismal church.

Patzold’s failure to consider baptismal practices reflects a book which tells us surprisingly little about what local priests did pastorally and liturgically. (This contrasts with another recent book on local priests: *Leading the Way to Heaven* by Carine van Rhijn.)⁵ Patzold’s approach, mainly concerned with priests’ independent action, education, and material situation, here seems unconsciously affected by Stutz’s Protestantism, as well as more consciously by a twenty-first-century emphasis on ‘quality management and knowledge’ (p. 501).

Perhaps because so much of *Presbyter* is devoted to demolishing Stutz’s model, Patzold’s discussions of more recent research sometimes also take on a rather confrontational tone. This is most prominent in chapter seven (on priests’ education), where a detailed and fascinating account of three priests’ books (pp. 342–86) repeatedly stresses the inaccuracy of Susan Keefe’s classifications of such books, in a way that seems excessive. Though it may be unreasonable to want a 600-page book to be longer, this was a chapter where I would have liked Patzold to expand on his research. Is it possible to use documents written by priests themselves (such as these handbooks and charters) to explore their own self-image? Were such men creating ‘knowledge’ about themselves in the way that Patzold has previously shown Carolingian bishops were?

There are some practical weaknesses in the organization of the book. Although the contents pages include subsections of chapters, the lack of subject and manuscript indexes make some important passages difficult to find. For example, scholars who would potentially be interested in Patzold’s very useful analyses of the collective role of local communities in building churches and choosing priests (pp. 137–42), the lack of Carolingian evidence for unfree priests (pp. 463–9), or the statutes for a confraternity of priests contained in Bern Burgerbibliothek AA 90.11 (pp. 433–48, 514–17) would not easily discover that the book contained such information.

Overall, I felt that *Presbyter* was more successful in demolishing Stutz’s *Eigenkirche* model than in creating Patzold’s own new model

⁵ Carine van Rhijn, *Leading the Way to Heaven: Pastoral Care and Salvation in the Carolingian Period* (Abingdon, 2022).

of the local priest. The three themes in the subtitle (morality, mobility, and church organization) are rather unevenly treated. In terms of church organization, Patzold demonstrates that a number of local priests had considerable independence and room for manoeuvre. I would have liked more acknowledgement, however, that charter evidence is biased towards wealthier and better-connected priests. Priests who were completely dependent on their lord are only likely to be documented in exceptional circumstances, such as when the priest Atto complained to Louis the Pious about being defrauded and beaten by his church's owner (pp. 283–4).

Patzold's discussion of the mobility of priests and their congregations makes very good use of an underused source: the *litterae formatae*, letters of recommendation by bishops which authorized priests to move between dioceses (pp. 74–84, 503–5). He does not, however, draw on archaeological data on the locations and spacing of local churches, or evidence on the spatial mobility of witnesses, as pioneered by Wendy Davies's studies of the ninth-century Breton church.⁶

The Carolingian reform movement's emphasis on *correctio*, in the sense of correct moral and spiritual behaviour by local priests and their communities, is a key theme of the book. Patzold follows much recent work in showing just how serious reformers' attempts were to influence the grass roots of society in multiple ways, but he does not discuss how 'reform' might interact with existing community norms. For example, he makes the plausible claim that clerical celibacy was more successfully enforced in the Carolingian period than during the Gregorian reforms of the eleventh century (p. 403). He is unconvinced by the suggestions of Julia Barrow and myself that different regional forms of church organization in the early Middle Ages affected patterns of father–son or uncle–nephew inheritance of church office, and thus the willingness of priests in different European regions to accept celibacy

⁶ The potential contribution of archaeology to analysis of local churches is demonstrated by Christine Delaplace (ed.), *Aux origines de la paroisse rurale en Gaule méridionale, IVe–IXe siècles: Actes du colloque international, 21–23 mars 2003* (Paris, 2005). Wendy Davies, *Small Worlds: The Village Community in Early Medieval Brittany* (London, 1988) includes a chapter on local mobility (pp. 105–33).

(pp. 413–17).⁷ Yet Patzold provides no alternative explanation for why reformers in ninth-century Francia encountered less resistance to bans on priestly marriages than those in later centuries, or why priests in Carolingian Italy and Brittany did continue to marry.

I am left finally wondering about a wider issue: for whom is this book intended? Patzold says little about more general research on early medieval proprietary churches, such as Susan Wood's monumental *The Proprietary Church in the Medieval West*.⁸ He sees Wood's definitions as 'lacking in analytical sharpness' (p. 19, n. 31) and so focuses on Stutz's much more tightly defined concept of the *Eigenkirche*, which he proceeds to demolish. Patzold's academic writing style is clear enough to make this book accessible to non-native speakers, but the book as a whole feels very much intended for the German academy. The substantial research already produced on local priests in the early Middle Ages shows that new models of the Carolingian priesthood can be created without an explicit demolition of Stutz's paradigm. Patzold's book is probably necessary for some corners of German medieval research which have not yet caught up with these developments. The rest of us may not make as much use of its scholarship as we probably should. It is particularly unfortunate in this respect that there is no subject index to signpost the many new and intriguing aspects of Patzold's research within this long text. It is helpful to have this book as a final stake in the heart for Stutz's ideas, but I do not feel that it quite succeeds in providing a new model of the Carolingian local priest.

⁷ Julia Barrow, *The Clergy in the Medieval World: Secular Clerics, Their Families and Careers in North-Western Europe, c.800–c.1200* (Cambridge, 2015), 115–57; Rachel Stone, 'Exploring Minor Clerics in Early Medieval Tuscany', *Reti Medievali Rivista*, 18/1 (2017), 67–97, at [<https://doi.org/10.6092/1593-2214/5076>].

⁸ Susan Wood, *The Proprietary Church in the Medieval West* (Oxford, 2006).

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