

Patzold, Steffen; Carine van Rhijn (Hrsg.): *Men in the Middle. Local Priests in Early Medieval Europe*. Berlin: De Gruyter 2016. ISBN: 978-3-11-044341-7; X, 252 S.

**Rezensiert von:** John Contreni, emeritus, Department of History, Purdue University

In his conclusion to this pathbreaking collection of ten essays, Rob Meens credits their authors with challenging the regnant view of early medieval clerical culture. Jacques LeGoff and Aaron Gurevich, to use his examples, portrayed the clerical world as monolithic and radically different from and antagonistic to the world of the laity. In focusing on local priests, these essays turn such outdated notions on their heads. Instead of men apart, local clergy were „men in the middle“ who oscillated frequently between their nominal superiors and local laypeople while adopting elements of lay culture.

The work of four scholars set the stage for a more realistic appreciation of local priests and their interactions with their communities. Rosamond McKitterick showed how royal demands for clerical reform were transmitted to bishops and through them to their priests.<sup>1</sup> Susan Keefe showed again how royal prescriptions concerning baptism were communicated through priests to lay people.<sup>2</sup> Wendy Davies' focus on „small worlds“ and Peter Brown's invention of the phrase „micro-christendoms“ encouraged historians to value the particular as normative rather than as aberrant.<sup>3</sup>

Space limitations prohibit summaries of the essays, but listing the authors and their topics underscores the high caliber of the team and the broad canvas of the book. Miriam Czock studied priests as economic actors in the region around Wissembourg. Bernhard Zeller surveyed Saint-Gall's charters for evidence of priests' activities. Thomas Kohl trained his lens on the evidence from Bavaria to observe priests at the local level and to assess how the Carolingian reform effort affected them. Charles Mériaux pointed his compass toward northern Francia where reports of some 60 priests survive. Marco Stoffella exploited the rich sources of rural Tuscany to document priestly activities in and around rural

baptismal churches. Wendy Davies' exploration of northern Iberia revealed a clerical landscape without strong traditions of political or ecclesiastical administration. Francesca Tinti's search for local priests in early Anglo-Saxon England was frustrated by lack of clear evidence of their presence in local communities. Yitzhak Hen connected priests with books in the Merovingian period. Carine van Rhijn studied books composed for local priests as a gauge of the extent and effectiveness of Carolingian reforms. Steffen Patzold concentrated on texts that helped priests explain the Lord's Prayer.

Four major themes emerge from this rich harvest of research. One concerns the social situation of local priests. Most appear to have been free individuals, but Kohl and Mériaux found priests who were unfree or of servile origin. Married priests and priests with families also turn up. Priests' paramount social connection was to their own kin group with whom they interacted frequently. Priest-uncles encouraged their nephews and sometimes their sons to become priests. Zeller constructed a family tree of the Hadubert-Patucho kin group to illustrate how the priesthood was a family business for four generations (p. 45). Davies described priests in northern Iberia as members of „a hereditary learned class“ (p. 133). In Tuscany, „[m]any kin groups encouraged their progeny often for several generations to take up a career in the church after having invested movable and immovable property to promote one or more family foundations.“ (p. 122)

Accumulation of wealth, a second theme, also links the essays, especially since charters recording land conveyances dominate the research base. Charters reveal how intimately local priests interacted with laypeople. When they weren't buying, selling, or swapping

<sup>1</sup> Rosamond McKitterick, *The Frankish Church and the Carolingian Reforms*, 789–895, London 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Susan A. Keefe, *Water and the Word: Baptism and the Education of the Clergy in the Carolingian Empire*, 2 vols., Notre Dame, Indiana 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Wendy Davies, *Priests and Rural Communities in East Brittany in the Ninth Century*, in: *Études celtiques* 20 (1983), 177–197; id., *Small Worlds: The Village Community in Early Medieval Brittany*, London 1988; Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom. Triumph and Diversity, AD 200–1000*, 2nd ed., Oxford, 2003.

their own property, they acted as notaries, witnesses, and scribes for people who were engaged in such activities. Wealth earned some priests high social status. Czock found that priests „could own demesne houses, servile manse, serfs, meadows, vineyards as well as churches.“ (p. 18) One priest, Milo, owned 44 serfs. Wherever records of legal transfers survive, evidence of business-minded, economically active priests focused on managing their wealth and passing it on to their heirs also survives.

Priests' agency to act in their own and their families' interests, a third theme, sometimes was challenged by their nominal supervisors. As men in the middle, priests theoretically answered to their bishops or to proprietors who controlled their churches. Control over priests varied enormously across Europe depending on the maturity and sophistication of ecclesiastical and political administrative structures. In northern Iberia many activist rural priests operated outside the purview of a cathedral chapter, episcopal or royal household. But, in Bavaria „[l]ocal priests were part of a hierarchical system with the bishop at the top, assisted by one or two archpriests who acted as deputies.“ (p. 75) Still, priests even in an ecclesiastically well-managed province such as Reims could challenge their bishop and „enjoy a certain autonomy from episcopal authority.“ (p. 97)

The other responsibility that bracketed men in the middle, a fourth theme, was to their pastoral duties. Carolingian royal legislation and episcopal statutes emphasized as never before the crucial role of local priests as point men of religious reform. Historians cannot assess how well local priests did in saving the souls of their people. Nevertheless, compelling manuscript evidence suggests that they took their duties seriously. Hen was able to discover only scant evidence that some priests used books in the Merovingian period. All that changes in the Carolingian age. The charters that record priestly economic activity witness to their basic literacy and educational level. Beyond that, the many service books (missals, lectionaries, penitentials, collections of homilies, antiphonaries, and canons) obviously were produced for priests who could use them. Also,

specific texts composed for priests prepared them to implement the mandates of the Carolingian reform. Susan Keefe called these books „instruction readers“<sup>4</sup>, books produced at the diocesan level composed of essential texts priests needed to effect religious reform at the grass roots level. Van Rhijn studied three ninth-century manuscripts that contain a collection of brief commentaries, expositions, excerpts, explanations, canons, and other material that show that priests „knew what they were doing, and why.“ (p. 198) A striking feature of these texts is their variability. Six different texts in eight instruction readers helped priests explain the Lord's Prayer. The goal was the same, the paths to get there multiple.

Charlemagne required that all Christians should know the Lord's Prayer. Patzold identified some 25 different texts that helped priests inculcate the prayer's teachings to Charlemagne's people. Charlemagne so insisted on the prayer's crucial importance that he demanded a record of those „who did not know the Lord's Prayer and the Creed by heart and *who refused to learn them*.“ (p. 206; emphasis added). This extraordinary admission – that some might refuse to participate in the reform – raises the question of its effectiveness. Patzold's observation that the density of transmission of texts explaining the prayer suggests that the royal directive did bear some fruit on the local level rings true. In the end, as the subtitle of Peter Brown's book reminds us, by the year 1000, Christianity had „triumphed“<sup>5</sup>. The men in the middle did their part.

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<sup>4</sup> Keefe, *Water and the Word*, vol. 1, pp. 23–26.

<sup>5</sup> See note 3.