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Heather J. Tanner
Editor

Medieval Elite Women and the Exercise of Power, 1100–1400

Moving beyond the Exceptionalist Debate

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*To Julie Tanner and Holly Cortelyou
With love and gratitude for all your support*

PREFACE

The chapters in this book are drawn from and inspired by an international conference entitled *Beyond Exceptionalism* that I organized in September 2015. The conference aimed to foster new avenues and analysis of elite women and power in the central medieval period (c. 1050–c. 1400) and push beyond the paradigm established by Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Fonay Wemple in 1973. McNamara and Wemple argued that elite women’s access to power declined c. 1050 with the expansion of centralized government, the enforcement of monogamy by the Church, and the rise of primogeniture. Since the early 1980s, the study of elite women (noble and royal) has flourished and undermined their theory both in the timing and in the extent of elite women’s loss of power during the Central Middle Ages. This body of work has disproved the “exceptional” status accorded to elite women who exercised power; however, the master narratives of medieval history still present any woman who rises out of anonymity—whether queen, countess, or brewster—as somehow unique. Therefore, “exceptional” medieval women are either excluded because they are not representative or included as an exception to the general experience of medieval women. The goal of this book is to change the discourse, promote new analysis and interpretation, and encourage the routine inclusion of medieval women into main narrative of medieval history. No matter how constrained by patriarchy, medieval women were, to quote Linda Mitchell, “ubiquitous, not exceptional, and influential.” The scope of the book is wide-ranging, both geographically and topically: queens, noble women, urban

women, and religious women from England, France, Germany, the Latin East, Portugal, and Spain. Each chapter offers a new lens or approach to understanding the role of elite women in the power structures of the central and late medieval periods.

As the spelling of medieval names and place can be inconsistent, as editor, I have taken the following approach. For those who lived primarily in England and Germany, I will use a modern English version of their name unless the individual is usually identified otherwise. I use the modern French version for those who lived in what is now France and the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem rather than the Latinate form. I have retained the Portuguese spellings of names and kingdoms. Given the rather restricted first names in some families, I have distinguished the holder with a regnal number in the index. I have retained the “de” in toponyms when that is how the person is routinely designated; otherwise, I have used “of” for those who lived in England and the continent. Place names have been anglicised where a suitable form exists (Normandy, Castile), and left in the original (Béthune) where not.

I would be remiss if I did not take this opportunity to thank Laura Gathagan, Lois Huneycutt, Kathy Krause, Amy Livingstone, Linda Mitchell, and Miriam Shadis (in alphabetical order) for their advice in planning the conference and this book. Their generosity, wisdom, and encouragement have been immensely helpful and truly appreciated. To all those who contributed to the volume, presented at the conference, and shared in the ongoing sessions and conversations, it has been wonderful to share in the insights and camaraderie. I look forward to the continuing collaboration. I am also grateful for the financial support from The Ohio State University, Mansfield Campus, The Ohio State’s History Department and the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies which made the conference possible.

Columbus, USA

Heather J. Tanner

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