

## Cultures of Power in Medieval Europe

Førsteamanuensis Erika Graham-Goering

*"Is is seldom possible to say of the medievals that they always did one thing and never another; they were marvelously inconsistent." -Thomas Cahill*

I am happy to discuss projects with any students wanting to work broadly on the societies, politics and conflicts of the Middle Ages, especially in Western Europe from c. 1100–1500. Medieval Europe was very different from Europe as we know it today, but trying figure out its rules—real or perceived, upheld or subverted, stable or fluid—is no simple task. Were there such things as ‘nations’ or ‘states’ in this period? What roles did women play in the hierarchies of power? Was rulership all about competition, or was there more to it? Was the bureaucrat’s pen mightier than the knight’s sword (and what did the rest of society have to say about it)? What’s up with chivalry, anyway? Historians have debated these questions and more for decades, and we’re still refining our appreciation of the complexity and diversity of the people of centuries long past, how they got along (or didn’t), and how these dynamics varied between different times and places.

Thinking about medieval cultures of power offers many possible angles for investigation. It is important to me that each student find a line of inquiry that really interests them personally, so I will work with you to develop your own research question according to your skills and style.

To give a few examples, a historiographical approach could engage with some of the major controversies in the study of medieval politics, such as the ‘Feudal Revolution’, the nature of queenship as a public office, the relationships between centers and peripheries, or the place of feuds in the social order—how and why have historians’ views about these problems changed?

Different types of source analysis can make for good case studies in the evolution of power and how people saw it. For instance, how did chroniclers think about individual or group loyalties? How did official records such as charters or accounts help memorialize authority?

Methodologically, you could also explore historians’ increasing use of digital techniques (e.g. databases, spatial mapping, networks) alongside more traditional textual criticism, while students with relevant language skills may consider editing or translating a text as a form of analysis.

Finally, our ideas about these power dynamics have played a significant role in modern politics from the French Revolution to corporate ‘feudalism’ to Crusades and the current alt-Right, as well as in popular media such as video games, books and film. Studying the reception of medieval history can give us a better understanding of how the past functions as a social tool today.

I welcome all questions about potential research in these areas or others, so if you’re considering the Middle Ages just get in touch!

Language of writing and supervision: supervision in English, students may write in Norwegian