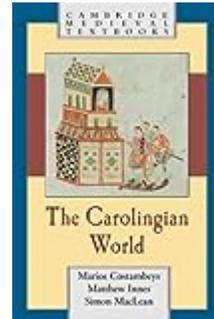




Marios Costambeys, Matthew Innes, Simon MacLean. *The Carolingian World.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xix + 505 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-56366-6; \$34.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-56494-6.



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The Carolingian World Reimagined

In this engaging monograph, Marios Costambeys, Matthew Innes, and Simon MacLean offer a textured survey of the Carolingian world from the inception of the Carolingian dynasty in 751 to its demise in the late ninth century. The aim is to present to a general and specialized audience a new synthesis that carefully integrates political, social, economic, and cultural developments, and communicates in an accessible way the most recent research and scholarly debates. To do this, the authors have divided the book into nine chapters: an introduction, an epilogue, and seven body chapters.

The introduction makes the case that there was an essential Carolingian world because Frankish writers of the time thought one existed. It then introduces the sources for the period, though not by means of a dry recitation of grist, but by emphasizing that the writing conventions and sentiments, which shaped the surviving evidence and established the patterns to its preservation, represent dimensions of evidence ripe for illuminating the world as Carolingian writers imagined it. They confess that the survey is limited to the areas of their com-

bined expertise—the core Frankish regions of western and central Europe, and Italy—though this turns out not to be much of a limitation because these regions have in fact attracted the bulk of scholarly attention.

The second chapter parses the rise of the Carolingians and the establishment of the dynasty down to 800. It quickly reprises the late Merovingian scene, the contingent politics that led to the Merovingians' demise and the Carolingians' triumph, the fraught interfamilial politics that seems to have driven the calculations and military campaigns of Carolingian dynasts, and the charged narratives written after the fact to make sense of this momentous shift and the recentering of power and favor around a new royal family.

The authors wisely move in chapter 3 to *â*belief and culture,â a choice that underscores the recent efforts to integrate religious preoccupations as basic to any understanding of the Franks, their bellicosity, and the far-reaching cultural reforms inaugurated by Charlemagne. Religious practice in early medieval Europe has long

puzzled researchers, who, even when they are trying to be charitable, have often depicted it as a primitive, Old-Testament form of Christianity. The chapter conveys expertly the intimate connection between Frankish piety and the wars of conquest and conversion, which fit snugly within Carolingian-era writers' sense of the Franks as a chosen people and a new Israel. The authors deftly illuminate the desires to make manifest the presence of God in the world, hence the obsessive attention to *correctio* (correct practice), and to the materiality of texts and the propriety of rituals to ensure divine action and favor. The fever to combat sin, and thereby appease the anger of heaven, stands behind the explosive growth in propertied gifts to monasteries and churches to ensure forgiveness and divine reward. The cumulative effect of these pressures was the gradual institutionalization of the church, an enthusiasm for papal authority, the collecting and copying of authoritative texts, and the distinctive alliance between family power and ecclesiastical institutions.

Chapter 4 returns to politics: the creation of the empire, the means of ruling it, and the spectacular revolts of the 830s. The "government" of the Carolingian empire has long presented a tough nut to crack mainly because researchers have had difficulty finding evidence that the abundance of laws and edicts issued by rulers was heeded or implemented. Drawing on a growing number of studies, the authors propose that government in a premodern state must be understood to be embedded within existing forms, such as social structures, which mediated the bestowal of *honores* on the exponents of influential families, as well as ideological structures, which required that laws and edicts serve as moral exhortation and affirm the prerogatives of the elite. So successful were the Carolingians in transforming imperial politics into a family concern buttressed by the dynasty's moral right to rule that the revolts of the 830s transpired within the arena delimited by Carolingian family politics. Thus, the authors adopt a half full approach, arguing that the Carolingians' successes set the stage for the revolts of the 830s, which represent not so much a disintegration of Carolingian power as the casualties of success.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 on social life and economics are perhaps the most precious of the book. Chapter 5 provides a vivid survey of the steady accumulation of research on villages, land holding, and the peasantry, and shows rural and estate life to be much more dynamic than stereotypes suggest. The authors have in turn carefully situated these developments within the economic demands imposed by Frankish lordship, which stimu-

lated surplus production and crop diversification for elite consumption. Chapter 6 turns more squarely to "elite society." Because so much work on the period has been preoccupied with the aristocracy, some of the chapter will not strike those conversant in Carolingian matters as novel. However, the authors have fruitfully illuminated less-trodden aspects of elite identity: the flaunting behavior of aristocratic men, the material markers of status, and the puzzle of elite residences, for which there continues to be a frustrating shortage of archeology. Chapter 7 on the economy extends aspects of estate production presented in chapter 5, and then turns to trade in the North and the South. The Mediterranean zone has long been a preoccupation of the profession going back to Henri Pirenne and more recently in the work of Michael McCormick, but the authors have deftly balanced this material with the expansion of *emporia*, such as Dorestad in the North, and skillfully evoked the economic specialization and local exchange that ensued. The authors note in both spheres the reciprocity of trading and raiding, and the decline of *emporia* as production near political centers became a higher priority during the late Carolingian period.

As its title indicates, "Sustaining the Carolingian Empire," the final chapter examines the politics of the late Carolingian period with an emphasis not on cataclysmic decline, but on the resiliency of the norms and forms of Carolingian rulership. It deftly works back and forth between the structures of lordship and the explosive royal dynastic crises of 840-843 and 877-888 to demonstrate both the persistence of imperial ideals and mechanisms of governance, and yet the subtle structural shifts that inevitably followed. Thus the late Carolingian period narrates neither the collapse of an old order nor the sudden emergence of a new, but the gradual shift to coherent, compact kingdoms as the distances narrowed between kings and their regional aristocracies.

This monograph represents both the state of the field as well as the authors' own often stimulating and novel inferences. The authors do have a tendency to invoke a "traditional" historiographical paradigm, dismiss it, and then present a carefully constructed tactical argument in response. However, it is not always clear to me who still holds the such views, or whether these older visions were as lacking in subtlety as they are made to appear. In any event, I could not help noticing that the ensuing discussions end up circling back to confirm on numerous occasions the broad outlines of the traditional view that readers had just been told had so many problems. Be that as it may, these are quibbles about an otherwise stimulat-

ing and fruitful survey. Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean specialists and students of the period, as well as to interested lay readers. have provided an accessible and up-to-date survey to spe-

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