



***Paths to Kingship in Medieval Latin
Europe, c. 950–1200***

By Björn Weller

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Much ink has been spilt discussing the nature and practices of kingship in the Middle Ages. Not a year passes where we do not see the publication of a new biography dissecting the reign of one of Latin Europe's many medieval monarchs and offering the reader new interpretations of their rule. However, while there is a plethora of material on medieval kingship from which to choose, these works are usually isolated studies focusing on individual monarchs, specific dynasties, or the customs of the kingdoms over which those monarchs ruled. Consequently, the scholarship on kingship in medieval Latin Europe is vast but the ideas that the scholarship has produced have not always been adequately connected or explored in a broader trans-European context. Moreover, scholarship has tended to focus upon the actions of medieval kings once in power, investigating how that power was wielded and how a monarch's royal authority was maintained. How a ruler became a king is usually confined to the opening chapters of a biography and is treated as merely the beginning of the narrative of a monarch's reign. The story of a ruler's route to kingship has been overlooked and minimised. Fortunately, this lacuna in the scholarship has now been addressed by Björn Weiler's comprehensive, insightful, and thoroughly engaging volume, *Paths to Kingship in Medieval Latin Europe, c. 950–1200*, published by Cambridge University Press.

Weiler's book examines how one became king in medieval Latin Europe. Focusing on the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, it draws upon a wide array of examples from across the medieval Latin world, from England to Hungary, from Norway to the Crusader States, to establish the common ideas, models, and practices those medieval Latin rulers followed in their paths to kingship. From the patterns that emerge in this broad ranging study, Weiler convincingly demonstrates that becoming king was not a singular event that occurred with an individual's election or coronation. Rather, kingmaking was a long-drawn-out process that could begin during the reign of a monarch's predecessor and could continue into their own reign long after they had been anointed and crowned. The path to kingship was a gradual process, with would-be kings building upon their previous successes, each step contingent upon the one preceding it, until the crown and royal authority was theirs to command. Crisis and disaster could be encountered at any point along that journey, and successful kings had to skilfully negotiate their way through these

moments of tension to achieve power. Weiler's volume aptly shows that biographers of medieval kings need to consider in greater depth the intricate processes and diplomatic efforts that acquiring a crown demanded, and that a ruler's path to kingship, more than just the preface to the events of their reign, can act as a means by which we might better understand the background and actions of a monarch's rule.

The book is divided into five thematic sections, each containing two chapters, that explore how kings in medieval Latin Europe ascended to power. This begins with an investigation into the literary culture and political theory of medieval intellectual elites, showing how medieval writers and their texts created a common framework for understanding and thinking about kingship, particularly regarding law, justice, and royal duties. Subsequent sections examine the customs and practices of creating a royal title, succession (including the designation of heirs), elections, and how kings were crowned and enthroned. The book is thorough in its coverage and analysis of the whole kingmaking process, with each stage comprehensively examined and the importance of each element carefully assessed. Consequently, the reader is left with a real step-by-step guide on becoming king in Medieval Latin Europe. Each section draws on examples from across Latin Europe, highlighting common themes and ideas wherever possible, but also acknowledging regional differences. The trans-European approach to this study is its key strength, and by identifying common patterns between medieval Latin realms it gives the reader much to consider, something that studies of single kingdoms are unable to provide. However, while the geographic spread of examples to support the volume's arguments is generally broad, at times it can be overly reliant upon a few core kingdoms. England, Norway, and the Holy Roman Empire feature prominently. A little more variety may have been beneficial at times and helped reinforce the argument further, even if they were not explored as thoroughly as those realms regularly drawn upon. That said, given the scope of the book, and that it is close to 500 pages in length already, it is understandable that the author is discerning in the historical examples they wish to prioritise, and it may be that these core kingdoms provide the best evidence.

Several key themes are consistently addressed throughout the volume. One is the conflict between how kings were expected to behave, according to the political treatise and ideas of their contemporaries, and the political realities of how their kingdoms demanded they rule in practice. The paradoxes created by theory and practice could be a source of regular conflict with far reaching consequences for both the ruler and those they ruled. Additionally, concerns over the virtue and morality of a contender for the Crown, both

before their coronation and during their early reign, were often at the forefront of the minds of a monarch's contemporaries. How a king lived up to these expectations, or how much they deviated from the ideals, could have a considerable impact upon their path to kingship and the success of their reign. The moral or immoral behaviour of a king reflected not only upon themselves but also upon those who had supported them on their journey to the throne. Furthermore, a ruler's path to kingship was not one that they would tread alone; the journey to become king was often dependent upon the involvement and active participation of the secular and ecclesiastical elites who surrounded a candidate for the throne. How a claimant to the Crown interacted and managed these relationships was of vital importance.

Weiler's thought-provoking work is rich in detail and will be a staple text for all those wishing to further their understanding of the nature of medieval kingship. Likewise, specialists will benefit from Weiler's conclusions and how they might apply to their own areas of expertise and enrich their own studies of medieval monarchs. Added to this, the volume's lively prose makes it an enjoyable read, ideal for those new to the field and for established scholars alike.

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