

BOOK REVIEWS



Femmes de pouvoir, femmes politiques durante les derniers siècles du Moyen Âge et au cours de la première Renaissance. Edited by Éric Bousmar, Jonathan Dumont, Alain Marchandisse and Bertrand Schnerb. De Boeck, 2012. Pp. 656. ISBN: 9782804165536.

THIS IMPRESSIVE TOME, consisting of thirty-one papers bookended by a brief introduction and more thorough conclusion, represents the proceedings of a conference that took place in 2006 jointly sponsored by the University of Liège and the University of Charles de Gaulle-Lille 3. The volume's expansive definition for the political women surveyed goes beyond queens to include ruling women of the aristocracy or "territorial princesses" and abbesses.

The volume is broken up into four groupings of varying size. The first is a ten-paper group on "The Power of Queens and Regents," which is followed by a very brief section entitled "Queens and Mistresses." The third and longest section titled "Political Women and Territorial Principalities" focuses on aristocratic rulers. Oddly the fourth and final section, "Women, Literature, Art and Power" is dubbed "Section Five" for some unknown reason.

The papers also vary in length, ranging from ten pages to one massive paper on Jacqueline of Bavaria that tops seventy. Most of the papers are in French with a few English exceptions. The geographical focus is, perhaps unsurprisingly, dominated by France and Burgundy, but there are papers that examine women from England, Iberia, Italy, and the Holy Roman Empire. Many of the papers are biographically based; however, there are also a few very interesting thematic papers that examine the exercise of power by women in selected contexts.

Given the ample selection of papers, it is impossible to discuss each individually at length here, however there are a few in each section that deserve to be highlighted. The first section looks at queens regnant, consort, and regent and how they exercised power. Several famous, or infamous, French examples can be

found here including Catherine de Medici, Blanche of Castile, Anne de Beaujeu, and, in an excellent paper by Rachel Gibbons, Isabeau of Bavaria. Surprisingly, only two reigning queens are profiled; Isabel of Castile and her daughter Juana “la Loca.” Both of these papers are very strong, particularly Miguel Ángel Ladero Quesada’s offering on Isabel. That paper serves as an effective summary of her reign and would be an excellent starting point for someone unfamiliar with Isabel’s career. The paper is clearly structured and is laced with useful footnotes that provide guidance for further reading or investigation.

Another excellent paper by Amalie Föbel in the first section investigates the change of Western empresses from *consors regni* to *koenigs busfrouwe* in the High Middle Ages. She examines how empresses exercised power both before and after this shift as well as the reasons for the change itself. Föbel demonstrates the very active role of early imperial consorts up to the twelfth century when they appear to lose their powers of regency, intercession, and intervention. She argues that this change was driven by an accompanying change in the role and power of the nobility, which excised much of the queen’s political function, leaving her marooned in a domestic and familial sphere as merely the king’s wife and mother of his children.

The next section on queens and mistresses contains only two papers, including a contribution by John W. Baldwin on “The Feminine Entourage of Philip Augustus.” Although this paper touches on all of the significant women in Philip’s life, the bulk of the paper focuses on his troubled relationship with his second wife, Ingeborg of Denmark. Baldwin attempts to ascertain why Ingeborg was originally selected and what went wrong in their relationship. Though both questions ultimately remain unanswered, the paper is still an interesting investigation of Philip’s relationships with women and the dynastic needs that drove them.

The third section focuses largely on women who ruled duchies, counties, and other territorial principalities. Many fascinating figures that are often overlooked are profiled here. An example is Michel Margue’s survey of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century heiresses in central Europe. Margue examines the lives of four women: Erminsinde of Luxembourg, Elizabeth of Bohemia, Margaret of Tyrol, and Jeanne of Brabant. The paper demonstrates the difficulties for female heiresses in gaining, retaining, and exercising power, particularly as married women.

The fourth (or fifth according to the table of contents) section focuses on the exercise of power and patronage. Dagmar Eichberger contributes a solid paper on Margaret of Austria. Like Ladero Quesada’s paper on Isabel of Castile, this

would also make an excellent introduction to Margaret's life and political career. The paper clearly demonstrates Margaret's exercise of power as Regent of the Netherlands and how she used artistic patronage to craft her own image and stress the power and connections of her dynasty. Although the paper ends with an odd subsection on her engagement in warfare, overall this is a strong offering.

Another paper in this section that stands out is Maria Teresa Guerra Medici's "Women, the Family and Power." That paper has four sections: on the treatment of political or ruling women in medieval law and political thought, female inheritance, "conjugal collaboration," and maternal power. The author uses a wide range of examples to demonstrate how women gained and exercised power from classical Rome to medieval Japan. She argues that, although women were perceived as inferior and perhaps lacking in ability, it was acknowledged that women could and did exercise power in the Middle Ages.

The volume concludes with a summary from Colette Beaune. She notes that of the thirty-seven women profiled in the volume, only seven lost their power and position, which makes a very reasonable "success" rate of 81.08%. She also argues that some of the women, such as Isabel of Castile, had a long and successful reign. Beaune highlights the volume's focus on the exercise of power and the use of both patronage and symbols of power such as titles and seals by women in crafting their image. She reflects that "All (of these women) came to power not as the result of a vocation, a taste (for power) or an ambition but as a need they had to fill because God made them the daughter, wife or widow of someone. In practice (however), I detect that some of them carefully prepared for their ascension and liked to govern" (636, my translation).

Generally, this is an excellent volume, although there are some editing errors, including the "missing" fourth section, an awkward and confusing plates section, and proofreading slips, particularly in the English language papers. However, this should not detract from the fact that this collection is comprised of a sterling selection of high-caliber papers that draw together some fascinating examples of women exercising power in the Middle Ages. It is a collection that every queenship specialist should have in their bookcase and would be an excellent point of reference for all those who study medieval women.

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