PERSPECTIVES FROM THE PERIPHERY: FRENCH KINGS AND THEIR CHRONICLERS*

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Abstract
The history of the later Capetian kings of France is often explored from the perspective of the court and those connected with it. While the great chronicles produced in Paris and its environs have been the focus of much research, historians are frequently more muted in their discussion of chronicles produced outside the Île-de-France. Yet regional chroniclers have a value that can be easily overlooked. Such chronicles provide an alternative to works influenced either directly or indirectly by the court. These writers were often less well-informed than their Parisian counterparts; their works can, however, demonstrate both the common ground that existed across the French kingdom as well as important differences. This article considers the perspective of two such texts, the vernacular chronicle of the so-called minstrel of Reims, produced in the 1260s, and the Latin history of the Benedictine of Sens Geoffroi of Courlon, written in the early 1290s. By exploring how concepts of political organization were understood beyond Paris in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, the article establishes that chroniclers from the periphery of the French kingdom have a unique contribution to make to our understanding of the history of political thought in this period.

A history of what might be considered today ‘political thought’ in France at the turn of the thirteenth century – and indeed western Europe more generally – has been written traditionally by drawing upon a specific

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canon of sources. This canon consists, predominantly, of the work of dedicated jurists and those thinkers such as John Quidort of Paris, Giles of Rome and James of Viterbo who were associated with the various faculties of the University of Paris. Since the early twentieth century many have followed the model set by the Carlyles and Charles McIlwain, and traced a history of medieval ‘political’ concepts via the pages of the treatises and commentaries these men produced and the debates they were involved in. While none of these medieval authors were ‘political theorists’ in the modern sense of the term, their discussions of Roman law, canon law and the implications of Aristotle’s newly re-discovered *Politics*, have been considered key to exploring the development of concepts such as the independent ‘nation-state’ or the idea that consent should form the basis for the exercise of legitimate authority. Recent work in this field has focused more on contemporaries’ understanding of political concepts than on the role played by medieval thinkers in the origins of modern political institutions. Nevertheless, the traditional ‘canon’ continues to play an important role in this research.

Questions concerning medieval perceptions of what we would term today ‘political structures’ and ‘political organization’ have not, generally, been asked of chroniclers. While many chronicles are considerably more sophisticated than they have sometimes been credited with being, there are clearly a number of significant differences between a chronicler and the jurist or tract writer. Not least of these is that, despite the complexity of their works, chroniclers did not generally pen them to articulate or embody specific ‘political theories’. It might therefore seem an odd, even perverse, juxtaposition to set such a complex work as John Quidort’s *De potestate regia et papali* alongside an account of history drawn up by a monastic annalist or a minstrel. Yet the latter were just as much the product of late medieval society as the trained theologian. Although most chronicles were not framed by reflections on the Philosopher, the *Digest* or the decretals, the works of chroniclers may convey the under-

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2 The classic study of the former remains: Strayer (2005). For consent, see, for example, Oakley (1983); Monahan (1987).
3 For an important early example of this approach, see Guenée (1971) and more recently Watts (2009).
4 For an introduction to the medieval historiographical tradition, see Southern (1970-1974); Goetz (2013). For a recent overview of the extent to which medieval historical writing was indebted to classical and patristic models: Kempshall (2012). For the complexity of the editorial decisions that informed the compilation of late medieval universal chronicles in particular: Chazan (2006).