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Conference Report: *Thirteenth Medieval History Seminar*

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Thirteenth Medieval History Seminar. Organized by the German Historical Institute London and the German Historical Institute Washington, DC, and held at the GHIL, 5–7 October 2023. Conveners: Stephan Bruhn (GHIL), Fiona Griffiths (Stanford University), Michael Grünbart (University of Münster), Jamie Kreiner (University of Georgia), Simon MacLean (University of St Andrews), Len Scales (Durham University), and Dorothea Weltecke (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin).

Every two years, the German Historical Institutes in London and Washington DC jointly organize a three-day seminar for PhD candidates and recent PhD recipients working on ‘medieval history’ in the broadest possible sense of the word. Already the thirteenth iteration of this successful format, the Medieval History Seminar in October 2023 brought together eighteen early-career medievalists from the UK, Ireland, the US, Canada, and Germany to discuss their work with each other and a group of well established scholars.

As usual, the seminar’s papers addressed a deliberately broad spectrum of topics and methodological approaches, ranging geographically from Fennoscandia to the Aegean and the Iberian Peninsula, and chronologically from the tenth to the sixteenth centuries. Recurring topics included interreligious encounters and relationships; learned cultures; the role of saints’ cults, visions, and exempla in political, religious, and social discourse; (re)configurations of monarchical, papal, and imperial rule; and elite formation processes and topographies of local power. There was much overlap between the papers: thematically there was a focus on the manifestations and functions of violence in medieval societies, geographically on the *Reich*, and chronologically on the later Middle Ages. The Mediterranean world did not feature as prominently as in past seminars, and there was a conspicuous absence of papers on the earlier Middle Ages, particularly the centuries after the end of Roman rule in the West.

To facilitate in-depth discussions, the seminar followed the well established pattern that participants did not give their papers during the panels, but pre-circulated them within the group for everyone to read in advance, with two (in one case three) participants asked to prepare comments. These comments then served as opening statements for the panels in that they briefly summarized the papers, highlighting similarities as well as differences, and addressed open questions. Following a brief response by the panellists, the chairs immediately opened the floor for discussion. Although labour-intensive and rather unusual, all participants agreed that this format of ‘non-held’ papers led to extremely stimulating discussions and beneficial feedback.

The papers in the first panel dealt with the formation of Christian value communities in the German-speaking lands in the high and later Middle Ages. Isabel Kimpel (LMU Munich) examined the structure, content, transmission, and reception of the Cistercian monk Caesarius of Heisterbach’s *Omellie morales de infantia Salvatoris*. Although Caesarius is quite famous for his homiletic and paraenetic oeuvre in general—especially the *Dialogus miraculorum*—scholarship has paid scant attention to the *Omellie* so far. However, it can provide us with new insights into Caesarius’ methods and the audiences he was targeting, as well as the recontextualization of his works in late medieval monasticism and reform contexts, as Kimpel convincingly showed. Savoy Curry (Northwestern University) also drew on one of Caesarius’ exempla but used it as a stepping stone for a different angle on Christian value discourses: the self-reassurance of late medieval urban communities in the context of interfaith sexual relationships. Via an in-depth analysis of municipal court records, Savoy revealed how urban authorities adopted clerical views on illicit sex and pollution in their treatment of Christian women who had sexual relationships with Jewish men. The growing criminalization of and anxiety over these relationships resulted, as Curry argued, from their inversion of gender norms, as they threatened established hierarchies and thus the foundations of Christian communal life itself.

The following panel drew attention to the multifaceted relationship between textual artefacts and the practices from which they evolved in the earlier Middle Ages. Daria Safronova (University of Tübingen) examined supplications which were directed to the ruler

during assemblies in tenth-century León. On the one hand, using mainly charters as gateways to the petitioners' speeches and gestures, she highlighted the constitutive role these performative acts played in dispute settlement and the formulation of royal ideology. Although the petitions show no trace of direct sacralization, they promoted the king's position as leader by ascribing Christian virtues to him. On the other hand, Safronova discussed the crucial problem of how closely the written evidence mirrors what happened at the meetings themselves, thus addressing the limits of historical knowledge. The same problem was tackled in the paper by Peter Fraundorfer (Trinity College Dublin), albeit from a different angle. Focusing on the practice of writing itself, he provided an in-depth stylistic and codicological analysis of the so-called 'Reichenau Group', a set of manuscripts from the ninth century written in an Irish hand, which were once part of Reichenau Abbey's library. In doing so, Fraundorfer underlined the immense value of a thorough and well defined palaeographical method for the field of historical study, since his analysis significantly strengthened the rather tentative older assumption that these codices stemmed from the same scriptorium.

The changing roles of dynasties and married couples within medieval religious culture were at the heart of the third panel. Antonia Anstatt (University of Oxford) examined the idea of chaste marriage in the cults of holy couples. Focusing on two case studies – the imperial couple Henry II and Cunigunde and the marriage between the Occitan nobles Elzear and Dauphine – she showed how these cults were used to promote new ideas of marital life in which the consensual decision to abstain from sex led to new forms of intimacy and, in particular, mutual assistance in the partners' quest for a saintly life. The shift in the significance of families and dynasties was also at the centre of the paper by Cynthia Stöckle (LMU Munich), which explored the role of medieval nobles as founders and benefactors of monastic communities. Focusing on the Cistercian abbey of Stams in Tyrol, Stöckle demonstrated that the classification of the abbey in older scholarship as a *Hauskloster* (family monastery) of the Meinhardinian and Witeltsbach dynasties was deeply misleading. Not only did the general chapter of the Cistercian order have a say in the founding process, which secured a certain degree of independence for Stams from its

noble founders, but the monks also made connections with other families in the vicinity to further their position within the local political and religious landscape.

The fourth panel developed new perspectives on elites in the Ottonian *Reich*. Alena Reeb (Otto von Guericke University Magdeburg) provided a thorough re-evaluation of the relationship between Saxon elites, both male and female, secular and ecclesiastical, and ‘their’ king at the beginning of the eleventh century. Taking the Billung Dukes Bernhard I and Bernhard II as well as the Abbesses Sophia of Gandersheim and Adelheid of Quedlinburg as case studies, she illustrated how difficult it is to draw any clear-cut conclusions based on the patchy and often biased evidence we have. While the dukes’ relationship with their royal overlord was much less troublesome and contentious than commonly thought, the two Ottonian sisters had a far greater impact on local political decision-making than scholarship has recognized so far. Ottonian elite women also featured prominently in the paper by Graham Johnson (University of Toronto) on female learned culture in the tenth and early eleventh centuries. In contrast to older scholarship, which has mainly focused on the supposedly exceptional character of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, Johnson unearthed a plethora of sources either written by female authors, directed at female audiences, or dealing with female education that collectively show how women played a key role in early medieval writing and learned culture.

The reconfiguration and legitimization of royal and imperial rule at turning points in the *Reich’s* history lay at the core of the fifth panel. Shifting the focus from local elites to the empire’s head, Felix Timmer (University of Münster) highlighted the hitherto neglected role of the Diet of Liège in 1131 as a watershed in Lothair III’s reign. Via a meticulous analysis of Lothair’s diplomas before and after the assembly, Timmer outlined a significant shift within his self-fashioning which was itself part of a larger and longer transformation process: at the beginning of the twelfth century, Roman-German rulers and their entourages experimented with new concepts of imperial rule – not all of them successful – which in the long run would lead to new configurations of political order. The paper by Richard Schlag (University of Oxford) on the repercussions of the Cologne Diocesan Feud in 1474–5 pointed in a similar direction. While the military invention by the

Burgundian Duke Charles the Bold in what was an internal affair of the empire has long been regarded as a token of Frederick III's weakness, Schlag showed how the Habsburg ruler and his advisers used the exceptional situation to significantly strengthen imperial rule within and beyond the archbishopric–electorate of Cologne. Not only did the emperor present himself as guardian of the German-speaking lands and steward of the Church, but he also put this self-fashioning into practice to exert more direct influence in Cologne's territory.

Elites took centre stage in panel six again, but this time the focus shifted to their interactions and relationships with groups they did not consider to be their equals. Tristan Sharp (University of Chicago) proposed a new perspective on feuding practices in the late medieval German lands by analysing the violent extraction of resources recorded in 'damage registers' (*Schadensverzeichnisse*). Directed against the rural population, this form of violence not only transcended the boundaries between feud and lordship, in that it was often used by nobles to extend their power over dependent groups; but it also provided a viable source of income, so that it was employed by all strata of noble society and thus became a feature structurally inherent to seignorial rule. Erik Wolf (University of Greifswald) examined the changing and multifaceted relations between Christian elites and the mainly non-Christian Sámi during the conversion of the latter. Deliberately questioning the adequacy of ethnological categories, Wolf persuasively argued that the conversion of Fennoscandia was not hindered by the population's unwillingness to accept the new faith; nor was the relationship between converter and not-yet-converted necessarily marked by alterity or antagonism. Secular and ecclesiastical elites did indeed other the Sámi when it served their needs, but this only rarely stemmed from the missionary context. What is more, the Sámi had agency of their own when it came to adopting the Christian faith.

The seventh panel addressed the experience, repercussions, and overcoming of violence in late medieval urban communities, with both papers highlighting the strategic dimensions inherent in this supposedly irrational and extreme behaviour. Maria Pieschacon-Raffael (LMU Munich) examined how the hunger crisis in cities under siege during the Hundred Years War was dealt with. Taking Calais and

Rouen as case studies, which were both besieged twice, Pieschacon-Raffael convincingly argued that urban authorities learned from the atrocities inflicted upon them, in that they successfully managed to prevent food shortages during their second military encounters. This success reveals on the one hand the adaptive skill and pragmatism of urban communities facing recurrent situations of extreme violence; but on the other, the apparently high priority given to these measures betrays how deeply the previous hunger crises were inscribed on the collective memory. The paper by Stanislaw Banach (University of Cambridge) dealt less with the systematic containment of violence and its manifold impacts than with its strategic employment by late medieval urban elites. As Banach's examples from towns in Silesia, Poland, and Prussia indicated, civil unrest was not caused by the faceless masses; nor was it necessarily a token of chaos breaking loose. More often than not, violence was a powerful means deliberately employed by a town's elites to further their own (political) interests. This applies particularly to situations in which the instigators were pursuing a change of government or dealing with outward interference in internal affairs, which was considered a threat to urban autonomy.

Multisensorial experiences formed the focus of the eighth panel. Beatrice Blümer (University of Kassel) analysed the complex relationship between text and image – or map – in Cristoforo Buondelmonti's *Liber insularum*. Delving deep into the *Liber's* multifaceted transmission history, she pointed out how successive copyists significantly changed the textual and visual representation of archaeological sites that Buondelmonti had included in his work. These changes, Blümer argued, mirrored the context in which the respective manuscript was produced. But they also reflect broader changes in knowledge culture and production, as well as the specific needs of those commissioning the copies. Late medieval reflections on the sense of sight and its usefulness in telling true from false formed the core of the paper by Genevieve Caulfield (UCL). Using examples from the canonization process of Dorothea of Montau and Johannes Nider's *Formicarius*, she convincingly distinguished between different conceptions of seeing, both physical and metaphorical. These different ways of seeing, Caulfield argued, were promoted in edification literature as a means of identifying saints and demons and were thus considered to be essential

techniques in underlining Christian truth claims and strengthening resolve in faith.

The seminar's final panel dealt with changes in papal elections, both on a practical and a theoretical level. Anna Eßer (RWTH Aachen University) focused on a group of texts generally known as 'schism treatises' (*Schismatraktate*), which she distinguished from the genre of 'controversy literature' (*Streit- or Kontroversschriften*). Whereas the latter stemmed from the Investiture Controversy and often took sides, the former derived specifically from papal schisms and were more pragmatic in nature. In their quest to explain the causes and minimize the impact of ecclesiastical factionalism, they often foregrounded the idea of *canonica electio* (canonical election), as Eßer underlined with regard to Abbot John's *De vera pace*. Schisms had to be prevented before they even came into being. Canon law and the question of whose claims were justified thus mattered less than the implementation of norms and behavioural codes which ensured unanimity and peace. These ideas already featured prominently in the early Middle Ages, as Stefan Schöch (University of Erfurt) explained in his paper on the 'papal election procedure' (*Papstwahlordnung*) of 769. Focusing on the older principle of an election conducted equally 'by clergy and lay people' (*durch Klerus und Volk*) and its varying implementations in practice, Schöch not only showed how clerical actors significantly professionalized the delicate procedure long before the creation of conclave and cardinals, but his analysis, like Eßer's, also highlighted the productive potential of disruptive moments. Without the succession crisis following the death of Paul I in 767, there would probably have been no need to clarify the election procedure.

As a sort of 'farewell' to the seminar, the outgoing convener Dorothea Weltecke gave a public lecture on the first evening, intriguingly titled 'On How and Why Religions Became Exclusive Social Formations – A Historian's View'. Based on her forthcoming book, Weltecke explored the historicity of both religion and exclusivity, which are closely entangled. The formation between the seventh and the fifteenth centuries of what have been called 'religions' since the Enlightenment had, she argued, less to do with absolute truth claims and more with the proliferation of mutually exclusive group affiliations that were fundamentally shaped by social inequality and political domination.

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While the followers of the three Abrahamic religions were well aware that they shared common organizational and doctrinal features and historical links, which could lead to tolerance and exchange, they also established boundaries by polemicizing against each other. Precisely because every teaching had its place, it needed to be limited to a specific group, be it one's own or a constitutive other. It was only when these rather loose claims of religious differences aligned with power that truth and thus exclusivity could be established. Religion should therefore be regarded as a category of legal and social inequality and not a necessary corollary of belief.

The seminar concluded with a lively conversation on the overarching questions and topics that had been discussed. The participants debated, for instance, whether the seminar's strong focus on the history of violence and the later Middle Ages was indicative of wider trends in the field or just a very fruitful coincidence. Another aspect that featured prominently over all three days and was duly credited in the concluding discussion was the high degree of source criticism that does seem to be a peculiarity of premodern history. All the papers had shown how profoundly medievalists scrutinize their sources, often gaining new insights from well known evidence, without falling back on the hypercriticism which characterized the field after the rise of the linguistic turn. Furthermore, all participants agreed on how valuable a format like the Medieval History Seminar is in enabling academic exchange and international networking at an early stage in medievalists' careers. It is therefore worth continuing to offer this opportunity.

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