

Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power in the Twelfth-Century Anglo-Norman Realm

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This exciting new study argues that medieval aristocratic women not only had power to exercise authority, but that they did so in different capacities depending on the times of their life cycle. Medieval aristocratic women were capable of doing so in the knowledge that their men folk accepted what they did and supported them and thus not, as has so often be argued, against their men's wishes, as their victims, or as acts of rebellion. This is an important argument, entirely convincing and as such forms an important contribution to the study of gender in the Middle Ages.

Although its main body is a thoughtful study of charters and other documents, based around Johns' original PhD thesis, written under the supervision of David Bates at Cardiff, it has been extensively reworked with significant additions discussing narrative texts like chronicles, poems and other literary works. As the author herself notes, the juxtaposition of literary and documentary texts poses methodological problems due to the fact that both genres are discourses written for different purposes. The former were composed as entities in themselves to inform and entertain, while the latter are mostly utilitarian 'frozen' narratives without a context (in the now famous words of the late Timothy Reuter) because the immediate socio-cultural context that gave birth to them has not survived. Where a chronicle introduces, explains and narrates a story with its actions, protagonists and storylines, the charter (or inquest report, or other document) plunges straight into the action – often a grant of land or rights without giving any of the detail the historian or the poet normally gives. Put bluntly, the action described in a charter often 'hangs in the air', and we as historians frequently

are at a loss how to fit the action within the wider framework of the society for which it was meant. Given these problems, how does the historian set about to use the two sorts of narratives to approximate the power exercised by medieval aristocratic women?

In each of her 'charter' chapters, Susan Johns helpfully summarises the recent historiography of her subject (witnessing, counter gifts, seals, royal inquests), so as to enable the uninitiated to follow where her own conclusions originate. Although these historiographical introductions are a clear reminiscence of the dissertation origin of the book, they are fundamental in underlining the novelty of Johns' work. In almost all cases she has to realign the arguments from (predominantly male) historians' reluctance to think about women's power, offering the cliché of the subjected women as victims of male restrictive authority, to a new dawn of presenting the same evidence as revealing women's initiatives and cooperation with men, women's actions sanctioned by men, or women's rights defended by women and men. In short, we are presented with a whole gamut of gendered cooperatives allotting tasks and wishes to men and women, not as battles, but as socio-cultural reciprocal enterprises. Let me give you the striking examples with which Johns ends her book: Countess Petronilla of Leicester ended up in a ditch and in her frustration she threw away her rings; Countess Matilda of Gloucester visited Lincoln Castle in 1141 and together with her hostess diverted everyone's attention, enabling her husband to capture it; Nichola de la Haye, under siege three times, determinedly hung on to her castle by defending it. All three women acted under their own steam, took initiatives, executed them in roles traditionally associated with men's actions. They did what they did, not as victims of men's orders but off their own bat. Susan Johns' book is so important because it identifies the impressive scope women had for their own initiatives.

Having said this, Johns is the first to qualify her conclusion by pointing out that the scope for action depended very much on the stage in a woman's life cycle. There is no doubt that the period of a lay aristocratic married woman's greatest freedom was the period of her widowhood. This is neither a new conclusion, nor a new qualification. But what is new is that Johns provides us with the evidence *explaining* how the medieval aristocratic woman came to exercise her authority at that stage. The important question is: if she had never had an opportunity to act independently, how was she able to do so, once her husband died? Surely, common sense dictates that the medieval woman must have had opportunities earlier on in her life to learn, experience and act in such a way as to develop the skills for which she is so well known in widowhood. The charters are deceptive as sources because of their quality of suspension; the aspect of 'hanging in the air' wrongly suggests that women only suddenly become capable of thinking, deciding, mediating and acting once their husbands are dead. And it is at this point where the contextual narratives are so crucial; the examples of the three women given above are all cases from chronicles and they all concern women whose husbands were still alive.

Traditionally historians – and twentieth-century British political and constitutional medievalists, following the path of Stubbs and Stenton, are a particularly guilty lot – swore by charters and rejected chronicles, unless the chronicles confirmed the charters. Any ambiguity of the chronicles, shrewdly highlighted by Johns, was interpreted in such a way as to confirm the charter's presupposed victimisation of women. If however, we read the two in conjunction, we often find that the charter and the chronicle can support each other in our interpretation, which allows the medieval aristocratic woman leeway of action.

The book concludes with two enormously helpful appendices. The first one is a catalogue of seals of 145 women, who owned and used seals in twelfth- and early thirteenth-century England. Five are royal women: Edith/Matilda, Adeliza of Louvain, Matilda of Boulogne, Empress Matilda and Joan, daughter of Henry II. There are apparently no seals for Queen Eleanor. The seal for Constance, wife of Eustace of Boulogne, son of King Stephen, could have been signalled as well. Admittedly, it is only preserved as part of her legacy as countess of Toulouse, but, as Bedos-Rezak convincingly argued, it dates from her life in England where it was modelled on that of Empress Matilda; her seal, though now lost, was once attached to her charter for St. Radegund, Cambridge.⁽¹⁾ The impressive number of seals reveals for the first time how wide spread the custom had become towards the late twelfth century. The list gives the name of the woman concerned, approximate date, a short description of the seal, its image and legend (if any), and the archive. The dating principles are not always clear, so for example the dates for Empress Matilda are given as 1136-54, while

those for Isabella, countess of Warenne are 1162-1198. The appendix has to be scrutinized in conjunction with the chapter on seals, which argues strongly and convincingly that women had a hand in the design of their seals and that the seals were the material symbol of the authority they could confer. Therefore the iconography and the legend are all important indications of these women's self-identification.

The second appendix is a list of noble women mentioned in the famous *Rotuli de dominabus*, of 1185, with the income and type of lands they held. This is a long-neglected resource, the study of which by Dr Johns deserves our gratitude. This appendix forms the graphic illustration to her Chapter 9 on royal inquests and the power of noble women. The chapter discusses various aspects of the inquest, such as the fact that many of the women (108) are widows; several are heiresses, some are minors (male and female); the ages of the women are given with some precision up to the age of forty. Thereafter, they are rounded off at fifty, sixty, seventy, or simply state 'very old'. The reason is of course the declining rate of fertility and thus the value of the women as potential rewards as marriage partners for men in need of remuneration. The main issue of the chapter is the discussion of the information provided by the *Rotuli* on land tenure and lordship.

There are various ways in which women held land. First of all they held land like men if they were heirs or co-heirs. However, the most common form of landholding by women was determined not by the circumstances of their inheritance but by their marriage. Marriage provided the women with two types of land: land acquired by way of dowry, the portion of land given to a husband upon marriage by her birth family, which as *maritagium*, could revert to the widow after the husband's death; or dower land, the portion of her husband's land, usually one third, set aside for her upkeep, which could be given either on the day of the wedding or after the husband's death. The *Rotuli* interestingly reveal that dowry, or *maritagium*, occurred mostly in families that could afford to give land worth over £5 to a daughter. Presumably, if they were not that wealthy they would give cash or moveables instead. It is important to note that in England, and indeed on the Continent as Laura Napran has shown in her study of marriage contracts in the southern Low Countries and Northern France in the twelfth centuries (2), increasingly from the late twelfth century onwards dowries consisted of money and other valuables in preference to land. In both areas receiving *maritagium* land did not preclude women from receiving other lands as part of their patrilinear inheritance. Johns notes, however, that of the 108 widows listed, only eleven women held land consisting of exclusively *maritagium* lands. This low incidence suggests that most women held more land than simply the dowry lands. In contrast, dower was the common form of land tenure by women. A significant number of widows had survived more than one marriage and thus could receive income from more than one *maritagium* settlement and indeed more than one set of dower incomes. The list suggests a rate of remarriage between 1:6 and 1:3, which is quite high, but is skewed in favour of richer women. It is likely, so Johns suggests, that wealthier widows had a higher chance to remarry than poorer noble women. Although the *Rotuli* would seem to list the women as 'victims' of an effective royal administration, it is also possible, as Johns correctly points out, to see their position as one of strength in that they were recognised as being in possession of resources over which they had considerable authority for them selves or on behalf of their children. That the king wished to know this information, no doubt in order to use it, does not diminish the say the women had over the land.

The information of the *Rotuli* was compiled, as Johns acknowledges throughout her book, on the basis of information from the localities, namely local jurors providing the king's justices with the details of the women's circumstances. Such information was therefore local, not always complete and depended on the justices' questions asked. Several women occur in more than one shire and no cross-referencing is provided in the document. It is interesting that a woman occurs as an heiress of her birth family in one shire but as a widow in another: clearly her entries depended on the different rights by which she held the lands. In my book *Memory and Gender in Europe 900-1200* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), I suggested that the list can be used to gauge a notion of how the women were seen in relation to their birth family and what information they had going back several generations. They might be listed with the name of their father or grandfather, as much as by the name of the husband. This private information on their family background and dynastic history could have been compared with that of such women's interest in the past as discussed in the first two chapters of Johns' book. Power and authority to commission historical narratives was one way to ensure that

one's past (birth or marital) was recorded; making oneself known in a locality as the daughter or granddaughter of so-and-so was another way. Clearly, we cannot be sure whether the Rotuli record how the women themselves wished to be remembered, but one could argue that the local jurors would reveal them by the names and affiliation by which they were best known. A woman's agency is difficult to discern but should not be underestimated.

I very much enjoyed reading and digesting this book. It constitutes a significant contribution to our knowledge of women and land tenure in England, and to a lesser extent in Normandy. I strongly recommend it to an audience of both beginners and the well-initiated, in the study of women and gender in the Middle Ages.

Notes

1. Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, 'Medieval women in French sigillographic sources', in Joel T. Rosenthal, ed., *Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1990), pp. 1-36, on pp. 21-2, n.74.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Laura Napran, 'Marriage contracts in the southern Low Countries and the north of France in the 12th century', unpubl. PhD. dissertation, University of Cambridge 2001.[Back to \(2\)](#)

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