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Some Observations on *The Medieval Nobility*:  
A Review Essay

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Both specialists and students owe to Timothy Reuter, the editor and translator of *The Medieval Nobility: Studies on the Ruling Classes of France and Germany from the Sixth to the Twelfth Century*,<sup>1</sup> to Richard Vaughan, the general editor of the series "Europe in the Middle Ages," and to North-Holland Publishing Company a vote of thanks for their respective roles in the appearance of this formidable volume. The lion's share of the credit goes to Mr. Reuter, who intelligently selected the ten unabridged studies published here, effectively translated them into English (no mean task when dealing with the work of Karl Ferdinand Werner and Karl Bosl), constructed a thirty-five page bibliography (actually a list of works cited, with the editor's additions and updates), and wrote an introduction that is both illuminating and stimulating.

Reuter selected and organized these studies with several purposes in mind and he accomplished his aims very well. The contributions by Irsigler on the Merovingians,<sup>2</sup> Werner (I) on the Carolingians,<sup>3</sup> Tellen-

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bach on the German Empire,<sup>4</sup> and Werner (II) on the Capetian monarchy,<sup>5</sup> provide an overview of the "high nobility" for the entire period from the sixth to the twelfth centuries. The studies by Schmid on the *Libri Memoriales*,<sup>6</sup> Hauck on satirical literature,<sup>7</sup> Irsigler on saints' lives,<sup>8</sup> and Vercauteren on the views of a single author as seen from his chronicle,<sup>9</sup> provide insights into how particular genres of source material present the reader with different kinds of realities. The methods used in these studies vary, although to a greater or lesser extent prosopographical investigations lie at the base of what is done. For example, the studies by Schmid and Werner (I) rely heavily on the theories that have been developed during the past forty years concerning "leading names" and their component parts. The studies by Bosl<sup>10</sup> and Van Winter,<sup>11</sup> while no less interested in the prosopography of their subjects, pursue discussions based more or less on overt sociological models dealing with the nature of class and social mobility, and in the process treat the "lesser nobility." This provides a valuable adjunct to the studies of the "high nobility" in the volume. The papers published in *The Medieval Nobility* also illustrate different types of history. The two by Werner, Tellenbach's contribution and that by Bosl may be seen as constitutional history, while the pieces by Hauck and Irsigler provide insights into the style of "noble" life. These latter two studies, along with those by Vercauteren, Schmid, and to a lesser extent Werner (I) may be considered to deal, as well, with what some specialists have come to call the history of *mentalities*.

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As well as the individual studies, there is a most valuable and most provocative introductory essay by Genicot, "Recent research on the medieval nobility."<sup>12</sup> In this we have an effort to show which problems concerning the medieval nobility have been solved, which are well on their way to solution, and which are still the subject of vigorous controversy. Genicot begins with an assertion which he admits is "fairly elementary," i.e., that "strictly egalitarian societies, where wealth and power do not separate a few men from the rest, are hardly known in history." Indeed, all of the essays in this book--and I would venture to suggest all work on what may perhaps be called the "medieval nobility"--focus on the "few men" and women so separated from the rest. At the heart of any study of these "few" during the period under discussion must lie the question: did they constitute a nobility, or were they merely an aristocracy?

More than forty years ago Marc Bloch formulated what was then the consensus concerning the status of the "few men separated from the rest," to use Genicot's phrase, in the *regnum Francorum* and in the polities which developed from its ruins. According to Bloch a nobility came into existence during the latter part of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when the important few separated themselves from those below them with legal barriers and then proceeded to obtain an explicit legal status and privileges which were transmitted by blood, i.e., by biological descent.<sup>13</sup> In consequence of Bloch's formulation it was held that in the regions under discussion, from the time the

senatorial nobility ceased to hold the privileged hereditary legal position given it by Roman institutions until at least the late twelfth century there was no nobility, only an aristocracy. The important few did not hold their position because of an heritable legal status, but rather because of a variety of other contingencies, among them wealth, political power, and personal ability.

However, for at least two decades Genicot himself has taken issue with the consensus that was represented by Bloch's formulation. He has argued for the existence of a nobility during the early Middle Ages. Two decades ago he maintained that "noble legal status" was summed up by the single word "liberty," which he argued was an attribute of birth. More recently Genicot has modified his view substantially and eschewed a monocausal perspective. Birth into a particular class endowed with "liberty" is still essential, but so is the possession of "power to command and to judge: *bannum et iustitia*." These privileges, which separate the noble from the rest of society, have to be capable of transmission, though Genicot does not insist that the transmission must take place in an hereditary manner.<sup>14</sup>

Genicot's formulation is helping to build what is perhaps somewhere along the road to becoming a new consensus. Indeed, it is clear that the authors whose studies appear in *The Medieval Nobility* do not adhere to Bloch's view.<sup>15</sup> Genicot himself seems to have been stimulated in large part by a desire to explain the frequent use of terms such as *nobilis* and *nobilitas* in the early medieval sources.<sup>16</sup> Thus



it has become increasingly clear that some consideration must be given to what those who used these words intended, and to what their audiences understood by such terminology.<sup>17</sup> In this context the contributions of Hauck and Irsigler strive to provide an understanding of the style of life and the patterns of behavior and thought that articulate in concert with such terms.

However, these two studies, as well as many others, approach the subject of terminology in a highly selective manner.<sup>18</sup> The systematic examination of the vocabulary used by a particular writer in the context of a specific genre of expression must be carried out before significant generalizations concerning the meaning of such terms as *nobilitas* or *nobilis* can be soundly based. The drudgery of lexicography --sometimes now called "historical semantics"--can be speeded up by the use of computers, but regardless of what one calls the enterprise or how one sorts the data, it remains as a first step that is yet to be taken with the vigor necessary to sustain the march of studies in the history of nobility. In addition, where statistical methods are used to evaluate the data that computers now so rapidly can collate, historians are well advised to work with competent statisticians, and they should not rely upon "cook book" recipes in the manner in which a generation of self-styled psycho-historians has based its assumptions upon epitomes and popularizations of Freud's *Werke*. In the case of statistical evaluation an assumed referent, for example, rather than a statistically established one, can undermine the valid-

ity of an entire study.<sup>19</sup>

A second major attack on the Bloch formulation is implicit in the work of Werner (I) and of others, mainly of the Tellenbach school, who have been able to trace the ancestry of many of the great noble families of the high Middle Ages, as Bloch defined them, back into the early Middle Ages. In short, it is now generally agreed that among the high nobility of the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries there was far more biological continuity with what Bloch considered the early medieval aristocracy than heretofore was believed to be the case.<sup>20</sup> However, biological continuity does not prove the hereditary nature of the privileges that set Bloch's nobility above the rest of society. Thus Genicot's observation that privilege must be transmitted, though not necessarily in an hereditary manner, becomes a key point for discussion.<sup>21</sup> The question must be posed as to how those privileges--thought to be necessary by contemporary scholars for the existence of a noble class--were transmitted, if this were not done via heredity. Toward this end it is clear that wills and other instruments of transmission are in need of detailed examination and that special attention might be given to the practice of association.<sup>22</sup> In addition, such celebrated texts as the exchange of letters dealing with honor between count Odo II of Blois and king Robert would seem to be of crucial importance.<sup>23</sup>

The emphasis upon the status conferred by birth as a crucial element in determining nobility, at least for some early medieval

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writers who use the term *nobilis* (and for an increasing number of medievalists seeking to develop a viable definition of nobility), makes clear that "family," however understood, plays an essential role in dealing with the problem. And though all of the contributions to *The Medieval Nobility* deal with questions of family, the study by Schmid<sup>24</sup> is undoubtedly the most important in this regard. Schmid has demonstrated through the use of the *Libri Memoriales* that the early medieval family was very different from that of the high Middle Ages. The former was not dynastic, in the modern sense, but rather was a very large group identifying its biological descent, either through the mother *or* the father, from some celebrated ancestor.<sup>25</sup>

In the *Libri* many people are construed as "family." Thus, according to Schmid, a consciousness of belonging together on the part of the members of a biological descent group existed, although most of those listed would seem to have been people of comparatively little political, social, or economic significance. Indeed, only a relatively small number of the members of any such family found in the *Libri* can be identified from other sources as office holders or as people who may be considered to have possessed "the power to command and the power to judge."<sup>26</sup>

Schmid contrasts this early medieval family, identified in the *Libri Memoriales*, with the dynastic families of the high Middle Ages which he argues are identified by a castle, tend toward patrilineal



descent, and are, compared with the families of the *Libri*, quite small. However, it may be observed that Vercauteren's study of Lambert of Watrellos, who discusses his own family in the *Annales Cameracenses* through the eleventh and twelfth centuries, indicates its connection with castles but emphasizes descent from both lines and construes relations beyond the fifth degree to be of significance.<sup>27</sup>

The sharp distinction between the early and high medieval concept of family drawn by Schmid invites criticism on a number of other points, and Karl Leyser makes several of these quite effectively when he writes:<sup>28</sup>

Based as they are so singularly on the *Libri Memoriales*, the religious association of nobles with the prayers of a monastic community, they run the risk, in a rather unusual and intriguing form of confusing consciousness and being. They assume that, because these men were conscious of being members of a very large and fluid group for the purpose of having their memory kept, they were conscious of this for all other purposes as well.

Leyser's critique calls our attention to an obvious fact about family, whether in medieval Europe or contemporary Western society, i.e., that there is no family in the singular; there are only families in the plural. When we invite the family to a wedding or some other great celebration it is a far different grouping from the family with which we live on a daily basis in the same residence. The family that concerns us when we pay taxes and calculate our deductions is not the same as the living members of the family that Aunt Edith or Uncle Edgar have listed on their charts while tracing descent from King Alfred.

One could identify a myriad of families in contemporary society

to which each of us belongs, and the fact that there is often much overlap among them is not a disqualifying limitation. This process of identification can and should be carried out for the Middle Ages. Indeed, we all know that the family of the *Libri Memoriales* is different from the family of the feud. The family, as defined for military service during the Merovingian era is likewise different from that defined by the canons concerning legitimate degrees of consanguinity with regard to marriage. One might add here that data regarding Godparents and adoption--however defined--must not be omitted.<sup>29</sup> If scholars are correct in maintaining that family status at birth is essential to any understanding of nobility during the early and high Middle Ages, then it is necessary to identify which family or combination of families into which a person is born provided the necessary biological, legal, or other characteristics that made one noble in situations that do not seem as clear as in England, where the peer's eldest son succeeded to the father's title and privileges while the younger siblings or elder females were not noble at all.

The history of the nobility as seen in recent literature is in transition from the consensus formulated by Bloch more than forty years ago to a new constellation, yet clearly to be defined. Along the road to the new consensus, scholars will have to carry out a large number of exhaustive lexicographical studies, focusing upon individual authors and specific genres of source material so as to ascertain the consciousness of the writers and of their audiences. The importance of the

family in all such work demands the careful delineation of the "context family" and the relation of the different "context families" to each other and to the consciousness of what various contemporaries believed to be of importance.

The rather chaotic present state of the question concerning the nobility, however, has not imposed a moratorium upon the use of such constructs as "the nobility" in constitutional history, wherein these constructs become markers positioned against such other constructs as "kingship" or "the middle class." Although we are now wary of the problems of reification, one does still encounter the juxtaposition of the king and the nobility (Werner I and II, Tellenbach, and to a lesser extent, Bosl). Of these, Werner's studies are clearly the most sensitive to the dangers caused by reification as he emphasizes the thesis that the nobility was a full partner in government. He argues that those scholars who dwell on the conflict between king and nobility, to the exclusion of the cooperation between the two, have misled their readers.

In the more important of his essays, Werner (II) argues from the point of constitutional history that the various sub-*regna*, e.g., Aquitaine and other large divisions such as Normandy, of the western *regnum Francorum* were the result of the delegation of power, not of usurpation. He adds that the further divisions of the sub-*regna* also were accomplished through delegation. Werner, thus, takes fundamental issue with Dhondt's picture of the western magnates as amassers of counties and

as usurpers of power.<sup>30</sup> Many of Werner's points are definitely well taken, and his identification of specific terminology and family relationships does much to recommend his case. However, the carefully legalistic tenor of the argument is in such stark contrast to the behavior of the action-oriented magnates, who murdered, stole, and possessed as the opportunity of the moment seemed to demand or permit, that there is a tendency for his evidence to be lost in the thunder of hoofs or drowned out by the clash of steel. Werner recognizes that at a lower level of development there were men operating who fit the image of amassers as drawn by Dhondt. He focuses on the counts of Blois as administrative innovators, and the amasser thus is given center stage. It may also be noted that the Angevin counts also fall into this category, and between c. 950 to 1050 these two houses clearly were of the greatest importance in the northern half of *Francia occidentalis*. First, the alliance between Blois and Anjou and then their enduring conflict dominated political life until the success of count Geoffrey's son Henry. The amassers seem far more important than those to whom power was delegated, with the possible exception of the Norman dukes.

In summary, it may be observed that the three major foci of the essays in *The Medieval Nobility*--what is a noble? what role does family play in nobility? what is the place of the nobility in the medieval constitution?--are likely to serve as a basis for research during the remainder of the twentieth century. *The Medieval Nobility* is a



valuable introduction to this fertile field, and, indeed, one might have wished for a collection twice the size in which the "lower nobility" was given sufficient coverage.<sup>31</sup> Yet to end on a note of dissatisfaction, however minor, would be ungenerous to all those whose work made this fine volume possible. Scholars interested in the important themes discussed in *The Medieval Nobility* will look forward to more such useful collections.

#### Notes

1. (Amsterdam, 1979). See note 11 below.
2. "On the Aristocratic Character of Early Frankish Society," pp. 105-36. This essay was originally published as chapter three of *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des frühfränkischen Adels*, Reinisches Archiv, 70 (Bonn, 1969).
3. "The Important Noble Families in the Kingdom of Charlemagne--a Prosopographical Study of the Relationship Between King and Nobility in the Early Middle Ages," pp. 137-202. Originally published as "Bedeutende Adelsfamilien im Reich Karls des Grossen: Ein personengeschichtlicher Beitrag zum Verhältnis von Königtum und Adel im frühen Mittelalter," in *Karl der Grosse, Lebenswert und Nachleben*, vol. 1, *Persönlichkeit und Geschichte*, ed. H. Beumann, (Düsseldorf, 1965), pp. 83-142. Although neither the text nor notes of this contribution have been abridged, Reuter did omit the appendices found on pp. 137-42 of the original.



4. "From the Carolingian Imperial Nobility to the German Estate of Imperial Princes," pp. 203-42. Originally published as "Vom karolingischen Reichsadel zum deutschen Reichsfürstenstand," in *Adel und Bauern im deutschen Staat des Mittelalters*, ed. Theodor Mayer, (Leipzig, 1943), pp. 22-73. However, translated here is a slightly revised version found in *Herrschaft und Staat im Mittelalter*, ed. H. Kämpf, Wege der Forschung, 2 (Darmstadt, 1956), pp. 191-242.
5. "Kingdom and Principality in Twelfth-Century France," pp. 243-90. Originally published as "Königtum und Fürstentum des französischen 12. Jahrhunderts," in *Probleme des 12. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Konstanzer Arbeitskreis für mittelalterliche Geschichte, Band 12 (Sigmaringen, 1968), pp. 177-225.
6. "The Structure of the Nobility in the Earlier Middle Ages," pp. 37-59. Originally published as "Über die Struktur des Adels im früheren Mittelalter," *Jahrbuch für fränkische Landesforschung*, 19 (1959), 1-23.
7. "The Literature of House and Kindred Associated with Medieval Noble Families, Illustrated from Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Satires on the Nobility," pp. 61-85. Originally published as "Haus- und sippengebundene Literatur mittelalterlicher Adelsgeschlechter von Adelssatiren des 11. und 12. Jahrhunderts her erläutert," in *Mitteilungen des Instituts für österreichische Geschichtsforschung*, 62 (1954), 121-45. However, the present translation is

based on a revised version that appeared in *Geschichtsdenken und Geschichtsbild im Mittelalter*, ed. Walther Lammers, Wege der Forschung, 21 (Darmstadt, 1961), pp. 165-99.

8. See note 2.
9. "A Kindred in Northern France in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," pp. 87-103. Originally published as "Une parentèle dans la France du Nord aux XI<sup>e</sup> et XII<sup>e</sup> siècles," *Le Moyen Age*, 69 (1963), 223-45. One should also see on this, Georges Duby, "Structure de parenté et noblesse, France du nord, XI<sup>e</sup>-XII<sup>e</sup> siècles," in *Miscellanea mediaevalia in memoriam Jan Frederick Niermeyer* (Groningen, 1967), reprinted as "The Structure of Kinship and Nobility: Northern France in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," in *The Chivalrous Society*, trans., Cynthia Postan, (London, 1977), pp. 134-48.
10. "'Noble Unfreedom': The Rise of the *Ministeriales* in Germany," pp. 291-311. Published originally as chapter 5, part 3, of vol. 1 of *Die Grundlagen der modernen Gesellschaft im Mittelalter*, Monographien zur Geschichte des Mittelalters, 4 (Stuttgart, 1972), pp. 190-211.
11. "The Knightly Aristocracy of the Middle Ages as a 'Social Class.'" Originally published as "De middeleeuwse ridderschap als 'classe sociale,'" *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 83 (1970), 262-75. Translated by Professor David Nicholas of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. See also, van Winter, "The Ministerial and Knightly Classes in Guelders and Zutphen," *Acta Historiae Neelandica*, 1

(1966), 171-86. Both of these studies seem to tell us less about the Middle Ages and about the nobility or the "lower nobility" than they make quite clear that efforts to use categories developed by contemporary sociologists are counter-productive and, in the long run, highly misleading. Trained medievalists could better use their time in more productive enterprises.

12. This study was originally published as "Les recherches relatives à la noblesse médiévale," *Bulletin de l'Académie Royale de Belgique, classe de lettres*, 5<sup>e</sup> series (1975), 45-68.
13. *La société féodale* (Paris, 1939-40). Translated into English by L. A. Manyon as *Feudal Society* (London, 1961). Attention should also be called to Bloch, "Sur le passé de la noblesse française: quelques jalons de recherche," *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, 8 (1936), 366-78.
14. See *L'économie rurale namuroise au bas moyen âge* (Louvain, 1960). With a wider reference see also his essays "La noblesse au moyen âge dans l'ancienne 'Francie,'" *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, 17 (1962), 1-22; and "La noblesse au moyen âge dans l'ancienne Francie: continuité, rupture, ou evolution?" *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 5 (1962), 52-59. This last study was translated by Fredric Cheyette, as "The Nobility in Medieval Francia: Continuity, Break, or Evolution?" in his important collection of essays, *Lordship and Community in Medieval*

*Europe* (New York, 1968), pp. 128-36.

15. Reuter has marked with an asterisk books in the bibliography that are of great importance. Among the marked works is Wilhelm Störmer, *Früher Adel. Studien zur politischen Führungsge-schichte im Fränkisch-Deutschen Reich vom 8. bis 11. Jahrhundert*, 2 vols., (Stuttgart, 1973), which, from the Bavarian evidence (for the title is rather misleading), concentrates upon upsetting that part of Bloch's formulation that depicts the early medieval aristocracy as a socially fluid group of locally oriented military adventurers. Störmer gathers considerable evidence to show that the people whom he studies had closed off significant penetration from the lower ranks of society and had broad territorial interests.
16. See the articles cited in note 13. Bloch, of course, was aware of the frequent appearance of such words, but he took them to mean that the men so mentioned were "free."
17. This point is highlighted by Jane Martindale, "The French Aristocracy in the Early Middle Ages: A Reappraisal," *Past & Present*, 75 (1977), 5-45.
18. In addition to the above mentioned study, see the article by Karl Leyser, "The German Aristocracy from the Ninth to the Early Twelfth Century: A Historical and Cultural Sketch," *Past & Present*, 41 (1968), 25-53. One of the most important methodological studies is Donald Bullough, "Early Medieval Social Groupings: The Terminology of Kingship," *Past & Present*, 45 (1969), 3-18.



19. See the warnings scattered throughout the study by Bullough cited in note 18.
20. One of the more important works which falls into this error is P. Van Luyn, "Les milites dans la France du XI<sup>e</sup> siècle: Examen des sources narrative," *Le Moyen Age*, 77 (1971), 5-51, 193-238. Concerning Van Luyn's methodological errors, see the doctoral dissertation of my former student, Professor William Delehanty, "Milites in the Narrative Sources of England, 1135-1154," Diss. University of Minnesota, 1975, pp. 26-29. Delehanty demonstrates, among other things, that during the period which he considers the term *milites* in the narrative sources normally means "soldier" and not "knight" or heavily armed horseman. Among works that give the impression of greater precision than they have are K. J. Hollyman, *Le développement du vocabulaire féodal en France pendant le haut Moyen Age* (Geneva, 1957).
21. See note 12 above.
22. Andrew Lewis, "Anticipatory Association of the Heir in Early Capetian France," *American Historical Review*, 83 (1978), 906-27. For an early case not treated by Lewis, see Bernard S. Bachrach, "Fulk Nerra and His Accession as Count of Anjou," *Saints, Scholars, and Heroes: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honour of Charles W. Jones* (Collegeville, Minnesota, 1979), II, 331-42. Investigation of wills does not seem to have progressed greatly in terms of examining whether they were an effective



vehicle for transmitting the privileges necessary for nobility.

See the few remarks by Georges Duby, "Lignage, noblesse et chevalerie au XII<sup>e</sup> siècle dans la région mâconnaise: une révision," *Annales. Économie, société, civilisation*, 27 (1972). Translated as "Lineage, Nobility and Knighthood: The Maconnais in the Twelfth Century--a Revision," in *The Chivalrous Society*, pp. 59-80.

23. *The Letters and Poems of Fulbert of Chartres*, ed. and trans., Frederick Behrends (Oxford, 1976), no. 86, pp. 152-55.
24. See note 6 above.
25. A fine discussion of the *Libri* as a source is Giles Constable, "The *Liber Memorialis* of Remiremont," *Speculum*, 42 (1972), 261-77.
26. See Genicot as cited in note 12 above.
27. See note 9 above.
28. "The German Aristocracy," p. 34.
29. See, for example, Joseph H. Lynch, "Baptismal Sponsorship and Monks and Nuns, 500-1000," *American Benedictine Review*, 31 (1980), 108-29.
30. *Études sur la naissance des principautés territoriales en France (IX<sup>e</sup> - X<sup>e</sup> siècles)* (Brussels, 1948).
31. Only the contributions by Bosl and van Winter may be considered to have treated the "lower nobility." For my observation on the latter, see note 11 above. Bosl's study wrestles with the problem of terminology involved in discussing the *ministeriales* and

more particularly with problems that arise from terms that stem from translating various ideas with the English / German "free unfreedom" and discussing a class of "unfree nobles." One must resist the temptation to translate Latin terms by their English / German cognates when the latter carry connotations that greatly distort the meaning of the former. Where does one place Lambert's family, as discussed by Vercauteren?

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