

**Björn Weiler, Paths to Kingship in Medieval Latin Europe, c. 950–1200, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 2021, 300 p., ISBN 978-1-316-51842-7, EUR 35,40.**

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par  
**Simon MacLean, St Andrews**

This is a hugely impressive and readable analysis of how kings became kings in Latin Europe in the central Middle Ages. One of the book's many achievements is in fact to highlight how significant its subject is. The ubiquity of kingship in this period makes it easy to take for granted, but Weiler shows that it is a complicated and interesting category worthy of sustained analysis – a problem hiding in plain sight. He also highlights its historical specificity, pointing out that it was only in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries that the kingdom finally became the default political unit in all parts of Latin Europe.

Much of the discussion is based on the rich narrative sources of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, which Weiler has mined with a tremendous eye for detail and an encyclopaedic range of reference. The opening chapters include interesting reflections on how these chroniclers were influenced (and, importantly, not influenced) by biblical, patristic and classical legacies – Weiler's interest is, he reminds us here, more in values and norms than practice (p. 10). Kings were not just rulers, but symbolic of a particular kind of central medieval political order. This approach liberates the analysis from well-worn debates about constitutional history or the role of ritual – as an indication of how that shapes the book, there are noticeably fewer references in the index to Henry IV than to Henry VI, Roger II of Sicily or Sverrir of Norway. Instead, the main part of the book is built as a kind of comparative group biography, moving through the various stages by which kings were trained, chosen and made.

The first part deals with how kingship was »created« – meaning both how it was imagined and narrated by contemporaries, and how the status of king was conferred. Weiler stitches together details from a constellation of sources to underline fundamental cultural commonalities, and uses case studies to work chronological and geographical variation into the picture. The analysis of different accounts of the famous encounter between Otto III and Boleslaw I in 1000 is particularly instructive, especially juxtaposed with the creation of Roger II's kingship at Palermo in 1130.

Part II turns readers' attention to succession and designation of heirs. It would be easy to imagine that this was a straightforward matter in the normal course of events, but in fact the succession of a king's eldest son took place in only about a third of cases in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries (p. 117–118). Weiler interrogates



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen Historischen Institut Paris | publiée par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous  
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

contemporary authors' ideas about continuity, peace, tyranny and just rule, and widens the perspective to encompass rulers' relationships with their nobles and their »people«. There are also lucid sections on the training, education and marriages of future kings.

The wider political community comes into focus even more sharply in part III, on the actual choosing and electing of kings. Weiler rightly dissolves the old historiographical dichotomy between election and succession, and emphasises that becoming king was in any circumstances a process rather than an event. Attention is drawn to the terms in which contemporaries praised the qualities of competing candidates (for example in the highly partisan commentary surrounding the succession of Henry II in 1002). This is followed by a very rich discussion (chapter 8) of the numerous preparatory stages for a royal election, and the various ways in which processes of choice are depicted in surviving chronicles. In chapters 9 and 10, the same treatment is given to enthronement itself (with its attendant feasts, performances of justice, etc.), and to the consolidation of kingship in the aftermath.

The book's core argument is that Latin Europe in this period had a more or less coherent set of ideas about what made a king, and how kings should be made. As Weiler stresses repeatedly, these ideas constituted a framework rather than a template (p. 400), which leaves plenty of room for contemporaries to disagree with each other and to change their minds over time. That the book gives so much attention to texts from Southern, Eastern and Northern Europe is not only one of its great strengths as a work of history, but also underlines its contention that kingship was one of the core institutions which bonded Latin Europe in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen  
Historischen Institut Paris |  
publiée par l'Institut historique  
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous  
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)