

Kingship and poor relief

-How can we explicate the historical context of the sources describing king's poor relief in the Middle Ages?-

Takashi Jinno

### Introduction

When we read the biographies of mediaeval kings in Europe, we encounter the description of king's poor relief. Such description often surprises us much because it is written that the kings fed a large number of poors and occasionally washed their legs. This kind of king's deed can be conspicuously found in the biographies of kings from the Carolingian period to the 11th century. But we must always accept that there may be unreliability in this kind of descriptions because the authors wrote such biographies of kings unfailingly in order to praise king's virtues and to consolidate royal authorities.

I should like to consider here whether such descriptions were written only as a kind of panegyric to praise king's virtues, namely as a kind of fiction, or as a kind of historiography which contains a certain amount of truth. By this consideration, I want to elucidate simultaneously how we may reveal the reality of poor relief in the early Middle Ages using descriptive sources such as biographies of kings. At the same time, as another relating problem, I want to discuss here the close relation between memory for the dead and poor relief in the early Middle Ages. Anyway, this essay is a sketch of my consideration to the social meaning of poor relief in the early Middle Ages. (1)

#### 1. Royal poor relief -the example of Robert the Pious-

There are so many biographies of kings which mention deeds of poor relief. We can cite the biographies of Charles the Great and Louis the Pious as famous examples of the description of royal poor relief. In the biography of Charles the Great written by Einhard, it is written that the king relieved many poors not only in the Frankish kingdom but also in foreign countries. (2) Also in the biography of Louis the Pious it is written that he founded hospitals for poors wherever he stayed. (3) It is obvious that such descriptions reflected the idea of charity as an important king's virtue in the Middle Ages. Based on the sentences of Bible, the kings and nobles were strongly recommended to relieve poors, orphans, widows or sick persons. We can read such precepts in the writings of the mirror of prince in the Carolingian period such as *«Via regia»* by Smaragd or *«De institutione regia»* by Jonas of Orléans etc. (4)

But can we assume that the poor relief described in the biographies of kings did not really be done but was a fictitious story to praise kings? Here I take the biography of Robert the Pious (996-1031) as an interesting example in order to explicate the meaning of such descriptions about royal poor relief.

When Robert throned to the crown in the end of the 10th century, the French royal power was too limited to dominate the total area of France. In the face of such a miserable situation, the Capetian king tried to enlarge his authority with the help of ecclesiastical powers. (5)

It is known that the kings behaved themselves as *«rex et sacerdos»* in the 10th and 11th centuries. (6) It would be fit for the case of Robert the Pious. While he respected the advises of prelates and protected church carefully as his posthumous name *«pious»* indicates, on the other hand he exercised his rights to the ecclesiastical authorities and used them for his power politics as if he were the head of

church in France. We can comprehend how he behaved as *(rex et sacerdos)* when we read his biography titled *(The life of Robert)* written by his secretary Helgaud. In this biography it is written that the king did largescale poor relieves. The description is as follows.

"Quis autem ei mos fuerit dandae eleemosynae in sui regni sedibus non praetermittimus. In Parisius civitate, Silvanectis, Aurelianis, Divione, Antissiodore, Avalone, Meloduno, Stampis, in unaquaque harum sede, trecentis, vel, quod est verius, mille pauperibus dabatur panis et vini abundantia, ---Praeter haec, quo ibat quotidie in sancta Quadragesima c aut cc jubebat pauperibus dari panem, piscium et vini cibaria."

[--he was accustomed to give alms to the poor at the palaces in his country. At the palaces such as in Paris, Senlis, Orléans, Dijon, Auxerre, Aballon, Moulin, Étampes, he usually gave bread and wine to 300 or more truly 1000 poors abundantly. ---While he did this everyday, he ordered to give bread, fish, wine to 100, or 200 poors at the time of Lent.] (7)

After this description, the author relates another deeds of royal charity such as the washing of poors' legs (Mandatum) at the Maundy Thursday every year. (8)

Anyway, it would be realized that the author intended to stress the king's willingness to do charities to the poor. But did he really do such largescale poor relieves? Is the description a historical evidence or a sort of flowery words to decorate the king's virtues ornately? At first we can pose some doubt as to the number of the relieved poors by his charities. Could such a large number of poors as about 1000 men in each palace be continuously supported by the weak kingship? When we realize that the number of population of each city in this time was usually

less than 1000 men, it would be a matter of course to throw doubt on the reliability of the description. In addition to that, it would be more doubtful when we know it is written in the same biography that the king miraculously healed some persons of their diseases by tracing the bodies of the sick with the marks of cross. (9)

## 2. Prayer and poor relief

When we compare the doubtful description of the biography of Robert the Pious with another contemporary sources, we can get some important clues to understand the true meaning of the largescale poor relief by the king Robert. As one of such contemporary sources, we want to cite here the same kind of description in the chronicle of Thietmar of Merseburg. In this cronicle the author describes the German imperial diet which was held at Dortmund in 1005. There we find a hint to understand the meaning of the poor relief written in the biography of the king Robert.

According to Thietmar, at this diet, the emperor Henry II and his wife concluded the pact of fraternity for the memory of the dead with 15 bishops in Germany and the duke of Saxony Bernard. They were obliged to pray for the dead persons among each other by the pact for the dead. At this diet they prescribed precisely how they would hold the memorial services for the dead among them and give alms to the church and poors.

Thietmar says as follows.

"Rex et regina infra triginta dies mille quingentos denarios pro anime redemptione erogent et totidem pauperes pascant. Episcopi singuli trecentos pauperes pascant et triginta denarios expendant et totidem lumina accendant. Dux autem Bernhardus quingentos pauperes pascat et quindecim solidos expendat."

[the king and the queen should pay 1500 denarii for the salvation of soul and feed 1500 poors during 30 days. Each bishop should feed 300 poors and expend 30 denarii and light 30 candles. Duke Bernard should feed 500 poors and expend 15 solidi.] (10)

As this latin text says, they must hold memorial services for the dead during 30 days when someone among them died. Especially the emperor and the empress promised to donate 1500 denarii to the church and give meals to 1500 poors. In the case of bishops they promised to donate 30 denarii and 30 candles to the church and give meals to 300 poors. The duke of Saxony Bernard promised to donate 15 solidi to the church and give meals to 500 poors. As we know, this kind of pact of fraternity for memory existed already from the Carolingian period. (11) Bishops, kings, and princes wanted to be held memorial services for themselves after they died. Such kind of pact of fraternity was concluded not only among prelates and lay princes, but also among monasteries. Some monasteries promised with other monasteries to pray for the dead monks each other. This custom of fraternity was kept from the Carolingian period in the Middle Ages continuously.

It is very important to know that poor relief was accompanied with memorial service for the dead. This combination of memorial service and poor relief can be clearly read in the above-mentioned description of the Thietmar's chronicle. Why were memorial service and poor relief combined? The reason is that they wanted poors as (Images of Christ) to pray for the salvation of souls of the dead persons in return for almsgiving to them. This way of thinking of (intercession) by poors prevailed among people in the early Middle Ages. (12)

As a suitable example to show this way of thinking, the poor relief of the German emperor Henry IV who lived in

the 11th century can be mentioned. He ordered to do almsgiving to poors in royal palaces and royal monasteries for the salvation of his soul after death. When he donated manors to the royal monastery Prüm, he ordered to give meals to 50 poors at the anniversary of his investiture as king and at the anniversary of his investiture as emperor, and to give meals to 300 poors and cloths to 30 poors at the anniversary of his death in return for his donation. (13) This kind of almsgiving for the salvation of one's soul seems to be the usual custom of other kings and queens in the 10th and 11th centuries. (14)

Therefore, the poor relief of Robert the Pious can be also regarded as a deed intended for the salvation of his own and his relatives' souls. But we must not forget that this combination of memorial service and largescale poor relief was firstly invented by the contemporary monasteries.

Saying precisely, it was the monastery of Cluny that began to do such kind of largescale poor relief. It is widely known that the monastery of Cluny did magnificent ceremonies daily. The ceremonies were mainly intended for the memory of own monks and other lay and ecclesiastical people who concluded the pact of fraternity with Cluny. While the monks in Cluny held the memorial services for the dead daily, they did poor relief as a part of memorial ceremonies. (15)

What surprises us much is that the memorial service and poor relief for the dead (frater) were done at the anniversary of his death every year in Cluny. In order to perform the memorial ceremonies of their anniversaries, Cluny and its filial monasteries drew up their calendars titled (necrologium). (16)

In each column of each day, the names of the dead (frater) were registered. The monks held the memorial services for the dead who died on that day and at the same time they gave meals to the same numbers of poors as the numbers of

the dead {frater} of the day. This meant a very largescale poor relief because we can find about 20000 names of the dead {frater} registered in the {necrologium} of filial monasteries of Cluny in the 12th century.(17) The activities of poor relief must become more and more largescale because the number of the dead {frater} continuously increased. Consequently at the period of the abbot Petrus Venerabilis the monastery of Cluny got into financial trouble because of this extravagant poor relief.The abbot Petrus Venerabilis ordered to limit the number of memorial services for the dead to less than 50 every day in order to lighten the burden of poor relief.

(18) Along with the decline from the second half of the 12th century, this kind of largescale poor relief disappeared in Cluny. But anyway, It is undeniable that such kind of largescale poor relief was always done in monasteries or chapters in the Western Europe at least until the 11th century.

### 3. Prayer as gift

It is very difficult to understand the way of thinking as to the close relation between poor relief and prayer for the salvation of soul, if we don't know the meaning of prayer in the early Middle Ages. As a background of this largescale poor relief, we must know the anxieties of the people about the salvation of own soul in the face of everlasting battles, famines or droughts. In the early Middle Ages the nobles competed with others in donating their manors to monasteries or chapters in order to be protected by the ecclesiastical powers and to seek for the prayer by monks or canons for the salvation of their souls. People's serious interest in the salvation of own soul reflected in the definite sentences of the documents for the donation to Cluny. It is written always that such

donations were done for the atonement of their own sins and the salvation of own soul after death.

It is widely seen that such donation seeking for the memorial service after death was done not only in Cluny but also in other monasteries or chapters. But it is important that the monasteries or chapters gave prayers to the donaters in return for the donation of monors or another valuable things. In the period when the commercial society had not been established, it is said that the society was ruled by the principle of reciprocity of gifts. But we should know that the act of donation was done not only by the things visible as manors etc. but also the things invisible as prayer. The monks prayed for the salvation of souls of donaters as a return gift for presented things. (19)

When we understand the meaning of prayer in this period, the meaning of sources relating to prayer in the early Middle Ages becomes clear. In the beginning of the 9th century (at the year of 819), the Carolingian king Louis the Pious ordered the royal monasteries to fulfill their duties. But the duties which the king ordered to fulfill differed from one monastery to another. There were three different categories of duties. Namely; to offer knights for (militia), to grant money, to pray for the king. (20)

Each monastery must do one obligation among three. But it would be hard to understand why there was the obligation of prayer, if we don't consider the important value of prayer for the contemporary people.

#### 4. Tithe and poor relief

After we realized that the poor relief in the early Middle Ages had much wider meaning than in the modern times, we should assume that the description of largescale poor relief written in the biography of the king Robert



can be regarded not as a hackneyed expression for the applause of the king's virtue but as a fact really done by the king. Probably the king gave meals to poors for the salvation of his and his relatives' souls.

But can we reduce the incentive of the royal poor relief only into kings' pious mind ? Should not we think there were also some kind of their political strategies in order to enlarge their political power in their realms?

Anyway, it would be insufficient to regard the salvation of souls as the only motive of largescale poor relief, if we consider how the kings in the early Middle Ages were always eager to seize their political power. What kind of profits did the kingship get from such largescale poor relief? To elucidate this problem, we can find some notable clues in the charters issued by the kings from the Carolingian period to the 11th century.

The royal monasteries to which a large number of manors were donated were important supporter for the kingship. The abbots who were appointed by the kings were the most trustworthy advisers to the kings when they accomplished their politics. It is very interesting to find the prescriptions of poor relief in the charters issued by kings to such royal monasteries. Especially, in the charters issued by the German and French kings from the period of Charles the Bald to the 11th century, such prescriptions can be found clearly. These charters approved that the monasteries could maintain the right of possession of the domain donated by kings and at the same time obtain the tithes from their domains under the condition that the tithes would be used only for poor relief. Especially in the charters to monasteries issued by Charles the Bald, we can see the order to use tithes for maintaining hospitals of the monasteries. (21)

Originally only the priests or bishops who took care of the souls of people could get the tithes. Theoretically the

monks could not get them. In this period we can see various discussions whether the monks could obtain the tithes or not. At last the authority of church made a provisional agreement with which the acquisition of tithes was approved, if the tithes would be used only for poor relief. So the kingship issued the charters to approve the acquisition of tithes to monasteries under condition that they would be used only for poor relief. (22)

But why the kingship did such kind of confirmation in the charters ? As one reason we can think that the royal monasteries began to do poor relief in order to get the favorite impressions from ordinary people, rivaling such monasteries as the group of Cluny. At the same time, it would be easy to know that they did not want to be deprived of the important sources of income such as tithes. Especially, by issueing the charter to confirm the right of possession of tithes, the kingship wanted to publicize his activities as **<father of poors>** in the society. This kind of charters can be regarded as a kind of king's propaganda to get the support from people. Anyway, for royal monasteries the poor relief using the income of tithes must become largescale. But it is difficult to know how many poors supported by this project because there were no registered documents as to the poor relief. But we may guess that the scale of poor relief done in Western Europe in this period would be unbelievably large.

##### 5. Who were poors?

Regarding to the problems of poor relief in the early Middle Ages, there is another important problem. We must consider precisely who the poors were. We cannot define the poors in this period only from economical point of view. The term **<pauperes>** indicated not only the people in

extreme poverty as beggars but also the people who did not have arms such as peasants. Namely in this time the term {pauperes} meant the people who could not protect themselves by their own effort in contrast with the people who carried arms as knights. (23)

With this consideration, the social meaning of poor relief in the early Middle Ages will become much more clear. The people who were saved by poor relief must be mainly the peasants who could not support themselves in the face of frequent famines and disasters. It happened often in the early Middle Ages in Western Europe that peasants were included in the category of {pauperes}. (24) In the proclamation of the peace of God around the year 1000, peasants seemed to be regarded as the same kind of social status as the poors. (25)

Consequently we can guess that the main part of the people to whom poor relief was done in this time were peasants. It would be much more comprehensible when we know that the French kingship at the time of the King Robert had a ideal of the concord of three orders, i.e. {oratores}, {bellatores}, {laboratores}, which was clearly expressed by Adalbero of Laon. In the scheme an indispensable importance was given to the status of {laboratores} as the supporter of the total society. (26)

Therefore we can presume that the poor relief of the King Robert would be done to get the support for the kingship from the peasants or lower staratum of people. Anyway, it seems that the largescale poor relief in this peroid was done in monastery, palace and episcpacy in order to protect the productors of food. Namely the poor relief around the year 1000 can be regarded as a mechanism by which the manorial system of society functioned in stability.

### Conclusion

Until now, the comprehensive studies on the relation between poor relief and kingship in the early Middle Ages have not been produced, though many scholars studied the topics relating to medieval poor relief. But in the field of the study on Byzantium we find an excellent research about the relation of poor relief and kingship done by Prof. E. Patlagean. (27) According to Patlagean, it seems that the large-scale poor relief done by church following the order of emperor functioned as a sort of restoration of goods to the lower stratum of society in Byzantium. Namely the rulers returned their profits which were gained from the peasants to the poor. It would be possible to see the same phenomenon in the early medieval society of Western Europe. But we must be careful that there was an important difference between Western Europe and Byzantium. Namely the poor relief in Byzantium had no contact with the memory for the dead. In this point, the poor relief in Byzantium can be understood as a kind of obligation to the rich which was a custom since the time of Ancient Rome. And this kind of generosity of the rich was seen not only in Byzantium but also in all historical societies.

As we saw, the poor relief from the Carolingian time to the 11th century in Western Europe was totally unique because the poor relief was done for the salvation of the souls of the dead and to renew the memory of the dead daily. The poor as Images of Christ functioned as mediators between God and the benefactors.

Now I want to return again to the problem of the biography of the king Robert the Pious. Though the description of the poor relief by Robert seemed absurd by itself, now we can assume that the poor relief in the biography was done really. Of course it seems to be probable that the author exaggerated the number of poor who were relieved.

So far this essay treated only the scheme of the

problem. But it is certain that the study on the relation between kingship and poor relief will contribute to the elucidation of the social structures in the European Middle Ages.

## Notes

(1) I do not refer to the long and voluminous preceding researches for the problems of poor relief in the European middle ages. But as a general tendency, the preceding researches mainly focused on the history of poor relief in the later Middle Ages, as shown in the researches of M. Mollat (Les pauvres au Moyen Age, Paris 1978) or B. Geremek (Geschichte der Armut, München 1988). The research for the forms and meanings of poor relief in the early Middle Ages has not been treated sufficiently.

(2) Einhardi Vita Karoli Magni, MGH, SRG.

(3) Thegani vita Hludowici, MGH, SS. II, pp. 505-603.

(4) Smaragd of St. Mihiel, Via regia, MPL, vol. 102, col. 931ff. Jonas of Orléans, De institutione regia, MPL, vol. 106, col. 279ff. Cf. H. H. Anton, Fürstenspiegel und Herrscherethos in der Karolingerzeit, Bonn 1967. O. Eberhardt, Via regia, München 1977. As examples, I cite two important passages from ⟨Via regia⟩ of Smaragd; "Si vis ergo, o rex, ut thronus tuus a Domino firmetur, non cesses justificare pauperem et pupillum, non cesses subvenire viduae et oppresso, non cesses defendere advenam--." (col. 949). "Qui enim, Domino adjuvante, pie cupit pauperes et viduas, advenas et pupillos defendere, misericorditer, si valet, eorum inopiam bonis suis debet abstergere, et mendicitatem eorum eleemosynis frequenter debet fulcire." (col. 950).

(5) For the political situation of the early Capetian dynasty, cf. E. M. Hallam, Capetian France, 987-1328, London 1980, pp. 20f.

(6) For the meaning and function of the idea ⟨rex et sacerdos⟩ in the early middle ages, cf. F. Kern, Gottesgnadentum und Widerstandsrecht, Darmstadt 1954.

(7) Helgaud de Fleury, Vie de Robert le Pieux. Epitoma vitae regis Rotberti pii ed. by R. H. Bautier & G. Labory, Sources d'histoire médiévale 1, Paris 1965, cap. 21, p. 102. cf. J. Wollasch, "Gemeinschaftsbewußtsein und soziale Leistung im

Mittelalter", Frühmittelalterliche Studien, 9 (1975), p. 273.

(8) For the various forms and the differences between regions of «Mandatum», cf. Th. Schöfer, Die Fußwaschung in monastischen Brauchtum, Beuron 1956.

(9) According to M. Bloch, this description of Helgaud as to the miraculous healing of disease is a first example which indicates that French king was thought to have miraculous power of healing disease. Cf. M. Bloch, Les rois thaumaturges, Paris 1983, pp. 33f.

(10) ed. R. Holzmann, Die Chronik des Bischofs Thietmar von Merseburg und ihre Korbeier Überlieferung, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum, Nova Series 9, Berlin 1935, p. 297. Cf. J. Wollasch, op. cit., p. 273.

(11) The first example of the pact of fraternity for memory between lay and ecclesiastical princes was the fraternity concluded at Attigny in 762. But it had no prescription of poor relief. Cf. K. Schmid-O. G. Oexle, Voraussetzungen und Wirkung des Gebetsbundes von Attigny, Francia, 2 (1974), pp. 71-122.

(12) For the problem of «Intercession» by poors, cf. O. G. Oexle, "Memoria und Memoriaüberlieferung im frühen Mittelalter", Frühmittelalterliche Studien, 10 (1976), p. 94.

(13) K. Schmid, "Die Sorge der Salier um ihre Memoria", in; eds. K. Schmid & J. Wollasch, Memoria. Der geschichtliche Zeugniswert des liturgischen Gedenkens im Mittelalter, pp. 706f.

(14) The kings and queens so often became «frater» of chapters or monasteries to which they donated manors or another valuable things. Their names were registered in «Liber Vitae» to pray by canons or monks. For the examples of German kings such as Conrad I, Henry III, Henry IV, etc., cf. J. Wollasch, "Kaiser und König als Brüder der Mönche. Zum Herrscherbild in liturgischen Handschriften des 9. bis 11. Jahrhunderts", DA, 40 (1984), pp. 1-20. And as a famous example of largescale poor relief by queen, we can cite the

deeds of Adelaide.cf.J.Wollasch,"Gemeinschaftsbewußtsein und soziale Leistung im Mittelalter", p.273.Id.,

"Eleemosynarius, Eine Skizze", in; ed.K.Hauk, etc., Sprache und Recht, Festschrift für R.Schmidt-Wiegand zum 65.Geburtstag, vol.2, 1986, p.982.

(15) Cf.J.Wollasch, Cluny, Licht der Welt, Zürich 1996.Id.,

"Konventsstärke und Armensorge in mittelalterlichen Klöstern.Zeugnisse und Fragen", Saeculum, 39 (1988), pp.184-199.

(16) The (necrologium) of Cluny itself did not survive. But some filial monasteries of Cluny transmitted their (necrologium) until now. From them we can guess the original (necrologium) of Cluny. Cf.J.Wollasch, "Les obituaires, témoins de la vie clunisienne", Cahiers de Civilisation médiévale, 22 (1979), pp.139-171.

(17) J.Wollasch, "Gemeinschaftsbewußtsein und soziale Leistung im mittelalter", p.281.

(18) G.Charvin, Statuts, Chapîtres généraux et visites de l'ordres de Cluny, I, Paris 1965, p.29.

(19) For the idea of (Prayer as gift) in the early Middle Ages, cf.O.G.Oexle, "Memoria und Memorialüberlieferung im früheren Mittelalter", Frühmittelalterliche Studien, 10 (1976), pp.87f.

(20) The text of (Notitia de servitio monasteriorum) is contained with glossary in Corpus Consuetudinum Monasticarum, vol.1, pp.485f.cf.

(21) Cf.E.Boshof, "Untersuchungen zur Armenfürsorge im fränkischen Reich des 9.Jahrhunderts", Archiv für Kulturgeschichte, 58 (1976), pp.316f.

(22) Cf.G.Constable, Monastic Tithes from the Origins to the 12th Century, Cambridge 1964, pp198f.

(23) Cf.K.Bosl, "Potens und Pauper. Begriffsgeschichtliche Studien zur gesellschaftlichen Differenzierung im frühen Mittelalter zur (Pauperismus) des Hochmittelalters, in; Id., Frühformen der Gesellschaft in mittelalterlichen Europa,



München 1964, pp. 107f.

(24) G. Duby, Les trois ordres ou l'imaginaire du féodalisme, Paris 1978.

(25) For an example, the proclamation of peace of God in Charreux (989) seems to treat peasants as the same status of people who were in need of protection as poors. Cf. eds. Th. Head & R. Landes, The Peace of God, Social Violence and Religious Response in France around the year 1000, New York, 1992, pp. 327-328.

(26) Cf. G. Duby, op. cit. O. G. Oexle, "Die funktionale Dreiteilung der «Gesellschaft» bei Adalbero von Laon", Frühmittelalterliche Studien, 12 (1978), pp. 1-54.

(27) E. Patlagean, Pauvreté économique et Pauvreté sociale à Byzance, IVe-VIIe siècles, Paris 1977.

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