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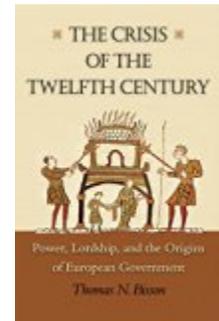
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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.

Reviewed by Mark Whittow (Corpus Christi College)

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Europe before Government: Power and Society in the Long Twelfth Century

This is a wonderful and important book. It is the fruit of a long lifetime studying medieval history, and as such an encouragement to the rest of us. More than seventy years a historian, Thomas Bisson only gets sharper, more engaged, and more wide-ranging. The Bisson of the early 1960s was a distinguished historian; half a century later he has become one of the leading interpreters of the central medieval West, and in this book he has given a shape to how we are to see the twelfth century that will no doubt dominate the scholarship of the twenty-first in much the same way that Haskins and Southern dominated most of the twentieth. It is a remarkable achievement.

The Crisis of the Twelfth Century holds few surprises, but that is no criticism, and indeed explains much of its likely impact. Its key themes, the central and lasting importance of lordship in western Europe, the ungovernmental nature of many aspects of medieval polities, and the significance of the late twelfth century in terms of the emergence of what would become a political society, or perhaps one might say a society with politics, are for most scholars uncontroversial. There was a time when historians enthused about twelfth-century government and the medieval origins of the modern state, but we have all become more sophisticated. Far from being out on a limb, *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century* lies on a main route of current thinking, with prominent traffic that includes Matthew Innes's skepticism about the Carolingian state, expressed most fully in *State and Society in*

the Early Middle Ages: The Middle Rhine Valley, 400-1000 (2000), the late Rees Davies's 2003 paper, "The Medieval State: The Tyranny of a Construct?" in the *Journal of Historical Sociology*, and most recently John Watts's *The Making of Polities: Europe, 1300-1500* (2009). All share a view of the central Middle Ages where power is principally affective rather than institutionalized, where talk of the state is anachronistic until the thirteenth century, even if glimmers of state-like behavior appear in the late twelfth, and where the key phenomenon of power is lordship. In 1994 when Bisson argued the case for "The 'Feudal Revolution'" in *Past and Present*, the responses that followed in later issues of the same journal made him appear out of step with his peers, but now much the same arguments express something close to a widely held consensus. I suspect this will have given him a certain wry pleasure.

Of course Bisson is not simply saying what others are saying. He remains untypical, for example, in the degree of his stress on the arbitrary and violent nature of lordly power. Since at least the publication of *Tormented Voices: Power, Crisis, and Humanity in Rural Catalonia, 1140-1200* in 1998 he has worn his heart on his sleeve in this respect. But who is to say that he is wrong? Certainly the argument often used against his 1994 paper, that he was being misled by the self-serving discourses of whingeing monks, now looks rather tired. Granted that texts may not be treated as an uncomplicated mirror into past experience, it is equally naive to assume that

they must be interpreted as evidence for the opposite of what they purport to say. Bisson's question, "What was the experience of power?" is a valid one, and his answer in our present state of knowledge is as convincing as any other on offer. To make progress from here historians will clearly need to look much more closely at the lives of the huge peasant majority of medieval Europe, but in the context of this book and its reception none of this matters much. As the subtitles of his books make plain, Bisson's focus has shifted from the "humanity" of 1998 to the "origins of European government" in 2009. He has not lost sight of the human experience, and this book ends with the image of the sassy peasant Durand, his mouth stuffed with dung by the royal bailiff, forced to kneel in the dirt and spit out, "You can do it, as lord and bailiff of the village!" But the point Bisson is making is not primarily one about the brutality of Durand's existence, which some would see as open to debate (the phrase "He would say that, wouldn't he?" springs to mind) but one about the conceptual confusion expressed by the phrase "lord and bailiff." Whether these are the words actually used by Durand, or are simply the terminology of the court scribe matters little to the point that still in the mid thirteenth century in the context of an enquiry into injustices committed by royal officials, power is still seen first and foremost in terms of lordly domination. This is a book about lordly power, about the beginnings of its transformation into something we would call government, and the stresses and strains that process entailed: the crisis of the twelfth century.

"Crisis" may seem an off-puttingly overused word. A quick trawl through the Bodleian catalogue reveals crises in the third, fifth, seventh, eleventh, thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, not to forget Karl Leyser's crisis of medieval Germany and the eighteenth-century crisis of the ancien regime.[1] But Bisson makes a good case that something special was happening here. Western Europe was already a world of lords and lordly power since the eleventh century or even the tenth. This had been the feudal revolution. In the twelfth century the pace of population growth and economic development quickened further with the result that there were more lords, each trying to make their living through the exercise of power. For any lordship, large or small, stasis was not an option. There were always followers to reward, rivals to fend off. Insufficiently effective exploitation and the lord would run out of resources, an increasingly pressing issue in a world where the costs of aristocratic display and up-to-date military technology were steadily rising; excessive exploitation risked throt-

ting a community's prosperity or provoking rebellion. Over the long term the rewards would tend to flow to the bigger lordships—kingdoms and principalities—and lords with smaller resources would slip into becoming an aristocracy of service. The story of the lords of Montlhéry, a castle less than a day's ride from Paris, serves to illustrate what happened to so many: dangerous independent neighbors to Louis VI at the beginning of the twelfth century; loyal and obedient servants to the crown by the end. But the process was far from smooth and the long twelfth century is littered with well-known events like the murders of the bishop of Laon, of Charles the Good, and of Thomas Becket, the bloody upheavals at Sahagún, or the baronial show-down with King John of England. All these were crises of lordship. At opposite ends of Bisson's century, Laon in 1112 and England a hundred years later are essentially the same story of arbitrary and exploitative lordship pushed beyond the limits that were seen as acceptable to the injury of the wider community. Bad lordship in both cases led to an explosion of violence and eventually to an agreed compromise, at Laon the *Constitutio Pacis* of 1128, in England Magna Carta and its reissues.

By bracketing 1112 and 1215 under the same heading, Bisson allows us to see the twelfth-century crisis of lordship as a creative process that lies at the heart of later European governmental structures. Bisson does not ignore the hesitating steps towards accountability or public responsibility. The familiar milestones of growing administrative sophistication, Domesday Book, the Pipe Rolls, the Exchequer, Bishop Nigel of Ely, the Grote Brief, the French registers are all here. Similarly Bisson talks of the emerging sense of public affairs, discernable in John of Salisbury, the circle of Peter the Chanter, Stephen Langton, and in the less well-known, but extremely interesting, *Summa de sacramentis* of the English scholar, Robert of Courson. (An edition and further study of this text currently only known from a manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris is an obvious desideratum.) But whether it is administrative documents or theological texts Bisson is principally concerned to limit their significance. Ideas in his view are not the motive force for change. Henry I's much vaunted government is presented as less governmental than simply kingly lordship of a particularly ruthless kind. The Paris theologians may be thinking new thoughts, but as regards creating a new political society they are either reactive or ignored. The motive force for change in Bisson's twelfth century is lordship, its contradictions and crises. Lordship and its discontents posed problems that slowly and shakily gov-

ernment and politics served to solve.

Bisson's vision of the twelfth century tends towards the dystopian: a brutal and rather grim society, creative in spite of itself. The dust jacket shows a woman and child fleeing as their house is burnt to the ground; the book ends with Durand's mouth crammed with shit. It is symptomatic that Eleanor of Aquitaine gets only two brief mentions, both under the heading of dynastic misfortune, and the troubadours appear as the bitter poets of a violent world of resentful castellans, the sort of versifiers who can compare their lady to a high dungeon. Not much love and dalliance here. And this may be the one thing that will limit Bisson's impact. It is not so much that historians are irretrievably wedded to a rosy view of the twelfth century (although one should not under-

estimate that), as that Bisson is writing for a readership already versed in the history of government, power, institutions, and administration. He says in the preface that this is neither a systematic treatise nor a textbook but an essay, and I might add an essay aimed at the well informed. Again in the preface he sounds the mildly regretful note that his students have long since deserted government for social and cultural history. If this essay is preaching it is preaching to the converted. But then why should such a distinguished historian at the height of his powers do anything else?

Note

[1]. *Proceedings of the British Academy* 69 (1983): 409-443.

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