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Philippe Buc: The Dangers of Ritual

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INTRODUCTION

Nous avons déplacé les notions et confondu leurs
vêtements avec leurs noms
aveugles sont les mots qui ne savent retrouver que
leur place dès leur naissance
leur rang grammatical dans l'universelle sécurité
bien maigre est le feu que nous crûmes voir couvrir
en eux dans nos poumons
et terne est la lueur prédestinée de ce qu'ils disent
—Tristan Tzara, *L'homme approximatif*

THIS BOOK is an essay. Its surface object is political ritual in the early Middle Ages. By necessity, this object must be vague, because historians have, collectively at least, piled a vast array of motley practices into the category. In the process, no doubt, splendid studies have vastly enlarged the historical discipline's map of early medieval political culture.¹ We are indebted for many stimulating insights to the crossbreeding of history and anthropology—an encounter that began before World War II and picked up speed in the 1970s. From late antiquity to the early modern era, from Peter Brown to Richard Trexler, it revolutionized our ways of looking at the past. In this meeting, ritual loomed large.²

Yet from the start, it should be said that the present essay ends up cautioning against the use of the concept of ritual for the historiography of the Middle Ages. It joins those voices that have underscored how social-scientific models should be employed with extreme caution, without eclecticism, and with full and constant awareness of their intellectual genealogies.³ In the pages that follow, then, the use of the term “ritual” is provisional and heuristic (the ultimate aim being to suggest other modes of

¹ See, e.g., Gerd Althoff, *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter. Kommunikation in Frieden und Fehde* (Darmstadt: 1997); Geoffrey G. Koziol, *Begging Pardon and Favor: Ritual and Political Order in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca: 1992); Hagen Keller, “Die Investitur. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der ‘Staatsymbolik’ im Hochmittelalter,” *FMSSt* 27 (1993): 51–86.

² I provide an incomplete panorama in Buc, “Political ritual: medieval and modern interpretations,” in Hans-Werner Goetz, ed., *Die Aktualität des Mittelalters* (Bochum: 2000), 255–272. Paradigmatic is Jacques Le Goff, “Le rituel symbolique de la vassalité,” trans. as “the Symbolic Ritual of Vassalage,” in Le Goff, *Time, Work and Culture* (Chicago: 1980), 237–87.

³ See Hildred Geertz, “An Anthropology of Religion and Magic—1” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6,1 (1975): 71–89. Cp. Natalie Zemon Davis, “The Possibilities of the Past,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 12,2 (1981): 267–75, at 275, 273, and Edward P. Thompson,

interpretation more fitted to the documents). Consequently, in the first part of this book, the word “ritual” will be shorthand for “a practice twentieth-century historians have identified as ritual.” Throughout, the term stands implicitly between quotation marks.

More than medieval political ritual, thus, the essay’s final object is the relationship between medieval documents and twentieth-century theories of ritual. More precisely, these chapters explore the fit (or lack thereof) between, on the one hand, the late antique and early medieval sources that contain depictions of rituals, and, on the other hand, the social-scientific (especially anthropological) models that twentieth-century historians have employed to analyze medieval rituals. The sources were produced in a political culture with specific traits and specific agents.⁴ It had a highly developed “native” understanding of rite that “in turn reacted on symbolic practices.” A status-group, the clergy, claimed a monopoly of legitimate interpretation (even if nonclergy could appropriate clerical methods and challenge clerical exclusivity).⁵ Arguably, the exegesis of the (Holy) Book, the Bible, conditioned premodern Christian production and reception of texts in general. Critical in these clerical hermeneutics (and hence critical for our modern reconstructions of medieval political culture) were the relationship of letter to spirit and the notion of *Heilsgeschichte*, providential history.

As for the social-scientific models that twentieth-century historians use, they also emerged from a specific political culture. Or rather, from a plurality of cultures. From at least the Reformation onward, successive historical moments impressed their mark on the elements that ultimately coalesced, circa 1900, in the concept of “ritual.” Like many concepts, then, ritual is the multilayered product of a *longue-durée* diachronic stratification. As such, it carries within itself the baggage of its early geological history. It is one of the main theses of this essay that the roots of our contemporary concept(s) reach down, with complicated subterranean trajectories, into the humus of the Middle Ages, and that this engenders methodological problems when one wants to apply these concepts to medieval sources.⁶

“History and Anthropology,” repr. in Thompson, *Making History: Writings on History and Culture* (New York: 1994), 199–225, pleading for methodological eclecticism.

⁴ For the concept of political culture, see Keith Michael Baker, “Introduction” to *The Political Culture of the Old Regime* (Oxford: 1987), xii.

⁵ See Dan Sperber, *Du symbolisme en général* (Paris: 1974), 29–32, 60–61. The most visible usurpers (always helped in this by individual clergy) include kings and members of the high aristocracy. For the High Middle Ages, see Buc, *L’ambiguïté du Livre: Prince, pouvoir, et peuple dans les commentaires de la Bible au Moyen Âge* (Paris: 1994), 173–97, whose erroneous assumption (173 n. 2) that Carolingian kings lacked interest in exegetical wisdom should be corrected in the light of, e.g., Nikolaus Staubach, *Rex christianus* (Cologne: 1993).

⁶ See as well the controversial study by John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: 1990), criticizing, on the grounds of such a genealogy, the application of social-scientific models to religion.

The intellectual tradition of hermeneutics would see in such a continuum an inviting chance to shuttle progressively back and forth between past and present categories. (And indeed, when reading the sources through the lenses it favors, those of exegesis, this study shall also avail itself of hermeneutic *Verstehen*.) But in the case of the relation between the social sciences and the medieval document, this chance is simultaneously a danger. One can lose one's way on the paths of pseudounderstanding. The risk lies in too fast an appropriation of the other, in a shortened, truncated hermeneutic spiral. Medieval modes of authorship and current social scientific habits do share one trait: Both purport to reveal the truth, spiritual or social, hidden behind the "letter" or data.⁷ This commonality does not facilitate the match between the document and theory, to the contrary. It sets up a potential rivalry between the medieval author and the scholar, since the latter's data is provided and shaped by the former. Both are interpreters, and make same-order claims that their interpretation goes to the heart of reality—religious *mysterium* for the one, society's sinews for the other. Furthermore, as recent discussions of forgery have shown, these two "truths" differ profoundly in the way in which they find their expression in writing. An illustration of this can be found in Augustine's discussion of lies. For the Church father, a "fact" in the visible world can be true despite its seeming mendaciousness when it signifies a transcendental truth.⁸

The essay, then, aims at three things. First, it seeks to explicate what late antique and early medieval authors thought happened when events that historians have identified as ritual occurred. What did they assume rituals did or ought to do? In other words, what was the medieval native's implicit anthropology (as opposed to that, explicit, of the twentieth-century social scientist)? The mastery of the thought-world that informs the documents is an absolutely necessary precondition to any speculation about social

⁷ As underlined in a pioneering essay by Talal Asad, "Towards a Genealogy of the Concept of Ritual," reed. in his *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: 1993), 60.

⁸ Horst Fuhrmann, "Die Fälschungen im Mittelalter. Überlegungen zum mittelalterlichen Wahrheitsbegriff," *HZ* 197 (1963): 537–38, discussing Augustine's reading of Gen. 27.19f., where Jacob dresses up as his brother Esau to obtain his blind father's benediction. See Augustine of Hippo, *Contra mendacium* 10.24, ed. Joseph Zycha, CSEL 41 (Prague: 1900), 467–528, at 499:7–13: "If we consider carefully and with a view to the faith what Jacob did at the instigation of his mother, with the result that he seems to have deceived his father, it is not a lie but a *mysterium*. Were we to call his deeds lies, then one would call lies all the figures that are meant to signify some realities (*res*), which figures are not to be taken literally but in which one should understand some other, dissimilar thing. This should by no means be done." (*Jacob autem quod matre fecit auctore, ut patrem fallere videretur, si diligenter et fideliter adtentatur, non est mendacium sed mysterium. quae si mendacia dixerimus, omnes etiam figurae significandarum quarumque rerum, quae non ad proprietatem accipiendae sunt, sed in eis aliud ex alio est intelligendum, dicentur esse mendacia: quod absit omnino*). And *ibidem*, 501:6–7: "These things are called true, not false, because, either in word or in deed they signify truths, not falsehoods" (*tamen vera non falsa dicuntur, quoniam vera, non falsa significantur seu verbo seu facto*).

agents' mentalities and practices. But authorial intentions and methods are no less critical. The second aim, consequently, is to understand why authors wrote about these rituals, and how.⁹ What was the role of a ritual in the economy of a late antique or early medieval narrative? In a pointed critique of Robert Darnton's *Great Cat Massacre*, Roger Chartier underlined that the historian must take seriously the textuality of the sources (especially authorial intention and literary genre) and refrain from immediately applying anthropology to what is not raw data.¹⁰ The same rules obtain when dealing with early medieval "evidence" on rituals.¹¹ One might be tempted to employ a two-step approach to address Chartier's critique. The first step is to reconstruct from the source, taking into account authorial intention, the ceremonies as they actually happened. The second step is to process the resulting data through anthropology to come to conclusions concerning society or culture. But as much as Darnton's approach, this two-step operation results in an ultimately direct relationship between text and the sought-after deeper social realities.¹² The authors, and the texts with which they sought to influence the world around them, vanish; they are lost as agents. Ultimately, there can be no anthropological readings of rituals depicted in medieval texts. There can only be anthropological readings of (1) medieval textual practices or perhaps (2) medieval practices that the historian has reconstructed using texts, with full and *constant* sensitivity of their status as texts. The latter is nonetheless much more difficult (especially for data-poor eras), less reliable, and allows only a circumscribed realm of appropriate questions and possible results.

⁹ For a first attempt at a typology of narrative style in relation to authorial aims, see Philippe Buc, "Ritual and interpretation: the medieval case," *Early Medieval Europe* 9,2 (2000): 1–28. The crafted nature of early medieval annals has been emphasized in recent years, most notably by Rosamond McKitterick. See also Paul Antony Hayward, "Demystifying the role of sanctity in Western Christendom," in *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, ed. by James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward (Oxford: 1999), 115–42, at 124.

¹⁰ See Roger Chartier, "Text, Symbols, and Frenchness," *Journal of Modern History* 57,4 (1985): 682–94, esp. 694.

¹¹ See also the caveat in Jacques Chiffolleau, Lauro Martines, and Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, introduction to *Riti e rituali nelle società medievali* (Spoleto: 1994), i–xiv, at xiii, but this collection offers scant realization of the promised "attention scrupuleuse aux sources ... [aux] limites spécifiques des sources qu'ils [the authors of the articles] utilisaient." Many historians are well aware of the problem, but it is more common to invoke it and then forget it.

¹² For it is the product of two linear equations, (1) of deciphering, from text to historical data, (2) of explanation, from historical data to the social or cultural processes subjacent to this data. In the language of algebra, $ax + b = y$ and $cy + d = z$ resolves in $ex + f = z$. See Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Scheingorn, "An Unsentimental View of Ritual in the Middle Ages," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 6,1 (1992): 63–85. Despite an initial caveat (that the text is a complicated filter), the authors move on to read the *Liber miraculorum sanctae Fidis* positivistically—the filter is, at best, linear.

The third and final agenda takes us into an analysis of concepts. For the essay's ultimate aim is to examine the fit between, on the one hand, medieval narratives and their implicit anthropology, and, on the other hand, the theories of ritual that twentieth-century historians have employed. When, where, and how are there continuities between the two? When, where, and how do we note breaks? In what ways does the combination of commonalities and ruptures produce misinterpretations of the medieval evidence? While German-style *Begriffsgeschichte*, like hermeneutics, helps link past and present, it can also serve to underline the disjunctions between them. Reinhart Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*, while covering the immediate present and the deep past, ultimately concentrates on the eighteenth century. For this era constitutes the temporal locus of the *Sattelzeit*, the moment in German History when the concepts then emergent were "Janus-faced," that is, when they still allowed apprehension of the past but were already such as to make our present world intelligible.¹³ Like Otto Brunner, whose approach Koselleck adopted and modified, I am more interested in the Middle Ages and the present than in the periods that mediated between them.¹⁴ In Koselleck's enterprise, the subject of conceptual history looks like a bell curve, with its apex in the eighteenth century; this essay considers it, rather, like an inverted bell curve, with twin apices in the early Middle Ages and the twentieth century.

Given the essay's agendas, it is pointless to attempt to survey all the practices that historians have labeled "ritual." This hazy laundry list includes: the baptism of rulers; coronations and crown-wearings; princely funerals; entries in cities (or churches) and other processions or parades; civic games; banquets; the hunt; relic-translations and elevations; oath-takings; acclamations or laudes; knightings; ordeals; public penances; and acts of submission or commendation. More important for this study are early medieval categories and vocabulary. Occasionally, authors did group together a plurality of solemnities—here we get a glimpse of "native" classifications that do not quite dovetail with our own. For example, Thegan, one of the biographers of the Frankish emperor Louis the Pious (r. 813–40), took care to signal, in a single breath, his ruler's proper demeanor in hunting, wearing royal ornaments, participating at Christian high feasts (such as Christmas and Easter), and feeding the poor. Another author active under Louis, Ermold the Black, recounting the conversion at the emperor's

¹³ See below, introduction to part 2, 162–63.

¹⁴ I am indebted to Martial Staub for the (perhaps flattering) comparison. See Otto Brunner, *Land und Herrschaft*, 3d ed. (Brunn: 1943), 187–88 and 504 (*quellengemasse Begriffssprache*), 5th ed. (Vienna: 1959), 163–64 and 440, with Howard Kaminsky and James Van Horn Mellon, "Introduction" to Brunner, *Land and Lordship* (Philadelphia: 1992), xix–xxi; and Reinhart Koselleck, introduction to *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, 8 vols. (Stuttgart: 1972–97), 1.i–xxvii.

court of the Danish prince Harald Klak (826), made it part of a series of solemnities. First, Louis sponsored the baptism of the Viking and acted as his godfather at the baptismal font, then Franks and northerners moved on together to banquet, hunt, mass, and gift-giving. It is noteworthy, however, that Thegan placed the solemnities just listed within a wider set of characteristics, which he called “sacred virtues” (*sacrae virtutes*). He did not mean to isolate the right performance of practices, which we might label “rituals,” from other qualities of the ruler.¹⁵ The sources’ vocabulary also underlines a concern with right conduct, custom, pomp, and honor. Medieval writers, in order to indicate patterned behavior, might employ shorthand verbal markers such as *rite* or *secundum morem*,¹⁶ or, with more descriptive valence, *solemniter*, *honorifice*, *humiliter*.¹⁷ We are told, for instance, that Louis the Pious’s son Charles the Bald celebrated Christmas 861 “festively, as is customary” and Christmas 862 “with the highest reverence.”¹⁸ This may or may not indicate that a bishop placed on the king’s head, in the sight of all, a crown, which Charles then wore during the whole celebration of the Lord’s Nativity.¹⁹ At the minimum, the caption means to say that the ruler did what he was supposed to do on such a liturgical occasion.

Finally, early medieval authors had at their disposal a notion imperfectly approximating that of ritual. Fundamental for late antique and early medieval structures of thought (and especially for exegesis) is the relation between the Old Testament and the New. The Jewish Law, now superseded

¹⁵ Thegan, *Gesta Hludowici Imperatoris* 19, ed. Ernst Tresp, MGH SS rer. Germ. in u.s. 64 (Hannover: 1995), 200:4–204:10; Ermold Nigellus, *Poème sur Louis le Pieux* vv. 2164–2529, ed. Edmond Faral (Paris: 1932), 166–91, with Janet L. Nelson, “Carolingian royal ritual,” in *Rituals of Royalty*, ed. Simon F. R. Price and David Cannadine (Cambridge [UK]: 1987), 167–69.

¹⁶ On the near equivalency of *ritus* and *mos*, see Andreas Alföldi, *Die monarchische Repräsentation im römischen Kaiserreiche*, reed. (Darmstadt: 1970), 7 and 10 n. 6.

¹⁷ See Keller, “Investitur,” 59; Koziol, *Begging Pardon*, 45, 60. Ingrid Voss, *Herrsbertreffen im frühen und hohen Mittelalter. Untersuchungen zu den Begegnungen der ostfränkischen und westfränkischen Herrscher im 9. und 10. Jahrhundert sowie der deutschen und französischen Könige vom 11. bis 13. Jahrhundert*, Beihefte zum Archiv für Kulturgeschichte 26 (Cologne-Vienna: 1987), 123, 134–37, 198. Thietmar of Merseburg, for example, opposed one bishop’s reception of a would-be king *honorifice* to a second prelate’s “caritative” acceptance of the pretender at his table. See Thietmar, *Chronicon* 5.4–5, ed. Robert Holtzmann, MGH SS rer. Germ. n.s. 9. (Berlin: 1935), 224, with the excellent study by David A. Warner, “Thietmar of Merseburg on Rituals of Kingship,” *Viator* 26 (1995), 53–76. But see Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Cambridge: 1994), passim, who doubts that such expressions as *in hominagium* always imply that a ritual was performed.

¹⁸ Hincmar of Reims, *Annals of Saint-Bertin ad an. 861 and 862*, ed. Felix Grat et al., *Les annales de Saint-Bertin*, 87 and 95.

¹⁹ Carlrichard Brühl and others have assumed that Carolingian annalists mentioned where the ruler spent Easter and Christmas *because* rulers “wore their crown” festively on such occasions. See Carlrichard Brühl, “Fränkischer Krönungsbrauch und das Problem der ‘Festkrönungen,’” *HZ* 194,2 (1962): 319.

by the New Dispensation of the Gospel, had mandated the performance of a great number of religious practices. Before the Coming of Christ, these Jewish rites had prefigured darkly Christian truths, and especially the Lord's Incarnation, life, and Passion. These *caerimonialia*, as they were called, were par excellence the letter to be read according to the spirit. With the Incarnation and Passion, their prefigurative role disappeared, since the truths that they had foreshadowed were realized in Christ. Consequently, the New Dispensation abolished for Christians Jewish ceremonial observances now emptied of meaning. The "blind" Jews still performed them, but, according to the logic of (Christian) providential history, to no real purpose. The early modern (and still current) expression, "vain ceremony," as well as the correlated idea that some or all rituals are "empty," harkens back to this assertion of superiority over Judaism. The opposition between practices empty of any true spirit and practices with a transcendental content or referent was highly appealing because it drew on the foundational opposition between the Old and the New Law. That it always implied superiority should be kept in mind throughout this essay.²⁰

I shall *not*, then, aim at collecting all the descriptions of ritual that can be found throughout early medieval sources. Nor shall I draw up the histories of particular practices, e.g., the royal funeral or the king's civic entry (*adventus*), unless they serve the contextualization of a specific text. A number of monographs providing histories of this kind already exist.²¹ Instead, the first part of the essay will explore fairly coherent documentary bodies, that is, either whole works or clusters of texts produced in an identifiable milieu. Symmetrically, the second part will *not* consider every anthropological theory that a historian might use to explain the Middle Ages, but focus on the social scientific traditions that twentieth-century historians have most commonly employed.²²

²⁰ Cf., e.g., Jacques Chiffolleau, "Analyse d'un rituel flamboyant. Paris, mai–août 1412," *Riti e rituali nelle società medievali*, ed. Jacques Chiffolleau, Lauro Martines, and Agostino Paravicini Bagliani (Spoleto: 1994), 215–44, at 241–44, who suggests in neo-Protestant fashion, if admittedly "sur le mode hypothétique," a transformation of ritual into ceremonial. Cf. below, ch. 5:1, for the Reformation origins of the dichotomy ceremonial-ritual.

²¹ E.g., Richard A. Jackson, *Vive le Roi: A History of the French Coronation from Charles V to Charles X* (Chapel Hill: 1984); Lawrence Bryant, *The King and the City in the Parisian Royal Entry Ceremony* (Geneva: 1986); Ralph Giesey, *The Royal Funeral Ceremony in Renaissance France*, 2d ed. (Geneva: 1983).

²² Hence such models as those proposed by the anthropologists Rosaldo and Fernandez, for example, will remain beyond the scope of this essay. See James W. Fernandez, "Symbolic Consensus in a Fang Reformatory Cult," *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965): 902–29; idem, *Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture* (Bloomington: 1986), esp. "The Mission of Metaphor in an Expressive Culture," 28–70; Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, 2d ed. (London: 1993). While Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi* (Cambridge: 1991), invokes these two authors in her preface, it is unclear to me whether she utilizes them.

As just argued, the medieval notion of *caerimonialia* is not identical with modern “ceremony.” Another phenomenon that highlights the distance between medieval conceptions and social scientific models is that of “bad ritual.” By this shorthand I mean rituals that social agents manipulate or rituals that break down. In strict method, these bad rituals should first be approached as elements belonging to narratives and not immediately (if at all) as actual events. But since modern analysts have taken rituals that work (“good rituals”) as *eigentlich gewesen*, it is legitimate, heuristically, to place bad rituals on the same positivistic plane. Read naively as evidence for the real, the abundance of depictions of manipulated or failed rituals suggests that far from creating consensus or order, rituals could be positively dangerous. To perform a ritual, then, must in many cases have been positively a gamble, because one’s enemies might manipulate it or disrupt it. Such is the first, surface meaning of this essay’s title, *Dangers of Ritual*. Far from providing an unambiguous system of communication among the aristocracy, and hence a lubricant for the political system, the “rules of the game of politics” invited cheating and manipulation.²³ And far from automatically legitimizing the this-worldly hierarchy, ritual references to the exemplary heavenly order never stood beyond the challenge of the disaffected.²⁴

Studies of political ritual probably trust the letter of medieval documents more than method warrants. Yet they have not always failed to notice how authors could heighten or deemphasize the rituality of historical events.²⁵ This insight should be an essential part of any model that takes ritual as its object. For challenges and manipulations happen in texts, and, in some political cultures at least, it may be ritual-in-text rather than ritual-in-performance that best legitimizes or delegitimizes. This is a second meaning of the title, *Dangers of Ritual*. In many a political culture, any performance can be the object of divergent interpretations through oral discussion (which, in the medieval case, we have lost) and through writings (which is all that we have).²⁶ This is especially the case in an early medieval world

²³ As demonstrated in one of Althoff’s earliest studies on ritual, Gerd Althoff, “Das Bett des Königs in Magdeburg,” in *Festschrift für Berent Schwineköper*, ed. Helmut Maurer and Hans Patze (Sigmaringen: 1982), 141–53. See the critique of ritual as creating order in Boureau, “Ritualité politique et modernité monarchique,” in *L’Etat ou le roi*, ed. Neithard Bulst et al (Paris: 1996), 13–14.

²⁴ Cf. Koziol, *Begging Pardon*. Contrast his later study, “England, France, and the Problem of Sacrality in Twelfth-Century Ritual,” in *Cultures of Power: Lordship, Status and Process in Twelfth-Century Europe*, ed. Thomas N. Bisson (Philadelphia: 1995), 124–48.

²⁵ Koziol, *Begging Pardon*, 110–12, 119 (“recorded or invented”), 146, on Flodoard and Richer of Reims. See as well Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York: 1980), 229, 312.

²⁶ For pagan Rome and misinterpretation of kneeling before the ruler, see the remarks of Alföldi, *Die Monarchische Repräsentation*, 49–50. Stephen D. White, “Proposing the Ordeal

informed by exegesis. One must suppose, then, that to perform a ritual with an end in mind was to gamble that one's desired interpretation would ultimately triumph. A majority of our sources, and especially the narrative ones, are the product of interpretation or of attempts to channel interpretation. Even the earliest liturgical *ordines* for the royal coronation may have owed their production to ninth-century conflicts—the need to have a fixed blueprint to reinstate Louis the Pious as king after his 833 deposition and the desire to solemnize the highly irregular annexation of Lotharingia by Charles the Bald in 869.²⁷

Rituals, then, are a complicated point of entry into early medieval political culture, precisely because of the importance this culture attached to solemnities.²⁸ They were too momentous for their depictions *not* to be highly crafted. To the specific techniques at play in this crafting we shall return. But while important, rituals did not constitute the sole foci of meaning in texts, and probably not in medieval political culture either. In a preface to his collected essays, Max Gluckman, an author often cited by historians, warned his readers that the early anthropologists, being missionaries, had focused mostly, in collecting data, on the religion of the natives and especially on ritual—“witchcraft trials, fertility ceremonies, masked dancers, wedding ceremonies, myths.” This slant in the documentation, he cautioned, risked influencing reconstructions of cultures to the detriment of their more prosaic components—for example the family, the economy, and warfare.²⁹ The same applies to the era that medievalists study. And indeed, as the following chapters will show, authors concentrated also on efficient and God-willed warfare as well as on the behavior, especially but not exclusively sexual, of females of the ruling families.

That sources owe their being to purpose and circumstance means that the historian cannot establish a linear relationship between ritual and political order. Were the documents to reconstitute, positivistically, the events, he

and Avoiding It: Strategy and Power in Western French Litigation, 1050–1110,” in *Cultures of Power: Lordship, Status and Process in Twelfth-Century Europe*, ed. by Thomas N. Bisson (Philadelphia: 1995), 89–123, at 98–99, 100 n. 53, 104–105, underlines how ordeals, pace Peter Brown, could intensify disputes, and be subject to divergent interpretations. Here his conclusions, based on a praxeological approach, dovetail with my own, grounded in textual criticism and medieval hermeneutics.

²⁷ Richard A. Jackson, “Who Wrote Hincmar’s Ordines?” *Viator* 25 (1994): 31–52; *AB* ad an. 869–70, 156–78 with *AF* ad an. 869–70, 69–71. Admittedly, the *Ordo of Judith* cannot be placed in a conflictual context.

²⁸ For the importance the Latin West’s Byzantine neighbors attached to solemnities, see Michael McCormick, “Analyzing imperial ceremonies,” *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 35 (1985): 1–20. For the determining importance of historiography over ceremonial, see Gilbert Dagron, *Empereur et prêtre. Etude sur le “césaropapisme” byzantin* (Paris: 1996), esp. 129.

²⁹ Max Gluckman, *Politics, law and ritual in tribal society* (Oxford: 1965), 20–23.

or she might use good ritual as an indicator of order or social consensus and bad ritual as an indicator of disorder or social dissent.³⁰ The lazy dream of contemporary historiography could come true: The analysis of a single phenomenon would grant access to society's essence. We would be as blessed as stock-image Roman sacrificers, who could divine by reading a single victim's liver the order (or disorder) of cosmos and polis.³¹ However, like good rituals, the bad rituals that the medievalist encounters do occur in texts. They do not reveal necessarily so much the existence of disorder in society or polity as point to authorial dissent. Whether authorial dissent is itself symptomatic of actual social disorder is another matter altogether, to be explored with other parameters factored in.³²

Bad rituals, then, cannot be fitted in the putative linear relationship between actual performance and actual order. They belong to another evidential realm. They should lead the historian to reevaluate recent reconstructions of medieval political culture, which have been distorted by explicit or implicit functionalism. At the simplest level, bad rituals constitute evidence for authorial practice. More fundamentally, they betray a sometimes radical (but in any century of the Middle Ages always present) distrust for any simple relationship between the appearances and the reality of *potestas*. Signs often deceived. Augustine distinguished between the miracles performed by good Christians, by bad Christians, and by magicians. The phenomena looked the same; the powers called upon and intentions of the agents differed radically.³³ He warned also that the fortune and misfortune of an emperor did not correspond in any way, either as cause or as effect, to his standing before God.³⁴ Likewise, a ruler's ability to present in ritual his power as an image of God's *potestas* did not stand beyond suspicion. It could be attributed to a carnal spirit of ambition, rather than to the spirit of God that should animate the liturgy and point to a *mysterium*.

³⁰ The linear equation attempted by Koziol, "England, France," using, especially, disrupted royal funerals and coronations. Cf. his *Begging Pardon*, 305, where rituals are "indicators of whether a political system is legitimate." Compare, on an Indonesian funeral, Clifford Geertz, "Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example," repr. in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (N.p.: 1973), 143–69.

³¹ Carlo Ginzburg, "Traces. Racines d'un paradigme indiciaire," repr. in Ginzburg, *Mythes, emblèmes, traces. Morphologie et Histoire* (Paris: 1989), 139–180, at 149–51, speaks of a "paradigme indiciaire ou divinatoire."

³² Such as the genre to which the source belongs, the author's spatial and temporal distance to the event, and his or her importance in (or isolation from) political or social networks.

³³ *De diversis quaestionibus* 79.4, ed. Almut Mutzenbecher, CCSL 44A (Turnhout: 1975), 229:98–101: "Quapropter aliter magi faciunt miracula, aliter boni christiani, aliter mali christiani: magi per privatos contractus, boni christiani per publicam iustitiam, mali christiani per signa publicae iustitiae" (incidentally a possible ancestor of early anthropology's coordination between the pairs private-public and magic-religion).

³⁴ *De civitate Dei* 4.33 & 5.24–25, 1.126–27 & 160–61.

These issues lead us to the third sense in which rituals are dangerous, that is, in terms of the scholarly risks that the use of the concept entails. The implicit or explicit functionalist bent of the historiography is not purely accidental. As part two of the essay will show, this propensity or affinity owes much to the history of the concept itself. The readiness with which medievalists have embraced anthropology is also a factor of *longue-durée* intellectual history. A quarter of a century ago, in his classic study of the cult of the saints, Peter Brown, with characteristic eloquence, explained the pregnance of the two-tiered model of religion by its rootedness in Western intellectual culture:

Such models [positing a sharp divide between popular and elite religion] have entered the cultural bloodstream . . . Plainly, some solid and seemingly unmovable cultural furniture has piled up somewhere in that capacious lumber room, the back of our mind. If we can identify and shift some of it, we may find ourselves able to approach the Christian cult of saints from a different direction.³⁵

Brown then went on to comment on the enormous “subliminal” force of this model. It was in no small part a factor of its “armchair quality,” drawing on high-culture commonplace evidence that the educated could only recognize as authoritative.

Mutatis mutandis, the post-Reformation concept of ritual, with its increasing emphasis on the social function of religion, has worked in similarly “subliminal” ways. Certainly, the attractiveness of anthropology for medievalists owes something to the descriptions of poison ordeals and political ceremonies harvested in ethnographic fieldwork. In these African or Pacific Islands materials, historians identified materials cognate to, and as such likely to help explain, European trials by fire and monarchic rituals.³⁶ But the willingness to recognize, rightly or wrongly, this datum as relevant to the analysis of the premodern West has been favorably overdetermined (and the analytical results twisted) by the social-scientific analytical framework in which fieldwork was conducted—through and through Western in lineage. In the mirror of the other, we have been seduced primarily by the self.

The bipartite structure of the essay is a function of these three agendas. The first part concentrates on medieval understandings of “ritual,” and narrative purposes and techniques. I have chosen to look at four moments of late antique and medieval political culture—backward, from the tenth to the first century c.e., in order to suggest simultaneously historical deri-

³⁵ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints. Its Rise and Function in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: 1981), 12–13.

³⁶ As pointed out by one of the anonymous readers for Princeton University Press.

vation and limited determinism. The first chapter opens with the tenth century. It analyses how Liudprand of Cremona constructed the superiority of the Ottonian kings of Germany over their rivals for the Italian crown through a contrast between the two parties' rituals—sacral and consensual for the Saxons, ideological and deceitful for the others. The second chapter takes us backward to the ninth century. In a manner consonant with its increasing political fragmentation, the Carolingian world produced a plurality of sources. Taken together, they allow one to demonstrate the inadequacy of the functionalist approach to political ritual: It is as much the outcome of the struggle to control a ritual's interpretation as its actual performance that give it its efficacy. The third chapter centers again on the strategies of a single author, Gregory of Tours; here too rituals are mustered to demonstrate a superiority, this time that of saintly bishops over kings. The fourth chapter, devoted to martyrdom as a (narrated) ritual, underlines and explains dissent and opposition within rituals. Medieval political culture owes to the remembrance of martyrdom an idea: Patterned action within and against an enemy's ritual prevents this solemnity from manifesting and creating the order one opposes. In this first part of the essay, the reader may sometimes lose sight of ritual, precisely because the sources have to be dissected lengthwise and crosswise if one is to understand authorial intention and the place of this or that depiction of a solemnity in the economy of a text.

Comprising two chapters, the second part of the essay traces the formation of the concept of "ritual" out of an originally medieval theological matrix. It highlights the simultaneous co-construction of the ancestors of, respectively, Marxist and functionalist anthropology, starting with the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. The French Revolution provides the caesura between the fifth and sixth chapters. The organizational choice is somewhat arbitrary, but the event is not. Revolutionary disruptions, like World War I's aftermath a century later, provoked the crystallization of a new sociology.³⁷ It is well known that nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century thinkers often used the premodern era, especially the Middle Ages, to think about the problem of order. This role of the distant past explains to some degree why and how historians are prone to match anthropology with medieval documents. The sixth chapter ends with a confrontation between the logic of medieval documents and that of the social sciences. The idiosyncrasies of the social-scientific models relative to their medieval ancestors serve in turn to underscore anew the specificities of early medieval political culture—those traits that anthropological readings of the sources tend to misapprehend or leave aside.

³⁷ For the centrality of conservative (and often Catholic) categories to nascent sociology, see Robert Nisbet, *The sociological Tradition* (New York: 1966).