

**Gregory I. Halfond, Bishops and the Politics of Patronage in Merovingian Gaul, Ithaca, NY (Cornell University Press) 2019, XIV–206 p., 1 map, ISBN 978-1-5017-3931-6, USD 49,95.**

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The popular scholarly narrative of the transformation of the Roman world and the rise of the barbarian kingdoms in the Latin West attributes a crucial role and power to the Christian Church, and specifically to the bishops who governed post-Roman dioceses. As the Roman Empire was slowly disintegrated and the traditional Roman institutions were slowly falling apart, someone had to fill this gap. The Gallo-Roman elite was aware of this change and noticed that the Church had much to offer in terms of power and control. Thus, gradually, its members began integrating into the ecclesiastical system, holding high-ranked positions, and gaining new ways to preserve their influence on the rest of the society<sup>1</sup>.

Gregory I. Halfond's study responds to this scholarly convention, challenges it, and argues that »[m]odern scholarship has been too quick to generalize about the episcopal *ordo* from the ambitions of those exceptional bishops who waded so confidently into the affairs of the court« (p. 5). Halfond is right to point out that our perspective on the history of the Merovingian episcopacy may be limited at times due to the material evidence found in various types of textual records. Bearing this in mind, Halfond proceeds to the main purpose of his book: to study the Merovingian episcopal *ordo* between the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, to examine its responsibilities and its interaction with the secular Merovingian government, that is the Merovingian kingship, and to offer a methodology that may be used on other »micro-Christendom« (p. 17). Halfond examines Merovingian bishops for their religious and spiritual role as well as their political and

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heinzlmann, L'aristocratie et les évêchés entre Loire et Rhin, jusqu'à la fin du VII<sup>e</sup> siècle, in: Revue d'histoire de l'Église de France 62 (1976), p. 75–90; Patrick Geary, Before France and Germany. The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World, New York, Oxford 1988, p. 123–135; Allen E. Jones, Social Mobility in Late Antique Gaul. Strategies and Opportunities for the non-Elite, Cambridge 2009, p. 52–54; Yitzhak Hen, Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul A. D. 481–751, Leiden, New York, Cologne 1995, p. 16; id., The Church in Sixth Century, in: Alexander C. Murray (ed.), A Companion to Gregory of Tours, Boston 2015, p. 238–244; Ian Wood, The Merovingian Kingdoms, 470–751, London, New York 1994, p. 71–73; Tamar Rotman, Imitation and Rejection of Eastern Practices in Merovingian Gaul: Gregory of Tours and Vulfilac the Stylite of Trier, in: Stefan Esders, Yitzhak Hen, Pia Lucas, Tamar Rotman (ed.), The Merovingian Kingdoms and the Mediterranean World, London 2019, p. 113–123.



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social role as community leaders and mediators between their communities and the kingship. In a way, this approach reminds the reader of that offered by Peter Brown in his seminal study of the Syrian holy man<sup>2</sup>. Aware of the problem of generalization, Halfond attempts to use a wide range of primary sources in order to create a more profound picture of the Merovingian episcopal *ordo*. He uses historiographical works, such as Gregory of Tours' »Histories«, Fredegar's »Chronicle«, and the »Liber Historiae Francorum«. He also uses canon law, epistolary evidence, *Acta* of Church councils, hagiographical records, and legal documents.

Halfond's study contains four chapters in which he examines politics and patronage from different perspectives. The first three chapters offer a thematic analysis, whereas the final fourth chapter gives a chronological and more cohesive analysis of the dynamics between Frankish royals and bishops, beginning with the reign of Clovis in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century. Chapter 1 describes the episcopal service to the royal court, focusing on the advisory role of the bishops. Halfond uses evidence found in the correspondence between bishops and royals that shows that throughout the Merovingian period bishops advised on various matters. Some of the bishops also gave administrative and legislative services, and Halfond offers examples from multiple Church councils to prove that. Finally, he concludes that »the Merovingians consistently relied on the spiritual and temporal authority of bishops as indispensable contributors to effective royal governance« (p. 62). Chapter 2 goes into the question of royal patronage over the episcopacy. It deals with episcopal elections, petitions made by bishops, and what Halfond defines as the »corporate spirit of the episcopal *ordo*« (p. 90). The chapter discusses the dynamics between the bishops and royals and explains their mutual dependence. Chapter 3 focuses on the dynamics within the episcopal *ordo*, and Halfond demonstrates how the dual role of the bishops – the spiritual as well as secular and administrative one – affected their relations with each other and with the kingship. Their political involvement, he explains, was part and parcel of their episcopal responsibilities. Finally, chapter 4 shifts the attention to the monarchs themselves. It surveys the dynamics between the royals and the bishops in chronological order, demonstrating how they developed and changed during the two centuries of the Merovingian reign.

Throughout his study, Halfond tries to demonstrate how the power of the ecclesiastical *ordo* was inherited within the *ordo*, regardless of the bishops' lineage. In the concluding chapter, he argues that »[b]ishops were drawn into partisan politics not simply as a consequence of aristocratic birth or the social status derived from their high office but also because the Merovingians recognized, and consistently attempted to take advantage of, the inherent quality of episcopal power to transcend the gap between the *civitas*



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<sup>2</sup> Peter Brown, *The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity*, in: *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), p. 80–101.

and the court« (p. 167). Yet, Halfond overlooks the long history of the elite dynasties in Gaul and elsewhere and its social and political effect on how both the royals and the bishops understood and defined their role and relationships with other authorities. Nevertheless, it seems that the book supports the common scholarly assumption that the Church in Merovingian Gaul played an important role both in the spiritual and in the secular spheres. The bishops were leaders with great power, their communities depended on them, and they gave counsel to the court and impacted the political and social life of the Merovingians. Halfond's book provides many examples for that, and he demonstrates the importance of using a wide range of primary sources to create a fuller picture of the medieval past.



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