Small Worlds in the Carolingian World

A Reflection

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In 1988 Wendy Davies published an inspiring study on the village community in early medieval Brittany: »Small Worlds«[1]. The amount of information the author had managed to extract from the Cartulary of Redon was an example to many younger historians of the early medieval West, and of the Carolingian world in particular. Eager to work on what was then called »popular culture«, they also realised that, given the limitations of their sources, they might not be able to get down to this kind of a grass root level of society with such precision and differentiation. Neither was the historiographical landscape of the late 1980s and early 1990s conducive to such an enterprise. French historians continued to think in terms of a fairly rigid opposition between popular and learned culture (the »culture folklorique« versus the »culture cléricale«)[2], while Duby's dominant view of medieval social history relegated early medieval peasants to a homogeneous and downtrodden mass. Since the 1960s, Great Britain has seen a wave of Marxist research into late medieval and early modern peasants, but early medieval history – predominantly Anglo-Saxon studies – was not affected by this. In the German Federal Republic, the Carolingian world did get due attention, but mostly from political and cultural historians, and the really serious debates were fought over issues such as »Staatlichkeit«[3]. Of course

1) Wendy Davies, Small Worlds. The Village Community in Early Medieval Brittany, London 1988.

2) Cf. for example Jean-Claude Schmitt, »Religion populaire« et culture folklorique, in: Annales ESC 31 (1976), pp. 941–953; Jacques Le Goff, Culture ecclésiastique et culture folklorique au Moyen Âge. Saint Marcel de Paris et le Dragon, in: Id., Pour un autre Moyen Âge. Temps, travail et culture en Occident (Bibliothèque des histoires), Paris 1978, pp. 236–279; Michel Lauwers, »Religion populaire«, culture folklorique, mentalités. Notes pour une anthropologie culturelle du Moyen Âge, in: Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique 82 (1987), pp. 221–258.

3) Cf. Staat im frühen Mittelalter, ed. Stuart Airlie/Walter Pohl/Helmut Reimitz (Denkschriften. Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse 334/Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 11), Wien 2006; Der frühmittelalterliche Staat – europäische Perspektiven, ed. Walter Pohl/Veronika Wieser (Denkschriften. Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse 386/Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 16), Wien 2009.

there were important exceptions such as Werner Rösener's influential publications[4], yet these tended to concentrate on the legal and institutional aspects of rural societies; the same held true for Adriaan Verhulst[5] and other specialists of Carolingian agrarian history. Research on ninth-century rural societies meant, above all, studying polyptychs and degrees of (un)freedom. Meanwhile, the tacit assumption was that »the Church« was a separate entity, distant from, and to a large extent, antagonistic to secular politics and popular culture. Since the majority of narrative and so-called normative early medieval sources had been produced by clerics, this meant that these could not be used for research on »ordinary people«, or at best if they were read against the grain, in order to get behind and beyond the distorting perspective of organised religion.

Admittedly, this is a deliberate simplification inspired by personal experience, but it helps to explain why a new kind of British early medieval history came as a breath of fresh air. From my own perspective, what was later called ›the anthropological turn‹ burst onto the scene in 1986 with the highly influential ›The Settlement of Disputes in Early Medieval Europe‹, produced by the so-called »Bucknell Group«, convened by Wendy Davies[6]. Concentrating on legal verdicts (*placita*) and legal practice in the various early medieval kingdoms, this band of younger British historians were not interested in establishing the presence or absence of »Staatlichkeit«, but in the practical functioning of the early medieval political order at various levels, royal and otherwise, primarily through the study of charters. In 1989 Rosamond McKitterick re-evaluated the status of Carolingian Latin literacy[7]. Challenging the traditional view that this was mainly the prerogative of clerics, she made a case for a much greater impact of Christian Latin culture on lay elites, and also for no longer treating the Christianity of the so-called Carolingian Renaissance as a merely superficial veneer of civilisation imposed by an idealistic royal court on a ba-

4) Werner Rösener, Die Bauern in der europäischen Geschichte, München 1993; Strukturen der Grundherrschaft im frühen Mittelalter, ed. ders. (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 92), Göttingen ^{2}1993; Grundherrschaft und bäuerliche Gesellschaft im Hochmittelalter, ed. ders. (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 11), Göttingen 1995; ders., Die Grundherrschaft als Forschungskonzept. Strukturen und Wandel der Grundherrschaft im deutschen Reich (10.–13. Jahrhundert), in: ZRG Germ. 129 (2012), S. 41–75.

5) Cf. Le grand domaine aux époques mérovingienne et carolingienne/Die Grundherrschaft im frühen Mittelalter, ed. Adriaan E. Verhulst (Publikatie. Belgisch Centrum voor Landelijke Geschiedenis 81), Gent 1985; and his collected papers in: Id., Rural and Urban Aspects of Early Medieval Northwest Europe (Variorum Collected Studies Series 385), Aldershot 1992.

6) The Settlement of Disputes in Early Medieval Europe, ed. Wendy Davies/Paul Fouracre, Cambridge 1986; Davies and Fouracre also edited Property and Power in Early Medieval Europe, Cambridge 1996 and The Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages, Cambridge 2010. Two sources of inspiration were Simon Roberts, Ordnung und Konflikt. Eine Einführung in die Rechtsethnologie, Stuttgart 1981 and Disputes and Settlement. Law and Human Relations in the West, ed. John Bossy, Cambridge 1983; another was Susan Reynolds, Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900–1300, Oxford 1984.

7) For the beginning of these ideas, see Rosamond McKitterick, The Frankish Church and the Carolingian Reforms, 789–895 (Royal Historical Society Studies in History), London 1977.

sically primitive society[8]. This new British early medieval history inspired several subsequent developments that are evident in most of the articles collected in this volume. Bucknell group member Chris Wickham's work exemplifies a social history that includes aristocracies as well as peasants, and focusses on their interaction in a geographically diverse context[9]. There has also been a fundamental rethinking of the ingrained church/state dichotomy on the part of political as wells as religious historians; in fact, the interface between both has claimed much productive attention. Last but not least, in an increasingly international practice of early medieval history, manuscript studies became an integral part of the formation of a younger generation. The ever expanding digitalisation helped a lot, but this particular tide already began to turn in the 1990s, the decade when European national research traditions began to connect through programmes such as »The Transformation of the Roman World«, and also through the significant participation of transatlantic scholars who were in an excellent position to act as mediators in this respect.

All this is visible in the contributions to this volume. The articles gathered here are characteristic of the »international polyphony«, as Steffen Patzold calls it in his introduction, and so are the leading questions he put to the participants before they started writing their papers. To which extent did the goals of the centre, as in the court and the king, affect people in the localities? Could the Carolingian ruling elites get their political goals implemented at these grassroot levels? This focus on the interconnectedness between centre and locality reveals the greater optimism of a younger generation of historians about the effectiveness of the Carolingian state. The discussion about early medieval »Staatlichkeit« still plays an important role, but there is no longer a shared assumption about its weakness or absence. Another significant change is that ecclesiastical structures have become an integral part of this research agenda. Accordingly, the classical theme of Carolingian »reform« takes on a new lease of life: if the effects of *correctio* become visible at the local level, this is an important indicator of the lines of communication that connected it with the larger world.

The focus of the papers in this volume is on the Carolingian world, but there is one significant exception. Wendy Davies compares the small worlds of Brittany with those of Northern Iberia, an area with a rich but complicated legacy of charters she explored more recently[10]. Davies' comparative approach reveals not just the dissimilarity of Brittany and Northern Iberia, but also, implicitly, the profound differences between these two areas on the one hand, and the Carolingian world on the other. Whereas the Breton material offers

8) Rosamond McKitterick, The Carolingians and the Written Word, Cambridge 1989; The Uses of Literacy in Early Mediaeval Europe, ed. ead. Cambridge 1990.

9) Chris Wickham, Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800, Oxford 2005.

10) Wendy Davies, Acts of Giving. Individual, Community, and Church in Tenth-Century Christian Spain, Oxford 2007; ead., Windows on Justice in Northern Iberia, 800–1000, London/New York 2016.

plenty of evidence of social and political organisation at the local level, there is nothing of the sort in Northern Iberia until the late tenth century. Furthermore, there is no visible impact of written legal prescriptions in Brittany, but much of it in Northern Spain, where older Visigothic law remained authoritative in the ninth and tenth centuries. As for the interaction between the centre and the localities, the Breton rulers did sometimes intervene in the localities through their representatives, but never the Carolingians; in Northern Spain, by the tenth century kings did get involved, primarily when monasteries appealed to them; it was not normal for peasants to appeal directly to the ruler. In both cases, the extent to which these small worlds were integrated in larger political structures is very limited, certainly compared with the hands-on intervention from the centre that one can observe in the Carolingian world, not only in theory, but also in practice. And there is another difference: for Davies, a »small place« has an action radius of eight to ten kilometres, while the Carolingianists tend to include any locality below the level of a diocese or a county.

The problem of size also plays a role in Sebastian Brather's methodical discussion of archaeological approaches to the »small world«, and a very practical one, for that matter. Burial sites, from which settlement archaeologists derive most of their data, yield only partial information on relatively complex local societies. Given the very rich graves in Alemannia and Bavaria, the absence of lordly residences seems strange, but in order to recognise an entire settlement, excavations at an impossibly large scale are needed. To historians with overly high expectations of »hard« archaeological facts, Brather has a salutary warning: the collaboration between the two disciplines is much needed, also with regard to the »Kleine Welten«, yet the goal should not be to weld textual and material data into one correct conclusion, but to arrive at a more complex and differentiated image. One tantalising aspect of this is the clear evidence of long-distance trade in which peasants as well as lords participated. This puts paid to the notion of isolated and entirely self-sufficient communities. Yet there is no such thing as an »archaeology of manoralisation«, for »Grundherrschaften« remain invisible. This is another salutary warning, although it should be noted that manoralisation may become less of a problem for archaeologists, now that the bi-partite manor or »Grundherrschaft« is no longer thought of by historians as the ubiquitous phenomenon it once was held to be. As is signalled in several papers (Innes/West, Kohl), recent research by Chris Wickham has shown early medieval property to be more fragmented, with a significant presence of free peasant holdings and allodial lands[11]. Furthermore, the concept of »Grundherrschaft« is bound up with specific notions of lordship and aristocracy that served as the pillars of German institutional history, but without much impact outside this particular scholarly com-

11) Wickham, Framing (as n. 9), p. 514–518, 535–570.

munity[12]). Hans-Werner Goetz' paper on Palaiseau, a well-documented domain of the monastery of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, shows how dense and detailed the data from polyptychs can be, especially with regard to the communication between lords and serfs, but also its limitations for the questions asked at this conference about the impact of royal rule on the domain in question: such information can only be found in polyptychs and »Urbaren« if the »Grundherrschaft« is part of royal fisc. As Goetz argues, small worlds and their dynamics in a wider political context only become visible to the historian through donation charters and notices.

I. Sources

One of the interesting features of the papers assembled in this volume was the concerted effort to broaden the range of sources that might be used for studying these dynamics. Charters retain their prominent place in several papers (Czock, Davies, Kohl, Zeller), but there are also doubts as to their privileged status in this kind of research. Miriam Czock contends that in order to get to local communities, it is necessary to move away from the charter collections produced by monasteries, and from the monastic perspective imposed by this material. Warren Brown agrees that the charter material is biased towards ecclesiastical archives, unlike the collections of *formulae*, which in his view give more insight in the world of the laity from all possible social strata, and especially on their violent crimes. We get an in-depth insight into conflict and its resolution, and also into the intervention from the king and his officials. And although *formulae* do not provide a window on social change, much can be learned from these texts about the priorities of their compilers and those requiring this kind of documentation.

For Matthew Innes and Charles West, the lay/clerical divide is less of a problem, for they perceive religious communities as interconnected with the surrounding world, and warn against creating too sharp a divide between learned elites and Frankish villagers. Instead, they have an issue with the assumption that only charters and polyptychs give access to the grassroots level of early medieval societies, which conveys the mistaken impression that local communities were only concerned with issues of property. As an alternative, they turn to miracle collections, which exist in such number that even statistical analysis might become feasible. In this paper, however, Innes and West highlight some of the source criticism that is needed in order to use these narrative sources, especially with regard to the chain of communication that led to the written version of a story, and the extent to which this final product was filtered by those who committed it to parchment.

12) Cf. Steffen Patzold, Der König als Alleinherrscher? Ein Versuch über die Möglichkeit der Monarchie im Frühmittelalter, in: Monarchische Herrschaft im Altertum, ed. Stefan Rebenich/Johannes Wienand (Schriften des Historischen Kollegs 94), Berlin/Boston 2016, pp. 605–633.

Interestingly, both authors have worked intensively on charter collections, but now they want to »think outside the box«, which to them means escaping the legal history imposed by documentary archive, and to turn to the wealth of information on charismatic power, local as well as monastic, contained in early medieval hagiography.

When it comes to alternative sources, there is plenty of this thinking outside the box on offer in the rest of the papers, such as Carine van Rhijn's investigation of two manuscripts that were arguably destined for and used by local priests; she discusses these with one of the central questions of this conference in mind, namely whether royal and episcopal attempts at reform reached small worlds and the clergy who served at this level. Van Rhijn's conclusion is that variety is the key to understanding the local impact of Carolingian *correctio*, even to the point of internal contradiction within one and the same manuscript. Central directives did have some effect, but these were so general that local preferences dominated, as well as the often limited availability of texts.

Although for some authors charters still represent the preferred medium to get at the dynamics of small worlds (Kohl, Zeller, Czock, Davies), others look to alternatives, as we have just seen. Stefan Esders confronts the problem head-on with regard to so-called normative sources, a rather unhelpful notion, in his view. Esders objects to the distinction between charters as a reflection of practice, and capitularies as the expression of norms. Capitularies should not be read as impractical by definition, for rules have something to do with the reality of the society they originate from. If nobody believed in these norms, and there were no *liberi homines* to whom they were addressed, there would have been no need for capitularies.

II. Middlemen

An undisputedly central role in these papers is played by the so-called »middlemen« (mediators, Mittler). Jean-Pierre Devroey offers an in-depth discussion of micro-studies in which these intermediaries have become visible, especially in Southern Europe. Following Henri Mendras[13], Devroey distinguishes between middlemen who belonged to the in-group, such as the *villicus* and local priest, and relative outsiders, like supra-local judges and administrators. Similarly, Esders assumes what he calls a frog and bird perspective: bottom-up and top-down are both relevant perspectives when it comes to assessing the role of *centenarii* and their *vicarii*, as well as local priests. Together, these men ensured the success of capitularies, for they knew the local society. This was not a consensual system, for there was misuse of office by the centenaries and their representatives. To hold office meant to have income from fines, at all possible levels, yet this monetarisation of the judicial practice was part of the clout of the Carolingian state, as Esders argues.

13) Henri Mendras, Sociétés paysannes. Eléments pour une théorie de la paysannerie, Paris ^{2}1995.

Be this as it may, the middlemen who loom largest in this volume are the priests, in Northern Iberia as well as in the Carolingian world, to such an extent that this evidence cannot be merely discounted by the argument that clerics had a monopoly of writing. This remains to be seen, and furthermore, »clerics« is a misleading label because it homogenises a highly diverse group. This transpires from Innes and West's evidence of priests and monks as the mediators of miracle stories, and also from Bernard Zeller's discussion of St Gall charters. As Zeller shows, when by the early ninth century monastic scribes began to monopolise the writing of donation charters from their community, an entire and much more varied world of local scribes, informally trained, becomes invisible, and not just paleographically; for Zeller, this also represents a greater monastic dominance of the surrounding countryside. Yet as Thomas Kohl points out, the position of mediators was a relative one: men could be bigwigs in their own village, but if they operated outside their familiar area, for example as witnesses to charters their social status could be more modest, as can be observed in witness lists from the Middle Rhine and Bavaria. Furthermore, any successfully functioning central government was dependent on elites with local ties. Kohl's charters do not yield a fundamental divide between local free men and notables on the one hand, and a higher aristocratic echelon on the other. They blend into each other, with the *centenarii* in the middle as a crucial link in government, and with priests in prominent position, not just as mediators of salvation, but also as a part of local elites with socially important knowledge about property relations and labour obligations. These could be complex, for a village had local identities that crossed property boundaries.

III. Small worlds and the Carolingian ecclesia-polity

One of the clearest examples of how Carolingian rule changed daily life is provided by Marco Stoffella's paper on a small place in Tuscany, Lunata. A transformation that was already underway was accelerated from 774 onwards. Through the patronage of the new rulers, proprietary churches, even if they were no more than small house monasteries, could become springboards for the exercise of socio-political control by bishops as well as lay elites. As in Bavaria, the Carolingian take-over functioned as a catalyst in a process that was already underway. Although the available documentation created a focus on ecclesiastical power in Lunata, Stoffella underlines a similar trend that can be observed in secular institutions, such as the *lociservatores* who were turned into *scabini.* Members of politically active elites under Desiderius became leading figures in the Carolingian constellation.

This »Carolingian constellation« was one in which secular and ecclesiastical institutions were distinct yet interconnected. This is not exactly a novel statement, but the interdependence of two domains that have long been treated as separate, and differently

so in various national research traditions, creates questions that surface in many of the papers collected in this volume. Some of these, as we have seen, deal with the privileging of some sources and the neglect of others. Why is hagiography not treated as a normative source? Such texts are certainly informative of »norms«, but Esders suspects they do not qualify because they contain miracles, and he would find Innes and West on his side. The nemesis of any research on local communities was and still is the dominance of »ecclesiastical« source material. Several contributors are determined to circumvent this, either by a close-reading against the grain of charters (Czock), or by turning from charters to formularies in order to get closer to the elusive practice of the laity (Brown).

There is a third strategy, and this is not just rethinking the lay/clerical divide, but making the most of this so-called ecclesiastical source material by focussing precisely on its religious contents, and on the question how religion may have been a harbinger of the state, down to a grassroots level. This is what Van Rhijn implies in her paper on priests' handbooks, and it is also what Kohl has in mind when he speaks of the sacralisation of the rural landscape, and of an »ecclesia-polity«. Carolingian state formation is also church formation, and this is not just a matter of modern historians being able to grasp only the ecclesiastical side of the matter, because clerics produced their sources. When the diversity of local scribes around St Gall is no longer visible because the monastic scribes monopolise the writing of charters, this says something about the increasing dominance of the monastery in question, as Zeller argues, and I think he is right. Innes and West seem to hesitate about the measure of openness of monasteries to the world outside. On the one hand, they envisage much communication between villagers and monks or nuns, on the other, they note that the latter did not appreciate the presence of self-made charismatics and tried to channel such local religious energy into a narrative that was acceptable to the hierarchical structures of the Carolingian state. It is this very tension that is evident in the papers gathered here, and this double perspective should be brought to future research that perceives the interaction of monastic institutions with their environment from the dual perspective of local communities and their relation to the centre. The impact of monasteries on Carolingian state formation is still underresearched[14], but some of the possibilities for future investigation have been mapped and discussed in this volume.

Of course this discussion goes on. In 2016, a collection of articles entitled ›Making Early Medieval Societies‹ was published. It tries to bridge the usual divide between late antique and early medieval history, and assesses the impact of the so-called anthropological turn I mentioned at the beginning of these concluding reflections. In his stimulating introduction, Conrad Leyser deplores the fact that »we have not weaned ourselves away from a conception of history in which the State is central, the source of all meaning

14) On the transfer of land to ecclesiastical institutions before the Carolingian period, see Ian Wood, Entrusting Western Europe to the Church, 400–750, in: Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 6th ser., 23 (2013), pp. 37–74.

and goodness«[15]. The real benefit of the encounter between history and anthropology that social anthropology decentres the State, and shifts attention back to the things that really matter in late antique and early medieval societies, namely the family and religion.[16] Yet Leyser also warns against going overboard in the other direction by perceiving early medieval societies exclusively in terms of face-to-face and personal relations, as if the family and religion had no coercive and public functions, and could therefore be detached from institutional and political history.[17]

A similar conclusion can be drawn from many of the papers gathered here. The ›light‹ version of early medieval states, current in Anglophone historiography, seems to be the best way of creating a kind of political history that takes into account regional and local communities.[18] The other welcome shift in perspective is that religion has moved centre-stage, not as a self-evident feature of so-called face-to-face societies which gets us away from ›the State‹, but as an integral part of an early medieval public order at different levels of society.[19] It is time to move away from ›the Church‹ and to pay attention to the many churches (*ecclesiae*), ranging from powerful monasteries to humble rural sanctuaries, and to ask how these connected the localities to the wider polity and vice versa. This endeavour was at the very heart of the Reichenau conference in 2015, and should be continued.

15) Conrad Leyser, Introduction. Making Early Medieval Societies, in: Making Early Medieval Societies. Conflict and Belonging in the Latin West, 300–1200, ed. Id., Cambridge 2016, pp. 1–15, at p. 2.

16) Leyser, Introduction (as n. 15), p. 9.

17) Leyser, Introduction (as n. 15), p. 4.

18) For a recent example of the ›state light‹ approach, see Chris Wickham, Consensus and Assemblies in the Romano-Germanic Kingdoms: a Comparative Approach, in: Recht und Konsens im frühen Mittelalter, ed. Verena Epp/Christoph H.F. Meyer (VuF 82), Ostfildern 2017, pp. 389–426.

19) Steffen Patzold, »Einheit« versus »Fraktionierung«. Zur symbolischen und institutionellen Integration des Frankenreichs im 8./9. Jahrhundert, in: Visions of Community. Community in the Post-Roman World. The West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300–1100, ed. Walter Pohl/Clemens Gantner/Richard Payne, Farnham-Burlington 2012, pp. 375–390; Mayke de Jong, The Two Republics. *Ecclesia* and the Public Domain in the Carolingian World, in: Italy and Early Medieval Europe. Essays Presented to Chris Wickham, ed. Ross Balzaretti/Julia Barrow/Patricia Skinner, Oxford 2018, pp. 486–500.