Making Early Medieval Societies
Conflict and Belonging in the Latin West, 300–1200
Edited by Kate Cooper and Conrad Leyser
Making Early Medieval Societies

*Making Early Medieval Societies* explores a fundamental question: what held the small- and large-scale communities of the late Roman and early medieval West together, at a time when the world seemed to be falling apart? Historians and anthropologists have traditionally asked parallel questions about the rise and fall of empires and how societies create a sense of belonging and social order in the absence of strong governmental institutions. This book draws on classic and more recent anthropologists’ work to consider dispute settlement and conflict management during and after the end of the Roman Empire. Contributions range across the internecine rivalries of late Roman bishops, the marital disputes of warrior kings, and the tension between religious leaders and the unruly crowds in Western Europe after the first millennium – all considering the mechanisms through which conflict could be harnessed as a force for social stability or an engine for social change.


In Memoriam Mary Douglas
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This volume traces its roots to a conference held in 2005 at the University of Manchester, ‘The Peace in the Feud: History and Anthropology 1955–2005’. We met to celebrate a fiftieth anniversary. In the spring of 1955, the Professor of Social Anthropology at Manchester, Max Gluckman, delivered a series of lectures on BBC Radio’s Third Programme, entitled ‘Custom and Conflict in Africa’, exploring how the tensions endemic in a number of African traditional societies were held in check by the power of tradition. Gluckman’s book by the same name came out later in the year. His aim, he averred, was to study ‘how men quarrel in terms of certain customary allegiances but are restrained from violence through other conflicting allegiances which are also enjoined on them by custom. The result is that conflicts in one set of relationships, over a wider range of society or through a longer period of time, lead to the reestablishment of social cohesion.’

There was a paradoxical ‘peace in the feud’, Gluckman argued: while the forces of vengeance and violence were perhaps intrinsically destructive, they could be harnessed to socially constructive purpose.

Gluckman explicitly sought to attract the attention of historians of medieval Europe, and his challenge was met with a ready response from his Manchester colleague, Michael Wallace-Hadrill. In 1959, the Bulletin of the John Rylands Library carried an article by Wallace-Hadrill, ‘The Blood-Feud of the Franks’, which offered a re-interpretation of revenge violence in Merovingian Gaul precisely along the lines suggested by Gluckman. The nature of Wallace-Hadrill’s collegial contact with Gluckman has not been documented, and it has yet to be established whether we are to imagine sustained face-to-face conversations in a Manchester common room or a more intermittent exchange conducted largely via print and broadcast.

Whatever its medium or extent, the Gluckman/Wallace-Hadrill encounter at Manchester remains one of the more influential moments

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of mid-twentieth-century intellectual history, for it gave new life to the close relationship that had persisted between anthropologists and medieval historians in the English-speaking world in the early days of anthropology as a free-standing discipline. Many pioneering anthropologists, such as E. E. Evans-Pritchard, had taken their first degrees in History at a time when the study of medieval charters was seen as the foundation of any historian’s training.

As a result of the 2005 conference, an increasingly hardy band of colleagues began to meet and to exchange drafts. Our attention was drawn back to Gluckman’s central questions: how does a social order hold together when centralized structures of authority are weak, or absent altogether? How do societies harness conflict to reinforce social order? We hope our readers will agree that the conversation between historians and anthropologists is still very much alive.

We remain grateful to the several sponsors of the original Conference, ‘The Peace in the Feud’, held under the auspices of the Manchester Centre for Late Antiquity. At the University of Manchester, these were: the Centre for Inter-disciplinary Research in the Arts, the School of Arts, Languages, and Cultures, the Faculty of Humanities, the School of Social Sciences, the Wellcome Trust Unit, and the Manchester Museum, which hosted the Conference Dinner in the shadow of a large dinosaur skeleton. Sponsorship came also from Jean Monnet Centre, and from Blackwells, who published Gluckman’s Custom and Conflict. Our abiding thanks to the conference speakers whose contributions are not represented in the pages which follow: Philippe Buc, Stuart Carroll, Guy Halsall, John Hudson, Maia Green, the late J. D. Y. Peel, David Pratten, the late Terence Ranger, Richard Rathbone, Lyn Schumaker, Chris Wickham, and Ian Wood. Further thanks are due to Philippe Buc, Maia Green, and to Stephen D. White, who led postgraduate workshops, as did Richard Rathbone, whose conversations with the editors at Cumberland Lodge in the mid-1990s were a lasting source of inspiration.

In the making of the volume, we have had support from the John Fell Fund at Oxford University and the Lightbody Fund at Worcester College, which enabled us to meet to discuss drafts. We are beholden to Hannah Williams, for unstinting and indispensable editorial support, extending over many years. Our thanks also to successive editorial teams at Cambridge University Press, latterly under the genial guidance of Elizabeth Friend-Smith. Finally, we wish to thank the volume’s contributors for exceeding our most ambitious hopes of scholarly collaboration, and for having the patience, grace, and sheer staying power to wrestle the intensity and excitement of face-to-face discussion into print.
All of those who were present at the Conference will remember the closing remarks of Mary Douglas. Her own contribution to the conversation between History and Anthropology needs no introduction. It is to her memory that we dedicate this volume.

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Introduction: making early medieval societies

Conrad Leyser

As a title, ‘Making early medieval societies’ is, at best, oxymoronic: to many, it will just seem like wishful thinking. In the default view, ‘the Middle Ages’ is when societies fell apart (at least in the Latin West, which is the focus of this book). Medieval times begin with the fall of Rome; they end with the chaos of the Italian Wars, or, more locally, the Wars of the Roses. In between, order is occasionally and temporarily restored, as in the Empire of Charlemagne – but disintegration is never far away. The Carolingian Empire collapsed after three generations, and, according to a highly influential school of thought, civil society was cut back to the bone at the hands of feuding warlords. Seen in this light, the whole medieval period stands introduced by Augustine, bishop of Hippo, who died in 430 with barbarians at the gates of his city. In the City of God, Augustine cast an apparently bleak eye on what held the social order together. Two people who did not speak the same language had less in common with each other, he opined than a man and his dog: only through the massive exercise of force had the Roman Empire been able to bring ‘peace’ to the world. The State, Augustine famously asserted, was robbery on a grand scale. What price, then, ‘making early medieval societies’?

While most twenty-first century medievalists would object loudly to this stereotyped view of their period, tacitly, we consent. Of course we know that the very idea of the ‘Middle Ages’ is no more than a messy set of polemical claims disseminated by various interest groups in Western Europe from the self-styled ‘Renaissance’ onwards; and that the standard periodization of European history (ancient-medieval-early modern) has been disrupted by the emergence of ‘Late Antiquity’ in the second half of the twentieth

1 Augustine, De civitate Dei XIX. 7 on peace; IV. 4 on the State as robbery. My thanks to the contributors for their several suggestions; none of them should be held responsible for the shortcomings of what follows.

The rise of global history may help us to see still more clearly the parochialism of the whole schema. For all that, ‘medievalism’ is still pervasive, and nowhere more so than where the early Middle Ages are concerned. Few historians celebrate their arrival. Indeed, the past ten years have witnessed a pulse of energy in asserting that the end of the ancient world was a violent catastrophe. Those who dissent cast the process in terms of ‘downsizing’ or ‘abatement’ – but even this more neutral language colludes in the notion that the Middle Ages were in some way second best. In the absence of the State (whether Roman or Carolingian), early medieval societies in the West are seen to have coped more or less well. ‘Degradations’ from imperial order might even be ‘possibilities’, but that is about as far as most early medievalists are prepared to go. The mood here is post-imperial, perhaps in Britain especially: we are after empire, so were they.

The problem is, we have not weaned ourselves away from a conception of history where the State is central, the source of all meaning and goodness. In the nineteenth century, when medievalists pioneered the establishment of History as a discipline for the training of citizens, this worked to the advantage of the Middle Ages. The fall of ancient Rome was seen in terms of progress towards the modern nation-state. However rough and ready, the barbarian kingdoms were seen as an advance on imperial tyranny. It was not long, however, before traditional prejudices reasserted themselves. In most conventional histories of the State, the Middle Ages

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come off badly: the epoch is defined as the period in which public justice falls into private hands. ‘Feudal anarchy’ reigns, as predatory lords roam the continent. This story of the privatization of justice shores up, in a very basic way, our sense of modernity.

The fable of privatization, if we may call it that, can be invoked whenever one chooses to initiate ‘a medieval period’. Two junctures are most commonplace: the fifth century, after the fall of Rome, and the tenth century, after the end of the Carolingians.\(^8\) Fashion veers one way, then the other, as to which juncture is more popular. In the past generation or so, scholars have run from one side of the boat to the other, as it were. The renewed vigour of the ‘Fall of Rome’ debate coincides precisely with the draining away of energy from the debate over the ‘Feudal Mutation’ around the Year 1000. Holding both periods in the same field of vision, so as to compare the plausibility of the privatization fable, seems to be beyond us: the attempt to do so is one of the key impulses behind this book.\(^9\)

To query this fable is not to pretend that imperial and post-imperial Europe were the same as each other – but it is to insist that the State, whether Roman or Carolingian, looked a lot bigger when it was no longer there. The whole notion of a ‘medieval privatization of power’, whenever it is deployed, trades on a fantastical image of imperial public majesty, a fantasy that took hold after the formal collapse of empire, and that has lasted ever since.\(^10\)

We should adjust for this distortion in any discussion of public and private spheres. In the ancient and medieval world, after all, the sphere of ‘the private’ was greater than even the wildest contemporary right-wing scenario. Thus family, economic, and religious life were ‘private’ enterprises. They fell into the domain of the household. ‘The public’ was strictly and narrowly defined as that which pertained to official business of State. Government in this period was a crude, lean mechanism

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\(^9\) See, for example, Cheyette, ‘Some Reflections’; and M. Innes, *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages: the Middle Rhine Valley, 400–1000* (Cambridge, 2000). Both offer a critique of the Year 1000 debate, but in both accounts, ‘privatization’ in the earlier period is taken as unproblematic: ‘medieval society’ is seen to take shape in the sixth and seventh centuries, after the fall of Rome and with the seizure of public power by incoming Germanic elites.

designed to maximize the benefits of surplus extraction, and to minimize the amount of ‘governing’ involved. When the Roman State in the West ceased to function, it makes little sense to describe this as a ‘privatization’ of power, because most power in this world was already ‘private’: the Roman father’s word was absolute.  

In this book, then, our starting point is not governmental power, but the prior and basic question of social order. What was it that held societies together? How did these social bonds change? To ask and to answer these basic questions, we turn for inspiration to social anthropology; that said, readers should be warned at once that we are working with a minimally theorized notion of ‘the social’. We are more interested in the language of our sources than in constructing our own taxonomies, and accordingly have taken a broad, unfussy view as to what constitutes a ‘social bond’. As one similarly minded scholar puts it, ‘Between coercion and chance lie the associations that are to some extent chosen’. These do include family relations, to the making and remaking of which people in this period devoted much of their energies; these also, emphatically, include religious ties. Indeed, given the etymology of religio, the element of ‘bonding’ in religious association would have been obvious to Latinate contemporaries, in a way that modern audiences still struggle to recapture.

All of this lands us necessarily squarely in the domain of ‘the private’ as defined before the eighteenth century. We do not, however, look entirely to collapse ‘the public’ or ‘the institutional’ as categories into a notional pre-modern world of exclusively personal conflicts and exchanges. Both the family and religion had coercive, public, and hence political and institutional dimensions. The State, necessarily, enters into the discussion. What we need to make possible is a history where the rise and fall of systems of government is the symptom, not the cause of wider shifts in social order.

Is this to reinvent the wheel? At least two kinds of account have long put the social order ahead of the State: one, the weaker version, comes broadly speaking out of varieties of social and economic history, the

11 See K. Cooper, ‘Closely Watched Households: Visibility, Exposure and Private Power in the Roman Domus’, *Past & Present*, 197 (2007), 3–33; and below in this volume. Work in progress by Hannah Probert (Sheffield) will follow the development of *pater potestas* into the early Middle Ages.


other stronger version out of cultural history. In the weaker version of the story, what happens in our period is that the State withers away, while the ruling elite continue, their pattern of life largely uninterrupted. This view can take different forms. A classic version is the Pirenne thesis, which views the fall of the Roman State in the fifth and sixth centuries as a non-event. Ancient networks of exchange across the Mediterranean, Pirenne insisted, were not disrupted by the political changes in the western half of the Empire.¹⁴

A different application of the same basic idea is to be found in close studies of elites. John Matthews’ *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court*, for example, in particular as read by one medievalist, conjured a view of aristocratic power stretching back to the Roman Republic and forward into the medieval centuries.¹⁵ On this account, the real motor of history is not political power, but the social, cultural, and economic power of what may be a very ancient regime.

Pirenne and Matthews share the conviction that late ancient/early medieval society is impervious to the epiphenomenon of political change: thus the weaker version. The stronger view is that the creation of different forms of social relationship actually overpowers the State. The classic example of this is Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Gibbon, notoriously, went so far as to argue that Christian superstition – a form of fanaticism or hypocrisy – corroded the entire fabric of the Roman social order, so that the State in the West stood no chance of surviving.

The great modern exponent of this tradition is Peter Brown. In his first collection of essays composed in the 1960s, *Religion and Society in the Age of St Augustine*, Brown looks to render vivid to readers ‘[t]he sudden flooding of the inner life into social forms’. ‘This’, he continues, ‘is what distinguishes the Late Antique period, of the third century onwards, from the classical world’.¹⁶ Christianity here does not consume the Empire: where Gibbon decries superstitious otherworldliness, Brown sees ‘the holy’, a force strong enough to supplement, or indeed create, institutions

¹⁴ H. Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, tr. B. Miall (New York, 1939); Pirenne of course also argued that the Carolingian Empire made little difference to the social order of the Latin West: only the rise of towns after the first millennium created a new network of exchange. See his *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade*, tr. F. D. Halsey (Princeton, 1925); and for comment, J. Dhondt, ‘Henri Pirenne: historien des institutions urbaines’, *Annali della fondazione italiana per la storia amministrativa* 3 (1966), 81–129.


But Brown shares absolutely with Gibbon the determination that religion is a social phenomenon, independent of the State.

These are all highly familiar directions of travel – and yet medievalists have not followed them through. Our suspicion is that an overturning of basic assumptions is within reach. Stereotypically, the Middle Ages witnessed a contraction of the social, a move away from a cosmopolitan world of strangers into the ‘face-to-face’ association of people who know each other. We ask whether the picture can be inverted. Throwing off the Roman State, new forms of association, newly extended trans-regional bonds, flourished in the Latin West. The same may be true in the post-Carolingian context. As a student of upper Lotharingia and Champagne has recently remarked, the end of empire ‘was more likely to be a consequence not a cause’ of changes in the nature of social relations on the ground. With a degree of reluctance, we offer the slogan, ‘The Middle Ages: Thin State – Big Society’.

Conflict, cohesion, and the anthropological turn

‘Big Society’ in our period was replete with conflict. We make no attempt to efface this. On the contrary, our focus is on the function of conflict in the forging of new social bonds. This a fundamental feature of modern sociological discussion. Georg Simmel argued consistently that society depended for its existence on conflict. We take our own cue from Max

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19 For the benefit of some possibly bewildered readers: ‘Big Society’ was an election slogan of the Conservative Party in the UK elections of 2010. On the one hand it signalled a retreat from the extreme position of Mrs Thatcher that ‘There is no such thing as Society’. On the other, it served to rebrand the familiar Conservative nostrum that the State should scale back in the provision of public services. ‘Big Society’ was thus a euphemism for ‘privatization’. The phrase went on to acquire a degree of academic notoriety, as the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council was seen to have encouraged research into ‘Big Society’. See www.thebigsociety.co.uk; and www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/bob-brecher/ahrc-and-big-society-reflections-on-neo-liberal-takeover-of-academy. My thanks to Caroline Humfress and Tom Lambert for helpful discussions here.
Gluckman’s classic study, ‘The Peace in the Feud’, published in the opening issue of Past & Present, and then again the same year in Gluckman’s Custom and Conflict in Africa. Gluckman’s message, which drew on the research of Evans Pritchard, was one of reassurance. African ‘tribal society’ might seem to be riven with conflict and liable to self-destruction in an endless cycle of violence between feuding families. Such conflicts, Gluckman showed, far from being random or relentless, had their own carefully modulated rhythm: custom ensured that conflicts were self-limiting, and even generative of social cohesion.

Gluckman’s insights, and those of the ‘Manchester School’, have themselves been generative of a half century of discussion by students of the early medieval feud and of violence in general (as Stephen D. White surveys with brio below). In 1959, his colleague in History at Manchester, Michael Wallace-Hadrill, published a study, ‘The Blood-Feud of the Franks’, in which he adduced Gluckman’s study to argue that there was an element of restraint in the apparently untramelled savagery of the Merovingians, as narrated by Gregory of Tours. The extent to which Wallace-Hadrill actually drew inspiration from direct collegial contact with Gluckman is debated. Two things are clear, however. First, Gluckman actively hoped that medievalists, with whom he will have studied prior to becoming an Africanist, would take notice of his observations; and second that Wallace-Hadrill’s essay, however casually, did just that. Medievalists went on to produce specific studies of feud among the peoples of early medieval Europe; more broadly in the 1980s, they took a now well-observed anthropological turn, in landmark volumes on dispute settlement and on community formation.

24 Gluckman, Custom and Conflict in Africa, p. 4.  
25 See, for example, K. Leyser, Rule and Conflict in an Early Medieval Society: Ottonian Saxony (London, 1979), esp. p. 102.  
26 S. Reynolds, Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900–1300 (Oxford, 1984); W. Davies and P. Fouracre (eds.), The Settlement of Disputes in Early Medieval Europe (Cambridge, 1986); followed by the same editors’, Property and Power in Early Medieval Europe (Cambridge, 1996); and The Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages (Cambridge, 2010), in which J. L. Nelson’s ‘Introduction’ reflects on the group’s engagement with anthropology (pp. 1–17).
Charting the whole relationship between History and Social Anthropology in the past two or three generations is beyond our remit.27 A synoptic view would be that we have been through at least two stages of the romance comedy plot: the couple meet, there are complications. While we await the resolution, we can spell out some of the costs and the benefits of a social anthropological approach as we see them.

A first danger is that the anthropological turn will serve only to reinforce stereotypes of the Middle Ages by lending an exotic primitivism to the period. We may appeal to, say, the Nuer of the Sudan to help us imagine medieval Europe as an alien social world, but when we posit that medieval allegiances were ‘tribal’, all we have done is to create an inverted image of what we perceive modern society to be. There is an ideological investment here of which we should beware, and medievalists have been highly alert to this.28

Some scholars, indeed, have gone further in identifying a full circularity of argument in the use by medievalists of social anthropology. In one view, anthropological theories of ritual are derived, ultimately, from the ritual specialists of the medieval Church: these ‘theories’ can never attain analytical perspective on the period from which they descend.29 Sometimes the circularity is patent. Anthropologists (especially, it seems, of Africa) come to their material with an explicit sense of medieval Europe as a useful point of reference for understanding their material.30 This exported European cultural baggage is then re-imported by medievalists as a form of ‘external’ perspective. What Richard Rathbone has called ‘The Analogy’ between tribal Africa and medieval Europe can be an object lesson in false glamour.31

A third, perennial, danger is that historians in the thrall of anthropology lose track of time. In our envy of the anthropologist’s participant observer status, our ‘ethnographies’ of medieval societies, while ‘richly textured’,

27 For the United States, see further Brown and Górecki, Conflict in Medieval Europe, pp. 6–10.
can fail to include any account of change, or indeed any analytical component. Ironically, the most stringent warning here has been issued by an anthropologist. Empirical observation, Paul Dresch cautions, avails us nothing unless we also notice the cultural frames that give meaning to any of the social dramas we see unfolding. Dresch takes medievalists to task for their fascination both with Gluckman, and with Pierre Bourdieu. Gluckman, in his view, was driven by an unexamined set of ‘common sense’ assumptions; by contrast, Bourdieu, while methodologically more articulate, nonetheless sustains an equally unreflective account of humans as self-interested strategists. This view of agency leaches culturally and historically specific content when it is applied.  

All of that said, there are some real benefits to the History–Anthropology encounter (as Dresch would not dispute). Social anthropology decentres the State, and refocuses attention on the family and religion. These were topics expressly excluded from the purview of History at the moment of its professional inception in the nineteenth century – not coincidentally, the zenith of the European nation-state across the world. By contrast, the disciplinary origins of Anthropology reside in the era of imperial ‘abatement’ in the mid- twentieth century. In Britain, the first Departments of Anthropology were established after the Second World War, when the failings of the European nation-state were all too clear, not least to governments themselves. Max Gluckman and his colleagues had the explicit brief from the British government to answer the question, whether it was safe to move to ‘indirect rule’ of the colonies. This required the applied study of kinship groups in segmented warrior societies. ‘There is no such thing as the power of the State’, Radcliffe-Brown announced, as his colleagues set about devising a new typology of political life.

Meanwhile, French ethnographers, above all Claude Levi-Strauss, also started with kinship, albeit from a different perspective. The French tradition focussed on exchange rather than conflict. ‘Society’ for

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34 M. Fortes and E. E. Evans Pritchard (eds.), African Political Systems (Oxford, 1940) signals in their Editor’s Note (p. vii): ‘We hope this book will be of interest and use to those who have the task of administering African peoples’. There follows A. R. Radcliffe Brown’s preface, with its refusal of State power as a useful category (p. xxiii).
Levi-Strauss began with the incest taboo. The prohibition on marriage within kin groups led to the exchange of women between different families. ‘Social’, as opposed to ‘natural’, relations developed from here. This distinction between nature and culture of course had its problems. Notoriously, two different schools for the anthropology of kinship developed: while the French approach remained centred on alliances between families, the English anthropology of kinship insisted that the family line and its maintenance was the key locus of meaning. In the event, after a generation of intensive discussion, anthropologists abandoned ‘kinship’ as a useful category of analysis: it was no longer seen to hold the key to social organization. Only recently, with fieldwork conducted not only in former colonies, but in IVF clinics in Britain and the United States, has kinship returned to the anthropological table.

Historians have been slow to respond to these vicissitudes—but any discussion of kinship has the enduring merit of taking us into the tissue of social relations, and away from the State as the starting point.

Engagement with anthropology has also lent energy to the history of religion. Before the era of professionalization, historians had discussed religion as a matter of course—witness, however hostile, Edward Gibbon—but a consequence of History’s conscription by the nation-state was to inhibit this. Religion fell foul of ‘the omission [from historical study] of those parts of human experience which are not related to public affairs’, and this was still an issue at the turn of the 1960s. Victorian History’s loss was Anthropology’s gain: since the late nineteenth century, the study of religion had been integral to the analysis of the social organization of ‘primitive’ peoples. This was expressly theorized in the French tradition founded by Emile Durkheim, and even the more pragmatic Anglo-Saxon tradition did not beg to differ. Thus Gluckman’s *Custom and Conflict in Africa* led readers from Evans Pritchard’s work on feud

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38 See, for example, R. le Jan, *Famille et pouvoir dans le monde franc (vii-xxe siècle). Essai d’anthropologie sociale* (2003); or the refreshingly ambitious D. W. Sabean, S. Teuscher, J. Mathieu (eds.), *Kinship in Europe: Approaches to Long-Term Development (1300–1900)* (New York, 2007); neither refers to current anthropology of kinship.
among the Nuer, towards his work on witchcraft among the Azande. Historians took slightly longer to respond here than to the ‘Peace in the Feud’ – but in 1968, to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of Evans Pritchard’s *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*, his pupil Mary Douglas convened an interdisciplinary conference in London. Among those who spoke were Keith Thomas and Peter Brown. Three years later appeared the former’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, which brought Azande villagers into dialogue with their Essex counterparts in early modern England, and the latter’s article on the rise and function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity.\(^{40}\)

Waxing nostalgic about such ‘first contact’ moments between History and Anthropology should not make us forget that there is a great deal of work still to do. The anthropological turn is not finished: in fact, it may not have properly begun. Wallace-Hadrill’s uptake of Gluckman on feud on the one hand, and on the other Brown’s uptake of Douglas are too easily taken to represent two different initiatives, the one focussed on the study of power in medieval Western Europe, the other attuned to ‘the holy’ in the eastern Mediterranean. This is in fact a mischaracterization, certainly of Brown’s intentions, which were precisely to contribute to a discussion of the settlement of disputes in the later Roman Empire.\(^{41}\) Now nearly sixty years on from Gluckman’s article, for all that we are further forward, we lack a sustained history of ‘informal’ power and social order from Marcus Aurelius to Mohammed and beyond.\(^{42}\) Our histories of exchange in this period do not include the exchange of women – according to Levi-Strauss, the most basic of all social transactions.\(^{43}\) If the anthropological turn allows us to develop this, we should steer into the skid.

We could also do worse than turn back to Augustine. Seen as a theorist of the State, he is a glass-half-empty pessimist: as a theorist of society, however, Augustine can be stunningly upbeat. Full peace on earth may be beyond us, but we are never without some peace.\(^ {44}\) A wife who has given away her child’s inheritance without consent from her husband is recalled


\(^{43}\) An omission noted in Davies and Fouracre (eds.), *The Languages of Gift*, pp. 6–7.

\(^{44}\) See Davies and Fouracre (eds.), *Settlement of Disputes*, p. 233 on the ‘contentious’ peace of early medieval societies.
to ‘the trustful partnership’ (*tam fida societas*) of her marriage. Even robbers, in their scheming together, have a kind of peace between them.  

### Making early medieval societies

We begin in the later Roman Empire, or more precisely in the late Roman household. Kate Cooper explores what an account both of the Roman State and of the Christian Church would look like if we start from the household. In this ‘minimalist’ perspective, governors and magistrates, bishops and abbots come across not as corporate men, but as Roman *patres*. Their power as decision-makers could be uplifting and terrifying in equal measure, precisely because it was personal, intimate, and not always predictable. One upshot of this approach is that Gibbon’s insistence that the rise of the Church led to disintegration of the State might turn out to be true – but this would be because Christian leaders are creative of social fabric, not destructive.

We take soundings of episcopal performance as impresarios of conflict and of loyalty in the two studies following. David Natal and Jamie Wood land us straight into the thick of church politics in the later fourth century. In studying two relatively obscure arenas of conflict in northern Spain and southern France, Natal and Wood show how bishops actually started to cut their teeth – to convert social capital as local ‘big men’ into something we might start to call institutional power.

Helmut Reimitz’s study of Gregory of Tours reads his *Ten Books of Histories* as an attempt to resist what he (Gregory) took to be a malign trend in the making of social order, namely ‘the ethnic turn’. In this reconstruction, Gregory could see the writing on the wall: that a key element in the post-Roman dispensation would be ‘Frankishness’. Here a bishop strives to prevent the formation of social bonds whose grounds he mistrusts. In the manner of Augustine, Gregory sought to flatten the claims of earthly potentates and earthly schemes of value in the name of otherworldly standards and currencies.

Next, Martin Ryan looks afresh at Bede as a social thinker. In the past generation, Bede has lost all credibility as a ‘cloistered monk’: capturing the momentum of revisionist scholarship, Ryan maps out Bede’s vision of the social order and of social change. In the present context, his essay contributes to a wider discussion among early medievalists about

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ecclesiastical ‘reform’ as a discourse of social transformation. This has centred on the writings of Carolingian churchmen. One implication of Ryan’s chapter is that this reform programme did not depend on the Empire for its genealogy: its outlines can be found earlier, in the court monastery of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow.

Riccardo Bof and Conrad Leyser head into the confrontation between religious specialists and lay potentates. They track Christian teaching about marriage and divorce, following the convoluted development of tradition from late Roman North Africa to Carolingian West Francia. On the one hand, they find a new understanding of marriage as a divinely sanctioned social bond; on the other, they show that dogmatic intransigence was less quick to take hold than we might think. The goal of churchmen was ultimately to keep the peace.

Identifying the moment at which the Church began to conceive itself autonomously, without the awning of Empire, is the goal of Conrad Leyser’s essay. He argues that the two or three generations after the death of Charles the Fat, the last legitimate Carolingian, are decisive here. It was at this juncture that bishops and their canonists, especially in northern Italy, took cognizance of themselves as belonging to an institution that could function independently of imperial protection. To do so, they summoned the resources of the past. Cultural memory – of Pope Gregory the Great in particular – here becomes institutional glue.

Who lost out here? Paul Fouracre and Marios Costambeys, from different perspectives, consider the capacity of the established order not only to withstand challenge, but to prevent its being articulated. In his study of ‘rebellion’ in the narrative sources for the Latin West, Fouracre is struck above all by its absence. Sustained political protest was not part of the lexicon of early medieval polities: the particular equation of ‘Thin State: Big Society’ did not permit it.

What Marios Costambeys charts is the emergence of a professional cadre – legal notaries – who could ensure that ‘justice’ always spoke in terms that were controllable. Like priests, they realized they could function without a political master. An institutional culture took over. The voice of the dispossessed was faint at best: listening closely, what Costambeys traces is how they were counted out altogether.

The final two papers cross the millennial threshold, but in very different styles. Both consider what we have called above the ‘privatization fable’ – the view that after the millennium public power fell into the hands of a

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rapacious and unaccountable warrior elite. Taking full cognizance of the critique of this view, R. I. Moore insists that there is a wider story here, which we miss at our peril. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, control over the sacred, which translated into power over justice, was monopolized by a newly defined clerical elite. The *clerici* left the people out of the account – and historians should not collude in their disenfranchisement.

By contrast, Stephen D. White’s suspicion is that medieval historians are addicted to narratives of drama and violence. He views the whole account of the ‘Transformation of the Year 1000’ as a resurgence of the lust for blood that characterized much medieval writing about the feud, before the engagement with Anthropology. Gluckman’s ‘peace in the feud’ holds this bloodlust in check. Whatever its problems as a model, it has a role to play in keeping us sane. For this reason alone, the anthropological turn is not over.

Where does this leave us? There is plenty here that we do not talk about. Our geographical range is restricted: this collection is firmly western Mediterranean in focus. This is also primarily a series of studies in social and cultural history, to the exclusion of classic topics in political and economic history, such as taxation, rent, or pottery. There has been plenty of discussion of these which cheerfully excludes the areas of concern to us. Our immediate concern is to redress a balance – but in the longer term, it is not to institute what child developmentalists call ‘parallel play’; the hope must be eventually to play together.

Three other hopes are as follows. The first is to have initiated a conversation that spans the late Roman period and the high Middle Ages. It is not just a fear of Grand Narrative that makes this difficult. There are deep fault lines constraining discussion. Late Antiquity as a field attends to a basically eighteenth-century problem: when did the ancient world end? The study of the early Middle Ages is founded on the nineteenth-century question, ‘When did a new order begin?’ These spirits from the apparently remote past exert real institutional pressures in the present, as anyone coming onto the job market knows. ‘Ancient’ or ‘medieval’ describe not just heirloom questions, but a training and a scheduling: the large-scale conferences, which in the United States are the venue for job interviews, respect traditional periodization. It will take smaller groups and sustained dialogue to get past this.47

It follows, second, that we hope to have rendered plausible our title: making early medieval societies. The millennium under discussion here was an intensely creative period for the flourishing of conflict and the formation of new social relationships. These new bonds – we can call

them ‘late ancient’ or ‘early medieval’ as we wish – were not a patch-and-mend strategy for the hole where the State used to be. As these bonds took shape in the later Roman Empire, they were a way of coping with the State’s dysfunctional and intermittent presence. In the Latin West, the State, was, or became, the problem; ‘making societies’ was the solution.

Third, we have sought to write in ways that are accessible to those outside the immediate field or discipline. This is partly a matter of politeness. It is also an attempt to redress a balance of trade. History seems forever to be ‘drawing’ on Anthropology. Why not the other way round?
1 Property, power, and conflict: re-thinking the Constantinian revolution

Kate Cooper

It has long been recognized that the rise of Christianity and the fall of the Roman state were somehow intertwined. Enlightenment writers including David Hume and, most influentially, Edward Gibbon saw the arrival of Christianity as both cause and product of a lamentable triumph of credulity at the end of antiquity, which decisively weakened both the Roman character and the Roman system of government. More recently, historians have seen the end of the Roman Empire as a question of the changing role of elites. Most influential has been the work of John Matthews, who sees a shift of power away from the state and towards large-scale private land-owners as the decisive development marking the end of antiquity and the beginning of the middle ages.¹ The present essay will attempt to draw these two strands together, considering how the emergence of an imperial Church influenced the changing balance between public and private power.

Gibbon’s distorting lens of credulity has distracted scholarly attention, we will suggest, from a more disturbing – and more interesting – historical process. Understood not through the lens of belief and credulity, but rather that of allegiance and accountability, the evidence for the evolution of Christian authority structures tells a surprising story. Two discrete but related developments took place simultaneously in the fourth century: the Christian churches served as a vehicle for contesting the private power of lay landowners, even as the great landowners themselves were successfully encroaching on the power of the Roman state.