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## REVIEWS

**Thomas N. Bisson, *Tormented Voices: Power, Crisis and Humanity in Rural Catalonia, 1140–1200* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1998) 186 pp.**

With *Tormented Voices*, Thomas N. Bisson presents an impressionistic and subjective investigation of rural life during the mid-twelfth century. He sets out to be consciously personal as a reaction to or conversation with the recent historical approaches and critiques of feudal society, creating a micro-history based on sixteen specific documents related to localities in and around the medieval county of Barcelona during the reigns of Ramon Berenguer IV (1131–1162) and Alfons I (1163–1196). This micro-historical approach is particularly effective in light of Bisson's lifelong investigation of the institutions of medieval government which have usually been characterized as a stabilizing force in society. Here, he intends to support his recent interpretations of feudal change, put forth in a series of debates on the feudal revolution in *Past and Present*, where Bisson argued that a violent transformation in feudal society occurred during the eleventh and twelfth centuries as traditional lordship became more exploitive and predatory across medieval Europe.<sup>11</sup> In *Tormented Voices*, Bisson is attempting to regain, by the acts of recounting and remembering, the lives and even individualities of the peasants present in his sources as they experienced this transformation.

Bisson's study is divided into four sections: Memorials, People, Power, and Culture. Within each, the problems of the intertextuality of his sixteen sources are continuously engaged—asking who, what and why these records describe people in certain ways—while attempting to ground the people and events in their physical localities. He demonstrates the complex history of the documents—were they comital inquiries, self-generated complaints of the peasants, of the scribes?—which he calls memorials. Here, Bisson wishes truly to remember the people involved, recalling their names if nothing else, while attempting to discover more about each individually. Only a small portion of peas-

<sup>11</sup>See Thomas N. Bisson, "The Feudal Revolution," *Past and Present* 142 (Feb. 1994) 6–42; followed by the counter arguments of Dominique Barthélemy and Stephen White, "Debate: 'The Feudal Revolution,'" *Past and Present* 152 (Aug. 1996) 196–223; and then Timothy Reuter, Chris Wickham, and Thomas N. Bisson, "Debate: 'The Feudal Revolution,'" *Past and Present* 155 (May 1997) 177–225.

ant cultural life can be uncovered since “their values, their sexual attitudes, their symbolisms largely elude us” (136). What does come to light concerns the culture and experiences of power described by his witnesses, where disputes of fidelity—as a concept which connected peasants to lordship and vice versa—honor and shame establish the existence of a crisis of power. Experienced power for these twelfth-century Catalans was that of lordship, held or demanded by local castellans, bailiffs, as well as former stewards and sergeants wanting to be lords. The sense of crisis stems from the nature of complaint: violations of good lordship appealed to the remedy of the Count of Barcelona who ought to restore affairs to their proper balance. The enduring thread of this experience was violence—“everywhere blows, seizures, shame and pain in the variable styles that seem to portray the petty tyrannies of delegated lordship” (150)—whether as housebreaking, beards pulled or noses cut, donkeys, sheep or pigs taken, or simply beatings. Clearly for Bisson’s memorials “violence is the story they tell” even if “the parties to those complaints did not speak of ‘violence’ as such” (144).

However, these descriptions do raise questions, which Bisson readily acknowledges. Were the documents really descriptions of new types of violence? Could they not have been the words of people complaining about customary dues and acts? Was the hog taken by a local lord or *miles* a violent seizure, since it was described that way, or was it the “normal” yearly tax owed to the lord or *miles* which the peasant did not wish to pay? In another sense, was the violence as described indicative of a new type of lordship—more predatory and apolitical than before—or were these acts the symbols and rituals of traditional lordly competition? At least one example used by Bisson indicates a *miles* recently raised in status from among his neighbors who quite understandably disliked the exertion of his lordship. While the violence in these kinds of acts could be quite real, it does not necessarily indicate new practices of lordship. Similar acts could be found in the ninth or fourteenth centuries.

One problem which seems unacknowledged by Bisson concerns periodization. In earlier arguments—repeated here—Bisson places the disruption and creation of a new type of Catalan feudal lordship in the troubled period between 1020–1060. However, his evidence of new predatory practices—identified in the complaints as the bad customs (*mals usos*) to which the peasants had not previously been subject—originated in the mid-twelfth century. Is it acceptable to believe that the

peasants in these rural communities were accurately remembering the (benign) conditions of their subjugation to comital lordship over 100 years earlier? Again, were the peasants really complaining about new experiences rather than just those they did not like and from which they wished to escape?

Bisson clearly identifies with the experiences of his subjects, as he—speaking of the records he examines—says “for I have lived with them enough to be persuaded that, whatever their limitations, they afford rare evidence of how power was experienced in a medieval peasant society” (v). His subjective approach to the material works extremely well because it is presented honestly without concealment. Throughout, Bisson maintains his attachment to the sources, interacting with them as artifacts which “lead lives of their own, human-like lives” (154). Their testimony becomes the overlapping, complex mixture of voices—scribes recording, peasants complaining, lords defending or accusing—providing captivating pictorials of medieval life and its suffering. Bisson’s strategy works because of its rare impact, defining lordship and lordly violence in terms of the people who were most directly affected. Regardless of the wider historical arguments concerning feudal “revolution,” “mutation,” or “continuity” made elsewhere, the violence and predatory acts experienced by the peasants in Catalan society during the mid-twelfth century is made real and immediate by Bisson. These were never abstract events.

The experiences were real but few if any remedies for these complaints were ever made. Bisson’s argument that the predatory nature of lordship in the mid-twelfth century became customary—the foundation of the practices of *mals usos* in Catalonia—by the end of the century is quite compelling. This coupled with his vivid description of peasant experience makes *Tormented Voices* an important and useful addition to the study of feudal society. I for one enjoyed Bisson’s open subjectivity in favor of the individual peasants. His attempt to memorialize them, by luring their names and voices from the documents, is a seductively successful endeavor.

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