Review Essay

Review of Gillis, M. B. (ed.) *Carolingian Experiments. Interdisciplinary Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*

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Review: Gillis, M. B. (ed.) 2022. *Carolingian Experiments. Interdisciplinary Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. Vol. 1. Turnhout: Brepols.[*]

The Carolingian era is worthily distinguished by medievalists as a special, unique period in the history of Western Europe. The Frankish Empire has attracted the attention of historians since the nineteenth century, when the problem of the formation of medieval political structures, the character of society and culture became urgent, and the identification of Roman or 'barbarian' elements in medieval society began. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the reign of Charlemagne became the starting point in the historical memory of the Europeans themselves from the Middle Ages onwards (Bloch 1939: 62–63, 147). The assessments of the factors that influenced the formation of the Carolingian Empire and its role in the development of European society often differ. Some historians present the reign of the Carolingians as a period of transformation of political and social structures, culture and ideas in the West, that laid the foundations of medieval society (Pirenne 1937; Lot 1941; Duby 1984). Others, focusing on the political processes that took place during this period, characterize

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the era as a 'false start', an unsuccessful attempt to integrate Europe under a single political leadership (Lopez 1962; Le Goff 2003). There is also the view that the political and social structure built by the Carolingian dynasty was doomed to failure (Wallace-Hadrill 1963; Ganshof 1971). The Carolingian Empire did not escape the attention of Soviet historians: there were lively discussions of its role in the genesis of the feudalism in Europe (Korsunsky 1963; Gurevich 1970; Bessmertny 1984).

Contemporary historiography, less interested in assessing the successes and failures of the Carolingian policy, considers the Carolingian era as a period of large-scale social experiments, driven by the ruling dynasty's desire for the moral 'restoration' or 'renewal' of society, the 'construction' of a Christian state (McKitterick 1994; De Jong 2009; Moore 2011; Wickham 2017). The list of interpretations and authors' views on the period, the role of the ruling dynasty, the influence of the Church, the formation of social relations, and the cultural heritage can be continued indefinitely. The historiography devoted to the Carolingian era is truly colossal, and the studies are so complex and multifaceted that it deserves a separate investigation. However, this period can hardly be said to be fully studied, and therefore it is always gratifying to see new research on this vast and urgent subject.

One of the most recent volumes devoted to the study of Carolingian society is *'Carolingian Experiments'*, published by Brepols in 2022, edited by Matthew Gillis (University of Tennesee Knoxville, Department of History), a specialist in the cultural and intellectual history of the early Middle Ages. The volume, which brings together the works of ten authors, became the result of the conference held in 2017 at the Marco Institute for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, the University of Tennessee. The studies are based on the interpretation of Chris Wickham, who defines the Carolingian era as a bold experiment by the ruling dynasty, aimed at the reorganization of power and society (Gillis 2022: 9). The authors themselves stated their aim as an attempt to present the Carolingian era from an unexpected, unusual angle and to develop the idea of 'experimentation' in a wider research field in various spheres of public life (Gillis 2022: 11–12). The formulation of research questions often looks very provocative, and the results are bold and sometimes even far-fetched, but this is precisely what allows medievalists to reconsider the perception of this historical period.

The volume is divided into two parts. The articles of the first part, entitled 'Structures, Family and Otherwise', are devoted to the study of the experiments carried out with various political and social struc-

tures during the Carolingian era. The second part, 'The Struggle against Sin', is devoted to the development of Frankish culture, united by the general concept of the desire for renewal and moral purification.

The first section starts with the article '*Carolingian Boyhoods*', by Valerie L. Garver (Northern Illinois University, Department of History). The author, known for her research on social roles in the early Middle Ages (Garver 2017), answers to the question 'What is it like to be a boy in the Carolingian society?' in her contribution. She presents adolescence as a particular stage in the socialization of the Frankish nobility and as a form of identity associated with a strict set of prescriptions imposed by the aristocratic milieu (Gillis 2022: 27–46). The subject itself is studied from two points of view: as the part of gender history, analyzing masculinity in Carolingian society, and as part of the *Alltagsgeschichte* of the Frankish nobility. Certain difficulties in the study are caused by the scarcity of historical data in the primary sources: descriptions of the youth of the clergy are much more widespread than information about the lay nobles' boyhood. Nevetheless, Valerie L. Garver succeeds in gradually reconstructing the daily leisure activities, the set of expectations and experiences associated with Carolingian childhood and adolescence.

The next article, '*Carolingian Experiments with Family*', by Paul Edward Dutton (Simon Fraser University, Department of Global Humanities), whose research on the Carolingian era ranges from climate to dreams (Dutton 1994, 2016) serves as a call for rethinking Carolingian dynastic policy (Gillis 2022: 47–70). The most extensively studied example is Charlemagne's dynastic policy, in particular his penchant for taking concubines and his refusal to marry his daughters to representatives of the Frankish aristocracy. Doubting that the Frankish emperor was unaware of his behavior, which was perceived as highly ambiguous by his contemporaries, the author explains such actions as a desire to limit the number of claimants to the throne. Other examples, namely Lothair II and Charles the Fat, reflect a much less successful family policy, namely the failed attempts of both kings to continue the line of succession. Dutton also pays attention to Louis the Pious, who refused to continue his father's dynastic policy in an effort to comply with religious prescriptions and follow the image of the Christian emperor, which worsened his position and led to the collapse of the empire.

The article by Abigail Firey (University of Kentucky, Department of History) '*The Paper Chase: The Pursuit of Carolingian Legal Innovations*' deserves special attention, in my humble opinion, since it

primarily calls for rethinking and reassessing of the canon law in the Carolingian era and the role played by the Carolingian clergy play in the development of canon law in Europe (Gillis 2022: 71–121). Firey opposes the researchers who have either studied the Carolingian canonical texts in the context of the legal development, thus downplaying the Carolingian legal sources by comparing them to the much more harmonious and holistic Decree of Gratian, or who have paid attention to individual collections, such as the Collectio Dionysio-Hadriana or the The False Decretals of Pseudo-Isidore, Firey addresses the emergence of the tradition of canon law in the Frankish Empire: since there was no single legal system as such in the Frankish Empire, she focus in particular on the existence of collections of canons in the church environment, their use by the clergy and the court, and their function as a political tool. She proposes a different approach to the classification of Carolingian canonical collections, namely, the division of collections according to genre specificity, with the aim of presenting an alternative to the traditional classification of texts according to geographical scope and textual continuity.

An article '*Carolingian imperial biography and the memory of Spain*' written by Ann Latowsky (University of South Florida, Department of World Languages), a researcher on the construction of the Carolingian imperial narrative (Latowsky 2013), is devoted to the evolution and functioning of the description of the Carolingian Spanish campaigns in Frankish historical writing (Gillis 2022: 123–148). The author pays attention to the changes in the rhetoric associated with Charlemagne's Spanish campaign in 778 in Frankish historical writing, as well as to the place occupied by Spanish politics, and, in particular, the conquest of Barcelona in 801, in the biographical works of Thegan and the Astronomer, and in a panegyric by Ermold Niegell. In her opinion, the reinterpretation of the Battle of Roncevaux as a failure of Charlemagne should have favorably emphasized the successes of Louis the Pious in the Spanish March. As an emperor not remembered for any large-scale conquests during his imperial reign, Louis may have needed to reaffirm his military prowess in order to maintain the military aspect of his royal image. In this way, the contrast between his success at Barcelona in 801 and the failure of his father in 778 seemed a very effective way of asserting his military achievements.

The last two articles in this section, namely '*The Historian Hrabanus Maurus and the Prophet Haimo of Auxerre: Experiments, Exegesis, and Expectations Emerging from the Ninth Century*' and '*Strange Nature: Theodulf's Letter to Moduin and Its Context*' move

away from displaying political aspects to examine how Carolingian culture comprehended such abstract categories as time and nature. Matthew Gabriel, author of '*The Bright Ages: A New History of Medieval Europe*' (Gabriele, Perry, and Meskimen 2021), refers to the works of Hrabanus Maurus and Haimo Auxerre drawing attention to the fact that Carolingian intellectuals shaped the idea of the cyclical nature of time. Given the widespread perception of the Carolingian as the people of Israel, Gabriel points out that the comparison between Frankish rulers and the Old Testament kings was more than just a metaphor, but rather an understanding of contemporary history of the Franks through the prism of Holy Scripture (pp. 149–164). Drawing parallels between contemporary events (Hrabanus Maurus – during the reign of Louis the Pious, and Heimo of Auxerre – during the reign of Charles the Bald) and the events of the Old Testament, the author notes the repetition of the historical cycle: the internecine war of the sons of Louis the Pious and the division of the empire in their eyes echo the collapse of the Kingdom of Israel. In this respect, the Old Testament became a source of omens, predicting the contours of the future: for Hrabanus – encouraging parallels with the Second Advent; while for Haimo Auxerre – very pessimistic omens of decay.

The study by Andrew Romig (NY University, Gallatin), a specialist in the gender and cultural history of the Carolingian period (Romig 2017), is much more extensive and ambitious than its title suggests. By examining a short letter by Theodulf of Orleans, the author actually refers to the epistemological aspects of the Carolingian intellectual environment, answering the questions: how was the nature understood in the Carolingian era, what was the place of mankind, where were the boundaries of human knowledge, and how much control could man exercise over natural phenomena? (Gillis 2022: 165–182) According to the author, the natural disasters that swept the Frankish Empire in the 800s, perceived as divine punishment, provoked a stormy surge of reasoning at Charlemagne's court about the causes of various natural processes and phenomena. Faced with the realization that their understanding of nature was far from perfect, Frankish intellectuals made an attempt to overcome their ignorance, guided by a common desire to build a righteous Christian society.

The second part of the volume begins with an article with the provocative title *'The Call of the Siren: Sex, Water, and Salt in the Sacramentary of Gellone'* written by Linda Coon (University of Arkansas, Department of History), a researcher on corporeality in the early Middle Ages. The article is devoted to the study of the image of mermaids in the Carolingian book miniature (Gillis 2022: 185–220). The

author comes to the conclusion that mermaids in the miniatures were presented as the embodiment of lust and depravity, as the devil's servants who seduce a person, contrasting with the image of the Virgin Mary as the embodiment of purity and spiritual fertility. Such a contrast of images served the monks as a reminder of the need to refrain from carnal desires.

An extremely unusual way of framing the question is the article by Courtney M. Booker (University of British Columbia, Department of History), a researcher in the history of early medieval emotions, '*By the Body Betrayed: Blushing in the Penitential State*'. The aim of the study was to answer the question 'how and why, according to the Franks, do people blush?' (Gillis 2022: 221–244). Using the methods of the history of emotions, the author analyzes this bodily reaction as a form of expression of shame that accompanies the process of confession and correction of one's sins. As a basis for this interpretation, the Carolingian writers looked to the fall of Adam and Eve described in the Book of Genesis. In this context, the absence of a bodily reaction could be interpreted as the absence of shame, which signaled a person's moral decline. The absence of a blush, therefore, in the perception of the Franks, was an indicator of persistence in sin, an unwillingness to embark on the path of correction. The author also pays particular attention to the contextualization of such frequent references to this reaction, linking it to a powerful movement aimed at the moral transformation of society that emerged during the reign of Louis the Pious. The fanaticism of moral purification created an unhealthy atmosphere of suspicion among the elites, in which the relevance of an indicator such as a shameful blush has increased dramatically.

No less entertaining is the article by researcher Martha Rampton (Pacific University of Oregon, Department of History) '*Why the Carolingians Didn't Need Demons'*. This part is an investigation of the changes in attitudes towards human sinfulness, demons and magic that took place in the Carolingian era (Gillis 2022: 245–268). The author identifies an important transformation: the desire for reform, renewal, and the construction of a truly Christian society that swept the Frankish world, makes Carolingian intellectuals think about the nature of sin and what could inspire a person to commit sin. In particular, this topic becomes relevant during the reign of Louis the Pious, when the Frankish elites, especially the clergy, under the influence of a series of events that took place at the court, began to fear that sin and decline were spreading throughout the empire. The reflection of the Frankish intellectuals leads them to the idea that sin is a consequence of man's sinful nature, his sinful deeds and the sinful state of society, and there-

fore the demons in the Frankish narrative are not a reason that provokes a person to deviate from Christian doctrine, but merely a concomitant consequence of sinfulness, a mark of decline, a tendency to wickedness.

The volume concludes with an article by the Matthew Brian Gillis, '*Pleasures of Horror: Florus of Lyons's Querela de divisione imperii*', which provides an insight into the eschatological expectations of Frankish society and how they perceived the decline of the empire (Gillis 2022: 269–289). The article is devoted to the deconstruction of horror as a form of emotional experience of the sinful state of society, as a specific way of resisting sin, as a trigger for understanding the consequences of indulgence in sin. The internecine strife between the sons of Louis the Pious and the subsequent division of the empire were events that were reflected in acute pain in the minds of contemporary authors who saw it as evidence of the collapse of their hopes for building an ideal Christian society. The author comes to the conclusion that the narrative constructed by Florus in his poem was intended to give the reader a deep sense of horror and make him realize that the division of the empire is a consequence of the indulgence of the Franks in their sins, a consequence of the fact that they lost their sense of the fear of the Lord, and therefore they broke away from it, for which they paid with bloody civil strife. At the same time, it is the appeal to fear, the emotional state of anxiety caused by the realization of the consequences of sin, which seems to be the first step towards correction.

To sum up, this publication certainly deserves the attention not only of researchers specializing in the history of the Carolingian period, but also of all those who want to know how medieval sources can be taken into account. The richness of the approaches of the authors of this collective monograph will not leave indifferent either historians interested in traditional studies of political and social structures, or researchers specializing in relatively young areas of historical knowledge, such as the history of corporeality, the history of gender or the history of emotions. The proposed research methods deconstruct Carolingian society, its culture, social mechanisms, political structures, collective experiences, perception of some fundamental categories. These methods can be extremely useful for historians, sociologists, cultural scientists and anthropologists and, in a broad sense, will shed light on the functioning of pre-modern society and the state, as well as the role of ideology. It only remains to lament a little that Russian studies on similar topics remain largely unknown to Western colleagues: articles by Dmitriy Starostin on the dynastic politics of the Merovingians and Carolingians or books by

Aleksandr Sidorov, devoted to historiography and historical literature of the Carolingian era definitely deserve their attention (Starostin 2008, 2013; Sidorov 2006, 2015).

NOTE

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