

Chapter 8

CONCLUSION

THE ARGUMENTS PRESENTED in this book confirm the importance of the fraternal bonds for the organization of early medieval kinship as well as for social order broadly understood. Brothers formed the core of the early medieval family as strongly (or even more strongly) than the married couple. The fraternal bond, established at the moment of birth and lasting throughout the entire life of an individual, appears to be the longest and the most stable social relationship in which a brother was involved. Wives died, children were born, but throughout their lives brothers remained partners in the pursuit of family strategies; they supported each other in asserting their rights; and finally, brothers were those with whom one shared one's identity or even one's fate. Collaboration between brothers was the basis for building one's position in the hierarchy of power and influence, acquiring property, and entering into advantageous alliances, for instance those associated with marriage.

Relations between brothers were characterized by durability, which for obvious reasons could be achieved neither in marriage nor in the relationship with one's parents. Yet this stability did not mean immutability: fraternal relations were dynamic, they changed as the siblings grew up, assumed new social roles, and chose different career paths. In addition, by their very nature (for instance for psychological or biological reasons) they were stretched between two extremes: loyalty to the next of kin and rivalry over shared goods, both symbolic and material. The brother figure was also an extremely important element in the medieval conceptual system. Brotherhood, understood metaphorically, constituted the ideological foundation of Christian society: a community of brothers equal before God. Yet behind the faithful and selflessly loving brother loomed the figure of the evil brother with traces of fraternal blood on his hands. The brother remained an ambiguous figure in the medieval imagination, though the brotherhood metaphor was often used to describe a relation that was thoroughly positive. Loyalty and support among brothers could easily turn into rivalry and conflict, sometimes so violent that only supernatural intervention was able to stop it. Christianity imbued the notion of brotherhood with positive references, but also forever attached to it the bloody mark of Cain.

The awareness of the existence of a dark side to fraternal relations strengthened the juxtaposition—Augustinian in its essence and crucial to the Christian vision of society—of biological brotherhood vs. spiritual brotherhood. Various types of sources (e.g. exegetical, hagiographical, and historical ones) clearly show a fatalist image of the relations between brothers of the flesh, who seemed doomed to conflict. Christianity added a theological dimension to the tension between brothers, making fraternal conflict one of the most important moments in the history of humankind and Salvation. The theological distinction between the pure brotherhood of the spirit and

the imperfect brotherhood of the flesh became one of the foundations of a dualistic division of society into the world of earthly families and of ideal, fraternal communities of the spirit. Other communities were modelled on the fraternal group, bound by ties of absolute and selfless loyalty, love, and collaboration. The spiritually loving members of monastic communities were an unattainable ideal for those who had not been able to free themselves from the temporal fetters of sin. In the construction of social relations this model played a role at least equal to that of the ideal embodied by the father-son relationship. Monastic communities, confraternities, personal friendships among the intellectual elites of the ninth century—all these forms drew on the same model: the ideal of spiritual brotherhood.

We can find in this distinction an echo of a clash between two different systems of values. On the one hand, a model of fraternal relations typical of society can be distinguished, based on bonds of kinship, identification with a shared earthly heritage, and a sense of loyalty to “one’s own”; on the other hand an all-embracing Christian brotherhood of the spirit, selfless, existing independently of material objects and even of the physical presence of the individual embraced by that love.

Yet no idea can exist outside the social world in which it emerged and to which it refers. The interest of early medieval thinkers in the motif of brotherly rivalry did not stem only from the theological power of such themes. It remained associated with the experiences of social and political life in the ninth century. Fight for power among royal brothers, insidious attempts to seize land and well as attempts on the life (or at least the freedom and health) of brothers were part of the everyday life of the Carolingian elites. It was a world in which royal brothers were sometimes allies, but the fraternal love described by the moralists remained an unattainable ideal for them. The same could be said about their subjects, who fought bitterly with their brothers or nephews for wealth, offices, or positions. Between these two extremes—loyalty and betrayal—there is a huge variety of situations in which circumstances determined the actions of individuals. It was a world in which interests and emotions played an equally important role.

The question which cannot be answered concerns the social reception of the Christian models of fraternal relations examined on the basis of theological and homiletic sources as well as in texts providing moral advice. As always, whenever we try to find an answer to the question of how individuals and communities from the past defined the world and which categories they applied to it, of what prompted them to choose a particular course, we must remain in the sphere of more or less likely hypotheses. One is not always able to answer the question about the impact of the ideas emerging among learned men of letters. However, the ideas they advocated, including those concerning the organization of social life, may have spread beyond monastic scriptoria and royal courts, by means of sermons or images painted on church walls, as in the church at Ingelheim, where Louis the Pious ordered the stories of biblical brothers to be painted.¹ Yet there still remained—and it was to remain for a long time—the ancient custom whereby a man

¹ *Ermoldi Nigelli In honorem*, 4, p. 64.

had to take bloody revenge for the death of his brother, and to put the good of his closest blood relatives above the truths of Faith.

We have looked at a society marked by a fascinating process, taking place more or less overtly, of seeking a balance between conflicting norms and moral imperatives, a process encompassing all spheres of social life, including those seemingly least susceptible to change, such as family life. In this book I have sought to demonstrate not only the significance but also the ambiguity and multidimensionality of fraternal relations. Many topics have been barely touched upon, yet this research has demonstrated how broad a research field stretches behind the seemingly obvious question: who is my brother?

