

European society was structured on the eve of the First Crusade were the distant legacy of the last time such an accommodation between the centre and the regions had been attempted on a grand scale. In the eighth and early ninth centuries the Carolingian kings who dominated the western European continent had developed a political system which mobilized Frankish society for frequent wars of expansion in southern Gaul, Italy, Spain, and central Europe. In part because convenient victims became ever scarcer, however, and in part because western Europe was forced by Viking and Muslim attacks to look to its internal defences, the rhythm of channelled aggression broke down as the ninth century wore on. The West's problems were exacerbated by bitter civil wars between members of the Carolingian family. A consequence was the loosening of the bonds of loyalty and common purpose which had connected the kings to the warrior dynasties of the regions. In one sense political life simply reverted to type, as power became concentrated once more in the hands of economically and militarily dominant kindreds. But the Carolingian legacy supplied an important added ingredient, in that the great nobles—the 'princes' in the sense of 'those who ruled'—were able to perpetuate and exploit the surviving institutions of public governance, often with only notional reference to the centre.

Since the 1950s historians have developed a thesis which sees the dislocation of royal power in the ninth and tenth centuries as the prelude to even more momentous changes which took place in the decades either side of 1000. Because this model of explanation—what French medievalists call the *mutation féodale*, the feudal transformation—has hardened into an orthodoxy, it is worth sketching in outline. From around the middle of the tenth century, according to the *mutationniste* view, the large regional blocs which were the remnants of the Frankish polity themselves became subjected to centrifugal pressures from petty warlords, many of whom had risen to prominence as the princes' deputies in the localities. Repeating the earlier pattern of fragmentation, but now on a much smaller scale, the local lords flourished by combining their economic muscle as landowners and their residual public powers with regard to justice and military organization. Peasants found themselves subjected to increasingly burdensome rents and labour obligations. Courts ceased to be public forums which served the free population of their area and became instruments of private aristocratic might, privileged access to which was gained by entering into the lord's vassalage. One compelling demonstration of the lords' success was the proliferation of castles, particularly in the years after 1000. Wooden structures for the most part, but coming increasingly to be made of stone, the castles amounted to a stark geopolitical statement that power in large stretches of the old Frankish empire had become thoroughly atomized.

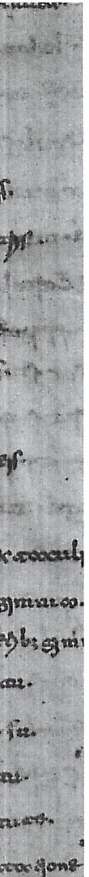
It is worth noting that scholars have recently begun to question whether the received orthodoxy is accurate. The *mutationniste* model, it has been argued, depends on an interpretation of ninth- and tenth-century developments which is both too neat, in that it posits an unrealistically clear distinction between public and private institutions, and too negative, since it consigns the later Carolingians (the last one to be king in France died in 987) to powerless inertia sooner than the evidence warrants. It is also clear that the social and economic status

of those who worked the land was very varied. Some sank into serfdom under the pressure of overbearing lords, but others clung on to their landed rights and relative independence. Nor was the fate of the princes uniform: some, such as the dukes of Normandy and Aquitaine and the counts of Flanders and Barcelona, fought back hard against the petty castellans. The transformation of around 1000 may even be an optical illusion. Charters, the records of transfers of lands and rights which are among our most important sources, become noticeably less formulaic and more discursive as the eleventh century progresses. This apparent rejection of tradition is usually interpreted as a symptom of a shift from public and systematic to private and ad hoc judicial organization, a process with wide social and political repercussions. But if the change in the documents can be explained by other factors—perhaps the old-style charters had been masking social changes for decades and were finally considered too inappropriate for an expanding and more complex world—then the *mutation-iste* thesis stands in need of modification. Overall, it is clear that the study of the period immediately before the crusades is entering a period of change. In recent years historians who work on the ninth and tenth centuries have generally been bolder than their eleventh-century colleagues in daring to rethink their basic assumptions and reinterpret their evidence. The effect is rather like that of a rising river pressing on a dam.

It is too soon to predict how thoroughly new interpretations will influence our understanding of the First Crusade's origins. Even when every allowance is made for the desirability of revision, however, it remains tolerably certain that historians need not abandon their traditional interest in one fundamental aspect of eleventh-century society: the dominance of the knightly élite. The terminology of chronicles and charters is instructive in this regard. By the eleventh century the warrior was coming to be called *miles* (plural *milites*). In classical Latin the core meaning of *miles* had been the footsoldier who was the backbone of the Roman legions, but in a significant shift of association the word now became applied exclusively to those who fought on horseback. In the process *miles* also acquired new social connotations, since it implied the ability to meet the great expense of obtaining mounts, armour, and weapons by exploiting the surplus produce of extensive landed resources or by entering the honourable service of a rich lord. In a related development, the techniques of mounted warfare also changed. By the time of the First Crusade it was common for knights to carry a heavy lance which was couched under the arm and extended well beyond the horse's head. This weapon was significant in a number of ways. It enabled ranks of horsemen to deliver a charge which exploited the full momentum of rider and mount. Its effective deployment

*Above: THE MILITARIZATION OF SOCIETY: armoured knights on horseback in an eleventh-century Italian manuscript. By the time of the First Crusade mounted warriors formed the élite corps of western armies, just as they dominated social and economic life.*

*Below: POPE URBAN II ON HIS WAY TO CLERMONT. The pope (left) consecrates the high altar of the new church of the abbey of Cluny on 25 October 1095, three weeks before the opening of the Council of Clermont. Members of the entourage which accompanied him on his journey through France, including six senior ecclesiastics, range themselves behind him. Abbot Hugh of Cluny stands with his monks at the other end of the altar.*

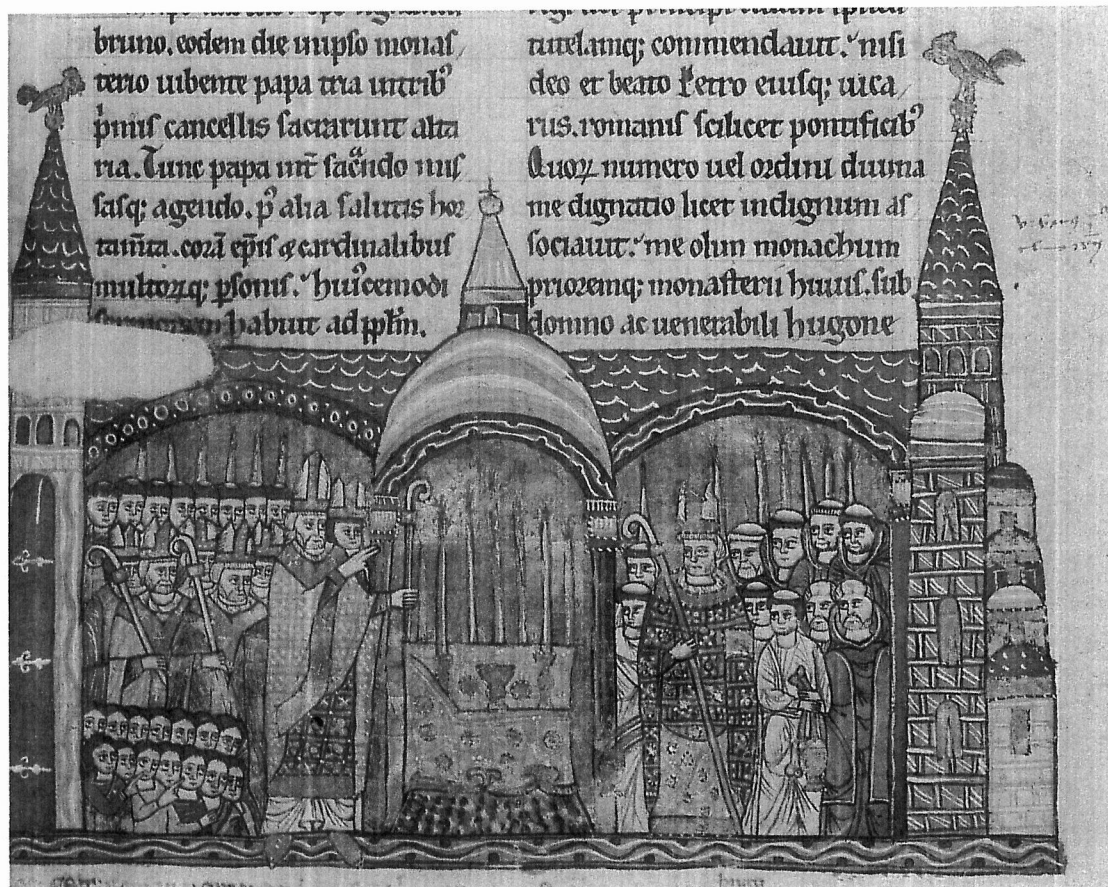
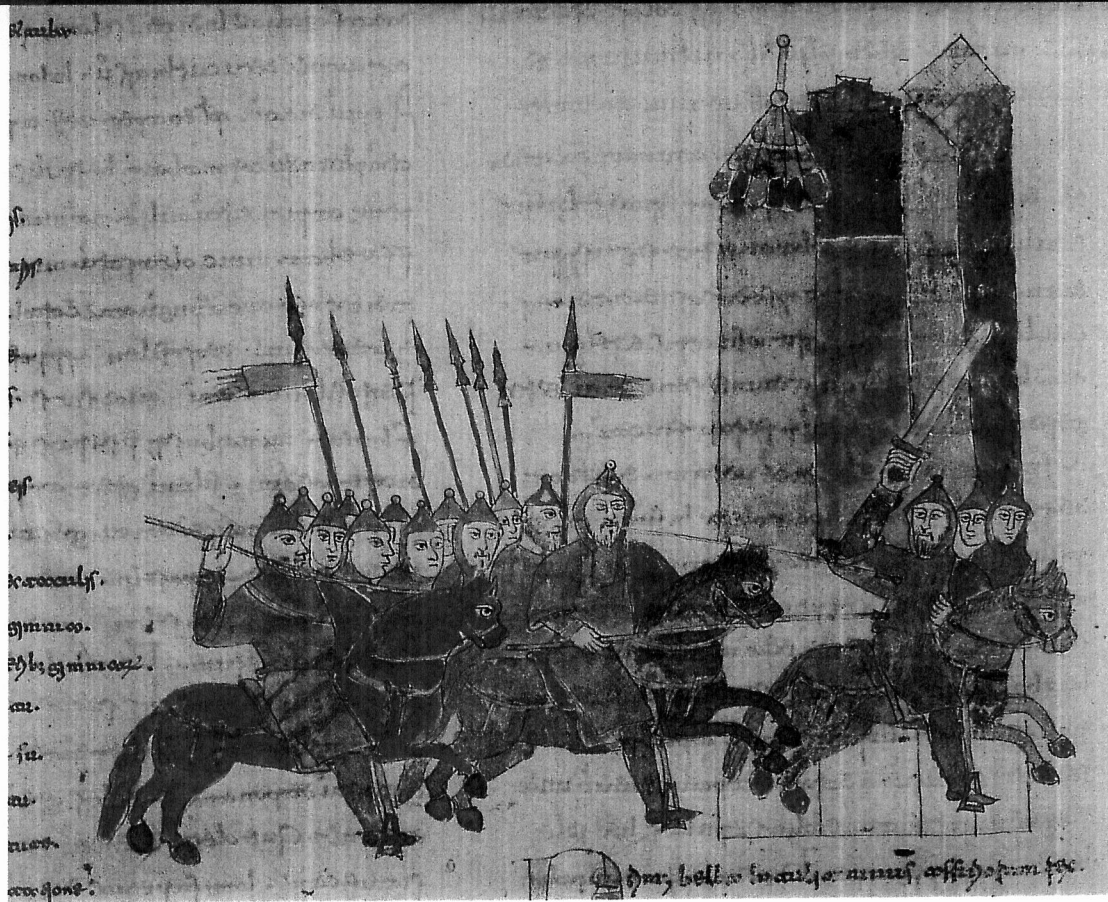


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A KNIGHT IN A TWELFTH-CENTURY RELIEF. Most of the principal elements of the knight's equipment are depicted, but not the lance. The spurs indicate that the favoured method of fighting was on horseback; but it was also possible to operate on foot, as most of the knights on the First Crusade were forced to do when their mounts died.

depended on rigorous training and co-operation, which promoted group solidarity. And it had symbolic value: the heavy lance was not the knight's only arm, but as the one most obviously and exclusively suited to mounted combat it served to proclaim its bearer's distinctiveness. Heavy cavalry's dominance on the battlefield was thus both a cause and a consequence of its broader social and economic status.

*Opposite.* THE POWER OF THE SAINTS: St Benedict of Nursia cures a man with a skin disease. Benedict was a sixth-century abbot whose Rule became the standard blueprint for monastic life in western Europe.