

Medieval Gender History – a Nordic Research Network Presents: Interpreting Endeavours, Assessing Agency in Late-Medieval Relations

A Note from the Editors

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The Medieval Gender theme issue of MIRATOR presents four articles by the members of the Medieval Gender History Network, a Nordic network aiming to enhance co-operation between scholars interested in gender and the Middle Ages in the North of Europe. The coordinators of the network are Anu Lahtinen (University of Turku) and Christine Ekholst (University of Guelph). The network, now consisting of more than fifty members, values interdisciplinarity; it gathers together scholars representing a variety of fields, including historians, archaeologists, philologists, art historians and theologians, to name but a few.

The first meeting of the network was held in Stockholm on 15–16 April 2010. Stockholm University offered the premises, where thirty medievalists from the Nordic countries (including one from UK) got together to discuss current research on gender issues within medieval studies. Invited keynote speakers were Elisabeth Arwill Nordbladh from the University of Gothenburg and Päivi Salmesvuori from Helsinki University. The second meeting took place in Helsinki, when a symposium *Taking Care of Body and Soul* was organized for 16–17 June 2011. David Ashurst (University of Durham, UK) and Elina Gertsman (Case Western University, US) gave the keynote lectures. Altogether 25 participants from six countries exchanged their ideas and results in the rooms of Svenska Litteratursällskapet, but also visited the fortress island of Suomenlinna as well as the medieval collections of the National Museum of Finland.

The third meeting, with the theme *Deviance*, took place at Durham University in England on 6–8 July 2012. The conference was hosted by David Ashurst and held at St John's College. Participants had a chance to visit Durham Castle and Cathedral, and take part in a little post-conference tour, an excursion to an Anglo-Saxon church in Escomb. Immediately after the Durham meeting, the network organized four sessions with three papers in each at the International Medieval Congress (IMC) in Leeds: 'Neglecting and (Dis)Obeying the Rules, I & II : Conflicts and Their Consequences; Conflicting Rules' and 'Rules of Love, Marriage and Inheritance, I & II: Marital Statutes, Ordinances and Law; Ideals and Disciplines in the Family.'" The network activities are still continuing: for instance, in 2014 at the meeting of the Nordic historians in Joensuu, Finland, on 14–17 August, *Det 28. Nordiska historikemötet*, where the network members

will organize a session with the topic ‘Crossing the Borders of Gender in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavia.’ Those interested in collaboration with the Medieval Gender History network are kindly requested to contact the coordinators, Anu Lahtinen, anulah@iki.fi and Christine Ekholst, christine.ekholst@gmail.com. More information about the network and its members can also be found at http://www.medeltid.su.se/Forskning/Medieval_gender_history.htm.

The articles of this theme issue of MIRATOR reflect the themes and subjects that have been discussed in the previous network meetings and give a chance to focus on some of the research that is conducted by the network members. The position of women, and men, is dealt with in the articles—chronologically and geographically the texts move from thirteenth- and fifteenth-century Iceland and late medieval Southern and Central Europe to sixteenth-century Norway and Sweden. The writers examine written sources, including Old Norse-Icelandic sagas, canonization documents and royal requests, and deal with gender ideals, sexuality, masculinity, femininity and agency.

Sofie Vanherpen discusses in her article the image of women in Old Norse-Icelandic sources. She has examined the construction of cultural memory concerning an exceptionally strong female character in the Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*), Auðr/Unnr *djúp(a)uðga* Ketilsdóttir, and the representation of her religious identity—and differences in representation—in both medieval Old Norse-Icelandic literature and later nineteenth- and early twentieth-century folklore tales. She points out how *Landnámabók*—a collection of records on the first Icelandic settlers and short anecdotes associated with them—highlights Auðr’s conversion before her arrival in Iceland and appears to emphasise the Christian aspects of her burial. The portrayal of Auðr in *Laxdœla saga*, however, according to Vanherpen, appears more secular in nature and rather accentuates her strong personality, her worldly accomplishments and her dignity. In later folklore, Auðr’s Christianity is again further emphasised, and she is depicted almost as a saint-like figure, whose posthumous power protects the district where she has been buried from a malicious witch. Vanherpen discusses the motives of the writers, commissioners, relators and collectors of the stories of Auðr in each era and how they influenced the relative emphasis given on diverse characteristics in each source.

The theme of Henric Bagerius’s article is medieval Icelandic aristocratic sexuality. Bagerius has studied the indigenous *riddarasögur*, or romances, that were written in Iceland in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and had as their model—though occasionally somewhat loosely—translations of medieval European romances that had been done at the court of the Norwegian king at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Bagerius examines how the original *riddarasögur* reflect the gender ideals that were held and redefined by the late medieval Icelandic elite, which wished to distinguish itself from the original farmers and lower social strata. He discusses how the evolvment of Icelandic aristocracy had been affected when the Icelanders had submitted to the rule of the Norwegian king in 1262–1264, and official posts granted by the sovereign as well

as growth in trade offered some members of society a chance to enhance their power and wealth. Bagerius shows how, according to the ideal aristocratic sexuality, homosocial bonds and exercise of sexual restraint that prevented conflicts between men of equal strata were highly valued: the body of a woman became male property, an ownership that was respected and not violated by other chivalric, aristocratic men. Bagerius also shows how female virginity became an ideal as it made it possible to ensure that aristocratic men were the real fathers of their offspring, and thus reinforced the principles of patrilineal inheritance rights.

Randi Bjørshol Wærdahl examines in her article the case of Lady Ingerd, a Norwegian noblewoman, as an example of female agency in early sixteenth-century Norway. She argues that Lady Ingerd's loss of crown fiefs in 1529 was not connected to a political scandal as previous research has suggested, but was a consequence of the enfeoffment policy of King Frederik I of Denmark, which was intended to make more Norwegian crown fiefs available to Danish noblemen. As Randi Bjørshol Wærdahl suggests, Lady Ingerd can be regarded as a good example of the degree of agency that was possible for noblewomen in both more and less favourable settings in late medieval Norway. Through her study, she sketches the outlines of the historical change that took place as a consequence of King Frederik's Norwegian enfeoffment policy, showing that the power as well as the opportunities available to noblewomen decreased in the sixteenth-century as a result of the centralization of governmental power.

Jenni Kuuliala's article discusses marital roles and family dynamics in later medieval miracle testimonies and narratives that portray miraculous cures of adults suffering from prolonged impairments. She investigates whether disability was a hindrance to marriage and how, according to the narratives, the roles of spouses in invoking the saint as well as in assisting the disabled one in everyday life were organized. Although the sources illustrate impairments primarily as disabling states to be cured, Kuuliala shows that they also open up the gendered roles as well as the flexibility of everyday life.

As is well known, issues attentive to gender have been appearing frequently in medieval and early modern research for more than 30 years. Looking at how things appear when gender is invoked continues, however, to be an epistemologically relevant way to enrich the ever-expanding picture we are forming of medieval life, including people; their rules, relations and sexuality, and their stories told or artefacts crafted. Undoubtedly, this chosen approach—as do all others—conveys the concerns and values we have or worry about in our own era. This is the beauty of historical inquiry; profoundly subjective insights into historical phenomena are investigated through a process that contains rigorous contextualisation and careful criticism of sources.

We as guest editors of this gender theme issue of *MIRATOR* wish to express our deepest gratitude to all the contributors, and to the anonymous referees who carefully read the articles that were offered for publication in this issue.

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