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Conference Report: *Twelfth Medieval History Seminar*

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Twelfth Medieval History Seminar. Workshop organized by the German Historical Institute London and supported by the German Historical Institute Washington DC, held online on 30 September–2 October 2021. Conveners: Stephan Bruhn (GHIL), Paul Freedman (Yale University), Fiona Griffiths (Stanford University), Bernhard Jussen (Goethe University Frankfurt am Main), Simon MacLean (University of St Andrews), Marcus Meer (GHIL), Len Scales (Durham University), Dorothea Weltecke (Humboldt University of Berlin).

Now in its twelfth iteration, the biennial Medieval History Seminar (MHS) has become an established platform for postgraduate students to present and discuss ongoing research projects on the Middle Ages with distinguished medievalists as well as their peers. It has also become a cherished tradition of the German Historical Institutes in London and Washington; however, the Covid-19 pandemic has forced many traditional events to be postponed or adapted, and the Medieval History Seminar was no exception.

While in previous years postgraduates from universities in the UK, Ireland, Germany, and North America met at the GHIL in person, international travel remains riddled with hurdles, and so in 2021 an online format for the MHS proved inevitable. Of course, the social aspects of in-person events, which are generally as enjoyable as they are constructive, can only be imperfectly imitated by virtual coffee and tea breaks; but thanks to the attendees' exemplary discipline, the academic parts of the seminar proved to be as productive as ever.

Ph.D. students and early-career scholars were invited to circulate short essays in anticipation of the seminar, and also asked to prepare and present more detailed commentaries on two of their peers' papers at the workshop. These commentaries kicked off the discussion of each essay among the attendees and were augmented by questions from the conveners, who chaired the sessions of the seminar. This year's conveners were Fiona Griffiths, Dorothea Weltecke, Len Scales, Paul Freedman, Simon MacLean, and Bernhard Jussen, whose familiarity with both German- and English-speaking academia was essential to another key feature of the MHS: its bilingual conception encourages participants to hone their skills in each other's languages, navigating

the advantages and disadvantages of German idiosyncrasies and English conciseness.

The attendees' impressive linguistic skills in languages from Castilian to Hebrew certainly added to the already disciplinarily diverse line-up of the seminar, with contributions from legal, social and economic, urban, religious, and cultural history, as well as considerable expertise in adjacent disciplines, including Latin philology. This allowed participants to pay close attention to the minutiae of translating tricky terms, as the first session impressively demonstrated. Vedran Sulovsky (University of Cambridge) considered the consecration date of the Marienkirche in Aachen. Looking closely at extant sources, including those concerned with local liturgy, he suggested that the church was in fact dedicated on 17 July 802 and endowed with relics of Sts Speratus, Cyprian, and Pantaleon, which, he argued, had been sent by the Abbasid rulers in Carthage. The year 802 also featured in the essay by Grigorii Borisov (University of Tübingen), although his interest in the reception of Carolingian legal writing went far beyond the early medieval period. Moving backwards from the antiquarian interests of humanist Johannes Herold in the sixteenth century, Borisov analysed the historical interpretation of early medieval *leges* in the case of the *Lex Thuringorum* during the reign of Abbot Bovo III (942–8) of Corvey Abbey and the composition of the *Lex Frisionum* in Charlemagne's time.

The second session saw a chronological leap away from the early Middle Ages, while thematically it turned towards questions of daily life, albeit in two different institutional contexts. Lena Liznerski (University of Mannheim) reminded participants of the challenging but promising research technique of acquiring quantitative data from qualitative sources. Tax decrees and guild ordinances, for example, can be made to answer questions of economic history, as Liznerski's analysis of the regulation concerning bread prices in late medieval Speyer demonstrated. Reconstruction from fragmentary information as the historian's task also formed the subject of the essay by Emma Gabe (University of Toronto), who attempted to understand the daily routine of lay sisters in the fifteenth-century Observant Dominican Katharinenkloster of Nuremberg. Eventually, Gabe argued, differences in the lay sisters' routine underlined differentiation from the

choir nuns: both shared spaces, but the secondary status of the lay sisters within the convent was perpetually reinforced.

The theme of differentiation continued in the third session, where the essay by Maria Seidel (Heidelberg Center for Jewish Studies) on the will – written in Hebrew – of Judah ben Asher (1270–1349) carefully excavated this emigrant’s desire to reconcile preserving inherited customs with embracing his family’s adopted home on the Iberian Peninsula. That the close investigation of physical manuscripts and their transmission history offers manifold insights for social and cultural history was also shown by the second essay of this session: Christian Schweizer (Trinity College Dublin) once again put the spotlight on the early medieval period, analysing Dicuil’s *Liber de astronomia* (c.814–18) as a source for Carolingian court life during the reign of Louis the Pious, as well as for the intellectual (and specifically computistic) interests of the Carolingian *correctio* (rather than renaissance).

Uses and reuses of written texts also inspired the first essay of the fourth session, submitted by Hanna Nüllen (Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg), who works on the registers or customals (*Stadtbücher*) of German towns. Their compilation, Nüllen showed, committed oral information to the written word and thus not only testifies to the intensification of writing in urban administration in the later Middle Ages, but also speaks to the formation of urban society as a legal community (*Rechtsgemeinschaft*). Both aspects were, ultimately, a matter for elites, and urban elites again took centre stage in the second essay of the session. Matthew Coulter (University of Cambridge) introduced his audience to the strategies of political communication employed by Saxon towns in their relationships with the Hungarian royal court, where personal connections to the king and royal officials proved a crucial condition for the towns’ ability to pursue their aims and protect their interests.

If the essays had so far oscillated between the early and late medieval periods, in the fifth session the High Middle Ages received their due attention. Monja Schünemann (Humboldt University of Berlin) argued that references to weather in accounts of the ‘Catastrophe of Rome’ in 1167, which saw Frederick Barbarossa’s Italian ambitions scuppered by a devastating disease, ought to be reconsidered as a

phenomenon of perceptual history (*Vorstellungsgeschichte*)—one that established idealized attributes of medieval rulers and aided in the creation of social cohesion at the same time. Matthew Clayton (Durham University) turned to a different topos of medieval literature by investigating representations of Julius Caesar in works such as William of Poitiers's *Gesta Guillelmi* and the Middle High German *Annolied*, where the Roman emperor emerges as a common denominator of culturally shared ideas about justice.

The sixth and final session provided further close readings of source texts in the field of religion, with the essay by Thomas Kaal (Goethe University Frankfurt am Main) questioning previous interpretations of the late medieval Castilian expression *nada que nascer e morir* as an indication of religious scepticism. Instead, Kaal showed the originally much broader semantic basis of the expression and traced it as it gradually narrowed in meaning and entered discourses about religious deviance. Returning to German-speaking areas one last time, the contribution by Laura Moncion (University of Toronto) sought to understand the role of obedience for female recluses in towns. Monastic rules, saintly vitae, and other sources, Moncion showed, articulated obedience as a concept that communicated not the subjugation of religious men and women, but their spiritual authority.

Given the disciplinary, thematic, chronological, and geographical breadth of the contributions discussed over the three days of the seminar, a concluding summary can only identify broader shared aspects. One that stands out is the productivity of detailed deconstructions of texts and in-depth analysis of their proliferation. As the attendees' essays and comments have shown, these remain two of the key tools of any medievalist, and they are sharpened—and by no means replaced—by the methodological attention (rightly) paid to visual and material culture.

Finally, there was undoubtedly something stimulating about the seminar's wide-ranging mix of contributions. This point was also emphasized at the end of the three days by Bernhard Jussen, who joined the Medieval History Seminar for the last time as his term as convener came to an end, as did Paul Freeman's. We are most grateful for their expertise and enthusiasm over eight years of the MHS

TWELFTH MEDIEVAL HISTORY SEMINAR

and hope to see them in London again soon. And the same applies to all participants who were not able to meet us in person in 2021, but whose readiness to join us in this online format we immensely appreciated.

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