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MEDIEVAL MEDIA REVOLUTIONS: AN EXCHANGE

WARREN C. BROWN and CHRISTIAN DE PEE

Christian de Pee

Having read through Warren's article on Carolingian formularies, as well as some of his previous writings on this topic, two themes seemed to me promising of a productive exchange. First, we are both concerned with writing and space, specifically with the transformation of existing media, technologies, and genres to aid in the creation of a new, larger empire. Both articles show that control over space was assisted both by writing as a practice (the making of records, the transposition of empirical knowledge and human relations into text) and by the text as an object (the notebook and the formulary as index, icon, and symbol of the empire), and that these texts created their own practices and communities and their own necessity in turn. Second, on a more general level, it might be interesting to reflect on the lessons these formularies and notebooks can teach us about the methods of medieval studies. By rediscovering the conventions and uses of notebooks and formularies, these two papers recover knowledge that had been forgotten and overwritten. Warren argues, in effect, that the *gesta municipalia* formulas are in fact what they say they are, in defiance of the common sense and transparent readings of social historians.¹ This, to me, is the power of hermeneutics and philology: the acknowledgment of the resistance of the text against the presumptions of the present—against what my friend Michael Nylan calls “the hermeneutics of condescension.” By heeding the resistance of the text, moreover, the historian clears a space for a dialectical relationship between the present and the past and between the historian's text and the text of the sources. The use of sources for “data” sets up an unequal relationship between the present and the past, between meaning and matter, between modern theory and medieval stuff, subject and object, and so forth. The acknowledgment of a movement from text to text, of *translatio*, establishes a more productive equality between the present and the past—horizontal and dialectical instead of vertical and unidirectional—and reveals the very principles that make the texts of the past intelligible and usable for historians and for the present more generally. Moments of transformation, such as the Carolingian

¹ Brown, “On the *Gesta municipalia*.”

period and the Song dynasty, are particularly helpful because they give us an opportunity to see new forms of text and writing acquire their meanings and functions, just as the authors of our sources are learning them.

As Warren observes below, genre figured prominently in competitions for power and prestige in eleventh-century China. The imperial examinations, for example—which in the tenth century had admitted only a few dozen candidates into the Song imperial government every year—from the eleventh century forward began graduating hundreds of men by means of triennial examinations, for an average of two hundred per year.² Although the requirements for the examinations changed over time, they always took the form of genre exercises, such as poetry, rhapsodies, policy essays, discursive essays, and canonical exegesis. Candidates prepared for these examinations by memorising the classical (“Confucian”) canon, philosophical texts, historical works, literary anthologies, and the collected poetry and prose of famous authors; but they had recourse also to specialised manuals for the genres tested in the examinations, such as collections of policy essays by successful graduates. (This suggests, incidentally, that the distinction between authentic individual records and schoolbooks may be moot in a highly literate culture. For example, the collected works of eleventh-century literati preserved a record of the career, the ideas, the correspondence, the friendships, the character, and the literary achievements of individual authors; but readers also used them as models of good writing—just as graduate students read academic articles and monographs both to acquire knowledge of their field of study and to learn how to write in those genres.) The intellectual historian Peter Bol has argued that, by their assimilation of the literary, historical, and philosophical tradition for the examinations, literati in the course of the Song dynasty became convinced that they held a superior claim to the moral governance of the empire.³ In this view, the emperor, as the Son of Heaven, represented mankind in solemn rituals and spoke with heavenly authority at court, but literati officials bore the responsibility for the practical and moral substance of government.

One may read the more general transformation of genres during the eleventh century in this context also, as evidence of competition among literati (as in the display of literary skill by daring innovation, or the demonstration of cultural power by defiance of conventions), between literati and the court (as in the imitation of prestigious ancient writers and the disparagement of contemporary styles such as “four-six parallel prose,” but also in deliberately blunt calligraphy and non-naturalistic painting), and between literati and wealthy merchants (as in

2 Hartman, “Sung Government and Politics.”

3 Bol, “Whither the Emperor?”

catalogues of commodity connoisseurship designed to set the refined appreciation of literati apart from mere conspicuous consumption, or in the acceptance of the urban streetscape as an acceptable topic of literary composition to make a place for the city in writing and to make a place for the literatus in the city). This presumes, of course, that genres were well defined and consciously taken up, and indeed they were. Both literary anthologies and the collected works of individual authors were arranged by genre, and authors living and dead were evaluated by their proficiency in specific genres. The semiotic marginality of the notebooks demonstrates the powerful control that genre exerted over the passage of speech and thought into writing. Some subjects that appear to have been prominent in the daily lives and conversations of literati could be introduced into authoritative texts only with difficulty, marked with ironic prefaces and grouped with subjects that were marginal to the written tradition in other ways, such as insults and dialect expressions. Because each genre has a distinct form, a distinct style, a distinct function, and a distinct orientation in time and space, I am often surprised that genre does not figure more prominently as a framework of analysis in historical studies of the Tang and Song dynasties. But I have the impression that genres were less clearly defined, more fluid, perhaps more local, in medieval Europe. Certainly, the empire-wide examinations and the spread of printing in the Tang and Song dynasties helped standardize genres (and texts) in a manner that is difficult to imagine in the European Middle Ages.

It seems worthwhile, however, to probe this matter of genre in Warren's Carolingian manuscript codices, and to consider the possible usefulness of a semiotic analysis of these formularies, in part because they appear to share a number of historical and formal characteristics with my notebooks (for example, the relationship between centre and periphery, the mediation between authoritative language and local conditions, and between speech and writing). This also brings up the confounding question, common to Warren's field and mine, of what constitutes a "book" during this period of variant manuscripts and shifting contents. From Warren's essay and from his previous articles, it appears that the Carolingian manuscript codices contained a number of identifiable genres (e.g., acts of church councils, sermons, anathemas, lists and tables, canon law), and that the codices divided their contents often by genre, although sometimes they also grouped materials by shared contents (e.g., a combination of council acts, anathemas, and sermons concerning the two natures of Christ). The formularies appear to identify distinct genres in the titles of individual documents, such as document of sale, charter, oath, letter, and security. The purpose of the formularies, whether they use generic texts or individualised documents or a combination of these, must be that they help their users to produce satisfactory documents in these genres, even if it may be difficult to determine whether "satisfactory" means comprehensive,

authoritative, elegant, or merely adequate. In this respect, the miscellaneousness and the variability of the formularies resemble those of the codices that contain the formularies.

That the specific selection of models in a formulary and the specific collection of documents in a codex may be determined by local needs, perhaps even by individual use (not to mention chance availability), does not necessarily prohibit a coherent semiotic analysis of these idiosyncratic gatherings, since Warren argues that writing and written objects were relatively rare, prestigious, and concentrated in places connected to wealth, authority, and power. Might it be useful, for example, to connect the very practicality of these diverse codices to their physical and symbolic place in ecclesiastical and secular hierarchies, and to think of both the codices and the writing they contain as mediations between central authority and local conditions? Understood in this way, the codices and formularies could also place the individual scribe within this hierarchy, allowing him to mediate between centre and periphery by applying authoritative language from elsewhere to local places, people, and things. I could imagine that these codices and formulas represented *auctoritas*, a combination of authoritative language and authoritative institutions, digested and embodied for local use. This *auctoritas* could be both indexical, as the form and contents of the collected texts point to both the high centre and the low periphery; and iconic, as the material object of the codex (parchment, writing, small size, clearly marked rubrics and labels) and the place where it rests (aristocratic court, monastery) embody the exercise of sacred and secular power.

I also wonder whether one might place the formularies, not only within ecclesiastical and secular hierarchies, but also within a new context of economic standardisation, exchange, and conversion. Warren mentions that some of the codices contain conversion tables for weights and measures, alphabets of different writing systems, instructions for calculating the volume of farm buildings, sets of laws from different regions, and the like. One might thus perhaps interpret the formularies, and the spread of certain formularies across wider regions, as evidence of a tentative movement toward a measure of standardisation. From an historical perspective, the formularies might show a regional, possibly trans-regional attempt to standardise laws, formulaic language, and value: a proposal to measure the value of goods, actions, and human lives by a standard shared between at least some regions of the Carolingian empire. From a semiotic perspective, one might then read the generic signs in the formularies (*N*, *ille*) as signifiers of interchangeability: this stolen horse is equivalent to that amount of money, this material damage is equivalent to that amount of human labour; all under a coordinated system of laws and monetary value. That in some instances the *N* and *ille* remained specific persons and places might make this convertibility more compelling rather

than less, placing the scribe or the patron in a position to become (by imitation) a specific person, with a specific authority and prestige.

In these ways, the formularies and codices might be defined by their use without losing formal (semiotic) coherence, and might be imagined within ecclesiastical and secular hierarchies without losing their local specificity. I am reluctant to let go of formal coherence entirely, because I believe that texts generally contain formal markers that indicate to the reader how the text is to be used, whether those indications be format, layout, content, style, register, the use of formulas, or something else.⁴ Texts are intended to be read and used, whether by the author's contemporaries or by later generations, and the externalization of language in writing (what Paul Ricoeur calls "distanciation"), directed at readers in a different place and time, requires some measure of standardisation of language and form.⁵ Genre is one important instance of such standardisation, and it matters to the historian because it can help connect a text to its practical context, and thereby to mediate between the present configuration of signs and the practical context of the past. In the words of linguistic anthropologist William F. Hanks, genres are "historically specific elements of social practice, whose defining features link them to situated communicative acts."⁶ I agree that one should not invent genres where there are none, but I also think that, conversely, formal analysis has the important advantage of identifying distinct historical markers of meaning and use that force the historian to acknowledge cultural difference and historical specificity and thereby limit the imposition of inapt assumptions. A semiotic understanding of notebooks allows an open-endedness to the contents and form of these texts that modern notions of a book generally prohibit, but nonetheless circumscribes a distinct realm of use and meaning. A semiotic analysis of the formularies and the codices might similarly preserve their variety and idiosyncrasy while at the same time placing them in a distinct, formal realm of practice. I may be mistaken in my observations about Warren's sources, but I hope that by this exchange about a specific body of puzzling medieval texts, we will address more general questions of textual analysis and historical inquiry.

4 See Hanks, "Discourse Genres."

5 Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 131–44.

6 Hanks, "Discourse Genres," 668.

Warren Brown

After reading through Christian's material, and my own again, I agree that there are significant (even astonishing) similarities between my formulas and Christian's notebooks, and what they represent. They raise common questions, both about history itself and about the theory and the practice of history. Christian, you've laid them out very clearly; I think we'll be able to drive home some important arguments. There also some differences, however, in our material and, to a degree, in our approaches to it. I'll outline some questions that I think can be the basis for further work and exchanges along these lines.

One question has to do with self-awareness and intent. Christian, you present the authors of your notebooks as being fully aware that the texts and collections they were compiling raised difficult questions of classification, and aware that they were creating a new genre. I also got the impression that you thought at least some of them were aware that the classification of text collections was competitive, and at the same time an arena for other kinds of competition. The notebooks were challenging a court culture whose power depended in part on controlling writing and genre; they were promoting as well as reflecting cultural and political transformations. This is not the case with my formula collections, or at best only implicitly. Collections of document forms were, in the late eighth and ninth centuries, undeniably creating as well as reflecting cultures of document use among local and regional lay communities in western and central Europe. They supply useful images of what lay people were doing and of what actions might require documents; but at the same time, they shaped how this was done by perpetuating older images of language and procedure, thereby constraining the forms in which lay transactions were written up—if not constraining the actions themselves. They also reflect the fact that the relationship between lay document users (on the one hand) and monasteries and churches (on the other) was being reshaped, while at the same time the texts participated in that process.

But unlike the makers of your notebooks, I don't think the compilers of the formula collections were aware of all this, or self-consciously promoted it. If they *were* aware of anything, it was of wanting to know what kinds of documents they might need to produce and how to produce them; accordingly, they compiled collections that met those needs. There was perhaps also a desire to do things as other people were doing or had done them—that is, "the right way": a desire that would have been kindled in the first place by expanding mental and cultural horizons. Only at the top, at the level of the imperial bigwigs who physically brought formula collections from the centre to new postings farther afield (Alcuin of York, Arn of Salzburg), might there have been a self-conscious desire to standardise document forms and legal procedures—you can see this in judicial records—

across the empire, and thus to help unify it. Other than that, I see all of this activity as a product, or byproduct, of efforts at court to create and secure a new empire through culture (education, a brilliant intellectual circle, church reform, and so on), rather than as something planned in any self-conscious fashion by scribes on the ground. The fact that your evidence is different, Christian, gives us two poles of possibility that would warrant further discussion.

A second question has to do with genre and classification itself. Christian, this is a central concept and question for you, both at the level of contemporary actors and of modern historians who try to identify and categorise what they see. People who have worked with the formula collections have struggled with questions of genre, primarily at the level of the manuscripts containing the collections, because their contents can be eclectic. Is this a schoolbook? A legal handbook? A collection of canon law? Purely a formula collection? Do we throw up our hands and call it a bishop's or a count's miscellany? There is very little direct evidence that the people who put the collections together and/or copied them into larger collections of texts were thinking in terms of genre. We have only the late seventh-century monk Marculf, from near Paris, who in a prologue to his formula collection states explicitly that his bishop had asked him to compile the collection for the education of students. So there's one possibility: formula collection as teaching tool. But Marculf's collection survives, whole or in parts, in many manuscripts that are not always clearly for meant for students. Marculf, in fact, became the single biggest source of material for quite clearly *practical* reasons, rather than pedagogical ones.

We can say that the genre "formula collection" did exist and was new *within the manuscripts*. But this does necessarily imply awareness on the part of the compilers that they understood this to be a new category of text collection and that they were doing something new. This remains a problematic issue. Many of the collections mix document and letter forms to different degrees. Letter collections may have been copied, not as letters per se, but as another source of examples. Some documentary forms have all of the specific information left in; were they formulas or records of actual transactions kept as such? Occasionally, poetry erupts into the middle of a group of formulas. My colleague Alice Rio has fallen back to the position that any collections of texts that were intended for reuse, or to serve as examples, can be counted among the formula collections.⁷ And what about the manuscript codices into which they were copied (or later bound)? The fact that they survive in such different kinds of manuscripts makes me wonder whether individual compilers perhaps thought that they were important in different ways or contexts.

⁷ Rio, *Legal Practice*, 56, and on the difficulties of defining formulas as a genre, 43–57.

Sometimes I wonder (from my perspective, not yours, Christian): why even raise the issue? Why is identifying genre or classifying a collection of texts important? What I am really going after, rather than making “genre” my object of inquiry, is intent and purpose: what was a given manuscript for; what purpose was it intended to serve? In the case of the formula collections seen in isolation, we can say that these were collections of documentary models that collected the past for the perceived purposes of the present and of the anticipated future. But in what context they were copied, and how they related to other texts copied alongside them, is a mystery. Do we need to classify or identify genres? Or can we simply observe contents and try to puzzle out use and intent? Christian, your sources indicate that genre and classification themselves were tools (weapons?) in a competition for identity and influence, and that people were aware of this. This is very interesting, and much different from my material (though not from documents themselves; I’ve got an article on “charters as weapons,” if you’re interested).⁸

Here we’re brushing up against a perennial concern of mine, namely of parachuting in modern concepts—such as the idea of genre itself, what constitutes a coherent genre, or even what the available genres even are (or were). Is it possible that past actors did not have the concept “genre”, or had a genre that we have not even thought of? Because we see a pattern, does that mean that past actors were aware of that pattern, or thinking in terms of it? (I get really grouchy when I read literary criticism that sees all sorts of patterns and relationships and automatically assumes awareness and intent.) It might be really interesting to discuss this issue of self-awareness as a theoretical problem, particularly given the differences in our evidence.

⁸ Brown, “Charters as Weapons.”

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Abstract When media revolutions occur within in a predominately manuscript culture—as in Song dynasty China, or Carolingian Europe—how do understandings of writing and genre also change? How can we gauge the awareness of all these changes among contemporaries? And how can historians guard against imposing their own categories on the texts of the medieval past? In this exchange, two historians of these two different cultures reflect on what they have learned from one another's work, and on these larger questions.

Keywords genre, semiotics, manuscripts, philology, hermeneutics, standardization, empire, literati, notebooks, *biji*, formularies, Song dynasty, Carolingian Empire.