

**THE CONTESTED COUNTRYSIDE: PEASANT ENGAGEMENT WITH THE  
SUPERNATURAL IN CAROLINGIAN FRANCIA**

An Honors Thesis

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## ABSTRACT

Title: **The Contested Countryside: Peasant Engagement with the Supernatural in Carolingian Francia**

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For the Carolingian era, when emperors, nobles, and clerical elites sought to link the stability of the empire and the salvation of their souls to the moral behavior of the entire population, deviant practices were unacceptable. From the eighth to the ninth centuries, royal and ecclesiastic elites formed a matrix of patronage networks across the countryside. These vertical ties between the rural parish and a wider Christian community tried to redefine the Frankish world as Carolingian. Carolingian rulers sacralized political authority by melding the collective sins of the people with the prosperity of the empire by trying to make a holy people through the correction of the *idiotia*. Carolingian religion tried to resituate the empire as the church. This paper investigates how rural communal engagement with supernatural forces threatened this complex process of sacralization by which the Carolingian elites ordered their empire. It extends the two interrelated themes of power and religion to rural communities through an analysis of ninth-century letters, annals, and miracle collections. By engaging with forces believed to be supernatural, rural communities accessed mechanisms of religious and political power

## The Contested Countryside: Peasant Engagement with the Supernatural in Carolingian Francia

In the ashes of Kempten lived a demon. In this small village in the Carolingian kingdom of East Francia, the *Annals of Fulda* reports that in 858 “an evil spirit gave an open sign of his wickedness.”<sup>1</sup> Little more than a nuisance, at first, throwing stones and banging on walls. Quickly, though, the demon began to sow the seeds for communal strife.<sup>2</sup> Rumors of a thief spread across the village. The evil spirit directed suspicions towards an unnamed villager. To ensure that the accused thief might be more hated, houses he entered went up in flames. Fire destroyed the harvest.<sup>3</sup> In Kempten, an eruption of the supernatural intertwined systems of sin and salvation with local justice. To members of the community, it was “as if it were for [the accused thief’s] sins that everyone had to suffer such things.”<sup>4</sup> But the villagers were not helpless. After exiling the suspect and his family to the fields outside village limits, the peasants plotted his execution. Local clerical authorities, as mediators of the Carolingian Church, demanded the villagers halt the lynching in the spirit of “peace, unity and concord among the Christian peoples.”<sup>5</sup> The methods by which the villagers of Kempten dealt with demonic trouble-making reveal a world of strife and suspicion inextricable from ecclesiastical systems of religious practice. For at the heart of this entry is the texture of rural Carolingian society as a spiritual community, tied together by common calamities, caught within the tensions between a local and imperial identity.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Annals of Fulda*, ed. and trans. Tim Reuter (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 44.

<sup>2</sup> *The Annals of Fulda*, 44.

<sup>3</sup> *The Annals of Fulda*, 44.

<sup>4</sup> *The Annals of Fulda*, 44.

<sup>5</sup> *The Annals of Fulda*, 44; Marios Costambeys, Matthew Innes, and Simon MacLean, *The Carolingian World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 269.

Between saints and demons, elites and peasants, the Carolingian countryside was a contested space. From the eighth to the ninth centuries, religious reforms attempted to press villages into a burgeoning imperial collective built on “an alliance of throne and altar.”<sup>6</sup> Emperors, nobles, and clerical elites wielded religion as a unifying force, a guide to correct belief and practice.<sup>7</sup> This paper will first examine how Carolingian dynastic legitimacy relied on the inculcation of the empire *as* the church through the correction of the ignorant. It traces the construction of a sacralized Frankish identity that elites sought to disseminate through parish networks in the reign of Charlemagne. It argues that this identity reached its ultimate expression in the literature of the early ninth century, especially under the rule of Louis the Pious, when the ecclesiastic and royal elite advanced doctrines that bound the fortune of the empire and the fate of their souls to the religious behavior of the entire population. This political theology embedded the countryside in a series of reforms that sought to ensure that religious experience occurred in authorized settings like the local parish.

Finally, this paper will examine how rural communities engaged with supernatural forces as an alternative, external form of agency to negotiate the strategies of control imposed on them by elites. Villages fell within a web of pressures, material or imagined – from nearby ecclesiastics and aristocrats, distant monasteries and courts, or even from local, informal elites and parish priests. But the connections that pressed rural inhabitants into the social structures of the empire also opened up possibilities for action. Elites were not the only people with decision-making capacities, even as manorial organization spread across the imperial heartlands; indeed, it is from the northern regions of Francia that the bulk of these

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas F. X. Noble, “Carolingian Religion,” *Church History* 84, no. 2 (2015): 306.

<sup>7</sup> Mayke de Jong, “The Empire as *ecclesia*: Hrabanus Maurus and Biblical *historia* for Rulers,” in *The Uses of the Past*, eds. Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 191-226; Noble, “Carolingian Religion,” 292.

supernatural stories emerge. Carolingian stories of miraculous and demonic intervention in rural conflicts evidence a tactic of dispute settlement that impeded the process of sacralization by which Carolingian elites order the empire.

### **Finding the Supernatural and the Peasant in Carolingian Francia**

In the archives of Carolingian monks is the countryside: villages and villagers litter the documents and texts produced and preserved by monasteries, the accounts of the divine an integral genre to the record of their heavenly patrons. Hagiographies and miracles collections blossomed in the Carolingian age.<sup>8</sup> It is not until recently, however, that historians turned towards these texts, namely hagiographies or visionary texts, to detail the supernatural elements of everyday lives.<sup>9</sup> This research predominately examines ninth-century miracle collections which, in contrast, remain neglected.<sup>10</sup> At first glance, this is not a surprise. Miracle collections appear as endless lists accrediting the power of relics, compiled by monastic authors with explicit aims to circulate and promote their patron saint.<sup>11</sup> The value of these texts is not in the beliefs that they attest, but rather in the interactions between these beliefs and the social circumstances of the believing community. These stories were not always limited to the walls of the cloister.<sup>12</sup> This research uses miracle collections, along with ninth-century letters and annals, to evidence how peasants instrumentalized the supernatural.

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<sup>8</sup> Charles West, "Visions in a Ninth-Century Village: An Early Medieval Microhistory," *History Workshop Journal* 81 (2016): 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Innes and Charles West, "Saints and Demons in the Carolingian Countryside," in *Kleine Welten : Ländliche Gesellschaften im Karolingerreich*, eds. Thomas Kohl, Steffan Patzold, and Bernhard Zeller (Stuttgart: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2019), 71.

<sup>10</sup> Innes and West, "Saints and Demons," 72.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Kohl, "Peasant Agency and the Supernatural," *Studia Historica Historia Medieval* 38, no. 2 (2020): 102.

<sup>12</sup> Innes and West, "Saints and Demons," 72.

Pastoral literature, a broad category of texts concerned with the spiritual, moral, and doctrinal orthodoxy of the faithful, are also critical but problematic sources. Bernadette Filotas' *Pagan Survivals: Superstitions and Popular Culture in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature* stresses that these texts were selective in indicting marginalized groups.<sup>13</sup> Occult charms in the Carolingian court, for example, deployed by clerics and elite laypeople for exorcistic practices, received comparatively less attention than the illicit behaviors of peasants.<sup>14</sup> Clerical authors also wrote with concerted criticisms towards the religiosity of women. One group of scholars found a consistent pattern of anti-female discourse in early medieval ecclesiastical texts, concluding that Carolingian spirituality possessed sharply gendered roles that excluded women from male religious spaces.<sup>15</sup> More recent scholarship, however, questions Carolingian restrictions on female religiosity. Hagiographical sources, they claim, reveal that in the countryside of Francia, nuns attended to pastoral needs.<sup>16</sup> From this angle, elite criticism of female spiritual behavior dances the line between miscomprehension and the purposeful silence of Carolingian women.

Through the category of "superstition," Carolingian writers – overwhelmingly male, aristocratic, and clerical – deliberately mischaracterized and coded religious behaviors. A standard medieval definition of this concept drew from Isidore of Seville, stressing the that "superstition" meant to excess.<sup>17</sup> It also encompassed a broad spectrum of behaviors, from

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<sup>13</sup> Bernadette Filotas, *Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2005), 42-51.

<sup>14</sup> Ildar Garipzanov, "Magical *Charaktères* in the Carolingian World: A Ninth-Century Charm in MS Vat. Lat. 5359 and Its Broader Cultural Context," *Spectrum* 96 (April 2021): 308.

<sup>15</sup> James Tibbets Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, Ca. 500-1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 59-125.

<sup>16</sup> Felice Lifshitz, *Religious Women in Early Carolingian Francia: A Study of Manuscript Transmission and Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 193-206.

<sup>17</sup> Shane Bobrycki, "The Flailing Women of Dijon: Crowds in Ninth-Century Europe," *Past and Present* 240, no. 1 (2018): 11.

incorrect observation and witchcraft to Muslim or Jewish beliefs.<sup>18</sup> Carolingian scribes, like Agobard of Lyon and his successor, Amolo of Lyon, included a social dimension by tying deviant or excessive religious practice to the figure of the “rustic” and the concept of “rusticity” (*rustici*), a shorthand for bad belief.<sup>19</sup> Efforts to disentangle actual practices from these sources read to extract patterns of local social dynamics through frames like class or gender. Consider the readings the suspect Dijon relics condemned by Amolo in the 840s. Shane Bobrycki advances that early medieval elites like Amolo used the trope of female pliability to critique crowds of unregulated religious worship: the mass of women venerating the Dijon relics threatened to upend the social order.<sup>20</sup> Other scholars, like Charles West, situate Amolo and his letter in the context of Carolingian Church reform, shifting the focus away from the relics and their venerators to the expansion of the imperial church into parish communities.<sup>21</sup>

Any attempt to locate the “peasant” within the legal statuses of the Frankish empire deepens the semantic issue with these texts. Not all rural land cultivators were free tenants. Peasant families who worked lands owned by an aristocratic family were often unfree dependents.<sup>22</sup> Those of unfree status were not slaves, and although Frankish merchants engaged in the slave trade, Frankish agriculture did not rely on a slave mode of production. An imposition of modern ideas of freedom muddies early medieval understandings of dependence. Free and unfree were not absolute conditions but a continuum of dependencies

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<sup>18</sup> Filotas, *Pagan Survivals*, 8-11; Bobrycki, “The Flailing Women of Dijon,” 11.

<sup>19</sup> Valerie J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 112; Filotas, *Pagan Survivals*, 38, 84; Bobrycki, “The Flailing Women of Dijon,” 11; Kohl, “Peasant Agency and the Supernatural,” 102.

<sup>20</sup> Bobrycki, “The Flailing Women of Dijon,” 5.

<sup>21</sup> Charles West, “Unauthorised Miracles in Mid-Ninth-Century Dijon and the Carolingian Church Reforms,” *Journal of Medieval History* 36 (2010): 310.

<sup>22</sup> Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, 245.

between laborers and land-owners.<sup>23</sup> It is therefore necessary to determine from context that status of a person mentioned in a text. For the purpose of my analysis, this paper defines peasants as members of a household that derive their resources mainly from agricultural work performed by members of the same household.<sup>24</sup>

No matter the status, Carolingian Franks operated within complex multilateral relationships. Implications of choice or agency in the sources does not mean these peasants had total freedom to practice their faith. Norms constructed by social structures, economic forces, or even violent conflict conditioned their actions. Even when sources present choices as self-determined action, it is impossible to know that the peasants had a clear motive behind their behavior. Saint's lives and miracle collections, for example, detail the voluntary acts of peasants expressing their devotion, and in a different way, the normative prescriptions issued in capitularies and canons suggest that church leaders expected a degree of autonomy. These sources provide ample evidence that peasants, with or without elite approval, structured their religious life.

### **Historiography**

In 811, after several years of violent skirmishes with Danish pirates, a sick and weary Charlemagne asked, "are we really Christians?"<sup>25</sup> Charlemagne's existential question reflects the centrality of identity in both the Carolingian imagination and in recent scholarship. On its surface, the empire lacked diversity. Religious historians have long noted that paganism diminished with every conquest, Muslim communities remained isolated near the Pyrenees,

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<sup>23</sup> Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, 246.

<sup>24</sup> Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400-800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 386. See also Thomas Kohl, "Peasant Agency and the Supernatural," 98.

<sup>25</sup> *Capitularia regum Francorum*, quoted in Thomas F. X. Noble, "Carolingian Religion," *Church History* 84, no. 2 (2015): 287.



and Jewish populations lacked the privileges afforded to their Christian counterparts.<sup>26</sup>

Historians of empire, however, stress that the Carolingian Empire maintained a patchwork of political, ethnic, and legal communities that permitted the political integration of conquered domains.<sup>27</sup> The unity of the realm depended on political and ethnic plurality as much as on the authority emanating from its center.<sup>28</sup> But the relationship between imperial hierarchies and local religious organization, specifically the diversity of practices at the disposal of the peasants, has not received any attention so far. I contend that diversity manifested not only in the borderlands of the empire, but also in the rural communities of its core, as Carolingian elites instrumentalized contending conceptions of Frankish identity and Frankish history to legitimize their authority over the Merovingian kingdoms.

A number of recent studies contest the confluence of social control, religious correction, and imperial church reform as machines for a homogenized Carolingian Christianity. In their survey, *The Carolingian World*, published in 2011, Marios Costambeys, Matthew Innes, and Simon MacLean claim that “there was not one Christianity, but many Christianities, not one Church, but many churches.”<sup>29</sup> Any sense of collectivity derived itself from the patterns of religious behavior adopted by a community. Drawing from emerging genres of religious writing, namely hagiography, the authors stress that belief was a matter of

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<sup>26</sup> Noble, “Carolingian Reform,” 289; Capucine Nemo-Pekelman, “The Ambiguous Notions of Jewish Legal ‘Statutes’ and ‘Status’ in Blumenkranz’s Work,” in *Jews and Christians in Medieval Europe: The Historiographical Legacy of Bernhard Blumenkranz*, eds. Phillipe Buc, Martha Keil, and John Tolan (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2015), 24.

<sup>27</sup> Stefan Esers and Helmut Reimitz, “Diversity and Convergence: The Accommodation of Ethnic and Legal Pluralism in the Carolingian Empire,” in *Empires and Communities in the Post-Roman and Islamic World, c. 400-1000 CE*, eds. Water Pohl and Rutger Kramer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 285; Rutger Kramer, “Franks, Romans, and Countrymen: Imperial Interests, Local Identities, and the Carolingian Conquest of Aquitaine,” in *Empires and Communities in the Post-Roman and Islamic World, c. 400-1000 CE*, eds. Water Pohl and Rutger Kramer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 318.

<sup>28</sup> Kramer, “Franks, Romans, and Countrymen,” 318.

<sup>29</sup> Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, 90.

external practices rather than of internal mentality.<sup>30</sup> From this angle, there is no reason to distinguish the kinds of holiness housed in local shrines, embodied by holy men, or embedded in rituals as incommensurate. This means that peasants across the empire, even if untouched by the burgeoning orthodoxy of religious practices, could access the channels through which the sacred was articulated.

The Christian pluralism advanced by Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, in a way anticipating the current characterization of the empire as diverse, contrasts Thomas F. X. Noble's conception of Carolingian Christianity as unifying, specifying, and sanctifying.<sup>31</sup> In an address given to the American Society of Church History in 2015, Noble argues that the Carolingians gathered the "many Christianities" into one meaningful whole, a process which eventually culminated into the creation of Roman Catholicism.<sup>32</sup> Religious life was set in the royal and imperial court, not in local communities, where bishops contributed to plans for reform and renewal.<sup>33</sup> Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean do not challenge that the Carolingian period experienced substantial changes in religiosity; but instead what emerged was less a fusion of state and church than a symbiosis of the secular and ecclesiastical.<sup>34</sup> Both the structural-functionalism of Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean and, to a lesser degree, the exacting teleology of Noble, fall into a historiographical trend that distinguishes between organized and unconstrained religiosity and personal and institutional forms of holiness. These separations obscure the dynamism of the Carolingian Church and its reforms in its linking of the peasant and their community to imperial political structures.

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<sup>30</sup> Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, 93.

<sup>31</sup> Noble, "Carolingian Reform," 288.

<sup>32</sup> Noble, "Carolingian Reform," 307.

<sup>33</sup> Noble, "Carolingian Reform," 293-294, 307.

<sup>34</sup> Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, 127.

A more complete conceptualization of Carolingian Christianity and selfhood must move away from binary oppositions. As Charles West argues, the root of this issue is the widespread habit of discussing religion, and particularly sanctity, through the Weberian concept of charisma.<sup>35</sup> In his reading of Amolo and the Dijon relics, published in 2010, West suggests an alternative formulation of charisma developed by the sociological theorist Edward Shils. This framework, also adopted by Shane Bobrycki in his 2018 analysis of the Dijon relics, defines the charismatic as a sense of being close to the center of society, not a trait of extraordinary personalities, as conceptualized by Weber.<sup>36</sup> Imperial officials, holy men, and objects could all embody the charismatic, each capable of invoking the “awe-inspiring centrality” of a social system, which included the values, norms, and beliefs to which members adhere or possess.<sup>37</sup> It is a new relationship between Christianity and imagined space that fuses the mechanisms of imperial expansion to the territorialization of the Church. As parishes stretched across the empire, so too did imperial reach. This in turn creates a useful analytical shift towards the geographical locations of the charismatic and its various articulations. Carolingian Christianity, in this sense, fits within a calibrated articulation of local and central interests. My research introduces the peasantry as an active actor engaging in the “awe-arousing centrality” developed by Shils and applied by West and Bobrycki. This is not to restrict the supernatural to the charismatic, to advance two distinct discourses of the hagiographical and the legal, but to cast otherworldly interactions as authentic articulations of social tensions.

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<sup>35</sup> West, “Unauthorised Miracles,” 308.

<sup>36</sup> West, “Unauthorised Miracles,” 310; Bobrycki, “The Flailing Women of Dijon,” 20-23; Edward Shils, “Charisma, Order, and Status,” *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 2 (1965): 200-202.

<sup>37</sup> West, “Unauthorised Miracles in Mid-Ninth-Century Dijon,” 309.

To view the Carolingian programs of reform as productive of the charismatic resituates the Church's role in relationships of power. This paper turns to Michel Foucault's theories of power to identify the peasant within the religious networks conceptualized by the imperial elite. Between 1977 and 1978, in a series of lectures at the Collège de France, Michel Foucault developed the theory of pastoral power. Pastoral power is the art of governing the collective faithful through a matrix of individualizing practices, namely penitence, self-examination, and confession.<sup>38</sup> Ecclesiastical authorities, or the "pastorate" according to Foucault, exercise pastoral power in pursuit of their flock's salvation. Central to this project is a Christian hermeneutics of the self: a verbal practice and struggle against the "interior Other," or Satan and his temptations. These struggles turn the soul into a visible object with a distinctive character and identity, malleable to external influences, and vulnerable to social norms.<sup>39</sup> Pastoral power is not incompatible with Shilsian charisma. Interactions between political authority, orthodox faith, and supernatural engagement in local communities demonstrate distribution of the sacred. Pastoral power is merely an analytical tool that illustrates how the ruling and clerical elites used religion to reorder the empire as the church, and to specify Carolingian Christianity as a social bond and a source of individual identity. By locating selfhood within these processes, Foucault alerts the medieval historian to the means by which Carolingian elites directed the periphery into the societal power relations of the imperial court.

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<sup>38</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège De France 1977-1978*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Michel Senellart, François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, and Arnold I. Davidson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 147-148, 168; Ben Golder, "Foucault and the Genealogy of Pastoral Power," *Radical Philosophy Review* 10 (2007), 166.

<sup>39</sup> Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 150-159; Lauri Siisiäinen, "Foucault, Pastoral Power, and Optics," *Critical Research on Religion* 3 (2015), 2-6.

Unspoken traces of this Foucauldian modal appear throughout Carolingian scholarship. Lynda L. Coon's "Collecting the Desert in the Carolingian West," published in 2006, argues that Carolingian "dynasts" appropriated the charismatic lure of Egyptian art through monastic regulations and the "imperialistic venture" of collecting relics, which also functioned as a vehicle of State propaganda.<sup>40</sup> John H. Arnold's *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, published in 2005, claims that Christian rituals of self-examination, such as confession, and of self-discipline, like fasting or abstinence, entwined ideas about selfhood and spirituality with ideas of the body.<sup>41</sup> Discourses of orthodox and illicit belief informed not only the way medieval people regulated one another, but also their own behaviors and thought processes. These imperialist ventures extended to the body. As Arnold points out, ecclesiastical authorities sought to police this behavior. Christian rituals of self-examination, such as confession, and of self-discipline, like fasting or abstinence, entwined ideas about selfhood and spirituality with ideas of the body.<sup>42</sup> Discourses of orthodox and illicit belief informed not only the way medieval people regulated one another, but also their own behaviors and thought processes. Through the horizontal, disciplinary power of social norms, Arnold concludes that the medieval religious community regulated body and mind to enable the formation of a specific Christian identity. More recent studies collaborate this claim. In his 2021 article, "Baptismal Renunciation and the Moral Reform of Charlemagne's Christian Empire," historian Yin Liu frames the renunciation of the devil in the rite of baptism as a discourse of moral reform that obligates the individual, regardless of social rank, to maintain

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<sup>40</sup> Lynda L. Coon, "Collecting the Desert in the Carolingian West," *Church History and Religious Culture* 86 (2006): 161.

<sup>41</sup> John H. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 187-189.

<sup>42</sup> Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, 187-189.

themselves fully in imperial and religious guidelines.<sup>43</sup> Further studies on political and moral fidelity argue that oaths and vows connected imperial subjects not only to kings and emperors but to the community they represented – the Franks.<sup>44</sup>

Evidence of pastoral power relies on sources that emphasize the *ought* – sermons, hagiographies, penitentials – each a normative prescription of emotional ideals. Through the history of emotions, Barbara H. Rosenwein contends the verticality of these bonds. In the thoughtful *Emotion Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, Barbara H. Rosenwein gives weight to the emotions conveyed in early medieval literature. Emotional communities are “groups in which people adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value – or devalue – the same or related emotions.”<sup>45</sup> These communities share elements of the common, Foucauldian discourse as a set of shared vocabularies and modes of thought with a disciplining function, that exist in social and/or textual spaces. Mayke de Jong’s seminal study, *The Penitential State*, published in 2009, advances a similar thesis of emotional unity, but centers it on the idea of collective guilt. In her research, de Jong argues that Emperor Louis the Pious’ public penance in 833 ordered the realm into a unique polity that fused religious rituals with public office, a penitential state organized by a need to combat the collective sins of the empire, “lest they incur God’s wrath.”<sup>46</sup> This powerful and expansive case of an emotional community used religious ritual as the primary tactic to address conflict, crisis, and questions of loyalty.<sup>47</sup> De Jong anchors imperial power in the Carolingian

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<sup>43</sup> Yin Liu, “Baptismal Renunciation and the Moral Reform of Charlemagne’s Christian Empire,” *Traditio* 76 (2021): 151.

<sup>44</sup> Esers and Reimitz, “Diversity and Convergence,” 291; Kramer, “Franks, Romans, and Countrymen,” 334.

<sup>45</sup> Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>46</sup> Mayke de Jong, *The Penitential State: Authority and Atonement in the Age of Louis the Pious, 814-840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 36-37.

<sup>47</sup> de Jong, *The Penitential State*, 120.

vocabulary of *correctio*, *admonition*, and *correptio*, focusing on elite reactions to the “new wave of imperial confidence” inaugurated by Louis’ correction.<sup>48</sup> Public penance rendered Louis the minister of the kingdom and caretaker of the church: a divine authority that empowered all ecclesiastical and secular leaders. By involving every subject of the empire in this atonement, fostering a sense of collective guilt, Louis interlocked the political and religious worlds. As Paul Kershaw envisaged, a spiritual understanding of the scripture was a political education: the well-being of the empire hinged upon piety and the ruler’s relationship with God.<sup>49</sup> Couching identity in terms of sin, guilt, and correction thus bridged the divides across the empire. It sets imperial and ecclesiastical officials and local communities within a web of interpersonal connections, with the court, and its hybrid political and religious offices, sitting at its middle.

These studies point to the formation of a *populus christianus*, its membership determined by one’s relationship with the ruler, not bishops, abbots, or priests. Except for Bobrycki and Arnold, all of the above scholarship fails to incorporate rural cultivators, unfree dependents, and lay women as actors in the creation of a sanctified Carolingian identity. De Jong and Rosenwein limit their analyses to elite dynamics: the influence of the patrimonial authority exercised by Carolingian kings, lords, and clergymen *on* kings, lords, and clergymen. Without extending the systemic parts of collective guilt and atonement to the peasants, de Jong restricts Carolingian Christianity to the unifying, horizontal force later articulated by Noble, whose earlier work inspired *The Penitential State*, and similarly does not include peasants.<sup>50</sup> Arnold, however, proposes that historians of religion “must engage with

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<sup>48</sup> de Jong, *The Penitential State*, 115

<sup>49</sup> Paul J. E. Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings: Peace, Power, and the Early Medieval Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 176.

<sup>50</sup> de Jong, *The Penitential State*, 3, 9.

those elements of faith that are less easily explicable and fit less happily with the core tenets of Christianity,” such as popular religious practices.<sup>51</sup> The purpose of his proposal is twofold. One reason is that the periphery of faith may inform the way in which the center *assumed* its central position; another is that the margins may give insights into the beliefs, attitudes, and ideas of lay people.<sup>52</sup> Medieval society normalized the supernatural as an omnipresent force. In the borderlands of sacred and secular power, like in the cases of saints and relics, marginalized lay people could instrumentalize the supernatural to wield power in their communities.<sup>53</sup>

Scholars of the Carolingian countryside attend to the nature of belief and not its function. This is, in part, a consequence of primary source material. Consider Agobard of Lyon’s letter condemning weather-magicians. Some historians frame these weathermakers as a critical feature of low-yielding agrarian societies.<sup>54</sup> Other scholars frame these magicians as vestiges of popular belief, or even rogue clerics extorting the faithful.<sup>55</sup> A more recent reading focuses less on the episode’s social context than the scriptural foundation of Agobard’s disbelief.<sup>56</sup> Agobard’s normative condemnations of deviant behavior, like all the learned discourse of Carolingian intellectuals, forces the dynamics of rural life to the periphery. There also exists in the historiographical tradition a tendency to privilege legal

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<sup>51</sup> Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, 8-9.

<sup>52</sup> Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, 8-9.

<sup>53</sup> Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, 97-99.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Edward Dutton, *Charlemagne’s Mustache and Other Cultural Clusters of a Dark Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 171-172; Kohl, “Peasant Agency and the Supernatural,” 107.

<sup>55</sup> Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*, 111-112; Rob Means, “Thunder over Lyon: Agobard, the Tempestarii and Christianity,” in *Paganism in the Middle Ages: Threat and Fascination*, eds. Carlos Steel, John Marenbon, and Werner Verbeke (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012), 165-166.

<sup>56</sup> Michael D. Bailey, “Magic and Disbelief in Carolingian Lyon,” in *Civilizations of the Supernatural: Witchcraft, Ritual, and Religious Experience in Late Antique, Medieval, and Renaissance Traditions*, ed. Fabrizio Conti (Budapest: Trivent Publishing, 2020), 186.



documents over miracle collections, hagiographies, and annals.<sup>57</sup> Formidable research concepts that press social systems into features of Carolingian economic organization, namely manorialism, are inescapable.<sup>58</sup> Charters, polyptychs, and estate surveys trap the countryside within a bureaucratic frame of reference that cannot account for the kinds of events, the kinds of conflict in rural communities, as hagiographical collections and annals evidence, that resist property-based social models.<sup>59</sup> In this respect, my research takes inspiration from Matthew Innes and Charles West, co-authors of “Saints and Demons in Carolingian Christianity” in 2019, who argue that “the Carolingian countryside was not necessarily as ‘legalized’ or ‘routinized’ as the received canons of charters and polyptychs (perhaps deliberately) make it seem.”<sup>60</sup> Obligations, status, and rights of ownership were not clear-cut.

Ultimately, my research diverges from previous works on the history of the Carolingian countryside in that it uses texts about the miraculous and the demonic to form an emergent picture of a distinctive rural model of social relations. There is a risk in framing the integration of rural communities into imperial structures as a “top-down” exercise of power with occasional acts of resistance. Hagiographical collections and annals attest to the rather real and vibrant internal dynamics of rural communities and detail how these villages operated within wider structures of authority. It is better, then, to characterize them as following a logic of “in-out” relations. In this “in-out” model, proposed by French historian Jean-Pierre Devroey, and advanced by Innes and West, relations of power are

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<sup>57</sup> Innes and West, “Saints and Demons,” 96.

<sup>58</sup> For recent usage of manorialism, see Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, 251.

<sup>59</sup> Innes and West, “Saints and Demons,” 97.

<sup>60</sup> Innes and West, “Saints and Demons,” 99.

multidirectional.<sup>61</sup> Villages and villagers were not monolithic groups, dominated by taxes and tithes, caged-in by an ideology of communal guilt, their local identities erased by a sacralized, imperial identity. Instead, all these element coalesced in the behavior of the peasants; their interactions with the supernatural an attempt to negotiate social tensions outside of formal law and without making direct challenges to positions of prominent parties.

### **Early Medieval *Idiota*: Carolingian Belief and Ignorance**

Monasteries and ecclesiastical institutions sought to concentrate the limits of supernatural authority. A central step was the mobilization of a secular ecclesiastical hierarchy towards the correction of the lives of the Franks.<sup>62</sup> Parish priests, living among the laity as representatives of the church, played an instrumental role in this project, and needed intimate knowledge of their communities to eliminate real or perceived ignorance of orthodox faith. Attempts to transcend or circumvent the boundaries of authorized religious experiences became an obsession of clerical authorities.<sup>63</sup> The *Roman Penitential*, composed by Bishop Haltigar of Cambrai in 830, highlights the efforts taken by local priests to unify and correct the souls of their flock. Haltigar, for example, pinned and disseminated several confessional prayers urging the faithful to lay their souls bare before God's gaze, beneath which "every heart trembles and all consciences are afraid."<sup>64</sup> His prescriptions of penance make frequent reference to the supernatural: for instance, anyone who acts as a "magician" for the sake of love faces half a year of penance, whereas those who cause death or conjure storms face seven years, and "ignorant" persons who eat or drink beside sacred places of

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<sup>61</sup> Jean-Pierre Devroey, *Puissants et misérables : système social et monde paysan dans l'Europe des Francs (Vie-IXe siècles)* (Brussels: Académie royale de Belgique, 2006), 497-498; Innes and West, "Saints and Demons," 92.

<sup>62</sup> Van Rhijn, "'Et hoc considerat episcopus'," 162.

<sup>63</sup> Devroey, *Puissants et misérables*, 591-593, 604-607.

<sup>64</sup> "The So-Called Roman Penitential of Haltigar," 300.

pagan origin must consume only bread or water for forty days.<sup>65</sup> Ignorance is a critical element of this corrective, pastoral power. Haltigar's condemnation of the uneducated mirrors a letter of instruction written thirty years earlier in the years around 800 by Archbishop Arn of Salzburg. Addressed to the clergy under his supervision, the Archbishop warns of *idiotiae* priests unable to understand scripture, and thus incapable of administering rituals, such as baptism or the Eucharist.<sup>66</sup> Orthodox communities of religious practice cannot suffer the improper, since, as Haltigar stresses, "if one member suffers anything, all the members suffer with it."<sup>67</sup> The *idiotiae*, or the uneducated, both lay and ecclesiastical, threaten to undermine the ideals of the Christian-Frankish world by their ignorance.

Activities outside the obvious bounds of Christian liturgical or material culture were thus dangerous practices. Against a backdrop of famines and natural disasters, Emperor Louis the Pious (778-840) convened a council to deliberate over the task of appeasing God. At the Council of Paris of 829, clerical and political authorities stressed that "there exist other most insidious evils, which, no doubt, remain with us from heathen rite."<sup>68</sup> Through these "various evils," such as sorcery, divination, and incantations, "the condition of the church weakened, and the kingdom put in jeopardy."<sup>69</sup> Control over magical forces, which invoked divine wrath, was a matter of physical and moral security. But such practices were not exclusive to the unfaithful. Hrabanus Maurus, a senior ecclesiastic of the Carolingian Church, famous for turning the abbey of Fulda into a scholastic hub, launched a critique of magic in his text, *On the Magic Arts*. Written in the early ninth century, *On the Magic Arts*

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<sup>65</sup> "The So-Called Roman Penitential of Haltigar," 305.

<sup>66</sup> Van Rhijin, "'Et hoc considerat episcopus'," 162.

<sup>67</sup> "The So-Called Roman Penitential of Haltigar," 297.

<sup>68</sup> Council of Paris, "Carolingian Catalogue of Magical Acts: Council of Paris" in *European Magic and Witchcraft: A Reader*, ed. and trans. Martha Rampton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 142.

<sup>69</sup> Council of Paris, 142.

denounces the divinations and “perverse” superstitions of “false Christians.”<sup>70</sup> Hrabanus Maurus writes, “anyone who does these evil things is an abomination” and will face annihilation, for “you must be perfect and without stain before the Lord your God.”<sup>71</sup> Carolingian Christianity, in this sense, made claims on the individual: following the faith required the navigation of controlled and carefully mediated eruptions of the otherworldly.

Peasants were not passive actors in the supernatural systems that populated the countryside. Among the most well-attested supernatural figures in pastoral literature are the *tempestarii*, a style of weather-magician paid by farmers to protect the fields from storms. In 816, Agobard, the Archbishop of Lyon, issued the most comprehensive treatment of the topic. In his treatise, *De grandine et tonitruis* (“On Hail and Thunder”), is evidence of peasants using the supernatural to articulate social tensions outside the boundaries circumscribed by the church. He relates that found four *tempestarii* within his custody, enchained by the very villagers for having failed to provide protection.<sup>72</sup> When faced with the extreme conditions of hailstorms, which could destroy a year’s harvest, rural communities needed a mechanism to cope with the randomness of nature. Peasants used weather-magicians as an alternative to existing systems of supernatural protection. In return for their services, these *tempestarii* received a share of the crops, an exchange which mirrored the payment of tithes to local priests.

Carolingian bishops wanted to routinize supernatural experiences to be less prone to error. In Lyon, Agobard observes that “nearly all men, noble and common, city and country

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<sup>70</sup> Hrabanus Maurus, “On the Magic Arts,” in *European Magic and Witchcraft: A Reader*, ed. and trans. Martha Rampton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 144

<sup>71</sup> Hrabanus Maurus, “On the Magic Arts,” 144.

<sup>72</sup> Agobard of Lyon, “On Hail and Thunder,” trans. W. J. Lewis, Internet History Sourcebooks Project. February 21, 2001. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/agobard-onhailandthunder.asp>.

dwellers, old and young, believe that hail and thunder can be produced by human will.”<sup>73</sup> It is not the improper practice itself that angers Agobard so much as the perceived idiocy of the peasants: “so much stupidity has already oppressed the wretched world that Christians now believe things so absurd that no one ever before could persuade the pagans to believe them, even though these pagans were ignorant of the Creator of all things.”<sup>74</sup> It is not that educated authorities, such as Agobard, were skeptical about the possibility of magic. In fact, he makes ample use of the Egyptian enchanters, Jamnes and Mabres, from the Old Testament, in his argument. What concerns Agobard is the perceived inability of the rural laity to engage with proper practices.<sup>75</sup> He links the *tempestarii* and their fee to the community’s failure to pay tithe, refusing to recognize that the peasants sought an alternative form of protection.<sup>76</sup> The violent reaction towards the captured *tempestarii* is no surprise. It was not through mindless ignorance that the peasants stumbled into the magicians’ fees but a conscious navigation of agricultural life. They expected meaningful returns, and when the *tempestarii* failed to uphold their end of the deal, the peasants responded, receiving prompt correction by ecclesiastical authorities.

Supernatural forces existed on a continuum of permissibility that corresponded with the political aims of the empire. Archbishop Agobard, despite his disappointment in the perceived spiritual and intellectual capabilities of his congregation, never demanded physical punishment. It was him, after all, who saved the *tempestarii* from mob violence. Frankish expansion into Saxony, however, not yet tied to dense ecclesiastical networks, lacked the unifying religious force present in Lyon. Emperor Charlemagne’s *Admonito generalis*

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<sup>73</sup> Agobard of Lyon, “On Hail and Thunder,” sec. XVI.

<sup>74</sup> Agobard of Lyon, “On Hail and Thunder,” sec. XVI.

<sup>75</sup> Bailey, “Magic and Disbelief in the Carolingian Lyon,” 197.

<sup>76</sup> Palmer, “Defining Paganism in the Carolingian World,” 407.

(*General Admonition*) in 789, for comparison, commanded magicians and enchanter within the empire to repent or face charges of death.<sup>77</sup> Reactions against the surviving paganism of Saxony, despite continuous waves of missions and military ventures, culminated in draconian measures, no matter the severity of the crime.<sup>78</sup> In the “Capitulary on the Saxon Territories” (c. 775-790), cannibalism and disloyalty are comparable offenses, the same as demonic sacrifices and a refusal to undergo baptism.<sup>79</sup> Emperor Charlemagne’s *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae* (c. 792) used accusations of paganisms for political gains in newly-conquered Saxony. Ironically, evidence for belief in cannibal witches is not in Saxon texts but in the Franks’ *Pactus legis Salicae* issued by King Clovis sometime between 507 and 511. Likewise, the decrees on pagan conspiracy against Christians, and condemnation against cremation practices, were efforts to enforce a Frankish culture.<sup>80</sup> Disloyalty within the realm posed a similar problem. In 834, his great-grandson, Lothar II, had a rival’s sister put in a cask and thrown into the River Saône as a witch.<sup>81</sup> These cases make evident that the supernatural, not without its risks, played an integral role in Carolingian systems of power. Charlemagne’s capitularies indicate that the concentration of legal and religious authority applied not only to local churches, but also, when faced with external threats, the entire empire.

### **Authority, Power, and the Pastorate: Constructing the Carolingian World**

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<sup>77</sup> Sophie Page, “Medieval Magic,” in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Witchcraft and Magic*, ed. Owen Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 30.

<sup>78</sup> “The Capitulary on the Saxon Territories,” in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader*, ed. Paul Edward Dutton (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1996), 58-61.

<sup>79</sup> “The Capitulary on the Saxon Territories,” 59.

<sup>80</sup> Palmer, “Defining Paganism,” 414; “The Capitulary on the Saxon Territories,” 58-59.

<sup>81</sup> Pierre Riché, *Daily Life in the World of Charlemagne*, trans. Jo Ann McNamara (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 184.

Contemporary imagination sought to make the empire's rise inevitable, existence natural, and legitimacy divine. Carolingian authority, from its inception in 751 to its dissolution in 888, relied on establishing political boundaries as religious boundaries. Pepin the Short, first of the Carolingian dynasty, usurped the Frankish throne from the Merovingian monarch Childeric III in 751. Two years later, Pepin received papal anointment as King of the Franks, which apologists later backdated to coincide with his coup.<sup>82</sup> Charlemagne's imperial coronation by Pope Leo III in 800 replaced the title of king with emperor. It is by virtue of this papal appointment that the Carolingians claimed not only Francia but also the Roman Empire. Emperor Louis II confirmed as much to the doubtful Byzantine emperor Basil I in 871, situating the Franks as the surrogates of the Romans: "When the branches were broken, we were grafted onto them; when we were wild olives, we were joined to their roots and became fat with olives. We say therefore that the branches were broken so that we might be grafted on."<sup>83</sup> These texts individualized the Carolingian realm coherent historical entity with divine legitimacy. Louis believed that the Carolingians "derived this title [Emperor of the Romans] from the Romans...whose people and whose city we divinely received to govern, and whose church, the mother of all churches, we received to defend and raise up."<sup>84</sup> By the mid-ninth century, the propagation of educational and religious reform self-consciously redefined the Frankish world as Carolingian.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Carolingian refers to "the family of Charles" (Latin: *Carolus*) – named for Charles Martel, the progenitor of the dynasty and father of Pepin. See Marios Costambeys, Matthew Innes, and Simon MacLean. *The Carolingian World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3, 61.

<sup>83</sup> Louis II, "The Letter of Emperor Louis II of Italy to Emperor Basil I of Byzantium, C. 871," trans. Charles West, May 2016, <http://turbulentpriests.group.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Emperor-Louis-II-of-Italy-to-Emperor-Basil-I.pdf>, para. 12.

<sup>84</sup> Louis II, "The Letter of Emperor Louis II of Italy to Emperor Basil I of Byzantium, C. 871," para. 12.

<sup>85</sup> Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, 14.

As places of learning and education, rural parishes and monasteries were key elements in the imagined and material construction of the Carolingian world. Monasteries contributed to the exponential increase in the production of historical records, such as annals, that sought to locate the dynasty within schemes of long-term historical development.<sup>86</sup> Early Carolingian historians politicized ethnic identity on a Christian foundation as far back as the 720s, when Charles Martel, Charlemagne's grandfather, controlled Merovingian politics. The *Liber historiae Francorum* is the only contemporary narrative history from the late seventh and early eighth centuries. It tracks the history of the Franks from their legendary beginnings up until 642, when the perspective shifts to an account of events up to 721, told from the perspective of the Frankish aristocracy.<sup>87</sup> Historians did not write the LHF, completed in 727, to flatter Charles Martel but to guarantee the Frankish elites a position in the new political constellation that featured the Carolingians at its center.<sup>88</sup> These chronicles did not just expand the political horizons of Frankish solidarity; they also reflect the geographical expansion of a shared Frankish past.<sup>89</sup>

As rural monasteries populated the countryside, the Carolingian realm tied its diverse, distinct regions to the religious and political hierarchies of the empire. As Charlemagne expanded east of the Rhine and south of the Loire, he launched a systemic policy of imposing imperial lordships over local elites by assuming control over key monasteries.<sup>90</sup> In 773, for example, Charlemagne granted the strategic fiscal estate of Heppenheim to the Abbey of Lorsch, effectively plugging Carolingian authority into local currents of power. But this

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<sup>86</sup> Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, 269.

<sup>87</sup> Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, 19.

<sup>88</sup> Esders and Reimitz, "Diversity and Convergence," 287.

<sup>89</sup> Esders and Reimitz, "Diversity and Convergence," 287.

<sup>90</sup> Matthew Innes, "People, Places and Power in the Carolingian World," in *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Mayke de Jong and Frans Theuvs (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 418.



transfer of property, as Matthew Innes reveals, came only after Charlemagne used a local land dispute to impose royal power over Lorsch.<sup>91</sup> Charlemagne's patronage, in effect, dismantled the control of local elites over monastic networks, turning the lands of Heppenheim and Lorsch, both built on the rural residences of local counts, over to the hands of monks under royal lordship.<sup>92</sup> New monasteries, like Lorsch, gained property rights at an unprecedented scale as local elites, gifting smaller, familial houses of worship, created centers and complexes of spiritual worship.<sup>93</sup> Carolingian power strategies thus centered on bids to position rural parishes as constituent cells of a network of imperial patronage, reifying the collective Frankish identity mobilized by chroniclers.

Monastic networks embedded the countryside in imperial structures, as evident in a return to Kempton's demon. In 858, As villagers resolved to put the suspected arsonist and thief to death, the archbishop of Mainz sent priests and deacons, armed with relics and crosses, to "expel the wicked spirit from that place."<sup>94</sup> These ecclesiastical authorities created a through-line between the village and wider Christian society: entangling the small worlds of the countryside into religious and political hierarchies. At Kempton, the priests and deacons, functioning as representatives of the imperial church, sought to heal a divided community through ecclesiastical peace-making, a concerted attempt to impose the contemporary political theology of Christian peace.<sup>95</sup> Instead of slaying the accused, as desired by the locals, the clerics performed an exorcism, reciting the litany and spreading holy water around the building where the demon was most active – all to no effect. For the

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<sup>91</sup> Innes, "People, Place and Power," 418.

<sup>92</sup> Innes, "People, Place and Power," 419.

<sup>93</sup> Innes, "People, Place and Power," 412.

<sup>94</sup> *The Annals of Fulda*, 44.

<sup>95</sup> Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings*, 177, 220; Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, 269.

demon, “the old enemy,” as labeled by the annal, threw stones at the exorcists and nearby villagers, wounding several, and forcing the clerics to abandon Kempton.<sup>96</sup> After their departure, the demon claimed to control an anonymous priest, whose liturgical cloak shielded him from the exorcism, and continued to spread disaster until the complete abandonment of the village.<sup>97</sup>

Kempton and its demon fit within the social networks around the archbishopric of Mainz; the *Annals of Fulda* itself a delicate negotiation of the convoluted politics of the year 858, mapping the tensions caused by the political stances taken by successive archbishops, including the incumbent, Charles of Mainz. Crisis plagued the region. Charles’ uncles, Louis the German and Charles the Bald, were at war over the region of Aquitaine, and the martial scandals of his cousin, King Lothar II, also demanded his attention.<sup>98</sup> Kempton, despite its potential for political allegory, is a complex, inconsistent account that serves as a vivid reminder of the dire consequences of moral degradation. Its narrative betrays a truth, mainly that in the Carolingian period it was possible to imagine peasants as guided by the passions of retributive emotions.

More immediately, the story reveals the limits of independent peasant action and the perversion of imperial mediators through ignorant action. Although the community exercised some degree of social action, it was neither sufficient nor within the villagers’ total control. Kempton, much like Lorsch, belonged to the networks of imperial rule, meaning it had to negotiate with the agencies of the Carolingian political and religious hierarchy.<sup>99</sup> The villagers exercised mechanisms of dispute settlement, primarily policing and exclusion, by

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<sup>96</sup> *The Annals of Fulda*, 44.

<sup>97</sup> *The Annals of Fulda*, 44.

<sup>98</sup> Innes and West, “Saints and Demons,” 88.

<sup>99</sup> Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, 270.

arranging an ordeal and banishing the afflicted to the borderlands of the community. The village was not an isolated unit. Murder transgressed the Carolingian political theology, forcing intervention on behalf of the church to prevent moral and social disruption. This community was so riven with conflict that its problems became an opportunity for the archbishop of Mainz's agents to penetrate the village structure. Yet the clerics of Mainz also failed. Ignorance threatens territorial affairs through the danger of demonic entryism. As the *Annals of Fulda* recounts, a corrupt priest slept with the bailiff's daughter, delivering him into the demon's servitude, and unleashing catastrophic disorder on the villagers.<sup>100</sup> This story encapsulates Haltigar's fears – local priests must inculcate the strict standards of church reform or else the parish collapses, and its members descend into blood-thirsty barbarity. The Kempten story serves a model of paternalistic lordship and pastoral care.<sup>101</sup> If the realm was to endure, it could suffer few *idiotas*.<sup>102</sup>

Ignorance, then, became the target of the Carolingian Church as its legitimacy depended on collective recognition. Anything on the contrary, like corrupt priests or murderous peasants, threatened the stability of the empire. Defining aristocratic and ecclesiastical rule in these terms meant that individuals failing to conduct themselves as agents of a Christian empire ought to receive strict correction.<sup>103</sup> As the *Annals of Fulda* warns, “nothing is hidden which will not be revealed.”<sup>104</sup> Carolingian elites, as ardent reformers of religious practice and social morality, attempted to establish their influence in material and otherworldly affairs. To act beyond the boundaries of legitimate belief brought

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<sup>100</sup> *The Annals of Fulda*, 44. See also Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, 270.

<sup>101</sup> Innes and West, “Saints and Demons,” 88.

<sup>102</sup> Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, 431.

<sup>103</sup> Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, 270.

<sup>104</sup> *The Annals of Fulda*, 44.

with its spiritual and mortal danger. Illicit practices, be it murder or weather-magic, obscured the soul, circumventing the established practices of penitence, self-examination, and confession, and thus rendered the self incompatible with the networks of power that supported the Carolingian world.

### **Supernatural Appeals: Intercessions of the Divine, Demonic, and All In-between**

Peasants used the supernatural as an alternative articulation of social tensions. Sometime in the mid-ninth century, in an unnamed village in northern Francia, Hubert the Priest recorded in a letter that Saint Vaast visited a carpenter named Dagobert. Near-death, soon to depart without penance or communion, the saint restored Dagobert to health, but with a catch.<sup>105</sup> The nephew of Imbod, the village priest, Hubert shared some responsibility for the villagers' pastoral care. Shortly after Hubert administered Dagobert's final rights, as demanded by Carolingian church legislation, Saint Vaast commanded the carpenter to "fearlessly repeat all things" revealed to him in a vision, passing messages that spoke "the truth of the matter as it is" to people in his village.<sup>106</sup> Through Dagobert, Saint Vaast commanded the village lord to restore some property to the nearby monastery of St-Vaast, and the local judge to not torment the villagers without cause. Some of these messages also penetrated the village's internal affairs. Indeed, rural communities functioned outside of the strategies imposed upon them, even though subjection was an important element of imperial cohesion. Imbod, the local priest, needed correction; the mayor, Orcius, received punishment for a village scandal; and divine forces reprimanded an informal elite named Ebruin, blinding

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<sup>105</sup> Hubert the Priest. "The Appearance of St Vaast," trans. by Charles West, <http://history.dept.shef.ac.uk/translations/medieval/saint-vaast/>, para. 2.

<sup>106</sup> Innes and West, "Saints and Demons," 84; Hubert the Priest, "The Appearance of St Vaast," para. 4.

one eye and paralyzing his daughter, for his part in the scandal, which concerned the theft of slaves over whom the saint claimed ownership.<sup>107</sup>

Hubert's letter was an appeal, at the expense of his uncle, Imbod, to a monastic patron and a call to mobilize the networks that connect the village to the wider Carolingian church. Hubert had explicit ties to the nearby monastery of St-Vaast, the target of Orcius and Ebruin's thievery, and the village lord's territorial dispute. Addressed to the monk Haimin, his "dearest instructor," Hubert's letter functions as a corrective cudgel that individualizes and illuminates the sins of the community.<sup>108</sup> Dagobert's vision, presenting the complex anatomy of a conflicted rural community, is an indirect critique of the monastery's neglected claims.<sup>109</sup> Hubert's letter articulates social tensions and advocates for dispute resolution through the divine and miraculous, even at the margins of structured and hierarchical authority. For Hubert the Priest, already in a place of relative power as a learned individual, Saint Vaast offered a means to manipulate relations within his village. Irrespective of Hubert's motives, however, the village existed with its own sense of history and obligations. Local traditions claim that King Dagobert, a Merovingian ruler, founded the village, and office-holders, poor laborers, and informal elites all interacted with patterns of local power mediated by the miraculous.

Miracle collections documented the extensive decision-making behind saintly patronage, with the most explicit examples coming from Einhard's *Translation and Miracles of the Blessed Martyrs, Marcellinus and Peter* (c. 830-831). At the tombs of Marcellinus and

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<sup>107</sup> Hubert the Priest, "The Appearance of St Vaast, para 6-8. See also Innes and West, "Saints and Demons," 84.

<sup>108</sup> Hubert the Priest, "The Appearance of St Vaast," para. 1.

<sup>109</sup> Charles West, "Visions in a Ninth-Century Village: An Early Medieval Microhistory," *History Workshop Journal* 81 (2016): 8.

Peter in Seligenstadt, divine and secular intercession were inextricable. Einhard, the famed biographer of Charlemagne and a powerful courtier, wrote extensively of the Roman relics housed at his monastery in Seligenstadt, boasting of the many visitors that came from near and far. Stories like the deaf girl from Bourges, for example, who travelled nearly 400 miles to Seligenstadt, evidence that peasants could access different shrines, and that saints offered help to everyone, regardless of status.<sup>110</sup>

Even unfree dependents of different monastic complexes, despite being the property of other saints themselves, received divine attention at Seligenstadt, but not without danger. Einhard reports the travels of a girl from Höchst, a village owned by the monastery of Lorsch, possessed by a demon named Wiggo. With the voice of the girl, Wiggo exclaimed in Latin that he was the devil's disciple, and launched into a damnation of the empire's moral condition. Wiggo targeted the Carolingian elites, even Louis the Pious, explaining he derived his demonic power from "the wickedness of [the Franks] and because of the various sins of those appoint [to rule] over them."<sup>111</sup> By seeking Marcellinus and Peter, the girl and her family abandoned Saint Nazarius, the patron of Lorsch, demonstrating that the rural laity had some choice in deciding where to receive miracles.

Einhard's *Translation* reveals that peasants used intercessions of the divine to challenge elite networks of power, especially those connected to a saint's shrine. In one example, Einhard urged a count named Poppo to spare two poor men found guilty of poaching. In his appeal, Einhard stresses the spiritual and moral opportunity created by the crime, as it led the criminals to the tombs of Marcellinus and Peter.<sup>112</sup> By accessing the

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<sup>110</sup> Einhard, "The Translation and Miracles of the Blessed Martyrs, Marcellinus and Peter," in *Charlemagne's Courtier The Complete Einhard*, ed. Paul Edward Dutton (Orchard Park: Broadview Press, 2006), 95.

<sup>111</sup> Einhard, "Marcellinus and Peter," 104.

<sup>112</sup> Einhard, "Marcellinus and Peter," 133.

saints' shrine and, by extension, Einhard's ear, the two men of lower status indirectly engaged in elite power dynamics. Similarly, two servants of the St-Martin cathedral in Mainz ask the martyrs to save their brother from heavy corporal punishment. Upon hearing their plea, Einhard advised an estate manager to allow the murderer's brothers to pay a *wergild* to the victim's family.<sup>113</sup> These brothers sought out Einhard as a figure of exemplary political and spiritual status, representing the confluence of choice and intercession. The links between the saintly and secular were apparent even to those of lower status.<sup>114</sup> The sacralization of political posts, initiated by historical narratives and perfected by Louis the Pious, rendered Einhard a well-connected host in the physical as well as in the spiritual world.

Miracle collections ultimately existed for the benefit and advantage of the community, following dominant narrative tropes that reordered documentary materials of the countryside. In his text, Einhard presented two versions of the same event that occurred on June 19, 828. Einhard heard the first account from George, a Venetian cleric and the *rector* of St-Saulve in Valenciennes, entrusted to transport some of his relics. According to this story, George let the oxen graze a meadow by the roadside. A peasant who owned the field confronted the cleric with a pitchfork, asking "with irritation" why the animals were on his land.<sup>115</sup> Before the conflict escalated, George demanded the peasant, described as a hunchbacked with a swollen jaw, prostrate himself before the relics, which miraculously cured his toothache, much to the community's delight.<sup>116</sup> The next entry in Einhard's text, however, is a copy of George's written account of the same miracle. In this version, the

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<sup>113</sup> Einhard, "Marcellinus and Peter," 138.

<sup>114</sup> Kohl, "Peasant Agency and the Supernatural," 109.

<sup>115</sup> Einhard, "Marcellinus and Peter," 116.

<sup>116</sup> Einhard, "Marcellinus and Peter," 117.

confrontation is gone, the peasant unarmed and passive, leaving only the toothache and its cure.<sup>117</sup> Einhard admits to reshaping George's oral report to reflect the miracle's social context. In George's written account, however, there is no communal celebration, in which "a great crowd of people poured into the meadow and a throng from the surrounding area gathered together to give thanks," just the cleric and the peasant.<sup>118</sup> These competing accounts illustrate that miracle compilers sought to dominate narratives of collective unity, peace, and spirituality, even at the expense of source materials.

Early medieval Frankish society organized around such communal gatherings, especially in religious behavior, where notions of legitimate worship were critical concerns of the elite. Aristocratic and ecclesiastical domination was not total, the lines between proper and subversive holiness not always clear. In the early 840s, for example, Archbishop Amolo of Lyon received strange news of disturbing miracles occurring inside the church of St-Bénigne in Dijon, Burgundy. The popular draw of relics is not a surprise; Einhard packs the whole fourth chapter of his "Translation" with accounts of crowds observing miracles and giving alms. Even the physical spaces of the cult of relics as monks built massive crypts and guesthouses or moved relics to strategic sites to accommodate crowds.<sup>119</sup> What distinguishes these relics was their power. Around the bones of an unknown saint, brought to the village by traveling monks, bruised women convulsed on the ground, unable to leave the premises.<sup>120</sup> Bishop Theobald of Langres, the bishop responsible for Dijon, sought advice from Amolo. The archbishop, while uncomfortable with the suspect origins of the relics and the

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<sup>117</sup> Einhard, "Marcellinus and Peter," 118.

<sup>118</sup> Einhard, "Marcellinus and Peter," 117.

<sup>119</sup> Bobrycki, "The Flailing Women of Dijon," 24; Einhard, "Marcellinus and Peter," 80-83.

<sup>120</sup> Amolo of Lyon, "The Letter of Amolo Archbishop of Lyon to Theobald Bishop of Langres, Concerning Suspect Relics (c.841x844)," trans. Charles West, [http://history.dept.shef.ac.uk/translations/medieval/amolo/#\\_edn6](http://history.dept.shef.ac.uk/translations/medieval/amolo/#_edn6), sec. 2.



“preposterous” traveling monks, did not categorically deny the sanctity of the bones.<sup>121</sup>

Instead, he insisted that they “should be totally removed from the holy buildings” and buried outside in the church courtyard, or under a wall, or in some hidden place, and the women sent home.<sup>122</sup> Amolo’s justifications are lucid and reflective – a rational approximation of the situation not dissimilar from Agobard, his predecessor, and the conflict with weather magicians. Outside the church, “some reverence may be shown to them, since they are said to be holy, yet also, since they are entirely unknown, the uneducated populace should not have any opportunity for error and superstition.”<sup>123</sup> The crucial point here is that the women afflicted by the relics did not engage in any illicit or improper supernatural forces. Instead, it is that communal veneration, specifically the presence of crowds, which placed the non-elite at the center stage of public events, attracted the concern of early medieval elites.

Traditionally, historians read the events of Dijon as a scandal accompanying the Carolingian expansion of the cult of relics. Crowds followed the transfer of relics, an important form of publicity and legitimization that provided monetary profits to shrines, monasteries, or churches and bolstered their authority.<sup>124</sup> But these relic cults also played a role in local power politics. In the late 830s and 840s, tensions fractured the relationship between the monks of St. Bénigne and the bishops of Langres. In the mid-eight century, the bishopric shifted from Dijon to Langres, granting the monks a considerable degree of autonomy from their Bavarian bishops who ruled from afar, until Theobald’s predecessor, Alberic (d. 838), transferred personnel from St. Bénigne to Bèze and to St. Mammès.<sup>125</sup> After

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<sup>121</sup> Kohl, “Peasant Agency and the Supernatural,” 105-106.

<sup>122</sup> Amolo of Lyon, “Concerning Suspect Relics,” sec. 3.

<sup>123</sup> Amolo of Lyon, “Concerning Suspect Relics,” sec. 3.

<sup>124</sup> Kohl, “Peasant Agency and the Supernatural,” 106; Bobrycki, “The Flailing Women of Dijon,” 20.

<sup>125</sup> Bobrycki, “The Flailing Women of Dijon,” 21.

Alberic's death, the promotion of new relic cults, West and Bobrycki argue, became a way for the monks of St. Bénigne to regain control, wresting the community out of Theobald's admittedly notional authority.<sup>126</sup> While this argument explains why the monks encouraged the crowds, it does not account for the behavior of the "three, or even four hundred women" that flocked to St. Bénigne.<sup>127</sup>

Despite the severity of their actions, the behavior of the St-Bénigne crowds was comprehensible in the language of communal guilt. Dijon was a pivotal theater in the civil war that plagued the 840s. In Burgundy, the grandsons of Charlemagne – Lothar, Louis the German, and Charles the Bald – seized resources, pressed men into service, and fought battles that spilled the conflict into local communities.<sup>128</sup> Amolo himself met with King Charles in January 842. Viking invaders also posed a threat from the North. Amidst this disorder, it is not a surprise that the central figures of this event were people at the social margin. "Compelled by necessity of hunger," these "unrespectable and wicked little people," as Amolo describes them, sought out the relics to supply their physical needs.<sup>129</sup> It was not only expected but demanded by capitularies that parish churches, and in fact the entire kingdom, provide "shelter and fire and water to pilgrims traversing our country in God's name, or to anyone traveling for the love of God or for the safety of his own soul."<sup>130</sup> Famines, war, and invasion, however, disrupted this social norm. As the Carolingian political theology posits, disaster arose from the misalign virtues of the ruler, the consequences of conflict a divine response to the sins of the populace. War and greed threatened the cohesion

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<sup>126</sup> West, "Unauthorised Miracles," 310; Bobrycki, "The Flailing Women of Dijon,"

<sup>127</sup> Amolo of Lyon, "Concerning Suspect Relics," sec. 2.

<sup>128</sup> Bobrycki, "The Flailing Women of Dijon," 27.

<sup>129</sup> Amolo of Lyon, "Concerning Suspect Relics," sec. 4.

<sup>130</sup> "The General Capitulary for the *Missi* from 802," in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader*, ed. Paul Edward Dutton (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1996), 66.

of the empire. In this respect, only bolstered by the Lenten context of the events, the violent reaction to these relics was not an outburst of mass hysteria. Rather the relics inspired physical action which mirrored monastic corporal penance.<sup>131</sup> Without access to structures of social aid, these worshipers used the supernatural to attend to crisis and rectify spiritual tensions.

While not explicit acts of resistance, the crowds simply making use of the limited resources available to them, this behavior challenged the account of Carolingian society given by its dominant elites. At St-Bénigne, the deviant religious practices of marginalized social groups indirectly threatened the imagined core of the Carolingian empire. Lorsch, Kempten, Lyon, Dijon, Seligenstadt – each of these villages represent the establishment of rural parishes as the central units of the empire. Exploring faith outside routinized boundaries, both spiritual and territorial, eroded the constructed differences social statuses and parish communities maintained by ecclesiastical elites.<sup>132</sup> Amolo's letter fits within the pastoral tradition, set by ecclesiastics like Haltigar and Agobard, that located the ignorant, or the *idiot*a, as obstacles to the unifying force of Carolingian Christianity. Amolo's paramount concern is with the "wicked little people," compelled by hunger or greed to ignore orthodox forms of collective, religious behavior.<sup>133</sup> These people, deluded by "worthless belief," are pawns in the "deceptions and mockery of demons," permitted by God to spread a pestilence of illusion and deception among the ignorant.<sup>134</sup> He even ordered the crowd flogged, should they not disperse.<sup>135</sup> Each congregation ought to remain within the boundaries of their own

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<sup>131</sup> Bobrycki, "The Flailing Women of Dijon," 30.

<sup>132</sup> Devroey, *Pussiants et misérables*, 502.

<sup>133</sup> Amolo of Lyon, "Concerning Suspect Relics," sec. 4.

<sup>134</sup> Amolo of Lyon, "Concerning Suspect Relics," sec. 5.

<sup>135</sup> Amolo of Lyon, "Concerning Suspect Relics," sec. 5.

parish, venerating local shrines and realizing spiritual wellness through local channels.<sup>136</sup>

These pilgrims, devoted to the “vanity of novelties,” disturbed the flow of resources that fueled pastoral expansion. The tithes and gifts owed to local parishes funnel into the pockets of the “greedy” priests of St-Bénigne.<sup>137</sup> Amolo’s letter illuminates peasant devotion to relics as much centrality of pastoral care in the exercise of Carolingian authority. Amolo’s denunciations of the St-Bénigne crowds reflects the Carolingian missions to disseminate the sacred across the countryside within the circumscribed network of the parish and the parish priest.<sup>138</sup>

Emphasis on the “rustic” elements of Theobald’s report undermined permissible behavior like collective worship, almsgiving, and penance. Tropes of female and rural manipulability delegitimize the crowd. Among the “wicked women” were “not just girls but even married women, both young and old, respectable and unrespectable,” all unable to leave presence of the relics.<sup>139</sup> The relics did not only recapitulate religious behavior in abnormal circumstances. They also perverted the social unit of the household. Amolo expressed disbelief that holy martyrs would ever separate wives from husbands, mothers from children, or young girls from parents.<sup>140</sup> Amolo’s gendered vilification bounds women to “the house of their menfolk,” just as the relics, in similar function, physically bounded them to the premises of the church.<sup>141</sup> By targeting alternative dispute-processing actions, Amolo makes his desires clear: lay communities must access the awe-arousing effects of the relics through authorized ecclesiastical channels lest the social fabric of the empire come under threat.

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<sup>136</sup> Amolo of Lyon, “Concerning Suspect Relics,” sec. 7.

<sup>137</sup> Amolo of Lyon, “Concerning Suspect Relics,” sec. 5.

<sup>138</sup> West, “Unauthorised Miracles,” 310.

<sup>139</sup> Amolo of Lyon, “Concerning Suspect Relics,” sec. 2.

<sup>140</sup> Amolo of Lyon, “Concerning Suspect Relics,” sec. 5.

<sup>141</sup> Amolo of Lyon, “Concerning Suspect Relics,” sec. 5, sec. 2.

## Conclusion

Sometime in year 1941 or 1942, the esteemed historian Marc Bloch professed “what a shock it might be if, instead of poring laboriously over the jumbled – and probably artificial – terminology of the Carolingian manorial scrolls and capitulaires, we were able to take a walk through a village of that time, overhearing the peasants discussing their status amongst themselves.”<sup>142</sup> Thanks in part to the publication of new documents, and the expansion of archaeological data, historians now approach the early medieval countryside with a transformative set of tools.<sup>143</sup> Perhaps the most impactful of these changes, however, is the willingness of some historians, like Innes, West, and Bobrycki, to engage with the Frankish countryside through non-legal material.<sup>144</sup> Through interactions with the supernatural, social tensions found articulation outside routinized, bureaucratic means.

Clerical authorities, like Haltigar, Agobard, and Amolo, expected unorthodox beliefs. Royal, aristocratic, and ecclesiastic elites formed across the countryside a matrix of patronage networks: these vertical ties between the rural parish and a wider Christian community redefined the Frankish world as Carolingian. External discourses, like the growing genre of pastoral literature, tried to make claims upon early medieval individuals. Rulers like Charlemagne and Louis the Pious sacralized political authority by melding the collective sins of the people with the prosperity of the empire, and by trying to make a holy people through the correction the *idiot*. Carolingian religion resituated the empire *as* the church: a political theology that was as much a totalizing discourse of moral reform as it was a cultural expression of a specific, Frankish identity; an institution of political and religious

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<sup>142</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Penguin Random House, 1953), 166.

<sup>143</sup> Innes and West also reflect on Bloch's comment. See Innes and West, “Saints and Demons,” 67-70.

<sup>144</sup> See

power as much as a social system of imperial hierarchies. Ultimately, it sought to embed rural communities within a supernatural landscape that demanded interactions with the otherworldly to negotiate local and imperial interests.

Hagiographical collections and historical records situate rural communities at a nexus of interpersonal relations and imperial hierarchies. In Lyon, peasants sought the *tempestarii* as protections against storms, and in Seligenstadt, peasants found protection from conflict within saints' shrines. From the margins of political organization and religious education emerged a unique mechanism to participate in the empire. Hundreds of women congregated at Dijon, the crowd mirroring forms of collective religious behavior: tithes to the wrong people, veneration of the wrong saints, and charity at the wrong place. For some, as with Dagobert and Hubert, village tensions articulated through the miraculous, and for the villagers of Kempton, it was a matter of life or death.

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