
H-France Review Vol. 5 (August 2005), No. 87

Richard E. Barton, *Lordship in the County of Maine, c.890-1160*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004. xvii + 255 pp. Maps, genealogies, notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 1-84383-086-8.

Review by Robert F. Berkhofer III, Western Michigan University.

Richard Barton aims to reevaluate scholarship on lordship and power in medieval France. And Barton aims carefully. By choosing the county of Maine, an area previously divided in annaliste-inspired regional histories, Barton selects a crucial piece of the jigsaw puzzle of medieval France being assembled by French historians over the last half century. By tackling the problem of the transformation of lordship, Barton engages the ongoing debate about power and change around 1000 among American, British, and French scholars. So, although his book may appear limited at first glance to readers unfamiliar with this field, Barton's work has broad implications.

Thus, *Lordship in the County of Maine* is both a regional study and a historiographic foray. Barton directly challenges what he sees as the prevailing French paradigm of "feudal transformation" or "*mutation féodale*" around the year 1000, arguing that: "The chronological model of the transformational paradigm does hold for the city of Le Mans and its county, Maine" (p. 3). But Barton does not merely seek to disrupt previous historians' time tables, rather he seeks to reinterpret the nature of lordship itself. Instead of change, Barton sees continuity, insisting that the "qualitative features of lordship in the tenth, eleventh and early twelfth centuries were deeply traditional and utterly consistent with medieval aristocratic mentalities" (p. 3). Barton also portrays his work as taking up the call for more nuanced studies of power and lordship in medieval Europe most forcefully posed by Thomas N. Bisson in the late 1990s and widely debated since (p. 7).^[1] However, Barton eschews terminological wrangling over "feudalism" characteristic of previous debate for a more holistic approach to power and lordship, stressing honor, prestige, and personal or affective aspects of lordship.

Barton's way through the tangle of interpretations is to opt for Geertzian "thick description," that is to delve deeply into records of lordship in Maine and surrounding regions, an approach which draws heavily on cultural anthropology, including Julian Pitt-Rivers and Pierre Bourdieu among others. (see introduction, esp. pp. 7-9 and p. 16)^[2] Barton exploits archival sources in depth and is not afraid to make comparisons outside his region when relevant. He mines charters, cartularies, narrative chronicles, and material evidence extensively and does not adhere to rigid boundaries as annaliste regional studies often do. He is also able to read his materials from various angles. This leads to some very compelling description. One example will suffice here. In the cleverly titled chapter two, "Two Great Men Cannot Live in the Same Sack," Barton narrates several episodes from the *Actus Pontificum Cenomannis* to illustrate the stormy relations between the bishops of Le Mans and the counts of Maine, including the accusations of Bishop Gunherius against Roger, founder of the second dynasty of counts of Maine (pp. 35-40). Here, Barton is able to read the surviving texts not merely as a struggle between episcopal and comital authority, but as the struggle of two aristocratic factions, who competed for control of material and symbolic capital—such as land (including Le Mans itself) and relics—as well as prestige. Moreover, Barton is able to read this incident on several levels, returning to it again in chapter seven, in which he examines violence, in particular the accusations resulting from Roger's despoliation of the episcopal estate of Baillou, including the abuse of peasants and attacks on clerics and their property (pp. 158-160). Such incidents reveal Barton's gift for narration, both as a historian and writer, and his ability to re-read evidence in different contexts. Barton's fine-grained examination of sources is the greatest strength of the work as a whole.

But it is Barton's thematic focus on lordship which drives the organization of the book. The first part of the book tells the story of comital lordship in Maine in four chapters. Chapters one and two offer straightforward political narrative, explaining how Maine became detached from higher authority and the conflicts between the counts and bishops who had been the principal figures of Carolingian rule. Chapters three and four treat the nature of comital lordship, dividing it for purposes of analysis into what Barton calls the "material" and "non-material" aspects of power; that is the control over specific places and items (which resulted in what Barton calls "symbolic" power (pp. 51-52)) on the one hand, and personal reputation and relationships on the other. This approach is intelligent because it disaggregates subjects that were frequently (and misleadingly) joined in previous scholarship.

The second half of *Lordship in the County of Maine* examines non-comital lordship, grappling directly with the tricky problem "feudal transformation." Some of Barton's arguments directly challenge and contradict recent scholarship. Chapter five examines power relations (and previous scholars' models) in regard to public vs. private power. Barton argues that the public/private distinction is a "false dichotomy" (p. 131), and that medieval historians, following Georges Duby, have been over-reliant on modern statist assumptions in their treatment of lordship in the tenth and eleventh centuries.[3] Barton finds that there were "outward" or "structural" changes in the geography of lordship (following the dislocation argument of Jean-François Lemarignier et al.). He also contends, paradoxically, there were no changes in what he sees as the traditional ideas and practices of lordship. For example, he argues that the so-called *malae consuetudines* or "evil customs" typically associated with the rise of seigneurial lordship "were neither new nor particularly evil" but rather "were ancient components of traditional rural lordship" (p. 143). Chapter six examines the role of violence in Maine and problems of order and disorder, arguing that violence was a continuous feature of lordship and that there was no greater disorder in the eleventh century than before or after. Chapter seven argues that "dispute resolution" was largely peaceful, because of the continuity of lordly ideas and the flexibility of lordly practices themselves allowed for, or even encouraged, compromises. Chapter eight examines the complexities of land, law, and lordship in Maine. In this final substantive chapter, Barton finds that "fiefs" (*feoda*) existed everywhere in Maine, but not as tenurial relationships over land as classically defined; rather, he argues "fiefs could and did mean many things" (p. 214) and were largely symbolic in nature representing something akin to "spheres of influence" (p. 219). He argues further that the lack of centralized power was paralleled by the absence of a "fixed system of legal or tenurial guidelines" (p. 219) and this led to tenurial fluidity. Once again, contrary to Duby and others, he argues that such fluidity did not produce chaos or feudal transformation because of the prevalence of the traditional ideas of lordship.

Overall, given Barton's prominent use of Thomas Bisson's and Pierre Bonnassie's writings on power, it is perhaps ironic that Barton rejects their view of change for a model of continuity more akin to that of Dominique Barthélemy or American and British scholars who use dispute resolution models to read eleventh-century evidence, such as Stephen White or Susan Reynolds.[4] Barton acknowledges significant variations in his evidence (and here his close reading serves him well) but insists throughout his work on continuity in lordly ideas and practices in contrast to other scholars. Perhaps this is simply reaction against claims of the more radical French mutationistes (Guy Bois, et al.) who have exaggerated both the rapidity and severity of lordly transformation around 1000.[5] But Barton anticipates such objections and it worth quoting his own words from his conclusion on this point:

Thus I do not mean categorically to reject change as a conceptual tool in evaluating medieval lordship. Indeed, I argue wholeheartedly for changes in the institutions and geography of power and for gradual changes in aristocratic perceptions of the meaning of property. Where I emphasize continuity, however, is in the realm of affect, of values, of *mentalité*. The superstructures of government and institutions may well have shifted, but many of the most fundamental underlying values and modes of thought of the aristocracy remained constant. Ideas and values are hardy things and do not change overnight. While changes in the *mentalité* of lordship could and did occur, they only did so over centuries, not decades.

There was no 'feudal transformation' or 'feudal revolution' around 1000. If lordship proliferated, the mechanisms of lordship practiced by those new lords were ancient and traditional. (p. 223)

This conclusion reveals a decided anthropological bent in Barton, which may explain his strong commitment to continuity. Indeed, his county of Maine, with its rapidly shifting political structures and its more durable mentalities, turns on its head the mutationist view of outdated institutions wilting under the pressure of new lordly behavior and ideas. Yet arguments for continuity are notoriously tricky and in Barton's case one wonders if including the years before 890—or better still—the rise of the Angevins, might reveal greater change in lordly ideas and behavior, if the chronological focus of his historical lens were adjusted. But it would be unfair to insist on this point, for it would be asking for a different book. Barton challenges the field in so many ways that his theses should be tested against evidence from other places and over longer time periods.

Some might argue that this work was "just" political history, but if so, than it is sophisticated political history rarely attempted today and all the more valuable because it addresses a crucial problem in recent historical literature. Even though Barton's work does not provide the last word on its subject, it will stimulate further historical debate about the nature of lordship in medieval France, from which the field as whole should benefit.

NOTES

[1] For an overview see: Thomas N. Bisson, "The 'Feudal Revolution,'" *Past and Present*, no. 142 (1994):6-42 and the responses it provoked from Dominique Barthélemy, Timothy Reuter, Chris Wickham, and Stephen D. White in "Debate: The 'Feudal Revolution,'" *Past and Present*, 152(1996):196-223 and 155(1997):197-255.

[2] See Julian Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," 19-78 in J.G. Peristiany, ed., *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) and Pierre Bourdieu, "The Sense of Honor," pp. 95-132 in Pierre Bourdieu, *Algeria 1960*, trans. Richard Nice, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) and his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

[3] The fundamental work is Georges Duby, *La société aux XIe et XIIe siècles dans la région mâconnaise* (Paris: A. Colin, 1953) now conveniently reprinted with revisions in Georges Duby, *Qu'est-ce que la société féodale* (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), pp. 7-597; for a survey of Duby's influence, see the introduction to this volume (pp. vii-xxxiii) by Dominique Iogna-Prat.

[4] For Bisson see note 1. Pierre Bonnassie, *La Catalogne au tournant de l'an mil. Croissance et mutations d'une société* (Paris: A. Michel, 1990). Dominique Barthélemy, *La mutation de l'an mil a-t-elle eu lieu* (Paris: Fayard, 1997). Stephen D. White, *Custom, Kinship and Gifts to Saints: The Laudatio Parentum in Western France, 1050-1150* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) and see note 1. Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[5] Guy Bois, *The Transformation of the Year One Thousand: The Village of Lournand from Antiquity to Feudalism*, trans. Jean Birrell (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992). Compare Jean-Pierre Poly and Eric Bournazel, *The Feudal Transformation, 900-1200*, trans. Caroline Higgett (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1990).

Robert F. Berkhofer III
Western Michigan University
robert.berkhofer@wmich.edu

Copyright © 2005 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. ISSN 1553-9172