On 28 January 893, a 13-year-old known to posterity as Charles III “the Simple” (or “Straightforward”) was crowned king of West Francia at the great cathedral of Rheims. Charles was a great-great-grandson in the direct male line of the emperor Charlemagne and clung tightly to his Carolingian heritage throughout his life. Indeed, 28 January was chosen for the coronation precisely because it was the anniversary of his great ancestor’s death in 814. However, the coronation, for all its pointed symbolism, was not a simple continuation of his family’s long-standing hegemony – it was an act of rebellion. Five years earlier, in 888, a dearth of viable successors to the emperor Charles the Fat had shattered the monopoly on royal authority which the Carolingian dynasty had claimed since 751. The succession crisis resolved itself via the appearance in all of the Frankish kingdoms of kings from outside the family’s male line (and in some cases from outside the family altogether) including, in West Francia, the erstwhile count of Paris Odo – and while Charles’s family would again hold royal status for a substantial part of the tenth century, in the long run it was Odo’s, the Capetians, which prevailed. Charles the Simple, then, was a man displaced in time: a Carolingian marooned in a post-Carolingian political world where belonging to the dynasty of Charlemagne had lost its hegemonic significance, however loudly it was proclaimed. His dilemma represents a peculiar syndrome of the tenth century and stands as a symbol for the theme of this article, which asks how members of the tenth-century ruling class perceived their relationship to the Carolingian past.

The relationship between the high Carolingian age of Charlemagne and the post-888 era of Charles the Simple has, in one form or another, long played a part in debates about the shift from the early to the central Middle Ages. At least since the formidable work of Georges Duby in the early 1950s, discussion of the tenth century in the Frankish world has been wrapped up in debates about periodization that revolve around two paradigms: the existence or
otherwise of the so-called “Feudal Revolution” (or “Mutation”) of the year 1000; and the pre-history of the papal reforms of the eleventh century. Depending on where one stands in these debates, the tenth century is variously characterized as a relatively serene continuation of the Carolingian “project,” as the last gasp of Late Antiquity, or as a Dark Age of collapse from whose rubble the kingdoms and institutions of medieval Europe would begin to emerge only in the mid-eleventh century. Viewed in such terms, the tenth century is either a beginning or an end, lacking definition of its own – a shadowy valley separating the towering peaks of Charlemagne and Gregory VII.

Historical periodization is a problematic business, and despite the dates in its subtitle it is one of the virtues of Robert Bartlett’s *Making of Europe* that it provides a panoramic perspective on these debates without becoming embroiled in their minutiae. Arguing that Europe was a product of the “fertile confusion” of the post-Carolingian period, Bartlett sees the tenth century neither as an end nor a beginning, but as part of a longer period with its own cultural traits dispersed by military-colonial expansion from the Frankish heartlands to the European peripheries. This “soft” periodization avoids the methodological traps of strict debates about continuity vs change and recognizes that all apparently stable systems contain the roots of their own change.

The *Making of Europe* does emphasize some distinctions between the social and political characteristics of the early and central Middle Ages, but its undogmatic description of the post-Carolingian period also anticipates more recent views of the era’s religious and social changes as emergent conse-

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5 Bartlett, *Making of Europe*, pp. 2 (rejection of 1000 as a sharp turning point), 31 (quotation).