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Relations of Power

Women's Networks in the Middle Ages

With 27 figures

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Series Editors' Preface

Two phenomena of socialisation lie at the heart of the Collaborative Research Centre (CRC) 1167 at the University of Bonn, '*Macht and Herrschaft. Premodern Configurations in a Transcultural Perspective*'. We place *power* and *domination* under the microscope and interrogate them with the tools of comparative research. Both phenomena have impacted human coexistence at all times and worldwide; as such, they are primary subjects of investigation for scholars in the humanities. Our multi-disciplinary research network aims to bring together the skills of many different participating fields as part of interdisciplinary cooperation, and to develop a transcultural approach to the understanding of power and domination.

Our selection of case studies from a wide variety of regions provides a fresh perspective on both similarities and differences across the different regions. In this series, we present collections of essays, which stem from workshops organised by our subprojects, as well as monographs that reflect on the main interests and research within individual subprojects.

It would not have been possible to publish the fruits of these important exchanges within this series without the generous financial support from the German Research Foundation (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*) and the continued commitment of the University of Bonn, which provided the necessary research infrastructure. We would like to express our sincere thanks to both.

Matthias Becher – Jan Bemann – Konrad Vössing

Introduction

This interdisciplinary collection of essays considers how women's networks, and particularly women's direct and indirect relationships to other women, constituted and shaped power from roughly 300 to 1700 AD, with a focus on medieval Europe and neighbouring regions. The volume arose out of the international workshop 'Between Women: Female Networks, Kinships and Power', hosted at the University of Bonn in June 2018, as part of the Collaborative Research Centre 1167, '*Macht and Herrschaft – Premodern Configurations in a Transcultural Perspective*'. Over an immersive two-day workshop, scholars from various fields explored the cultural, political, religious and material influence of women's contacts in premodern Europe, Central Asia and Eastern Africa. Half the papers in this collection grew out of those presented during the workshop, while the other half were added to expand the volume's range of approaches to and sources for medieval women's networks.

The essays in this collection juxtapose scholarship from the fields of archaeology, art history, literature, history and religious studies, drawing on a wide variety of source types. The volume's aim is to highlight not only the importance of networks in understanding medieval women's power but also the different ways these networks are represented in medieval sources and can be approached today. The concept of networks is loosely defined in this collection. Each essay works from its own conception of how women's relations to people and objects outside themselves shaped power in particular contexts, as well as how they actively constructed and curated these relations. Women's networks emerge across these essays as formed and facilitated through, for example, dream visions, the gifting of rings and the commissioning of liturgical books. They are revealed through the analysis of charters, genealogical diagrams, poetry and social network visualisations, among many other critical approaches. To extend the interdisciplinary conversation of the workshop, the contributors were invited to reflect on how their specific methodological approaches respond to, and offer possible solutions to, problems in the scholarly study of women's power.

Scholarship on women's medieval networks, capaciously defined, has opened up diverse ways of identifying relationships, rethinking boundaries and understanding women's agency beyond overt and male-centric systems of power. Study of cross-cultural relations that noble and royal women forged through exile, intermarriage and pilgrimage is highlighting diffusive notions of geography and diplomacy that are not necessarily tied to regnal borders.¹ Female networks influenced language mixing and translation, challenging scholarly assumptions about 'national' languages.² The "itineraries" of women's luxury objects, which moved with or without their owners or senders, shaped culture and politics, as well as women's personal claims to authority, power and identity.³ Recent studies have also explored women's power through networks at regional, municipal and domestic scales and across time, in processes of genealogy and succession.⁴ A

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- 1 There is a vastly rich field of scholarship on these topics. Foundational studies include Susan Groag BELL, *Medieval Women Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture*, in: *Signs* 7,4 (1982), 742–768; John Carmi PARSONS, *Eleanor of Castile: Queen and Society in Thirteenth-Century England*, New York 1995; Elisabeth VAN HOUTS, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe, 900–1200*, Hampshire/London 1999; June Hall McCASH (ed.), *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*, Athens, GA 1996. Important recent studies include Elizabeth TYLER, *England in Europe: English Royal Women and Literary Patronage, c.1000–c.1150* (Toronto Anglo-Saxon Series), Toronto 2017; Mary DOCKRAY-MILLER, *The Books and the Life of Judith of Flanders*, Farnham 2015; Rose WALKER, *Leonor of England and Eleanor of Castile: Anglo-Iberian Marriage and Cultural Exchange in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, in Maria BULLON-FERNANDEZ (ed.), *England and Iberia in the Middle Ages*, Gordonsville, VA 2007, 67–87. Though on a later period, see also, Douglas CATTERALL/Jodi CAMPBELL (eds.), *Women in Port: Gendering Communities, Economies, and Social Networks in Atlantic Port Cities, 1500–1800*, Leiden/Boston 2012.
 - 2 For example, Jonathon HSY, *Mobile Language Networks and Medieval Travel Writing*, in: *postmedieval* 4 (2013), 177–191; Ingrid NELSON, *Premodern Media and Networks of Transmission in the *Man of Law's Tale**, in: *Exemplaria* 25 (2013), 211–230; Ian SHORT, *Patrons and Polyglots: French Literature in Twelfth-Century England*, in: *Anglo-Norman Studies* 14 (1992), 229–249; Susan CRANE, *Social Aspects of Bilingualism in the Thirteenth Century*, in: *Thirteenth Century England VI: Proceedings of the Durham Conference 1995* (1997), 103–115.
 - 3 Tracy Chapman HAMILTON/Mariah PROCTOR-TIFFANY (eds.), *Moving Women Moving Objects (400–1500)*, Leiden 2019; Jitske JASPERSE, *Medieval Women, Material Culture, and Power: Matilda Plantagenet and Her Sisters*, Leeds 2020.
 - 4 For example, see, Jocelyn WOGAN-BROWNE, *Powers of Record, Powers of Example: Hagiography and Woman's History*, in: Mary C. ERLER/Maryanne KOWALESKI (eds.), *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, New York 2003, 71–91; Kathryn REYERSON, *Women's Networks in Medieval France: Gender and Community in Montpellier, 1300–1350*, Basingstoke 2016; for approaches that examine how multiple, everyday networks intersect, see Ephraim SHOHAM-STEINER (ed.), *Intricate Interfaith Networks in the Middle Ages: Quotidian Jewish-Christian Contacts*, Turnout 2016. On cross-generational networks, see, for example, Emma O. BÉRAT, *Transformative Genealogies: Childbirth and Crises of Succession in Athelston*, in: *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 42 (2020), forthcoming; Constance B. BOUCHARD, *Three Counties, One Lineage, and Eight Heiresses: Nevers, Auxerre, and Tonnerre, Eleventh to Thirteenth Centuries*, in: *Medieval Prosopography* 31 (2016), 25–46; Alyssa GAB-

focus on kinships and networks has also shed light on under-recognised female relationships and communities, such as disability networks, queer relations in manuscript production and sexual pedagogies.⁵ The essays in this collection build on this wealth of scholarship, but they give particular attention to the nature of networks themselves, how women's relations are represented in medieval sources and the benefits – and limitations – of particular critical approaches to networks.

The essays in this collection, like previous scholarship on women's kinships and networks, engage with network theory to different degrees. Yet a brief – and selective – overview of a few key concepts in network theory highlights how it can provide an effective, interdisciplinary framework for examining women's power in the Middle Ages. The basic form of a network includes vertices (nodes) connected by links (edges); it involves multiple relationships and hence can draw attention to seemingly marginal characters and the influence of their relationships. As Franco Moretti puts it, examining networks allows us to “take the *Hamlet*-network, and *remove* Hamlet”.⁶ Intentionally or not, Moretti's phrase also points to the gender biases that studying networks – rather than principal, powerful and usually male characters (whether fictitious or historical) – can help to mitigate, as the first two essays in this collection by Julia Hillner and Máirín MacCarron and by Lucy Pick persuasively demonstrate. As medieval feminist scholars push to move beyond the study of exceptional women, the study of networks is also helping to shift focus from singular, ‘exceptional’ characters to highlight the relationships that women drew on and enabled.⁷ In particular, Mercedes Pérez Vidal's contribution to this volume highlights how archival

BAY, *Gender and Succession in Medieval and Early Modern Islam: Bilateral Descent and the Legacy of Fatima*, London/Oxford 2020.

5 Christopher BASWELL, *Disability Networks in the Campsey Manuscript*, in: Thelma FENSTER/Carolyn P. COLLETTE (eds.), *The French of Medieval England: Essays in Honour of Jocelyn Wogan-Browne*, Cambridge 2017, 157–174; Lucy ALLEN-GOSS, *Queerly Productive: Women and Collaboration in Cambridge*, University Library Ms Ff.1.6, in: *postmedieval* 9 (2018), 177–191; Laura Saetveit MILES, *Queer Touch between Holy Women: Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Birgitta of Sweden, and the Visitation*, in: David CARRILLO-RANGEL/Delfi I. NIETO-ISABEL/Pablo ACOSTA-GARCÍA (eds.), *Touching, Devotional Practices, and Visionary Experience in the Late Middle Ages*, London 2019, 203–235; Carissa M. HARRIS, *Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain*, Ithaca, NY 2018), 182; Rebecca HARDIE, *Male and Female Devotion in Three Texts of the Vercelli Book: Vercelli VII, XVII and *Elene**, in: *English Studies* 100 (2019), 273–290.

6 Franco MORETTI, *Network Theory, Plot Analysis*, Stanford, CA 2011, 5.

7 For an overview of the state of feminist medieval scholarship, see Kathy M. KRAUSE (ed.), *Medieval Feminist Forum (Beyond Women and Power: Looking Backward and Moving Forward)* 51 (2016).

tracing of overlooked relations can tease out the many strands that made up medieval women's webs of political, cultural and ecclesiastical influence.⁸

Networks not only make visible 'non-exceptional' characters as sites of production and reception (nodes) but also draw attention to the nature and importance of transmission and communication (links). In both literary and historical sources, medieval women are often associated with intermediary states. They connect generations as childbearers, the king and the body politic as intercessors, potentially opposing families and kingdoms as peaceweavers or diplomatic wives and religious houses to royal or noble houses as abbesses, to give a few examples.⁹ The importance of links in networks, therefore, often also places new emphasis on women, highlighting not only their presence but the ways in which they were connected – and connected themselves – to others.

In a study drawn on by several contributions in this volume, literary theorist Caroline Levine has emphasised the importance of attending to multiple networks, or "social forms", in narratives, as they "cooperate, come into conflict, and overlap".¹⁰ Networks, she argues, include "an enormous variety of connectors that link people".¹¹ In Karen Dempsey's and Abigail Armstrong's essays in this volume, women's bonds interweave material objects, lineage, genealogical memory and affective ties, creating complex links across cultures, political borders and time. Moreover, as contributors Alyssa Gabbay and Jitske Jasperse show of Islamic patrilineal systems and Anglo-Iberian relations, respectively, even when women function as facilitators for male relations, they are rarely passive transmitters, instead asserting their own influence on and shaping relations. Indeed, medieval sources prompt nuanced reflections on how networks function when women and the objects attached to them can be both node and link simultaneously and under different circumstances.

Finally, approaching women's power through the study of networks accommodates – even assumes the presence of – change, mobility and unpredictability, which characterised many medieval women's lives. Negotiating the competing

8 For a useful overview of how recent social network theories and approaches, particularly within the digital humanities, have been applied to early modern history, see Kate DAVISON, *Early Modern Social Networks: Antecedents, Opportunities, and Challenges*, in: *American Historical Review* 124 (2019), 456–482. Majied Robinson's digital analysis of concubine networks in early Arabic texts highlights the utility of this method for correcting misconceptions about women's roles in familial networks, Majied ROBINSON, *Statistical Approaches to the Rise of Concubinage in Islam*, in: Matthew S. GORDON/Kathryn A. HAIN (eds.), *Concubines and Courtesans: Women and Slavery in Islamic History*, New York 2017, 11–26.

9 For example, Kristen L. GEAMAN, *Beyond Good Queen Anne: Anne of Bohemia, Patronage, and Politics*, in: Heather J. TANNER (ed.), *Medieval Elite Women and the Exercise of Power, 1100–1400*, Cham 2019, 67–89.

10 Caroline LEVINE, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Princeton/Oxford 2017, 10.

11 *Ibid.*, 123.

loyalties of daughter, wife, mother and widow and transitioning between familial, religious and political lives, women had to maintain, forge and integrate into new relations along the way. Network theorists, including Bruno Latour and Levine, have underscored the flexibility and dynamism of networks, which often lead in unexpected and inconclusive directions, both in actual, real-life contexts and in representational, artistic forms.¹² Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker suggest that “to be a network” means “to be capable of radically heterogeneous transformation and reconfiguration” – a statement that might equally be applied to the lives and influence of many medieval women.¹³ At the same time, the studies by Stephanie Hollis and Lucy Pick in this collection warn against assuming that the power of women’s relationships and networks was haphazard. While women’s networks were often contingent on changing circumstances, they could also be long-established and authoritative means of transmitting power, deliberately and carefully represented in text, art and material objects.

The first two essays of this collection engage explicitly with social network theory. In the opening essay, Julia Hillner and Máirín MacCarron combine quantitative and digital network analysis with historical study to offer a new perspective on women’s narrative functions in late antique and early medieval sources concerning exiled bishops, with a focus on Liberius of Rome and Wilfrid of York. This essay challenges the tendency in historical and literary studies to focus on negative portrayals of female characters in stereotypical roles, such as the biblical models of Eve, Jezebel and Herodias. Through digital network visualisations, the authors highlight the variety of roles afforded women in historical narratives, as well as their changing roles as stories are retold and adapted to shifting authorial, social and historical interests. Female networks in the narratives of exiled bishops are used to pass judgement on the bishop’s moral integrity, orthodoxy or heresy and legitimacy as a rightful leader. Quantitative analysis and digital network analysis demonstrate how constellations of female characters are arranged according to political allegiances and highlight the characters’ capacity to subvert male hierarchy, in accordance with the author’s agenda.

Lucy Pick brings together historical and art historical analysis with network theory to challenge the older “master narrative” of the king as a uniquely sovereign subject and to demonstrate instead the king’s participation in a host of overlapping and shifting networks. In this essay, social network analysis enables different visualisations, descriptions and representations of power relations. Pick compares two physical objects, both of which have royal daughters at their centre:

12 Bruno LATOUR, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford 2005, 12.

13 Alexander R. GALLOWAY and Eugene THACKER, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*, Minneapolis 2007, 61.

the first, a Spanish royal diploma from 1071, issued by a royal daughter, Urraca Fernández of León-Castilla, and the second, a painting by Diego Velázquez from 1656, now known as ‘Las Meninas’. Through careful comparative work, Pick reveals how both objects represent power as spread unequally and asymmetrically across the networks of relationships they depict. Social network analysis, as an approach to historical studies, therefore needs to consider the many different types of networks depicted in a source – temporary and permanent, secular and divine – as well as the impact that assumptions about power and its transmission have upon the composition of network visualisations.

Jitske Jasperse also addresses questions of how to represent power and female relations in her study of material artefacts, particularly rings and precious stones, connected with the Plantagenet dynasty in the twelfth century. Genealogies of the Plantagenet family and the visual and written record connected to them often present power as something that passes between men along select kinship lines. By reconstructing “object biographies”, however, this essay provides a fresh way of looking at sources such as chronicles, inventories and lists of expenses to consider women’s complex roles within the networks that exist between objects, women and men. Jasperse draws upon diverse sources to reconstruct the biographies of rings and precious stones, apprehending rings as animated, powerful objects that transmitted history, emotion and protection throughout European networks. She demonstrates how women made use of these artefacts to help create, control and maintain the communication of identity within and about the wider Plantagenet dynasty.

Material artefacts are also of primary interest in Abigail Armstrong’s contribution, which examines the material record for the relationships between Edward I of England and his Breton nieces, Marie and Eleanor. This relationship has been consistently overlooked in studies of Edward I’s diplomatic network of extended female kin. Armstrong examines household expenditures and inventories of the royal treasury to provide a vivid account of the contrasting and shifting dynamics of Edward I’s relationships with his two nieces. She contrasts two phases in the lives of Marie and Eleanor and their connections with Edward I, focussing on different types of expenditure across these phases, to reveal how spiritual gifts and favours (or the lack thereof) provide valuable evidence of affective ties, the reciprocity of affection, or the weakening of personal connection within kinship groups. Through a study of material artefacts, Armstrong demonstrates the shifting and adaptable nature of affective, spiritual, political and familial networks over time.

Likewise examining interwoven spiritual and material ties, Mercedes Pérez Vidal’s essay highlights the roles women’s book transmission had on religious reform in the Iberian Peninsula, and particularly Castile, from the mid-fourteenth to mid-fifteenth centuries. Studies of Observant reforms have tended to

assume a model of exceptional charismatic endeavours by male individuals, with women implementing these endeavours at a local level. However, by tracing the transmission of liturgical and devotional books across male and female religious centres, Pérez Vidal shows how women – cloistered and uncloistered – helped shape the liturgy of reformist centres, therefore participating in influential ways throughout the Observant reforms. With a very wide range of documentary evidence, Pérez Vidal demonstrates that women’s active roles in reform movements cannot be treated as a novelty but must be understood as the continuation of a longstanding tradition of male and female spiritual connections.

Stephanie Hollis also explores spiritual and material connections between religious women and their wider networks, but with a focus on how such relations extend across generations. Her essay argues for the importance of dream visions to creating dynastic continuity by examining the spiritual authority of such visions in the consecration of abbesses at the influential English abbeys of Wilton and Barking, particularly in the eleventh century. In this essay, Hollis introduces a new reading of dream visions as a distinctive genre, which medieval authors employed in nuanced ways. This method reveals the need to look more closely at the literary properties of dream visions, their imagery and structures of rhetoric across diverse texts, including hagiography and legislative documents. Using examples of the endowment of Alfgifu of Wilton, supported by a vision of St Edith, and the consecration of Alfgifu of Barking, prophesied in a vision of St Wulfhild, Hollis argues that such dream visions serve to convince the immediate female community that the elected abbess holds her office through the authority of spiritual ancestors.

The final two essays of the collection expand on this theme of remembering and re-envisioning connections to women across time. Alyssa Gabbay’s essay investigates matrilineal ascription in Islam’s early period by examining the case of Mu‘āwiya, the first Umayyad caliph, and his mother, Hind bint ‘Utba. Gabbay notes that names in early Islamic texts are frequently composed of patronyms, which has led to the perception that Islam is, and always has been, fundamentally patrilineal. However, many examples of matrilineality exist in Islamic texts, including that of Mu‘āwiya, who is often ascribed to his mother rather than father in historical chronicles and biographical dictionaries written between the eighth and tenth centuries. By contrasting these sources with others in which matrilineal ascription is downplayed or denied, Gabbay demonstrates how maternal ascription is a “normal part of early Islam”. Whether used for positive or negative effect, matrilineal descent imputed a certain power to women that challenges misconceptions of their role as “mere vessels”.

Karen Dempsey’s essay revisits the volume’s themes of object biographies and alternatives to female ‘exceptionality’ through an innovative approach to women’s relations in castle studies. Dempsey focusses on an eleventh-century no-

blewman, Gundrada de Warenne, who may have been lady-in-waiting to Matilda of Flanders, queen of England. While recent studies of noble and royal women have done much to highlight the diverse roles they occupied, Dempsey asks how studies of castles, their architectural remains and remnants might shed light on such women's lived experience or patterns of daily life. Architectural evidence indicates how noble and royal women and men used materials to shape memory and social connections across several generations and multiple geographical sites. Focussing on material artefacts affiliated with Castle Acre in Norfolk, England, along with evidence from related sites in Normandy and Flanders, Dempsey demonstrates the complex domestic relationships between Gundrada, her objects and castle, which were instrumental in developing a community's ambitions, affective ties and responses to diverse daily concerns.

Taken individually, these essays offer fresh insights into how women's networks were a source of power in various European and neighbouring regions throughout the Middle Ages, highlighting the interrelationship of individual, communal and cultural identity with perceptions of power. Taken collectively, they emphasise the diverse roles of women, which were considered influential and noteworthy, including that of counsellor and advice-giver, political benefactress, noblewoman, lady-in-waiting, abbess, prophet and visionary, devotee and spiritual conduit, mother, daughter, niece and sister, translator, commissioner of texts, craftswoman, gift-giver (and ring-bearer) as well as owner of luxury items. These roles, moreover, are fluid and adaptable and best understood within networks of relationship and power, which are themselves shifting, overlapping and, at times, competing. Networks of women in these essays emerge as powerful sources of legitimisation and dissension, both revered and reviled, highlighted and elided. The relations they reveal move between women, men, objects and place and are not constrained by conventional national, geographical, regnal or temporal borders.

This volume demonstrates the range of questions and methods of approach that scholars with diverse source materials are using to uncover women's networks and rethink relations of power. By tracing women's contacts within literary texts, documents and material objects, the contributors make clear that women's networks were not only widespread but often openly acknowledged as important instruments in shaping political, familial and spiritual legacies.

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Female Networks and Exiled Bishops between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: The Cases of Liberius of Rome and Wilfrid of York

Abstract

*This essay brings together results from two research projects based at the University of Sheffield, *The Migration of Faith: Clerical Exile in Late Antiquity* (325–c. 600), and *Women, Conflict and Peace: Gendered Networks in Early Medieval Narratives*. *The Migration of Faith* uses quantitative approaches, such as social network analysis, to illuminate the role of late antique exiled clerics in disseminating ideas and practices through their personal and ecclesiastical networks. One outcome of this approach has been the identification of a far more prominent role for women, especially elite women, in these clerical networks than has heretofore been acknowledged. While this is an important observation, new approaches championed by the *Gendered Networks* project, in particular analysis of narrative networks created by literary texts, help to refine our understanding of this phenomenon further and to identify its rhetorical potential for late antique and early medieval authors. This essay examines how and why different stories about two high profile exile cases, Liberius, a fourth-century bishop of Rome, and Wilfrid, bishop of York (c. 634–709/10), highlight and change the roles of female characters in the networks they describe.*

The late Roman and post-Roman worlds abound with stories of exiled bishops. This is partly because hundreds of clerics, mostly bishops, were banished in this period. Bishops' increasing legal status and social authority meant that exile – rather than another more humiliating penalty – became the prime method for rulers to manage conflicts involving the clergy, including the many theological disputes of the period. This development began with Constantine and continued into the post-Roman world.¹ Yet stories of clerical exile also abounded because, similar to early Christian martyr stories, they provided salutary tales of Christian vice and virtue for late antique and early medieval audiences: of persecution, cowardice and deception, as well as of steadfastness, sanctity and natural au-

1 Daniel WASHBURN, *Banishment in the Later Roman Empire 284–476 CE*. London 2013; Harry MAWDSLEY, *Exile in the Post-Roman Successor States, 439–650*, diss. Sheffield 2019. For numbers see Julia HILLNER/Dirk ROHMANN et al., *Clerical Exile in Late Antiquity*, <http://www.clericalexile.org>, (1 July 2018) and the appendices in MAWDSLEY 2019.