This is a splendid book, well grounded in the sources and informed by the best of recent secondary literature. It contributes much to our understanding of the shifting dynamics of the Roman church in late antiquity and the efforts of its bishops to establish their authority in this volatile environment.


Why did people go on the First Crusade anyway, and what determined who went? Matthew Gabriele offers, among other things, an answer to this question. His slender book argues that it was a concatenation of fortunate events, if one can take ideas as events, for this is an argument about ideas and their power across the centuries.

The first of these ideas was that by the mid-ninth century Charlemagne’s reign was considered a golden age of the Franks and Charlemagne himself a useful figure to his successors, who used him to legitimize themselves, and to monasteries, which created foundation legends linking themselves and their relics to him. It was in the interest of both parties to portray the Frankish ruler as casting a shadow as far as Jerusalem. By the later tenth century there were witnesses to a tradition that he went all the way there himself. Three texts, from monasteries where the memory of Charlemagne was particularly strong, tell versions of the story, variously that he met cozily with Harun al-Rashid (a tenth-century chronicle from Mount Soratte), received the Holy Foreskin by the hand of God in Jerusalem (the eleventh-century Historia of Charroux), or conquered Jerusalem at the request of the Byzantine Emperor and Patriarch of Jerusalem and returned bearing relics of the Passion (Gabriele accepts the argument that this source was written at Saint-Denis around 1080). These and less voluble witnesses drew on widely shared memories of the Carolingian golden age.

The second component idea was Jerusalem. Constantine’s buildings, particularly the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, gave the city a terrestrial Christian foundation, but the Muslim conquest left the terrestrial city remote, if not unreachable. Interest in the holy city ebbed and flowed, but it underwent a notable uptick in the eleventh century as many new churches drew on the dimensions and design of the Holy Sepulchre, and as changes in the Easter liturgy worked to re-enact the holy city in holy times. Pilgrimage to Jerusalem not only expanded sharply as the land route reopened because of the Byzantine revival, but began to feature very large groups of people traveling as a cohort.

The third component idea was that of imperium, which Gabriele argues meant authority and power as wielded by a man proven worthy of it to the authors of the sources, rather than empire. Imperium meant rulership over Christendom, and the notion of it was found all over Western Europe. Imperium was the right of the “last emperor” who would rule in end times and surrender his crown to Christ in Jerusalem. While Beno of Alba might write to the Emperor Henry IV (1056–1106) arguing that he was the last emperor, other traditions held that it would be Charlemagne, who rested at Aachen but would come again. This was not surprising given the increasingly sacralized treatment of Charlemagne, his working of miracles, and his legendary and historical defense of Christendom.

Finally, a fourth idea was crucial: that where Charlemagne led and would lead, the Franks followed and would follow. By the eleventh century, many people embraced the identity of Frank, and with it notions of Christian fidelity and warrior prowess. Norman writers called their people Franks and even considered them more Frankish than the French. They were therefore susceptible to addresses aimed at their heritage, such as Pope Urban may have delivered (and was remembered to have delivered).

Gabriele argues that the coalescence of these trends can help explain the outpouring of support for the First Crusade. The crusaders came from lands where the “empire of memory” of Charlemagne was current and thought of themselves as Franks, as they came to be called in texts like the Gesta Francorum, wherever they had come from. The memory of empire paved the way for the new enterprise.

Gabriele does not intend his argument to displace other explanations but to supplement them. This is a plausible argument, eruditely rooted in a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including liturgical studies, art history, “literary” and “historical” texts (which he argues were all simply texts to medieval contemporaries), crusade histories, and current arguments about orality, history, and memory. If his claim to originality based on the interdisciplinary nature of his work is somewhat overstated, the book nonetheless exemplifies that methodology. The writing is clear and accessible, free of obnoxious jargon, and frequently lively. Although half of most pages consist of footnotes, the reader who is not interested in the notes can read without reference to them. The book itself is an attractive object, as it ought to be given its slightly hair-raising price.

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Kievan Rus’ was the medieval Eastern Slavic polity with a capital in Kiev (present-day Ukraine). In most accounts of medieval European history, it is consigned to
the chapter on Rus’ian dynastic marriages to the choices of names for the children born of these marriages in order to demonstrate how foreign brides “were able to affect an aspect of royal power,” but ultimately such evidence shows only respect for the bride’s family rather than her own agency (p. 113).

Raffensperger also notes the prevalence of commercial connections between Kievan Rus’ and the rest of Europe, highlighting in particular overland trade to the West as a counterpoint to the more familiar focus on the Baltic/Byzantium route. This is, however, the shortest chapter. It is tantalizing in its allusions to the wide array of products that were exchanged and merchants who traveled back and forth, but it is insufficiently developed. Further, as Raffensperger proposes in the conclusion, Kievan Rus’ was not only integral to Europe, but it also served as “the preferred route” to the exotic lands of the Silk Road (p. 188). It is key to contextualizing Europe within world history during that era.

Given the paucity of primary sources, Raffensperger often must depend on slender evidence and the power of analogy. Consequently, at many points his arguments remain speculative, a point he acknowledges from the start. He does marshal an enormous secondary literature to complement the contemporary (or near-contemporary) texts in an impressive variety of languages, inviting scholars to retrace his steps.

Raffensperger aimed to address two audiences: Russianists and scholars of medieval Western Europe. He largely succeeds, although specialists in Russian history may grump at the long (but purposeful) digressions into episodes in Western European history, and Western medievalists may lack sufficient familiarity with the narrative of Kievan history to appreciate his innovations. Everyone who teaches the early period of Russian history ought to read this book before beginning a new semester, and historians of the medieval West ought to place it at the top of their list of works to broaden their perspective on Eastern Europe.

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Medieval Europe propagated many forms of physical privation, yet there was none subject to such frequent refinement as the prison. The development of the environment and the equipment of incarceration between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries is a marker of the elaboration of medieval governance, its growing industrial capacity, and, of course, its increasing fragility. If the spectacle of the prison only strengthened its hold on public attention in this period of change, so too, suggests Megan Cassidy-Welch, did the idea of imprisonment. Earlier readings suggested that the concept of confinement lost something of its force from the twelfth...