

ARTICLE AND ESSAYS

Visions in a Ninth-Century Village: an Early Medieval Microhistory

by *Charles West*

As historians begin to take the ‘global turn’ and to measure up the advantages of ‘big data’ history, it should not be a surprise that microhistory is if anything enjoying a revival. Contrary to the implicit assertion of David Armitage and Jo Guldi in their recent book, *The History Manifesto*, microhistory is not just a history of the very small, a recklessly antiquarian immersion in the tiny and obscure – or at least, it ought not to be. In its origins, it was a method that embraced ‘the minute analysis of a circumscribed documentation’, linked to a desire to go beyond the elite perspectives of traditional political history while retaining a sense of contingency and possibility neglected by the social history of the 1960s and 1970s.¹ When Carlo Ginzburg wrote about Menocchio the miller, or when Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie wrote about Montaillou, they were not avoiding big historical questions, they were trying to answer them. In the hands of these historians, microhistory was more about changing how we see the bigger picture than filling in the gaps: so it fits very well together with the global and the statistical.

Through the work of historians such as John Arnold, microhistory has continued to play a significant part in the study of the European Middle Ages in general.² But what about the early Middle Ages in particular, that is to say Europe before the year 1000? To be sure, the ‘small worlds’ of certain regions in this period have been explored to the extent that caches of documentary records permit, usually in areas relatively free from elite control.³ There have been some fine, sensitive case-studies of local officials and other ‘rural elites’, based on surviving elements of their archives.⁴ Battered old manuscripts of pastoral care have much to tell us about local priests across the early medieval Latin West, while archaeology is providing fresh evidence all the time about the material conditions of existence in the period.⁵ Yet while enquiries of this kind can reveal much about the lives of fairly low-status people, this is not exactly the recovery of lost voices, or only very indirectly so: these are detailed case-studies more than microhistory as such.

If microhistory is a method that seems rather to have passed the study of the European early Middle Ages by, it is not historians who are to blame, but their sources. These are generally not rich enough to sustain an approach that could properly be termed microhistorical: there is simply no

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early medieval equivalent to the Inquisition records, for instance. And even when our sources do become more detailed, it is, so to speak, the wrong sort of detail. Microhistory is not just about the amount of information or the scale of analysis; it is about perspective, too. Those early medieval documentary records just mentioned, though skewed towards the elite, sometimes do direct the historians' gaze towards the village level, and can occasionally even be used to decipher individuals' strategies, in spite of the pressures exerted by the archiving process. But these charters are written in a formal legal discourse, whose purpose was to align specific circumstances with universalizing formulas, so the very nature of the evidence makes it difficult to recover much of the subjectivity of the actors involved.⁶

The early medieval estate surveys known as polyptychs present an analogous case. These texts, mostly from the ninth century, provide us with an almost unparalleled amount of information about non-elites in the countryside, the great majority of the population. Through them, we know the names of inhabitants of dozens of Frankish and Italian villages. More than that, we know who these inhabitants were married to, how many children they had, and what names they had given to those children. We know too about the land they lived on, and the kinds of rent they had to pay for it, to the nearest piglet and the nearest egg. This information was moreover mostly collected from the inhabitants themselves, using inquests similar to those of Domesday Book. Yet despite all this, no one can really say what it was like to be such a villager, or what it was like to live in these villages, at least not without resorting to fiction.⁷ No matter what the provenance of the snap-shot evidence they contain, these estate surveys in their written form represent the early medieval world as the landlords saw it: they are a view of the countryside from the top.⁸

Much the same could be said of a third major genre, early medieval hagiography (that is, writings about saints), which also often offers information about life beyond royal courts and monasteries, and how lower-status groups interacted with the numinous, particularly in the case of miracle accounts.⁹ The works of the sixth-century bishop Gregory of Tours are positively bursting with stories of village inhabitants being healed, suffering punishments, and receiving visions, and there are plenty of similar collections from later too.¹⁰ In many instances it is clear that the stories such collections record must have originated outside the monastery or the cathedral. Even in these cases, however, the information has been filtered, processed and polished to such an extent that the only rigorously recoverable viewpoint is that of the author of the finished product. In most cases that was a monk, and by that token a member of the elite.¹¹

Obviously, this by no means invalidates the interest of these miracle texts. They can be excavated for nuggets of usable detail, whether political, social, economic, environmental or cultural. In more sophisticated fashion, they can be read for theological, religious and social mentalities.¹² It is also possible to give them a political context, to explain why this particular account

was put together at that particular moment, and what the this-worldly impact was supposed to be.¹³ But though one can attempt to use these texts to recover details of peasant life, we need to tread carefully. In miracles, just as in charters and polyptychs, the low-status voices that we can hear are ventriloquized, and, to that extent, inauthentic.¹⁴

We might reluctantly conclude that early medieval microhistory is to all intents impossible; that while it certainly remains possible and fruitful to study a locality or a low-status individual in this period, to do so in terms that that locality or individual would have recognized is out of the question, because voices outside the monastery or the royal court circle, voices outside the elite, are simply irrecoverable, so there is no way of challenging or transcending the authorized representation. But this article argues for the possibility of exceptions, and presents a case in point. It is an experiment in early medieval microhistory.

DAGOBERT'S VISION

The focus of this article is a Latin account of a vision, about 2,000 words long, written in Francia at some point in the ninth century, probably before 850.¹⁵ The standard edition calls it the *Apparitio Sancti Vedasti* (The Apparition of Saint Vaast), but a better title, judging from the manuscripts, would be the *Epistola Huberti* (The Letter of Hubert). The text recounts how a certain carpenter named Dagobert fell dangerously ill, leading everyone in his village, and most of all his wife, to despair of his surviving the night. Having received the last rites from a conspicuously conscientious local priest (to whom we shall return), Dagobert was blessed with a vision from a sixth-century saint, namely Saint Vaast, the patron saint of a major early medieval monastery named after him, in what is now the town of Arras, in the Pas de Calais in northern France.¹⁶

When the vision ended, Dagobert woke up, feeling hungry but much better, and breakfasted on cheese and beer. The next day – a Friday – Dagobert felt strong enough to go and collect firewood, using a borrowed wagon since he was apparently too poor to have his own. And there was a miracle, too, although not a very spectacular one: ‘this man, who had previously been slow to speak and lisping, was endowed by this revelation with such a force of speaking, that he is now able to say more properly in a single hour than previously he had been able to say in an entire day’.¹⁷

In many respects, this is a perfectly ordinary early medieval miracle story. Its transmission is, at first sight anyway, unremarkable. Our text survives in six medieval manuscripts (including a deluxe illuminated one in Arras Bibliothèque Municipale: Fig. 1), all made up chiefly of hagiographical material. These manuscripts are a little later in date, the earliest being from perhaps the late tenth century, but that is entirely normal for hagiography. Indeed, looked at in the round, this is quite an early transmission: after all, many great works from Late Antiquity, like the *Passion of Perpetua*, survive only in manuscripts centuries younger than their presumed composition.¹⁸

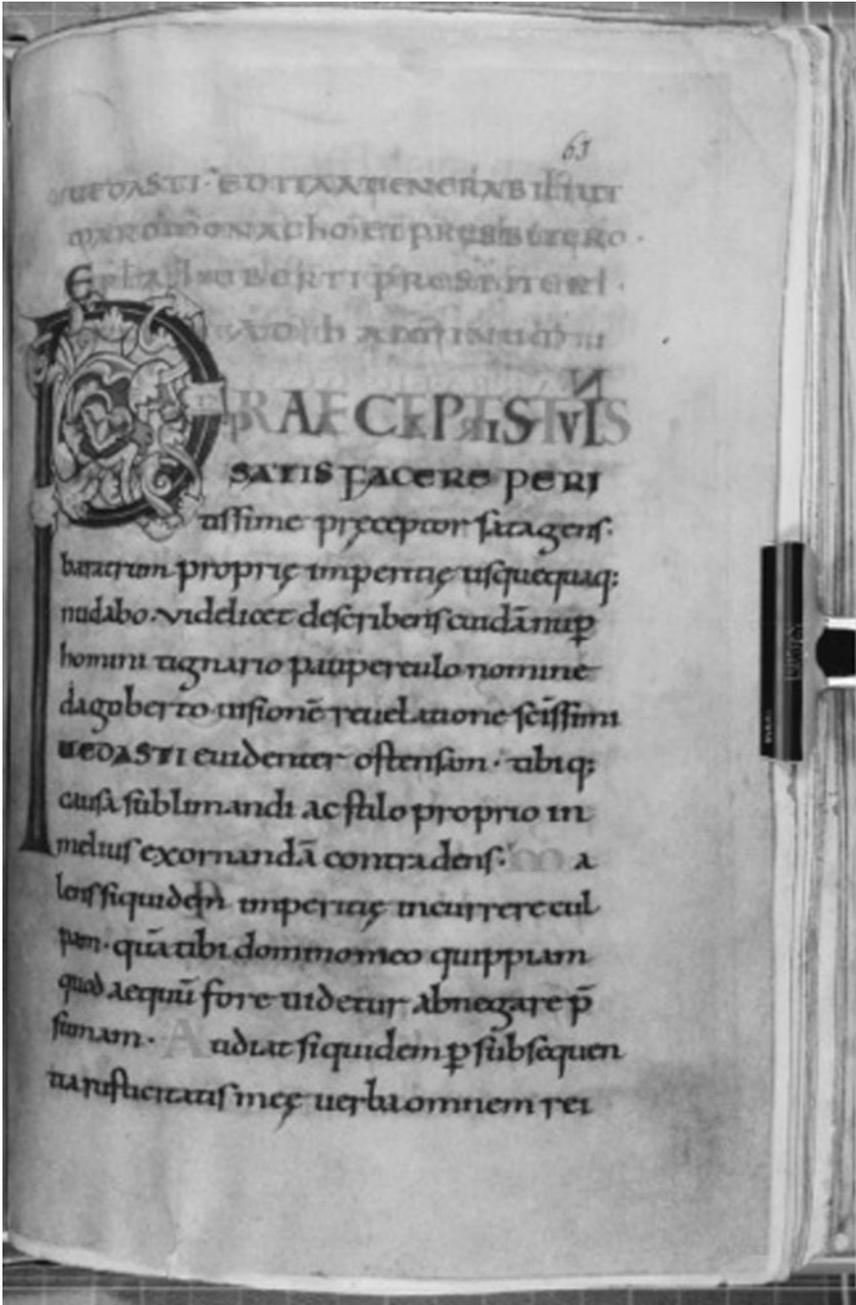


Fig. 1. A page from the ninth-century 'The Apparition of St Vaast', from an illuminated manuscript of texts about the saint. Arras Bibliothèque Municipale ms 734, f. 63.

With permission of the Médiathèque d'Arras.

Terminologically and otherwise, there is no sign of interpolation in the *Epistola Huberti*, and no reason to suspect any either.

Nor is the form of the text unusual. Peasant visions are relatively commonplace in early medieval miracle stories. In most cases, these visions are brief, underdeveloped preludes to a marvellous cure, recommending or commanding a visit to a shrine (such as the monastery of St-Vaast), where the healing takes place, to the saint's and the monastery's glory. Sometimes, though, the peasant is instead primarily a conduit or means of communication: the saint appears, interacts with the visionary, and implicitly or otherwise, demands that he (and it usually is a he) tell somebody more important about what he has seen. Dagobert's vision fits into this latter type, for he too was given messages to deliver by the apparition.

Yet whereas most such visions concern the post-mortem punishment of kings or other important aristocrats, Dagobert's vision had altogether more circumscribed horizons. For the messages Saint Vaast tasked him to deliver were aimed at people who seldom feature in such communications. These messages, mostly in fact stern reprimands and warnings, were directed to five men: Imbod, the village priest, who was commanded to restore to the church what it was owed; Adelgis, the *dominus villae* or lord of the village, warned to return land he had unjustly taken from the church, on threat of losing royal favour and the village with it; Winfrid, a *iudex* or judge, ordered to stop tormenting the inhabitants; a prominent villager named Ebruin, accused of having stolen the saint's unfree dependants; and Oric, the village mayor and 'the head of this wickedness, and of other similar ones', apparently guilty of helping Ebruin. The saint finished by insisting that Dagobert must 'reveal in clear speech all things which have been commanded to you', and reassured him that once these messages were delivered, he could expect to be looked after as a *matricularius* – a man on the list (*matricula*) of needy people given regular help by a particular church.¹⁹

What Dagobert's vision presents us with is effectively the anatomy of a village community, of a kind that may be familiar to readers of Don Camillo.²⁰ Within this community there were formal office-holders, like the priest and the mayor, whose position conferred influence, and who we know could be quite intimidating.²¹ There was also however an informal elite. The saint concentrated his criticism on one of its members, Ebruin, because he had apparently recently managed to swing a local court case to gain control of some unfree residents (*mancipia*). He had succeeded in involving the village mayor, Oric, in the affair, and had also made the village priest, Imbod, complicit: probably a necessary step, because a priest was required to legitimize the oath-swearing, but also an easy one, because Imbod's niece was married to one of the men in Ebruin's circle of friends.²² In the village, Ebruin was clearly a mover and a shaker, far more influential than men like Dagobert, who could not even afford his own wagon, or the harvesters who worked for the village priest.²³ At the very bottom of the village hierarchy were the unfree, the *mancipia*. It is revealing that the saint

had no message for them and that they are not even named, despite their centrality to the case. Whether or not legal status mattered much in this village, this was a group that did not count to the person who recorded the story.²⁴

Dagobert's village was evidently a conflicted community of some complexity, with office-holders, informal elites and subordinated workers, as well as a certain number of people less directly caught up in these networks and conflicts. Yet this was not a self-contained society, complete in itself. For the saint had messages for prominent outsiders too. There was Adelgis, the lord of the village: a man dependent on royal favour, so of elevated status and probably not resident in the village, but nevertheless enough of a participant in village affairs to receive a specific dream message tailored to him. Then there was the judge Winfrid. From the fact that he had imposed a fine of twelve pence on Ebruin, we can surmise that Winfrid was involved at a low-level, perhaps day-to-day basis with the village, and his targeting of this particular socially mobile figure shows a concern to maintain a degree of stability within the community. Finally, there was the monastery of St-Vaast, which had some kind of interest in the village, not least as manifested by its saint's appearance there, but also perhaps through property claims. Saint Vaast had no explicit message for the monks, but, as will become clear, there was an implicit message for them; and in fact this may be the key for the whole text.

HUBERT'S VISION

Let us face facts: Dagobert's dream might be a fiction; so too might Dagobert himself. Admittedly, the suspiciously bright future held out for him by the saint suggests we should not jump straight to that conclusion. Tensions in early medieval villages sometimes were articulated through the miraculous, or even the demonic; and some ninth-century peasants really were named Dagobert, though in earlier centuries this had been a royal name.²⁵ So we cannot rule out the possibility that Dagobert had his own motivations, and wanted to use the vision for his own purposes (or indeed that he genuinely experienced a vision of some kind), which would explain why, according to the text, 'he does not cease up to now to set out in clear explanation what was divinely shown to him'.²⁶ Nevertheless, if we take a rigorous approach, then the only vision to which we have access is not that of the dreamer, but of the author of the hagiographical text. What is remarkable is that to focus attention on this author, as good historical practice requires, far from robbing the story of its microhistorical interest, actually consolidates it.

The author in question, Hubert, was clearly connected to the monastery of St-Vaast. He dedicated the text to his 'most wise instructor', the monastery's schoolmaster Haimin, and it is therefore likely that he had been educated there.²⁷ Yet contrary to what has sometimes been assumed, there is no specific evidence to suggest that Hubert was actually himself a monk, either

there or anywhere else.²⁸ In fact the *Epistola Huberti* (conspicuously not dedicated to the abbot or provost) militates against any such supposition, because it shows that Hubert lived in the village in question. Hubert states that it was he himself who had been called to Dagobert's bedside at short notice and 'had hurried with quick step to the house of the ill man', and that it was he himself who had conscientiously administered penance and the Eucharist, 'having no hope whatsoever for his [Dagobert's] recovery'.²⁹

True, monasteries did occasionally send monks to keep an eye on distant properties, and very occasionally early medieval monks may have served as local priests.³⁰ Yet this village was explicitly not owned by the monastery when Hubert wrote. In any case, it is not just that Hubert lived in the village: it was the home of his family too. For according to his own account, Hubert was none other than the nephew of Imbod the village priest. Ninth-century Frankish texts make explicit provision for priests to send their nephews to monastic school as part of their training: it rather looks as though what we have here is evidence that this sometimes really happened (perhaps the monastery was filling in for the bishop of Cambrai).³¹ As a priest, Hubert was assuredly of higher status than many of his neighbours, but he was nevertheless considerably further down the social scale than were most early medieval authors.³² If the account of Dagobert's village seems so remarkably local and bottom-up in its approach, it is because it was written, I think uniquely for a narrative in the early medieval world, from within the village itself.

That does not mean that the text is easy to approach. Quite the reverse: it is only by understanding Hubert's motivations for writing that it is possible to come close to the reality of life in this village, capitalizing on the view from inside. It may well be, as the text suggests, that Hubert had been commissioned to write by Haimin, his teacher, who we know from other sources had a keen interest in the miracles of Saint Vaast. Yet the way that Hubert frames his story suggests that this local priest was up to something, and that his motivations were as much about local ambition as about showing off to a monastic audience: or rather, that one was a means to the other.

If we look beyond the details, the *Epistola Huberti* has a fairly clear thrust: that the monastery of St-Vaast should assert its presence in Hubert's village. Most of the reprimands that the saint delivers via Dagobert, via Hubert, relate to this core issue in one way or another. The precise legal or historical justification for doing so remains uncertain, because it is not altogether clear whether the saint, when talking about 'his church', means his monastery in Arras, or the local church in the village. Perhaps the monastery owned the local church, or perhaps it had merely provided relics for it. As a result, it is difficult to see whether the saint was protecting the local church's rights or the monastery's. But of course, that ambiguity might have been Hubert's point. In effect, he represents Saint Vaast as the village's real lord. The saint is actively monitoring, protecting and disciplining its inhabitants, as well as those who deal with them.

The reason for the ‘anatomy of the village’ feel of Hubert’s text, and the underlying message of the saint to the monastery, was to show that from a heavenly point of view this was already the monastery’s village, even if earthly affairs had not yet caught up.

If the priest Hubert wrote the *Epistola Huberti* to present the monastery with a challenge, to make good in some way the claims pressed by its saint, he also presented it with a solution: him. He, Hubert, was the man on the ground, with local knowledge and local connections, who was ready to help make its rights a reality. But there was a *quid pro quo*. The fact that the saint apparently requested repairs to be carried out to the local church, and a lime-kiln to be built for it, suggests one possible benefit for Hubert. Yet there are indications that Hubert was planning to make use of the monastery in a more political sense, too. It is striking that while he is an exemplary priest in his own account, conscientious and trusted by the locals, Hubert depicts his own uncle, the priest Imbod, as a morally compromised figure, pastorally inactive and even complicit in the unjust theft of the saint’s own unfree dependants. Whether Imbod really was that corrupt is impossible to say (he is conspicuously not said to be married, which suggests he was living up to contemporary standards of celibacy). He was certainly well integrated into the village, with marriage links to the leading group of inhabitants, while his self-righteous nephew could only turn to the untalkative and impoverished Dagobert.

But one advantage that Hubert did have over his uncle was a connection to an immensely powerful and wealthy community of 112 monks: the monastery of St-Vaast. I suggest that Hubert’s account of Dagobert’s vision is his attempt to mobilize that connection, at his uncle’s expense. The text does not merely document local village politics: it was in itself an attempt to intervene in them, an appeal from a client to a distant but powerful patron.

RECEPTION AND ANONYMITY

It is not necessarily strange that Hubert chose hagiography as his medium. As early medieval authors well knew, miracle stories had certain advantages as a means of communicating messages that it would be impolitic or presumptuous to speak of directly. To write an account of a vision was to make use of an authorized discourse, every bit as much a language of power as the rolling formalities of charters or the dry enumerations of polyptychs. True, appealing to such a weighted language carried risks as well as benefits, since visions could be dismissed as demonic and deceptive. Hubert must have calculated that his version of Dagobert’s vision was likely to go down well at St-Vaast; that this was the best way of writing the monastery into the village and the village into the monastery, for his and the monks’ mutual benefit. Perhaps other miracle stories in comparable collections had similar points of origin: neither the literacy nor the cunning of rural priests should be underestimated. Indeed, it may be that the most unusual thing about

Hubert's text is that it somehow escaped being redacted into some chapter of a larger collection, as Hubert had doubtless anticipated.

The manuscript evidence may shed some light on how this happened. As noted, the *Epistola Huberti* is preserved in six medieval manuscripts, in all of which it is part of a corpus of hagiographical material about Saint Vaast that includes a revised version of the Life of Vaast by Alcuin of York, together with three miracle collections.³³ Hubert had probably hoped his story would be incorporated into the first of these miracle collections, compiled by Haimin, the already-mentioned schoolmaster of St-Vaast and dedicatee of Hubert's text. If so, his hopes were disappointed. Perhaps that was because Haimin died before he could finish – his collection only has six short miracles – or perhaps Haimin did not like what Hubert had sent, whether on literary or political grounds, or simply because the Dagobert miracle was insufficiently sensational.

A reworking of the St-Vaast hagiography undertaken in the 890s supplemented the hagiographical material with a sermon by Haimin that previous compilers had omitted, but still did not include Hubert's letter.³⁴ Only later, in the course of the tenth century, was it belatedly added to the St-Vaast hagiographical collection, simply stuck on the end rather than edited and worked into the corpus. It is indeed revealing that the early manuscripts call Hubert's text a 'letter': perhaps the text had remained a stand-alone document, kept in some chest, until it seemed to someone a good idea to copy it into a hagiographical manuscript for the sake of completeness (miracle collections often 'attracted' extraneous material in this way). It may have turned up as the tenth-century St-Vaast monks began to engage more closely with their documentary archives.³⁵ Alternatively, Hubert's letter content might have become more appealing as the monastic community re-established itself following disruption caused by Viking attacks. The letter's implications about the saint's projection of power beyond the monastic walls, and the danger that he posed to any laymen who crossed him, could have resonated at any number of moments in St-Vaast's history in the tenth century.³⁶

By this date, though, what had mattered most to Hubert no longer mattered at all: namely, the specific identity of the village in question. The passing of time had separated the two things that Hubert had so carefully tried to bring together, the cult of Saint Vaast and the politics of his village. For whether it had been lost already or was deliberately omitted as the text was 'universalized' for new audiences, the name of the village is not given in any surviving manuscript. It is ironic that, as a result, the setting of one of the most profoundly local early medieval texts to survive cannot be precisely identified.³⁷

LOCAL SOCIETY IN DAGOBERT'S VISION

This anonymity is frustrating. But it does not entirely rule out attempts to think about how this microhistorical study contributes to a broader picture.

Early medieval Europe was notoriously diverse – patterns of local power were not at all the same in the Rhineland as in Burgundy or the Po valley, let alone in areas at the edges of or beyond Frankish influence such as Brittany, England or southern Italy.³⁸ Obviously we cannot generalize about an entire continent on the basis of a single case study. Yet the presumed regional location of Hubert and Dagobert's village somewhere in north-western Francia makes it of considerable interest, for this heavily manorialized region was at the heart of European-wide dynamics of economic growth at the time, and of considerable strategic and political importance too, a real centre of royal power – yet nevertheless also a region whose sources, as already mentioned, generally allow only a very top-down perspective in this period.

The details of Dagobert's vision fit smoothly with the wider archaeological evidence for settlement in its presumed region, matching what is known of the importance of cereal cultivation, the use of woodland, and relatively coherent settlement patterns.³⁹ All its characters – mayors, priests, judges, landlords, and a supporting cast of peasants – are attested in all the standard written sources for the period and area, too.⁴⁰ Presumably therefore this village was much like the hundreds of others owned by elites that are mentioned in north-western Frankish polyptychs and charters.

Yet in some respects, the view of the village the vision presents differs strikingly from such sources. Suppose Adelgis, the *dominus villae*, had been granted this village by royal charter, which is admittedly not stated but perfectly possible. Such a charter, if it survived, would doubtless have looked just like all the other documentary evidence of the period, talking in unremitting terms of ownership: *proprietas, res, proprium*.⁴¹ From such a text, nothing would be known about any of the complex interactions taking place at the local level (for example the plotting of Ebruin and Oric), and the village would have appeared only as a token in a game played by aristocratic elites. And what if this village had been mentioned in some monastery's estate survey? Then the names of Dagobert, Ebruin, Oric and Imbod would all probably be recorded, but little or nothing would emerge of the social dynamics that shaped their world.

It is only thanks to Dagobert's vision, and Hubert's account of it, that we can see this early medieval settlement as not just a unit of property, or a unit of revenue, but as an arena of conflicted social action in its own right, even in the heartland of Frankish social and political order.⁴² In fact, the village, or at least Hubert, would seem even to have had a sense of its own history. This village priest could remember the names of previous lords and judges, and their fates, too, all mentioned as warnings for Adelgis and Winfrid. Perhaps most interestingly of all, Hubert's letter records a belief that the village had been established by King Dagobert, whom Hubert describes as the 'famous former king of the Franks and founder of this village'.⁴³ Now the text was preserved in a monastic context, at the monastery of St-Vaast – yet there is no evidence that this monastery ever cultivated the memory of

Dagobert. Its foundation in the late seventh century took place long after Dagobert's death in 639, and to judge from its documentary archives, its preferred Merovingian roots were rather with a later king, Theuderic III, who died in 691.⁴⁴ So it is plausible that Hubert's reference to Dagobert points to a local folk-memory, a local foundation legend.

The *Epistola Huberti* therefore reminds us that charters and polyptychs are partial representations of more complex realities, just one set of discourses that do not capture the whole of the reality that they describe, that there were real human communities operating underneath the dry technicalities of the early medieval archival and archaeological records. In itself, of course, that is nothing very new.⁴⁵ Historians know that already, or should know it. Where the *Epistola Huberti's* value lies is rather in fleshing out that speculative complexity in ways that I think no other source can.

Particularly interesting in this regard is the contrast drawn between the judge and the lord, the *dominus* and the *iudex*. The lord may have owned the village, but this ownership seems to have been rather a precarious thing, and somewhat distant too. Changing hands according to the vagaries of royal favour, ownership of Hubert's village overlaid complex and to an extent independent local realities. No wonder that ninth-century Frankish monasteries developed elaborate rituals to demonstrate the subordination of the inhabitants whose land they claimed to own; no wonder that aristocratic owners could not always get away with making changes to how these communities were organized.⁴⁶

The judge, in contrast, was a much more hands-on figure, to judge by the fine of twelve pence Winfrid imposed on Ebruin: doubtless a substantial sum for a ninth-century villager, though a small amount in the general scheme of things (in 794, a penny could buy twelve two-pound wheat loaves). A step above local notables like Ebruin, Winfrid would seem to have been a more immediate presence for the inhabitants than the lord Adelgis. There is however no explicit association between him and the village lord; and when judges are mentioned in early medieval sources elsewhere, it is usually in a public or royal context.⁴⁷ Given his capacity to impose fines, Winfrid is more likely to have been a representative of public authority in some form, perhaps of the count or perhaps of a privileged church (might this village have been granted out in benefice by the king?), rather than of the lay landlord.⁴⁸

One implication is that distinctly public forms of authority evidently mattered on the ground in this corner of ninth-century Francia. But equally significant is that no single individual really straightforwardly controlled this community, in spite of Adelgis's title. Rather, integration into wider circuits of power took place heterogeneously, through different dimensions: religiously through priests, tenurially through owners, and administratively through judges. This heterogeneity mapped onto the circuits of power inside the village too, with formal and informal kinds of power working sometimes together, and sometimes in competition. Indeed, it was probably this very



Fig. 2. Northwestern Francia in the ninth century. St-Vaast was in the bishopric of Cambrai, on the site of the modern French town of Arras.

fluidity that provided the conditions of possibility for Hubert's letter. The potential to orchestrate change that these circumstances offered, combined with an education provided by a nearby monastery in the full spate of the 'Carolingian renaissance', were surely what led Hubert to put pen to paper, to develop a strategy. The survival of his letter may result from happenstance, and its richness from Hubert's imagination; but the text itself was very much a product of the realities of Hubert's world.

So while it may be that the conventional elite-centred records of the early Middle Ages do not entirely reflect the reality of villages like this one in the heart of the Frankish empire, Hubert's text shows an early medieval 'small world' that was nevertheless quite different in structure from that dominated by the proliferating petty village lords of the post-1000 period, who tended to combine political power with tenurial control, and to exercise this authority at a very local level.⁴⁹ Ultimately, therefore, the *Epistola Huberti's* depiction of northern Frankish society complements rather than competes with the better known sources.

CONCLUSION

Hubert's village is not identified. Moreover, St-Vaast's once abundant records are now depressingly fragmentary. So unfortunately we shall never know whether Hubert's efforts to improve his own position in the village by bringing in his patrons from the monastery proved successful. Nevertheless, his attempt to bring about change has left its record in a text that illuminates

village life in a rather unusual way: from the point of view of a village priest, as he grappled with distinctly early medieval dynamics and power relations, and did so, too, by means of the very text that survives. That priest may not have been entirely typical, since it is difficult to say with certainty how common Hubert's monastic connections were. But his individual typicality or otherwise actually matters less here than the fact that he was part of village life, a context that determined the tenor of his text just as it doubtless shaped his aspirations.

The early medieval microhistory I think we can recover from the *Epistola Huberti*, in short, is about a village priest's attempt to engineer a change of power relations in his own village, in the context of early medieval, and specifically ninth-century, conditions, and expressed in his own words. It is a text that shows how early medieval agency can be found at low social levels, in the margins of more structured forms of authority; and like all microhistories, its value derives from how it relates and contributes to wider themes and developments. It is also a text that reeks of ambition, albeit ambition with local horizons. Prepared to bad-mouth his own family in pursuit of his own advantage, this village priest is not a particularly attractive figure.⁵⁰ But then, who said that lost voices need always be sympathetic ones?

Charles West is a historian of early medieval Europe, with a particular interest in Carolingian Francia. His current research examines how the contestation of jurisdiction over clerics articulated debates concerning the boundaries of the secular and the religious. His publications include *Reframing the Feudal Revolution* (2013), and *Hincmar of Rheims: Life and Work* (2015), co-edited with Rachel Stone.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1 The quotation comes from Carlo Ginzburg, 'Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It', *Critical Enquiry* 20: 1, 1993, pp. 10–35. For more recent work, see John Brewer, 'Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life', *Cultural and Social History* 7: 1, 2010, pp. 87–109. Thanks to James Shaw for references. On *The History Manifesto*, see the review by Deborah Cohen and Peter Mandler, 'The History Manifesto: a Critique', *American Historical Review* 120: 2, 2015, pp. 530–42.

2 For instance, John Arnold, *What is Medieval History?*, London, 2008, pp. 1–8, on the case of the fourteenth-century priest Bartolomeo. More generally, see his *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, 2005, for instance pp. 27–9, and his *Inquisition and Power: Catharism and the Confessing Subject in Medieval Languedoc*, Philadelphia, 2001, an extended engagement with the challenges of recovering subaltern voices from Inquisition records.

3 The classic is Wendy Davies, *Small Worlds: the Village Community in Early Medieval Brittany*, Berkeley and London, 1988. For an attempt to reconstruct a small world without documentary evidence, see Chris Wickham's history of Malling, in *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800*, Oxford, 2005, pp. 109–16. For doubts about whether microhistory is possible on the basis of early medieval documentary records, see Ross

Balzaretti, 'The Politics of Property in Ninth-Century Milan. Familial Motives and Monastic Strategies in the Village of Inzago', *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome* 111, 1999, pp. 747–70. Matthew Innes has a study in hand concerning an exorcism in a Frankish village (I am grateful to him for discussion on this point).

4 For instance, Katherine Bullimore, 'Folcwin of Rankweil: the World of a Carolingian Local Official', *Early Medieval Europe* 13, 2005, pp. 43–77.

5 On the manuscripts, see Carine van Rhijn, 'The Local Church, Priests' Handbooks and Pastoral Care in the Carolingian Period', *Settimane di Studio del Centro di Studi sull'alto medioevo* 61, 2014, pp. 689–710; on the archaeology, see Chris Loveluck, *Northwest Europe in the Early Middle Ages, c. 600–1150*, Cambridge, 2013.

6 On the archiving pressures, see *Documentary Culture and the Laity in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Warren Brown, Marios Costambeys and Matthew Innes, Cambridge, 2012. On the discourse, see Charles West, 'Meaning and Context: Moringus the Lay Scribe and Charter Formulation in late Carolingian Burgundy', in *Problems and Possibilities of Early Medieval Charters*, ed. Jon Jarrett and Allen McKinley, Brepols, 2013.

7 As famously done with the Frankish peasant 'Bodo', in Eileen Power's *Medieval People*, London, 1951.

8 See Jean-Pierre Devroey, *Puissants et Misérables: Système social et monde paysan dans l'Europe des Francs (VIe – IXe siècles)*, Brussels, 2006, pp. 480–1.

9 A recent survey by Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*, Princeton, 2013. On the early Middle Ages in particular, see Amy Bosworth, 'Learning from the Saints: Ninth-Century Hagiography and the Carolingian Renaissance', *History Compass* 8: 9, 2010, pp. 1,055–66. For the potential of visions as sources, see Peter Dinzelsbacher, *Revelationes*, Turnhout, 1991.

10 A list of several miracle-books is provided by Hans-Werner Goetz, 'Wunderberichte im 9. Jahrhundert: Ein Beitrag zum literarischen Genus der frühmittelalterlichen Mirakelsammlungen', in *Mirakel im Mittelalter: Konzeptionen, Erscheinungsformen, Deutungen*, ed. Martin Heinzelmann and Klaus Herbers, Stuttgart, 2002, pp. 180–226.

11 See the forthright comments in Hedwig Röckelein, 'Hagiographie, élément d'une culture des élites?', in *La Culture du haut moyen âge, une question des élites?*, ed. François Bougard, Régine le Jan, and Rosamond McKitterick, Turnhout, 2009, pp. 187–200.

12 For instance, Steffen Patzold, 'Laughing at a Saint? Miracle and Irony in the Vita Gangulfi prima', *Early Medieval Europe* 21, 2013, pp. 197–220.

13 As done with exemplary care for visions about elite figures by Paul Dutton, *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire*, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1994.

14 Cf. Janet L. Nelson, 'Women and the Word in the Earlier Middle Ages', *Studies in Church History* 27, 1990, pp. 53–78, on how women were used by monks as 'good to think with'. For discussion of the difficulties of extracting authentic voices even from more copious later records, see Arnold, *Inquisition and Power*.

15 In the Bollandist catalogue, *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina*, Brussels, 1898–1901 (henceforth BHL), the text of *Apparitio Sancti Vedasti* is given the number 8512. For the text used here, see *Acta Sanctorum*, ed. Godfrey Henschen, Antwerp, 1658, February, vol. 1, pp. 803–5 (an early modern multi-volume edition of saints' lives arranged by feastday and published in calendrical order). The text's dating is based largely on its dedication to Haimin, whose precise date of death is unknown but was probably in the 840s: see note 27 below. A full English translation of the text is available at <http://history.dept.shef.ac.uk/translations/medieval/saint-vaast/> (accessed 18 Oct. 2015).

16 On the historical figure, see Charles Mériaux, *Gallia Irradiata: saints et sanctuaires dans le nord de la Gaule du haut Moyen Âge*, Stuttgart, 2006. On the monastery itself, see Tobias Herrmann, 'Historisch-diplomatische Untersuchungen zur Frühgeschichte der Abtei St-Vaast in Arras', *Archiv für Diplomatik* 51, 2005, pp. 49–125. The text is discussed in specific relation to Frankish elites by Charles West, 'Le saint, le charpentier et le prêtre: l'Apparitio Sancti Vedasti et les élites dans la Francia du IXe siècle', in *Faire lien. Réseaux, aristocratie et échange compétitif au Moyen Âge. Mélanges en l'honneur de Régine Le Jan*, ed. Laurent Jégou, Sylvie Joye, Thomas Lienhard and Jens Schneider, Paris, 2015, pp. 237–45.

17 *Apparitio Sancti Vedasti*, ed. Henschen, p. 805.

18 On Perpetua, see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, New York, 1988, pp. 73–7.

19 *Apparitio Sancti Vedasti*, ed. Henschen, p. 804. On the institution of the *matricula*, see Devroey, *Puissants et Misérables*, pp. 325.

20 Thanks to Gianluca Raccagni for this observation. For an English translation of one of the classic stories by Giovanni Guareschi about the small world of a post-war Italian priest, see *The Little World of Don Camillo*, transl. Una Vincenzo Troubridge (London, 1950), which has enjoyed many subsequent editions as well as BBC television and radio dramatizations.

21 On local intimidation by priests, see Nelson, 'Women and the Word'.

22 The Frankish legal collection known as Benedict Levita's capitularies details just this requirement: *Capitularia Regum Francorum*, ed. Etienne Baluze, Paris, 1677, vol. 2, p. 214 ('ut omne sacramentum in ecclesia iuretur' – 'that every oath should be sworn in the church').

23 See Jean-Pierre Devroey, 'Libres et non-libres sur les terres de Saint-Remi de Reims: La Notice Judiciaire de Courtisols (13 Mai 847) et la Polyptyque d'Hincmar', *Journal des Savants* 2006, pp. 65–103, for a study of the leading 'coqs du village' in a Carolingian context.

24 On unfreedom, see Devroey, *Puissants et Misérables*, pp. 265–80.

25 For stress on authenticity underlying visions, see Dinzlbacher, *Revelationes*. Three peasant Dagoberts are attested in the ninth-century estate survey of the monastery of St-Germain des Prés, edited by Dieter Hägermann (and others) as *Das Polyptychon von Saint-Germain-des-Prés*, Cologne, 1993: Dagobertus, the son of Ardoin and Lise Gund (section VI, para 35); Dagbertus (section XIII, para 7); and Dacbertus, son of Dacboldus (section XIII, para 42). For tensions in Frankish villages associated with the demonic and the miraculous, see Matthew Innes and Charles West, 'Saints and Demons in the Carolingian Countryside', in *Kleine Welten. Ländliche Gesellschaften im Karolingerreich*, ed. Steffen Patzold, forthcoming.

26 *Apparitio Sancti Vedasti*, ed. Henschen, p. 804.

27 *Apparitio Sancti Vedasti*, ed. Henschen, p. 803 ('peritissime praeceptor'). On Haimin, see *Clavis Scriptorum Latinorum Medii Aevi: Auctores Galliae, 735–987*, ed. Marie-Hélène Jullien, vol. 3, Turnhout, 2011, pp. 263–6.

28 The eighteenth-century necrology is noticeably hesitant: 'An fuerit monasterii alumnus? Non infundate creditur' (Was he an alumnus of the monastery? It is not without grounds believed so): Eugène van Drival, *Nécrologe de l'Abbaye de Saint-Vaast d'Arras*, Arras, 1878, p. 6.

29 *Apparitio Sancti Vedasti*, ed. Henschen, p. 804 ('concito gradu in domum perueni iacentis... nullatenus spem recuperationis eius omnimodo habens').

30 See Carine van Rhijn, *Shepherds of the Lord: Priests and Episcopal Statutes in the Carolingian Period*, Turnhout, 2007, p. 6.

31 For wider context, see Julia Barrow, *The Clergy in the Medieval World: Secular Clerics, their Families and Careers in north-Western Europe, c. 800–c. 1200*, Cambridge, 2015, especially pp. 117–35 (on nephews) and pp. 180–200 (on education). On the relation between Arras and Cambrai, see Lotte Kéry, *Die Errichtung des Bistums Arras 1093–4*, Sigmaringen, 1994.

32 On priests as members of the local elite, Steffen Patzold, 'Bildung und Wissen einer lokalen Elite des Frühmittelalters: Das Beispiel der Landpfarrer im Frankenreich des 9. Jahrhunderts', in *La Culture*, ed. Bougard, Le Jan and McKitterick, pp. 377–92.

33 For an up-to-date list of the manuscripts, see *Clavis Scriptorum Latinorum Medii Aevi: Auctores Galliae, 735–987*, ed. Marie-Hélène Jullien, vol. 4: 1, Turnhout, 2015, pp. 21–2. Of these manuscripts, Rheims Bibliothèque Municipale 1405 is the oldest, perhaps from the late tenth century (thanks to Dominique Stutzmann for his kind advice on this question).

34 For manuscripts with Haimin's sermon (BHL 8511), see *Clavis Scriptorum*, ed. Jullien, vol. 3, p. 266.

35 On the historical 'compilation védestine' produced at this time, see Steven Vanderputten, 'Universal Historiography as Process? Shaping Monastic Memories in the Eleventh-Century Chronicle of Saint-Vaast', in *The Life of Universal Chronicles in the High Middle Ages*, ed. Michele Campopiano, York, forthcoming.

36 David van Meter, 'Count Baldwin IV, Richard of Saint-Vanne, and the Inception of Monastic Reform in Eleventh-Century Flanders', *Revue Bénédictine* 107, 1997, pp. 130–48. For a broader angle, and attention to earlier phases of the monastery's monastic history, see Steven Vanderputten, *Monastic Reform as Process: Realities and Representations in Medieval Flanders, 900–1100*, Ithaca, 2013, esp. p. 44 and pp. 71–3.

37 The Dagobert legend (see pp. 10–11 above) might however suggest the possibility of *Daginvilla*, now Dainville, a settlement just a few kilometres away from the monastery. The monastery of St-Vaast had seven holdings (*mansi*) there in 867 – making it a substantial but not necessarily dominant presence – and the village remained connected to the monastery throughout the Middle Ages. Could the name have been etymologized as relating to Dagobert? For a neat case-study of how old hagiographical texts could be re-presented for new purposes and

audiences, see Tjamke Snijders, “‘Obtulisti libellum de vita domni Remacli’”: the Evolution of Patron Saint Libelli as Propagandist Instruments in the Monastery of Stavelot-Malmédy, 938–1247’, *BMNG-Low Countries Historical Review* 128: 2, 2013, pp. 3–30.

38 On cultural diversity as a feature of the early medieval world, see Julia Smith, *Europe after Rome: a New Cultural History 500–1000*, Oxford, 2005, as well as Ross Balzaretti, ‘The Creation of Europe’, *History Workshop Journal* 33, spring 1992, pp. 181–96, which stresses the ‘diversity and disunity’ of the period. For a study, see Matthew Innes, ‘Practices of Property in the Carolingian Empire’, in *The Long Morning of Medieval Europe: New Directions in Early Medieval Studies*, ed. Jennifer Davis and Michael McCormick, Aldershot, 2008, pp. 247–66.

39 General background is provided by *Carte Archéologique de la Gaule 62:1, Pas de Calais*, 1995; see also Étienne Louis, ‘A De-Romanised Landscape in Northern Gaul’, in *Recent Research on the Late Antique Countryside*, ed. William Bowden, Luke Lavan and Carlos Machado, Leiden and Boston, 2003, pp. 479–504 (complete with a picture of a reconstructed Frankish village).

40 See Laurent Feller, *Paysans et Seigneurs au Moyen Age: VIIIe–XVe siècles*, Paris, 2007, pp. 83–5.

41 As it happens, a royal charter for a certain Adelgisus does survive, issued by King Charles the Bald. It is however a little late (860), and concerns land in Normandy: not an impossible fit for our Adelgis, but not compelling.

42 For reservations about the extent of this order, see Jean-Pierre Devroey, ‘Ordering, Measuring and Counting: Carolingian Rule, Cultural Capital and the Economic Performance in Western Europe (750–900)’, unpublished paper, 2009, <http://hdl.handle.net/2013/ULB-DIPOT:0ai:dipot.ulb.ac.be:2013/124981>, accessed 19 Oct. 2015, pp. 19–21.

43 *Apparitus Sancti Vedasti*, ed. Henschen, p. 804 (‘Dagobertus etenim inclitus quondam Rex Francorum et conditor villae istius’).

44 See Herrmann, ‘Historisch-diplomatische Untersuchungen’. On memories of Dagobert in general, see Christoph Wehrli, *Mittelalterliche Überlieferung von Dagobert I*, Bern, 1982.

45 See Matthew Innes, Marios Costambeys and Simon MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, Cambridge, 2011, p. 256: ‘... we cannot assume that manorialisation significantly altered the texture of peasant society’.

46 For the rituals, see the important article by Ludolf Kuchenbuch, ‘Porcus donativus: Language Use and Gifting in Signiorial Records between the eighth and the twelfth centuries’, in *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-modern Figurations of Exchange*, ed. Gadi Algazi, Valentin Groebner and Bernhard Jussen, Göttingen, 2003. For resistance, see the *Miracula Ulmari* (BHL 8513), written at St-Vaast, chap. 9, about peasants’ resistance to a wicked beneficeholder: ‘For he had ordered them all to go to a place that he had in his own possession. They refused, not because of pride, but so that it should not become a custom’: *Acta Sanctorum*, ed. Henschen, February vol. 1, pp. 805–8 (p. 807).

47 For instance in the royal capitularies: see the *Capitulare de villis*, in *Capitularia regum Francorum*, ed. Alfred Boretius, vol. 1, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Legum Sectio II, Hanover, 1883, no. 32, pp. 82–91. Judges are also prominent in a standard clause in early medieval royal immunity charters, ‘ut nullus iudex...’ (‘that no judge...’).

48 For a translation of a selection of immunity charters, documents by which a degree of public authority was conferred on churches, see Alice Rio, *The Formularies of Angers and Marculf: Two Merovingian Legal Handbooks*, Liverpool, 2008, pp. 131–7; see also pp. 148–5 for a text hinting at the conferral of such authority upon laymen too.

49 For the proliferation of local lords, see Richard E. Barton, *Lordship in the County of Maine*, Woodbridge, 2004. For an account stressing more than just change in scale, see Charles West, *Reframing the Feudal Revolution: Political and Social Transformation between Marne and Moselle*, Cambridge, 2013.

50 Cf. Jill Lepore, ‘Historians who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography’, *Journal of American History* 88: 1, 2001, pp. 129–44.