

INTRODUCTION

Julio Escalona

Orri Vésteinsson

Stuart Brookes

‘The neighborhoods are all so blah, the only thing that turns people on is proximity to power’. Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), p. 225

In the year AD 1042, Lyfing, bishop of Worcester, granted Æthelric ‘his faithful man; lease, for three lives’ of land at Elmley Castle, Worcestershire (S 1396). The grant is recorded in an original charter which gives the estate boundaries as: ‘First from nettle coomb (valley) along Wulfric's boundary to the tail of land’ and via further landmarks including ‘Nether(ton) people’s boundary’, ‘Byrdingc farm’, ‘Wigferth’s pool’, ‘Hin(ton) people’s boundaries’, ‘Sedge(berrow) people’s boundary’, ‘the monks’ boundary’, and the ‘chalk stone’s marsh so that back to nettle coomb’¹. The grant was attested by the bishop, and the attached witness list describes an assembly of the highest political spheres, including King Harthacnut himself, the archbishop of Canterbury, the bishops of Crediton, Hereford, Wells, and London, Godwine, the powerful ealdorman of Wessex, the Earl of the Mercians, alongside various lesser abbots, deacons, priests, and secular nobles (thegns).

This document, as so many others like it from early medieval England and the continent, exemplifies some of the many ways that polities and the workings of state intersected with neighbourhoods in their localities. Ostensibly, these official records of landholding and privileges, were one mechanism by which the state made its subjects ‘legible’, to use a term advanced by James Scott: taking ‘exceptionally complex, illegible, and local social practices, such as land tenure customs or naming customs, and creat[ing] a standard grid whereby it could be centrally recorded and monitored’.² The grant draws up, through its detailed description of the bounds, a map of local landholding, assigns fiscal value to it, and stipulates the conditions of ownership. These documents, on the face of it, are the very expression of centralised bureaucratic power. But to focus only on state-driven legibility is to overlook the importance of agency at lower social levels. In codifying these

¹ Charter number as per Sawyer’s list (see Abbreviation list at the bottom). See the on-line version: *The Electronic Sawyer*: <http://www.esawyer.org.uk/charter/1396.html>.

² Scott, *Seeing like a State*, p. 2.

conditions, each charter draws on local practices and knowledge—of patterns of ownership, community identities, local resources—which furthermore reinforce and formalise the spatial limits of the neighbourhoods they describe. Charters reflect, in other words, the interests of the state, the investment of local communities, and, in the formula of the diplomatic, the scribal practices of the officials that sat at the interface between polities and neighbourhoods. In some cases, they can reflect even more than that. Early medieval Europe is different to those states described by Scott in at least one crucial respect: systems of legibility had been around for a long time and could survive in local practice even in the absence of states. Legibility in some cases emerged, not as an imposition from above, but from institutions existing in their localities.

This book marks the culmination of a collective effort that has spanned over a decade and three funded projects, focusing on the relationships between the local and the world beyond in the early Middle Ages. Over the course of these projects our interests have shifted from the analysis of local communities,³ to theoretical issues of scale and scale change, and the conceptualization of complexity in these societies.⁴ This third volume focuses more specifically upon local and supralocal relationships: the ‘neighbourhoods’ and ‘polities’ of early medieval Europe.⁵

Both ‘polity’ and ‘neighbourhood’ are concepts that need to be grounded in specific historical contexts. In defining ‘polities’, questions can be asked about the nature of power and how it is rooted in the local: how was authority exercised locally; what was the reality of people’s experience of power; and to what degree was it consultative with, and receptive to, local concerns? ‘Neighbourhood’ in turn, requires understandings of the everyday expressions of social behaviours, and how localities could become the building blocks of societies. What and who constituted the neighbourhood community, and what obligations existed locally to regulate the family, labour, conflict, and justice? The varying complexity of early medieval societies is expressed in the ‘social distance’ between these two opposite ends of the spectrum. Did ongoing dynamics at the micro-levels of society affect—actively

³ Davies, Halsall, and Reynolds, eds, *People and Space in the Middle Ages*.

⁴ Escalona and Reynolds, eds, *Scale and Scale Change in the Early Middle Ages*.

⁵ This was realized within the framework of the research project “The Foundations of the European Space (2): Local Identities and Emerging States in Early Medieval Europe”, funded by the Spanish Government (Plan Nacional de I+D+i HAR2010-21950-C03-01). We also gratefully acknowledge the University of Iceland, University of Winchester, Museum of Cultural History (University of Oslo), University of Padua and the Eric Fletcher Fund for additional financial support to our meetings and for helping some of the group members to participate in them.

or passively, directly or indirectly—higher-level socio-political constructions, or were they parallel, unconnected dimensions that only interacted sporadically? Rulers and aristocrats clearly did not exist in isolation from local issues and structures, and while early medieval local communities may not have actually ‘created’ the structures of governance above them, neither were they just passive sufferers of indifference or exploitation.

Any study of the interactions between early medieval localities and higher political levels inevitably evokes the issue of state formation. We have chosen to take a critical approach to such a hotly debated topic. First, we have tried to avoid the widespread teleology that, because of the form they took in the central and later middle ages, all early medieval polities necessarily were states, or that all changes in their political structures must be understood as steps in that direction. Second, we have sought to circumvent the dominant narrative that holds that the Late Antique state remained essentially operational through the early middle ages until *c.* AD 1000, when the so-called ‘Feudal revolution’ overturned the structures of ‘public governance’. At the heart of this model is the Frankish/Carolingian core, but the narrative exerts a powerful influence over peripheries as diverse as late Anglo-Saxon England and ninth-to-tenth-century Catalonia, to name just two. It also has the effect of separating the territories that were once part of the Roman Empire or came into the sphere of ‘Carolingian statehood’ from other—mainly northern and eastern—regions. Here, narratives of state formation tend to be built upon anthropological/archaeological evolutionary theories that emphasise a development from fragmented to centralised power taking place between Late Prehistory and the early middle ages.

As we argue in chapter one, escaping these dominant narratives is easier if we bear in mind that a crucial feature of the early medieval period is that these were ‘secondary’, not pristine states, and that there were a variety of paths to (or away from) statehood. These paths were followed, albeit to different degrees, both within the Frankish core and beyond its borders. In this volume we have chosen to adopt a ‘view from the edge’ that focusses upon the peripheries. This is not because we think that the concepts and processes we discuss lack relevance for the ‘Carolingian core’—in fact, we would contend quite the opposite—but because this perspective allows us to focus squarely on issues unencumbered by accumulated historiographical baggage. By the same token, it is our contention, that observations we make in this book about developments in the peripheries, may also be of value to analyses of the ‘core’ by adding texture and nuance to the dominant top-down narratives.

Finally, we would argue that the kinds of issues that interest us in this volume can be generalized far beyond early medieval Europe to other places and historical periods, including the present. This potential for an extended dialogue with specialists from other periods and from other social sciences has been foremost in our thinking whilst assembling this volume; nevertheless, it was decided to root the book firmly in the relatively coherent laboratory of early medieval western Europe. This also requires further qualification. As in our previous outputs, no attempt has been made to provide either chronologically or geographically even coverage. Chronological themes are handled flexibly, as we are less concerned with synchronicity than with conceptually comparable processes. Early medieval Europe is characterised by uneven developments, where similar situations emerged in very different areas, sometimes centuries apart, such as (say) twelfth- or thirteenth-century Iceland, tenth-century Portugal, or ninth-century Frisia. Comparison is no less fruitful because of that. Likewise, our cases range geographically from England, to Frisia, Iberia, Iceland, Italy, and Norway (acknowledging, as in our previous books, the group's composition and main funding source with a larger proportion of papers on Iberia). It is our contention that this coverage is sufficiently diverse in time and space to examine the issues outlined below.

The outline of the book

Material for this volume was enabled by periodic meetings between the contributors from 2011 to 2014, with financial support from the Spanish Government and other agencies (see note 3). As in our previous projects, this endeavour proceeded by defining an overarching conceptual framework and then addressing it through the lens of each contributor's expertise and—appropriately given the theme of the book—local knowledge. Four plenary meetings were held in Madrid, Iceland, Norway and again Madrid, in which preliminary papers were presented and debated. The second and third meetings included fieldtrips to visit some of the archaeological sites under discussion. We are grateful to a number of additional experts who accompanied us on these trips but who have not contributed directly to the volume: Francisco Reyes, Gonzalo Viñuales, Marie Ødegaard, Halldis Hobæk, and Juan Antonio Quirós. Following the meetings, preliminary drafts of the papers were produced and circulated amongst all the contributors to invite feedback and comment from all authors on each other's pieces. We believe this method, previously employed on our other projects, greatly helps to foster the necessary dialogue among contributors who would otherwise be too far removed from one another.

The resulting papers are grouped into three sections. The first addresses the overall issue of social complexity as viewed from the localities, and how this perspective can help challenge traditional top-down narratives. All the contributors highlight the great diversity that is visible in the archaeological and written record of localities. Grenville Astill (chapter 2) argues that there is growing archaeological evidence for diversity and change in Anglo-Saxon settlements and rural landscapes. Astill explains this variability in relation to the nature of power in the later Anglo-Saxon state. He argues that this diversity reflects the uneven intensity of state impact upon localities as well as a variability in top-down control over agricultural processes. Local variability is not only a product of uneven state control. From a study of two localities in Asturias in northern Spain, Margarita Fernández Mier (chapter 3) suggests that two drivers, at different chronological horizons, led to important changes in the organization of settlements, landscapes and boundaries. Change took place in the tenth century in an area close to and under the direct influence of the kingdom's main royal centre. This contrasts with a mountainous area, away from royal power, where similar changes only occurred in the twelfth century, mainly due to the intensification of seigneurial control.

Local variability is also a feature of Alexandra Chavarría's contribution (chapter 4). She argues that burial practices in northern Italy underwent increasing diversity, both in rites and locations, at a time between the more stable Roman and Carolingian periods. She makes an explicit connection between standardization in burial practices and state control, and regards the intervening phase of diversification as an indication of local initiatives coming to the fore. Funerary evidence is also explored in Iñaki Martín Viso's paper (chapter 5). He examines a type of burial in rock-cut graves, common in the southwest of the Duero basin in central Spain, that seems to be characteristic of local communities at a time of very little state intervention. He argues that this kind of burial monument was a marker of local agency, but one which was scaled up into larger cemeteries serving supralocal areas. Ultimately, this practice came to influence upper levels of society, as it was adopted during the first half of the tenth century at newly created or rebuilt strongholds promoted by the Asturian kings.

The second section of the volume focusses on the supralocal—a larger-than-neighbourhood scale—to illustrate how the relationships between the lower and upper political levels differed depending on several factors, mainly social distance. Frode Iversen (chapter 6) deals with the important practical and ideological role of public assemblies ('things') in Scandinavia. He argues that these were venues for a great degree of bottom-up agency emanating from small supralocal communities, particularly in the earlier period, but

that there was a progressive emptying of higher political business from these assemblies as political complexity increased and the state developed. This notion of a progressive growth in the polity's scale and complexity finds an interesting counterpart in Alfonso Vigil-Escalera's chapter (chapter 7). Using examples from the region of Madrid in central Spain, he describes methods to reconstruct small-scale supralocal communities comparable to those of Norway. However, unlike Norway, in the context of a more developed, large-scale state of Late Roman pedigree, it seems that the collective institutions of these territories were orientated primarily towards their internal functioning, and did not influence processes at the state level, which was too distant in social and political terms. This makes the Iberian example more similar to Iversen's final stage of separation between kings and things, despite obvious chronological and geographical differences.

Chapters by Orri Vésteinsson (chapter 8) and Letty Ten Harkel (chapter 9) present extreme cases of social distance. In both papers, 'local' is defined in terms of relatively large spatial entities: the island of Iceland and the territories of three ringforts on Walcheren (Frisia, Netherlands) respectively. Both describe instances of 'distant states and kings', that is, contexts where a minimum interference from the higher political spheres was felt. Vésteinsson shows how, in the total absence of intrusion from Norwegian kings, awareness of an overarching, superior political level formed a fundamental component of Icelandic identity and the basis of political competition on the local scene. Before the thirteenth century, the Norwegian monarchy was in Iceland essentially an ideological tool, and a means, through either direct or inferred participation, by which political advancement in Iceland could be achieved. Belonging to a wider—largely passive—Norwegian realm was, it seems, a crucial component of local Icelandic political identities. Ten Harkel, by contrast, discusses a peripheral area of the Frankish realm (Walcheren, Frisia), where in the face of Viking raids, she argues, direct intervention from the Carolingian state—including state-driven defence arrangements—was more minimal than is traditionally assumed. Focussing on the evidence for intermediate supralocal power and the close distribution of fortifications, she suggests that state intervention was nonetheless effective, either by handing over territory to Viking leaders as part of a bargaining process, or to monastic landowners.

These case-studies can be contrasted with other areas where a much greater degree of state intrusion upon localities can be recognised. This is the core argument of the chapter by Stuart Brookes and Andrew Reynolds (chapter 10). By comparing several regions of England they illustrate how the growth of the state in the late Anglo-Saxon period favoured the development of a network of districts that, although they involved consultative assemblies of supralocal scale, were primarily a top-down instrument of administration. Whilst ostensibly part of the same system, the character of these districts, however, varied from region to region. In some cases a continuation of ancient, well-

established territories can be recognised, whilst in other cases there was a wholesale territorial re-organization; variances that reflected the changing conditions of domination in different regions and contexts.

The last section of the volume comprises four chapters that focus more explicitly on the interactions between the local and the supralocal. The fact that supralocal actors, institutions and powers need to root themselves locally, at one point or another, means that local space is also the setting for larger-scale connections, whether material or ideological. Iberia is the context for three of these papers, but it is more significant that all four use charters as their primary source of evidence. This focus makes land transfers the paramount social process under discussion. Across the section there is a common thread that connects charter-making with its legal and cultural constraints, notions of landed property, the role of land transactions in creating social complexity, the materiality of space, and the divisions whereby complexity materializes itself in local landscape.

Through a detailed analysis of specific formulas that appear in north Iberian charters, Wendy Davies (chapter 11) argues for the existence of a charter-writing tradition that derived from Late Antique practice but was so embedded in local culture that it managed to survive long into the medieval period. Davies's study makes a powerful case for the resilience of statehood in a stateless period – a crucial, if often neglected aspect of secondary state formation. Her chapter, moreover, provides an insight about cultural transmission that is relevant to the following two papers about north Iberia. Álvaro Carvajal (chapter 12) discusses the vocabulary used in tenth-century charters to describe rural settlements. He argues that the ubiquitous term 'villa' was not a reference to a physical settlement but a notion employed by lords to categorize the basic unit of aristocratic land holding. It was only with the growth of aristocratic landownership and attendant settlement changes in the central medieval period (suggested also on archaeological grounds by Fernández Mier above) that the seigniorial and physical senses of 'villa' became synonymous.

Building upon an overall argument that emphasizes the multi-scalar nature of land-ownership patterns, Julio Escalona (chapter 13) explores land transfer records from tenth-century central Castile. He argues that such texts provide insights into Dense Local Knowledge. This term describes the local experiences of landscape (a densely symbolized space that contains a representation of the community and its past) as knowledge that is created from everyday experience, transmitted orally within the local society, and is primarily accessible only to local actors. Escalona suggests that Dense Local Knowledge functioned as an interface between the local and the supralocal. It was not directly accessible to supralocal actors, but they needed it and could only harness it in order to build and maintain their estates by drawing on the knowledge of intermediaries or through negotiation with locals. This argument is largely shared by Alex Langlands (chapter 14) in

his analysis of boundary clauses in Anglo-Saxon charters, albeit with a different conceptualization. He regards the large-scale land divisions recorded in charters as reflecting local experiences of landscape and practices aimed at maintaining the memory and knowledge of boundaries. He moreover points to a level of territoriality that is earlier than, and different from, the territorial grids imposed by seigneurial and state powers.

*

One consequence of the collaborative methodology employed in the development of this volume is that, while some chapters explore specific aspects of either ‘polity’ or ‘neighbourhood’, most emphasise the interactions between both, and range widely across the main themes and in dialogue with almost every other chapter. As a result, any subdivision is bound to impose unwanted distinctions. The editors have had to combine the progression of the book’s overall argument with the need to allow for a freer dialogue between pieces that will highlight the conceptual proximity between apparently separate times and places. Unlike the usual collection of academic papers, it is strongly suggested that readers look closely at adjacent papers, even if they fall outside their area of expertise, and, more importantly, take notice of the abundant cross references between chapters, which will help reading the pieces in this volume not as a collection, but as a network, very much as their authors do.

Abbreviations

S – Sawyer, Peter H., ed. *Anglo-Saxon Charters: an annotated list and bibliography* (London: Royal Historical Society), 1968.

Bibliography

Davies, Wendy, Guy Halsall, and Andrew Reynolds, eds, *People and Space in the Middle Ages (300-1300)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006)

Escalona, Julio, and Andrew Reynolds, eds, *Scale and Scale Change in the Early Middle Ages: exploring landscape, local society and the world beyond*, *The Medieval Countryside*, 6 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011)

Scott, James C., *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998)