INTRODUCTION

Personal Relations, Political Agency, and Economic Clout in Medieval and Early Modern Royal and Elite Households

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Studying a royal or elite household is a distinct form of scholarly voyeurism. We peep into the windows of people who died centuries ago and nose about in their closets and their pantries. Our gaze is scholarly and our intentions are good, but reading accounts of dinners both at home and on the road is not unlike reading the menu of a state dinner at the White House, or the catering accounts for a society wedding in London. It is a bit like reading a lifestyle magazine report on what people wore, who sat where at banquets, who rode at the head of a hunting party, and where people slept when they travelled. We see both women and men, from lowly chamber maids to lofty aristocratic men and women, engaged in the labor of keeping their lords and ladies dressed, fed, bathed, educated, protected, and entertained.

The work recorded in household accounts was vital. A house is a physical structure – a building or place – but when historians talk about the household, they are talking about a group of people who lived and worked under the same roof and engaged in routine activities involved in caring for the well-being of family members.¹ The household was the site of familiarity, friendship, nurturing, intimacy, and sexual intimacy and, regardless of the social rank of the inhabitants, the household was deeply political. It was organized generally in ways that mirrored and reinforced patriarchal values with the husband and wife as the model for ruler and ruled. In practice, however, patriarchal values collided with circumstances. The household was headed by a partnership of husband and wife who were bound, or ought to be bound, by real affection even though dynastic ambition and patriarchal attitudes shaped organization.

People of all ranks felt the impact of the politics of monarchy, but this was felt most acutely by the people inhabiting and working in medieval and early modern elite and royal households. What they experienced was at best nepotism, but was often – literally – incestuous. The official of the royal court and officers of the household overlapped with those of elite households, creating a wide network of affiliations and obligations that created the personal foundation of monarchy. That overlap necessarily links the study of royal and elite households, so that all of the essays here connect, intersect, and at the very least touch on similar themes or refer to the same people. Elite families maintain their own country estates, provide men and women to serve at the royal court, marry princes and princesses, and as Audrey Thorstad shows in her essay on the Duke of Buckingham’s travels, were both hosts and guests as they moved from place to place.

Most of the work to date on large households of elite and royal families focuses on England and the essays here by David McDermott, Linda Mitchell, Eileen Kim, Sally Fisher, Caroline Dunn, Alexander Brondarbit, and myself build on impressive foundational work. But it is exciting to see Megan Welton and Penelope Nash take us to Francia, Germany, and Italy; Zita Rohr to France; Alana Lord to the Crown of Aragon; Germán Gamero Igea to Castile; and Isabel de Pina Baleiras, Manuela Santos Silva, and Hélder Carvalhal to Portugal. The essays have begun important comparative work that extends the links between the royal and elite families as they move across Europe, marry foreigners, and staff their households with ambassadors, tutors, clerics, artists, and soldiers from far afield.
