

Neither Simple, Nor Obvious: Power and the Transformation of the Roman World

Yitzhak Hen

Mayke de Jong, Frans Theuws and Carine van Rhijn, eds., *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages*, The Transformation of the Roman World 6, Leiden, Boston, Köln: E.J. Brill, 2001. x + 609 pp. ISBN 90 04 11734 2.

Frans Theuws and Janet L. Nelson, eds., *Rituals of Power from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, The Transformation of the Roman World 8, Leiden, Boston, Köln: E.J. Brill, 2000. ix + 503 pp. ISBN 90 04 10902 1.

Walter Pohl, Ian Wood and Helmut Reimitz, eds., *The Transformation of Frontiers from Late Antiquity to the Carolingians*, The Transformation of the Roman World 10, Leiden, Boston, Köln: E.J. Brill, 2001. vi + 299 pp. ISBN 90 04 11115 8.

Inge Lyse Hansen and Chris Wickham, eds., *The Long Eighth Century: Production, Distribution and Demand*, The Transformation of the Roman World 11, Leiden, Boston, Köln: E.J. Brill, 2000. x + 388 pp. ISBN 90 04 11723 7.

To study the transformation of the Roman world is to study the tension between tradition and innovation. Although Byzantium and the various barbarian kingdoms which succeeded the Roman empire may have been part of a Roman continuum, it is obvious that a gradual change and various transformations did indeed take place. Western Europe and the Byzantine East were significantly different in the seventh and eighth centuries from what they had been in the third or fourth. Hence, unravelling the interplay between dependence on the past and novel initiatives is the indispensable basis for any attempt to delineate the new directions given to the historical process during the five hundred years of transition from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages (4th-8th centuries). Comprising a variety of studies by well known as well as young scholars, the four volumes under review here are the latest products of the project 'The Transformation of the Roman World' undertaken by the European Science Foundation.¹ Bearing in mind Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of 'the field of power', and the four layers of 'capital' — economic, social, cultural, and symbolic — associated with it,² it seems that all four volumes deal, in one way or another, with the transformation of power.

¹ On this project, see Ian N. Wood, 'Report: The European Science Foundation's program on the transformation of the Roman World', *Early Medieval Europe* 6 (1997), 217-27. For a review of some earlier volumes, see Yitzhak Hen, 'Before Mohammed and Charlemagne: new studies on the transformation of the Roman world', *Scripta Classica Israelica* 19 (2000), 235-49.

² See Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991). On Bourdieu's sociological thought, see *Pierre Bourdieu*, ed. Richard Jenkins (London, 1992).

‘How did people construct “places of power”, and how did such places, in turn, create powerful people?’, is the question at the heart of the volume edited by Mayke de Jong, Frans Theuws and Carine van Rhijn. Visiting the Capitoline Hill in October 1764, was a crucial moment of inspiration for Edward Gibbon. Standing on the ruins of what he assumed to be the temple of Jupiter, Gibbon was struck by the shambles of Rome’s most renowned site, and it was then that he decided to write his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.³ For Gibbon the Capitolium, that is, the site of Rome’s foundation ceremony, symbolised the power and sovereignty of the Roman people. It was the ‘place of power’ *par excellence*, that had lost its glory through the shifts of power during ‘the first stages of the decline and fall’.⁴ Rome’s so-called ‘military emperors’ (from Septimius Severus onwards) turned their backs on Rome as capital, dispensed with the Senate, and even insulted Jupiter and the Capitoline religious tradition.⁵ ‘The most fatal though secret wound’, wrote Gibbon in his usual melodramatic style, ‘which the senate received from the hands of Diocletian and Maximian was inflicted by the inevitable operation of their absence’.⁶ The nature of political power was changed for good, and with it Rome’s topography of power.

As Mayke de Jong and Frans Theuws state in their conclusion, ‘political power and its location became more decentralised and less institutionalised in the post-Roman West, but this did not necessarily entail any “weakness”. Instead, we are dealing with power assuming different forms and following different rules. Early medieval power-relations became interpersonal and complex; they were situated [in] topographical contexts [that] one cannot classify as ... political, religious, institutional, social or economic’ (p. 534). A splendid case in point, masterfully discussed by Frans Theuws, is provided by the city of Maastricht. Not only was it a centre of power, where kings, aristocrats and bishops had an interest, its episcopal power was not defined by the city itself, but rather was dependent on a network of ‘places of power’ in the Meuse Valley. ‘It was a “multivalent” place, to which all those competing in this arena assigned a different significance, but these multiple meanings reinforced each other’ (p. 534).

Other papers in this volume study a whole variety of ‘places of power’ and the ways in which they were reconstructed as such. Thomas Noble surveys the rise of Rome, ‘*ipsa urbs urbium et totius mundi caput ingens*’,⁷ as a papal city in the eighth and ninth centuries. In an illuminating paper, Leslie Brubaker examines the contraction and transformation of public space in early Constantinople, and concludes that public use of urban spaces changed during Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, and the static symbolic civic spaces of the Roman *polis* gave way to ‘an apparently more diffused and fluid use of urban space, with nodal points defined by churches and walls but with ritual public space constantly redefined by procession routes’ (p. 343). A cluster of papers (by Régine Le Jan, Barbara H. Rosenwein, Mayke de Jong, Matthew Innes, Pablo C. Díaz,

³ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J.B. Bury, 7 vols., 2nd ed. (London, 1909-14), VII, 338; idem, *Autobiography*, ed. J. Murray (London, 1896), 270.

⁴ Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall*, VII, 218.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 406-7; II, 328.

⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 369.

⁷ Gregorius Turonensis, *Libri Historiarum X*, ed. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison, MGH SRM I.1 (Hannover, 1951), V, praef.

and Julia M.H. Smith) discusses the emergence of monasteries as centres of power, whose importance went far beyond their function as religious institutions; in a fascinating paper Janet Nelson discusses the rise of Aachen as the centre of royal power in the Carolingian period;⁸ and Walter Pohl in his contribution rightly questions the validity of *Beowulf's* description of Hrothgar's court for the study of barbarian places of power.

Pohl's paper is also an excellent warning against what I would call the tyranny of the sources. Important and significant as they are, some unique pieces of evidence, like the description of Hrothgar's court of warriors, loom large among the ways in which scholars have described and understood late antique and early medieval politics and society. But are we to accept this evidence at face value? The answer, of course, is: no! Ann Christys clearly demonstrates how a careful and attentive reading of the *Vita vel passio Argenteae* may result in a rather different view of Cordoba, unlike the one traditionally accepted by scholars, and Ian Wood illustrates how the writings of Gregory of Tours have dictated our views on the holy topography of Gaul. Thanks to Gregory's lengthy descriptions, Tours became the yardstick according to which sites of saints' cults were measured in Merovingian Gaul. However, as Wood points out, 'the image of the cults of the saints presented by Gregory is a remarkable reading by a single author: it deserves to be taken seriously, as indeed it has been in the last twenty years — but it should also be understood for what it is: one author's view, influenced largely by his experiences at two arguably eccentric places, Brioude and Tours' (p. 154). Against this background, I find it hard to accept Heinrich Härke's assertion that 'the early medieval evidence suggests that the living used cemeteries systematically for the representation and negotiation of power' (p. 29). No doubt cemeteries had some symbolic power in the early Middle Ages, largely because of the *memoria* they preserved and transmitted. But defining them as significant 'places of power' is, I would submit, a drastic exaggeration and a distortion created by the abundance of grave goods that dominate the archaeological findings from the period with which we are concerned.

The second volume, *Rituals of Power*, is an appropriate complement to *Topographies of Power*. The historian Ramsey MacMullen wrote in his study of the Christianisation of the Roman Empire that 'ritual gives authority to belief',⁹ and Robert Markus rendered the idea as 'ritual behaviour can count as no less effective an expression of commitment'.¹⁰ Those symbolic acts which we call 'rituals', operate on two different levels. On the one hand they are symbols, concrete expressions, that represent notions and concepts, such as religious belief, social status, or political power. On the other hand, those rituals gradually become the constitutive element of such notions and concepts. An example might clarify this point. In October 360 at the outskirts of Paris, Roman soldiers acclaimed Julian as their Augustus. After he was compelled to consent, he was 'placed upon an infantryman's shield and raised on high, he was hailed by all as Augustus and bidden to bring out a diadem. And when he declared that he had never had one, they called for an ornament from his wife's neck or head. But since he insisted

⁸ For further discussions of royal capitals, see *Sedes Regiae (ann. 400-800)*, ed. Gisela Ripoll and Josep M. Gurt (Barcelona, 2000).

⁹ Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire, AD 100-400* (New Haven and London, 1984), 75.

¹⁰ Robert A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1990), 11.

that at the time of his first auspices it was not fitting for him to wear a woman's adornment, they looked about for a horse's trapping, so that being crowned with it he might display at least some obscure token of a loftier station'.¹¹ The diadem was indeed a token symbolising the *imperium* of the Roman emperor, but at the same time it had the power to legitimise the ruler's position. So crucial was it in the eyes of the soldiers that they were prepared to use a piece of jewellery from Julian's wife, or even a horse's trappings. This notion would fit extremely well with the editors' and contributors' understanding of rituals 'as a mode of social power, without which such power was, and is, quite literally, inconceivable' (p. 478).

The eleven papers in *Rituals of Power* fall, largely, into two categories.¹² The first group of papers discusses rituals which were broadly defined by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep as 'rites of passage',¹³ and it includes illuminating papers (by Pablo Diaz and M^a.R. Valverde, and Stefano Gaspari) on inauguration rituals among the Visigoths and the Lombards, as well as on imperial and Carolingian funerals (by Javier Arce and Janet Nelson). Régine Le Jan offers an exemplary analysis of the Frankish arming ceremony and its implications. The shift from *Barbatoria*, the common rite of passage for the young male in Merovingian Gaul,¹⁴ to the arming ceremony took place sometime between 738, the last documented *Barbatoria*, and 791, the first documented arming ceremony of Louis the Pious. Charlemagne, it seems, preferred a 'Germanic' warrior rite of passage to a Roman/Merovingian one. This preference and the ritual associated with it, argues Le Jan, 'were ensconced in a system of social relations which guaranteed social equilibrium by blending filiations and fidelity. The circulation of weapons, drawn into an ellipse by hierarchical exchange, was thus an essential element of social regulation and adjustment, while at the same time it maintained social hierarchy' (pp. 305-6). Finally, in a dazzling paper Mayke de Jong examines the evolution and contextual implications of public penance in the early medieval West.

The second group of papers in *Rituals of Power* takes its cue from the work of Marcel Mauss,¹⁵ and explores the shifting uses and meanings of gift exchange. In an engaging paper Christina La Rocca and Luigi Provero unravel the personal and political ambitions that stood behind the will of Count Eberhard of Friuli and his wife Gisela, daughter of Louis the Pious. The will, as they clearly point out, attempted to legitimise

¹¹ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum libri qui supersunt*, ed. and trans. John C. Rolf, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1940), XX.4.17-18.

¹² One paper — Lotte Hedeager, 'Migration period Europe: the formation of a political mentality', 15-57 — is at odds with the topic of this volume, and is too vague and superficial to be of any value.

¹³ Arnold van Gennep, *Les rites de passage* (Paris, 1909); English translation: *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffé, with an introduction by Solon T. Kimball (London, 1965).

¹⁴ On the *Barbatoria*, see Yitzhak Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul, AD 481-751* (Leiden, New York and Köln, 1995), 137-43.

¹⁵ *The Gift. Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (London, 1954). See also the important survey by Arnoud-Jan A. Bijsterveld, 'The medieval gift as agent of social bonding and political power: a comparative approach', in *Medieval Transformations. Texts, Power, and Gifts in Context*, ed. Esther Cohen and Mayke de Jong (Leiden, Boston and Köln, 2001), 123-56.

the future owners' social power while buttressing the concept of a dynastic patrimony, and in making it Eberhard and Gisela 'made a number of thoughtful choices which reflected the options of both public and private power available to the Carolingian elite' (p. 273).

The interplay between power, or rather the transmission of power, and objects also occupies the last three contributions to this volume. While Heinrich Härke discusses the circulation of weapons in Anglo-Saxon England, and Frans Theuws and Monica Alkemade study sword depositions in late antique northern Gaul, Jos Bazelmans focuses on *Beowulf* in an attempt to understand the relationship between lords and retainers in early medieval Anglo-Saxon society. In his paper, which is based on his original and thought-provoking book,¹⁶ Bazelmans formulates a model of the structure of a socio-cosmic universe (as represented in *Beowulf*), which goes beyond the established politico-economically oriented models of *Gefolgschaft*, and which deals with exchange relations between the living and the supernatural. No doubt this paper will rapidly become compulsory reading for anyone interested in this topic.

The transformation of the Roman world was inevitably the transformation of frontiers. It was at the very same Capitoline hill that Jupiter's promise to give Rome an empire without limits was challenged by the god Terminus, although unsuccessfully. First cracks in this concept can already be seen in Augustus' struggle to confine the Roman empire within natural geographical limits — a strategy that was applauded by Gibbon, and was adapted by Winston Churchill.¹⁷ However, during the five hundred years which mark the transformation of the Roman world, Rome's official ideology of a triumphant empire with no limits was severely damaged. The so-called 'barbarian invasions' and the gradual collapse of the Roman *limes*¹⁸ made every Roman official realise that Terminus' revenge was just a matter of time. Moreover, during the period with which we are concerned, the definition and notion of frontiers changed, and many new types of frontiers were established — not only military and administrative boundaries, but also cultural and religious ones. As Ian Wood rightly indicates in the introduction to this volume, 'culturally, Europe between 300 and 900 can be seen to be criss-crossed with frontiers, linguistic, artistic, religious and philosophical' (p. 3).

It is rather symbolic that the collection of papers edited by Walter Pohl, Ian Wood and Helmut Reimitz begins with an illuminating discussion (by Javier Arce) of the anonymous *De rebus bellicis*, a fourth-century treatise which challenges the Roman notion of a triumphant empire with no limits. Not only does it propose to solve the problem of frontiers by creating a continuous line of *castella* linked by a solid wall and watchtowers, it also insists that this new defence system should be financed and paid for by the landowners. No doubt there was a distinctively different perception of the Roman *limes* as between official propagandists and reality, and the papers by Peter Heather and

¹⁶ Jos Bazelmans, *By Weapons Made Worthy. Lords, Retainers and their Relationship in Beowulf*, Amsterdam Archaeological Studies 5 (Amsterdam, 1999).

¹⁷ See Roland Quinault, 'Winston Churchill and Gibbon', in *Edward Gibbon and Empire*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick and Roland Quinault (Cambridge, 1997), 317-32, at p. 322.

¹⁸ According to Benjamin Isaac, *limes*, from the first to the third century, was a demarcated land-border of the Roman empire. See Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire. The Roman Army in the East* (Oxford, 1990); idem, 'The meaning of the terms *limes* and *limitanei*', *Journal of Roman History* 78 (1988), 125-47.

Evangelos Chrysos clearly demonstrate how the frontiers of the Roman empire were not merely defence lines, but also bases of offensive operations, a focus in elaborate exchange networks, and a means of internal control.

In a careful paper Hans-Werner Goetz traces the gradual change in the perception of realms and frontiers in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. As he concludes, '... there was a shift in perception from the late Roman way of thinking of a world-wide Empire, where frontiers actually contradicted ideological convictions, to the Carolingian way of thinking where frontiers might have been disputed, but no doubt existed in reality as well as in theory' (p. 82). Against Goetz's thoughtful analysis, Dick Harrison's claims regarding early medieval concepts of liminality and centrality are problematic. Following Yi-Fu Tuan and Aaron Gurevich, but unfortunately without giving enough attention to their critics, Harrison identifies an 'early medieval tendency to regard the boundaries of the *civitates* ... as the most prominent boundaries seen from a political perspective', and therefore, he argues, 'Lombards, Franks and others did not describe their countries/kingdoms as big units geographically defined by a border. On the contrary — this modern sense of boundaries appears to have been absent from early medieval Europe' (p. 49). Such a claim, it appears, is at odds with the evidence, and a statement such as 'from a purely political point of view, this spatial attitude can be tentatively explained as a consequence of the fall of the West Roman empire' (p. 49), is simply untenable. Following Goetz's and Harrison's theoretical discussions, two papers (by Gisela Ripoll-Lopez and Walter Pohl) analyse the construction and the blurring of frontiers between the empire and the barbarian kingdoms in Spain and Italy (Visigothic and Lombard), and two papers (by Matthias Hardt and Herwig Wolfram) focus on Carolingian frontiers and their political as well as military implications.

The two most interesting contributions to this volume, to my mind, are the papers by Helmut Reimitz and Ian Wood, who discuss ecclesiastical and religious boundaries. With a stimulating analysis of the council held on the banks of the Danube in 796, following the Carolingian victory over the Avars, Reimitz stresses 'the tension between the religious and the affirmative strategies of the Carolingians as yet another reason why in the course of the ninth century the Carolingians, despite their attempts to create a symbolic order, never managed to establish one within their frontier imagination in the middle Danube' (p. 207). Ian Wood, on the other hand, concentrates on the ways in which missionaries interacted with frontier politics, and how they were concerned with the identification of cultural/religious boundaries. Almost a decade ago I argued that the abundant references to superstitions and pagan practices in our Merovingian sources suggest not so much the survival of paganism in sixth and seventh century Francia, still less idolatrous worship among Christians, but the use of a literary *topos* to define and illustrate what is acceptable. In other words, those supposedly pagan survivals were exploited by clerics and missionaries to define clear-cut boundaries between what is Christian and what is not, in an attempt to create communal self-identity among the Christians themselves.¹⁹ Whether one accepts my assertions or not, it seems that both

¹⁹ See, for example, Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul*, 154-206. See also idem, 'Paganism and superstitions in the time of Gregory of Tours: *une question mal posée!*', in *The World of Gregory of Tours*, ed. Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood (Leiden, Boston and

Reimitz and Wood vindicate in their papers some of my thoughts on the concept of the 'other' and the creation of psychological boundaries in the early Middle Ages. All in all, the various papers collected by Pohl, Wood and Reimitz, clearly demonstrate that the transformation of frontiers was not a linear process in which the Roman imperial frontiers were abandoned and the means of controlling them declined. It was rather a slow and complicated process, which depended on specific circumstances.

The last volume to be noticed here, *The Long Eighth Century: Production, Distribution and Demand*, is a counterpart of *The Sixth Century: Production, Distribution and Demand*, which was published in the same series a few years ago.²⁰ If, in economic terms, the sixth century was the last of the Roman centuries, then the eighth century, or rather the 'long' eighth century from 680 to 830, was the first clearly post-Roman century. Like its earlier companion, *The Long Eighth Century* also revolves around the Pirenne thesis; but unlike *The Sixth Century* its main purpose is not to carp at Pirenne's mishandling of the sources or his views on the late Roman and early medieval economy. The twelve papers collected by Inge Lyse Hansen and Chris Wickham are dedicated to the re-examination of a much-neglected period in economic history, and they provide a rich panorama of various aspects related to the economic transformation of the Roman world.

The volume begins with a theoretical discussion by John Moreland, who surveys the conceptual evolution of early medieval economy in modern research (concentrating mainly on scholars such as Keith Thomas, Marcel Mauss and Philip Grierson). Several papers focus on regional economies and examine their associated political structures. Hence, Denmark and Anglo-Saxon England are discussed by Ulf Näsman and John Moreland respectively; the coinage of Lombard and Carolingian Italy is the topic of Alessia Rovelli's paper; John Haldon investigates the Byzantine world; and Alan Wolmsley concentrates on the Islamic east Mediterranean. The role of cities in the transformation of the European economy is discussed by Adriaan Verhulst, and a specific example, that of the city of Marseille, is provided by Simon Loseby. Finally, Stéphane Lebecq and Ian Wood explore the contribution of monasteries and missionary activity to the economic evolution of late seventh- and eighth-century Francia. The entire volume concludes with a superb overview by Chris Wickham, who summarises the major points raised by the various papers, and places them in a coherent context. The reader is well advised to start with Wickham's conclusion; and it would also be quite beneficial for the reader to juxtapose the various papers in *The Long Eighth Century* with Michael McCormick's new and thorough analysis of the economic transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages.²¹

To sum up, *Topographies of Power, Rituals of Power, The Transformation of Frontiers*, as well as *The Long Eighth Century*, deserve a very warm welcome by both schol-

Köln, 2002), 229-40; idem, 'Martin of Braga's *De correctione rusticorum* and its uses in Frankish Gaul', in *Medieval Transformations*, ed. Cohen and De Jong, 35-49.

²⁰ *The Sixth Century: Production, Distribution and Demand*, ed. Richard Hodges and William Bowden, *The Transformation of the Roman World 3* (Leiden, Boston and Köln, 1998), and see my comments in 'Before Mohammed and Charlemagne' (n. 1), 247-9.

²¹ *Origins of the European Economy. Communications and Commerce, AD 300-900* (Cambridge, 2001).

ars and students. This survey does less than justice to the many useful discussions and thought-provoking ideas crammed into these four volumes, but I hope that it will encourage others to read the papers for themselves. It was Edward Gibbon who said that the ruin of Rome was 'simple and obvious'. However, the various papers surveyed above demonstrate beyond any reasonable doubt that the transformation of the Roman world was neither simple, nor obvious, and that Roman notions and practices were indeed slow to disappear.

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev