6
Competing Hegemonies: The High Middle Ages

6.1 Introduction

The period from around 1000–1250 is generally represented as a major shift in European culture, trade and the construction of the self. The Carolingians notwithstanding, the period 500–1000 can be analysed as one dominated by centrifugal forces, with previously connected units becoming increasingly dissimilar. In this new period tendencies of cultural and political homogenization, associated with centripetal forces, became dominant. Although much recent scholarship (for instance, Reynolds 1994) has shied away from seeing the full-blown development of feudalism as the primary cause for homogenization, there is no doubt that, in much of western Europe, power and land tenure did become concentrated. Moore (2000) goes so far as to describe the period as the ‘first European revolution’.

But while the primary political and cultural units of western Europe north of the Alps became larger, they did not merge (except into the rather hazy Christendom). Indeed the distinctions that they represented gradually solidified around not merely allegiance but also language and culture. More than one centrifugal force was at work.

Moreover, the new European culture which these centuries produced was still capable of considerable regional variation. And while Latin remained dominant in most written domains in the west, broadening its use through the extension of literacy, the literate expression of previously oral domains and of a new scholarly culture, the vernaculars continued to be used and, in the case of the Romance languages, approached full Ausbau status.

Additionally, in the defeat of the Magyars and the Scandinavians lay the future success of western Europe. The ability of the Church and
other large-scale organizations to popularize homogenization had led rapidly to the incorporation of the former ‘barbarian’ ruling classes into a system of interlocking loyalties across the continent. Indeed, the Normans were so successfully incorporated that they became among the new system’s greatest exploiters (although the Normans were more interested in the new arts of warfare than any other part of the new Carolingian learning).

6.2 The heartland

Francia had already been through a homogenization process under the early Carolingians, so that what happened from around 1000 on was not without precedent. Those who were taught to write were educated in a similar manner, both mechanically (in terms of script) and linguistically (in terms of the ‘reformed’ Latin diffusing from the court schools). Similar tendencies, with greater use of the vernacular, were at work in other polities, such as Anglo-Saxon England. Reforms within the Benedictine tradition from around 900 (Lawrence 2001: chapter 6) helped spread similar religious practice across large areas. But the scale of homogenization was much lower than was true later. The following sections will offer an explanation of why this was the case, and describe some of its linguistic results.

6.2.1 The Church

The early medieval Latin Church was united in liturgical language and largely in liturgy. The Roman Church was pre-eminent in the communion as the principal Christian congregation. The Pope acted as Church arbiter; his courts had primary authority. But there were practical limitations to his ability to exercise monarchical power over the Church. Ecclesiastical appointments were normally made by local civil powers following the Eigenkirche system. This made for a rather cosy relationship between church and lay authorities, leading to ecclesiastical worldliness, if not actual corruption. This connection between family allegiance and high ecclesiastical office even affected the Papacy in the early eleventh century, to the institution’s detriment. But it also encouraged an interest in vernacular culture among clerics.

Radicals within the Church began to call for reform (Moore 2000; Robinson 1990). From around 1050 on, these clerics began to assume powerful positions in the Church, a process which reached its first climax in the Papacy of Gregory VII (1073–85). Power achieved, the reformers attempted to root out corruption – from venal to gross. The