

# Introduction

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In the first volume of his monumental study *The Sources of Social Power*, the sociologist Michael Mann begins with a definition: “power is the ability to pursue and attain goals through mastery of one’s environment.”<sup>1</sup> This definition is perfectly sensible, and may be what most historians have in mind when they write in an unselfconscious fashion about power. Unlike Mann, however, most historians of power rarely offer a definition of their ostensible subject. Perhaps as a result, power has become such an all-encompassing concept that its utility as a category of historical analysis has suffered. In a wide range of monographs from the 1980s on, the appearance of the word power in the title serves more as an implicit nod to Foucault than as an accurate indicator of subject matter. At best, it serves to signal a concern with certain subjects that fell out of favor with the rise of the new social history, such as political and institutional history or the history of the nobility (despite the fact that power plays an equally important role in the study of non-elite groups). More recently, “power” has become a conveniently vague label for more broadly inclusive conferences and book series.<sup>2</sup>

And why not? If power is seen as present in all social and political relationships, then the study of power is simply the study of history.<sup>3</sup> Such a broad view does have the advantage of extending the language of power to a wider array of subjects. As Ludo Milis suggested in *Negotiating Secular and Ecclesiastical Power*, “For far too long, institutional history, legal history, and *histoire événementielle* have tried to monopolize power relationships and to encapsulate

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power 1, The History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> The theme of the 2003 International Medieval Conference in Leeds was “Power and Authority.” The medieval series of Cornell University Press, now entitled “Conjunctions of Religion and Power in the Medieval Past,” has published excellent studies on a wide variety of topics, ranging from conflict to cruelty, ethnicity to architecture, and poverty to piety.

<sup>3</sup> Reversing the older formulation: Alexander Cartellieri, *Weltgeschichte als Machtgeschichte*, 4 vols. (Munich, 1927–41).

them in rather narrow explanatory schemes.”<sup>4</sup> But at a certain point a concept loses coherence. Thomas N. Bisson noted this historiographical problem in his introduction to one of the most useful recent collections about power in the medieval period, *Cultures of Power: Lordship, Status, and Process in Twelfth-Century Europe*: “It may not be easy to think of these diverse studies as addressing, let alone defining, a single historical subject. ‘Power’ seems so conceptually vast, so inscrutably inflated, that one instinctively seeks to pluralize the word; there is editorial perplexity in this book’s main title.”<sup>5</sup>

For some earlier scholars, power was a more precise historical tool. Max Weber’s definition of power as “the probability that one actor in a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests” and his distinction between coercive power and authority (be it charismatic, traditional, or legal-rational) served as an early touchstone of social-scientific inquiries into power.<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault’s analysis of political and all other forms of power as rooted in mechanisms of exclusion and constraint, and his understanding of power as discursive relationships, pushed the political and institutional history of many eras in creative new directions at just the moment when those fields were ripe for revitalization. But Foucault associated “governmentality” with the rise of the state and of “rationality” in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, and rarely ventured to discuss medieval power.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, as Otto Brunner understood well, Weber’s “state” had little relevance for the medieval lordship.<sup>8</sup> So these influential theories of power in history are usually present in current medieval scholarship as mere learned references rather than as organizing principles.<sup>9</sup> As empirically minded historians,

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<sup>4</sup> Ludo J. R. Milis, “Preface,” in Arnoud-Jan A. Bijsterveld, Henk Teunis, and Andrew Wareham, eds., *Negotiating Secular and Ecclesiastical Power: Western Europe in the Central Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 1999), p. ix.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas N. Bisson, ed., *Cultures of Power: Lordship, Status, and Process in Twelfth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia, 1995), p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York, 1964), p. 152.

<sup>7</sup> See Michel Foucault, “Governmentality” and “The Political Technology of Individuals” in James D. Faubion, ed., *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–84*, 3, *Power* (New York, 1994), pp. 201–22 and 403–17.

<sup>8</sup> Brunner’s discussions of power in its various forms remain especially useful for medievalists: *Land und Herrschaft: Grundfragen der territorialen Verfassungsgeschichte Österreichs im Mittelalter*, 4th ed. (Vienna, 1959), trans. Howard Kaminsky and James Van Horn Melton, “Land” and *Lordship: Structures of Governance in Medieval Austria* (Philadelphia, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> One counter-example is Stephen D. White, the only one in *Cultures of Power* to cite Foucault, pp. 89–90. See also Thomas N. Bisson, “L’expérience du pouvoir chez Pierre Abélard (c. 1100–1142),” in Jean Jolivet and Henri Habrias, ed., *Pierre Abélard: Colloque*

we do not think that this is necessarily a bad thing. We do think, however, that the conceptual space occupied by the idea of power needs to be limited.

The present collection is a modest attempt to rein in the concept of power. The essays do not propose a new definition of power—Mann's is as good as any for our purposes. Nor do the essays suggest a coherent theory of medieval power (although one might easily find traces of Weber or Foucault in the individual essays and even the editorial categories). Instead they offer three ways of discussing power in a medieval historical context: uses of power, relations of power, and discourses of power. Thus, we examine the operational and social aspects of power, as well as power as a contested category within the medieval world—for power (*potestas, auctoritas, dominium, imperium...*) was a medieval concept.<sup>10</sup> We have analyzed these aspects of power under the larger heading of “experience,” which includes the experience of those who held power, those who were near them, and those who felt its effects. Bisson observed in *Cultures of Power* that “the history of medieval power is to be sought in its microcosms, its locales.”<sup>11</sup> In this volume, too, we offer microcosms and locales, from England in the north to Castile in the south, from the tenth century to the fourteenth, and from cloister and countryside to city and court. Rather than adopting a structure based on geography, chronology, or social milieu, we have grouped the essays under thematic headings so as to highlight the three distinct approaches noted above. We think that, taken together, the essays suggest a constructive understanding of power—and how to study it—in the Middle Ages.

The first section, the “use of power,” contains essays devoted to how those who held power exercised that power. The use of power, for profit or piety, as personal prerogative or feudal/governmental function, came in many forms. Samantha Kahn Herrick and Claire Valente consider the subject of “authority” in Normandy and England: how power was legitimized and what consequences legitimation may have had for its use. Robert F. Berkhofer III and Elka Klein examine the difficulties of delegation of power to agents in France and Aragón, and the use and abuse of power by those agents. Stephen P. Bensch and Alan Friedlander examine two common expressions of power in Catalonia and Languedoc, coins and notarial signs, for traces of the everyday use of power. Collectively, these studies show that the use (or uses) of power were multiplying during the Middle Ages, as lords and their servitors found (or refound) new means to rule, exploit, or dominate others.

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*internationale de Nantes* (Rennes, 2003), pp. 91–108 at p. 94. See also Simon Doubleday's observations on Derrida below, p. 276, n. 30.

<sup>10</sup> See, among other studies, Michel Zimmerman, “‘Et je t'empouvoirrai’ (*Potestativum te farei*): A propos des relations entre fidélité et pouvoir en Catalogne au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle,” *Médiévales* 10 (1986), 17–36.

<sup>11</sup> Bisson, ed., *Cultures of Power*, p. 331.

The second section, “power relations” considers power in two contexts. The first context is that of family and the implications of blood and marriage for those who held power. Paul Freedman reveals how a change in status (from layman to monk) may have affected the family connections of a prominent Catalan noble. Nathaniel L. Taylor examines the contemporary understanding of aristocratic lineage among the counts of Barcelona, and how it shaped and was shaped by power. Elizabeth Haluska-Rausch considers how the power of women, as wives and widows, was transformed in Montpellier. The second context is relationships between people dependent upon institutions rather than family connections. Alan Cooper investigates protestations of ignorance in the great Anglo-Norman survey, Domesday Book, in an attempt to understand the situation of the jurors who were asked to give evidence against the interests of their lords. Adam J. Kosto reveals how the practice of granting hostages helped establish representative institutions between rulers and groups in Occitania. Together these studies show the complexity of the structures of power that bound the powerful and the powerless.

The third section, “discourses of power,” considers medieval and modern discussions about power, in an attempt to answer the question: how did medieval people conceive of power? Frederick S. Paxton, Bruce L. Venarde, and Jennifer Paxton scrutinize eleventh- and twelfth-century monastic writings about power and vexed relations with higher authorities in northern France and England. They show how monks conceptualized the power of the king, nobles, and other ecclesiastics. Carol Symes and Amy G. Remensnyder explore the rise of new polemics about power in the thirteenth century, the “lordship of jongleurs” and the application of Marian ideology to monarchy. Finally, Simon Doubleday revisits the tormented voices of Catalan peasants and questions how our understanding of subaltern medieval people has been (re)constructed. By examining medieval discourses about power, these authors all prompt reflection on modern historical discourses about power.

Given their varied sources and subjects, the essays inevitably intersect in ways that cut across the thematic divisions we have chosen. In our reading, three issues deserve to be highlighted.

The first is the issue of legitimization or justification. Herrick and Valente’s pieces, which appear at the beginning of our collection, but at opposite ends of our period, may serve as a good, comparative starting point. In Herrick’s piece we find the supporters of the early dukes of Normandy using saints’ lives to justify their claims to territory, especially when that territory had been won with the help of pagan allies. In Valente’s piece we see the efforts of thirteenth-century English barons to limit the power of the king, wrestling with such slippery concepts as the nature of written law and the necessity and desirability of being able to amend that law. The documents the two authors look at could not be further from each other in terms of form, but the issues are similar: what arguments will

enable the protagonists to manage, shape, limit, and assert power in an age lacking—almost without exception—force sufficient to achieve power by more direct means.

Strategies of legitimization and justification appear in other essays, too, especially in the hands of wielders of power that might not have been viewed as very “powerful” in a conventional, mundane sense. The essays by Berkhofer, Jennifer Paxton, and Frederick Paxton all concern monks finding means to assert their spiritual power in the world. For Berkhofer, this is a matter of the invention of practical measures to keep lay servants in check, but this story is not a simple one; it is, rather, a matter of quietly—and sometimes less quietly—employing the ideology of power invented by Benedict of Nursia and Gregory the Great. This strategy is not easy or obvious, but its implications for the history of governance are immense. In a similar vein, Jennifer Paxton studies besieged twelfth-century English monks, who turned to monastic ideals of sacred power and thus to the Bible itself to conjure a model of lay power with which to bind lords, whose actions suggested a different understanding of power. Frederick Paxton reveals French monks attempting a similar sleight-of-hand on a grander scale. He shows the monks of Fleury inverting notions of power in their writings, making kings appear as monks, and giving monks the power of kings. He finds them creating thereby new notions of responsible kingship alongside an ideology of abbatial sanctity that is at once mundane, active, and administrative.

The second issue is the public nature of power. Although there is an extensive debate about whether the public/private distinction applies usefully to the medieval world, here we ask if power is public in the simple sense of being open and manifest to medieval people who experienced it.<sup>12</sup> The issue of public display, in the form of perversity of a truly performative nature, is at the heart of Venarde’s essay on Robert of Arbrissel. Robert’s critics preferred more staid forms of evangelism, while Robert chose to keep his work errant—in both senses of the word. The issue of publicity is also central to Valente’s essay. The debate about the limits of the king’s power was a very public one in thirteenth-century England. Valente’s study of the spread of baronial reform ideas demonstrates how the key concepts, and the key document, were very much in the public gaze, and how reference to public statements and actions shaped the whole crisis. At the same

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<sup>12</sup> Mayke de Jong, “What Was *Public* about Public Penance? *Paenitentia publica* and Justice in the Carolingian World,” in *La giustizia nell’alto medioevo (secoli IX–XI)*, 2 vols., *Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull’alto medioevo* 44 (Spoleto, 1997), 2:863–902, especially pp. 872–3 and 893–7. Cf. Thomas N. Bisson, “The ‘Feudal Revolution,’” *Past and Present*, no. 142 (1994), 6–42, esp. 9–12. This article and the responses it provoked (“Debate: The ‘Feudal Revolution,’” *Past and Present*, no. 152, 196–223 and no. 155, 197–225), of course, shape the current discussion about medieval power. Many of the contributors refer to this debate, although it is not a central concern of this volume.

time, at the other end of Europe, Alfonso X made very public use of the Virgin Mary, as Remensnyder shows. Alfonso's conquering drive into the South was fuelled by the rededication of Islamic sites to Mary, and by the invocation of Mary as a patron in battle and as an audience for chivalrous exploits. This program found a very public culmination in the magnificent burial site designed by Alfonso for himself and his parents, which once again made Mary the public embodiment of the triumphant Castilian monarchy.

It is not immediately clear, because of the nature of the documents, quite who controlled the making of the *Lives* that are Herrick's subject, nor for whom they were intended: the dukes or the dukes' subjects? Herrick shows, however, that the *Lives* oriented worshippers in contested borderlands toward Normandy itself by grafting a militant, Christian *Normannitas* onto affection for the saints. Thus, the *Lives* propagated ideas to a wider audience. Other people in this collection find themselves occupying a similarly public stage: Berkhofer's lay servants are compelled to take their oaths openly before large gatherings. Klein's bailiffs are brought to heel by the community when, in collusion with the king, they try to change the method of tax assessment. Cooper's jurors are caught in the gaze of their lords and their peers, in danger of public and communal reprisal for saying the wrong thing. Kosto's hostages spread high politics well beyond the royal courts. Symes's jongleurs were people for whom publicity was both their tool and their masterwork. And it is the visible and manifest uses of force that produced the tormented voices of Catalan peasants, and thus the haunted house of history evoked by Doubleday.

The third recurring issue is the ad hoc quality of power relations. Rulers and ruled constantly refashioned power. Consider the variety of evidence found here: sacred legend, royal biography, public oaths, charters, genealogies, jurors' testimony, legislation, petitions, architecture, ritual, graphic design, prayers, and songs. This variety is not a coincidence. The tensions and anxieties that run through these pages reveal a world in flux, one that sought to use every technique imaginable to manipulate power. The examples are numerous; inheritance strategies are some of the best. Haluska-Rausch shows families seeking new ways to keep their patrimony together by excluding women from overt power. Taylor, like Freedman, finds families struggling to find the right course when presented with newly heritable property around 1000. We find the house of Barcelona first sharing, and then turning to primogeniture and apanages, while rewriting their family history to make it look like that had been the goal all along. Innovation is also a theme of Berkhofer's essay, which shows us abbots first trying one strategy, adjusting, and then trying another to discipline their servants. Klein's Jewish community of Zaragoza can be seen reinventing itself in a number of ways: remaking its relations with the king, agonizing over its unity as a community, and even questioning its own self-identity. Bensch studies lords struggling to find new ways to assert the identity and existence of a small county through a fragile right to

mint their own coins. Friedlander's notaries are the very souls of invention, curling and twisting new motifs through their initially simple designs, attempting to assert their identity as individuals and as a newly powerful order of society. The Middle Ages may have been a period in which tradition, custom, and authority were paramount, but everywhere people found ways to overcome, circumvent, and reimagine these apparently limiting forces.

What makes the "experience of power" studied in this volume a particularly medieval one? This is an important question, but one that requires a comparative framework that goes beyond our focus here. A few thoughts may be ventured, however, at the risk of provoking specialists in other fields. In these pages, power is wielded and experienced in many different ways, but it is rarely shown to have been through overwhelming force or coercion. Of course, brute violence lies in the background of most, if not all, of these essays. Behind Friedlander's elegantly blooming fleurs-de-lis lie the Albigensian Crusades; behind the trembling of Cooper's jurors lies the Norman Conquest; and so on. Implicit in many of these essays is the violence of high medieval Europe, the potent combination of horse and castle, and the oppression that it brought.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the kings and great lords examined here rarely had the ability simply to command without persuasion. The great standing armies of the early modern period are not found. Instead, we find that power is a matter of debate and argument. As befits an immature discourse, these arguments were conducted in a still fluid language. In the intellectual struggle for power in the High Middle Ages, everything was up for grabs. Any new rhetorical or conceptual weapon that might bring results was fair game. For example, we repeatedly see people bringing Christian religiosity into the debate in new ways: the project to use a discourse borrowed from Antiquity, however inappropriately, was only just beginning. The study of power in this period is thus a vibrant enterprise touching on every element of medieval culture and civilization.

The authors of this collection were all students of Thomas N. Bisson and share his interest in the history of power. Indeed, the title echoes that of Bisson's plenary lecture at the 2003 International Medieval Conference at Leeds ("The Experience of Power"), and the *Cultures of Power* volume he edited is in some sense a model. Bisson's work also provided a common reference point for the contributors, and his influence will be seen in many of the essays here. This collection is dedicated to him with our thanks and esteem.

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<sup>13</sup> The subject of violence is a significant sub-field within the history of power, as are dispute and conflict. For a good summary of recent historiography, see Warren C. Brown and Piotr Górecki, "What Conflict Means: The Making of Medieval Conflict Studies in the United States, 1970–2000," in *Conflict in Medieval Europe*, Brown and Górecki, eds. (Aldershot, 2003), 1–36, esp. pp. 30–33.