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POLITICAL UTILITY IN MEDIEVAL HISTORIOGRAPHY: A SKETCH

GABRIELLE M. SPIEGEL

Historians have long recognized the importance of law and jurisprudence in shaping political life in the Middle Ages, yet relatively little attention has been paid to the political utility of medieval historiography, either as a source of political theory or as a determinant of political behavior. But history no less than law was, to borrow Maitland's phrase, the place where life and logic met, the codification of an intellectual confrontation with reality. And like law, historiography played an important role in the politics of a traditional society dependent, as was medieval society, upon the past for legitimacy.

This article seeks to investigate the way medieval chroniclers at the Abbey of Saint-Denis in France viewed and used the past to explain and legitimate politics. The chronicles of Saint-Denis formed the most extensive and consistently royalist historical corpus in medieval France, if not anywhere in the Middle Ages. From the twelfth to the fifteenth century, the monks of the abbey—the Dionysian monks—were continuously engaged in writing history, producing an enormous body of historical works, both Latin and vernacular, in which they set forth the history of France from its putative Trojan origins.¹ In the course of this task they became, in a very real sense, the historical voice of France.

This enormous collection, so valuable for an inquiry into the historiographical mentality of medieval chroniclers has, unfortunately, never been systematically exploited. Concerned with the chroniclers as source material for other studies, both nineteenth- and twentieth-century discussion of them has focused on the problems of verifying their historical accuracy or exposing known instances of distortion or outright fabrication. Indeed, it is only recently that medieval historiography in general has begun to be investigated as an intellectual tradition that demands the same sympathetic attention to its underlying beliefs and techniques of expression accorded to other genres of medieval intellectual life.² And that effort has not yet

1. For a discussion of all the texts in this tradition, see my "Studies in the Chronicle Tradition of Saint-Denis," Appendix (Johns Hopkins University Ph.D. thesis, 1974).

2. Some recent writings which are useful from this perspective are: Philippe Ariès, *Le Temps de l'histoire* (Monaco, 1954); Helmut Beumann, "Die Historiographie des Mittelalters als Quelle für die Ideengeschichte des Königstums," *Historische Zeitschrift* 180 (1955), 449-488; Willi J. Brandt, *The Shape of Medieval History: Studies in Modes of Perception* (New Haven, 1966); Bernard Guenée, "Histoire, Annales, Chroniques: Essai sur les genres historiques au moyen âge," *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 28^e année (1973), 997-1016; Robert Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain* (New York, 1966) Benoît Lacroix, *L'Historien au moyen âge*, (Conférence

extended to the chronicle tradition of Saint-Denis. But no less than the scholastic or poet, the Saint-Denis chronicler operated with a set of philosophical assumptions and a literary tradition from which he drew his understanding of his subject and his means of communication. He belonged to an ancient and rich historiographical tradition that included the best works of both Christian and classical history. This tradition directed his inquiry into specific paths, molded his views and interpretative strategies, and provided a language of historical discourse through which he might impart his findings. It gave him, in short, the tools of his craft.

Medieval historiography offers an excellent subject for investigating the function of the past in medieval political life, for surely few complex societies have so clearly regulated their life in accordance with their vision of the past. Medieval social life was governed by custom, that is historical precedent, so much so that even innovations in social and legal practices were given the force of custom.³ As custom, social practice was both legitimized and made prescriptive; because it was customary it was *ipso facto* good, and because good, to be followed.

Politically, the situation was more complex. In theory, medieval government originated in the divine will of God, functioned at His behest and strove to do His bidding. This conception of the extra-temporal dimension of medieval politics was summed up in the lapidary formula *rex Dei gratia* and symbolized in the consecration ceremony of the king. In a general way, divine right remained the foundation of political legitimacy throughout the medieval period. The theological basis of medieval government was, in this sense, consciously un-historical, for consecration asserted a right to rule *de novo*, irrespective of the past.⁴

Nevertheless, consecration established only the legitimacy of rulership; it provided medieval kings with few guides to action and little in the way of explicit programs of political policy. These were drawn, instead, from the record of the past. Just as custom reigned supreme in social life, so history, the record of political tradition, determined the parameters of political activity. Along with divine right, medieval governments justified their dominion on the grounds of what Max Weber called the "authority of the eternal yesterday."⁵

It is only by appreciating how deeply this attitude of piety toward the past ran in medieval society that we can begin to understand the use made of history. It is

Albert-le-Grand, 1966) (Paris and Montreal, 1971); H. A. Myers, "The Concept of Kingship in the 'Book of Emperors' ('Kaiserchronik')," *Traditio* 27 (1971), 205-230; Joel T. Rosenthal, "Edward the Confessor and Robert the Pious: Eleventh-Century Kingship and Biography," *Medieval Studies* 33 (1971), 7-20; R. W. Southern, "Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writings," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th ser. 20 (1970), 173-196; 21 (1971), 159-179; 22 (1972), 159-180; 23 (1973), 243-263; Robert Stepis, "Pierre de Langtoft's Chronicle: An Essay in Medieval Historiography," *Medievalia et Humanistica* new ser. 3 (1972), 51-73. See also the important review of Lacroix's book by Robert Hanning in *History and Theory* 12 (1973), 419-434.

3. Marc Bloch has described this mechanism very precisely. "The very authority that was ascribed to tradition favored the change. For every act, especially if it was repeated three or four times, was likely to be transformed into a precedent — even if in the first instance it had been exceptional or even frankly unlawful." *Feudal Society*, transl. L. A. Manyon (Chicago, 1965), I, 114.

4. See Walter Ullmann, *The Carolingian Renaissance and the Idea of Kingship* (London, 1971).

5. *From Max Weber*, ed. Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York, 1958), 78.

not a question of the mindless repetition of tradition, of an inability to innovate or create, but of a compelling necessity to find in the past the means to explain and legitimize every deviation from tradition. In such a society, as Strayer remarked, "every deliberate modification of an existing type of activity must be based on a study of individual precedents. Every plan for the future is dependent on a pattern which has been found in the past."⁶ The eternal relevance of the past for the present made it a mode of experiencing the reality of contemporary political life, and the examples the past offered had explanatory force in articulating the true and correct nature of present forms of political action. The overall tendency of the chronicles of Saint-Denis was to assimilate past and present into a continuous stream of tradition and to see in this very continuity a form of legitimation.

In part, this explains the enormously rich use made of forgeries, historical legends, and myths in medieval political life. The legend of Trojan origins, the myth of the translation of Empire from Roman to Frank, the legacy of Charlemagne, the Valerian prophecy, and a host of other quasi-historical traditions could be shaped to present needs. What is important here is to recognize the fruitfulness of the medieval approach to the past. Precisely because it was so little known, in any critical sense, the past could become a vehicle for change. All that was needed was to recreate it in the image of the present, and then claim its authority for the legitimation of contemporary practices. Perhaps the most egregious example of this process is the fabrication of a crusading past for Charlemagne by the monks of Saint-Denis at precisely the time when French kings first took up the cross.⁷ But this is only one among many illustrations of what is, in the end, a fundamental posture toward history. It means that the medieval chronicler utilized a very fluid perspective with regard to past and present. The search for the past was guided by present necessities; but so, too, the historical understanding of the past for its part determined the rhetorical presentation of contemporary events. Thus in a reverse procedure, Philip Augustus' campaign against Otto of Brunswick in 1214, for example, is viewed as a renewal of Charlemagne's struggle with the Saxons, and draws its historical meaning from that context.⁸

Obviously, such a peculiar posture toward the past affected the nature of medieval historiography, shaping a vision of the past that could be manipulated to supply legitimacy to the present. Although it is difficult to prove that kings consciously sought to imitate the great deeds of history, one may at least assume that the general intellectual forces at work in medieval historiography not only influenced the writings of the chronicler but events themselves.⁹

While it has long been recognized that medieval chroniclers wrote according to rhetorical principles of classical historiography developed in the ancient world, it is worth examining these briefly, since they formed the literary basis of historical writings in the Middle Ages.

6. In *The Interpretation of History*, ed. Jacques Barzun *et al.*, (Princeton, 1943), 10.

7. See *Grandes Chroniques*, III, 160ff.

8. Guillaume le Breton, *Phillipidos*, bk. VIII, v. 632 sq., p. 234; bk. I, v. 283 sq., pp. 18-19; *Nuncupatio*, v. 28, p. 3; and bk. X, v. 698 sq., p. 310, in H.-F. Delaborde, ed., *Oeuvres de Rigord et de Guillaume le Breton*, II (Société de l'Histoire de France) (Paris, 1885).

9. Cf. Beumann, "Historiographie des Mittelalters," 452-453.

To the Greeks and Romans, history is an operation against time, an attempt to save human deeds from the futility of oblivion.¹⁰ At the same time it is a struggle against Nature, whose cyclical permanence stands in imposing contrast to the transitoriness of human existence. To defeat time and gain the permanence of the natural universe would mean to enter into the everlasting, to insert the mortal into the realm of cosmic immortality.¹¹ History for the Greeks and Romans is essentially heroic, a way of measuring man's capacities against those of the universe. As the record of human greatness, it shields mankind from the destruction of time, bestowing on him everlasting fame and glory. Once written down, memory preserves this immortality from generation to generation.

The chroniclers of Saint-Denis retained the memorializing impulse of ancient historiography without, perhaps, the intensity that a philosophy lacking belief in the afterlife invests in historical work. As Cassiodorus had already remarked, chronicles were "the mere shadows of history and very brief reminders of the time."¹² Still, the opening sentences of chroniclers' prologues recall this mnemonic function of history, embracing it as a principal cause for writing. Suger, for example, in writing the history of Louis VI, desires to raise to him "a monument more durable than bronze, whose memory no vicissitude of time can efface."¹³ So, too, Guillaume de Nangis, in the Prologue to his *Vita Sancti Ludovici*, begins by extolling the value of history as a record of princely deeds: "The effort and application of historians have endeavored to commit to literary tradition, as an example, the most memorable deeds of kings and princes who reigned in ancient times, lest we see them slip from human memory and be destroyed by devouring time."¹⁴ But as Guillaume's Prologue shows, the emphasis has shifted a bit. Rather than a means of achieving immortality, no longer dependent upon human memory, the desire to create a permanent record of human deeds now has a primarily ethical function. For like Greek and more especially Roman historians, medieval chroniclers see the past as a school of moral instruction, a storehouse of examples of good and evil conduct which illuminate principles of behavior and teach men how to live. They repeat Cicero's famous definition of history as "the witness of the past, the light shed on truth, the life-giving force to memory, the guide to life" (*De Oratore*, II, IX, 36). History is a form of moral exhortation and employs hortatory devices which move men to assent to its precepts. This ethical function ties history to rhetoric, for it is the orator's duty to guide the historian's expression

10. Arnaldo Momigliano, "Time in Ancient Historiography," *History and Theory* (*Beiheft* 6, 1966), 15. Hence Herodotus, whose well-known opening words establish this life-saving function of history: "These are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnasus which he publishes in the hope thereby of preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and Barbarians from losing their due meeds of glory."

11. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (Cleveland, 1965), 43.

12. Cassiodorus, *An Introduction to Divine and Human Readings*, transl. with introduction and notes by Leslie Webber Jones (New York, 1969), 116.

13. *Vita Ludovici Grossi Regis Franciae*, ed. Henri Waquet (Les Classiques de l'histoire de France au moyen âge) (Paris, 1964), 3.

14. "Regum et principum gesta recordatione dignissima qui antiquis temporibus regnaverunt, ne ab humana memoria viderentur excidere, et edaci vetustate ea contingeret aboleri, labor et diligentia historiographorum studuit literarum traditionibus tradere ad exemplum." *Vita Sancti Ludovici*, ed. M. Daunou, *RHF*, 20, 310.

so that he may achieve moral persuasiveness. To the extent that the medieval chronicler follows a canon of composition, it is derived from rhetoric.¹⁵

It is probably fair to say that the medieval historian honored rhetorical rules of composition more in the breach than in practice. But he was at least aware of them and strove to follow them with what little skill he possessed. The typical complaint of rude speech and lack of literary learning with which each writer began his work betrayed not only the inculcated habit of monastic humility but a true sense of literary limitations which could not be overcome. Although such complaints were part of rhetorical convention, the poignant warning with which Rigord prefaces his "Short Chronicle," "do not expect in my small narrative the eloquence of Tully or rhetorical flourishes, since I will have done well if, from the confusion of facts, an orderly arrangement emerges, which will escape the bite of censure," has the ring of truth.¹⁶ While few writers were capable of literary greatness, all recognized the principles on which a true literary history should be written and those within their grasp they readily obeyed.

In conformity with the laws of *narratio* as developed by classical rhetoricians, the chroniclers of Saint-Denis sought to make their accounts brief, lucid, and truthful.¹⁷ Although they rarely heeded the command of brevity, and not invariably that of lucidity, they did base their narrations as far as possible on eyewitness testimony or documents thought to be truthful. Rigord was probably more scrupulous than his monastic companions in claiming that he would omit things "unknown" to him, but his stated desire to rely on his personal knowledge of events or, failing that, information derived from his own inquiry of others, accords with principles of evidence in historical writing that go back as far as Thucydides.¹⁸ Often this meant copying verbatim the histories of previous writers, who being closer to the event acquired a probable authority regarding it. But it revealed at least a rudimentary concern for evidence, despite the fact that critical method, whatever the claims of the historians for their works, remained weak throughout the Middle Ages. The closer the chronicler came to describing events of his own times, the more reliable he became, and many writers were conscious of and tried to control deficiencies in their sources.

In the same way, although lacking literary subtlety, sometimes even a grasp of grammar, the chroniclers sought to write in a simple manner which would make up in forthrightness what it lost in ornamentation. In place of elaborate classical *sententiae*, *loci communi*, and other rhetorical conventions, the Saint-Denis chronicler aimed at an open, unembellished style which could be understood by all. As Primat explained in the Prologue to the *Grandes Chroniques*: "Si sachent tuit que

15. See Bernhard W. Scholz, "Principles of a Medieval Rhetoric of History," Paper read at the Sixth Biennial Conference of Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo.

16. "Nec in narratiuncula mea Tullianam eloquentiam aut flores rethoricos expectetis quia mecum bene agitur si ex veteri confusione tracta et succinte facta digeris morsus reprehensionis evaserit." Bibliothèque Municipale, Soissons MS 129, f. 130r.

17. Scholz, "Principles of a Medieval Rhetoric of History," 6. Cf. Lacroix, *L'Historien au moyen âge*, 105ff.

18. "Scripsi enim quedam que propriis oculis vidi, quedam que ab aliis diligenter inquisita forsan minus plene didici, quedam mihi incognita penitus pretermisi." Prologue, *Gesta Philippi Augusti*, ed. Henri-François Delaborde, *Oeuvres de Rigord et de Guillaume le Breton*. 5.

il tretera au plus briément que il pourra, car longue parole et confuse plest petit à ciaus que l'escoutent, main la briés parole et apertement dite plest aus entendanz."¹⁹ No matter how attenuated the literary form of the medieval chronicle, it takes its point of departure from the essentially rhetorical conception of history as a means to persuade men to imitate good and avoid evil. The basic purpose of historical writing, then, is edification;²⁰ at least in theory, it is more concerned with the propagation of moral idealism than with a concrete analysis of reality. By setting forth the experience of the past, history, to use the favorite phrase of Renaissance writers, was "philosophy teaching by examples."²¹ Particularly in the realm of politics, history had long been thought of as a necessary education for rulers who were considered best situated to learn its precepts and translate them into action.²² Dionysian authors urged kings to read their works so that, as Rigord wrote to Louis VIII in the Epistle Dedicatory to the *Gesta Philippi Augusti*, "you will always have before your eyes like a mirror the commendable acts of such a prince, as an example of virtue."²³ By their very adherence to the exemplar theory of history, the chroniclers expressed the belief that history had a moral and political utility beyond mere description of the deeds of the past.

One result of this approach to history was a willingness to reduce the complexity of human experience into stereotypes which could be utilized easily to make a moral point. Medieval chronicles, even more than classical histories, strike the modern reader by the thinness of their concern for individual personality. In the chronicles of Saint-Denis it is obvious that the description of characters is largely conventionalized. W. J. Brandt has maintained that the lack of interest in human character and motive which appears in chronicles can be traced to the medieval scientific "mode of perception." Medieval science, he argues, denied coherence in human character and behavior, envisaging man simply as a collection of attributes with more or less independent status. This perceptual mode, in Brandt's view, made

19. *Grandes Chroniques*, I, 2. Cf. Guillaume de Nangis, Prologue, *Vita Sancti Ludovici*: "Praeterea lectorem hujus operis exostulo, ut moveat ipsum tam rudis hominis scribentis auctoritas, nec quis dicat, sed quae dicuntur attendat. Utile vero non judicatur dubiis verborum sentiis historiae seriem tradere, sed plano simplici loquendi genere, ut simplicibus et peritis intellectus capacitas sit communis"; ed. M. Daunou, *RHF*, 20, 311.

20. Jean Leclercq connects this with a specifically biblical and monastic notion of edification as well. *Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, transl. C. Misrahi (New York, 1961), 194.

21. See Hannah H. Gray, "History and Rhetoric in Quattrocento Humanism," (Radcliffe College Ph.D. thesis, 1956). See also George H. Nadel, "Philosophy of History before Historicism," *History and Theory* 3 (1963-64), 291-315 and Lacroix, *L'Historien au moyen âge*, 167-175: "historia est narratio rei gestae ad instructionem posteritatis," 168.

22. One notes the class bias in Primat's Prologue to the *Grandes Chroniques*, despite the fact that it is one of the first works of vernacular history in medieval France and presumably aimed at a wide audience: "Si puet chascuns savior que ceste ouvre est profitable à fere pour fere cognoistre aus vaillanz genz la geste des rois et por montrer à touz dont vient la hautece dou monde; car ce est exemples de bone vie mener, meismement aus rois et aus princes qui ont terres à governor," I, 3.

23. "Tanti principis commendabiles actus quasi speculum pre oculis semper habeatis in exemplar virtutis." *Gesta Philippi Augusti*, 2-3.

it impossible for chroniclers to view character in its totality and thus to establish any workable approach to the problem of individual personality.²⁴ Without a theory of personality, the descriptive powers of chroniclers necessarily foundered, and any attempt to explore the relation between character and conduct was doomed to failure.

Similarly, Brandt and others have argued that medieval chroniclers lacked any concept of causation. The exemplarist and stereotypical use of historical events and persons meant the abandonment of a concern for causal process. It elevated these data into the realm of universal moral precepts, denying what a modern historian would consider their historicity, their relationship to an historical context. The result was an enormously weak sense of anachronism, an inability to distinguish the particularity of historical phenomena and separate it from universally valid moral principles.²⁵

So too, they argue, the symbolic mentality of the Middle Ages obstructed causal thinking, since causal relations tended to yield to symbolic connections. Perhaps no one expressed this better than Marc Bloch when he wrote that "in the eyes of all who were capable of reflection the material world was scarcely more than a mask, behind which took place all the really important things; it seemed to them also a language, intended to express by signs a more profound reality. Since a tissue of appearances can offer but little interest in itself, the result of this view was that observation was generally neglected in favor of interpretation."²⁶ From all sides, scientific, literary, and religious, medieval thought, it would seem, conspired to deny the historian a basic tool of research: a disposition and capacity for seeking out causal process beneath the variety of historical matter that came within his purview.

Without seeking to deny the truth of these assertions, I would like to modify their harsh implications somewhat. While the medieval historian may have lacked a specifically modern sense of causation, he nevertheless operated with a set of assumptions about the relationship between events in the past and present reality which, for him, functioned much as modern theories of causality do for us. In order to understand this it is necessary to return to the use of *exempla* and reinterpret their possible function in medieval historiography.

To begin with we might point out, as Nancy Struever has reminded us, that the *exemplum* in medieval literature "had not the humble status of fact, but . . . a quasi-religious prescriptive status as traditional material."²⁷ It not only illuminated universal moral realities, it commanded men to pursue them; like custom, it determined modes of behavior. It therefore asserted a relationship between be-

24. Brandt, *Shape of Medieval History*, 160. For his analysis of medieval scientific perception, see ch. I.

25. Cf. Georges Lefebvre, "L'infériorité de la critique apparaît dans l'absence de toute idée de développement historique. Pour eux, le passé était à demi fableux, conventionnel, fixé une fois pour toutes, ou au contraire, beaucoup plus fréquemment, quelque chose de semblable au présent. Jamais, peut être, depuis le temps primitifs, l'anachronisme n'a été cultivé au même degré." *La Naissance de l'historiographie moderne* (Paris, 1971), 44. See also the fervent argument to this effect by Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London, 1969), ch. I, "Medieval Historical Thought."

26. Bloch, *Feudal Society*, I, 83.

27. Nancy Struever, *The Language of History in the Renaissance: Rhetoric and Historical Consciousness in Florentine Humanism* (Princeton, 1970), 186.

havior in the past and contemporary practice which, if not fully causal, nevertheless suggests something more than moral exhortation.

If one tries to determine the source for this peculiar use of *exempla* in medieval thought, its similarity to Biblical exegesis is immediately apparent. The typological interpretation of the Bible by medieval exegetes establishes precisely the same analogous relationship between genuine historical acts in the past and their fulfillment in later, also genuinely historical events. In typological exegesis the earlier event, analogous to the later, becomes a foreshadowing of it, a "type" of the later.²⁸ As Richardson has explained it:

The typological interpretation of the Bible differs from the allegorical in that it detects a real and necessary correspondence in the structure and meaning of the original or "typical" event or complex of events to the new application or fulfillment of it. Accordingly the idea of the fulfillment of the Scriptures will mean . . . the fulfillment of history, the making explicit of what was implicit in the pattern of earlier historical events by the movements of the later events, the deepening of the meaning of history itself as this meaning is revealed to the prophetic insight.²⁹

By means of typological interpretation, the significance of the past is reaffirmed for the present; the old becomes a prophecy of the new and its predeterminant in the sense that its very existence determines the shape and interpretation of what comes later. In this way the past becomes an explanatory principle, a way of ordering and making intelligible a relationship between events separated by vast distances of time.

It seems obvious that monastic chroniclers, trained on the daily reading of the Bible, could easily have transferred this way of reading Scripture to the interpretation of history.³⁰ What is involved is the secularization of typology, its application to the material supplied by history rather than sacred events. As early as the second century, Christian writers began to view occurrences in their own lives as fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.³¹ It is not hard to imagine, once this step was taken, how the present came to be viewed as a fulfillment not only of sacred prophecies but of other events themselves.

I would like to suggest that *exempla* as used by the Saint-Denis chroniclers were often intended to function like Biblical types. Although the chroniclers' Prologues suggest that their methods of explanation and expression differed insignificantly from classical rhetoric, the use of *exempla* in their narrative is informed by an exegetical tradition that owes more to the Bible than to Cicero.³² When the chron-

28. Tom F. Driver, *The Sense of History in Greek and Shakespearean Drama* (New York, 1960), 59.

29. Quoted, *ibid.*, 60.

30. On the importance of the Bible for understanding medieval historical thought see Lacroix, *L'Historien au moyen âge*, 58ff.

31. See Hanning, *Vision of History in Early Britain*, 14.

32. See the excellent remarks of Hanning (*History and Theory*, 425-426) about the potentially misleading effect of chroniclers' invocation of rhetorical principles of historiography in their Prologues. In Hanning's view, the conscious articulation of rhetorical traditions which occurs in so much of medieval historical writing has a paradoxical role "in providing not a guide to perceiving and communicating the meaning of history, but rather a context within which the author and audience share a common intention — to address themselves to the needs of the past for instruction and edification." These rhetor-

iclers drew analogies between their rulers and David, Alexander, Constantine, or Charlemagne, they were not merely ascribing a particular list of attributes to their subject. They were affirming a positive, virtually causal, relationship between what a David or Constantine had done, and the deeds of the “new David.” The record of the past was seen as having a relation to the present that was more than prescriptive, if less than what we would consider as scientifically causal. In this way the past not only explains the present, it exercises an indirect influence over contemporary events. It was the sense of an implicit relationship to what had happened before that made it unnecessary for these historians to investigate the immediate causes of occurrences. In the chronicles Philip Augustus acted as he did “because” Charlemagne had, and what Charlemagne did he, too, would do. While explaining the present, the past casts the shape of the future. Typological thinking sets up a complex field of influences which ties past and present, present and future into one essentially prophetic mode of analyzing history. For this reason a characteristic voice of history in the chronicles of Saint-Denis is prophecy; not in the Old Testament sense of decrying contemporary practice and foretelling better or worse days to come, but in its ability to establish genuine historical relationships between temporally distinct phenomena.

With the aid of such “typologies” the chroniclers could use figures and events of the past as explanations and as modes of legitimizing present political life. For example: the formulation by Dionysian chroniclers of the fiction known as the *reditus regni ad stirpem Karoli Magni* — the return of the Capetian realm to the heirs of Charlemagne in the person of Louis VIII, biological descendant of Carolingian parents — engendered a typological relationship between the second and third *race* and thereby made available to succeeding Capetians the ideological claims embedded in the Carolingian *topos*.³³ It described a political future which would unfold as the realization of the potentialities of the past and thus implicitly legitimized the political programs and policies to which Capetian efforts in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were directed as an acting out of the dictates of history. For in such a scheme, the past was prophetic, determining the shape and interpretation of what was to come and binding past, present, and future into a single, comprehensive historical matrix.

In a more immediate sense, the Carolingian typology was used to legitimate Capetian conquests under Philip Augustus and his successors as a return to the former *imperium* of Charlemagne, grounding present action in a mythical, but highly usable, past which held unchallenged authority in the minds of contemporaries. Such typologies were, moreover, multivalent. The Carolingian *topos* also endowed the Capetians with a new identity, articulated in the title *Rex-Imperator*, with its implied reference to the imperial past of Frankish kings. Although this identity was subject to shifting interpretation, it was to be a decisive factor in shaping French goals in the last Capetian century. The *reditus* doctrine, as applied to Philip Augustus and his successors, illustrates the underlying typological struc-

ical commonplaces were intended, he believes, to provide a “verbal context” in which the historian could locate himself and win acceptance from his audience, but they do not, therefore, necessarily describe the methods or purposes which govern and inspire his work. My own study of the chronicles of Saint-Denis bears out Hanning’s observations.

33. On this see my “The *Reditus Regni ad Stirpem Karoli Magni*: A New Look,” *French Historical Studies* 7 (1971), 145-174.

ture of the chroniclers' thought, the utilization of historical *topoi* as explanatory principles of contemporary action, and the hortatory and legitimizing function of the past which enabled historical actors and writers to come to terms with their present reality.

Similar uses were made of the newly refurbished crusading past of Charlemagne to supply historical precedent, and hence legitimacy, to royal crusading ventures; and of the conversion of Clovis, which demonstrated France's long-standing dedication to the fundamental principles of Christian society, and thus aided in the development of the notion of France as a "Holy Land,"³⁴ whose past achievements in service to the Church gave the nation an historical personality and argued assent to her aspirations for political leadership among the states of Europe.

Throughout the chronicles of Saint-Denis, legitimizing accounts of previous French kings as "good," "just," "pious," "benevolent," and "powerful" carefully build up an internal structure of historical relationships that is fundamentally typological. On the basis of these typologies, Dionysian chroniclers elaborated historical, ideological, and ethical themes which governed their presentation of Capetian kingship and created a national past that was a source of immense pride, exalting the kingdom as well as the dynasty. Precisely because such typological relationships fit so well with medieval modes of perceiving historical reality, sacred and secular, the ideological elements arising from them were persuasive as political propaganda justifying the monarchy's actions and programs. At the same time, they helped to clarify for the nation itself the inner meaning of French history, just as Biblical typology clarified the meaning of Christ's new dispensation to mankind in relation to the historical preparation for His coming articulated in the prophetic teachings of Judaism. In this way the royal myth, fostered and amplified by historical typologies which reaffirmed the continuity and legitimacy of royal action, contributed to the formation of a national identity in France in the Middle Ages.

The typological nature of medieval historical thinking also helps to explain its weak sense of chronology. To date an event precisely in the past means fixing its significance as a distinct object, separated from the present. But typology wishes to break down the barriers between past and present, to draw events out of the past and make them live in present experience. It operates with what Driver calls the "principle of contemporaneity" in which "time and historical occurrence refuse to take their place in a chronology of the past. The event which *was*, meaningfully enters the *now*." Because history is a mode of experience, and not merely ascertainable fact, it refuses to die, to remain chronologically fixed in the past.³⁵

History utilized as a mode of experience constructs time as a continuum rather than a series of distinct acts following one upon the other into the past. It functions like tradition, assuming a certain identity between what happens then and now. To the very degree that men in the Middle Ages sensed the reality of the past, they were incapable of perceiving with equal acuteness its distance.

This does not mean, as Gaston Paris claimed, that men believed in the immutability and permanence of all things. On the contrary, they were philosophically

34. Cf. Joseph R. Strayer, "France, the Holy Land, the Chosen People and the Most Christian King" in *Action and Conviction in Early Modern Europe*, ed. T. K. Rabb and J. E. Seigel (Princeton, 1969), 3-16.

35. Driver, *Sense of History*, 53.

and religiously conditioned to an appreciation of the transitoriness of mundane occurrences, what was so tellingly designated as the “temporalities.”³⁶

The act of writing history was, in fact, a means of preserving the reality of time. By capturing the moment in written memory, history, as Gilson points out, constructed a “duration,” redeeming the world from the stream of becoming.³⁷ To put it somewhat differently, history creates a “time-space” which saves the things of the moment and establishes their relation to what has and will happen. And because of its concentration on politics, history creates above all a temporal “space” which sustains political life.

If one looks at the chroniclers of Saint-Denis from this perspective, their insistent concern with genealogy takes on a new importance. The creation of an historical tradition required the demonstration of social continuity over time. It is instructive that the opening lines of the *Grandes Chroniques* announce their concern with political continuity as established through genealogy: “Pour ce que plusieurs genz doutoient de la genealogie des rois de France, de quel origine et de quel lignie ils ont descendu, enprist il cest ouvre à fere par le commandement de tel homme que il ne pout ne dut refuser.”³⁸ Similarly, the organizational framework of the entire work is supplied by genealogy: “Et pour ce que III generacions ont esté des rois de France puis que il commencierent à estre, sera toute ceste histoire devisée en III livres principaus: ou premier parlera de la geneologie Merovée ou secont de la generation Pepin, et ou tierz de la generation Hue Capet . . . Li commencez de ceste histoire sera pris à la haute lignie des Troiens, dont ele est descendue par longue sucesion.”³⁹ Genealogy, even when largely mythical, asserts the temporal durability of a people. Because it considers rulers as the expression of social continuity, whose own unbroken descent implies the political continuity of those they rule, it establishes a temporal dimension for the consideration of politics.

At the same time it provides a framework for precisely the kind of enriching use of the past that medieval chroniclers essayed. Genealogy transforms the connection between the political past and present into a real one, seminally imparted from generation to generation. As evidence of historical continuity it lends plausibility to the analogizing tendencies of medieval historical thought, allowing perceived relationships between historical figures and events in the past and present to be viewed as part of one continuous stream of history. It prevents these “typologies” from becoming purely symbolic connections, and therefore saves history from allegory.

The extent of medieval allegorizing of history can be seen in an historian like Joachim of Flora, for whom historical data are merely signs of the spiritual significance and tendency of history. Because the chroniclers of Saint-Denis grounded

36. See, for example, the Prologue to the First Continuation of the *Chronicon* of Guillaume de Nangis by an anonymous monk of Saint-Denis: “Verum cum breves sint homines dies, eorum paucitas ita finiatur in brevi, et caduca, mortalis et misera vita nostra, multis repleta miseriis et respersa tamquam vapor parens ad modicum non subsistat, sed ut fumus ocius evanescens”; *Chronique Latine de Guillaume de Nangis*, ed. Hercule Géraud (Société de l’Histoire de France) (Paris, 1843), I, 327. The belief that medieval thought contained a strong bias toward the universal, unchanging, and timeless can still be found in even such sophisticated writers as Pocock. See his *Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (New York, 1971), 81.

37. Étienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, transl. A. H. C. Downes (New York, 1940), 386.

38. *Les Grandes Chroniques*, I, 1.

39. *Ibid.*, 3-4. This organization was later dropped, but it was Primat’s intended one.

their works in a real, genealogical tradition, they never yielded to a purely prophetic treatment of history. Unlike Joachim, who uses genealogy for allegorical purposes, they remain bound to the human, biological significance of their genealogies. The record of the past, while prophetic in its ability to shape the course of future events, never lost its foundation in social and political reality.

Perhaps this explains the need to create genealogies when they were lacking, as in the case of the Trojan origins of the Franks.⁴⁰ Once this relation to an ancient past was asserted, everything between the mythical Trojan foundation of France and the present became historically relevant as part of French tradition. Without such a framework, the attempt to aver desired connections to past events became highly subjective and open to interpretation. With it, an objective relationship to the past was maintained, to be explored and utilized for guidance and legitimation of the present.

Genealogy also made it possible to organize history into a total plan around a central theme. In the case of the chronicles of Saint-Denis, that theme was for the first time a purely royal one.⁴¹ The chronicles of Saint-Denis represent, in their totality, the first history of France, invoked to illustrate and sustain the royal myth.

Once we become sensitive to the explanatory and legitimizing function of the historical "typologies" employed by Dionysian chroniclers, a whole new dimension to their historiographical techniques seems to open up. Beneath the flat, almost opaque surface of the political narrative, one senses the effort to establish a coherent system of historical relationships which both tell the story and convey its meaning for the present. The chroniclers of Saint-Denis were not particularly successful in this effort, or at least so it seems to the modern reader. But one wonders if the fault lies with them or with us. Just as any modern reader inevitably fails to catch the wealth of biblical allusion evoked in all medieval writings, by phrases, words, and surface details as well as direct references, perhaps we fail equally to catch the secular typologies evoked in much the same manner.

There is no way of restoring to the modern reader the historical imagination of a medieval audience, any more than most of us can become as fully conversant as a monk with the Bible. But we can perhaps agree that such a system of reference and explanation is implied in the structure and methods of medieval historiography. If we agree on this, it should be possible to read medieval chronicles in a new way, no longer as quarries to be mined exhaustively for information whose historical status, by our standards, is difficult to verify. Rather, we might study them as vehicles for the expression of fundamental ideas concerning the nature of medieval political reality and its relation to the political past. Medieval chronicles might thus be made to yield a new understanding of the political utility of history in the Middle Ages.

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40. There are two traditions, apparently independent, which create the myth of Frankish Trojan origins. The first and best known is that of the so-called Chronicle of Fredegar. The other is a tradition established at Saint-Denis in the eighth-century *Liber Historiae Francorum*, ed. Bruno Krusch, *MGH, SS. Rer. Mer.* 2, 215-238. For an opinion of the independence of these two traditions see John M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar* (London, 1960), xff.

41. For the importance of genealogy in the effort of the Chroniclers of Saint-Denis to write a history of France, see also Ariès, *Le Temps de l'histoire*, 146.