

One of the most significant features of this book is its wide-ranging analysis and the way that Baraz deftly weaves his argument over long periods of time. For any scholar working on violent events within medieval societies, this book will be thought-provoking and will spark debate over whether his definitions of violence and cruelty retain their validity in different contexts than the ones discussed. Such an historical enterprise will add significant weight and depth to our understanding of medieval and early modern European societies. Overall this is an important book that adds immensely to our understanding of how medieval peoples made sense of their world.

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Barnwell, P. S. and Marco Mostert, eds, *Political Assemblies in the Earlier Middle Ages* (Studies in the Early Middle Ages; 7), Turnhout, Brepols, 2003; hardback; pp. ix, 213; RRP €60; ISBN 2503513417.

Most of the papers in this seventh volume in Brepols' early medieval series were originally presented in themed sessions at the 1999 and 2000 International Medieval Congresses at Leeds. As each paper addresses a different geographical area, the book is a mine of useful comparative information about gatherings of peoples associated with decision-making.

Paul Barnwell follows his very general 'Political Assemblies: Introduction' with a paper on 'Kings, Nobles, and Assemblies in the Barbarian Kingdoms'. He reviews the sources for royal assemblies amongst seventh-century Franks, Lombards and Visigoths. He highlights the practice of kings and nobles reaching decisions in a smaller gathering, which were then acclaimed by a broader assembly to give the impression of consensus, a practice which is a recurrent theme throughout many of the papers in this book.

Stuart Airlie ('Talking Heads: Assemblies in Early Medieval Germany') introduces another recurrent theme of the book, the coincidence of many decision-making assemblies with musters of armed forces, with the army sometimes the major component of the assembly. Airlie also raises the intriguing question of the importance of individual voices in the context of assembly, which can occasionally be traced in the sources.

In 'Assemblies and Charters in Late Anglo-Saxon England', Charles Insley seeks an understanding of the relationship between assemblies and charters in

the tenth and eleventh centuries. He concludes, interestingly, that charters did not simply record transactions made at or announced to assemblies, but could additionally play a significant symbolic role as physical objects.

Stefan Brink's incongruously named 'Legal Assemblies and Judicial Structure in Early Scandinavia' takes a primarily onomastic and topographical approach to the identification of assembly sites in Scandinavia. As well as pinpointing individual locations, he discusses the natural and man-made physical characteristics of sites, referring to documentary and material evidence.

Assemblies for inaugurating kings are examined by Elizabeth Fitzpatrick in her excellent 'Royal Inauguration Assembly and the Church in Medieval Ireland'. In particular, she discusses artefactual and textual references to the ritual object *slat na rígh*, a hazel rod given to the king at his inauguration, and its changing role in the context of Christianisation of the inauguration ceremony. A missing reference on p. 80 is rather frustrating in the context of a discussion of the rite of *deiseal* (turning clockwise three times during the ceremony).

János M. Bak and Pavel Lukin ('Consensus and Assemblies in Early Medieval Central and Eastern Europe') present the major sources of information about assemblies in the tenth to thirteenth centuries. These are all documentary; the authors assert that 'no archaeological or other material (or iconic) evidence survives' for the location or form of assemblies (p. 110). The conclusions are limited and somewhat speculative as a result of the paucity of evidence.

Judith Everard's 'Aristocratic Assemblies in Brittany, 1066-1203' considers political assemblies of aristocrats other than those centred on the sovereign. She presents the interesting paradox that the practice of assembling aristocrats to render homage, essential to the exercise of royal authority, provided a means to challenge that authority by accustoming the aristocrats to the idea of assembling in response to crisis, and giving them a corporate identity.

Adam J. Kosto examines the 'Reasons for Assembly in Catalonia and Aragon, 900-1200' neither as survivals from Visigothic tradition nor as precursors of the thirteenth-century parliaments of the region but on their own terms. He finds consistent evidence that assemblies were significant in bringing together a large number of people who could transact a variety of business, and that the making public of the business was more important than the roles of any individual participants.

In 'Galbert of Bruges on Political Meeting Culture: Palavers and Fights in Flanders During the Years 1127 and 1128', A. Demyttenaere presents a lengthy, blow-by-blow description of the events following the murder of Count Charles

in 1127. While the events present an interesting story, the place of assemblies in the story is hardly central. In the conclusion, though, we are presented with some interesting thoughts on the nature and impact of assemblies, including the notion that ‘celestial beings’, that is saints present through their relics, were significant participants.

Edward Coleman (‘Representative Assemblies in Communal Italy’) traces the increasingly important role of the assembly throughout the formation and development of the city communes.

The combination of onomastic, archaeological, historical and literary approaches in this book is very appealing. The occasional typographical errors are irritating; proofreading seems not to have been intensive. A greater frustration results from the untranslated quotations in many of the papers. Even if one shares the view that all scholars of the medieval should read Latin and therefore excuse Latin texts from translation, surely one has a right to expect that in a book of such diversity quotations from pre-modern French (p. 127) ought to be translated.

Political Assemblies in the Earlier Middle Ages contains some fascinating material. It is primarily a useful resource to be consulted for specific information about assemblies at a particular time or place or under particular circumstances. Unfortunately, the decision to include only a limited index impairs this usefulness.

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Benson, C. David, *Public Piers Plowman: Modern Scholarship and Late Medieval English Culture*, Pennsylvania Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004; cloth; pp. xix, 283; RRP US\$45; ISBN 0271023155.

The first half of this book asserts that *Piers Plowman* studies have been hampered by ‘the Langland myth’, C. David Benson’s phrase for the interrelated beliefs that the poem is the personal expression of its author and that it was revised sequentially from A to B to C. The second half shows that the poem shares characteristics with other vernacular literature, parish wall paintings, and civic practices.

In Benson’s world, so weak is George Kane’s work on the textual state of *Piers Plowman* that Anne Hudson’s queries about it ‘struck at the heart of the myth of the poem’ (p. 46), even though they were unsupported by any specific