CHAPTER ONE

UNDERSTANDING INTERCESSION:
SOURCES AND APPROACHES

This book addresses an important but rarely-considered aspect of early medieval political culture: the role and nature of intercession, or third-party advocacy in behalf of groups and individuals. What exactly was intercession, and how did it work? One of the best, and briefest, introductions to the topic comes from my young daughter’s bookshelf—Beatrice Schenk de Regnier’s whimsical story of a young boy’s friendship with a royal couple, *May I Bring a Friend?*

The King and Queen
Invited me
To come to their house
On Sunday for tea.
I told the Queen
And the Queen told the King
I had a friend
I wanted to bring.
The King told the Queen,
‘My dear, my dear,
Any friend of our friend
Is welcome here.’
So I brought my friend.

These simple lines offer a number of valuable insights about the structure and function of intercession. First and foremost, it is a mediatory process: the intercessor (in this case, the queen) literally goes between two parties, bringing formally distinct individuals or groups into contact. In this respect, intercession was part of a broader socio-symbolic complex of mediated interactions in early medieval Europe. In the early Frankish ritual of adoption (*acfatmire*), for example, an intermediary stood in for the ultimate recipient of the inheritance (*hereditas*) in question, receiving it from its original owner through the transfer of a branch (*festuca*) and enjoying it for a full year, before in turn conveying the branch and thus the

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property to its final recipient. The manumission of unfree persons likewise took place through the mediation of a third party, who presented the servus or ancilla to the lord. Similarly, donation miniatures such as those from the so-called “Gero Codex” and the Egbert Psalter, both produced at the Swabian monastery of Reichenau in the latter half of the tenth century, represent the act of gift-giving as a mediated act rather than a direct donation from giver to receiver, with two sets of prestations from scribe to bishop and from bishop to patron saint (Figures 1 and 2).

Intercession, however, was more than just a form of mediation—it also was a form of petition. The intercessor (the queen) is someone who asks for something from someone (the king), in behalf of a third party (the boy). Moreover, it was simultaneously effective and affective: through her involvement, the intercessor produces a new and hoped-for state of affairs by drawing upon, and even leveraging, her personal relationships with both parties, and thus enhances the personal relationships that already exist between them.

Of course, this simultaneously intimate and removed, simple and complex interaction was not unique to the Middle Ages. In the ancient Roman world, intercessory advocacy was an important element of the system of patron-client bonds (patrocinium), while two thousand years later it continues to shape professors’ lives as they face countless requests to recommend their students, protégés, and colleagues for jobs, fellowships, and honors. Nevertheless, the boundaries that we impose upon intercession—the degree to which such advocacy is deemed appropriate and, more significantly, legal—are far more pronounced, and more stringent, than they were in early medieval Europe.

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3 For manumission, see e.g. DC II no. 27, an undated diploma of Conrad II, freeing a serving-maid (ancilla) of his predecessor’s wife, Kunigunde: quondam sui [Kunigunde’s] iuris ancillam A. nomine per manum cuiusdam H. nobis presentatam manu nostra de manu illius excusso denario liberam fecimus .... The mediated process described here was not unique, as the text’s preservation in a later Bamberg formulary suggests. A similar ritual was used in late ninth-century Lotharingia; see Cor van der Kieft, “Twee vrijlatingsoorkonden van koning Zwentibold,” Nederlands Archievenblad 84 (1980): 204–14.