

Jäger, David: *Plündern in Gallien 451–592. Eine Studie zu der Relevanz einer Praktik für das Organisieren von Folgeleistungen*. Berlin: de Gruyter 2017. ISBN: 978-3-11-052883-1; XIII, 626 S.

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This book tackles a major strand in the history of successor state formation in the Early Middle Ages: the function and impact of plunder as a means of acquisition and reallocation of material resources. The book argues that in Gaul from the mid fifth century to the end of the sixth century plunder allowed the emerging Frankish ruling elite to accumulate substantial material wealth. In essence, Jäger argues that the Merovingian dynasty based its power on the double function of plunder. First, it functioned as an active means of wealth accumulation and redistribution to an army which was no longer salaried by means of taxation. By redistributing the wealth accumulated by plunder, the king preserved the loyalty of the warrior bands who had supported his military expansion. Second, plunder served as a passive tool for the persuasion of a local population, who received protection from plunder in exchange for the taxes they paid. By protecting the local communities from the perpetration of this practice, the Merovingian king won the support of the Gallo-Roman elites, who kept what survived of the imperial tax system in operation to the benefit of the ruling dynasty.

The volume comprises eight chapters in total, divided into three parts. Part 1 sets the scene by reviewing old and recent literature on plunder and booty. Of great relevance for Jäger's interpretation is the theoretical framework elaborated by the Viennese School of Ethnogenesis. It rejects the idea that the process of early medieval state formation was a by-product of an ancestral cohesion based on ethnic identity.¹ Jäger takes up this notion and makes an attempt at integrating the practice of plunder within the wider process of Ethnogenesis.

Part 2 supplements the previous section by outlining the author's methodology. In essence, Jäger combines textual and socio-

logical analyses in order to demonstrate that the dissolution of the imperial infrastructures in the West in the fifth century served as a means of integrating the newcomers. Based on this theoretical framework, he points to the transformative effect of plunder on the socio-economic order. Jäger locates it among the various modes of exchange as opposed to the tributary mode of production, which was the predominant relationship of exploitation in force between the state and the landowning class on the one hand, and the local population on the other.

Part 3 moves on to examine the sources referring to the dynamic process of resource accumulation through plunder, as it affected the process of state formation in Gaul from the mid fifth to the late sixth century. This section is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1 scrutinises the period from 451 to 482, that is, from the battle between the imperial general Aetius and the Hun leader Attila near Orleans to the death of Childeric, the leader of the Salian Franks. Jäger argues that within this period dominated by warfare, the mode of resource extraction based on plunder appeared to be the most successful way to consolidate the political-cum-military power of the emerging leaders.

Chapter 2 moves on to examine the consolidation of the Frankish power under Clovis (482–511) and his immediate successors up to the years 536/537. In defeating his neighbours and absorbing the Frankish polities of Sigibert (Cologne), Ragnachar and Chararic (Cambrai), Clovis acquired their treasures together with their followers. In this way, he reproduced on a larger scale the system of acquisition and reallocation of resources initiated by his father Childeric. Under Clovis, there was another major change, however. Clovis' conversion to orthodox Christianity won the Franks the support of the Gallo-Roman elite and the Church. The king established a close cooperation between the royal power and the local communities and their leaders, the bishops. While Gallo-Roman bishops continued to represent their commu-

¹ Herwig Wolfram, *Die Goten*, München 1979; Walter Pohl, *Die Völkerwanderung. Eroberung und Integration*, Stuttgart 2002; Helmut Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550–850*, Cambridge 2015.

nities, the new ruling elite used them and the remains of local and judicial administration for consolidating own power. A further novelty was the appointment of a count (or comes), personally connected to the king, to major towns and communities. Jäger argues that the main function of this royal official was to protect the local taxpayers from plunder and robberies perpetrated by external enemies.

Chapter 3 deals with the internecine war, which took place between Childebert I (511–558) and Clothar I (511–561) from 536/537 to 561. Jäger suggests that the civil strife between the members of the Merovingian kinship marked a further change in the practice of funding the warrior bands. While plunderings were closely tied to war operations, during the civil wars warrior bands could also turn to robbery, in this way expanding the possibilities for collecting resources from the local population. However, Jäger admits that the distinction between these two modes of surplus extraction was tiny and hard to define.

Chapter 4 narrates the vicissitudes of the Merovingian polities from the death of Clothar I in 561 and the truce between the kings Gunthram (561–593) and Childebert II (575–595) in 585. In the period after 561 two contrasting trends did emerge: on the one hand, the kings relied on a tributary system more than in the earlier period. On the other hand, local powers tended to emancipate themselves from royal authority, both in political and in economic terms. A clear indicator of this state of affairs was the response from the powerful local landowners to the military *bannus* (the call to the army by the king). Magnates and wealthy lords found the wherewithal to oppose the kings, even if passively, simply by not turning up or not sending soldiers or warriors, or enough of them.

In Chapter 5, which summarizes the events from 585 to 592, Jäger argues that even though the tributary system replaced plunder as a means of resource extraction and redistribution, Gunthram and Childebert II still needed the support of warrior bands, and therefore, plunder continued to play a significant role as a means of funding royal military activities.

The best way to appreciate the book is to

read it in reverse by studying the conclusions first. The first paragraph of the concluding chapter 6 sets out very clearly Jäger's main thesis running through the previous chapters. In sum, Jäger argues that plunder served as a mechanism for mobilizing resources alternative to the traditional system based on tribute, tax or rent extraction. Paradoxically, plunder achieved this aim by means of two opposing roles which Jäger terms active and passive functions. This twofold character of plunder was the determining factor for the formation of the Merovingian kingdoms. Under certain conditions, plunder functioned as a means of resource accumulation and as an engine of social cohesion between the emerging ruling elite and armed groups, who were attracted by the prospects of becoming rich by pillaging their enemies or the local population. Notwithstanding his brilliance, Jäger's study fails to discuss its results within the context of the debate revolving around the distinguishing features of the Merovingian kingdom. What does the practice of plunder tell us about the structures of this kingdom? Jäger's emphasis on the function of plunder as a decentralized method of mobilizing resources is significant with respect to recent research studies, especially to John Haldon's description of the Merovingian kingdom as a territorial sovereign polity with nominal central yet patrimonial rule and with a number of peripheral centres of power and administration. His notion of the Merovingian kingdom as a 'segmentary state'² is reinforced by Jäger's results.

To conclude: Although not all of the proposed theses concerning the formation of the Early Medieval states will hold up, Jäger's book offers new perspectives on the matter which are well worth pondering.

² John Haldon, *Late Rome, Byzantium, and Early Medieval Western Europe*, in: Andrew Monson / Walter Scheidel (eds.), *Fiscal regimes and the Political Economy of Premodern States*, Cambridge 2015, pp. 345–389, here p. 380; see also John Haldon, *Comparative State Formation. the Later Roman Empire in Wider World*, in: Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, Oxford 2012, pp. 1111–1147. For a different perspective on the Frankish state, see Matthew Innes, *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages. The Middle Rhine Valley 400–1000*, Cambridge 2000, p. 262.

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