

Gaëlle Calvet-Marcadé, Assassin des pauvres. L'Église et l'inaliénabilité des terres à l'époque carolingienne, Turnhout (Brepols) 2018, 358 p., 2 ill. en n/b (Haut Moyen Âge, 30), ISBN 978-2-503-57793-7, EUR 80,00.

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In this book, Gaëlle Calvet-Marcadé examines the discourse for the defence of ecclesiastical property used by the clergy during the Carolingian period. Underneath accusations of sacrilege and threats of excommunication, she uncovers a system of exchange in which the Frankish elite competed for control over inalienable land in a rapidly changing empire. The texts produced by the clergy redefined the circulation of property in a Christian economy and, in doing so, reconfigured the social order of early medieval society.

The outcome of this revised 2012 Paris thesis, is a careful analysis of a broad corpus of sources from 820 to 880 that has not been assembled like this before. Gaëlle Calvet-Marcadé demonstrates that ecclesiastical property, despite its inalienable status, was a multi-layered and rather flexible concept. A church could be founded by a noble family, dedicated to a saint and administrated by a local priest in the name of a bishop, all while being owned by God. At the same time, those that donated land out of pious intent could moments later be condemned as »murderers of the poor«, if the wealth generated by the property was not distributed correctly. The author effectively utilizes the complex and dynamic medieval notion of property to provide an alternative for the analytical concepts of »église privée« and »secularization«, which are either too simplistic or presuppose too many false dichotomies to be useful.

In five chapters, Gaëlle Calvet-Marcadé meticulously examines the discourse employed by the clergy to defend ecclesiastical property, which consists out of tractates, conciliar decrees, papal letters, canon law and sources describing conflicts over the possession of land. Together the first and second chapter provide a survey of the discourse, consisting of the terminology used to describe the transgressors and their acts, and the sources to support different arguments. It appears every benefactor had the chance to become a plunderer depending on his or her relationship with the author, which Gaëlle Calvet-Marcadé characterizes as »coopétition«. Furthermore, contemporary authors, such as Agobard of Lyon, Hincmar of Reims and Walafrid Strabo, all seem to operate within the same frame of reference, using the same biblical, patristic and conciliar material. Yet, within this shared frame many positions were available, as the texts proved remarkably versatile.



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The third chapter concerns the circulation of ecclesiastical property and outlines the historical, theological and economic dimensions of the debate. The distribution and the ownership of land constituted authority and thus power. During the ninth century, clergymen attempted to limit access to this system via the introduction of certain barriers, such as defining sacrilege more broadly to also include the wrongful possession of church land at the council of Aachen in 836. Naturally, this action primarily affected the laity. In the end, all members of the Carolingian elite were able to hold land, yet not every claim was equal.

The clerical discourse itself used for the defence of ecclesiastical property is examined in the last two chapters. By using case studies, Gaëlle Calvet-Marcadé distils a series of central questions around which the debate revolved, namely for which purposes land could be used, the division of tasks among the various parties holding the land and the relationship between them. The rhetoric employed by the clergy defined the rights and obligations of all the parties involved in the system of exchange, thereby creating a clear social hierarchy and legitimizing their own position at the top of the *ordines* as supposedly impartial distributors of property. The author proceeds by identifying the tools used in the discourse, which vary from different types of law (including roman and »barbaric« laws), calling on royal and papal aid, and the spiritual threat of excommunication and penance.

In conclusion the author states that the clerical discourse with its plunderers and acts of sacrilege was intended to mask the social reality of competing for land for the sake of honour and power, just as their lay counterparts did. This is a somewhat unconvincing ending to an otherwise excellent study, as it seems to disregard the religious aspect of the debate which did involve a moral obligation to properly utilize and defend church land as part of one's *ministerium*. Even though the author discusses the multiple perspectives on ecclesiastical property that were part of the clerical discourse, the religious aspect has been overlooked for the conclusion.

Overall it is a convincing work that is skillfully composed around the limitations of the source material. The selected methodological approach of microhistorical analysis matches the highly localized debates well and effectively counters the rather limited geographical scope of the study, which only covers the area of the Frankish empire between the Loire and the Meuse river. No documentation on the circulation of church land remains from other parts of the realm, which is curious in itself, because the political and social changes that affected the kingdom of Charles the Bald must also have had repercussions elsewhere. The introduction of mandatory tithes, for instance, also occurred in northern Italy and eastern Francia, where elites also exchanged ecclesiastical property and most of the textual sources used for the debate in the West were equally available. The author is not to blame for this open question, however. It goes to show that there still is a lot of work to be done.



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With this book, an important contribution is made to the study of Carolingian political and intellectual culture. It demonstrates the impact of the debate about the circulation of land on the idea of the *res ecclesiae* and its significant contribution to the social ordines of the following centuries. Although the often complicated subject matter will mostly interest experts, a commendable attempt has been made to make it more accessible by translating all the cited source material.



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