

BOOK REVIEWS

La nature et le roi: Environnement, pouvoir et société à l'âge de Charlemagne (740–820), by Jean-Pierre Devroey (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 2019; pp. 588. €25).

That the inhabitants of the Frankish kingdoms in the later eighth and early ninth centuries were regularly hit by famines is not news to anybody who has read the chronicles and histories of the period. In this book, Jean-Pierre Devroey takes four of these famines as his starting-point for a wide-ranging exploration that takes the reader to sometimes surprising fields of neighbouring research (entomology, dendrochronology, Napoleonic France). Unlike older scholarship, which explained famines either via Malthusian cycles, inadequate agricultural techniques or as natural phenomena, Devroey considers hunger as a social phenomenon caused by human agency, but determined by natural causes. The focus of his research is therefore two-fold: firstly, the natural and climatological circumstances that led to famine, and, secondly, the way in which people imagined and dealt with such disasters. The author allows himself many digressions that sometimes obscure the main line of his arguments, but the book is an erudite and innovative contribution to the history of the early medieval climate and environment, which, through the use of the findings of palaeoclimatology, sheds new light on periods of hunger in the early Carolingian period. The book is intended as a starting-point for future research that combines social and environmental history via micro-historical case-studies, and it certainly shows that this approach yields interesting insights.

In the first part (chs. 1–5), the reader is treated to a crash-course in the latest insights of scientific palaeoclimatology (based on glacier cores, lake sediments, tree-rings) showing, first of all, that famines are never just the result of a single cause such as bad weather, but always stem from a complex interplay of natural and social factors. Interestingly, the author emphasises how, more than the accessibility of food in itself, the changes in the *access* to food in times of crisis for different social groups is a crucial element in the explanation of famines. The response of any given society to food shortage, in other words, was as important as the natural circumstances that caused it. If we want to understand how famines ‘worked’, we should not only study the climate and natural events (eruptions of volcanos, droughts, changes in average temperature), but also the ‘social eco-system’ and its reactions to food shortage. For the early medieval case-studies that form the heart of this book, the central figure in this social eco-system is the king, a king-pastor (in Foucault’s words) who ought to take good care of his flock of subjects and ensure that they had enough to eat. In the investigation of the four famines, therefore, both ‘le roi’ and ‘la nature’ play prominent roles.

The second part of the book first discusses the famines of 762–4, 779, 791–4 and 800–24 respectively (chs. 6–11), followed by an analysis of the Carolingian ‘moral economy’ (chs. 12, 13) that informed the responses of king and society to these crises. For each case, Devroey tries to combine

palaeoclimatological data with as many historical sources as possible to shed light on both aspects, and the results are interesting. The famine of 791–4, for instance, for which there is substantial historical evidence, has left no trace whatsoever in palaeoclimatological data, which makes it unlikely that the weather was its cause. Sources from the time mention ‘empty grain’, and interpret it as either demonic intervention or divine punishment. The cause of this phenomenon, according to Devroey, was probably an unidentifiable parasite of cereals combined with a type of fungus that thrived after a period of humid weather, which led to grain that looked normal but turned out to be void and inedible. Such circumstances are, however, usually very local, which casts an interesting light on the primary sources that report this famine for the entire Carolingian world.

What the case-studies show is that the causes of famine could be many, and that it tended to strike after a period of time in which different contributing factors stacked one on top of the other. The best example of this is probably the period between *circa* 800 and 824 (with crises in 805–9 and 820–24), which, according to palaeoclimatological data, saw no anomalies in rain or temperature. Instead, the early ninth century witnessed a period of unstable weather (droughts and inundations), which in the course of time caused failed harvests and outbreaks of bovine disease that killed plough oxen. Especially for this period there are many historical sources that show us how the king and his leading men perceived these crises, and how they tried to deal with them. In a letter sent by Charlemagne to Bishop Gerbald of Liège, for instance, the emperor asked the bishop to organise litanies and fasting in order to beseech God to end His punishment.

This is not to say that early medieval populations were just passive victims of such disasters: Devroey presents them as active agents, who started to exploit previously uncultivated land or moved to new regions to deal with hunger. Additionally, the early ninth century witnessed a series of high-level interventions to counter the effects of famine, especially for the poor. Examples of these ‘moral politics’ are Charlemagne’s capitularies that fixed the prices of bread and different kinds of cereals, or his normative texts about tithes and alms-giving. In this way, the king made sure that the poor, too, kept access to food in times of shortage. Both in a practical and in a moral sense, then, early medieval society was resourceful and active, using many different strategies to deal with famine.

By combining the findings of palaeoclimatology with a rigorous analysis of early medieval sources, Devroey shows the way into new interdisciplinary directions of research, which will surely inspire future scholars to explore the world behind the well-known histories and chronicles of the time.

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doi:10.1093/ehr/ceab028

Carolingian Catalonia: Politics, Culture, and Identity in an Imperial Province, 778–987, by Cullen J. Chandler (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2018; pp. xv + 321. £75).

To anyone working in the field of early medieval Europe, a modern and up-to-date account of Carolingian Catalonia is most welcome. But Cullen