It is the goal of history to restore voice to the past, a task, due to the nature of extant sources, that is particularly difficult for medievalists. Recently, however, social historians have been able to restore voices that were long thought to be forever silent; the lives of peasant women, deviant monks, powerful counts and influential bishops have been brought to light. Yet the lives of important powerbrokers, such as viscounts, lords, and miles, have remained obscure. Robert the Burgundian and the Counts of Anjou, ca. 1025-1098 by W. Scott Jessee seeks to fill this void. Robert the Burgundian was an important ally and supporter of the eleventh-century counts of Anjou. This examination of the life of one of the "new strongmen" of the feudal era is a welcome addition to current scholarship. Jessee's book brings to light an individual life, while at the same time demonstrating how pivotal eleventh-century political, legal and social developments were in shaping the medieval world. Examination of the microscopic, in this case the life of Robert the Burgundian, provides access to the broader, macroscopic, issues that defined the Central Middle Ages.

Three sets of relationships shaped the course of Robert the Burgundian's life: his relationship with the count, the Church and his family. Of these, Jessee concentrates most of his attention upon Robert's relationship with the counts of Anjou. Central to his discussion is the issue of what role newly emerged strongmen such as Robert the Burgundian played in the development of comital power. As he states: "The question is this: did the domini very nearly wreck the Angevin state, only to be brought to heel by a resurgent comital policy of the Plantagenets, or was it the domini themselves who remained loyal to the house of Anjou and maintained the integrity of the state during a period of comital weakness?" (4). His answer, overwhelmingly, is that men like Robert aided in the preservation of comital power.

Jessee's argument follows the narrative of Robert's life. He begins his examination with Robert the Burgundian's birth. His first subject, then, is the role that family played in Robert's placement in Anjou and his acquisition of power. Countess Agnes of Anjou was Robert's paternal great-aunt and it was through her patronage that Robert and his brother Guy ended up at the court of the count of Anjou. Unlike other strongmen of the eleventh century, Robert came from a prestigious family with roots in the Carolingian past. Surprisingly, Jessee rather underplays Robert's illustrious family and instead emphasizes his relationship with the counts of Anjou. Indeed, Jessee suggests that family ties, beyond providing an entree into the Angevin court, paled in comparison to Robert's relationship with the counts.

Robert the Burgundian established himself through his service to Count Geoffrey and Countess Agnes of Anjou. He first emerges as peripheral to the court, appearing as a witness in some comital acts in the 1040s. Robert proved himself in the
Robert's skill in negotiation, diplomacy and intrigue, already evident, were honed in the period of civil war. Robert had a deft touch in navigating the uneasy waters of Angevin politics. Instead of alienating any one faction, it appears that Robert survived the period of fraternal wars and emerged even more powerful at their conclusion. His acumen is illuminated in his role in two significant disputes. When Robert became the lord of Sable, he inherited lordship over certain churches at Sable, which were eventually granted to the abbey of Marmoutier. Jessee believes Robert, like many of his class, was religiously devout and a supporter of the reform movement that was sweeping across Europe in the mid eleventh century. A dispute over jurisdiction of churches given by Robert to Marmoutier erupted between Robert and the bishop of Le Mans. Robert did not wish the churches to fall under the control of the bishop of Le Mans, whom he viewed as a Norman supporter. Robert wanted to be sure that these churches fell under the control of a “pro-Angevin” foundation. So he consulted with the archbishop of Tours, who like Robert was anti-Norman, and he suggested that Robert give them to the “pro-Angevin” institution of Marmoutier. While it is debatable whether or not Marmoutier was in fact a “pro-Angevin” foundation (the counts of Chartres would certainly have taken exception to this characterization), it is clear that Robert used excellent judgment in seeking the advice of the archbishop of Tours. The archbishop's suggestion let Robert restore the churches in good conscience, but also maintained his political affiliations. Little did Robert know that the relationship he cultivated with the archbishop would aid him tremendously in the dispute over the county of Maine. Robert became concerned in the 1080s when the Norman's renewed their interest in Maine—which bordered Robert's holdings. At this point, the office of the count of Maine was up for grabs. Through the aid of his kin and political allies, Robert and his faction were able to have Helias of La Fleche established as count of Maine. Helias was a member of the Beaugency family who were allies of Robert and the Angevins. Through Robert and his compatriot's skillful manipulation and diplomacy, the Norman threat to Maine, and potentially Anjou, was neutralized.

The last chapter of Jessee's book outlines the end of Robert the Burgundian's life. Robert joined the First Crusade and perished either en route to or in the Holy Land. His participation in the Crusade is in many ways emblematic of Robert's life. Like many of his time, Robert embodied both extreme piety and extreme violence. While he owed his success in life to his skill in battle and negotiation, he was a deeply pious man and a generous benefactor of the church. The desire to go on Crusade reflects both sides of Robert's personality. Jessee concludes that Robert the Burgundian's life was a "splendid success". (170) Not only did Robert himself personify the successful warrior of the feudal era, but to Jessee, Robert also represents the success of eleventh-century strongmen in maintaining and extending the Angevin polity. Robert's whole life, as told by Jessee, exemplifies a man dedicated to extending the power of his lord and creating stability. This is a view that contrasts sharply with the usual depiction of eleventh-century elites as rapacious warriors, out for whatever they could get, who were antithetical to the processes of the construction of governmental systems.

Jessee has accomplished much through his rendering of the life of Robert the Burgundian. The question central to his discussion of Robert was whether or not the military supporters of the count were responsible for the disintegration of the nascent political organization of the county, or, as Jessee attempt to demonstrate, that it was actually these “strongmen” who maintained the continuity of the county in the face of fraternal warfare. He makes a strong case for his assertion. Robert the Burgundian certainly seemed to act in a way consonant with the idea of preserving, rather than destroying, comital power. Whether this was true of all lords, however, it is impossible to tell. While Jessee may not be able to prove that all eleventh-century Angevin lords acted to “[maintain] the integrity of the state during a time of comital weakness”, he does demonstrate that these lords were more than complete ruffians. The view that the lords who came into power in the first feudal age were little more than rampagers using their sword to gain whatever land and power they could has been successfully challenged.

As Jessee and other scholars point out, these domini and their lords did construct effective methods of governance, which created a modicum of stability in a politically unstable world. Jessee's discussion of Robert does the service of examining the life of one such lord and demonstrating that he was thoughtful, intelligent, and an often canny politician.

One of the particular strengths of Jessee's book is that it provides us with the discussion of one, individual life—an accomplishment that is notoriously difficult for the minor aristocracy of the Central Middle Ages. Moreover, the author is able to create a compelling narrative of Robert's life based upon charters and chronicles. Other scholars have brought to light the lives of counts and countesses, and Jessee's study suggests that we may have the voices of their supporters restored to us as well. This book is an excellent example of how skilfully local history can be done, and how it can illuminate the larger issues that shaped medieval civilization.

While there are many strengths to this book, there are some significant weaknesses. Chief among them is Jessee's treatment, or more accurately the lack of treatment, of Robert the Burgundian's family. While he begins the book with discussion of the complexities of Robert's family, which was connected to many of the important houses of eleventh-century Francia, he all but abandons this topic after the first chapter. References to Robert's brother Guy are interspersed throughout the narrative, but other relatives, particularly female relatives, do not figure into Jessee's account at all. What about Robert's
first wife? Marriage to her brought him the important lordship of Sable, yet we hear nothing about her. Did she act with Robert in his donations? Was she also a patron of Marmoutier? What role did Robert’s affinal kin play in his political maneuverings? What about Robert’s continuing relationship with his natal family? The lack of any real investigation of these dimensions of Robert’s life significantly weakens Jessee’s treatment of his subject. The absence of discussion is particularly puzzling since Jessee begins his discussion with Robert’s family origins. While Robert may have gained much through his service to the counts, it was family that first brought him to Anjou and that first tied him to the Angevin house, a point that Jessee neglects after chapter one.

The oversight of family may have to do with a larger problem with this book. The thesis of this book is to examine the role that such powerful lords as Robert played in the “state” of Anjou. The notion that the county of Anjou actually comprised a “state” is a bit of an overstatement. While eleventh-century counts and lords were more politically advanced than previously thought (as Jessee proves), the evidence presented does not support or prove the notion that there was a “state” in eleventh-century Anjou. Indeed, the author’s search for evidence of complex political systems seems at times overzealous. For example, he interprets the presence of a priest, two knights and a vicarius in one of Robert’s acts as evidence of “a fairly complex administrative organization”. The presence of such dependents hardly seems extraordinary given Robert’s status as the lord of Craon and Sable. Moreover, Jessee offers no other evidence of “complex” administration at Robert’s household. While such evidence does support the idea of organization, it is a far cry from “complex”. Certainly the counts and lords of the eleventh century were better organized and politically savvy than previously thought, but Jessee pushes his notion of political abstractions and complexity too far. This search for the state may explain why family is so superficially treated in this book. To recognize the importance of family would undercut an interpretation of political systems independent of personality and family. Yet oddly the author frequently refers to the “House of Anjou”, implying that at least at the comital level we are dealing with a dynasty founded upon family ties. Regrettably, the family of Robert the Burgundian does not receive the same consideration.

In addition to inferences of complexity from evidence that merely suggests a well-organized household, there are other problems with Jesse’s use of the evidence. In an attempt to trace Robert the Burgundian’s rise to power, Jessee uses witness lists to comital charters. Depending on Robert’s place in the witness, Jessee draws conclusions about Robert’s position within the comital retinue in particular and his personal power in general. This would be a sound practice if Jesse were always consulting original charters, but he is not. Instead, he is relying upon nineteenth-century editions of the cartularies. Deriving information from witness lists can be problematic, particularly if one is not looking at an original. Later redactors or nineteenth-century editors may not have gotten the sequence of the list just right. Moreover, later redactions might change the sequence of the witnesses if they knew, for example, that certain witnesses were powerful in their own day or if they knew that witnesses became powerful after the recorded act itself. Jessee’s conclusions about Robert’s particular status at a particular moment, based solely upon witness lists, are flawed.

One of the challenges of examining the lives of medieval elites is reconstructing their genealogies. Indeed, genealogies are imperative to keep track of family alliances. Unfortunately, the genealogies provided in this volume are not always helpful. At best they represent the bare bones of Robert’s complex family. Indeed, one of Robert’s most significant family relationships (his connection to his Aunt Agnes and her husband Count Geoffrey of Anjou) is not included in the genealogies provided. Also frustrating is the lack of dates! While it is seldom possible to date the lives of medieval people with complete accuracy, approximate dates would have been extremely helpful. The lack of attention to the genealogy is yet another reflection of Jesse’s overall inattentiveness to family in the life of Robert the Burgundian.

In spite of these criticisms, Jessee’s examination of the life of Robert the Burgundian contributes much to the study of medieval France. He has brought to life an individual who challenges our notions about eleventh-century lords and politics. Indeed, this study will hopefully point the way for other scholars interested in learning about the lives of people living in the turbulent and compelling time of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.
W. Scott Jesse, Robert the Burgundian and the Counts of Anjou, c.1025-1098 (Catholic University of America Press, 2000), p. 55. ^ a b