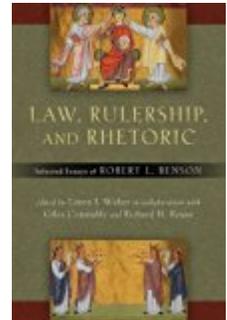


Robert L. Benson. *Law, Rulership, and Rhetoric: Selected Essays of Robert L. Benson.* Edited by Loren J. Weber in collaboration with Giles Constable and Richard H. Rouse. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014. xxiii + 382 pp. \$68.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-268-02234-1.



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It is a testament to the strength of Robert L. Benson's scholarly personality and to his intellect that the contours of both are so clearly and consistently visible in this eclectic collection. Assembled after Benson's death in 1996, the essays gathered here were composed over the course of a forty-year scholarly career and delivered in a variety of contexts, both academic and (relatively) popular. The editors—a former student, Loren J. Weber, and two longtime colleagues, Giles Constable and Richard H. Rouse—were faced with an unorganized and erratically formatted body of material, and endeavored to assemble from that body those pieces that were relatively complete and intrinsically interesting. Weber's lucid editorial preface expresses both the team's frustration at what was not found—most obviously a full or substantial draft of Benson's planned book on Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, or even of the 1989 Carlyle Lectures upon which the book was to be based—and their conviction that what remains is nonetheless worthy of dissemination to the scholarly public.

In this conviction, the collection admirably vindicates its editors. Benson's clarity of purpose ensures that even such a necessarily wide-ranging book functions as a kind of extended meditation on Benson's chosen subject: power, or rather the process by which (as Benson himself puts it) "the medieval world devised an elaborate network of concepts to justify, express, and conceal the awful realities of power," as well as "the different ways in which medieval men conceived the highest governing officers: emperor, king, pope, archbishop, bishop" (p. 46). This was essentially the subject of Benson's penetrating, unassumingly titled 1969 monograph *The Bishop-Elect*, and it is a subject that appears to a lesser or greater extent in four of the five parts of this collection. Part 1, "Thought and Culture," shows medieval texts in conversation with intellectual touchstones of the classical and late antique worlds. Part 2, "Art and Rulership," discusses the iconography of power in a series of medieval images and objects. Part 3, "Medieval Rulership," includes a series of studies concerning political thought and medieval under-

standings of the ruler. Part 4, "Frederick Barbarossa," offers a tantalizing glimpse of Benson's never-completed book-length study of the twelfth-century German emperor, assembling three thoughtful explorations of the political, ideological, and theological debates that underlay key moments in Barbarossa's reign, such as the infamous 1157 clash at Besançon. Benson cast a wide chronological net, capturing moments and developments from late antiquity to Dante, but his center of gravity was the long twelfth century, the period of the Investiture Controversy, the ascendancy of both papacy and empire, when the natures of *regnum* and *sacerdotium*—secular and ecclesiastical power—and the proper relationship between them were never far from men's thoughts. His source base was both suitably immense and diverse, and one of the great pleasures of this book is the repeated juxtaposition of close reading with sweeping analysis of canon law or political theology. But however widely Benson ranged, his essential topic was nearly always power, as conceived, articulated, contested, and depicted by both rulers and their subjects in the Middle Ages.

Benson's interests, of course, were recognizably those of his great teacher, Ernst Kantorowicz, whose influence over this book is profound; it could, in another guise, stand as a kind of Festschrift for Kantorowicz. Kantorowicz's most widely read and admired book, *The King's Two Bodies* (1957), was itself a study of political theology, of ideas about rulership, and his 1927 biography of Emperor Frederick II incited significant scholarly controversy by concerning itself more with the "myth" of the great thirteenth-century ruler than with the institutional realities of his empire. Benson's sympathy with Kantorowicz's overall approach could therefore be easily predicted; in the essays that make up part 5, "Medieval History in Modern Perspective," however, Benson makes his debt to Kantorowicz explicit. With one exception—an amusing if essentially minor discussion of "the medievalist as hero" (the title of chapter 19) in literary fiction—these essays were all written

in defense of Kantorowicz, in response to criticisms both of his scholarly methodology and of his supposed Nazi allegiance. The latter accusation has been made most forcefully by Norman Cantor in his *Inventing the Middle Ages* (1991), a lively, popular, and hugely divisive history of twentieth-century medieval scholarship. Cantor's chapter on Percy Ernst Schramm and Kantorowicz, whom he refers to as "The Nazi Twins," is forcefully rebutted by Benson, who regards Cantor's strident claim that Kantorowicz was a committed and celebrated Nazi as absurd, irresponsible, and largely fabricated. This is not only important criticism of a widely read book on the discipline of medieval history, but itself contains enriching details about Kantorowicz's career and the experience of being his student. Part 5 thus nicely complements parts 1 through 4 to create a rounded picture of Benson as a scholar in the tradition established by Kantorowicz. But despite Kantorowicz's considerable influence—visible not only in Benson's concerns but also, for instance, in his unabashed (and insightful) forays into art history—Benson's scholarly identity was his own. His commitment, in particular, to placing the bishop and the pope alongside the king and the emperor in considerations of medieval rulership created a nuanced and dialogic view of medieval power.

The nature of this collection, and the formidable challenges overcome in assembling it, make it difficult and, indeed, somewhat churlish to render criticism. The editors could not have clarified ambiguous points, or completed incomplete essays, or supplied (for instance) more of the Barbarossa material than they have here. This collection represents an effort not only to memorialize Benson but also to present his thoughts on a subject he had mastered more thoroughly than his published record would indicate. The definitive book on medieval theories and expressions of power that Benson could have produced will never appear; this book is a necessarily inadequate substi-

tute, but a profoundly worthy contribution nonetheless.

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