EIGHTH MEDIEVAL HISTORY SEMINAR, 2013

Joint seminar of the German Historical Institutes in London and Washington at the GHI London, October 10-12, 2013. Organized by Cornelia Linde (GHI London) and Stefan Hörder (GHI Washington). Conveners: Stuart Airlie (University of Glasgow), Michael Borgolte (Humboldt University Berlin), Patrick Geary (Institute of Advanced Studies, Princeton), Stefan Hörder (GHI Washington), Ruth Mazo Karras (University of Minnesota), Cornelia Linde (GHI London), Frank Rexroth (University of Göttingen), Miri Rubin (Queen Mary, University of London). Participants: Lilach Assaf (University of Konstanz), Christopher Braun (Warburg Institute, University of London), Matthew Champion (Queen Mary, University of London), Jan Clauss (University of Münster), Emily Corran (University College London), Julia Crispin (University of Münster), Étienne Doublier (University of Wuppertal), Linda Dohmen (University of Bonn), Sebastian Dümling (University of Göttingen), Dana Durkee (Durham University), Torsten Edstam (University of Chicago), Duncan Hardy (University of Oxford), Daniela Kah (University of Augsburg), Verena Krebs (University of Konstanz), Joseph Lemberg (Humboldt University Berlin), Maya Maskarinec (University of California, Los Angeles), Eugene Smelyansky (University of California, Irvine), Jeffrey Wayno (Columbia University), Nicholas Youmans (Dresden University of Technology), Milan Žonca (Queen Mary, University of London).

At the eighth biennial Medieval History Seminar, jointly organized by the German Historical Institutes of London and Washington, twenty participants from UK, US and German universities presented and discussed their current research. These research projects represented a wide range of methodological approaches, reflecting the participants’ different backgrounds, which ranged from political, social, and religious history to literary studies, communication studies, and art history. Each paper was briefly introduced by its author and was the subject of two commentaries by fellow participants. The papers were then discussed in plenum, allowing for rich and fruitful engagement with each paper, within the context of wider reflections on relationships between projects and the broader interests of the seminar’s participants. Although the papers employed and combined a number of methodological approaches and utilized an array of source material, particular areas of shared interest emerged. A comparatively large group of the projects were concerned with cultural history and the history of religious cultures, while studies of social and economic
history were less represented. A stress on modes of communication and reception, combined with the interpretation of political, visual, and theological languages, showed that recent theoretical emphases on questions of mediation and representation remain central to this group of new medieval historians.

Several contributions were concerned with a broadly defined intellectual and cultural history of the high and late Middle Ages. Milan Žonca explored the beginnings of the study of Maimonidean philosophy in late-medieval Jewish communities in Central Europe, especially in Prague. In an important contribution to understandings of intellectual authority within Jewish communities, Žonca argued that the turn to philosophical texts in the late fourteenth century was stimulated by internal Jewish developments, as well as external influence from contemporary Christian intellectual culture. Continuing this focus on communities and authority, Nicholas Youmans discussed the definition of early Minorite obedience and its development, arguing that increasing institutionalization of the order over the course of the thirteenth century gradually changed the meanings of obedience. Charismatic understandings of the early Franciscans were gradually overshadowed by hegemonic strategies. Like Youmans, Torsten Edstam devoted his paper to changes in meaning over time, particularly changes in the reception of the writings of the twelfth-century theologian Hugh of St. Victor within reforming monastic communities in the fifteenth century. Focusing on Hugh’s texts at the Benedictine Abbey in Melk, Austria, Edstam argued that the interests of this particular community in linking discipline to love of God shaped the transmission of Hugh’s work.

Reform and reform texts were likewise the focus of contributions by Matthew Champion and Sebastian Dümling. Champion’s paper used the writings of the Louvain theologian Peter de Rivo to explore the ways in which the concept of time was created and experienced within reformed monastic communities of fifteenth-century Brabant. Arguing for a history of time which considers explicit reflections on time alongside the rhythms of human action, his contribution described the production and maintenance of a liturgical self in late-medieval reform, a master measurer of time. Dümling’s paper turned from the liturgical implications of reform to the construction of expertise and experts within a complicated body of texts devoted to political and ecclesiastical reform in the fifteenth century. In these texts, university-educated experts are presented as a means of reform, and failures
of expertise are castigated; knowledge and experts emerge as a social
good which offers a pathway to managing change and contingency.
The role of experts and the reception of the past also emerged as
central in the paper offered by Joseph Lemberg. Addressing debates
over the interpretation of Charlemagne in 1935, Lemberg’s paper
focused on the successful career of the German medievalist Friedrich
Baethgen. Negotiating the poles of race and Reich ideology, Baethgen
rehabilitated the idea of Charlemagne as a founder of the German
Empire against the attacks of Alfred Rosenberg. Lemberg’s paper har-
monized with the plenary address by Stuart Airlie, who discussed the
complex and mediated reception and projection of medieval power
and rulership in the twentieth century, through reflections on Percy
Ernst Schramm and Aby Warburg.

Questions of authority, knowledge, and the production of value
adumbrated in the preceding papers were pursued more closely in a
trio of papers dealing with church structures, politics, and canon law.
Étienne Doublier examined the use of indulgences by Pope Gregory
IX, arguing that indulgences served as an efficient political instru-
ment which supported and shaped the newly founded Mendicant
orders, particularly through crusade sermons, the inquisition and
the cult of the saints. Jeffrey Wayno analyzed the communication
practices and strategies of Pope Alexander III during the schism
of 1159 and the role of Eberhard, Archbishop of Salzburg, in that
conflict. Wayno’s particular emphasis lay in the importance of
the Archbishop’s information networks for the Pope. Strategies of
communication, this time in legal settings, were a theme for Emily
Corran, who examined the function and the development of oaths
of calumny in thirteenth-century canon law. She argued that the
oath had a limited practical impact on court decisions and instead
functioned as a statement of the ethical values of the ecclesiastical
courts in the face of increasing professionalization of the law and the
concomitant danger of morally questionable legal practice.

Legally and ethically questionable inquisitorial practice emerged in
Eugene Smelyansky’s investigation of itinerant inquisitors in the
fourteenth century. Smelyansky’s paper focused on the means by
which one such inquisitor, Heinrich Angermeier, negotiated and
constructed his inquisitorial power and practice in the persecution
of Waldensians in late fourteenth-century Augsburg, and in this
discussion, Augsburg’s complex social and political worlds emerged.
Smelyansky’s largely cultural-historical analysis of late-medieval
urban persecution of heresy was balanced by investigations of urban and communal social structures in the work of Dana Durkee and Lilach Assaf. Taking fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Norwich as an example, Durkee examined questions of social mobility in the late-medieval English town. Revising theories of mercantile domination of guilds in Norwich, Durkee argued for the importance of weaver’s guilds in Norwich’s civic elite and traced examples of social mobility within these groups. Assaf’s examination of Jewish memorial books explored social structures and gender relations in German Jewish communities from the thirteenth century onwards by means of naming practices, leading her to suggestive conclusions concerning changes in women’s positions within families and Ashkenazi communities.

In contrast, to the lives of these Jewish women, Linda Dohmen’s paper examined the women of the Carolingian court. Using the case of Richardis, wife of Emperor Charles III, as a case study, Dohmen examined accusations of sexual impropriety against the wives of Carolingian rulers. She focused on the political implications of those accusations and emphasized the explanatory value of their political discourse for relations between Emperors and Carolingian elites. This emphasis on rule, as practiced and performed, continued in three papers examining the complexities of hegemony in fifteenth-century Europe. Duncan Hardy explored lateral interactions between political actors, such as regional leagues and alliances, in the southwest part of the Holy Roman Empire in the fifteenth century. Arguing against exclusively vertical analyses of imperial action, Hardy used the example of Emperor Sigismund to show how rulers could instrumentalize horizontal structures for political ends. Hardy’s emphasis on the mechanics of horizontal relations was complemented by Daniela Kah’s examination of self-representation and strategic communication in the imperial cities of Augsburg, Lübeck, and Nuremberg. Combining communication studies and art history, Kah interpreted the ways in which imperial presence was constructed and negotiated in civic architecture and town planning in the second half of the fifteenth century. Like Kah’s paper, Julia Crispin’s paper straddled the disciplines of political history and art history. Through a close examination of the manuscripts illuminated in Paris for John of Bedford, Regent of France from 1422 to 1435, Crispin interpreted their function and use as devotional aids and pedagogical tools, showing their representations of politically central ideals of lineage and Lancastrian rule in fifteenth-century France.
Such questions of cultural interchange, transfer, and interaction were the subject of a final group of papers spanning an array of settings from early medieval Rome to early sixteenth-century Ethiopia. Maya Maskarinec’s deft examination of the introduction of the cults of Eastern soldier-saints to early medieval Rome showed how these militant saints were shaped by, and responded to, the needs and ideals of changing communities, particularly the Byzantine presence in Rome. In turn, these soldier-saints aided the development of Rome’s new Christian topography. Moving northwards, Jan Clauß’s paper examined the texts of Theodulf, Visigoth, Bishop of Orléans and scholar at the court of Charlemagne. Theodulf introduced specific Visigothic traditions and modes of communication, shaping Frankish court and scholarly culture. Christopher Braun was the sole historian of the medieval Arab world. His paper examined the enigmatic genre of handbooks for treasure-hunting in Egypt. These guides, which provide instruction for finding buried treasure and for the occult rituals associated with extracting it, present a window into the widespread phenomenon of treasure-hunting in the medieval world. Finally, in a paper based on difficult research into the material culture of late medieval Ethiopia, Verena Krebs showed how European visual culture was received at the Christian court of the Emperor of Ethiopia in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Through textual traces of European artists at the Ethiopian court, as well as surviving visual materials, Krebs shone a light on this complex and as of yet under-researched world of cultural exchange and contact.

The seminar concluded with a wide-ranging discussion, led by Patrick Geary, on the purposes and methods of historical research. Debate about the purposes of history, and its social and cultural roles, led to reflections on the importance of public history from a variety of participants. This emphasis on the participation of historians in public life was mirrored by a strong emphasis on the important role of teaching in academic life. The role of teaching in maintaining a vibrant public discourse of history in turn generated reflections on the ways in which research can be tied to both dissemination and teaching. Yet, as several participants insisted, research also exists as a contribution to the longer history of academic discourse, emerging in unexpected ways at unexpected times to challenge and supplement later historical practice.

The 2013 seminar saw the retirement of Patrick Geary and Michael Borgolte from their leading roles in the Medieval History Seminar. It
was fitting, then, that the final discussions closed with warm thanks for their rigorous dedication to mentoring new medieval historians, and for their extraordinarily distinguished service fostering international dialogue in the study of the medieval world.

Matthew Champion (Queen Mary, University of London) and Julia Crispin (University of Münster)