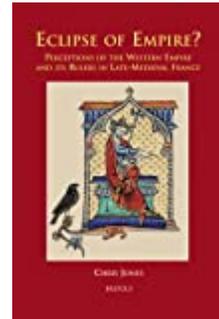




Chris Jones. *Eclipse of Empire? Perceptions of the Western Empire and Its Rulers in Late-Medieval France.* Turnhout: Brepols, 2007. xxiv + 416 pp. \$116.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-2-503-52478-8.



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The Middle Ages and the Origins of the Modern Nation-State

Chris Jones offers here an inventive approach to answering the question of whether or not the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries witnessed the fading of a notion of universal imperial authority in western Europe and the concomitant emergence of a definition of royal power that denied the existence of any kind of supra-regnal temporal authority. Specifically, he examines how a broad range of chroniclers and treatise-writers active between the 1240s and 1340s in what he terms the “northern French milieu” discussed the western empire and its relationship to the kingdom of France. According to Jones, Emperor Frederick II’s deposition by the pope in 1245 and his subsequent death in 1250 marked a turning point in French conceptions of the empire and the imperial title. Because none of Frederick’s successors as kings of Germany and as emperors achieved his level of power and prestige, the notion of a western empire became increasingly amorphous. As a result, northern French authors developed new ways of conceptualizing the place of imperial authority in Latin Christendom.

The book’s eight chapters approach this central topic from a variety of perspectives. The first three chapters

explore the ways in which authors working within the northern French milieu treated the careers of each of the emperors and German kings from Frederick II through Ludwig of Bavaria. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on perceptions of Emperor Frederick II before and after his death, while chapter 3 concerns the rulers who succeeded him. The remaining five chapters of the book are not organized so coherently, as each concerns a different theme. In chapter 4, Jones investigates how chroniclers and other writers treated Charlemagne and his perceived dual role as emperor and king of France. Chapter 5, one of the most compelling in the book, examines how authors of the northern French milieu perceived the electoral nature of German kingship and the lack of dynastic continuity in the empire after 1250—two features of imperial history that contrasted sharply with the situation in France, where the remarkable stability of the Capetian dynasty was a key component of the thirteenth- and early-fourteenth-century political environment. Jones shifts in chapter 6 to the analysis of various writers’ opinions on the issue of whether or not the imperial title granted German rulers any kind of temporal authority over the French kings. Chapter 7, which is quite different in feel from the other

chapters, looks at the more concrete issue of how the French treated the territories along the frontier between France and the empire; here, Jones employs charter evidence and a more diverse source base than in the rest of the book to determine whether or not the French considered the empire to have well-defined borders. In chapter 8, Jones returns to the question of how the imperial title was conceptualized in the northern French milieu and claims that most authors, even into the early fourteenth century, did believe that the office of emperor differed in significant ways from the royal office.

The work concludes with Jones arguing against the prevailing historical model, one promoted first and foremost by Joseph Strayer, that the period after Emperor Frederick II's death saw the French cast off all notions of imperial power and begin moving toward a conception of the modern nation-state that recognizes no external authority. On this point, Jones is convincing. He clearly demonstrates that the imperial office continued to be identified as something distinctive among authors of the northern French milieu throughout the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The emperors were viewed as having a special role vis-à-vis the papacy and were thought to be the leaders of the crusading movement. A notion of supra-regnal authority thus survived the collapse of the Staufien Empire after 1250.

As Jones explains in his preface, two interests attracted him to this topic: Jean Quidort's famous treatise on royal and papal power and the use of the chronicle as an historical source. Jones develops these interests by displaying throughout his work an impressive knowledge of archival materials relating to the chronicles and treatises written inside the northern French milieu between the 1240s and 1340s. He is thus able to demonstrate, for example, that Quidort's treatise had much less of an impact on late medieval political thought than most

modern scholars assume. But in the process of making this and similar arguments, Jones reveals that most of the chroniclers and treatise-writers he analyzes did not share common opinions about *anything* concerning the empire and the imperial title. Jones therefore struggles at times to tie all of his research together into a straightforward argument. Significant stretches of the book, including chapters 1, 2, 6, and 8, are essentially catalogues of different authors and their disparate opinions. As a result, the reader often finds himself lost—trying to understand, for example, why it is significant that Guillaume de Nangis, Vincent de Beauvais, and Bernard Gui differ somewhat in their accounts of Frederick II's capture of a group of French prelates in 1241—with few path markers to help him see where these trees stand within the forest that is the book's main argument. The strongest impression this work leaves with the reader is that writers in the northern French milieu did not have a consistent understanding of the status of the empire and the role of the emperor in western Europe. This conclusion, of course, is hardly surprising; even authors living and writing inside the empire were confused and uncertain about the nature of imperial authority in the wake of Frederick II's death.

Specialists in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century France will find this book valuable because of Jones's detailed discussions of the authorship and manuscript traditions of numerous chronicles and treatises written in the northern French milieu from the 1240s to 1340s. Within this context, his work on the *Grandes Chroniques de France* is especially impressive. While the conclusions Jones draws are important for understanding late medieval political culture, other scholars will find that much of this book is too focused on examining the nuances of individual chroniclers' and treatise-writers' opinions on imperial authority to reward a close reading.

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