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Royal bastards. The birth of illegitimacy 800-1230

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BOOK REVIEW

Royal bastards. The birth of illegitimacy 800-1230, edited by Sara McDougall, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 310 pp., £65 (hardback), ISBN 9780198785828

In *Royal Bastards. The Birth of Illegitimacy 800-1230*, Sara McDougall nuances the long-held view that the stigmatization of children born outside of marriage as 'bastards' emerged in the Early Middle Ages due to a strict application of canon law. The author demonstrates that until well into the late twelfth century a child's prospect depended more upon the social status and lineage of both parents than of the legitimacy of their marriage. This book thus offers a new account of the history of illegitimate birth and focuses particularly on royalty in Western European kingdoms. By scrutinizing specific 'key moments' in the history of 'this exclusionary policy', this research resulted in a lengthy study with a broad chronological as well as geographical scope.

This book is structured in 10 chronologically ordered chapters. The first chapter offers a profound discourse analysis of the shifting vocabulary used to address illegitimate children and their parents. A central point is that concepts like *bastardus* (a medieval invention) and *illegitimus* do not have a Roman or Early Medieval origin, but emerge quite late in the Middle Ages, only in the twelfth century. Furthermore, the author highlights that until the thirteenth century these concepts had no fixed definition. The next chapters (2-4) give a chronological overview of the inheritance practices in the Merovingian, Carolingian and subsequent dynasties (Ottonian and Capetian) as well as the Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman dynasties. The difference between Merovingian and Carolingian ideas about legitimate succession is related to the role of maternal lineage: a shift from a Merovingian emphasis on paternal descent to a Carolingian interest in promoting a ruler whose mother had high lineage and whose family had political influence. McDougall claims that the Carolingian dependence on women from powerful families became more essential to their success in the second half of the ninth century. Succession could be restricted for other reasons than illegitimacy as well: to limit the number of claimants for instance. In the subsequent chapter, the author goes against the thesis that Christian ideas about legitimate marriage were strictly employed at around 1100. Scholars regularly identify 1126 as a critical moment in the history of illegitimate birth. In that year, King Henry I of England designated his daughter Matilda as heir to his throne, passing over her elder half-brother Robert. It is typically assumed that Henry chose Matilda because she was his only remaining legitimate child. This event, however, demonstrates the fundamental importance of female lineage. Chapter 5 again deals with the twelfth century and the supposed impact of the Gregorian reform on the exclusion of children born out of marriage in the twelfth century. McDougall argues that these reformers may not have focused as keenly on the children born to those sworn to celibacy as prior scholarship assumes. Furthermore, many examples from the (early) twelfth century demonstrate a flexibility in the ideas about children born outside of marriage. The following chapter analyses a changed attitude towards illegitimate children from the second half of the twelfth century onwards. The author emphasizes that this development did not take place at the initiative of an activist papacy or church reformers, but at the request of individual parties. Formal law that regulated illegitimate birth and its consequences developed only later and in response to these new practices. The subsequent chapter further deals with the practical application of these ideas in inheritance disputes by means of three interesting case studies. Chapter 9 and 10 demonstrate how allegations of illegitimate birth on the grounds of the parents' illegal

marriage were applied with remarkable inconsistency in the thirteenth century. Again, not the papacy, but lay rulers were the driving force behind these allegations, each with their own political motivation. This can be illustrated by various examples from the Crusader states, the counties of Flanders and Hainaut, and the kingdoms of Castile and Leon.

The central thesis of this work is that only from the late twelfth century onwards evidence can be found for the exclusion of children from succession on the grounds of their illegitimate birth. A particular value of this research is that it challenges our ideas about the role and importance of women and female lineage in medieval society. According to the author, the social rank of the mother is crucial for the status of her child. A second point well attended is the supposed practical implication of canon law in the eleventh to mid-twelfth centuries for illegitimacy and marriage. Although the wide geographical scope and comparisons are an added value to this work, there is little attention for regional differences. The author underestimates the importance of customary laws and local privileges. In the first chapter, discussing the council of Bourges in 1031, she assumes that 'these secular laws' had no wide application. Nevertheless, customary practices are extremely important for the local and territorial level. In the case of Marie of Boulogne and Matthew of Alsace for instance, apart from the issue of her sworn celibacy, one should consider the customary laws on elopement and abduction. Furthermore, the political context could have been investigated more thoroughly. Some case studies seem to be rather examples of (royal) succession conflicts than actual illegitimacy disputes. A last point is that the author points to the flexible interpretations of texts, but there is often a lack of sufficient argumentation for this supposed alternative reading of earlier texts and canon law, especially for the Early Middle Ages.

With *Royal Bastards. The Birth of Illegitimacy 800-1230*, McDougall provided a well-written overview of the history of illegitimacy from the ninth to the thirteenth century in Western Europe with renewed attention to the importance of female lineage. By reassessing traditional theories on illegitimacy and offering an alternative reading of primary sources, this study will likely serve as a stepping stone for new studies on marriage and inheritance practices in the Middle Ages.

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