

After Empire: Using and not using the past in the crisis of the Carolingian world, c.900–c.1050

The tenth century is an overlooked moment in European history. It has played an important role as a starting point for the national narratives of modern countries including England and Germany, but is often characterised as a ‘dark age’, a ‘century of iron’ in which the structures of the Carolingian Empire (751-888) collapsed and the map of medieval Europe took shape in the rubble. By rejecting these stories of nations or chaos as starting points for our project, we seek to understand the tenth century on its own terms. ‘Uses of the Past’ is an ideal theme for this endeavour because the absence of clear administrative or legal structures in our period meant that action in the present often drew authority and legitimacy from claims about the past. The ways that contemporaries chose to use (or not to use) the past – especially the Carolingian past – can be highly instructive to the historian. Focusing on legal, liturgical and historical attitudes to the past will therefore help us recapture the imagined landscapes of tenth-century Europe and to explore it not as a chapter in pre-ordained national narratives but as a case study in transition – an example of how people in the past dealt with crisis and rapid change in the political order. The project will produce academic articles and monographs, but will also attempt to open up the period to a broader audience by providing online resources (including images and translated texts) for teachers and general readers. To accomplish these goals, we will collaborate with schoolteachers and with museums and archives in Germany, Austria, Spain and the UK. As well as these ‘virtual’ outputs, we will organise a public exhibition of related manuscripts in Catalonia.

Project team

Priv.-Doz. Dr. Maximilian Diesenberger, Institut für Mittelalterforschung,
Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna
Prof. Dr. Stefan Esders, Freie Universität Berlin (project leader)
Professor Sarah Hamilton, University of Exeter
Professor Simon MacLean, University of St. Andrews
Prof. Dr. Matthias M. Tischler, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
2 postdocs and 3 doctoral students in Barcelona, Berlin, Exeter, St. Andrews and Vienna

Project partners

Staatsbibliothek, Berlin
Bundesgymnasium, Vienna
Historical Association, London
Exeter Cathedral, Exeter
Secretariat Interdiocesà de Custòdia i Promoció de l’Art Sagrat de Catalunya,
Barcelona