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De Franken en hun geschiedenis

Een interview met Rosamond McKitterick

Op donderdag 27 april deed Rosamond McKitterick, Hoogleraar in de Middeleeuwse Geschiedenis aan de Universiteit van Cambridge, Groningen aan. Groniek sprak met de Engelse historica over haar belangrijkste publicaties, de kritiek op haar beweringen en haar onderzoek naar 'de rol van Rome in de Frankische wereld' aan het Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS).

*Before you wrote **The Carolingians and the Written Word** in 1989 you mainly published on Carolingian politics. What made you decide to shift your attention to the written word?*

I don't think it was a shift of attention so much. My doctorate was on the Frankish church and the Carolingian reforms but that involved texts at all levels that tried to present Christianity to people who may have heard about it before or who were pagan and had to be converted. It was about the whole consolidation of Christianity. So always, as a Carolingian historian I was encountering texts. I was familiar with the idea of the introduction of written texts to people who had not yet developed writing. People learned how to write Old High German for the first time in the eighth century. Although my work after my doctoral thesis was related to manuscripts especially, I started to look at the charters as well because that was part of my teaching in Cambridge. And it was really a process of thinking about for whom these manuscripts were intended, what was the context in which they were produced, why was there such an emphasis on writing. The same questions were relevant for the charters. So I think it wasn't a shift of attention, it was simply a greater focus of attention.

In your introduction you wrote of your dissatisfaction with earlier historians like Pirenne and Riché, who emphasize the difference between the literate Roman Gaul and the oral Carolingian period, while you seem to

stress the continuity between those two periods. Why did you criticize these historians?

There was really too much of a contrast between the Roman and the Carolingian worlds. I started to look at the production of written documents in their historical contexts, the continuation of educational practice and the kinds of texts, ideologies and assumptions that were made about the importance of education. I also thought about the whole liturgical development from the early church through into the eighth and ninth centuries and then I could not see so many clear breaks. Specifically however Pirenne had said that lay literacy was one of the things that disappeared in the eight century and what he suggested absolutely as a proof, of that was that in the middle of the eight century the chancery personnel of the Frankish kings changed from laymen to clerics. This he took as an indication that there was no longer a sufficient level of lay literacy within Frankish Gaul and that only the clergy were sufficiently educated. It is that very specific point of Pirenne's rather than the general thesis that I really had a quarrel about with Riché too, who had suggested that literacy was confined to a very small elite.

What I was trying to do was to see if literacy extended much further down in society than just a lay elite. And that even those who have no personal contact with writing nevertheless felt the impact of writing within society. It was an assumption that a written document mattered, that you had to have it. There is a wonderful instance of slaves who have been freed, who demand a document from the abbot, and the abbot actually says: 'What do you want a document for, you can't read!' But they say: 'This writing proves that we are free.' Even at that level, people knew that writing was important in legal contexts. The other element of course is the Christian church. If one went into a church, even if only on high festivals, one was then read to from a book. One could not fail to know that a book and writing was important. So, essentially I wanted to see what the implications of that were, which I didn't think earlier historians had fully considered.

You wrote that 'writing functions as a symbol as well as a form of communication', like the slave who wanted his document. What do you mean by this symbolic function of writing in the Carolingian period?

I mentioned the liturgy. One has to remember the beginnings of St. John's Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'. The whole Christian Gospel is also in writing, so that



Professor Rosamond McKitterick in Groningen

the symbolic function of writing *communicating* an essential Christian message makes it into a symbol. Even if you have three letters, like 'XPS', which was the Greek way of writing 'Christos', then that would act as a symbol. So people would see inscriptions, a bible, a document. Writing represented authority in part, it also represented religion – according to the context in which they were seeing it. Even if you couldn't read it, those letters would mean something. A modern parallel might be the way you recognize a logo. You know a very large and ugly yellow 'M' probably means that dreadful American fast food place. Certain things act as symbols, simply because of what they represent and the kinds of associations that people seeing letters or writing make in their head.

Your book was well-received and praised, but critics claimed that your concept of 'literacy' was too wide and that you didn't succeed in describing what was really meant by this. Is this because you move literacy up to the social and cultural scale?

It's always difficult to know why people criticize one. I did think that some of the critics concentrated too much on chapter six of my *The Carolingians and the written word*, which was the chapter which dealt most with the literacy of the laity. I was trying to argue that literacy was absolutely embedded in the whole way Carolingian society functioned and that it permeated at every level: the legal level, the way government worked, the way the religion worked and the way ordinary people would make legal transactions. I also tried to explain that to understand literacy, there are indeed many levels of accomplishment. And I think there is a tendency for people to think about it too loosely, to think about literacy as 'everybody having to read and write at a high level, like a university student', as distinct from a range of ability from a high ranking academic who writes very complicated prose, who thinks original thoughts, right down to somebody who couldn't even write their name, but could recognize that somebody was writing a document for him.

So there's a huge range and not everybody who could read could also write, because that wasn't the way society functioned. And in order to prove that somebody was literate it is not necessary to prove that they were actually able to write. You may perhaps know the famous story that Einhard tells about how Charlemagne tried to write when he couldn't sleep at night and he kept his pen under the pillow, and it's often held up as an example, as if to say 'oh well, this proves he was illiterate' but of course it does nothing of the kind. What the story suggests was that he couldn't actually perhaps write in a particular way. He may well have been able to read. But do kings or very high ranking businessmen- actually have to write much anyway? The important thing is not to confuse reading and writing and also to recognize there is a huge spectrum of ability that is understood by literacy. So, I would defend my wide interpretation.

Your greatest adversary Michael Richter, who wrote The Formation of the Medieval West. Studies in the Oral Culture of the Barbarians, argues that written sources in this period are not representative for these societies generally, and argues for the continuing strength of oral culture in literate society. You also stress the importance of oral culture but you on

the other hand focus on the continuity of literate modes and you criticize Richter for neglecting the use of writing in the construction of power and neglecting the fact that texts can function as potent weapons. Can you clarify this?

First of all, I'd like to reiterate that I never intended - never even said - that there was no oral culture. In a way, Richter has tried to redress the balance by exaggerating. To some degree I can understand his criticism of my work; on the other hand I think he's being a bit too dismissive, a bit too harsh even. I think in fact he hasn't read my book properly and he has also focused on chapter six again far too much and has simply not taken on board the qualitative, as distinct from the quantitative, arguments. I think it's a pity if literacy is assessed too much on a quantitative level, or in terms of how large a proportion of society could actually read and write. That's actually not the point. The point is, to what degree were people accustomed to thinking that the written word was part of the way society was organized.

This comes back to your question to clarify the degree to which writing could be an instrument of power. The king communicated by means of writing to his officials right across his empire. He also of course repeated his instructions given orally and in writing and there are one or two letters where he says 'I'm sending you this, if you can't read it go and get somebody to read it to you and I have also told you this in our conversations'. So, it's not as if either oral or written communication is involved: it is both. Writing was a means of record and you could communicate with the past as well. There was a huge tradition of written texts which a king could then draw on to legitimate his own government, to enhance the ideology which the Franks were getting from the past. So it was a great strengthener, it gave you more power because you knew of it and all that knowledge was communicated in texts.

Isn't it true that in fact you and Richter both represent two sides of the same coin?

You could say that. But I think it would be fair to say that Richter has been more inclined to ignore the obverse than I. In other words, there are two sides of the coin and one of us looks at one side only and the other attempts to look at both a little bit more. And in fact, I would say that part of what Richter has done with oral history has helped me see in what kinds of other ways you can look at the way oral culture is indeed carrying on and interacting with written culture.

Scholars such as Carruthers, Coleman and Geary have already published on the memory in medieval culture. Are your 'new genres' to record memory - narrative histories, cartularies and libri memoriales - your addition to this discussion?

That's one aspect of it. There are ways in which memory was recorded, which do need to be fitted into the other texts that we would normally associate with recording memories. But I think that what Carruthers, Coleman and Geary all established was how incredibly rich the use of memory was and that there were also different levels in which you should understand it. My contribution was partly a tribute to what they had achieved already. One other contribution is the way in which the evidence has survived and the way in which I have looked at manuscripts in the context in which they were written in the ninth century. I tried to think about why people put these texts together, in what circumstances and on what knowledge they were able to draw. That certainly hadn't really been put together before.

Is that something that has come forth out of the linguistic turn and the postmodern approach?

The great thing discussion of the linguistic turn did do for all historians was to sensitize them to the idea that there's much more to text and context that needed to be considered, even if they ended up rejecting most of what the linguistic turn had established. What historians then tried to do was put texts back in context, rather than just treat them as texts that had some kind of life or extra reality of their own without being rooted in the society which produced them. So what I was trying to do was to benefit from the kind of close analysis and criticism that is a consequence of this marriage between historical analysis and literary criticism. In fact half of my first degree was in English and Literary Criticism anyway. I try to combine textual analysis with an attempt to 'anchor' these texts into their social and historical context and to think about the people who were producing them, why and for whom they were writing and what kind of circumstances would have made this kind of text possible or appropriate.

In History and Memory in the Carolingian World you wrote: '[F]or the Franks, an understanding of the past worked at several levels and was manifested to them in a number of different textual contexts.' What do you mean by this?

The 'textual contexts' is a fancy way of referring to all the different texts

that I've looked at in the other chapters. One is thinking of historical narratives of various kinds, another is thinking of the history books that the Franks put together – the actual manuscripts where their own history was juxtaposed with earlier history from the Christian and Roman period. One is thinking also of the canon law collections, the *libri memoriales*, the way in which the martyrologies and saints lives are put together and the cartularies, which form also the history of a particular institution. So all those are textual contexts because they could all be described as having more than one function. They record the past, but something like a *libri memoriales* is also a signal to pray. It is a contract with the holy, it is a book of those who are going to be prayed for and it is the equivalent of the book in heaven. That's what I meant by textual contexts, because it's not just a text, it also is the way it operates.

'History' is an unclear concept during the early Middle Ages. Can you clarify how it was possible that in spite of Augustine's Historia, with its emphasis on veritas, the fictional Liber Historiae Francorum became to be regarded as one of the most influential history books in the Carolingian world?

That's a very interesting question. You could actually suppose that our notion of 'fiction' is not terribly helpful, but if you are describing the history of your own people having come from the Trojans you are actually describing what you think could have happened, even if you are not sure that it did. But we have no indication that the author of the *Liber historiae francorum* thought he (or she!) was writing fiction. So it may be false to say that Frankish writers were setting themselves apart from Augustine's notion of history as he had embraced it in the *City of God*. But you also have to set beside Augustine, of course, what Cicero and the classical historians thought about history. They stressed its edificatory purpose and its rhetorical function. So in many ways the notion of history writing is going to benefit from both the Augustinian tradition and the classical tradition. If you've ever looked at Herwig Wolfram's little piece on origin legends in early medieval Europe, or looked at Jordanes who wrote about the origins of the Goths, you would see why the notion of trying to find your origins has been suggested by some historians as a natural impulse. The author of the *Liber Historiae Francorum* wasn't necessarily inventing an origin story, as distinct from trying to record a story that he or she had inherited about the past and origins of the

Franks, which was the history of his or her people.

At the moment you are a fellow of the NIAS and you're researching the formation of Carolingian political identity. The role of Rome is very important in this research. How can the idea and/or the historical reality of Rome contribute to define the Franks' political purpose?

It's a mind boggling notion. Some of that has already got into my new book *Perceptions of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, because there is a chapter on Rome and the Franks in it. It would not be fair to say that that's the end of my discussion of it because I think it is a very complicated problem. I think there are two ways one can begin to approach it. The first is that when Charlemagne conquered Italy in 774 and then went on to Rome, he was building on a relationship already established with the papacy. Rome was very important in terms of Frankish Christianity. This culminated in a way in the famous coronation as emperor in 800, which is famous probably for all the wrong reasons, because it was then built on by subsequent emperors. If one thinks of a king who has hitherto been north of the Alps suddenly acquiring all this area south of the Alps he has a special responsibility for Rome and the pope. He visits it for the first time in 774 at Easter. Can you imagine the impact this has on his whole thinking? This is where the Roman Emperors were and there's Saint Peter and the Roman martyrs, and Rome's role in the development of western Christianity. So that's one direction, Charlemagne had a close relationship with the papacy and Roman Christianity is therefore very important. Associated with that are of course Roman emperors who were Christians – Constantine and Theodosius especially. They became in a way models for the Frankish ruler, because they too were Christian, they too had a vast Empire and as an educated Frank one would have come across more and more Roman history about Caesar and Augustus and their successors, some of whom indeed were pagan, but a lot of them had very high moral, ethical or martial qualities. Also when one went out into the streets one would see Roman remains. Roman buildings were just part of the Franks' world. So 'Rome' meant lots of things on lots of different levels: very high ideology, religion, responsibility, evocation of the past. It's romantic, with lots of wonderful stories from that period, but it is also part of the early medieval landscape.

Can you give an example of how a classical writer influenced the formation of the Frankish identity?

It would be dangerous to make claims about influencing the whole Frankish people, but through the spread of particular ideas you might then be able to trace an influential network. One example of course, which is very obvious, is Roman law and Roman legal practice because that actually is a very strong, though thin, line of continuity. Roman law is still used in the Frankish world, it is known through the Theodosian code, many clerics observed Roman law and it gets embodied into some canon law as well. The whole Roman system of thinking about the way justice worked is also important. We have statements which directly compare the Frankish kings to Theodosius and refer directly to the Theodosian code. You may not know, but there is a very interesting little valley in Switzerland called Graubünden, where a digest of Roman law was made in the early ninth century which constituted the summary of Roman law they needed there. So Roman law was still very current in the Frankish world.

In terms of particular texts having a strong influence on particular individuals one could cite the use that Einhard made of Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* and the parallels he drew between the emperors in that text and Charlemagne. And then you can trace the influence of Einhard and his work *Vita Caroli* with this kind of Roman comparison built into it. Valerius Maximus – *The Deeds and Sayings of Emperors and Their Doings* – was in fact quite remarkably current and widespread. Quintus Curtius Rufus' *History of Alexander* is actually in Latin and some elements of it were taken up and you can find them reflected in other texts. And another way relates back to what I was talking about before when I referred to history books, because quite a lot of Frankish history books start with Roman history and there's a direct line from Eutropius through to Frankish annals. The transfer of ideas and the enriching of your own with other cultures make the early middle ages so interesting. The Carolingians are very creative and receptive. They take and copy things, but they change and alter them and use them in other interesting ways.

Is it possible to separate the imperial and Christian tradition of Rome in the early middle ages?

In practice it is very mixed up with each other. One can talk about it separately and you can probably even find texts which talk about it separately,

but it's more common to find it mixed up. I'll give you one example of a text known as the *Einsiedeln Itinerary*, which is a little bit like a tourist guide. It's a Christian writer from the ninth century and he goes around Rome and he looks at the classical *imperial* roman monuments like Trajan's Column and the Arch of Titus and Constantine as well as Christian churches. It's more common to find in Carolingian texts the kind of Christianization process; it's often expressed in relation to the notion: 'well, this was the Roman emperor while this particular person was martyred'. There's always the connection between a particular Roman emperor at the time and then something that has happened within Christian history. You go right back to Augustus for Christian history. It's in the first bit of the Gospel of Matthew: 'in the years of Caesar Augustus the decree went out for the people to be taxed'. So right from the beginning, Christians had a Roman Emperor associated with Christian history. That makes the idea of Rome in the early middle ages even more difficult to characterize. The pope was certainly the ruler in Rome in the Carolingian period and the empire was actually located in the east with Byzantium, but that created lots of other complications and I'm still not certain how extensively the Franks engaged with Byzantium on an ideological level, at least not in Charlemagne's reign; maybe later they did. There's a very famous letter written by Louis II in the 870s responding to a letter of the emperor Basil of Constantinople. He actually repeats the things Basil has said and then refutes them: 'you say you are Emperor of the Romans, but you're Emperor of the Greeks! You've abandoned the Latin language! You're not even orthodox!'

You might also have to point to knowledge that survived of the actual extent of Roman territory and to think about the Franks' knowledge of how that power was gained, the wars that were waged, the peoples that were conquered, the provinces that were created and it may well be that the links between Christian and Roman history were clear. Certainly the Franks knew Roman history, there's a lot about the history of Rome that was communicated to people who would have encountered it in their education in Augustine's *City of God* and Orosius' *The Seven Books of History against the Pagans*. There is also, of course, Jerome's translation of Eusebius' *Chronici canones*. There is even a copy of that particular text from the early ninth century associated with the royal court. It is in Leiden. And if you wanted to open it up and see what the world empires have achieved, there they were, all set out in columns until finally one reached to the Romans. So it may

well be that this presentation of Roman history was inspiring, it just didn't spell out the connection between Roman and Christian history in so many words. We just don't have any texts where Charlemagne says: 'I'm going to conquer the Saxons, because then I will be bigger and better than anyone before'. We don't have it, and we may be wrong even to expect it.