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Power, Propaganda and Medieval Historiography

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between historical writing, power and politics in medieval Europe. The article is part of a Special Issue marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Journal of Medieval History. It explores the contribution of Antonia Gransden's article, 'Propaganda in English Medieval Historiography'. It argues that while the tendency to focus on the political aspects of historical writing has grown more influential in the fifty years since Gransden wrote, a number of new contributions share Gransden's reservations on the use of history as 'propaganda' in the Middle Ages, and points to new ways to appreciate the purposes and powers of medieval historical writing.

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Antonia Gransden's 'Propaganda in English Medieval Historiography' was published in December 1975, in the fourth issue of the *Journal of Medieval History*.[1] In the article Gransden explored the degree to which political power shaped the writing of history in England, from the early to the late Middle Ages, or in other words, the degree to which these writings could be termed 'propaganda'.[2] The article was published the year after Gransden's great work *Historical Writing in England, c. 550-1307*, a still-unsurpassed survey and study of historical writing in medieval England.[3] The article reads as a natural continuation of the work involved in the survey volume, offering further reflections on an aspect of historical writing that had been central to her approach. As Gransden remarked in *Historical Writing in England*, she had

> … borne in mind the interests of students using chronicles and biographies as historical sources. Therefore, I have tried to indicate what the student can expect to find in a

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[1] Antonia Gransden, 'Propaganda in English Medieval Historiography', *Journal of Medieval History* 1 (1975): 363–81.

[2] For Gransden's definition of the term 'propaganda', see Gransden, 'Propaganda', 1, where it is identified as the attempt by governments or local institutions to 'disseminate their views and rally support'. On page 2, however, she points out the limitations of the term for the Middle Ages; see below. For a critical discussion of the possibilities of propaganda in the Middle Ages, see Felice Lifshitz, 'Dudo's Historical Narrative and the Norman Succession of 996', *Journal of Medieval History* 20 (1994): 101–20 (106–7). For a more positive evaluation, which argues for a 'veritable revolution' for propaganda in 1100–1300, recalling in smaller scale that occasioned by the printing press, see Martin Aurell, 'Rapport introductif', in *Convaincre et persuader: Communication et propagande aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles*, ed. Martin Aurell (Poitiers: CESCM, 2007), 11–49 (14).

[3] Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England, c. 550–1307* (Routledge, 1974), followed by Gransden, *Historical Writing in England, c. 1307 to the Early Sixteenth Century* (Routledge, 1982).

> specific work and what possible misrepresentations, resulting for example from political bias, local loyalties or literary mode, he must guard against.[4]

Gransden was probably quite right to expect her readers to approach the chronicles as 'low-grade archives which can be mined for 'facts' – to borrow a formulation from Timothy Reuter – and first and foremost facts relevant to political developments.[5] When Gransden wrote, past historical writers were still often approached as distant colleagues, engaged in a recognisable project of historical writing that naturally focussed on institutions and politics, and which did not need to be problematised or subjected to theoretical reflections.[6] Modern approaches may be more nuanced and attuned to the differing worldviews and aims of past writers, but that greater sensitivity depends greatly on the foundational work carried out by scholars such as Gransden.[7]

Given how central politics was to Gransden's view of historical writing it is striking that the theme of her article is rather the limitations of political power in shaping historical writing. Gransden pays due attention to the cases where royal or institutional propaganda influenced historical writing: Alfred the Great and his court circles' shaping of English history, William the Conqueror's arguments for why he was the rightful heir to the English throne, and the uses of history in the Hundred Years War and the Wars of the Roses.[8] But, Grandsen argues, 'the evidence shows that in general the kings of England did not commission historical works as vehicles of propaganda'.

Official histories were only commissioned in 'exceptional circumstances': when the crown was threatened by foreign invasion, when it itself undertook such invasions or when the king 'had gained the throne by force'. Furthermore, these official works 'were written either by foreigners or when foreign influence was particularly strong at court'. In general, Gransden concluded 'government propaganda was not congenial to the English chronicler' and

> It must be concluded that the strength of the historiography of medieval England lay in the monasteries; the great names, William of Malmesbury, Matthew Paris and Thomas Walsingham, are all monks. There the chroniclers, writing in conditions of comparative independence, could to some extent resist external pressure, and produce works free from the overall imprint of government propaganda.[9]

A central feature of the article is Gransden's constant consideration of the limitations of historical writing as a form of communication: ' … the term propaganda can have only a

[4] Gransden, *Historical Writing*, 1: xi.
[5] Timothy Reuter, 'Modern Mentalities and Medieval Polities', *Medieval Polities and Modern Mentalities*, ed. Janet L. Nelson (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3–18 (12).
[6] Gransden, *Historical Writing*, 1: xi: 'My approach to each author is pragmatic, not theoretical'. For a classic critique of this approach, published five years after Gransden's work, Nicole Loraux, 'Thucydide n'est pas un collègue', *Quaderni di Storia* 12 (1980): 55–81; for English translation by Cécile Dudoyt, 'Thucydides is not a Colleague', in *Greek and Roman Historiography*, ed. John Marincola (Oxford University Press, 2011), 1–39.
[7] Justin Lake, 'Current Approaches to Medieval Historiography', *History Compass* 13 (2015): 89–101 (89–90).
[8] For these, see now: Pauline Stafford, *After Alfred: Anglo-Saxon Chronicles and Chroniclers, 900–1150* (Oxford University Press, 2020); David Bates, 'The Conqueror's Earliest Historians and the Writing of his Biography', in *Writing Medieval Biography: Essays in Honour of Professor Frank Barlow*, ed. David Bates, Julia Crick and Sarah Hamilton (Boydell Press, 2006), 129–42; Colin Richmond, 'Propaganda in the Wars of the Roses', *History Today* 42 (1992): 12–18; Craig Taylor, 'War, Propaganda and Diplomacy in Fifteenth-Century France and England', in *War, Government and Power in Late Medieval France*, ed. Christopher Allmand (Liverpool University Press, 2000), 70–91; Andrew Broertjes, 'The Lancastrian Retreat from Populist Discourse?: Propaganda Conflicts in the Wars of the Roses', *Limina: A Journal of Historical & Cultural Studies* 20 (2015): 1–21.
[9] Gransden, 'Propaganda', 377.

very limited application for most of the middle ages, because it could not disseminate a view widely; until at earliest the late fourteenth century it would initially have reached only a small circle of men'.[10] The propaganda in 'royal biographies cannot have been aimed at a wide audience. They were probably intended primarily for the court circle and can have had little vogue outside it'.[11]

Because historical writing would normally only reach a small community, such as the members of a monastery or court and their visitors, its function was 'partly to gratify corporate pride and to improve the *espirit de corps*'. Such morale-boosting work may well involve partisan readings of history, but it would only rarely reach a mass audience. Even in those cases where official histories were created and disseminated, the author's and patron's control of the reception and use of the story would tend to decrease over time. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* may have started as Alfredian propaganda but, when continued in monasteries across the country, it 'gradually lost its official character and became localized'. By 1066, it 'had acquired the independent outlook which was to become characteristic of the monastic chronicles of the post-Conquest period'.[12]

Gransden's account of English historical writing was drawn in explicit contrast to that of France, more specifically the king-centered historiography produced by the 'monks of St Denis' in the central and later Middle Ages.[13] This had been the theme of an article by Gabrielle Spiegel, 'The Cult of St Denis and Capetian Kingship', in the first volume of the journal, published in April 1975 – eight months before Gransden's article.[14] It is tempting to read 'Propaganda in English Medieval Historiography' as a response, although Spiegel's article does not feature in Gransden's notes and bibliography.

Irrespective of the origins of Gransden's article, the two studies present interesting counter-poles in the interpretation of the political element of medieval historical writing. At the risk of drawing a caricature that does justice to neither, we on the one hand have history as a polity-making tool, by which the beliefs and motivations of the masses could be shaped, and on the other, history as the expression of local peculiarities, interests and grievances, difficult to control and difficult for political actors to wield effectively.

There are, of course, several ways in which our approaches to and interpretations of historical writing have moved on in the last fifty years: historians would no longer describe the audiences of history as consisting of a 'small circle of men' and much work has been done to show the central role played by women in the making of historical writing.[15] The easy distinction between English and foreign habits and influences, and

[10] Gransden, 'Propaganda', 364.
[11] Gransden, 'Propaganda', 372.
[12] Gransden, 'Propaganda', 370–1.
[13] Gransden, 'Propaganda', 375; on the tendency of 'France, or even northern France' to stand for the whole continent of Europe, see Susan Reynolds, 'How Different was England?', *Thirteenth Century England* 7 (1999): 1–16 (1).
[14] Gabrielle M. Spiegel, 'The Cult of St Denis and Capetian Kingship', *Journal of Medieval History* 1 (1975): 43–69. See article in this issue by Cecilia Gaposchkin.
[15] For important contributions, see Elisabeth van Houts, 'Women and the Writing of History in the Early Middle Ages: The Case of Abbess Matilda of Essen and Aethelweard', *Early Medieval Europe* 1 (1992): 53–68; Elisabeth van Houts, *Medieval Memories: Men, Women and the Past* (Routledge, 2001); Janet L. Nelson, 'Women and the Word in the Earlier Middle Ages', in *Studies in Church History* 27 (1990): 53–68; Rosamond McKitterick, 'Women and Literacy in the Early Middle Ages', in McKitterick, *Books, Scribes and Learning in the Frankish Kingdoms, 6th - 9th Centuries* (Variorum, 1994), Chapter XIII. For an introduction to recent work, see Clare A. Less, 'Gender and the Subject of History in the Early Middle Ages', in *Medieval Historical Writing: Britain and Ireland, 500-1500*, ed. Jennifer Jahner, Emily Steiner and Elizabeth M. Tyler (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 299–318.

the former's deep-rooted love of liberty and free speech, also now looks less convincing: the propagandistic 'romance mode' may itself have been 'imported from the continent', but so too was the stubbornly independent monastic chronicle.[16]

The central argument of Gransden's article, however, seems just as fresh – indeed, provocative – fifty years on. For, in the meantime, the idea that medieval historical writing was deeply influenced by politics, and was itself an important political tool, has only become more influential. Below, I'd like to offer some reflections on current discussions of historical writing in light of Gransden's work. First, I'll touch on the presumed difference between France and England and on some of the work done on the political character of historical writing. Secondly, I'll bring together some of the work that, sometimes with explicit reference to Gransden's article, pose questions to the political approach or provide alternative ways of reading and understanding medieval historical writing. As in Gransden's article, the focus will be on England, although I'll occasionally draw on examples from studies of other medieval polities.

England and the Rest

Antonia Gransden was far from the last historian to remark on the English chroniclers' striking lack of reverence for their kings. In 1995, Geoffrey Koziol compared the use of ritual at the Capetian and the Norman-Angevin courts and the way this was recorded in chronicles. The French chroniclers 'simply do not tell tales about their rulers' and seem to have broadly accepted the king's claims to sacral status.[17] The kings of England, on the other hand, 'were never able to count on their magnates to respect the solemnity of their rites'.[18] Koziol concludes that 'something in the Anglo-Norman experience of politics tended to de-sacralize political authority, rendering it fit for parody and resistance, while in France something made it possible to adapt the old typologies that held political authority sacred'.[19] Koziol suggests that it may be explained by the English experience of conquest and subsequent struggles over the crown, which rendered it difficult to promulgate a picture of divine royal authority, whereas in France royal sanctity came to stand as a symbol, not just of French unity but of the 'principle that political authority was sacrosanct', encompassing not only the power of kings, but also of bishops, counts and dukes.[20]

More recently, however, historians have begun to pick apart the idea that England and France were fundamentally different. In a discussion with Koziol, Philippe Buc argued that the chroniclers' accounts of failed or disrupted rituals 'point to authorial dissent. Whether authorial dissent is itself symptomatic of actual social disorder is another matter altogether'.[21] Nicholas Vincent goes further, arguing that the impression that the two kingdoms had very different political cultures is largely the product of the

[16] Gransden, 'Propaganda': 377, see Sarah Foot, 'Annals and Chronicles in Western Europe', in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing, Volume 2: 400-1400*, ed. Sarah Foot and Chase F. Robinson (Oxford University Press, 2012), 346–67.
[17] Geoffrey Koziol, 'England, France and the Problem of Sacrality in Twelfth-Century Ritual', in *Cultures of Power: Lordship, Status and Process in Twelfth-Century Europe*, ed. Thomas N. Bisson (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 124–48 (141).
[18] Koziol, 'England, France', 137.
[19] Koziol, 'England, France', 144.
[20] Koziol, 'England, France', 148.
[21] Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 10

more or less chance survival of particular types of sources in particular countries (more Angevin administrative texts surviving compared to France) combined with contemporary stereotypes (showy Frenchmen vs. businesslike Englishmen). When subjected to closer study, the English administrative records show considerable interest in ritual, while the idea that the Capetian had a firm grasp on the mental universe of central medieval France has a lot to do with the later development of the Paris-centered polity:[22]

> Only in hindsight, once the Capetian lives had been digested into *Grandes chroniques*, and once modern historians began to probe the differences between the supposedly sacral, mimetic style of Capetian kingship, set against the supposedly bureaucratic and secularized style of the Anglo-Norman and Plantagenet kings, only then did the absence of Plantagenet royal biographies and their relative abundance in France lead to and reinforce the very different ways that modern French and English historians chose to write about their kings.

As Vincent shows, Gransden's point about the limited dissemination of court-focused writing in England turns out also to hold for France. The celebrated lives of Capetian kings from Louis VI to St Louis 'circulated in only limited numbers and only rarely beyond the immediate circle of the court'.[23] Even the thirteenth-century compilation and translation of the lives, the *Grandes Chroniques*, was read mainly north of the Loire.[24]

England may thus have been more like France than we used to think. More importantly, a growing number of studies have pointed to the fundamental structural similarities between polities in Latin Europe. In a recent magisterial work that breaks out of the usual English-French dualism to present a truly European history of kingship, Björn Weiler suggested that we approach the question of difference between European polities by comparison with 'musical variation … [w]hile each version is distinctive, highlighting some features, adding or omitting others … the underlying structure remains nonetheless recognizable as the original theme. The same principle applies to high medieval kingship'. That principle of variation within a shared framework also, Weiler's work suggests, applies to the way chroniclers interacted with power.[25]

Setting old fascination with cross-channel differences to one side, however, only brings home the larger significance of Gransden's question: to what extent did medieval historical writing function as 'propaganda': To what extent did it respond to the desires of people in power, and to what extent did these people view it as an instrument in the political struggle?

History and Power

Although Gransden's survey of historical writing has been widely used since its publication, her cautious remarks on the political role of historical texts received relatively modest attention. Indeed, the idea that historical texts were instruments of political power has only grown more influential in the half-century since Gransden

[22] See now Justine Firnhaber-Baker, *House of Lilies: The Dynasty That Made Medieval France* (Penguin, 2024).
[23] Nicholas Vincent, 'The Strange Case of the Missing Biographies: The Lives of the Plantagenet Kings of England, 1154-1272', in *Writing Medieval Biography*, ed. Bates, Crick and Hamilton, 256–7. See also Nicholas Vincent, 'The Pilgrimages of the Angevin Kings of England, 1154-1272', in *Pilgrimage: The English Experience from Becket to Bunyan*, ed. Colin Morris and Peter Roberts (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 12–45.
[24] John Taylor, *English Historical Literature in the Fourteenth Century* (Clarendon Press, 1987), 53.
[25] Björn Weiler, *Paths to Kingship in Medieval Latin Europe, c. 950–1200* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 9; for the later Middle Ages, see John Watts, *The Making of Polities* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

wrote.[26] The challenge of the linguistic turn – and its key contribution that pasts are not just discovered, but created in the act of writing – has been pivotal, even though few historians now would sign up to the most extensive deconstruction of the possibility of accessing knowledge of the past envisioned in it. Rather, historians have used awareness of the constructed character of stories of the past to place medieval historians more firmly in contemporary political contexts.[27] Writing in 1994, Patrick Geary explained that the process of 'creating the past' was 'part of a way of creating a present within a broadly political process in which the nature of that present, and thus of the past which created it, was in contention'.[28] Older studies, Geary maintained, had underappreciated the 'political or intentional dimensions of both collective memory and history', but '[h]istorians write for a purpose, essentially to shape the collective memory of the historical profession and ultimately of the society in which they live'.[29]

Rosamond McKitterick's work on historical writing in the Carolingian Empire has been foundational: through the study of manuscripts of texts such as the Royal Frankish Annals, McKitterick argued that the empire saw 'a concentrated effort on the part of a group of associated members of an elite' at the royal court 'to deploy history in the service of politics'. Their aim was to 'articulate a clear ideology of political power and a very particular presentation of the past' which came to shape and promulgate a Frankish imperial identity.[30] The same point was emphasised in the blossoming field of ritualised communication, where in the early 2000s, thanks not least to the work of Gerd Althoff and Philippe Buc, debates began to focus on the texts within which rituals were communicated. These texts, Buc, argued, were also 'forces in the practice of power' and the efficacy of ritual communication depended 'less on the specifics of [the ritual's] performance than on political agents' control of means of communication and interpretation'.[31]

In light of all this much more methodologically and theoretically sophisticated work, how do Gransden's reservations about the political efficacy and political nature of historical writing stand up? Quite well, I would suggest. Interestingly, they resonate with concerns raised in a number of recent works, especially those from the last decade and a half,

[26] On this, and for further references, see Lake, 'Current Approaches', 92–5. Gransden's own views seem also later to have shifted somewhat, compare Gransden, 'Propaganda' with her 'The Chronicles of Medieval England and Scotland', in Antonia Gransden, *Legends, Traditions and History in Medieval England* (Hambledon Press, 1992), 199–239 (212–22).

[27] For influential contributions, see Nancy Partner, *Serious Entertainments: The Writing of History in Twelfth-Century England* (University of Chicago Press, 1977); Gabrielle Spiegel, 'History, Historicism and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages', *Speculum* 65 (1990) 59–86 reprinted with other contributions in *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Monika Otter, *Inventiones: Fiction and Referentiality in Twelfth-Century English Historical Writing* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996). For critical discussion, see Carl S. Watkins, *History and the Supernatural in Medieval England* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 16–18; Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Harvard University Press, 2004), 162–65.

[28] Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton University Press, 1994), 7.

[29] Geary, *Phantoms*, 12.

[30] Rosamond McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 130–31; see also McKitterick, 'Political Ideology in Carolingian Historiography', in *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 162–74, and the other essays in that volume. For further developments of this approach, see the contributions to Clemens Gantner, Rosamond McKitterick and Sven Meeder, eds., *The Resources of the Past in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge University Press 2015).

[31] Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual*, 259, 83; Gerd Althoff, *Inszenierte Herrschaft: Geschichtsschreibung und politisches Handeln im Mittelalter* (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2003).

some of which reference Gransden's article explicitly and others of which follow similar lines of enquiry. It would be to go too far to speak of a turn away from the 'political' paradigm, but there is a growing skepticism about the extent to which historical texts – in general – served political ends and a growing interest in the many other reasons why history might be written. It is illustrative of this new direction that Michael Staunton, in his 2017 study of historical writing in Angevin England, while recognising the importance of the 'political and social environment in which the historian wrote', pushed for greater attention to the 'intellectual and literary traditions that such writers inherited'. In Staunton's work, the impact of politics is in no way ignored, but it is put in context alongside other imperatives shaping and inspiring historical writers.[32]

In one of the most important and programmatic interventions in the debate, Justin Lake asks questions that align with the concerns underpinning Gransden's article but applies them in a much wider European context.[33] While recognising that the 'focus on the political dimensions of history has greatly enhanced our understanding of the context and function of medieval historical writing' Lake suggest that 'some caveats are in order'. His caveats are three-fold, focusing first on the intentions of the author: 'it is necessary to distinguish purpose (*Absicht*) from bias (*Tendenz*). To have identified the political stance of a text is not necessarily to have understood the reason why it was written'.[34]

Secondly, focusing on the uses of their texts, Lake argues we should not 'overstate the political utility of historical writing' and specifies that 'the word 'propaganda' is sometimes used to describe any text with a marked political bias, but the indiscriminate use of this term is highly problematic. Before the widespread availability of paper in the fourteenth century, and the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth, the difficulty of copying manuscripts severely limited the diffusion of historical texts'. Thirdly, looking at contexts and alternatives, the chronicle does not appear to be 'a particularly effective vehicle for the widespread or rapid dissemination of information. More practical means of mass communication were ceremonies (assemblies, consecrations, funerals, etc.) and circular letters dispatched from a ruler to local authorities, who could have them publicly posted, read aloud by heralds, and declaimed in sermons'.[35]

Lake's criticisms are gently phrased, but these are fundamental questions to ask about the way we approach historical writing. Below, I will use them as the basis for considering a number of recent works that point beyond the 'political' uses of history. I'll look first at the question of the motivations behind writing history (Lake's first caveat) before moving on the question of the uses of historical writing (Lake's second and third caveat).

The Purposes of Historical Writing

One of the chief advances in recent writings on medieval historiography is the growing appreciation of the range of purposes to which history was put.[36] Thus, for example, the

[32] Michael Staunton, *The Historians of Angevin England* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.
[33] Justin Lake, 'Authorial Intention in Medieval Historiography', *Medieval Compass* 12 (2014): 344–60 (352–53) and Lake, 'Current Approaches', 92–95.
[34] For this and the below: Lake, 'Authorial Intention', 351–3.
[35] Lake, 'Authorial Intention', 353.
[36] For a sense of this, a good approach is to compare Gransden's work with the introduction and contributions in Jennifer Jahner, Emily Steiner and Elizabeth M. Tyler, 'General Introduction', in *Medieval Historical Writing*, ed. Jahner, Steiner and Tyler, 1–15, with explicit discussion of Gransden's work at 6.

histories of the crusades produced in the Middle Ages have been the subject of a veritable explosion of interest in recent years.[37] These tended to be read, straightforwardly, as propaganda texts designed to move audiences to take the cross themselves. Undoubtedly, the writers of many of these histories and compilers of the manuscripts in which they appeared hoped that they would have these results. But crusade historians have grown increasingly attentive to the difficulties involved in disseminating these texts.[38] At the same time historians begun to dig deeper into the other purposes these texts served: spiritual instruction, commemoration and what Thomas Smith has called 'scribal crusading': an opportunity for writers situated in the west to spiritually and practically participate in the wars of the cross.[39]

Some of the most stimulating work has been connected to an increasing interest in the immediate social context in which historical writing took place and the ways in which these writings were used within that community. Elisabeth van Houts has highlighted the importance of family traditions and the desire to keep the memory of these alive to historical writing. The monks and nuns who penned many of our histories were not just representatives of institutions, but also members of families. Although systemically underrepresented among the witnesses and authorities cited by male chroniclers, women turn out often to have been 'prime movers in the remembrance of things past', both as patrons and as keepers and shapers of family tradition. Family history could, of course, be loaded with political, legal and economic consequence, but van Houts shows that 'women's interest in a mother's or grandmother's own personal history and in the whereabouts of cousins seems to have played at least as important a role as (legal) interest in land'.[40] Historical writing was one of several tools available to families to preserve the reputation and remembrance of the past for the future, a goal that is not reducible to simple political, legal and financial interests.

The institutional context of a cathedral chapter or monastery is also increasingly appreciated as providing its own stimulus for historical writing. As Benjamin Pohl notes in a recent study of monastic writing across the breadth of the Middle Ages, monastic chroniclers were not always 'on the back foot', reacting to external challenges.[41] In a recent book, Graeme Ward offers a challenge to the political paradigm for Carolingian historiography 'not by rejecting the study of power and politics but by prioritizing the intellectual contexts and institutional settings in which historical knowledge not only was created but also was consumed'.[42] Ward explores the work of bishop Frechulf of Lisieux (d. c. 850-852) whose focus is shown to be not so much the contemporary

[37] See Christopher Tyerman's contribution to this issue.
[38] Nicholas L. Paul, 'A Warlord's Wisdom: Literacy and Propaganda at the Time of the First Crusade', *Speculum* 85 (2010), 534–66; Stephen J. Spencer, 'The Crusade Text as Commemorative Artefact: Recent Developments and Future Directions in the Study of the Memorialisation of Crusading', in *The Routledge Handbook of Crusade Texts, Images and Artefacts*, ed. Simon Parsons and Linda Paterson (Routledge, forthcoming).
[39] Thomas W. Smith, *Rewriting the First Crusade: Epistolary Culture in the Middle Ages* (Boydell, 2024), 154–93; Stephen J. Spencer, 'Repurposing a Crusade Chronicle: Peter of Cornwall's *Liber Revelationum* and the Reception of Fulcher of Chartres' *Historia Hierosolymitana* in Medieval England', in *Crusade, Settlement and Historical Writing in the Latin East and Latin West, c. 1100-c.1300*, ed. Andrew D. Buck, James Kane and Stephen J. Spencer (Boydell, 2024), 534–66.
[40] Elisabeth van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe: 900–1200* (Macmillan, 1999), 149.
[41] Benjamin Pohl, *Abbatial Authority and the Writing of History in the Middle Ages* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 8.
[42] Graeme Ward, *History, Scripture and Authority in the Carolingian Empire: Frechulf of Lisieux* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 1.

political situation, but providing his learned colleagues and students, including future bishops, with the necessary knowledge of the past to fulfil their duties.

Frechulf's prologues were dedicated to the arch-chancellor Helisachar and Empress Judith, mother of Charles the Bald, and have, on that basis, been read in the 'mirror for princes' tradition. But Ward is cautious, demonstrating that these prefaces were carefully constructed attempts to frame reception of the text, and are not trustworthy guides to the text's actual intended audience. Works such as Frechulf's may rather 'have responded initially to the immediate needs of a local community, while prefatory material, added subsequently, invested the end product with court-facing qualities'. When we 'peel away' the political shell, Frechulf's work turns out to have its own logic not primarily directed at the courtly purposes set out in the prefaces, but centrally concerned with questions of liturgy and biblical exegesis that were directly and immediately relevant for Frechulf's colleagues.[43] Studying his work, they would not just learn 'about imperial-ecclesiastical relations' but also 'the basic shape and dynamics of Christianity, of a world created and governed by God, a world whose origins were detailed in the Old Testament and more fully revealed in the New'.[44] Frechulf's *Histories* were not just among the longest pieces of Carolingian historical writing, but also one of the most widely read and transmitted.[45] This approach to history was thus not just a particular personal quirk but reflective of a wider sense of the purpose of history.

Attention to the immediate, pastoral uses of historical writing is also a central element in Sigbjørn Sønnesyn's study of William of Malmesbury. For Antonia Gransden, William of Malmesbury ranked among the very best medieval historians – he gained the singular honour of having an entire chapter dedicated to him in the first volume of *Historical Writing in England*–but even 'William had shortcomings. He was a product of his age' and 'fell far short of his scholarly ideals' when it came to the history of the origins of the great abbeys. Yet he was 'on the whole conscientious. He had weighed carefully the historian's duty: it was, as he saw it, to record the truth, as far as it could be discovered, about important people and events, without fear or favour'.[46] Sønnesyn agrees that William of Malmesbury was conscientious to report history as accurately as he could, but shows the extent to which this reporting was motivated and shaped by the obligation to provide ethical instruction for his readers.[47] The institutional context and function of medieval historical writing is also central to Sønnesyn's later work on saints' lives. The *vita* of the twelfth-century Danish magnate, Cnut Lavard (d. 1131), has been read as propaganda for the saint's son, Valdemar I (r. 1158-82).[48] The generally accepted idea that the *vita* of Cnut Lavard was primarily a political text turns out to have much to do with the decisions made by the early twentieth-century editor. In the edition from 1908-1912, all superfluous catholic pieties had been stripped away to provide a more direct access to

[43] Ward, *History, Scripture*, 177, 184; see Antonia Gransden, 'Prologues in the Historiography of Twelfth-Century England', in *Legends, Traditions and History*, ed. Gransden, 125–51, and Justin Lake, *Prologues to Ancient and Medieval History: A Reader* (University of Toronto Press, 2013), xv–xvi.
[44] Ward, *History, Scripture and Authority*, 198.
[45] Ward, *History, Scripture and Authority*, 5.
[46] Gransden, *Historical Writing*, 1:168.
[47] Sigbjørn Olsen Sønnesyn, *William of Malmesbury and the Ethics of History* (Boydell Press, 2012), 259–72.
[48] Sigbjørn Olsen Sønnesyn, '"Only Through Time Time is Conquered": Liturgy, History and the Timeless Aspirations of the Temporal', in *Of Chronicles and Kings: National Saints and the Emergence of Nation States in the High Middle Ages*, ed. John Bergsagel, David Hiley and Thoma Riis (Museum Tusculanum Press, 2015), 23–50.

the historical, that is political, information contained in the text. In 2003 a new edition was published, complete with the running commentary of choir responses and prayers, making it much easier for the modern historian to appreciate the context within which a medieval audience would have encountered it: as an element of the liturgical celebration of Cnut Lavard. As Sønnesyn shows, the *vita*'s aim was first and foremost to guide its performers and their audience on how to reach salvation, the same prize that Cnut Lavard had won.[49] There is a parallel here to the fate of Frechulf's *Histories*, discussed by Ward, only the prefaces of which were found worthy of inclusion in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*. The rest of the work was left out because it only reproduced older authorities. Just as with the *vita* of Cnut Lavard, this predisposed historians to read his texts as courtly and political.[50]

In comparison, the editors of the *Rolls Series* were more merciful to the work of another of Gransden's 'great names', the thirteenth-century chronicler Matthew Paris. In his universal history, the *Chronica majora*, the material that Matthew drew from earlier collections was included but printed in small type. It was also ignored by most historians until Björn Weiler subjected Matthew's work to a thorough reappraisal in 2009 in an article in the *Journal of Medieval History*. Weiler, who tragically passed away from illness at the age of 54 in 2024, was the historian who did most to advance the way we read historical writings from central medieval England in the twenty-first century. Weiler took issue with the tendency to read Matthew 'either as a storehouse of useful facts, or of entertaining anecdotes that can be used to illustrate the deeper and more profound truths found in records of royal administration'.[51] In his 2009 article and a series of other contributions, Weiler demonstrated that Matthew's interest in contemporary politics was shaped by his commitment to 'higher truths', edificatory and spiritual, as well as an interest in prophecy and sacred time, the world's slow march towards Armageddon. Matthew did not claim to be able to predict when that would happen, nor was he confident that he always understood the significance and meaning of the wonders and signs he reported. The numerous marginal comments in the autograph manuscript of the *Chronica majora* bear witness to his constant revision of his views and reflections on the significance of the events he reported, politically as well as spiritually. Summarising recent advances in understanding of medieval writers' (especially monastic authors') understanding of history, Weiler described it as a

> desire to use history as a means of, on the one hand, offering moral counsel, and, on the other, of setting events within the broader context of human history and its place within a divine plan of creation. To these can be added the need to explore the workings of the supernatural and transcendental within earthly society, but also a desire to record and

[49] *Vitae sanctorum danorum*, ed. Martin Cl. Gertz (Gad, 1908–1912), 189–204, with Gertz' explanation of his methodology on p. 179: that the liturgical material would be 'unneccessary and useless ballast'. Compare the new edition by Michael Chesnutt, 'The Medieval Danish Liturgy of St Knud Lavard', *Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana Opuscula* 11 (2003), 1–159. On liturgy and politics in Denmark, see Erik Niblaeus, '"One Harmonious Form": Liturgy and Group Formation in Central-Medieval Denmark', in *Political Liturgies in the High Middle Ages: Beyond the Legacy of Ernst H. Kantorowicz*, ed. Pawel Figurski (Brepols, 2021). For salvation as the chief purpose of devotional texts designed for royal audiences, see also Ludger Körntgen, *Königsherrschaft und Gottes Gnade: zu Kontext und Funktion sakraler Vorstellungen in Historiographie und Bildzeugnissen der ottonisch-frühsalischen Zeit* (Akademie Verlag, 2001).

[50] Ward, *History, Scripture and Authority*, 18.

[51] Björn Weiler, 'Matthew Paris on the Writing of History', *Journal of Medieval History* 35 (2009): 254–78 (257).

> preserve for future generations the history, the deeds both laudable and damnable of contemporaries … [52]

Only when Matthew's contemporary historical texts are read in the context of his writings on the remote past, on saints and legendary figures, and are 'restored to that tradition of Benedictine monastic historical writing' is it possible to 'employ his writings as a source not only for Matthew's representation of the world around him, but also for the society about which he wrote'.[53]

Because of Weiler's work, Matthew Paris's writings are no longer used as a second-rank archive. Rather, Matthew is approached as a distinct voice of the thirteenth century, who allows us, among other things, to see how deeply political and spiritual concerns were connected and how closely intertwined England was with Europe and the rest of the world.[54] When Matthew wrote candidly about the deeds of popes, kings and other potentates, it was – according to Weiler – not primarily to achieve an immediate political goal, nor just to serve St Alban's institutional interest, but to provide coming generations with the material to understand the wider working of sacred time:

> By offering a narrative both detailed and in a strict chronological sequence, Matthew allowed future readers to draw connections that he himself could not make— just as, in hindsight, Matthew had been able to see connections that had eluded his predecessors. In this regard, history served a function not unlike prophecy.[55]

Few historical writers of the Middle Ages were as opinionated and explicit about their views as Matthew Paris, but Matthew's work – as re-read by Weiler – is a perfect demonstration of Lake's point that the fact that a historical writer has firm opinions and expresses them well does not necessarily mean that he believed himself to be, or was believed by anyone else to be, writing propaganda.

Ward and Weiler's work on the way chroniclers rewrote older texts is characteristic of a growing awareness of how much can be gained from studying medieval engagement with the not-so-recent past. Working in this vein, Emily Winkler has shown the value of studying twelfth-century chroniclers' accounts of the eleventh-century conquests of England (1016 and 1066). These do not provide much reliable information about the conquests, but they are rich opportunities for exploring what the chroniclers thought about the forces that shaped history and specifically about the responsibilities of monarchs and dynasties.[56] This, evidently, was not propagandistic, but certainly political writing. Weiler argued that history may in fact have been a particularly important genre for discussions of political principles and practices, especially in the period between the fall of the Carolingian Empire and the thirteenth

[52] Weiler, 'Matthew Paris on the Writing of History', 257; see also Björn Weiler, 'Monastic Historical Culture and the Utility of a Remote Past: The Case of Matthew Paris', in *How the Past was Used: Historical Cultures, c. 750-2000*, ed. Peter Lambert and Björn Weiler (British Academy, 2017).
[53] Weiler, 'Matthew Paris on the Writing of History', 258.
[54] Björn Weiler, 'Historical Writing and the Experience of Europeanization: The View from St Albans', in *'The Making of Europe': Essays in Honour of Robert Bartlett*, ed. John G.H. Hudson and Sally Crumplin (Brill, 2016) and Nathan Greasley, 'Networks and Information Gathering: The World of Matthew Paris' (PhD diss., University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 2018).
[55] Björn Weiler, 'History, Prophecy and the Apocalypse in the Chronicles of Matthew Paris', *The English Historical Review* 133 (2018): 253–83 (275).
[56] Emily A. Winkler, *Royal Responsibility in Anglo-Norman Historical Writing* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

century where there is a dearth of abstract discussion of politics in medieval Europe.[57]

The Uses of History

Lake's second caveat focused on the political utility of historical writing: to what extent were histories able to shape public, or at least elite, opinion and to what extent did political actors expect them to?

As we saw above, historians have been growing increasingly aware that prefaces evoking royal sponsorship do not necessarily reveal straightforwardly that monarchs had taken an active interest in the work, nor that the chronicler expected them to do so after it was completed. There are numerous examples of kings and, especially, queens offering encouragement to writers of history or even, like Frederick Barbarossa in his famous letter to Otto of Freising, offering up information to them that they wanted to have recorded for posterity – a point we return to again below. But, as Weiler notes, 'examples of histories being directly composed or directed' by political leaders 'are rare'.[58] Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine's court was once thought of as a centre of historical writing, as it was a centre of administrative, legal and courteous edification. But while the royal couple may have shown interest in the more distant past, there is, as John Gillingham points out, little evidence that the king 'was interested in sponsoring a history of his own or even recent times'.[59] The outstanding exception, as noted by Weiler, is King Sverre of Norway (r. 1184-1202) who, according to *Sverris saga* 'himself sat by' his historiographer Karl Jónsson and directed the writing of the first part of the saga. Here it is surely relevant that Sverre had begun his strange career as a priest and never seems to have lost appreciation of the power of the written word.[60]

As Gransden noted, we have slightly more court-centered historical writings from later medieval England, but once these texts are submitted to a more thorough examination the propagandistic reading seems less convincing. In a study of historical writing in England between 1270 and 1430, Chris Given-Wilson concluded that chronicles do not really fit the normal definition of propaganda. Celebratory accounts of the deeds of the English kings during the Hundred Years War, such as the *Gesta Henrici Quinti* and the *Vie du Prince Noir*, have been read as propaganda, but as '[p]lausible as it might sound, the problem with this hypothesis is the lack of evidence of dissemination of the text: only two manuscripts of the *Gesta* survive, and there is no evidence that it achieved any kind of 'public' audience at all'. The *Vie du Prince Noir* also only survives in two manuscripts. As a vernacular poem, designed for recital, it would be more likely to reach a wider

[57] Björn Weiler, 'Thinking About Power Before Magna Carta: The Role of History', in *Des chartes aux constitutions: autour de l'idée constitutionnelle en Europe (XIIe-XVIIe siècle)*, ed. François Foronda and Jean-Philippe Genet (Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2020), 33–56.
[58] Weiler, *Paths to Kingship*, 14.
[59] Karen M. Broadhurst, 'Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine: Patrons of Literature in French?', *Viator* 27 (1996): 53–84; John Gillingham, 'The Cultivation of History, Legend and Courtesy at the Court of Henry II', in *Writers of the Reign of Henry II. Twelve Essays*, ed. Ruth Kennedy and Simon Meecham-Jones (Palgrave, 2006), 25–52. For more positive evaluations: Martin Aurell, 'Henry II and Arthurian Legend', in *Henry II: New Interpretations*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill and Nicholas Vincent (Boydell, 2007), 362–94, and Charity Urbanski, *Writing History for the King: Henry II and the Politics of Vernacular Historiography* (Cornell University Press, 2013).
[60] *Sverris saga*, ed. Þorleifur Hauksson (Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2007), 3: ' … en yfir sat sjálfr Sverrir konungr ok réð fyrir hvat ritas skyldi'; for introduction to the vast debate on Sverre and the saga: David Bregaint, *Vox regis: Royal Communication in High Medieval Norway* (Brill, 2016), 103–66.

audience, but nevertheless, as Given-Wilson remarks 'it is difficult not to be struck by the thought that there were considerably easier ways of making the point'.[61]

In fact, when texts can be shown to have been designed for immediate public consumption, such as the *Rebellion in Lincolnshire* (1471), Given-Wilson finds that they show very different characteristics to the complex, layered construction of the past familiar from most medieval historical writing: 'one of the immediately striking points about them is how brutally direct they were in conveying their message'. These texts were 'not really chronicles but political tracts or manifestoes'.[62]

As Given-Wilson notes, there were, indeed, easier ways to spread information than through chronicles and since Gransden wrote we have gained a much deeper sense of what they included. Since the 1990s, there has been a veritable explosion of interest in the ritualised and symbolic aspects of medieval rulership, the use of assemblies and feasts by rulers and magnates to show their wealth, piety and the solidarity of their followings. As we saw above, there has been considerable debate about the role of historical writing in controlling how these rituals were communicated and understood. But, as with historical events more generally, it has proven much easier to show that chroniclers cared deeply about how they presented rituals than that political actors cared about the details of what they wrote.[63]

One kind of writing that rulers do seem to have cared about in detail was the letters that were issued by the royal court. John Gillingham and Kathleen Neal have shown that royal letters, sometimes taking the form of veritable 'newsletters', were central to regnal communication in England from the late twelfth century onwards. Often designed for performance in front of assemblies, these enabled kings to provide their subjects with up-to-date information about their achievements and movements.[64] The earliest letters survive because some of them made it into the chronicles of contemporary writers. In one instance, Gillingham points to a direct attempt to have them so recorded. In 1195–1196 the chancellor William Longchamp passed a copy of a (forged) letter defending Richard I's reputation on to Ralph of Diss, dean of St Paul's, 'so that it can be included in your chronicles'.[65] But to what extent was control of historical writing, generally, an important element in the royal considerations behind issuing such letters?

Nicholas Vincent has called for caution in our interpretation of chroniclers' use of royal newsletters: the dissemination of news of the court's movement and the king's achievements were a regular feature of itinerant monarchy and would 'have been available to anyone sufficiently interested to collect and digest the regular bulletins that issued from the court. Such activity does not argue direct royal sponsorship of the chronicles in which such official 'state papers' were paraphrased or copied'.[66]

[61] Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England* (Hambledon, 2004), 202–3.
[62] Given-Wilson, *Chronicles*, 204.
[63] For pioneering work on this in England, Björn Weiler, 'Symbolism and Politics in the Reign of Henry III', *Thirteenth Century England* 9 (2003): 15–41; for important critical reflections on the powers of ritual, Christina Pössel, 'The Magic of Early Medieval Ritual', *Early Medieval Europe* 17 (2009): 111–25; Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual*.
[64] John Gillingham, 'Royal Newsletters, Forgeries and English Historians: Some Links between Court and History in the Reign of Richard I', in *La Cour Plantagenêt (1154-1204): Actes du collowue tenu à Thouars du 30 avril au 2 mai 1999*, ed. Martin Aurell (Centre d'études supérieures de civilisation médiévale, 2000), 171–86, Kathleen B. Neal, *The Letters of Edward I: Political Communication in the Thirteenth Century* (Boydell & Brewer, 2021), 74–5.
[65] Gillingham, 'Royal Newsletters'. For historians use of documents, see now Henry Bainton, *History and the Written Word: Documents, Literacy, and Language in the Age of the Angevins* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).
[66] Vincent, 'The Strange Case of the Missing Biographies', 245.

Such caution seems warranted by the way chroniclers themselves report the use of newsletters. Roger of Wendover (d. c. 1236) offers us a description of the practice. After the Battle of Gisors in 1198, where Richard had impressed with his personal chivalric exploits, 'the most victorious king of England, Richard sent letters to all his friends in the kingdom of England, namely archbishops, bishops, abbots, counts and barons' calling on them to join him in thanking God for his victory.[67] The primary audience, then, seems to have been the realm's political elite, even though the presence of both abbots and bishops might suggest that kings also hoped that their deeds would be recorded by chroniclers associated with the monasteries or cathedral chapters.

Writers of history, especially those who hoped their works would further their political careers, occasionally evidence anxiety about how critical statements would be received. Robert Bartlett has shown that Gerald of Wales sometimes delayed the publication of works or issued them anonymously because he feared incurring displeasure. Gerald complained that his ungrateful nephew had made notes of how he had censured 'the pope, the Roman curia, and our kings and princes' in 'the historical writings on various topics which we once published' and 'whatever we said in our hospice or at table' and threatened to show them to the court of King John to bring down royal displeasure on Gerald.[68] That probably gives us an accurate glimpse of the paranoia that the reign of that most notorious king incurred among the elite of the kingdom, but Gerald of Wales does not suggest that he is anxious that his writings will bring him into displeasure because they were writings, but as testimony of his wider communications alongside what he said at table.[69] As in the case of positive descriptions of rulers, it is much easier to show that writers fretted over what they had written than that people in power cared – let alone feared it.

One generation later, the example of Matthew Paris suggests how much freedom of expression chroniclers expected: Henry III knew Matthew and the fact that he was writing a chronicle.[70] In 1247, Henry III donated a relic of the Holy Blood to Westminster in a great ceremony. Afterwards, the king noticed Matthew in the audience and ordered him to 'write a plain and full account of all these events, and indelibly to insert them in writing in a book, that the recollection of them may be in no way lost to posterity'.[71] Ten years later, in 1257, Henry III stayed at St Albans for a week. During his stay, Matthew was constantly with the king, in hall and in chamber, and Henry III 'directed the pen of the author with fair diligence and friendliness'.[72] Matthew mentions two topics of conversation, the names of the princes on whom his brother Richard of Cornwall's attempts to be elected ruler of the Holy Roman Empire

[67] Roger of Wendover, *Chronica sive Flores Historiarum*, 5 vols., ed. Henry O. Coxe (London, 1841–4), 2:132: 'victoriosissimus rex Anglorum Richardus direxit epistolas ad omnes amicos suos de regno Angliae, archiepiscopos videlicet, episcopos, abbates, comites et barones'

[68] *Giraldus Cambrensis Speculum Duorum: Or a Mirror of Two Men*, ed. Yves Lefèvre, R.B.C. Huygens and Michael Richter and trans. Brian Dawson (University of Wales Press, 1974), 144–45; Robert Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales, 1146–1223* (Clarendon Press, 1982), 62–4.

[69] David Crouch, 'Baronial Paranoia in King John's Reign', in *Magna Carta and the England of King John*, ed. Janet S. Loengard (Boydell, 2010), 45–62.

[70] Weiler, 'Matthew Paris on the Writing of History', 263.

[71] Matthew Paris, *Chronica majora*, 7 vols., ed. Henry R. Luard (Rolls Series, London, 1872–84), 4: 644–5: 'ut te expresse et plenarie scribente haec omnia scripto notabili indelebiliter libro commendentur, ne horum memoria aliqua vetustate quomodolibet in posterum deleatur', translation from Nicholas Vincent, *The Holy Blood: King Henry III and the Westminster Blood Relic* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3.

[72] *Chronica majora*, 5:617: ' … direxit scribentis calamum satis diligenter et amicabiliter'.

depended, and the names of 'all the kings of England who had been canonised', which Matthew dutifully include in the chronicle.[73]

What is striking is that the period from 1250 onwards, where Matthew knew the king was aware of his work and might – conceivably – want to have a look at it when he next visited the centrally placed abbey of St Albans, was also the period in which Matthew penned his most vitriolic criticisms of the king.[74] He must either have felt certain that the king would not ask to have a look at the manuscript of the *Chronica majora* – despite all the beautiful pictures that accompanied the text – or that he would not be censured for criticising the king.[75] Bartlett notes that, despite Gerald of Wales' anxieties, in reality, while public criticism was punished, '[w]ritten criticisms … were not hunted down and destroyed. This was probably a fair estimate of their importance. Anti-curial chronicles in monastic libraries might stiffen the monks' resolve in conflicts with the crown but were hardly likely to incite any large-scale disturbance'. The question of dissemination was again central, as 'the absence of the printing press made written criticism much less threatening and hence of less concern to rulers'.[76] Printing did not just change texts' ability to reach mass audiences, but that very change and the need to accommodate the interest of governments that, also for religious and political reasons, were becoming much more interested in and willing to censure writing, also changed the shape of historical texts.[77] In a study of the transformation of history in the early age of print, A.S.G. Edwards finds that, by the mid-1500s '[h]istorical writing has now taken on an explicit contemporary political colouring'; the past is readily 'reshaped … to meet new kinds of immediate political expediency and become an agency of current policy'.[78]

Edwards's observations on the way history was changed by the pressures and possibilities of print is a reminder not just to approach medieval texts as deficient, unable to fulfil the purposes that printed works came to fulfil in the early modern period. That problem seems, to me, to be central to the ambivalence that Gransden and other historians discussed here raised about the use of the term 'propaganda' for the Middle Ages. As Martin Aurell reminds us, the term 'propaganda' is post-medieval. It was coined in the context of the more deliberate instrumentalisation and bureaucratisation of the spread of religious dogma in the Counter Reformation, originally used to designate the Congregation for Propagation of the Faith (*Congregatio de propaganda fide*) which was instituted to oversee the Church' missionary work in 1622.[79] Without descending into the complex discussion of whether we ought to use post-medieval terms to make sense of the Middle Ages, the specific context of the origins of the word 'propaganda' should be food for thought. Perhaps a better appreciation of the particular political purposes that historical writing could fulfil in the Middle Ages can be reached by focusing on the distinct qualities of a manuscript-based historical culture.

[73] *Chronica majora*, 5:617: 'Nominavit insuper omnes Angliæ sanctos reges canonizatos'.
[74] Weiler, 'Matthew Paris on the Writing of History', 274.
[75] On Matthew's pictures: Suzanne Lewis, *The Art of Matthew Paris in the Chronica Majora* (Aldershot, 1987).
[76] Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, 63–4.
[77] For an overview of a rich field, see Julia Boffey, 'From Manuscript to Print: Continuity and Change', in *A Companion to the Early Printed Book in Britain 1476–1558*, ed. Susan Powell and Vincent Gillespie (Boydell & Brewer, 2014), 13–26.
[78] A.S.G. Edwards, 'History in Print from Caxton to 1543', in *Medieval Historical Writing*, ed. Jahner, Steiner and Tyler, 370–85, 382.
[79] Aurell, 'Rapport Introductif', 11.

Most straightforwardly, the physical historical text was a more expensive, exclusive and therefore prestigious object before the advent of print. In 1997, Leah Shopkow made a powerful case that the primary value of a historical work to medieval princes did not rest in the details of the narrative, but in the 'book as an object'. Since then, a growing interest in medieval manuscript culture has highlighted the ways in which books could serve as markers of wealth and refinement, often, in the case of royal manuscripts, accompanied by illustrations and decorated with precious stones.[80] These objects could be used as gifts, lent and exchanged; to copy such a book was a way for subjects and allies to demonstrate solidarity and loyalty towards the prince. Historical texts were part of the arsenal of objects and practices that demonstrated princely legitimacy. As Shopkow notes, 'to be the patron of such a work was to be princely; to have such a work written about one's territory was testimony to its importance'.[81]

This was even more important for rulers and polities on the fringes of Latin Christendom. Lars Boje Mortensen has discussed the case of Saxo Grammaticus' monumental *Gesta Danorum* (c. 1208), a history of Denmark from pagan antiquity to the twelfth century. Saxo's text was composed in such an elaborate silver-age Latin that even a later Danish monastic historical writer complained that it was difficult to understand. This raises again Lake's question about whether chronicles were really the right tool for wider political communication: Saxo's chronicle was certainly carefully designed to present a positive image of his patron, archbishop Absalon of Lund and his family, but it is less obvious how this artful narrative would be disseminated. But then, as Mortensen notes, the 'monumental quality of a large Latin book on the Danish past residing in the archiepiscopal library in Lund was a success in itself'; it showed that Denmark was part of the Latin community and 'reassured the elite that a glorious local past was codified and could be referred to'.[82]

The legitimising effect of such a historical text would not necessarily be diminished by the fact that writers, such as Matthew Paris and Gerald of Wales, voiced criticisms of their ruler. Indeed, Matthew proudly recorded in the *Chronica majora* that he had 'boldly remonstrated' with the king over a charter issued to the detriment of St Albans and that the king had taken it in good spirit, even if he didn't do anything about it.[83] As Ryan Kemp has recently emphasised, a willingness to subject oneself to censure and correction from spiritual authorities was central to medieval conceptions of good kingship, on the model of King David and Nathan the Prophet from the Old Testament.[84] Medieval society may have gotten less tolerant from the twelfth century onwards, with severe

[80] See Laura Cleaver, *Illuminated History Books in the Anglo-Norman World, 1066–1272* (Oxford University Press, 2018).
[81] Leah Shopkow, *History and Community: Norman Historical Writing in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1997), 185–86. On the text, see also Ben Pohl, *Dudo of St Quentin's Historia Normannorum: Tradition, Innovation and Memory* (York Medieval Press, 2015).
[82] Lars Boje Mortensen, 'A Thirteenth-Century Reader of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*', in *The Creation of Medieval Northern Europe: Christianisation, Social Transformations, and Historiography. Essays in Honour of Sverre Bagge*, ed. Leidulf Melve and Sigbjørn Sønnesyn (Dreyer Forlag, 2012), 346–55 (347). For Saxo, see *A Companion to Saxo Grammaticus*, ed. Thomas K. Heebøll-Holm and Lars Boje Mortensen (Brill, 2024).
[83] *Chronica majora*, 5:130: 'imperterritus redargueret'.
[84] Ryan Kemp, 'Images of Kingship in Bishops' Biographies and Deeds in Twelfth-Century England and Germany' (PhD diss., University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 2018) and Ryan Kemp, 'Hugh of Lincoln and Adam of Eynsham: Angevin Kingship Reconsidered', *The Haskins Society Journal* 30 (2018): 133–58.

consequences for the groups that came to be seen as standing outside the catholic, national community, but within that community there was still a place for criticism.[85]

We should beware of projecting post-reformation rulers' mission to create and maintain conformity and uniformity back on their medieval antecessors, and of evaluating the political efficacy of medieval rulers' textual technologies on whether they would fulfil the needs of early modern potentates.[86]

Finally, we should consider the future-facing qualities of medieval historical writing. Early modern audiences were haunted by anxieties about the ephemeral quality of print.[87] Medieval audiences, on the other hand, had a firm expectation that, once committed to manuscript, deeds would stand the test of time. Writers of history themselves routinely sought to legitimise their work by highlighting their ability to transmit knowledge of deeds to future audiences. Interestingly, many secular potentates' interactions with writers of history indicate that they too saw it as central to the work of history.[88] As we saw above, Henry III had asked Matthew Paris to recount his gift to Westminster Abbey precisely in order that it would not be forgotten. His son Edward I had a clear expectation that chronicles contained important evidence of the past deeds and rights of English kings. In 1291, Edward I tried to mobilise this by issuing instructions to the monasteries of England to scrutinise their chronicles and communicate what they found regarding English overlordship of Scotland to the court. The results do not seem to have impressed the court, an indication in itself that the use of historical texts as political ammunition was neither easy nor routine. Nevertheless, Edward I was still concerned to have his own achievements written down by chroniclers.[89] Recently, a number of historians engaging with political uses of history have suggested we need to take this claimed focus on the future seriously; Chris Given-Wilson argued that historical writing 'is unlikely to have been aimed at a contemporary audience (let alone a 'mass' audience), but should be seen rather as an act which might prove to have some political utility at an undetermined point in the future'.[90] František Graus, similarly, has warned against 'overrating the propaganda effect of history', but if the immediate impact of historical writing was limited, that only – thus Graus – made its power to shape long-term attitudes more striking.[91] This too was a form of political power, but a very different one than that wielded by a widely and immediately disseminated text.

Conclusion: The Joys of History

Any attempt at a categorical answer to the question of whether medieval historical texts were instruments of power would be folly and antithetical to Gransden's own

[85] This was the core argument of Robert I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250*, 2nd ed. (Blackwell, 2007).
[86] Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, 63.
[87] Harriet Phillips, *Nostalgia in Print and Performance, 1510–1613: Merry Worlds* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 19–23.
[88] Lake, *Prologues*, xiii.
[89] Alice Taylor, 'Recalling Anglo-Scottish Relations in 1291: Historical Knowledge, Monastic Memory and the Edwardian Inquests', *Thirteenth Century England* 16 (2017): 173–206.
[90] Given-Wilson, *Chronicles*, 203.
[91] František Graus, 'Funktionen der spätmittelalterlichen Geschichtsschreibung', in *Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsbewußtsein im späten Mittelalter*, ed. Hans Patze (Thorbecke, 1987), 11–55 (30).

methodology, so carefully grounded in an appreciation of the particular and so sensitive to the variations within the amorphous field of historical writing.[92] Gransden's article, together with the other contributions discussed above, is, however, an important reminder not to take for granted that these texts, so important to us and to their authors, were necessarily that important to contemporary political actors or political developments. Where we want to make such claims, they must, as the most effective of the works discussed above shows, incorporate not only a reading of the text but also examinations of how, and whether, it was disseminated. This also has the advantage of grounding discussions of historical texts' power more firmly in a practical context of money and might. Critical examinations of questions of identity formation and political culture have been central to the most important advances made in our field in the last half-century, but there is good reason to heed the voices calling for more attention to 'brute force and such seldom mentioned factors as economic and social resources' which 'outside the realm of texts … made the power of kings and princes'.[93]

I would like to finish, however, on another point, raised by Björn Weiler in his last article. Alongside our careful attention to the potential political significance of historical texts, their role in strengthening, or questioning, communities and hierarchies and equipping readers with the necessary knowledge to fulfil their duties, we should also take the writers seriously as authors motivated by the quest for status, the 'sheer joy of finding things out' and of creating beautiful texts to share with peers.[94] In this direction lies further possibilities of understanding the motivations of medieval authors and the texts they created. Those were not the kinds of questions that Antonia Gransden, or her expected readers, focused on in 1975, but an insistence that politics was only one part of what shaped and inspired medieval writers is one of the most striking legacies of her rich and nuanced work.[95]

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[92] Gransden, 'Prologues', 151.
[93] Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual*, 261; see also Christine Carpenter, 'Introduction: Political Culture, Politics and Cultural History', in *The Fifteenth Century IV: Political Culture in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. Linda Clark and Christine Carpenter (Boydell, 2004), 1–19 (6).
[94] Björn Weiler, 'Ralph of Diss, the Coronation of Philip Augustus (1179) and the English Claim to the French Throne', *Historical Research* 97 (2024): 1–21(20). On the importance of the individual and aesthetic aspects of historical writing, see also generally Staunton, *Historians of Angevin England*; Lake, 'Authorial Intentions', 354; Edward Roberts, *Flodoard of Rheims and the Writing of History in the Tenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 219. Robyn Faith Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature: Contextualising the New Testament within Greco-Roman Literary Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), esp. 195–200, demonstrates the advantages that such an approach can have for unfolding new possibilities in much-studied texts.
[95] See especially, Gransden, *Historical Writing*, 2: 454–69.

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