

Possibilities of royal power in the late Carolingian age: Charles III the Simple

Summary

The thesis aims to determine the possibilities of royal power in the late Carolingian age, analysing the reign of Charles III the Simple (893/898-923). His predecessors' reigns up to the death of his grandfather Charles II the Bald (843-877) serve as basis for comparison, thus also allowing to identify mid-term developments in the political structures shaping the Frankish world toward the turn from the 9th to the 10th century. Royal power is understood to have derived from the interaction of the ruler with the nobles around him. Following the reading of modern scholarship, the latter are considered as partners of the former, participating in the royal decision-making process and at the same time acting as executors of these decisions, thus transmitting the royal power into the various parts of the realm. Hence, the question for the royal room for manoeuvre is a question of the relations between the ruler and the nobles around him.

Accordingly, the analysis of these relations forms the core part of the study. Based on the royal diplomas, interpreted in the context of the narrative evidence, the noble networks in contact with the rulers are revealed and their influence examined. Thus, over the course of the reigns of Louis II the Stammerer (877-879) and his sons Louis III (879-882) and Carloman II (879-884) up until the rule of Charles III the Fat (884-888), the existence of first one, then two groups of nobles significantly influencing royal politics become visible. This image changes only under the latter, when individual nobles originating in the immediate vicinity of the older groups were promoted. The missing inner coherence of this new elite is revealed after the death of Charles the Fat, when rivalling parties formed, which supported different candidates for the vacant throne. This fragmentation of the leading nobility continued throughout Odo's reign (888-898) until the first years of Charles the Simple's rule. Only then, after the death of political key figures, the full integration of those nobles opposing the new king into the circle around him became possible. Over the course of the next decades this circle underwent a number of further modifications, most of all by the integration of numerous nobles after the addition of Lotharingia to Charles' rule as well as the ascent of a new group of nobles promoted by the king in the late 910s.

These analyses constitute the basis for an evaluation of the rulers' activities in regard to their peers as well as the Vikings. A close cooperation between the rulers is revealed to have had a stabilizing effect on the relations between the rulers and the nobles. At the same time, however, these alliances also limited their room for manoeuvre when it came to pursuing their interests against their partners. Concerning the politics pursued against the Vikings, purely military measures to secure the realm remained rather ineffective. Longer lasting success could only be obtained by diplomatic agreements with the Northmen, negotiated and implemented with the support of the leading nobles of the realm.

While for the most part of his reign Charles enjoyed the support of the leading nobles, his rule, nevertheless, remains under the shadow of their rebellion against him in 922. Outlining the importance of trust by analysing different conflict situations, this contrast is resolved by arguing that the deterioration of the relations between Charles and the nobles was caused by repeated actions of the king, which were perceived as violations of the existing norms and a failure to adjust his symbolic language to respond to this crisis.