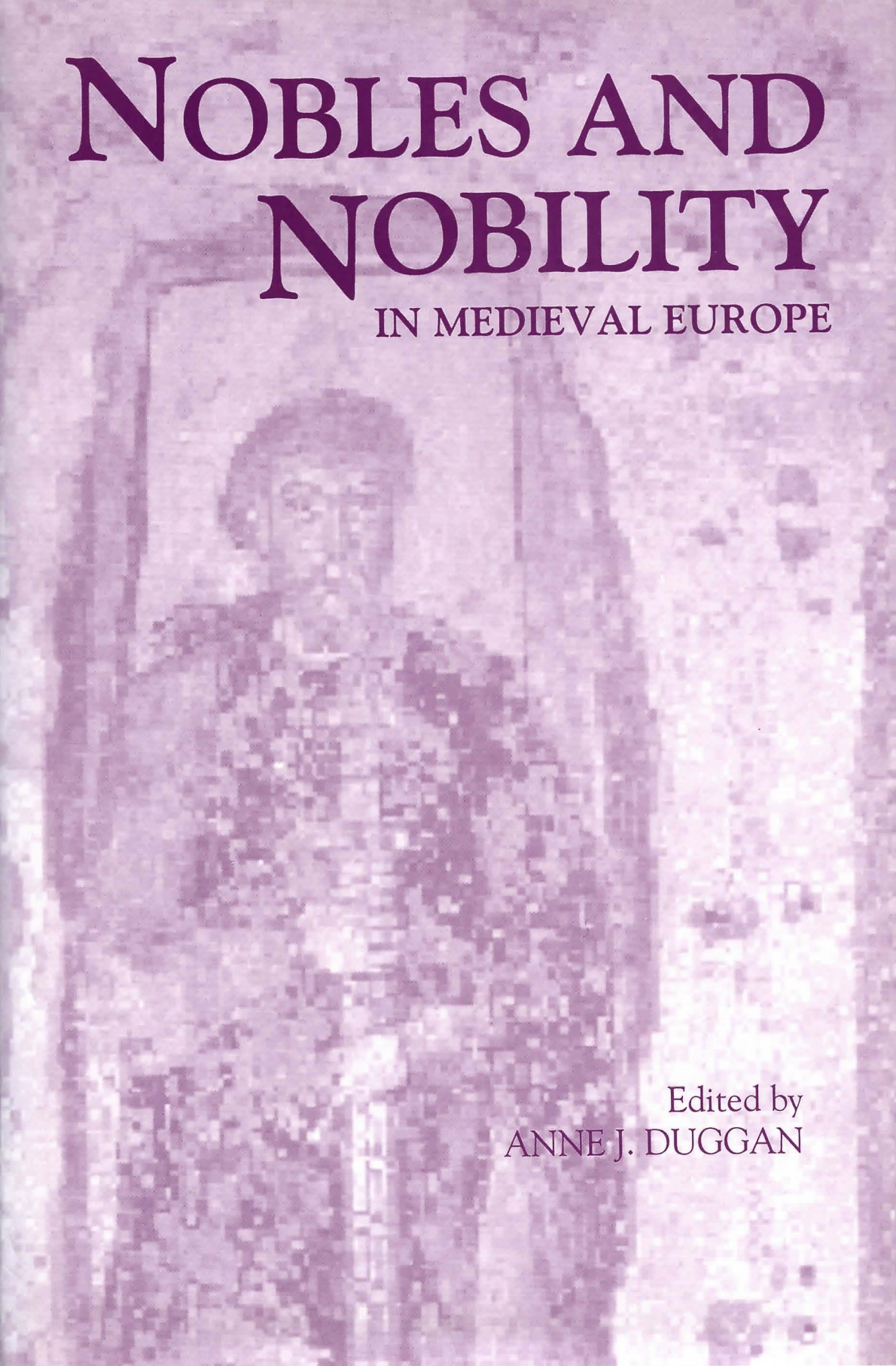
NOBLES AND NOBILITY

IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE



Edited by
ANNE J. DUGGAN

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CONCEPTS, ORIGINS, TRANSFORMATIONS

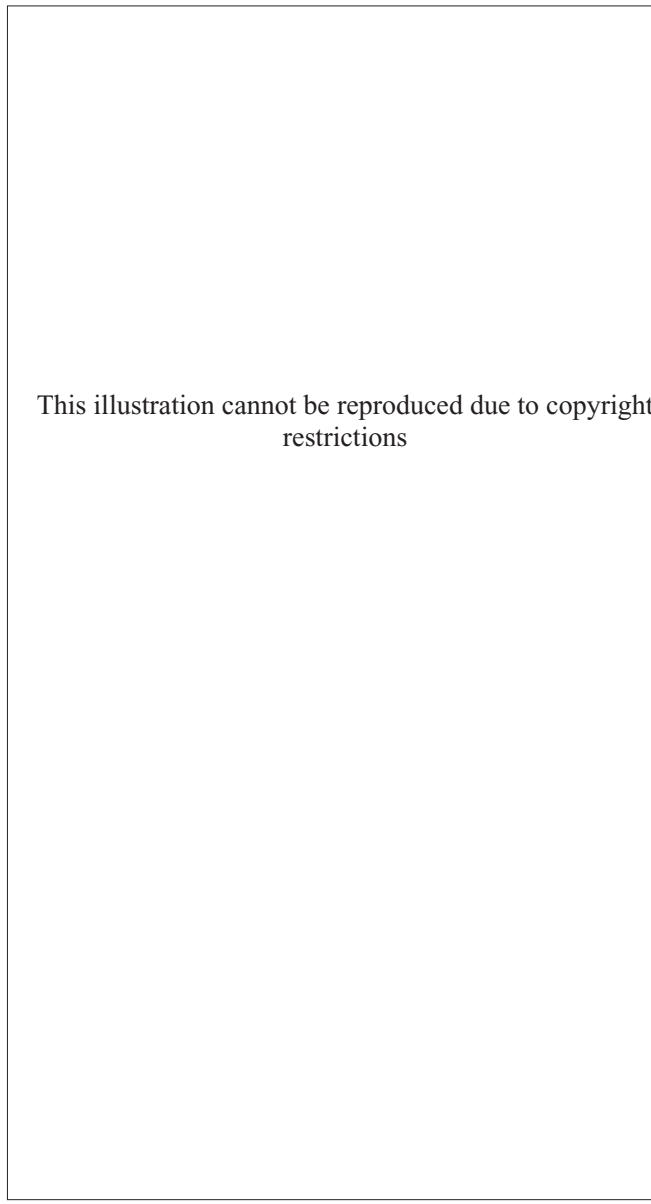

Plate 1. The memorial plaque for Count Geoffrey of Anjou (father of King Henry II of England). Multicoloured enamel plate, 63 x 32 cm, Municipal Library, Le Mans. The inscription reads: ENSI TVO PRINCEPS PREDORUM TURBA FVGARUNT: ECCLESIISQUE QVIES PACE VIGENTE DATVR (The crows of robbers flees from thy sword, O prince; and as peace flourishes tranquility is bestowed upon the

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CONCEPTS, ORIGINS, TRANSFORMATIONS

EDITED BY

Anne J. Duggan

THE BOYDELL PRESS

First published 2000
The Boydell Press, Woodbridge

ISBN 0 85115 769 6

The Boydell Press is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
PO Box 41026, Rochester, NY 14604–4126, USA
website: www.boydell.co.uk

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 99–087553

This publication is printed on acid-free paper

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Publication of this volume was aided by a grant from The Isobel Thornley Bequest Fund of the University of London

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Abbreviations

a.	anno
Berger	Adolf Berger. *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Roman Law*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, New Series, 43 pt 2 (Philadelphia, 1953; repr. 1991)
c.; cc.	capitulum; capitula
c.	*circa*
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis (Turnhout, 1953–)
ch.; chs	chapter, chapters
EHR	*English Historical Review*
ep.	epistola
JL	P. Jaffé, *Regesta Pontificum Romanorum ad annum 1198*, ed. W. Wattenbach, S. Loewenfeld, F. Kaltenbrunner, and P. Ewald, 2 vols (Leipzig, 1885–88)
MGH	*Monumenta Germaniae Historica:*
Capitularia	*Capitularia regum francorum*, ed. A. Boretius and V. Krause, 2 vols (Hanover, 1883–97; repr. 1957)
Poet. Lat.	*Poetae Latini aevi Carolini*, i–ii, ed. E. Dümmler, iii, ed. V. Traube (Berlin, 1881–86) = *Poetae latini medii aevi*, i–iii
SRG	*Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum ex Monumentis Germaniae historica separatim editi*, 61 vols (Hanover, et alibi, 1839–1935; variously re-edited and reprinted)
SRG, *NS*	*Scriptores rerum Germanicarum*, New Series (Berlin, 1922–)
SS	*Scriptores* (in folio), 32 vols in 34 (Hanover, 1826–1934)
MPH	*Monumenta Poloniae Historica. Pomniki dziejowe Polski* (Lwów/Kraków, 1864–93, repr. Warsaw, 1960–61)
MPH n.s.	*Monumenta Poloniae Historica –Series Nova. Pomniki Dziejowe Polski –Seria II* (Kraków and Warsaw [alternately], 1952–)
MTB	*Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. J. C. Robertson and J. B. Sheppard, RS 67, 7 vols (London, 1875–85)
NglL	*Norges gamle Love*, iii (Christiania/Oslo, 1849)
PBA	*Proceedings of the British Academy*
pd	printed
PL	*Patrologiae cursus completus, series latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, 234 vols (Paris, 1844–1955)

RHES	*Revista de História Económica e Social*
RPH	*Revista Portuguesa de História*
RS	Rolls Series: *Rerum Britannicarum medii ævi scriptores: Chronicles and Memorials of Great Britain and Ireland during the Middle Ages, published under the direction of the Master of the Rolls* (London, etc., 1858–1911)
repr.	reprint
SCH	*Studies in Church History*
s.a.	*sub anno*
s.v.; *s.vv.*	*sub verbo*; *sub verbis*
TRHS	*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*

Preface

With the exception of David Carpenter's chapter, all the papers in this volume were presented at the Third International Conference held under the auspices of the Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies at King's College London in the Great Hall of the College in April 1998. The theme was 'Nobles and Nobility in the Middle Ages', and the conference was planned to enable comparisons to be made across time, from the fifth to the late fifteenth century, and between very different areas and phases of political development, embracing regions as diverse as England (before and after the Norman Conquest), France, Poland, the Romano-German empire, Norway, and Portugal. One of the highlights of the conference was a performance of courtly music presented in the College Chapel by members of the College Choir, under the direction of Mr David Trendell.

Our grateful thanks are due to the British Academy, the Royal Historical Society, and the Humanties Research Committee of King's College London, all of whom provided financial assistance for various aspects of the Conference; to the Isobel Thornley Bequest, whose generous grant made possible the publication of this volume; to the Music faculty of King's for use of the Viscount St David's Room; to the Dean of King's, who allowed the College Chapel to be used for the concert; and to Janet L. Nelson, who translated the papers presented by Martin Aurell and Régine Le Jan.

In addition, the editor wishes to thank the Musées du Mans and the Radio Times Hutton Picture Library for permission to reproduce the illustrations in Plates 1 and 2.

AJD
King's College London
3 June 1999

In Memoriam

CHARLES DUGGAN

Introduction

Anne J. Duggan

'Indeed, I am not ''sprung from an ancient line of kings'' ',[1] wrote Thomas Becket in 1166, rising to the taunt that he had been raised from poverty through the king's favour, 'nevertheless, I prefer to be a man in whom nobility of mind creates nobility than one in whom nobility of birth degenerates.'[2] This response neatly encapsulates the two principal elements in the construction of nobility in the Middle Ages: distinction based on birth, blood, and lineage and distinction of character and intellect – and expresses the recurrent theme that the one could and often did exist without the other. By the time that Thomas Becket (himself very much a *parvenu*, born of mercantile parents with some knightly affiliations, but not knightly status) was embroiled in his great dispute with Henry II (who was affronted when Herbert of Bosham pointed out that he was not the son of a king!), the broad shape of the European nobility had come into being and was poised to consolidate itself even further. Evidence of its self-consciousness, wealth, and status is everywhere to be seen: celebrated in vernacular *chansons*, reflected in the newly created and hugely popular Arthurian literature, emblazoned on tombs and personal seals, and its members commemorated as founders and patrons of churches, monasteries, and hospitals. They were notable and noted in chronicles and annals; they divided the lordship of lands and peoples among themselves and shared the government of realms with kings and emperors. But who were they, these 'nobiles', where did they come from, how did they acquire the precise power and status which they enjoyed, and how did they then manage to hold on to that power and transfer it, sometimes through many generations, to later descendants who would bear their names? How, indeed, was the concept of 'noble' and 'nobility' constructed? – for what we see is not merely the acquisition and maintenance of landed wealth, but the creation of an ideology which justified their superior status and attributed to them a dynastic right to rule based on descent from noble ancestors.

To begin with the terminology. The English nouns 'nobles' and 'nobility'

1 Horace, *Carmina*, i. 1, 1:

> Maecenas atavis edite regibus,
> O et praesidium, et dulce decus meum.

2 *MTB*, v, ep. 223 at p. 499: 'Non sum reuera "attauis editus regibus"; malo tamen is esse in quo faciat sibi genus animi nobilitas, quam in quo nobilitas generis degeneret.'

derive not from Old English but from French and ultimately from Latin; and it was the *lingua franca* of late Latin that provided the semantic basis for the terminology of 'nobility' in the Latin-derived languages adopted by many of the Germanic peoples that established their rule in the Western Roman empire in the fifth and sixth centuries; and even where Latin did not become the language of the people, progressive Christianization brought the language of the Vulgate, the Latin Fathers, and the liturgy, and with it much of the Roman vocabulary of nobility. Underlying the Germanic actualities lay the inheritance of Roman constructions of a civil aristocracy, based on birth and civic/imperial service. Roman law principally distinguished between free and unfree and between citizen and non-citizen, but the Roman world distinguished also between 'patricians' and 'plebeians', and the distinction between 'nobiles' and 'ignobiles' established itself in the realities of legal, social, and political life. The term *nobilis* (noble) meant both well-known, distinguished, famous (and infamous) and well-born – *nobili genere nati*. Cicero, a *novus homo* himself, was sensitive to the gradations of Roman society. His description of the lady Clodia as 'a woman not only noble but notorious' ('Cum Clodia muliere *non solum nobili, sed etiam nota*') played on the contradiction between her high status (*nobilis*) and her alleged lack of reputation (*nota*).[3] The legal texts do not supply a definitive list of those enjoying privileged status, but there was a dual penalty system in operation which distinguished not only between the legal categories of free and unfree but between those of higher and those of lower social status. Capital punishment, for example, in all its forms, was generally imposed only on the *humiliores*, those below the rank of decurion;[4] and the *honestiores* were generally spared degrading penalties like condemnation 'to the mines or to public labour, nor are they exposed to the beasts, nor beaten with rods', or subjected to torture.[5] As in Anglo-Saxon England (and much of the Germanic world), this differentiation extended also to the categorization of offences: 'An injury is judged to be grave . . . because of the person to whom it is done, when the victim is a senator, or equestrian or decurion, or someone else of conspicuous prestige . . .'[6] What these *honestiores* enjoyed was *honor* (esteem, respect) and *dignitas* (an honourable prestige which merits respect and reverence).[7]

The Roman world also constructed a language of privilege. Its official docu-

3 *Pro Caelio*, 13, 31. Cf. Neal Wood, *Cicero's Social and Political Thought* (Berkeley, 1988), esp. pp. 90–104.

4 Except for particularly heinous crimes like treason, parricide, and, from the late third century, participation in magic and armed burglary of a temple at night.

5 Peter Garnsey, *Social Status snd Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 105–78, esp. p. 135, quoting an opinion of Marcianus from *Dig*. 49. 18. 3. Although the general pattern of exemption for the *honestiores* and veterans (who were legally assimilated to the decurions) is clear, there were exceptions: see *ibid*., pp. 142–5.

6 Garnsey, *Social Status*, pp. 199–201, esp. 201–2, quoting a late third-century commentary. For a discussion of privileged groups (senators, equestrians, decurions, veterans, soldiers, and magistrates), see *ibid*., pp. 234–59; and for the proposition that the social and legal ordering emerged in late Republican times, see *ibid*., p. 279.

7 Garnsey, *Social Status*, pp. 221–33, 'The vocabulary of privilege', esp. pp. 223–5.

ments used a hierarchy of honorific styles of title and address which settled into a three-fold ranking of *illustres* (highest officials: Prefects of the city of Rome, *magistri militum, quaestores sacri palatii*, but could also be conferred by the emperor, by *codicilli honorariae dignitatis*);[8] *spectabiles* (second rank of officials),[9] and *clarissimi* (senators and those of senatorial rank).[10] Visible marks of distinction emerged at the same time. The broad purple stripe (*laticlavus/clavus latus*) on tunic or toga marked senators and their sons, and later the higher dignitaries of the empire; the narrow purple stripe on the toga (*clavus augustus*) marked those of equestrian rank.[11] Familiarity with this world of social and political gradations surely underlies the well-known distinctions in St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, where, in Jerome's Latin Vulgate, the 'potentes' and 'nobiles' of the world are compared with the 'infirma' and 'ignobilia'/'contemptibilia', whom God has chosen to confound the strong, and 'ea quae non sunt (those who are nothing)', whom He has chosen to bring to nought 'ea quae sunt (those who are something)'.[12] Paul was, famously, a free-born Roman citizen ('. . . hic enim homo civis Romanus est') of the first century AD,[13] and his letters resonate with echoes of that world of rank and privilege which the Christian Gospel was set to dissolve into a new community of believers, where there is neither slave nor free.

How far the Roman construct was transmitted to the 'barbarians' who assumed the rulership of Roman or formerly Roman territories in the fifth and sixth centuries is a matter of some debate;[14] but the emergence of an élite – a nobility – and a language to describe it can be readily discerned. Writing in a Northumbrian monastery in the early eighth century, Bede tells of a captive who was recognized as not 'of common stock' (*de paupere uulgo*) but 'of noble family' (*de nobilibus*) from 'his appearance, his bearing, and his speech' (*ex uultu et habitu et sermonibus eius*).[15] The context is the late seventh-century wars between Anglo-Saxon kingdoms; the language of the record, the refined

8 Berger, pp. 491b–492a, *s.v.* Illustris.

9 Berger, p. 712a–b, *s.v.* Spectabilis.

10 Berger, p. 390a–b, *s.vv.* Clara persona, Clarissimatus, Clarissimus.

11 Originally the cavalry in the Roman army, the *equites* became a distinct social category – a 'nobility' of rich men who obtained their wealth from commerce (forbidden to senators) and tax farming (*publicani*). Reorganized under Augustus, they monopolized the highest administrative positions in the empire, with the right to wear a gold ring (*ius annuli aurei*): Berger, p. 455a–b, *s.v.* Equites.

12 1 Cor. 1: 26–8, '. . . non multi potentes, non multi nobiles . . . et infirma mundi elegit Deus, ut confundat fortia. Et ignobilia mundi, et contemptibilia elegit Deus, et ea quae non sunt, ut ea quae sunt destrueret.' (AV: 'not many mighty, not many noble are called . . . and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty; and the base things of the world, and things that are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are.')

13 Acts, 22: 26

14 Fouracre, p. 19; Le Jan, pp. 61–4.

15 *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), p. 402, lines 29–30, cited by Jane Roberts, p. 72.

Latin of an Anglo-Saxon monk; but it tells of visible distinctions between 'nobles' and 'the common people' which were recognizable in a seventh-century prisoner-of-war, and no doubt visible also in the Northumbrian society from which Bede sprang. Monks, as Janet Nelson says, citing a Carolingian capitulary of 817,[16] knew the difference between 'nobles' and others; but the lexicological evidence presented by Jane Roberts shows that vernacular writers were equally sensitive to the nuances of status. The surviving monuments of early English composition provide many clusters of words to describe status, esteem, and rank: *æðelic, eorlic, hl āfordlic, þegnlic* (lordly, noble), compounds including *dæl* - (noble condition, based on birth) and *weorþ*- (honour-), and nouns *aldorþegn* (senior noble), *þegn* (noble); while the Old English epic *Beowulf* provides two outstanding examples of 'nobility' in Beowulf himself and the heroic Æschere.[17] This latter character tells us much about the early English concept of nobility: he is a generous, brave, shield-bearing companion of the king. These are the qualities of an aristocracy of war – an aristocracy which earned its reputation on the battlefield; but underlying the conceptualization is recognition of birthright, or perhaps, more properly, of the obligations that attach to 'noble' birth. Æschere's depiction as a 'shield-bearing companion of the king' is also highly significant, since association with the circle of the ruler was to remain a pervasive mark of nobility throughout the medieval period: in larger kingdoms, a mark of the higher nobility; in smaller kingdoms and non-royal lordships, a mark of nobility in general. So, 'noble' birth, military prowess, and royal service (especially military) seem to be characteristics of the post-Roman nobility.

What can be discovered of early Frankish society in sub-Roman Gaul reveals a clear recognition of rank and its inheritance. Such concepts are readily discernible in the writings of Gregory of Tours and in the saints' lives discussed by Paul Fouracre, but it is not entirely clear how far the Franks had assimilated to Roman ways. Theirs was a warrior élite – not so dissimilar from that of the Old English world described in *Beowulf* – and in the case of the ruling family, the Merovingians, also one of descent. That élite assumed control of a late Roman world whose system of privilege accommodated both nobility of birth and office and nobility by wealth, and conferred special rights and exemptions on soldiers, and where status, power, and office were monopolized by a relatively small number of distinguished families. The fact that a Gallo-Roman 'nobility' can be traced through the period of Frankish conquest and settlement down to the seventh or even eighth century in some regions of Francia is evidence of the endurance and adaptability of that class; it is evidence also of

16 *MGH Capitularia*, i, no. 170 (817), c. 27, p. 345: Nelson, App. 1, no. 14.

17 The range of such terms and variants is very wide and their meanings richly nuanced: see below, pp. 71–3. Old English law codes, equally, display recognition of and concern with the gradations of status, as they lay down monetary penalties assessed according to the rank of the injured party in descending order from king, archbishop, bishop, or ealdorman, to the 'common man' (*ceorl*).

the survival at least in formal terms of late Roman patterns of government. Based more on economic capacity (land and its rents and produce) than on office, but forming the class from whom office-holders were usually drawn, their position depended on birth (inheritance of family estates and the honour that went with them) and the offices which they expected to fill (episcopal, abbatial, civil). Carried from the Roman world were not only the civil and ecclesiastical structures of government (the *civitas* and the diocese) but a population and an élite accustomed to working in and through them. How far the Frankish leaders grafted the Roman model onto their own traditions of dominion remains problematic, but the survival in some regions of the late Roman aristocracy alongside the Frankish made for some degree of assimilation. Not surprisingly, therefore, the picture that Paul Fouracre finds among the Franks in Merovingian Gaul is one of complexity and contradiction: 'even as some people were entering the nobility, others were sinking to a social level below it. In this sense élite formation was an unending process, with movement throughout the social spectrum as wealth was continuously accumulated and dispersed.'[18] This conclusion might profitably be applied to the whole of Latin Europe, throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. There is always an 'old élite' – or one claiming ancient descent – and upwardly mobile aspirants seeking entry to the charmed circle; but the problem is to discern the process of creation.

Two studies on contrasting regions from the northern and eastern peripheries of Latin Christendom throw interesting light on the question of élite formation. Steinar Imsen's analysis of the *Hirdskrå*, the customs governing the Norwegian king's liegemen and household, demonstrates the existence of tiered élites among the king's supporters and servants and of concentric circles of status arranged around them. Although all *hirdsmen* were bound by oath to the king, there were differentials of rank, privilege, and status, from dukes and earls, through to 'lendmen', who received royal land, acted as advisers, and were allowed armed retinues, and 'skutilsveins', who were not. Though technically not hereditary, the tendency was for the status of lendman and skutilsvein to circulate within a small number of leading families. Moreover, in what was evidently a deliberate assimilation of forms and concepts prevalent elsewhere in Europe, lendmen and skutilsveins were given titles of honour as 'barons' and 'ridder' (knights), respectively, and addressed as 'herra' from 1277 onwards. Compared with the nobilities of other regions, however, their social origins were modest. They were drawn from the 'better', that is, the wealthier farming families of the kingdom. What in fact distinguished them from their free neighbours was 'their exclusive relationship to the king, which gave them what we might call noble status'.[19]

By contrast, Piotr Górecki illuminates what one may call the self-creation of nobility in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Poland. Although he is reluctant to

18 Fouracre, p. 23.
19 See below, pp. 205–10.

use the term 'nobility', preferring the phrase 'patterns of social privilege', he shows that land ownership and military ability were the basis of a status which could be transmitted to one's heirs. His analysis of the witness-lists of charters issued to monasteries in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries reveals an already established terminological hierarchy of 'counts' (*comites*), 'lords' (*domini*), and 'knights' (*milites*), although he is hesitant about precise definitions. Instead, he emphasizes the fluidity of social status in a border region where central authority was weak and the opportunities for successful depredation (and therefore improvement in one's position) were correspondingly large, and cites the career of one Peter Stoszowic in Silesia, who seems to have progressed 'from banditry to lordship' in a period of thirty years, so that he emerged with the title of *comes*.[20] Equally interesting is the way in which this emerging 'nobility' identified itself by family names, inheritance of family lordship, the use of signs and symbols, and the enjoyment of privileged status. What began as successful brigandage could become the foundation of an honourable name. Membership of that nobility seems to have been rather widely drawn, however. Like the equestrian order in imperial Rome, the Polish knighthood attached itself to the *honestior* rank and shared its privileges, being distinguished by birthright, military service to the king/duke, and the possession of the *ius militare*: specific rights of jurisdiction and lordship over neighbours, tenants, and peasants.[21] How far the better-documented Polish phenomenon offers significant parallels with the establishment of the early Frankish 'nobility' is an interesting question which might be pursued.

Similar but more developed patterns are found in Iberia, in the context of another border society, where the expansionist wars against the Moors provided perfect conditions both for the formation of a military élite and for its consolidation. In Portugal, for example, the movement south in the twelfth century occasioned not only the creation of a specific military nobility, but the elevation of the count of Portugal to kingship, and the creation of a new Christian kingdom. These conditions also provided the context for noble self-admiration. By the late thirteenth century, the Portuguese nobility was busy constructing an image of itself as heirs of the warrior crusaders who had, with the king, pushed back the borders of Islam and created the kingdom. The Lineage Books compiled between 1280 and 1340 propagated a highly developed sense of dynastic nobility, identified by family name and family lordships, and self-consciously aware of its family identity.[22]

Such increasing emphasis on dynastic lordship advantaged noble women who were honoured and endowed as the transmitters of noble lineage, and increasingly educated to take their places in a self-consciously noble world. Airlie, Le Jan, and Nelson see evidence of this tendency in the Carolingian

20 See below, pp. 136–7.

21 Casimir the Great (mid-fourteenth century) did not distinguish between the 'privileges' of 'knighthood' and 'nobility'.

22 Maria João Violante Branco, below, pp. 223–8.

world and Ward stresses the self-consciousness of rank and lineage evinced by noblewomen themselves in the later Middle Ages. For, the more the nobility stressed the legitimacy and distinction of its descent, the more it emphasized and protected the high status of its mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters. Maria João Violante Branco highlights the elevated status of noble women in Portugal: their sharing in family inheritance and their ability to control their inherited land, even after entering religious houses. Teresa Sanches, for example, daughter of King Sancho I and former wife of Alfonso IX of León, created a Cistercian nunnery for herself at Lorvão (following the expulsion of the male Benedictines), but nevertheless inherited a large domain from her father and continued to govern her inheritance in her own name. She issued privileges using her royal style as queen, and participated fully in the political affairs of the kingdom for half a century, until her death (1250) in the odour of sanctity.[23] And Thomas Bisson's discussion of princely nobility shows that more than a century earlier Countess Matilda of Tuscany could be treated as one of the very noble rulers of her day. Equally, since rank and inheritance could be transmitted by women, marriage to an elevated heiress, or to a member of a royal family, could be a source of elevation for the man. Airlie and Le Jan both stress how attachment to the Carolingian family through female members was an important element in the consolidation of noble lineages in the ninth and tenth centuries. The elevation of Boso of Vienne and Arnulf 'the Bad' of Bavaria, the one as king, the other as an all-but king, owed a great deal to their Carolingian descent.[24] And it was through women, principally, that Henry II of England acquired his extensive territories: the kingdom of England and the duchy of Normandy through his mother, the Empress Matilda, daughter and heiress of Henry I; the great duchy of Aquitaine (equivalent to a quarter of France) by marriage (1152) to its heiress Eleanor. Equally, David Carpenter draws attention to the importance of heiresses in the turbulent world of the Welsh Marches in the thirteenth century – and to their strenuous defence of their rights. Maud de Braose's defence of Painscastle in the 1190s was so celebrated that the castle was re-named Castle Maud in her honour; and it is likely that her great-granddaughter Maud Mortimer played a similar role in respect of the great fortresses of Radnor and Wigmore in the mid-1260s.[25] Just as many medieval queens were able to play active rôles in the power-politics of their day,[26] so noble women expected (and were expected) to be more than biological agents in dynastic transmission. They were as aware as their male siblings of their rank, status, and rights; and many showed themselves as determined as their husbands and sons to defend and advance the family honour.

Marriage to an aristocratic heiress, or to a princess of the royal family, was a

23 See below, pp. 242–3.
24 See below, pp. 30–3.
25 See below, p. 201.
26 *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe*, ed. Anne J. Duggan (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. xix–xxii.

means of upward mobility for a successful soldier or bureaucrat, or for an upwardly mobile noble. Yet there was a countervailing tendency also, especially in the later Middle Ages, when the growing use of primogeniture and male entail and the establishment of what Ward calls 'a Europe-wide concept of the noble family as a dynastic lineage, with a male head, heroic ancestry, coat of arms, and chivalrous reputation'.[27] In regions where these tendencies became prevalent, even distant male cousins were preferred to daughters as inheritors of the family name and title. But no single pattern prevailed. Dynastic accident, political miscalculation, or economic mismanagement – or combinations of all three – created fundamental instabilities which caused some families to thrive and prosper and others to decline, and careful management of marriage and inheritance policies was required to ensure the survival of wealth and status from generation to generation. Such preoccupations lay at the heart of the transformations that Régine Le Jan finds in the otherwise remarkably stable nobility that emerged from the Carolingian empire in the tenth century, where the descendants of Charlemagne's *proceres* exploited the disintegration of Carolingian power after 888 to consolidate their hold on counties and duchies which they transformed into dynastic lordships for transmission to their descendants. And it was dynastic lordship, underpinned by a strong sense of inherited territorial rights, which in David Carpenter's view finally dictated Roger Mortimer's abandonment of Simon de Montfort in the barons' war.[28]

Although nobility tended increasingly to clothe itself in extravagant dress and trumpet its claims to a superior code of ethics, Górecki and Reuter emphasize that its origins and maintenance were often much less virtuous than the later legends portrayed. The Peter Stoszowic who made himself into some sort of count did so by aggression; and the problem of the *raubritter* (robber knight) was certainly not confined to thirteenth-century Poland. Le Jan comments on the phenomenon in tenth-century Francia.[29] An effective fighter of modest means, either on the way up or on the way down the social scale, had ample opportunity to make a name and fortune for himself in areas where the local nobility was weak or not yet itself established. Moreover, he could make himself useful – possibly even distinguish himself and earn honour – in wars of expansion or defence. A considerable element of the lordship which became established in the early Middle Ages was based on conquest or aggression and was maintained by what Reuter calls 'direct and unmediated coercive force'.[30] Such considerations led Pope Gregory VII, echoing the even earlier Augustine of Hippo,[31] to challenge the authority of the princes of his day in a letter to Bishop Hermann of

27 Ward, pp. 249–54.
28 See below, p. 203.
29 See below, pp. 68, 136–7.
30 Reuter, p. 87.
31 *De doctrina Christiana*, i. 23 (*PL*, xxxiv, 27).

Metz in 1081 (although castigating 'kings and dukes', its criticism could have been applied to much of the lesser nobility as well):

> Who does not know that kings and dukes derived their origin from men, ignorant of God, who with intolerable presumption and blind greed established their power over other men who were their equals by pride, perfidy, rapine, murder, and every sort of crime, under the stimulus of the devil, the prince of this world?[32]

Dominion of man over man is here described as satanic! How then could the wielders of such power justify their claims? A little wash of Aristotelianism could be applied, but to the simple question of why the nobility were 'better' and therefore better suited to rule, there was no single answer. One strategy was to construct an image of warrior nobility, formed at the beginning of the region's history, which had earned its rank and status by fighting for the land against common enemies. For the Iberians, the Reconquest provided fertile ground for such conceptualization (and, indeed, for the actual acquisition of lands and lordships), later celebrated in the Lineage Books compiled in Portugal and Navarre.[33] A similar pattern can be discerned in the way in which the princely nobles, clerical and lay, male and female, discussed by Thomas Bisson were described by their biographers. Where nobility of parentage could be claimed, it was stressed; but greater emphasis was placed on effective and notable action. Heroic struggle against the enemies of one's race or religion or land was a powerful claim to the renown that was a constituent of nobility.[34] Such emphasis was to be enduring. When, in the early nineteenth century, King Louis-Philippe proposed to celebrate the ancient and honourable nobility of France in the Salles des Croisades in Versailles, such was the competition to be included in the grand array of the noble descendants of the crusaders that a veritable industry of faked or doctored genealogies, supported by forged charters, sprang up to substantiate aristocratic claims not just to ancient but to heroic lineage.[35] Justification by (legitimate) conquest underlay the claims of the Anglo-Norman baronage in post-Conquest England. Like their Iberian counterparts they could point to a specific historical event to justify their position and status. In their case it was the share-out of the spoils of victory which followed William the Conqueror's triumph at Senlac (Hastings) in 1066. When King Edward I's judges demanded to see the warrant by which the earl of Surrey (John de Warenne) exercised exempt jurisdiction in his estate, he allegedly drew

32 *Das Register Gregors VII*, ed. E. Caspar, *MGH*, *Epistolae Selectae*, ii (2 fascs, Berlin, 1920–23), viii. 21, pp. 547–63, at. p. 552: 'Quis nesciat reges et duces ab iis habuisse principium, qui Deum ignorantes superbia rapinis perfidia homicidiis postremo universis pene sceleribus mundi principe diabolo videlicet agitante super pares, scilicet homines, dominari ceca cupidine et intollerabili presumptione affectaverunt?'

33 See below, pp. 223–8.

34 See below, ch. 7.

35 J. Riley-Smith, 'Past and Present', in *The Past and the Present: Problems of Understanding* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 75–92 at pp. 77–8.

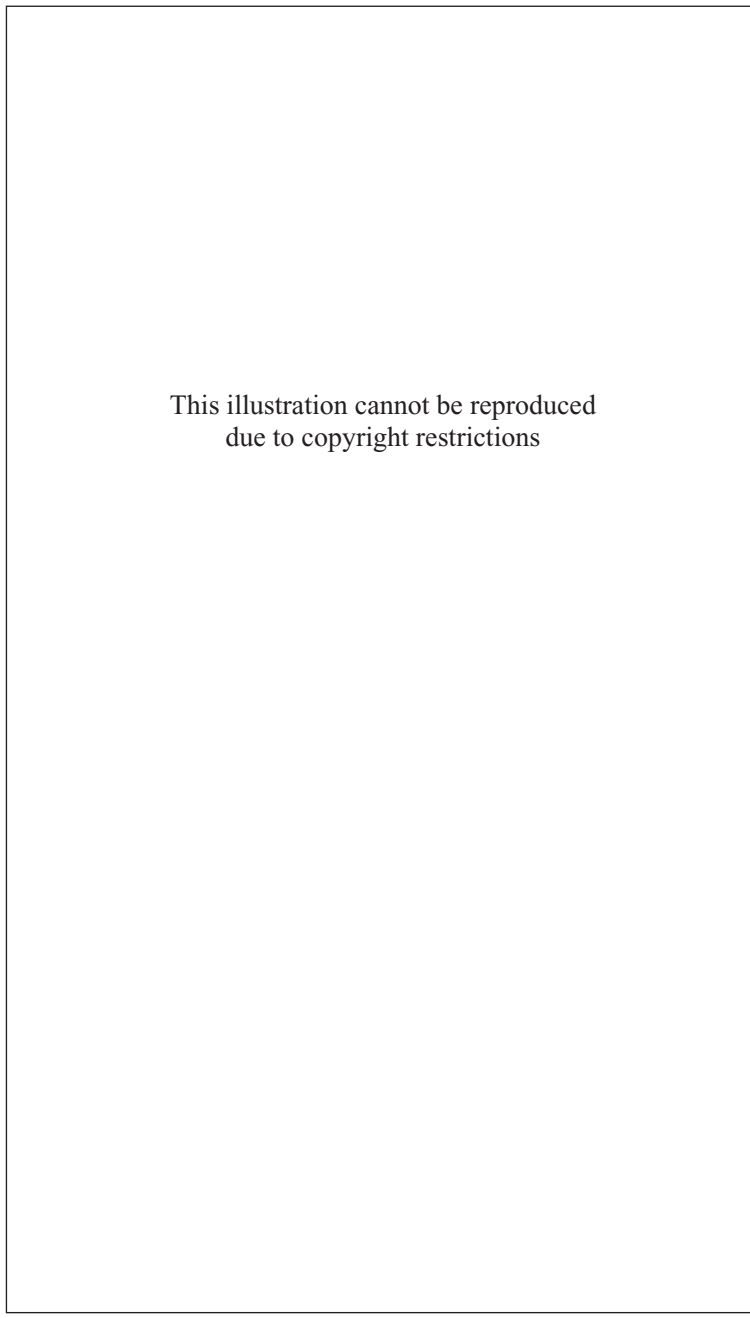

Plate 2. A Carolingian count, ninth-century. Detail of fresco, oratory of St Benedict, Malles Venosta (Trentino-Alto Adige, Italy). Radio Times Hutton Picture Library.

his rusty sword and declared, 'Here's my warrant . . . For the king did not by himself conquer and subject the land: our progenitors were his partners and supporters.'[36] It was an answer which would not have come all that amiss from the mouth of the anonymous Carolingian count who is depicted holding his great sword with both hands in a 'presentation of arms' gesture in the famous ninth-century fresco in the church of St Benedict in Malles Venosta (Trentino-Alto Adige, Italy).[37] For the thirteenth-century English earl and the ninth-century Carolingian count, as well as for the nobility throughout Europe, the sword was both a symbol of noble status and the means of its creation and defence.

Another strategy was to legitimize the nobility's possession of coercive force. Ecclesiastical writers of the Carolingian period constructed a theory of aristocratic and royal government which both accepted and transformed the conceptualization of military power by emphasizing the public and Christian duties of those who exercised it. The emperor Louis the Pious became a *miles Christi*, and the *militia saecularis* of the lay aristocracy, whose function was seen as the defence of the weak, paralleled the *militia Christi* of the monastic order.[38] Three centuries later, a similar justification was emblazoned on the plaque made to commemorate Count Geoffrey of Anjou, who died in 1151 (see Frontispiece). Arrayed in the heraldic symbols that set him apart from his vassals and fellow nobles, his unsheathed sword is raised aggressively against the enemies of public order, while the inscription proclaims, 'From thy sword, O Prince, hordes of plunderers have fled: and, with the blossoming of peace, tranquillity is bestowed upon the churches.' Those 'plunderers', of course, were men not very different from himself, and his own protection of churches was sometimes a mixed blessing, but the image of lawful force protecting the weak against lawless force is dramatically conveyed.

Corresponding concepts of the altruistic use of military power underpinned the chivalry described in the *chansons de geste* and celebrated in the Arthurian literature composed in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Such works created a literary glorification of the ideals and mores of a nobility and knighthood increasingly informed by Christian values. Written for this now self-conscious 'aristocracy', they both described and helped shape their self-consciousness and the mores expected of an élite defined by birth, dominion, wealth, and the profession of 'knightly' arms. The works of Hartmann von Aue reflect this world very nicely. Here the Arthurian myth creates an imagined world in which the ideals of this élite are celebrated and propagated.[39] Indeed,

36 Walter of Hemingburgh, *Chronicon*, ed. H. C. Hamilton, 2 vols (London, 1849), ii, 6: 'Ecce, domini mei, ecce warrentum meum . . . Non enim rex per se terram devicit et subjecit, sed progenitores nostri fuerunt cum eo participes et coadjutores.' Although probably apocryphal (Sir Maurice Powicke, *The Thirteenth Century 1216–1307* [Oxford, 1953], p. 521 and n. 2), the account conveys historical truth.

37 Cited by Le Jan, p. 64.

38 Le Jan, pp. 64–6.

39 See below, ch. 9.

such literature shaped as much as it reflected; and Martin Aurell rightly emphasizes the role of royal and other courts in civilizing regional nobilities, and in creating a common ethos of manners and mores across Europe in the later Middle Ages (although the pace of that development varied from region to region).[40]

Parallel with what we may call the literary construction of a chivalric code, one can see the emergence of political and ethical paradigms applied to the upper nobility. By the end of the twelfth century, Thomas Becket could describe the 'noble' Count Philip of Flanders as one who

> combines nobility of birth with the gift of discretion in the government of the state [and] is certainly worthy of the greatest honour: he restrains wrongdoers with firm justice, governs his law-abiding subjects with moderation and gentleness, respects and protects the Church, receives Christ in His ministers, calls forth the esteem of everyone with his kindness, and binds their affection by indulgence and favours. He does not vent his rage on his subjects, nor seek opportunities under the pretext of justice whereby he may torment the poor and exhaust and despoil the rich. More than is usual among his neighbours and contemporaries, he knows how 'to spare the submissive and subdue the proud'[41] – once the distinguishing quality of the noble Caesars.[42]

No doubt devised to flatter the great count, this little eulogy combines two themes in medieval nobility: distinguished birth – born from noble stock, from titled parents – and the attributions of 'nobility': justice, moderation, respect for God and the Church, and restraint in the exercise of power. In much the same way that the Carolingian nobles were assimilated to the divinely appointed royal office of the *domus carolingica*,[43] one of their descendants is here compared with the even earlier archetype of Roman imperial government. A similar combination of 'nobility of birth' and 'nobility of action' is found in a letter to Queen Margaret of Sicily: 'Although we have never seen your face, we cannot be ignorant of your renown, made illustrious by the distinction of noble blood and adorned by the reputation of many outstanding virtues.'[44] Again, the

40 See below, pp. 269–71.

41 Virgil, *Aen*. vi. 853.

42 *MTB*, vii, ep. 558, at pp. 67–8 (with medieval spellings restored): 'Honore siquidem maximo dignissimus est cui ad gubernandum imperium adest nobilitas generis, prudentia suffragatur: delinquentes cohercet rigore iustitie, subditos obtemperantes iuri mansuetudinis moderatione gubernat, ecclesiam ueneratur et protegit, in ministris suis suscipit Christum, et uniuersorum gratiam benignitate prouocat, et obsequiis et beneficiis obligat affectiones, non seuit in subditos, nec occasiones iustitie pretextu querit quibus cruciet pauperes, exhauriat et spoliet copiosos. Hec fuit quondam nobilium generositas Augustorum, quam iste preter conterminalium et coetaneorum morem exercet, qui saluberrime et honestissime nouit et consueuit "parcere subiectis, et debellare superbos." ' Note the use of *imperium* in its sense of 'state'.

43 Le Jan, p. 55.

44 *MTB*, vii, ep. 595 at p. 142: 'Licet faciem uestram non nouerimus, gloriam tamen non pos-

approach is adulatory – but the underlying assumptions are significant. The deep roots of the modern adage 'noble is as noble does' can be found here. Equally telling are the string of nouns, verbs, and adjectives used to construct the image of nobility: *gloria, claritas generosi sanguinis, illustrare, insignis*. For the Latin reader, these words were redolent with echoes of the late antique world. Indeed, Queen Margaret was addressed with titles of honour once reserved for the Roman emperors and their highest officials: 'Serenissime domine . . . Margarete . . . illustri regine Siculorum [To the most serene lady . . . Margaret . . . illustrious queen of the people of Sicily]'.[45] *Serenissimus* was used of the later emperors; *illustris* of the highest rank of imperial officials.[46] The words scintillate! In similar vein, Becket wrote to the princely bishop, Henry of Winchester, brother of King Stephen and cousin of Henry II: 'Thus, father, should a man of noble blood and the distinguished descendant of ancient kings[47] . . . adorn the nobility of his birth',[48] and he emphasized the immunity which 'nobility, prudence, wealth of goods and friends'[49] conferred on him. Here again, the run of Latin nouns in the conclusion conjures up the essential components of the Roman construction of the dignity which confers privilege and exemption: 'nobilitas, prudentia, copia rerum et amicorum'.

The Romanizing tinge of these examples was no mere echo of a lost age, however, for they derive from letters written in the name of an archbishop of Canterbury by a learned entourage that included John of Salisbury (author of *Policraticus*, one of the most important medieval treatises on royal government) among its members. For John and many of his colleagues, the literary and legal remains of the classical period provided not just useful exempla, but valid models for the government of their own world. The eulogy addressed to Count Philip of Flanders should not therefore be dismissed as classicizing rhetoric. It expressed an ideal in which concepts of Christian duty and Roman public service were combined into a philosophy of good government, applicable to all rulers, king and noble alike. The routine application of the adjective 'noble' to counts and earls[50] (as well as kings), combined with the creation of chivalrous codes of courtly conduct, carried with it an expectation that their rule should be

sumus ignorare, quam et generosi sanguinis illustrat claritas, et multarum magnarumque uirtutum decorat titulus, et fame celebritas numerosis preconiis reddit insignem.'

45 *MTB*, vii, ep. 595 at p. 142.

46 Berger, p. 702a, *s.v.* Serenissimus; pp. 491b–492a, *s.v.* Illustris.

47 An echo of Horace, *Carmina*, i. 1, 1: see n. 1 above.

48 *MTB*, vii, ep. 549 at p. 45: 'Sic, pater, decet uirum sanguine generosum, et clarum atauis regibus . . . generis exornare nobilitatem.'

49 *Ibid*., at p. 46 'nobilitas, prudentia, copia rerum et amicorum'. As brother of King Stephen, Bishop Henry (of Blois) shared with Henry II descent from William I himself, the progenitor of the Norman line of kings.

50 E.g. Rotrou II of Perche, 'maiorum sanguine generosus et propria uirtute nobilis (noble through the blood of his forefathers, noble too in his own virtue)': *MTB*, v. ep. 138 at p. 247. For the illustrious genealogy of the Perche family see *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. M. Chibnall, 6 vols. [1969–80], i, 212.

legitimized not only by their descent from ‘noble’ progenitors but also by their conduct, and by their commitment to just and lawful government. Thus the nobility came increasingly to conform to norms of behaviour created not simply by their own self-regarding reflections but by the demands of the political rôles which the emergence of nation-states imposed on them.

I

Early Middle Ages

1

The Origins of the Nobility in Francia

Paul Fouracre

Any review of work on the early medieval nobility quickly reveals that historians use the term 'nobility' to refer to an élite which was open, imperfectly defined, and subject to regional variation. With regard to the Frankish nobility, one can apply a series of normative statements about its origins and nature, but any general observations must always be qualified, or even contradicted, in the light of particular case studies. We can, for instance, observe that Frankish sources laid great emphasis on birth as the basis of nobility. That a person was 'born noble' was a standard way of indicating high social status at the beginning of Saints Lives, at least from the early seventh century onwards. Yet the Frankish nobility was by no means a closed élite. One can detect sentiments of exclusiveness, a horror, almost, of people who had risen from below to occupy the highest positions. This was contempt based on real, not just imagined, cases of dramatic upward social mobility: that of Leudast, for instance, Gregory of Tours's *bête noir* , who became count of Tours, or that of Ebbo, allegedly a serf, who became Archbishop of Reims and was said to have betrayed his lord and benefactor, the Emperor Louis the Pious, in a predictably base manner.[1] It is often said that this was an élite which channelled property through sons, but we can find cases in which daughters received equal shares of a given inheritance. Female inheritance rights were supposedly postponed behind males, except that sometimes they were not. Unforgettable here is an extraordinary passage in the (probably) late seventh-century *Formulary of Marculf* which gives a model for a charter in which a father states that the custom of preferring sons to daughters as heirs is 'impious'. Since all his children are God-given and he loves them all equally, he wishes to divide his property among them equally, thus making his daughter the equal and legitimate co-heir of her brothers.[2]

The Frankish élite was also one which apparently united family wealth with political and ecclesiastical high office, and expected to pass on wealth and office to the next generation. These expectations were, however, often disappointed. It was an élite which paid attention to distant kindred when it suited, say in times

1 On Leudast, see Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, trans. L. Thorpe (London, 1974), v, cc. 48–50, pp. 314–23. On Ebbo, J. Martindale, 'The French Aristocracy in the Early Middle Ages: A Reappraisal', *Past and Present*, lxxv (1977), 3–22.

2 *Marculfi Formularum Libri Duo*, ed. A. Uddholm (Uppsala, 1962), ii. 12, p. 218.