

Interview with James Palmer

Richard Broome and Tim Barnwell

Dr James Palmer is a Lecturer in Medieval History at the University of St Andrews. He obtained his PhD from the University of Sheffield in 2004 under the supervision of Prof. Sarah Foot, before taking up his first lectureship at the University of Leicester in 2005 and then holding a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship at the University of Nottingham in 2006-7. He has published articles on a variety of subjects, ranging from the missionaries of the eighth and ninth centuries to the understanding of time in the Early Middle Ages. His first monograph – Anglo-Saxons in a Frankish World, 690-900 – was published by Brepols in 2009, and his second – The Apocalypse in the Early Middle Ages – will be published soon. We decided to talk to him about his research and about his thoughts on academia more generally.

NETWORKS & NEIGHBOURS (N&N): HOW DID YOU COME TO STUDY EARLY MEDIEVAL HISTORY?

James Palmer (JP): By pure accident. I was really interested in the twelfth century and I'd been intending to do a Special Subject on the 'Anarchy' of King Stephen's reign but the convenor went on research leave, and my second choice was Sarah Foot's 'The Age of the Vikings'. That got me interested in the ninth century, so I went to Cambridge to study with Rosamond McKitterick for my MA, looking at things that hadn't been covered in the Special Subject course, especially hagiography, and the *Life of Anskar* in particular.

N&N: WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE SOURCE?

JP: My current favourite source (because of course it keeps changing) is the *Revelation of Pseudo-*

Methodius – a late-seventh century Syriac text which was translated into Greek and then into Latin in the eighth century – just because of its exciting use of apocalyptic prophecy to provide a moralising interpretation of the Arab Conquests designed not to demonise Muslims but to condemn Christians for their lax behaviour. And studying how it spreads around Europe in three very different contexts; it's amazing. People think in the Early Middle Ages people didn't really travel very much and peasants had no sense of the horizons outside their own village, so it's really fascinating to see a truly international text with genuinely interesting things to say.

N&N: DO YOU SEE SUCH A THING AS A DISTINCTLY EARLY MEDIEVAL MISSIONARY IDEAL OR IDEOLOGY?

JP: I'm not sure about a distinctly early medieval ideology, but what you do get in the early Middle Ages is a cluster of ideas about mission which are notably different in quality and quantity to what had come before in the Roman Empire. This is the classic way of describing the situation but it seems to be true. We tend to begin the Middle Ages by looking at Gregory of Tours and saying he wasn't very interested in mission: well of course he wasn't. He was living in a former Gallo-Roman province that had been Christian for hundreds of years; there were no pagans to go out and convert – there were some Jews down the road, but you could largely ignore those. What you get by the end of the seventh century is a different kind of religious agitation, partly influenced by interactions with Irish and English monks on the continent who didn't have the long-established idea about the Roman Empire ending at the Rhine, and so they continued on. This was also supposedly inspired by the classic idea of Germanic kin groups. But essentially what is very interesting is the arrival of social outsiders: you get very few Franks wanting to go out and convert their neighbours, so the arrival of outsiders arriving in the Rhineland and wanting to convert its inhabitants is important: it changes the cultural dynamics. At the same time, that's an interpretation that relies on not reading any Merovingian hagiography. The Merovingian hagiographical tradition about the conversion of Gaul is built on the idea of people coming from far away and building churches. This is in all the major martyr stories: Saints Crispin and Crispinian of Soissons, Saint Dionysius; these are outsiders who convert people, just like the Irish and English. So the story is universal, and it takes certain social circumstances to activate it, that's why people are interested in this: it's watching the universal become localised.

N&N: SO IF THAT'S HOW EARLY MEDIEVAL MISSIONARY IDEOLOGY GOT GOING, DO YOU THINK THERE WAS A POINT WHEN IT CAME TO AN END, OR SHIFTED INTO A DIFFERENT KIND OF IDEOLOGY?

JP: One of the interesting things about Christianity in the second half of the first millennium is that it's subject to a number of different ways of thinking about things at the same time, and people are looking for role models. An interesting thing that happens in the ninth century with the conversion of Saxony is the competition between the cults of Saint Alexander and Saint Willehad. When Adam

of Bremen was looking back on this [in the eleventh century] he said that Anskar wrote the *Miracles* to defend the reputation of Bremen against the foreign saint, Alexander. So there are clearly people who aren't really interested in missionary work, but are interested in the Classical tradition, the more 'urban' form of religion, and sometimes this has a stronger cultural influence. There are also practical limits related to money and organisation, and that's what the diocese of Hamburg-Bremen gets stuck with: they are a long way from anyone who has money and resources, which they need. Although they don't do too badly in the grand scheme of things, they could hardly control the whole of Scandinavia, which, in their imagination, they would like to. You can already see these practical limitations at the start of the ninth century, when Charlemagne and Louis the Pious decide not to invade Denmark, and instead just try to influence it from outside. It takes too many resources to impose an infrastructure: Saxony had been a difficult region for them to deal with because the Saxons had little in the way of pre-existing civic structures, so they had to almost invent it as they were going along and this becomes harder the further away you get. It's also a very long process. So, you get this exciting burst of expansion followed by a period of consolidation that tails off during the ninth century. But then you get another burst in the late tenth century and into the eleventh century: what you're looking at is a kind of pulsing. Whether the ideology had changed is difficult to say, but the tenth- and eleventh-century missionaries were inspired by exactly the same martyrs who inspired the eighth-century missionaries, as well as by those earlier missionaries. So in that sense it really is a continuous movement.

N&N: HOW SIGNIFICANT WERE THE ANGLO-SAXONS IN CONTINENTAL MISSIONARY WORK?

JP: The most important aspect of the work of the Anglo-Saxon missionaries on the continent was in creating an imagined social group. It has been argued by many scholars that the places the missionaries turned up to were already Christian or being worked in by the Irish: so what did the Anglo-Saxons actually do? Well, they became the figureheads, the names that people remember. Part of this is just because Boniface had such a long career and was so charismatic. The same must have been true for Willibrord, although we have less information about him, but he's probably one of the biggest land-owning aristocrats in northern Europe by the time he dies, with land that crosses all sorts of political divides: he's a big political player. Who had a bigger impact, these two institutional men, or the Irish, who built few if any churches, may have converted some people, and probably died in fields while no one was looking? It's the building of infrastructure and the development of a hagiographical tradition that almost always has to follow the infrastructure that creates the legend, and once you've built the legend you want to add more stories. It may take another two centuries before you get a *Life of Burchard* [a disciple of Boniface], but someone eventually wants to write a *Life* of Burchard of Würzburg, and another hundred years later someone wants to write a *Life of Lull* [Boniface's successor as bishop of Mainz]. People are looking back and writing new *Lives*, or rewriting old ones that don't make sense anymore. Boniface himself mattered enough that people are continually writing and rewriting *Lives* about him, all the way

through the Middle Ages. This is the real importance of the Anglo-Saxons.

N&N: HOW DO YOU ENVISAGE THE CHRISTIANISATION PROCESS? IS IT SOMETHING THAT'S QUITE RAPID, OR IS IT SLOW? WHAT SOCIAL CLASSES AND GROUPS ARE INVOLVED? WHAT ARE THESE MISSIONARIES ACTUALLY FACILITATING?

JP: Any given moment of interaction is going to be different because of the political and social circumstances, but the overall process of Christianisation must have been quite similar. Take the *Indiculus superstitionum*, for example, a list of supposed pagan practices apparently to be discussed at a church council, but we have no idea how much this list represents the reality or whether the missionaries had just made things up. And this was written in an area that hadn't suddenly converted, it had probably had a slow trickle of Christian influence over centuries. Take the conversion of Frisia; this was not a linear process where they started with no Christianity and gradually got more and more: there were times when the Frisians had priests and times when they didn't. Christianisation is incredibly haphazard. So many of the sources we have are from after the event. Canon law collections and sermons may be helpful, but we have no way of knowing what was preached during the conversion process or how much of the legislation was paranoid fantasy or based on older texts compared to what the missionaries were actually experiencing.

N&N: WHERE DO MISSIONARIES FIT INTO THE OVERALL CHRISTIANISATION/CONVERSION PROCESS(ES) IN EARLY MEDIEVAL EUROPE? HOW IMPORTANT WERE THEY?

JP: Sometimes it can be difficult to identify whether an individual was a missionary or not, and Ian Wood touched on this in *The Missionary Life* when he said that it's often difficult to identify missionary hagiography: the two problems are related. You get people like Anskar who are identified as 'missionary bishops'. What this really means is they spent most of their time actually performing the day-to-day activities associated with being a bishop, especially preaching and baptism, but sometimes they directed this at pagans rather than Christians. Being a missionary was not always clearly defined in the early medieval period, compared to modern missions associated with evangelical movements, where there is a more definite sense of 'being on a mission'. Tim Reuter made a very interesting point about Boniface as a missionary and Boniface as a reformer, that it's really all part of the same process; Boniface is just making sure that the people around him are being good Christians, and that's his primary objective, that's how he sees what he does.

N&N: WHAT WERE THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN MISSIONARY WORK AND MISSIONARY LITERATURE AND APOCALYPTIC AND ESCHATOLOGICAL IDEAS (IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES, BUT ALSO IN YOUR WORK AND THOUGHT)?

JP: The reason I got from looking at hagiography to looking at apocalyptic literature is I was thinking about models of time in the Early Middle Ages, and especially the work that had been done on calendars and the veneration of saints in the Carolingian period. But in job interviews people

asked how I would teach this to students and I answered that I would teach a course on ‘the end of the world’, which seemed to make sense at the time. One of the interesting texts in this area is Bede’s *On the Reckoning of Time*, which begins with a description of how time works, and different cultures and ways of keeping time: there’s Nature’s Law, Salvation History, stuff like the Olympics, but by the end Bede is talking about how the only two sure ways of recognising the end of the world are the conversion of the Jews and the coming of Antichrist. He’s clearly been having arguments with other monks in the monastery about whether you can predict the end of the world or not and which chronological traditions to follow, and some of them had accused him of being a heretic. Anyone who looks at early medieval missionary work uses Bede, and once you start looking through his other works a sort of natural progression leads you to the *Reckoning of Time*. That’s how I got from A to B, but how did they [in the Early Middle Ages] get from A to B? Well the Gospel says preach unto the ends of the earth and then the consummation of the world will come, so mission is an apocalyptic movement from the word go. The Carolingian author Paschasius Radbertus pointed out in exegesis that the building of churches in Scandinavia is fulfilment of that, and then goes on to say that we don’t have to convert all peoples, we just have to preach to them, to do the structural stuff in preparation for the end. You can always find apocalyptic ideas on the peripheries of missionary movements: even Columbanus had talked about the need to be prepared and to be proactive in Christianity because the end of the world is coming. When Pope Gregory the Great wrote to Aethelbert of Kent, he mentioned the coming of the end of the world, but also the idea that part of being a good leader was inspiring terror in one’s subjects, and the end of the world was one of the ways of doing this: it was part of Gregory’s preaching strategy. It’s quite clear that the important thing about eschatological ideas in the Early Middle Ages isn’t that people were acting like the cults in barns in the modern USA. Christ said the end of the world is coming, so it’s not crazy for them to believe that, but what they don’t do is predict when it’s coming; instead they prepare themselves for it. The only way to complete Church reform was for the world to end, and missionary work was part of this, so missionaries were tied up in eschatology from the beginning: Columbanus and Gregory were both eschatological thinkers in their own ways, and the missionaries in Scandinavia were not unaware of this either, as we can see from the ambiguous language in Rimbert’s *Life of Anskar*. It’s not that they thought they were bringing about the end of the world, but they are preparing as many people as possible for Judgement, because that’s the end goal of being Christian, to be judged on Judgement Day, then you can ‘go home’ to Jerusalem.

N&N: HOW PREVALENT WERE ESCHATOLOGICAL IDEAS IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES?

JP: In terms of eschatology, in terms of believing there will be an end, it’s absolutely prevalent: it’s front and centre of Christ’s message. There are so many texts about it, so many people are talking about it and it’s a common motivating strategy that a lot of authors use. It’s very convenient to think cynically about all those kings and emperors who do things to ensure succession or memory like founding monasteries for their own benefit, but really they’re thinking about their own

mortality. They're terrified they might be going to hell, and the best thing they can do is pour their money into churches because they're going to be judged. So much of Christianity is eschatological because it's predicated on the idea of being judged eventually; everyone must have been thinking about it. The idea of being judged keeps coming up, from Augustine of Hippo and Caesarius of Arles right through the Middle Ages. There are also visions of the afterlife, particularly prevalent in the ninth century, and while Paul Dutton is right to say a lot of this is displaced political commentary, it all comes back to apocalyptic thought. Unfortunately there is little debate about this among modern scholars; everyone either thinks medieval people believed the end of the world was about to happen and predicted it, or they didn't believe in it at all. There is a famous example of Wolfram Brandes having an article refused by *Deutsches Archiv* (I think) because the editor didn't think that Charlemagne would have had anything to do with eschatological thought. Clearly Charlemagne wasn't predicting the end of the world, but that doesn't mean he wasn't aware of eschatology. People weren't predicting the end of the world, they were just preparing for it. At the end of the *Reckoning of Time*, Bede says (based on Augustine) don't think the end of the world is going to happen soon because you will be disappointed if it doesn't, just be prepared that it is going to come eventually. That's the defining apocalyptic thought in the period.

N&N: YOU'VE WRITTEN ABOUT PAGANS AND PAGANISM AS THE 'OTHER' IN THE CHRISTIAN REGIONS OF EARLY MEDIEVAL EUROPE. TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU THINK THAT AN EARLY MEDIEVAL AUTHOR WOULD BE WILLING, OR EVEN ABLE, TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN DIFFERENT GROUPS OF 'OTHERS' (FOR INSTANCE, BETWEEN PAGANS IN SAXONY AND MUSLIMS IN SPAIN, OR BETWEEN DIFFERENT GROUPS IN SCANDINAVIA)?

JP: This distinction can be seen clearly in the *Continuations of the Chronicle of Fredegar*, where the continuator clearly distinguishes between the pagan Saxons, who are ferocious and badly behaved – as normal – and the Muslims, who he says are called Saracens through a corruption of the term Ishmaelites. With the latter, he's not sure whether they're heretics, and by calling them Saracens he implies they might be a political group even though they're not, and they're not pagans, but they have a different theology and way of viewing the universe to Christians. Christian authors don't really understand Islam, but they do understand that it's not paganism, nor is it Christianity or Judaism either, and they make a contrast. Just by calling them Saracens and Ishmaelites shows that these authors knew what they were talking about. But why were there no missions to Spain? It must be because this was a relatively harmonious environment where Christianity and belief in Christ were accepted, although this changes in the ninth century with the veneration of the martyrs of Córdoba and the idea that good Christians are those who disrupt the harmony between religions. But at the time it was the local bishop, Reccafred, who had the martyrs arrested, so there was clearly collaboration between the episcopate and the caliphate to stop the disruptive elements. There was an understanding, and clearly Islam represents a very different kind of 'Other' to paganism. And Jews are different again. The way they are treated in conciliar legislation and polemic is much closer

to the way one would treat heretics. But pagans and Muslims share a related space, even if the latter are dark, mysterious, and northern while the former are strangely cultured, whereas the Jews are sinister but unarmed, and that's a crucial difference. There was an idea that the Christian Church was surrounded on all four sides by pagans, Muslims, Jews and false Christians so there was a clear typology, and a repertoire of language that went with each of these groups. Pagans are from the north and likely to invade, Muslims might invade but no one is really sure, but Jews and heretics represent more a cultural threat through social infiltration than a political threat. Pseudo-Methodius says the Muslims will invade but will be beaten back by the Christians, but this will awaken the peoples of the north, so they are clearly different groups. It's not just 'Us and Them'. There will also be different regional responses: Spain is more concerned with Jews, because they actually have them; people in northern Germany aren't particularly concerned about Muslims, because there aren't any; people in Italy aren't particularly concerned about pagans, because there aren't any. People on the Mediterranean who have a long Roman-Christian tradition would have a different response to the 'most pagan' Saxons than would a Thuringian who encounters Saxon traders on a regular basis.

N&N: IN THINKING ABOUT THE 'OTHER' YOU'RE DEALING A VOCABULARY AND APPROACH WHICH HAS ITS ORIGINS OUTSIDE THE DISCIPLINE OF HISTORY IN PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY, AND WHICH HAS NOW BEEN TAKEN UP ACROSS THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES AS WELL AS PARTS OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES. TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU FEEL THAT HISTORIANS OUGHT TO BE ENGAGING WITH THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES ORIGINATING OUTSIDE OF THEIR OWN DISCIPLINE?

JP: What you should never expect is that reading some philosophy or anthropology will give you 'the answers', but it might give you nice questions. What I think has been useful in thinking about Otherness, and in thinking about identity – these ideas go together – is that everyone is interested in identity and identity formation; there is no 'in-group' without an 'out-group'. So looking at different ways of conceptualising Otherness allows us to shape different ways of thinking about the issue. It is important, and we need to have discussions with other disciplines. For example, Fenella Cannell's *Anthropology of Christianity* recommends reading Peter Brown and Averil Cameron to allow anthropologists to think about new ways of approaching their discipline. By talking to people in other disciplines we can find new questions that we are not yet asking, which opens up whole new ways of studying our own discipline.

N&N: WHAT IS YOUR APPROACH TO TEACHING/PEDAGOGY?

JP: I have always tried to engage the students; certainly in small-scale classes teaching has to be more of a conversation. It's about finding ways of encouraging people to talk; a lot of teaching is about making people feel more relaxed about taking on ideas, and there are lots of different ways to do this, whether it be breaking the class down into smaller groups, or asking everyone to prepare

some answers to questions on a set text for the following week. But it becomes easier as you get older: teaching becomes more like having a chat and less like having a check-list of ‘facts’ you have to impart to the group. It can be useful to just see where a conversation goes: students feel more empowered if they have the freedom to raise points you haven’t addressed. This allows them to feel their tutorial was unique, but it also helps them to prepare for things like research because it helps them get better at framing questions and breaking down arguments. There also has to be some emphasis on the transferable skills: presentations for example, encouraging them to think about different ways of presenting information and developing strategies of how to talk about anything – it doesn’t have to be medieval history – strategies they can take elsewhere.

N&N: WHAT DO YOU FEEL THE STUDY OF THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES ADDS TO A FACULTY, UNIVERSITY OR, INDEED, HIGHER EDUCATION AS A WHOLE?

JP: I think all history is equally valid as a subject, but what is unique about early medieval history that provides interesting challenges is the fragmentary nature of much of the evidence, which calls for people to make coherent judgements. That’s a different kind of skill to what you need when studying the twentieth century, where you have all this documentation and people writing voluminous biographies. We just don’t have that. But actually people are surprised by how much we do have. Even just working on the ninth century, for example: that’s a lot of material right there. So there is a distinctive challenge to studying the Early Middle Ages within the discipline of history. And a slightly more political way of looking at it is that people like to know about origins, and that’s what we’re dealing with in a way. It’s the period of history where Europe stops looking like the Roman Empire and starts to look more like a Europe with countries rather than just a line down the Rhine and the Danube. We have Christianity spreading everywhere, but also the breakdown of a literate Latin society and the emergence of vernacular languages: that’s a huge cultural shift in Europe’s history. This all happens within a couple of hundred years, in the period in which we’re interested. It’s important for students to learn about that, and it’s good for them to learn about that, especially in Scotland at the moment with debates about ‘what is Scotland?’

N&N: WHAT IS YOUR OPINION OF OPEN ACCESS AND ITS ROLE IN THE FUTURE OF PUBLISHING AND ACADEMIA?

JP: I think Open Access is potentially quite liberating in many respects for the way that research and publication and the dissemination of ideas can work. Just thinking in terms of blogs and similar types of websites; if I’ve written something, I can get it up online and get feedback instantly, and that’s great. It would be nice to have more peer-reviewing, but on the other hand, intellectual exchange still happens, historians respond to each other’s blogs. I think when we start to have a problem is when OA has to fit onto existing publishing models. That’s an issue, because it’s taking a twenty-first-century idea and saying we’re going to shackle it to sixteenth-century technology. Publishers charge scholars to have their work published and then charge the universities to get

access to it, so it becomes more expensive for the taxpayer to get something they should be getting for free. The business model that's being proposed for OA is terrible, especially with the idea of shackling it to REF in the future, the idea that only research that has been paid for is quality research: that's nonsense. We're being asked to think creatively, but really people don't want us to think creatively when there's still a profit margin. But this just isn't a sustainable model in the long term, and it has to change. So, OA: potentially very liberating, but currently handled very poorly.