

Magali Coumert, La loi salique. Retour aux manuscrits, Turnhout (Brepols) 2023, 428 p. (Haut Moyen Âge, 47), ISBN 978-2-503-599861, EUR 75,00.

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Coumert begins her study by outlining the previous editorial history of the Salic laws, with a particular focus on the academic and political motivations underlying the previous work, especially the editorial process behind the preparation of K. A. Eckhardt's two-volume edition of the Salic laws (the so-called *Pactus legis salicae* in 1962 and the *Lex Salica* in 1969) which – despite repeated critique from numerous historians drawing on it – remains to the modern day the standard edition of the law codes. She demonstrates the gulf between the manuscript evidence and Eckhardt's work, which ignored the manuscripts of the ninth century, while the editorial process focused on selectively creating an *Urtext* to push the origins of the Salic law back to pre-Christian history, as a monument of »Germanic« nationalism and identity. From the outset, Coumert demonstrates that her reappraisal of the manuscripts and contexts in the monograph to follow will not just be beneficial for the field, but rather essential. In addition to a comprehensive bibliography, the volume includes a clear and usefully arranged tabulation of the manuscripts in question, along with an index of the manuscripts at the end, noting which ones have been consulted directly, and providing page references to where they are mentioned in the volume itself. Moreover, throughout the book there are various passages which essentially comprise detailed catalogue description and analysis of many of the individual manuscripts in question.

Chapter 2 is set against the framework of the lack of manuscript evidence from the Merovingian period, and concentrates on the manuscripts of the so-called A and C versions of the Salic law. Inverting the tired argument of bad copyists passively introducing mistakes, Coumert centres the evidence of the eighth-century manuscripts, arguing that they instead indicate a stage prior to the establishment of a stable collection of legal chapters. She demonstrates the law books as compilations, in which scribes brought together laws that were circulating independently and arranged them according to their own needs. Chapter 3 dives into this evidence in greater detail, bringing the material and written state of the laws in and before the seventh century into focus, while at the same time contrasting this with Eckhardt's editorial assumptions. Coumert then extends the implications of the research so far, as to reopen the question of the origins of the Salic laws in Chapter 4. Again, this is not just a matter of the laws first being written, but the origin is also centred in the re-writing and incorporation of laws in their manuscript contexts and the flexibility of the scribes and compilers in the social, literate and legal contexts in which they were active.



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In the latter half of the monograph, Coumert examines the ongoing transmission and augmentation of the laws following the political transition from Merovingian to Carolingian rule. Chapter 5, focused on the early Carolingian period from 744-819, brings the role of capitulary legislation into the spotlight, in an analysis that integrates it within the continued textual fluidity and dynamism of the law texts in their manuscript contexts. In chapter 6, critical attention is brought to the E version of the *Lex salica*, demonstrating that on the one hand the law text was becoming more stable, with scribes concentrating on the close reproduction of their exemplar than on innovation, but at the same time it was associated with a great variety of other texts in its manuscript contexts. Chapter 7 highlights the *Lex Salica Karolina*, noting the implications for loose oversight by Carolingian imperial authority and relating how they integrated into the broader campaign of capitulary legislation. Coumert concludes that while multiple versions of the Salic law were circulating under Charlemagne, under his descendents there was a tighter control of the form of the legislative text, the form becoming stable by the end of the ninth century. The final chapter moves to consider the restriction of textual variants of the laws in the ninth century, noting that while new versions were occasionally produced they did not gain traction, and even Lupus' thematically systemised variant, the *Liber legum*, only survives in three copies. For the most part, scribal intervention relates to updating the mise-en-page and the selection of which capitularies to include or omit from the broader manuscript contexts. Coumert argues that from the turn of the ninth century, new law books were not produced with teaching in mind, but rather the stable text – usually without narrative prologues – was optimised as a reference text for practical purposes in the administration of the law. Despite this recognition of the increased pragmatic role of the law books, Coumert emphasises the contrast between the limits of the law-text as written and the enforcement of the law in practice, framing it as negotiation and compromise.

The chronological arrangement of Coumert's study presents a nuanced and manuscript-led view of the overall development of the Salic laws from a »living« text, in which scribes compiled law books from multiple sources, selecting and updating the contents as required, through to the stable, pragmatic text of the late ninth century. Similarly, the study and summary of a large number of the individual manuscripts, reveals in concrete terms how each was developed in relation to the political and historical background contexts and the needs of the people for and by whom it was produced and used. It seems obvious to me that in addition to being an invaluable study in its own right, Coumert's work here will have great impact on the methods and frameworks used by scholars to study and interpret the Salic laws and socio-legal contexts across the early medieval period. Where scholars might previously have started researching with Eckhardt's flawed edition, it is now essential to first pick up Coumert's study – at least until new editions of the Salic laws, which ideally take the »retour aux manuscrits« as their starting point, are established.



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