

**The Endings of Early Medieval Kingdoms:  
Murder or Natural Causes?**

by Julio Escalona

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**The collapse of the early medieval European  
kingdoms (8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries)**

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### 1. *A short overview*

Historians, archaeologists, and social scientists more generally, like to borrow and adapt terms from the physical and life sciences. Collapse is one such term. To which extent a word that evokes destruction and, ultimately, death can be applied to human societies has long been a matter of discussion. In the long run, the debate owes much to Gibbon's catastrophic view of the ending of the Roman Empire, but the peaking interest of the last decades has a major reference in the ending of the Soviet Union, more recently coupled with global concerns about climate change and environmental catastrophe<sup>1</sup>. Such approaches are more readily found in discussions about very large and complex polities (empires) rather than smaller ones, and in fact it is empires and their aftermaths that are more frequently subjected to comparison<sup>2</sup>.

The Early Middle Ages suffer no shortage of examples of large-scale pol-

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<sup>1</sup> For the first see for example Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*; for the second, Diamond, *Collapse*.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance *Empires*.

ities in distress, be that the ending of the Roman Empire in the West, the fragmentation of the Umayyad Caliphate in the eighth century, that of the Carolingian Empire in the ninth, or any of the various episodes of crisis of the Byzantine empire. The number of lesser-scale political units that disappeared throughout the period is, of course, much larger. However, for various reasons, medievalists have been less prone to re-frame their traditional narratives about the ending of kingdoms and empires according to the conceptual toolkits that archeologists and anthropologists have been favouring over the last decades: “collapse”, “resilience”, “regeneration”, and so on.

The papers gathered in this monographic section of «Reti Medievali. Rivista» as the contributions to the Salamanca symposium they derive from, constitute an extremely interesting exercise in seeking shared perspectives to address issues that are usually considered within their own specific coordinates, where exceptionality and uniqueness rule. Some authors indeed remark – as Insley does for Mercia – how much national historiographical traditions have shaped the way we think about lost kingdoms. By inserting them into a teleological narrative they become steps in the genealogy of present-day nation states. However, if kingdoms passed away, it was obviously not the same to lose out to the successful “makers of the nation”, as Mercia to Wessex, than to alien conquerors. As Igor Santos Salazar pointed out in the debates at Salamanca, had Visigothic Spain succumbed to the Carolingians rather than to invading Muslims, historians’ visions of that episode would have surely been much less catastrophic. As it is, the scars of Islam’s presence and later disappearance from Iberia remain hard to integrate in popular narratives of the Spanish nation-state. A perfect contrast is provided by the Carolingian conquest of the Lombard kingdom, traditionally understood as the elimination of a not-very Catholic polity by the joint action of a Christian emperor and the Pope, as Gasparri criticizes in his paper.

There is – understandably – no aim on the editor’s side to provide an exhaustive or balanced geographical coverage, which would demand an entirely different kind of venture. The repertoire of cases considered concentrates upon southern Europe (Iberia and Italy), territories under Carolingian rule, and two excursions north (Mercia) and east (Great Moravia). Other regions could no doubt have been added, but the set is varied enough to address the main issues about the ending of early medieval polities. If at all, the one element I find missing is an explicit consideration of the ending of the Roman empire itself, arguably the clearest case of proper “collapse” available for this area and period<sup>3</sup>. To which extent the structural dismantling of the Roman empire resolved itself in the fifth century or continued into its successor kingdoms is a crucial aspect that could perhaps have enriched some of the approaches.

<sup>3</sup> The most sophisticated approach to the structural analysis of Roman collapse is Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*.

All papers deal with the endings of specific political constructs (we may choose to consider them “states” or not, just as the term “kingdom” may suit some cases better than others). To what extent those endings represent cases of “collapse”? In Tainter’s formulation as a sudden fall in complexity – by far more sophisticated than Diamond’s environmental perspective – collapse is mainly a sociopolitical process, but of strongly structural nature<sup>4</sup>. It can be recognized in a drop in social differentiation and economic specialization (simpler labour division, less sophisticated material cultures, and lower technological thresholds), as well as a fall in centralized political control and a general loss of investment in complexity: monumentality, arts, sciences, technology, and so on. All of these factors can be identified archaeologically, even if their relative impact demands nuance. By contrast, it is political factors – aristocratic competition, dynastic relationships, military conquest – that seem to govern most of the processes studied in this volume. This is to a great extent a consequence of the sources employed, as made clear by the fact that the two papers that combine texts and archaeology (Martín Viso, Betti) are also the ones to bring in more explicitly issues of socioeconomic nature.

The two essays on Iberia address the 711 Arab invasion from the complementary points of view of the kingdom’s political core – the royal court, the aristocracy, the high church – by Díaz Martínez and Poveda, and that of its northwestern periphery in Martín Viso’s paper. Likewise, West’s discussion of the ending of the Carolingian empire from the perspective of its intellectual core finds a counterpart in the same phenomenon as experienced in its Italian periphery (Albertoni), or even in a specific region thereof (Santos). Yet on different grounds, how much state formation in the peripheries owes to the influence of existing polities and how much the links between them may affect the demise of the former is a matter for reflection when dealing with Mercia (or even more with Alfred’s Wessex, which a long-standing historiography tends to present as being as complex as the Carolingian kingdom, only more efficient), or the Great Moravia, which can be seen as a periphery dramatically affected by pulses at the Carolingian core.

## 2. *Murder?*

Several papers in this collection mark out military conquest as one of the most repeated causes for kingdoms to end. Conquest may happen not only in times of political instability, as in Visigothic Hispania, but also under perfectly “normal” conditions, as in Lombard Italy. It is the historical narratives that account for such defeats that tend to paint a gloomy picture of the losers, in an effort to rationalize/ moralize what is otherwise up to contingency. Not

<sup>4</sup> Tainter, *The collapse*; Diamond, *Collapse*. For details, see the presentation to this monographic section by Iñaki Martín Viso.

all conquests are the same. In 711 the Visigothic and Arab armies were more or less even and any outcome could have been possible, whilst no processes of socioeconomic deterioration were drawing the Visigoths to perdition (Díaz Martínez and Poveda). “Murder” more than “collapse”, their kingdom was conquered rather than explode from within. The ensuing cultural shift was profound and the Visigothic ruling elites were either removed or had to reinvent themselves dramatically<sup>5</sup>. For central power that was an abrupt termination. However, the winners’ loot included, among other things, the main factor that had limited the development of power structures by their predecessors, namely, a highly fragmented territory with numerous regional elites whose engagement with both state and aristocracies was a permanent matter of negotiation. While the aristocratic edifice of the Visigothic kingdom perished, the transition might have been less traumatic for lesser-scale elites, especially in the areas where a reasonably healthy town-to-countryside relationship existed.

There is much less ground for arguing that the Lombard kingdom could have resisted Frankish military might. Warfare-wise both parties were pretty unequal, but not that dissimilar culturally, despite the efforts deployed by the winners to depict the Lombards as pagan or nearly so. Gasparri’s rendering of the process shows that what was “murdered” in 774 was only an aristocratic power structure that involved a very limited segment of society<sup>6</sup>. The territory was neither destroyed nor depopulated. Quite the opposite, it was incorporated into a much larger polity of greater structural complexity. In the absence of a cultural and religious breach like that of post-711 Iberia, adaptation was much easier. Both significant segments of the Lombard aristocracy and medium-scale – mainly urban – elites played largely proactive roles in accepting and implementing the new situation. But, as in Iberia, the key issue in the Carolingian empire was how to keep a healthy flow of power between the center and the very diverse localities. Larger social distance to the center created more room for the exercise of delegate power and, thus, landscapes of opportunity, with the contradictory effects of reinforcing localities as the capillary terminals of faraway rulership and, at the same time, promoting new sub-regional elites that could eventually take over if and when the center got into trouble, as Igor Santos discusses for Tuscany.

Other kinds of military threat are addressed in some of the study-cases as external disruptions that can lead to the end of kingdoms. If central power fails to counteract raids, looting, killing and hostage- and tribute-taking, this can trigger all sorts of mechanisms of alienation. In societies where victory is strongly associated to God’s favour, how to account for defeat is a gigantic issue. It demands somebody to take the blame. As Charles West studies, the

<sup>5</sup> A recent reassessment in García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*.

<sup>6</sup> See further Gasparri, *Il regno longobardo in Italia* and the essays collected in 774: *Ipotesi su una transizione*.

laments of Abbo of Saint Germain about the crisis of the Carolingian kingdom take the Viking and – secondarily – the Hungarian raids as punishment for the sins of the Frankish elites. Francia was however too large and complex for raiders to entertain any prospect of conquest. They could instead deliver a lethal blow to smaller polities, especially if they eventually turned from plundering to large-scale settlement, as in the Danelaw in Britain. However, both Insley and Betti make similar points in their articles that raids were not the only cause for Mercia or the Great Moravia to end. Much less so for territories under Carolingian rule. In fact, historians through the centuries have hesitated between considering alien raids as the trigger of collapse and seeing them as a stimulus that led rulers to enact defensive policies that in the long run prompted the development of statehood. Perhaps the best example of the latter case is Alfred the Great's Wessex, in conjunction with the terminal phase of Mercia's life as a kingdom. Insley is right to question such approaches and the same is valid for contemporary Francia.

### 3. *Natural Causes?*

Most essays in this special issue stress internal processes, mainly what could be called elites' power relationships and networks. In short this comes down to three interrelated kinds of tension: within ruling dynasties, between kings and aristocrats and among the aristocracy. The level of detail that can be derived from the Italian massive preserved texts is in this respect truly amazing. Albertoni's analysis of the ending of Carolingian rule in Italy shows particularly clearly that, even if elites composed very exclusive circles, their kin (let alone clientship) connections could be much denser than we can reconstruct for most early medieval situations. This is a fine reminder, too, that dynasties and the hereditary transmission of power are fluid constructs, more than hard rules, and ultimately the expression of certain levels of aristocratic consensus. Once a source of symbolic capital – to use Bourdieu's terms – is established, the range of actors who can derive legitimacy from it may turn to be much broader than originally intended. This is well illustrated by the use of Carolingian ascendancy by contenders for power in post-Carolingian Italy (Albertoni). However, the success associated to those strategies depends less on the force of a legitimacy that any contender can invoke than on having an audience sensitive to such claims.

Would it not be more realistic to reverse the agency flow and suggest instead that competing parties chose the candidates to support and echoed their discourses as part of their strategies for gaining positions within a given power structure? The statement of Archbishop Fulk of Reims, cited by West in his essay, that it was the custom of the Franks to choose their kings from the Carolingian dynasty, unmasks dynasties as the ultimate product of political consensus. In most early medieval contexts, uncontested dynastic succession – at any rate relatively rare – has little to do with the strong institu-

tional stability whose lack as has often been alleged as a structural weakness of the Visigothic monarchy. The Iberian aristocrats grouped up in parties, chose their leaders, backed candidates to the throne and deployed all sorts of strategies to put their man on it. They did not, however, reject the concept of a single monarch for all Hispania (Díaz Martínez and Poveda). That overall consensus set a framework for competition beyond which all players would lose out. Dynastic succession could be seen under this light like a way of limiting the number of potential candidates, but the multiplication of would-be rulers of alleged Carolingian pedigree in the post-Carolingian world reminds that ideological resources never rested in one single actor's hands.

Neither did they have the last word. Several articles in the present collection discuss cases where aristocratic consensus was broken. The fact that the last ruler of the Mercians was a woman could – and did – foster arguments of political or military unsuitability, but Insley suggests that beneath her imprisonment by the king of Wessex underlay a change of allegiance on the side of the bulk of the Mercian aristocracy. The consensus that had formerly fueled the Mercian expansion and led it to incorporate a constellation of surrounding minor polities had vanished. Segments of the Mercian nobility opted for a larger-scale, militarily stronger kingdom, for which Wessex represented a better option, and they contributed to develop an all-encompassing identity in accordance, despite sporadic reappearances of a Mercian one in the written sources. Betti's argument about the end of the Great Moravia is comparable. The death of Svatopluk gave way to a period of struggles among competing aristocrats that seems to have gone far beyond dynastic rivalry. In the process, it was the great Moravian polity itself that exploded. The deeper reasons for the disruption of the former aristocratic consensus that had supported the principality can be, as Betti discusses, a combination of Hungarian attacks and the blockade of the Danube long-distance trade routes, but at some point the perception set in that respecting the existing political framework was no longer a red line. The ruler's death did the rest.

Of course, reminiscences of this process can be found too in territories under Carolingian rule. Could not one easily argue that the several phases in the division of Charlemagne's realm dovetail nicely with the former territorial divisions of the Merovingian kingdoms and that unity is an oddity that calls for explanation more than the norm? Being the largest polity in the West, early medieval Francia seems to have always operated on both scales: the individual kingdoms and the kingdom of the Franks as a whole. The associated two-layered identities are explicit in Abbo of Saint Germain, as West carefully deconstructs in his essay. Operationally, the Frankish-wide scale seems to have only seldom superseded the others. Already in the seventh century, the aristocrats of Neustria and Burgundy chose Childeric II with the condition that each kingdom would keep its own traditions and appoint its own officers. In other words, that the state apparatus – thin as it could be – would remain a power resource at that scale. To what extent did the Carolingian expansion create a single, empire-wide aristocracy, committed to preserve that opera-

tional scale? It rather seems that with the incorporation of more and more territories – Italy is a perfect case – the kingdom became increasingly “creolized” and therefore more prone to fragmentation. Needless to say, though, that each of the Carolingian building blocks was more complex than the Great Moravia and that the socioeconomic foundations of their respective aristocracies seem to have been very different too, so there are obvious limits to this comparison.

One remarkable effect of the development of modern states is that historians have long cherished the idea that pre-modern politics were dominated by a sort of zero-sum tension between the monarch (central power) and his nobility (selfish individuals with enough power to damage or even disintegrate the state if they felt their privileges were under threat). Among many other flaws, such an approach represents the state as a timeless organizational *Deus ex machina* that operates regardless of society. In doing so, it obscures the fact that states reflect the power relationships existing in society. The “king vs nobles” model is particularly inappropriate for the early middle ages, with their complex blend of reminiscences from Roman statehood, emergence of numerous non-state polities and start of state formation processes. Early medieval polities – most of which boasted a legal and symbolic rhetoric that superseded by far their actual achievement in terms of scope, reach, and effective governance – were mostly elite-driven constructs. They embedded power relationships to maintain social order (the foundations of social inequality) and they became states – “systems of durable inequality”, to borrow Charles Tilly’s formulation – inasmuch as they could develop an organizational apparatus relatively independent from and longer-lived than individuals<sup>7</sup>. In the absence of more powerful drivers towards statehood, a minimum aristocratic consensus must be seen as the *sine qua non* condition for early medieval kingdoms to operate, and the breach of such a consensus a major force for their departure.

An additional point can be made about the importance of political identities. West’s analysis of Abbo of Saint Germain’s notion of the kingdom of the Franks and his pessimistic view of its crisis represents the central power point of view, as is to be expected, especially among high ecclesiasts. However, Carolingian identity was a resource that could be both enacted and re-cycled in different contexts. It could be argued by peri- and post-Carolingian contestants to kingship. It could be employed in post-Carolingian Italy as a legitimating device, even if with no intention to revive Carolingian rule itself, as Albertoni indicates. Ties to Carolingian rulers could be employed by other foreign rulers with no direct participation in the Frankish political mainly to reinforce their internal position within their territories, as Svatopluk seems to have done in Moravia and, indeed, as Alfonso II did in the rising Asturian kingdom. Similarly, the Mercian ideological U-turn that Insley discusses,

<sup>7</sup> Tilly, *Identities, boundaries and social ties*, pp. 71-90.



appears to have been facilitated by the existence of a two-layered political identity that wrapped Mercian identity in a broader notion of Englishness. By identifying such an all-English consciousness with the kingdom of the West Saxons, the change of identity could be more smoothly effected. Instead, perceptions from the peripheries of agonizing kingdoms need not follow exactly the same lines. Our sources definitely privilege central power and aristocratic views, but it would be narrow to assume that ordinary “local” people had only “local identities” and no conception of the world beyond and higher power. Hard as this is to investigate, the resurfacing of mentions of long-deceased kingdoms in later texts (Insley) could indicate that at least some layers of the former political articulation were embedded in local perceptions deep enough to be a part of their identities in the long term<sup>8</sup>. Maybe an extreme case is the Iberian Northwest studied by Martín Viso. A less developed periphery, first of the Roman Empire, then of the Visigothic kingdom, in the eighth century this large region seems to have got basically disconnected from any form of state organization. Martín Viso discusses in detail the archaeological expressions of such a disconnection, such as a loss in overall complexity and a wider range of operation for local peasant communities. However, complex cultural traits such as limited forms of literacy and a basic documentary and judicial culture persisted and were reproduced in local contexts, as recent work by Wendy Davies shows<sup>9</sup>. To what extent that locally rooted residual statehood paved the path for the incorporation of those regions to a large-scale kingdom in the late ninth and tenth centuries is a fascinating issue for future research.

#### 4. *Strategies for Comparison*

A more general realization that arises from reading this collection is that a full understanding of the topic cannot be reached within the narrow frame of the “period of collapse”. In my view, if kingdoms died, we must know how they lived. In other words, the endings of kingdoms cannot be separated from their formation and their structuration, as, for all their formal similarities, early medieval polities were extremely different from one another. General notions, such as “king”, “elites”, “aristocracy” or “Church”, mean very little if we do not bring into consideration which were the power resources effectively available to kings, which were the socioeconomic foundations of the aristocrats’ differentiation, or which – if any – were the capillary links that connected the higher political structures to the basic productive layers of society. As Kathleen Morrison has argued, what falls apart in a collapse are structures of inequality, and this is what early medieval kingdoms primarily were<sup>10</sup>. Con-

<sup>8</sup> See Schwartz, *From Collapse*.

<sup>9</sup> See, among others, Davies, *Windows on Justice*, Davies, *Local Priests and the Writing of Charters*, and Davies, *Judges and judging*.

<sup>10</sup> Morrison, *All is not lost when the center does not hold*.

sidering socio-economic factors beyond the vicious circle of economic mismanagement and environmental catastrophe not only brings into the picture the peasantry and the localities (both the material foundations of the higher elites and the limiters to their growth), but also puts flesh on the bones of structural political change. For example, a fundamental early medieval process like the transformation of non-landed aristocracies into land-based ones and the creation of a structurally subaltern peasantry, as famously studied by Faith, is as much a sociopolitical process as an economic one and a major force underlying kingdom formation and termination in Anglo-Saxon England<sup>11</sup>. It all comes down, therefore, to scrutinizing social complexity in itself, a theoretical stand which has the further advantage of being abstract enough to allow for both text-based and archaeological approaches to converge.

Social complexity can be modeled by analyzing operational scale<sup>12</sup>. The importance of this issue is well illustrated in the present collection, where the scale of the units considered varies from the huge Carolingian construct to the much disarticulated Iberian North-West. The ending of the Lombard kingdom is particularly interesting in that it led not to fragmentation but to incorporation to much larger Carolingian territories and, conversely, the withdrawal of Carolingian rule in Italy meant a return to operational scales more in tune with the internal situation in the peninsula. Mercia's ending resolved likewise in absorption into rising Wessex, while the Great Moravia basically fragmented and faded out. Changes in scale are particularly revealing of the underlying social processes. To what extent, for instance, one polity's territorial expansion is a mere quantitative enlargement or involves structural change? And, if the latter, which kind of change? The rapid expansion of the Great Moravia one generation before exploding looks like a case of mere "aggregation". Lesser units were added to a polity largely based upon direct links between the ruler and the respective dominant elites, with a minimum of direct central agency. This tends to lead to structurally volatile aggregates that can easily explode, as it seems to have been the Moravian case<sup>13</sup>. On the opposite end, the Carolingian expansion was based upon a massive investment in complexity. Rulers went a long way to secure direct central agency within the conquered territories, through a complex network of delegated offices, leading to much greater stability and local involvement in the functioning of the state as a whole. However this, in Tainter's terms, also leads to decreasing benefits; greater and greater expenditure to preserve the state of things, and ultimately a failure to generate stable dependencies of the regional aristocracies from the center. Time scale is an equally important factor<sup>14</sup>. Social actors

<sup>11</sup> Faith, *The English Peasantry and the Growth of Lordship*.

<sup>12</sup> For details, see Escalona, *The early Middle Ages: a scale-based approach*. See also *Confronting scale*.

<sup>13</sup> See more generally Kristiansen, *Chiefdoms*, and a very comparable case in Davies, *Patterns of power*.

<sup>14</sup> Gosden and Kirsanow, *Timescales*.

are more likely to perceive, and respond to, processes that work at spatial and temporal scales that match their own experience. Abrupt political collapse is better noticed than gradual economic changes and not all actors have the same perceptual scales. While some of the kingdoms considered here had centuries-long existences (Visigothic Hispania), other units were strikingly ephemeral (Great Moravia), which reminds us that any consideration of political identities needs to combine long-term cultural transmission with the ephemerality of individual human experience.

The essays in this special issue provide much food for thought. Individually they are all highly focused and provocative. Together they offer a fantastic material for comparison. This slightly random response does not intend to provide a sketchy rendering of them, much less so to “put them right” in any sense. It only expects to illustrate the huge potential that experiences as the Salamanca symposium they stem from have to trigger further thought and comparative reflections. Even if the collection can be seen as only scratching the surface of a topic that could well deserve a much more ambitious initiative, like a large EU-funded project, there is hardly a better praise for it than to say that it certainly makes you want more of it.

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