

Looking beyond the Horizons of Medieval Courts: Performativity, Alterity and Materiality

The subject of medieval courts is such a multifaceted one that, even when it seems to be an already well-researched topic, there are many good reasons why it still appeals to medievalists in the twenty-first century. The ongoing attraction arises not only because the elite, whom we associate with courts, left distinctive marks such as written documents, artworks and architecture, but also because medieval courts can be studied from numerous perspectives. Research on medieval courts can, furthermore, bring together medievalists from different disciplines and regions and stimulate interdisciplinary research.

Whether viewed as places where rulers, their wives and their entourages gathered (forming networks or ‘social figurations’ as Norbert Elias labelled them), as places where art and culture flourished (networks of cultural exchange), or as places where day-to-day business and issues such as disputes were handled, medieval courts still offer a wide range of research issues. Other more recent approaches are also highly relevant. Along with gender studies, subjects such as performativity and alterity also offer significant opportunities to discuss medieval courts amongst literary historians, art historians and cultural historians. In addressing, for example, questions concerning femininity-masculinity, space, audience and clothing as part of performativity and alterity, researchers can mutually benefit from discussing their approaches and research objects and goals. Together with subjects such as material culture, gift-giving, memory and a variety of ‘new’ sources, both new and more established approaches can stimulate researchers to look beyond the horizons of courts in Western Europe. Work which extends also to encompass the medieval courts of Byzantium, the Islamic world – including the Iberian Peninsula – Eastern Europe and beyond into Asia will provide new insights into court culture across Europe.

This CARMEN meeting aims not only to stimulate an exchange of the research questions and objects used by those studying medieval courts, but also to discuss old, new, different and interdisciplinary approaches and their limitations.

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