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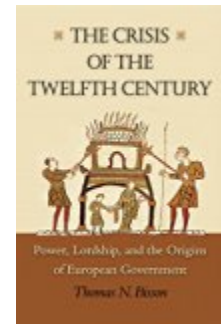
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas N. Bisson. *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century: Power, Lordship, and the Origins of European Government*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. xxviii + 677 pp. Illustrations. \$39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-13708-7.

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From Cruel Lords to Knowledgeable Officials

As Thomas Bisson explains in his preface, the origins of this book lie in a course he began offering at Harvard in 1988. Twenty years of teaching and research thus went into this work, and at almost six hundred pages, it clearly demonstrates Bisson's prolonged and thoughtful engagement with the subjects of power, lordship, and government during the long twelfth century. The use of the word "crisis" in the title of the work is undoubtedly meant to be provocative. Bisson offers here a much darker and more violent vision of the period than many earlier scholars—especially supporters of a twelfth-century renaissance—have put forward. Nevertheless, this work is not a radical reinterpretation of the traditional narrative of the years 1050 to 1250. Bisson does not completely rewrite the chronology of the growth of royal administration in western Europe; King Henry II of England and King Philip II Augustus of France play familiar roles. What this book provides is a much more nuanced account of the development of medieval government than anyone else has attempted. There is thus an extraordinary subtlety to Bisson's argument, and I suspect that historians will be engaging with aspects of it for years to come.

It should be noted at the outset that this is really a book about England, France, and the Spanish kingdoms, those regions where Bisson has typically focused most of his research in the past. Germany makes numerous appearances, and the sections of the work concerning Bavarian lordship and the Saxon revolts during the

Investiture Controversy are quite good. Nevertheless, Bisson's engagement with the German sources does not match the level of analysis he brings to his evidence from further west. Similarly, while Poland and Italy are occasionally referred to as well, they serve only a supporting function within the broader framework of the book. Bisson's argument certainly would have been stronger if he had integrated these regions into his narrative more effectively, but this presumably would have made for an even longer work.

At the center of this book lies the transition from "lordship"—which Bisson defines broadly as "personal commands over dependent people" (p. 3)—to an experience of power more like our modern understanding of government. According to Bisson, this transition was a much more complex and nonlinear process than earlier generations of political, legal, and administrative historians have acknowledged. Bisson argues that capricious lordship, with its affective, militant, and unstable character, remained an influential force in medieval society long after other scholars have suggested we can begin to see something that looks like rational administration. A key component of this thesis is that "politics," an essential feature of modern government, did not begin to develop until the thirteenth century.

Bisson's argument unfolds gradually over the course of the book. After a brief introduction (chapter 1) he focuses on the feudal revolution in chapter 2, "The Age of

Lordship (875-1150).” This section should look familiar to scholars who know some of his previous work on this subject. The lively debate that Bisson and other prominent historians conducted during the mid-1990s in the pages of *Past and Present* forms the backdrop to this chapter. Interestingly, Bisson does not significantly alter here the position he took in that debate, insisting that the most typical human experience of power around the year 1000 was violent, castle-based exploitation of peasants by ambitious lords.

With chapter 3, “Lord-Rulership (1050-1150): The Experience of Power,” Bisson moves away from this earlier debate and begins to chart the ubiquity of lordship across Europe in the later eleventh and early twelfth centuries. He is at his most sweeping in this one-hundred-page chapter, which includes discussions of Spain, Germany, Italy, France, England, and the Low Countries. Though he acknowledges and frequently even emphasizes regional differences here, he is also seeking to describe a pan-European phenomenon of lordship. One of his central arguments is that the kings of this period functioned like other lords. Their actions were “devoid of active political or legislative purpose” (p. 161) because their power was affective; they and their functionaries had no sense that they held “official” positions. Chapter 4, “Crisis of Power (1060-1150),” continues many of the themes of chapter 3 and has the same geographical and chronological parameters. According to Bisson, the Saxon revolts during the Investiture Controversy, the independence of castellans in France, the murder of Count Charles of Flanders, and the anarchy of King Stephen’s reign in England all demonstrate the instability of lordship in western Europe during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. “Bad lordship” was commonplace among both magnates and lesser lords, and for Bisson it is therefore not surprising that so many sources make references to tyrants and tyranny in these years.

How the societies of western Europe began to transition away from the most violent and unstable forms of lordship is the story of chapter 5, “Resolution: Intrusions of Government (1150-1215).” Bisson is quick to demonstrate how uneven this shift was. No kingdom or region experienced a straightforward progression from lordship to government, and in many places, exploitative lordship persisted well into the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Nevertheless, Bisson does see in this period a growing awareness that the most capricious excesses of lordship posed problems for rulers—not because of a concern for the welfare of the people, but because rulers came to realize it was more profitable to manage

estates than to exploit them. For this reason, violent local lords started to concern kings and magnates, who increasingly began to expect accountability from their followers. In chapter 6, “Celebration and Persuasion (1160-1225),” Bisson brings this story into the thirteenth century. Here, he argues for the expanding importance of the royal court as a new experience of power, distinct from lordship. In addition, money takes on new significance in this period; the increased need for money forced rulers of all sorts to look for new revenues beyond traditional lordly prerogatives. The thirteenth century thus sees important developments that fuel the transition to modern-looking conceptions of government. But as Bisson’s analysis of the events surrounding Magna Carta reveals, such change was slow. Though Magna Carta is evidence for new forms of consultative government, sources from the time—still trapped inside older conceptions of power—did not recognize these novelties. Lordship remained central to the worldview of medieval people long after it had begun to fade in significance.

This is an expansive work, and summarizing an argument with such a broad scope is difficult. Different readers will undoubtedly take away different themes and lessons from the book. Here, I would like to highlight two arguments of Bisson’s that I think are especially compelling and merit further debate. The first concerns the distinction he draws between lordship and fidelity on the one hand and office and administrative competence on the other. As he explains, past historians have been inclined to see official positions like that of sheriff in England or *prévôt* in France as evidence of rational government. Bisson, however, is much more skeptical. He argues that, prior to the later twelfth century, these offices were staffed by lords who owed their positions solely to their fidelity to the king. As a result, such men were not interested in managing the rights and territories that came with these positions; they were exploitative lords, similar to the worst castellans. The holders of these and similar offices only started to become accountable for their actions when kings and other rulers began to be concerned about mismanagement. Gradually, competence then replaced fidelity as an important factor in who acquired these positions.

The second argument I would like to highlight is Bisson’s cautious use of the word “politics.” He argues throughout that lordship leaves no room for politics. Lords, from kings to castellans, may have taken counsel from their followers, but that does not mean we can speak of consultative forms of government in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Indeed, sources prior to the thirteenth

century provide little evidence for the existence of genuine political discourse. Groups that may look like political factions to modern scholars were routinely labeled conspiracies by medieval writers who had no conception of politics as we know it today. Thus, Bisson asks at one point, “How did assemblies as such, as distinct from the doings of assembled people, become instrumental in the exercise of power?” (p. 558). This is an important question, and one that Bisson does well to raise here.

While anyone who reads this book will undoubtedly find it easy to quibble with some details, the overall arc of the work’s argument is impressive. For me, the most

significant complaint is that Bisson is at times lacking in critical detachment. While he acknowledges that “corruption” is an anachronistic term to use for the twelfth century, there is still a tendency here to criticize lords because they exploited and mistreated peasants. This stance is most distracting when Bisson uses words like “inhuman” (p. 76) to describe the experience of power. Rational government is the protagonist in this story; violent lords, the bad guys dressed all in black. Ultimately, however, this is a minor criticism. Bisson has provided historians with an impressive work that will hopefully spark new discussions of medieval lordship, politics, and government.

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