01 The Investiture Contest and the Rise of Herod Plays in the Twelfth Century

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Since the publication of O. B. Hardison’s *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages,*¹ E. K. Chambers’s and Karl Young’s evolutionary models for liturgical drama’s development² have been discarded. Yet the question remains of accounting for what Rosemary Woolf calls its “zig-zag” development,³ its apogee being the twelfth century. The growth and decline of Christmas drama is particularly intriguing, as most of Young’s samples of the simple shepherd plays, the *Officium Pastores,* come from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, while the earliest Christmas play he documents, from an eleventh-century Freising Cathedral manuscript, is a complete play about Herod and the Magi, the *Officium Stellae.* Young singles out this Freising play as the “culmination” of *Herodes iratus* (2:92) as if it were some developmental endpoint rather than one of the earliest instances of Christmas drama that we have. The play is complex and inventive in dialogue, creation of character, and use of dramatic space, and by the middle of the twelfth century many of the play’s invented aspects become a loose pattern, appearing in plays as far afield as Sicily, Rouen, Bilsen, and Fleury. What accounts

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¹ O. B. Hardison, Jr., *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965).


for the rise of such complexity, seemingly *ex nihilo*, and the rapid spread of a number of its elements so quickly across early twelfth-century Europe?

Many factors undoubtedly contributed to the appearance of this highly developed play pattern: the festiveness of the Christmas season, the creative challenges of compressing historic events that occurred across several days in disparate localities into the dramatic time and space conventional to religious communities, and the dramatic possibilities inherent in a character like Herod. But with these we should also consider how the plays might be reacting to more immediate concerns. Richard K. Emmerson has considered the Beauvais *Ludus Danielis* in this light, and he finds the play to be exploring “the proper relation of religious and secular power” in the realm of local politics, the relationships between the local bishop and the Parisian monarchy.⁴ While this accounts for the highly idiosyncratic *Daniel*, a much broader and more trenchant concern must account for the wide and systematic spread of the Herod inventions. Given the date of the play—the late eleventh century—and their origin in the heart of the Teutonic Empire, not to mention their central conflict between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of Herod, one likely influence on the plays is the investiture contest and its associated complex of Church-State conflicts which spawned a large volume of theoretical and polemical writing contemporary with Herod’s rise on the stage.⁵ After all, it was just in 1077 that Emperor Henry IV lay prostrate and

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cruciform before Pope Gregory VII at Canossa, and in 1084 that the same Henry drove the same
Gregory from Rome and crowned his own pope.6

And it was just in 1110 that Henry V marched on Rome and ultimately took Pope Paschal
II and his cardinals hostage to force concessions on investiture. While such large-scale
international crises largely ended with the Concordat of Worms in 1122, the dispute simmered to
the end of the century and occasionally boiled over in sensational events such as the conflict
between Archbishop Thomas Becket and King Henry II of England. The concepts developed in
polemics and treatises surrounding this complex of controversies, I will argue, resonate in the
twelfth-century Herod plays.

I am not suggesting that Herod plays allegorize, represent, or are specifically referential
to key events in the investiture contest; rather, the plays’ use of dramatic space, invented
dialogue, and construction of character disclose an awareness of the disputes over the nature of
political legitimacy and the boundaries of regal and sacerdotal power that lie beneath the
controversy. More specifically, the plays reveal an awareness of how their imbedded worldview
conceptualized these disputes. Medieval plays characteristically represent the interconnectedness
of historical events with both the historical present and the absolute present inhabited by the
divine.7 Both political philosophers and playwrights saw contemporary events as projections of

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7 See Erich Auerbach, “Adam and Eve,” in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western
biblical archetypes and as a continuation of a providential historical process that began at Creation; hence plays reflect contemporary political thought by associating contemporary Church-State conflicts with the biblical conflicts depicted in liturgy.

Of course, the formulation of “Church versus State” is inaccurate and anachronistic, as the ecclesiastical and royal hierarchies were hardly monolithic entities opposed to each other, and political organization at the time did not resemble the modern state. Many bishops and abbots supported kings and emperors against the pope, and many kings and nobles supported the pope for their own expedient purposes. That notwithstanding, there was clearly an extended crisis over the boundary between royal and sacerdotal power that found local, regional, and pan-European expression. In contention was the right to invest bishops and depose emperors; also at stake were the rights to grant and recover fiefs, the respective legal jurisdiction of ecclesiastical and royal courts, the sale and purchase of proprietary churches and church offices, and taxation.

There can be little doubt that the canons and monks who wrote liturgical drama knew about royal-sacerdotal conflicts and the issues surrounding them. Between 1070 and 1125 there were at least twenty-five councils and synods that took up aspects of the matter; these would have been attended by bishops and abbots who would have brought the news back to their communities. Papal letters attempting to garner support spread to episcopal sees and abbeys throughout Western Christendom; emperors and kings—or, rather, their hired writers—were just as prolix with their pens, especially Henry IV, whose cachet of correspondence has been called

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“the earliest known propaganda literature in Germany.”9 Moreover, the papacy's claims to supremacy were grounded in the century-old monastic reform movement that sought spiritual purity and attacked simony; Gregory VII’s arguments had intellectual roots familiar to any Church thinker of the period.10

It is an intriguing and felicitous coincidence that two centers of liturgical drama, Fleury11 and Freising, also produced important writing on political theory. Throughout its early history, the Abbeye St. Benoît de Fleury at St. Benoît-sur-Loire at Fleury maintained its liberty by negotiating a complex web of claims between bishops, kings, local nobility, and the pope.12 As a wealthy abbey sited near an ambitious bishop with its papal or royal protectors distant and often impotent, its chief political weapon was the intellect made manifest in politically colored theological treatises and biblical commentary. Consequently, Fleury developed, along with its literary tradition, a political consciousness largely informed by its tenth-century patriarch, Abbo of Fleury. Although he wrote no systematic treatise on politics, his various writings touched so

8 Blumenthal, The Investiture Controversy, passim.


10 Blumenthal, The Investiture Controversy, 1–27.

11 While arguments still swirl about the provenance of the Fleury Playbook, the tendency of those considering the question now seems to favor Fleury; see Fletcher Collins, Jr., “The Home of the Fleury Playbook,” in Thomas P. Campbell and Clifford Davidson, eds., The Fleury Playbook: Essays and Studies, Early Drama, Art, and Music, Monograph Ser. 7 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1985), 26–34; V. A. Kolve, “Ganymede/Getron: Medieval Monasticism and the Drama of Same-Sex Desire,” Speculum 13 (1998): 1028, n. 40; if the plays are not from Fleury, they must have been from a monastery very much like it; see my “Virtual Ritual,” 398–406.

often on issues of both religious and secular governance that they project a political theology that touches on issues at the core of the investiture contest.\textsuperscript{13} He questioned the sophistry used to defend simoniacal practices, and called for a harmonious cooperation between king and pope in their respective domains.\textsuperscript{14} As a political writer Abbo had a twelfth-century successor in Hugh of Fleury, also known as Hugo de Santa Maria, who wrote his \textit{Historica Ecclesiastica} and his \textit{Modernum Regum Francorum Actus}\textsuperscript{15} partly as mirrors for magistrates, and also produced his own treatise on royal-sacerdotal relations, \textit{De Regia Potestate et Sacerdotali Dignitale}.\textsuperscript{16} Characteristic of monastic writers, he explored possibilities for rational compromise and reconciliation rather than subornation and submission based on ideological purity.\textsuperscript{17} Freising gave us Bishop Otto, whose \textit{History of the Two Cities and Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa},\textsuperscript{18} like Hugh’s histories, conceived the Church-State controversy along the characteristic lines of universal history, of which more will be said presently. Otto’s work was widely read and disseminated in its own day, with over fifty manuscripts still surviving, and was

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 122, 124–25.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Patrologia Latina}, 163:805–939. Translations from Hugh of Fleury are mine.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 163:939–73.
\textsuperscript{17} Tierney, \textit{The Crisis of Church and State}, 83–84.
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quoted as authoritative by historians as late as the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{19} It is a long stretch to claim that any of these works directly influenced local playwrights. Otto’s work undoubtedly postdates that of the Freising \textit{Officium Stellae}, yet both Otto and Hugh represent widespread and mainstream thinking about the interconnectedness of politics, history, and theology.

How might this political theorizing work its way into the drama? It begins with the monastic awareness of history and its underlying importance to all that happened in a monastery or a college of cathedral canons. It was reenacted daily in the \textit{Opus Dei}, and it was schematized and analyzed in the outpouring of historical writing in the twelfth century, to include the treatises of Hugh and Otto. This historical consciousness prescinds from Augustine. As Thomas Campbell has pointed out, Augustine’s scheme of history, an outworking of the conflict between the City of God and the city of this world, underlies many features of the Fleury plays.\textsuperscript{20} It is not hard to extrapolate his analysis to the plays from Beauvais and Benediktbeuern, or to other Christmas drama, as they represent the same essential conflicts presented in the Fleury plays and share some of the stagecraft. Augustine’s scheme underlay drama because drama was a part of liturgy, and liturgy is a dramatic reenactment of history, a concept expounded in the allegories of liturgy authored by Amalarius of Metz, Honorius of Autun, and others.\textsuperscript{21}

Liturgy invites its participants to recognize the past in the present, and medieval historians follow the liturgist’s lead by extending Augustine’s two-cities scheme to recent events—a scheme which presents the conflicts of the historian’s own age as an extension of

\textsuperscript{19} Mierow, Introduction, in Otto, Bishop of Freising, \textit{The Two Cities}, 45–46.

biblical typology into the present. Hugh of Fleury regards Church-State controversies as an extension of the long string of conflicts between biblical heroes and secular kings: Moses and Pharaoh, Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar, Elijah and Ahab. Otto of Freising treats the clash between Gregory VII and Henry IV as a continuation of the successive conflicts between the two cities. To be sure, royal-sacerdotal conflicts do not clearly fall into the two cities paradigm: in theory, it was an intramural quarrel, both parties being of the City of God. Otto concedes that by the time of Otto III his history is about one city rather than two, although he fears that the investiture contest threatens to separate the cities again. Much writing on the investiture controversy did not explicitly invoke the two-cities theme: it schematizes the conflict in terms of the “two swords,” one spiritual and one temporal, or in terms of the greater and lesser lights of Creation. Yet Augustine’s dualism lies beneath it all. Writing of the Roman Empire and its predecessors, Augustine held that secular government is founded at best on the desire for temporal peace and at worst on covetousness. Gregory VII, taking up this theme, calls Henry “a


23 Hugh of Fleury, Tractatus de Regia Potestate, chap. 4; Patrologia Latina, 163:945–46.


25 Tierney, The Crisis of Church and State, 45–46; see also Beryl Smalley, Historians in the Middle Ages (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), 48–49.

member of Antichrist”\textsuperscript{27} and contends that “kings and princes derive their origin from men ignorant of God who raised themselves above their fellows by pride, plunder, treachery, murder—in short, by every kind of crime at the instigation of the Devil.”\textsuperscript{28} Hugh of Fleury, virtually plagiarizing Gregory, writes that while even reprobate and heretical kings derive their power from God for God’s divine purpose, they “possess their principality not from God, but ignoring God, by these: pride, rapine, treachery, murder, and ultimately they have affected, with universal crimes, subject to the Devil, prince of the world, blinded by desire and indescribable presumption or temerity, to have dominion over equal men.”\textsuperscript{29}

This picture of secular kingship deriving its legitimacy from violence and the events that occasioned its revival may have had a hand in the rise of Herod as the central figure in early Christmas drama. Herod certainly has a large role in St. Matthew’s account of Epiphany, but the plays give him an even greater role, to include a standard realization of his character as suspicious, hard to approach, deceptive, scheming, and wrathful. The germ of all of these is in Matthew’s account, but Herod still acquires a stage presence larger than the source might warrant with his prominent position on a \textit{sedes} or \textit{solium}, his large number of lines, and his violent gestures. Further, Incipit titles such as \textit{Versus ad Herodem faciendum} and \textit{Ordo ad Representandum Herod} suggest that the manuscript’s redactor and perhaps the audience saw him as the play’s principal attraction. The Magi’s adoration of the infant Savior may in the end be central to the plays, but the texts invite the audience to understand the events of Epiphany with

\textsuperscript{27} Gregory VII, \textit{The Correspondence}, 123.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 169.
respect to Herod’s status, character, and actions, which collectively project the antitype of the City of God. These resonances of Augustine’s scheme would have been reinforced in the plays’ management of dramatic space, as Bevington,\textsuperscript{30} Campbell, and others have pointed out: Herod and his retinue’s raised platform, probably in the nave, contrasts the pomp and pride of earthly royalty sharply with the spiritual humility of the manger, probably in the choir, perhaps at the altar. Costuming might have implied the two-cities conflict into contemporary times; the Fleury play calls for companions \textit{in habitu juvenili}, who, more through unintentional anachronism, may have looked quite like the young nobles about Orléans.

Admittedly, these features render Herod as an archetypal tyrant who does not necessarily reflect contemporary events. But pieces of dialogue and gestures presented by Herod and his retinue more directly resonate with many of the basic issues discussed in treatises on royal-sacerdotal relations. Table I [pp. 22-23 of this reprint] collates material from five key moments that recur across twelve plays. No single play contains each element: the Freising \textit{Officium Stellae} includes most of them, and the two Fleury plays taken together include them all, although the plays were not intended to be performed together. Yet these elements overlap between the plays sufficiently such that they appear to present a common, if loose traditional—albeit not a universal formula or \textit{Urtype}—that spread rather quickly. None of these elements appear in St. Matthew’s gospel, the source of the Epiphany story, and are therefore conscious inventions, and it is in such inventions that we are most likely to find how biblical narratives were crafted to reflect contemporary concerns.

\textsuperscript{29} Hugh of Fleury, \textit{Tractatus de Regia Potestatis}, in \textit{Patrologia Latina}, 163:941b.

\textsuperscript{30} David Bevington, “The Staging of Twelfth-Century Liturgical Drama in the Fleury \textit{Playbook},”
The first of these elements to consider is salutations. Most of the Epiphany plays, to include the earliest, have a brief scene during which a messenger (*Internuncius*) announces the arrival of the Magi to Herod. In about half of the plays (see Table I, col. 2), the messenger addresses Herod with “Vive, Rex in eternum” (G, H, J, and K) or a comparable formula (B, 1). This form of salutation is found in the book of Daniel and it recurs at the appropriate moments in the Beauvais *Daniel*; the Queen addresses Belshazzar with it (Dan. 5:10), and both the advisors and Daniel use it to address Darius (6:7, 22). The hope for eternal reign, as a monk or canon experiencing this play would know, can only be fulfilled by the Messiah, so the salutation suggests a spiritual pretension. A more pointed claim to messianic authority occurs in the plays wherein the messenger (A, D, E) or the Magi (F, K) address Herod with “Salve Rex ludeorum.” Yet another holy title is usurped when in two of the plays (E, H) Herod addresses his son Archelaus as “Fili amantissime” (col. 4), most beloved son, a dim echo of the words pronounced from heaven at Christ’s baptism. Herod’s response of “saluet te gratia mea” (E, H) blatantly usurps a divine privilege.

The issue of secular rulers appropriating spiritual prerogatives lies at the heart of the investiture contest, and treatises on both sides addressed the problem. Imperial apologists argued that the emperor, anointed with chrism at his coronation, had supreme authority over at least the temporalities of the Church, and this included appointments to ecclesiastical office; some went so far as to claim sacramental virtue for the king. A polemical writer known only as “Anonymous of York” (c.1100) took the most extreme view: “No one should take precedence by right over [the king], who is blessed with so many and such great blessings, who is consecrated

and made like unto God with so many and such great sacraments, for no one is consecrated and made like God with more or greater sacraments than he is. . . . Therefore, he is not to be called a layman, for he is the shepherd, master, defender and instructor of Holy Church, lord over his brothers, worthy to be adored by all men, chief and highest prelate.”\textsuperscript{31} The practice of anointing the king, it was argued, had roots in the Old Testament; it was continued by Byzantine emperors and Frankish kings, and its significance grew with the coronation of Charlemagne.\textsuperscript{32} Succeeding Ottonian kings developed liturgical and iconographic programs to enhance their image as hierophants,\textsuperscript{33} an important source of power an otherwise weak central monarch could wield against his often wealthier and better armed vassals. As part of advancing this idea of a sacralized kingship, emperors were often addressed or referred to with spiritual titles. Wipo, the biographer of Conrad II (c.990–1039), understood the emperor to be the “elect of God,” “vicar of God,” “avenger of the Faith,” and “a sharer of the will of God”; his successor, Henry III (1017–56), styled himself as “lord of lords,” “ruler of the world after Christ,” “propagator of the orthodox faith,” and “head of the Church” as he oversaw the deposition of two popes and the forced abdication of another. Henry IV was addressed by his correspondents as “vicar of the Creator,” “the catholic and pontifical king,” and even “your Blessedness.”\textsuperscript{34} From these various


\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Imperial Lives and Letters}, trans. Mommsen and Morrison, 5–11.

\textsuperscript{33} I am indebted to John W. Bernhardt, “Continuity and Change in the Ottonian Church,” unpublished paper, read at the 35th International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University in May 2000.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Imperial Lives and Letters}, trans. Mommsen and Morrison, 23–24, quoting from Wipo’s
identities emperors claimed a number of spiritual prerogatives, including the power to appoint
and depose bishops and abbots, to discipline ordained clergy, and, from the precedent of
Constantine the Great, to call Church councils to consider matters of heresy and theology.\textsuperscript{35} The
spirit of these claims fit the Herod of the twelfth-century stage well, and one could imagine a
king believing in the sacral qualities suggested by such titles saying, \textit{salvet te gratia mea}.

Supporters of ecclesiastical supremacy, on the other hand, argued that the king’s
anointing rendered him subordinate to the pontiff who performed the sacrament. Hugh of St.
Victor wrote, “For the spiritual power has to institute the earthly power that it may be and to
judge it if it has not been good. The spiritual power itself was instituted by God in the first place
and, when it errs, can be judged by God alone. . . . [T]he earthly power, which receives
benediction from the spiritual, is rightfully regarded as inferior to it.”\textsuperscript{36} Bernard of Clairvaux
similarly argued for papal superiority in his discussion of Gelasius’s doctrine of the two swords
of temporal and spiritual authority: “We can therefore conclude that both swords, namely the
spiritual and the material, belong to the Church, and that although only the former is to be
wielded by her own hand, the two are to be employed in her service.”\textsuperscript{37} Gregory VII countered
the imperial faith in anointment by pointing out that Saul, also anointed, “scorning the prophet’s

\textit{Tetralogus} and other sources.


\textsuperscript{37} Bernard of Clairvaux, \textit{Treatise on Consideration}, as quoted in Tierney, \textit{The Crisis of Church and State}, 94.
admonitions . . . was rebuked by the Lord.”38 The Herod plays seem to support the Gregorian position in that they ironically undercut the king’s appropriation of spiritual titles and prerogatives. This irony in part comes from staging. The salutation “Rex in eternum vive” is revealed for the vainglory that it is by the presence of the manger on another acting area a short space from the sedes on which these lines are sung. In that manger lies the Messiah who reigns forever, the king to whom, in several plays, the Magi eventually sing Salve princeps secula or some comparable piece. The irony of “Fili amantissime” is undermined in the same way since the most beloved Son of the divine Father lies only a few meters away at a different acting station. Narrative construction and dialogue in some of the plays heighten the irony. The Fleury Innocents play (H) reveals the futility of the Nuncio’s “Rex, in eternum uiue” as Herod dies and is succeeded by his son. The irony of “Salve Rex Iudeorum” seems self-evident, but is accentuated in the Freising play by its immediately preceding scene, where the Magi ask of the Cives Hierosolimitanos (most likely the cathedral choir), “vbi est expectatio gentium; nouiter natus rex Iudeorum?” (“where is the hope of nations, the newborn king of the Jews?”), emphasizing the regal and messianic identity of the Christ child (Young, 2:93). Such juxtaposition seems typical in Herod plays. In the Sicilian play, the Magi sing the antiphon Venite, adoremus eum, quia ipse est Dominus Deus noster (“Come let us adore him who is the lord our God”) immediately before the messenger’s greeting to Herod (Young, 2:60); in the Bilsen play, the Magi in processional sing of “regnum regi, pacem quoque reddidit orbi” (“king of kings who brings peace to the world”) (2:75); in the Fleury Herod the pastores at the manger

38 Gregory VII, The Correspondence, ed. and trans. Emerton, 89.
sing “Salve, Rex seculorum” (“Hail, king of ages”) shortly before the messenger greets Herod with “Vivat Rex in eternum” (2:85).

Contemporary political thought might also account for a second invention common to many of the plays. Most Herod plays include a scene in which the Magi are interrogated when approaching Herod, either by a messenger or a soldier (col. 3). In the Freising play (A) the Nuntius asks, “Que rerum nouitas, aut que uos causa subegit / Ignotas temptare vias? / Qui genvs? Vnde domo? Pa<em>cemne</em> huc fertis an arma?” (“What novelty, what cause impelled you to tempt unknown paths? What is your race? Where is your homeland? Do you bring peace or war?”). The lines are adapted from the *Aeneid*. The Fleury play reproduces the Freising lines exactly, and four other plays present shorter questions that seem to allude to comparable Virgilian formulae (Young, 2:67). The scene reveals the hostility and suspicion that characterized temporal courts by showing how difficult it might be even for kings to get an interview with another king, while elsewhere in dramatic space one can plainly see the easy access even the poorest shepherds have to the infant Christ. Of interest here is the allusion to Virgil, a poet representative of the pagan liberal arts and also of the Roman Empire. Virgil is not the only Roman poet in Herod’s library: the line “Incendium meum ruina extinguam” from Sallust appears in the Freising *Ordo Rachelis* (B), the *Officium Stellae* (D) from Sicily, and the


fragmentary *Officium Stellae* from Einsiedeln (C).\(^{41}\) While Virgil is unquestionably influential for secular and vernacular poetry, and was part of many standard syllabi in monastic and cathedral schools,\(^{42}\) this allusion to Virgil is not likely a nod to his literary greatness. Odo of Cluny, abbot at Fleury in c.930, reportedly considered the poet’s work to be “a beautiful vase filled with serpents.”\(^{43}\) The suspicion of pagan writers ran strong in Benedictine monasteries in the early Middle Ages and was rooted in St. Jerome’s famous dream in which a divine judge rebuked him for his love of Cicero and other classic authors.\(^{44}\) Herod may not represent Roman power *per se*, but on stage he also presents an elegant and imposing exterior that is corrupt within, and his lines from the quintessential imperial poet give him the air of the Roman Imperium. Such a characterization reflects the contemporary imperial practice of adopting the signs and aura of ancient Rome as part of a program to establish the empire's legitimacy. As the restinguam” (“Then in a transport of fury he cried: ‘Since I am brought to bay by my enemies and driven desperate, I will put out my fire by general devastation’”). Rolfe adds that the saying “refers to the method of checking great fires by demolishing of buildings” (55). The egocentric bombast of Sallust’s tyrant suits Herod well.

\(^{41}\) Another line common to several plays (O, F, and G) — “Regia uos mandata vocant; non segniter ite” (“Royal commands call you; go not leisurely”), spoken by the Nuncio to the Magi — also has a classical ring to it, but I have yet to discover the source, if any.


\(^{43}\) John the Monk, *Vita Sancti Odonis*, 1.12; *Patrologia Latina*, 133:49a, as quoted in translation in Edith Wright, *The Dissemination of Liturgical Drama in France* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Bryn Mawr College Library, 1936), 139.

twelfth century progressed, Salian emperors increasingly claimed for themselves the mantle, power, and prerogatives of the Roman Empire on the theory of the *translatio imperii*, the notion that a divine patent for empire migrated from the Byzantine rulers to the Frankish kings when Charlemagne became emperor. Several Teutonic kings styled themselves *Rex Romanarum*, and Otto III imagined reigning from Rome itself. These claims came strongest from Frederick Barbarossa in the mid-twelfth century. When a group of Roman municipal officials who styled themselves “senators” claimed they could bestow the imperial crown upon him, Barbarossa responded, “Do you wish to know the ancient glory of your Rome? The worth of the senatorial dignity? . . . Behold our state. All these things are to be found with us. All these have descended to us, together with the empire.” While these claims represent the *renovatio imperii* at its apogee, the concept developed earlier. Both Conrad II and Henry V, for example, buttressed their claims to empire by asserting Rome as the empire’s symbolic capital. Imperial historians referred to an emperor as *triumphator* or *Caesar*, lesser nobles were sometimes styled senators, and German knights were occasionally called *milites Romani*. Both Otto of Freising and Hugh of Fleury’s histories treat the *translatio imperii* as if it were an established fact, so the theory was current in both of the centers that produced plays with the complete Virgilian lines. By quoting

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45 Smalley, *Historians in the Middle Ages*, 98–100; Benson, “Political *Renovatio*,” 370ff.


47 Benson, “Political *Renovatio*,” 371.

48 Ibid., 373.
Virgil at a time when signs of Roman power were in renewal, Herod, as if he were not imperious enough, acquires a more imperial air.

Herod’s concept of kingship finds symbolic expression in the plays’ emphasis on swords, both as props and in dialogue (cols. 5–6). The Freising play (A) serves as a model. The soldier, after telling Herod he has been deceived by the Magi, advises him to “Decerne, Domine, vindicare iram tuam, et estrecto mucrone querere iube pueros, forte inter occisos occidetur et puer” (“Decide, oh lord, to avenge your wrath, and order the boys to be slain by the naked sword; perhaps the boy we seek will fall among those slaughtered”). Not only does each play that includes this scene make explicit reference to a sword—ensis, mucron, gladius—but four of the scripts (A, F, I, K) call attention to the sword’s physical presence as a prop. The Freising script is again exemplary: “Rex gladium versans Armigero reddit dicens: Armiger o prime, pueros fac ense perire” (“The king hands the sword over to the soldier, saying, ‘Chief of soldiers, make the boys die by the sword point’”). The Rouen Herod play ends with the menacing waving of swords as if to remind everyone of the impending slaughter (Young, 2:72). The power to hand over the sword is a symbol of the source of Herod’s authority, his near monopoly on organized violence. The scene evokes Hugh of Fleury’s and Gregory VII’s commentary, above, on the violent basis of kingship, but also points to the growing imperial philosophy, espoused in its extreme form by Barbarossa in his letter to the Roman Senate in 1155: “I have made your prince my vassal and from that time until the present have transferred you to my jurisdiction. I am the

49 One must wonder if this invention of advice from an officer reflects the prevailing medieval notion that bad regal decisions could only be the result of corrupt or incompetent advisors.
lawful possessor. Let him who can, snatch the club from the hand of Hercules." As the twelfth century progressed, kings and emperors declared their legitimacy to be based less on their sacerdotal anointing, their succession from nobility, or from legal tradition than from personal power, the ability to hand the sword to others who will use it on their behalf. While this clashes with the idea that the empire and its ruler are divinely established and all but concedes that divine right is an ideological cover for the real basis of government, twelfth-century politicians seem no more concerned with philosophical consistency than do those of the twentieth or the twenty-first and were just as astute at adopting different arguments to persuade different audiences. What is clear is that as emperors grew stronger materially and less subject to their own vassals, the more the concept of rightful conquest was used to legitimate political claims.

This reliance on violence is evident most clearly in the Bilsen play, where Herod waves his sword at the Magi and says, “Si illum regnare creditis, dicite nobis” (“If you believe this one to reign, tell us” [Young, 2:77]). His legitimacy threatened, he goes back to his basics.

But the plays also represent the limits of violence as a source of political legitimacy. The Fleury Herod has Herod and Archelaus wave their swords in futility at the star leading the Magi to the manger (Young, 2:88). Some shorter Epiphany plays end with the emphasis removed from Herod; for example the Sicilian Herod ends with angels and the Magi adoring the infant Savior and celebrating fulfilled prophecy, and the Fleury play closes with the Magi pointedly bypassing Herod’s platform as they traverse the nave on their way to join the choir in singing the Te Deum.


51 Benson, “Political Renovatio,” 375–82.
The Fleury Innocents’ play, as mentioned above, depicts Herod’s death, and the plays from Freising and Bilsen include the hymn *Hostis Herodes impie*, which mocks Herod’s ultimate impotence in the face of supernal power.

*Hostis Herodes impie*
Christum venire quid times?
Non eripit mortalia
qui regna dat cœlestia. (Young, 2:447)
Why, impious Herod, shouldst thou fear
Because the Christ is come so near?
He who doth heavenly kingdoms grant
Thine earthly realm can never want. (trans. Percy Dearmer)

The plays’ resolutions also reflect the stance many monastic writers held toward political conflict. I would qualify somewhat Thomas Campbell’s assessment that the Fleury plays in the end depict the ultimate victory of the City of God. The plays may prefigure a spiritual victory, as when the slaughtered children rise and join the choir at the end of the Fleury Innocents play, but in the Christmas dramas from other locations the plays end in anxiety. The *Ordo Rachelis* typically ends in grief, and the *Ordo Stellae* typically leaves an exasperated Herod issuing swords to his troops. Indeed, it seems incongruous, almost bewildering to hear *Te Deum laudamus* at the end of the Freising *Ordo Rachelis*. And yet the emergence of liturgical praise from the midst of suffering exemplifies the monastic worldview and is precisely what many spiritual writers proposed in response to the investiture controversy. In his treatise *De Regia Potestate*, Hugh of Fleury emphasizes scriptural calls to wait patiently for deliverance in the face of persecution, that God is not unaware of the evil done by kings, and that Christians should fear not those who can destroy the body but him who can destroy body and soul. He pointedly recalls
Christ ordering Peter to sheath his sword on Gethsemane, and argues that evil kings were to be fought not with arms but by prayer day and night.\textsuperscript{52} He stresses that kings like Herod and Pilate “are accustomed to end life in ignominious death,”\textsuperscript{53} that however instrumental tyrannous acts may be in the divine narrative of history, they are yet subject to divine retribution.

This is a characteristically monastic approach to royal-papal disputes: temporal detachment, spiritual engagement, and patient waiting for the divine will to manifest itself in time and space. To the extent that Christmas drama is “political,” then, it is not to call kings to repentance—they would not be in attendance anyway—or to stir up material resistance. Rather, the plays reveal that the political is subsumed by the spiritual, part of the divine plan to direct history to a provident end, a plan reenacted daily in the liturgy. It is remarkable that this revelation is offered as an act of worship in an age where, at every turn, events seemed to prove the contrary, but such is the essence of faith.

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\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Patrologia Latina}, 163:946c.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 169:953