MEDIEVAL LANDS: A PROSOPOGRAPHY OF MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN NOBLE AND ROYAL FAMILIES

by Charles Cawley [1]

ABSTRACT

Medieval Lands is the first edition of an on-going new Member's Project, hosted on the FMG website. It presents the results of several years' research to verify family relationships of medieval nobility and royalty against primary source material, in the context of the territories which they controlled.

Foundations (2006) ***2*** *(2): 165-168* *© Copyright FMG*

Medieval Lands is a major new on-going European medieval genealogy project, the first edition of which has been launched on the website of the Foundation for Medieval Genealogy.

In this work, the families of rulers and nobility in more than 140 geographical and political entities in medieval Europe and western Asia are being reconstructed from scratch. Outline tables on royal and noble families presented in published secondary works, such as the *Europäische Stammtafeln* series, provide the basic informational framework into which data from primary sources is being incorporated as and when research is completed. At this stage, the project is far from complete. However, it has been judged better to make available the results of research carried out to date rather than wait for notional "completeness", which will always be one step away given the scope of the project. The ultimate objective is to verify and correct secondary source data against primary source material and supplement it with accurate historical background information. The eventual result will be an encyclopaedia of accurate and reliable historical information which will be of benefit to all medieval genealogists and historians.

New Approach

Medieval Lands represents a new approach to the presentation of royal and noble families. Most existing published works in the field have two important drawbacks. Firstly, the information, even if the genealogies are complete, is usually limited to dates and outline relationships. Secondly, there is a tendency to copy information from previously published secondary works without adequate verification against primary sources. This has resulted in connections which started life as speculative being transformed into apparent certainty, and the perpetuation of errors. The problems are understandable. In the case of works published in traditional printed format, there is simply insufficient space to record more than basic information. As far as verification of data is concerned, the task is monumental, if attempted on a Europe-wide scale, so tends to be limited to specialist works dealing with specific families or precise geographic locations.

---

[1] Charles Cawley is a retired corporate lawyer who now devotes himself full time to historical research.
Email address: charlescawley@hotmail.com

Medieval Lands covers all of Europe, as well as those parts of Asia and North Africa which have had a major impact on the development of European civilisation, for example the Caliphate and the Mongol Empire. The information is presented within a strictly territorial structure. This contrasts with the family-based approach which is frequently adopted in works in the field. The *Medieval Lands* project is about the history and development of medieval lands, not family history. This enables attention to be concentrated on how each area evolved in the context of those families which were fundamental to its development. The broad scope of the project allows comparative conclusions to be drawn about differences in the role and influence of the nobility in different parts of the continent. Grouping by geographic location also serves to highlight the degree of intra-territorial contact between noble families and provides a basis for further study on many other matters of interest, for example the extent of intra- and inter-territorial marriages.

Project Structure

The documents within *Medieval Lands* are structured together under ten broad geographic categories: Balkans & Eastern Europe, British Isles, Eastern Mediterranean & Asia, France, Germany, Iberia, Italy, Poland & Baltic States, Russia, and Scandinavia. Documents within France and Germany are further sub-grouped into regions. In many cases, the documents dealing with a particular territory are linked in pairs, one document showing the families of the rulers of the territory and the other those of the prominent nobles in the same area. For instance, "BAVARIA, Dukes" shows the families of the ten different dynasties of dukes of Bavaria, while "BAVARIA, Nobility" sets out details of other Bavarian noble families. This serves to highlight the extent of influence of the nobility on the rulers in each territory, and also the cohesive nature of the noble class within each area.

All the documents are fully indexed in the CONTENTS document. They can also be accessed quickly by means of the drop-down menu bar which floats at the top of each web-page, provided by the FMG. If the sphere of activity of a family moved from one geographical territory to another, the presentation of the family shifts to the corresponding document, hyperlinked back to the first document. By way of illustration, the origins of the Welf dynasty are shown in "SWABIA, Nobility", reflecting the German province in which the family first rose to prominence. The Welf family moves to "BAVARIA, Dukes" after they received the dukedom of that territory, and moves again to "SAXONY, Dukes & Electors" after they lost Bavaria and were appointed dukes of Saxony. Lastly, their descendants are shown in "BRUNSWICK" after their power was limited to this dukedom. These moves serve to underline the importance of the geographical structure of the research, but are easy to follow with the hyperlinks.

Methodology

The work process used in compiling *Medieval Lands* involves extracting and analysing information from a wide variety of primary sources, including contemporary chronicles, cartularies, necrologies and testaments. Analysis has been assisted by using Excel spreadsheets for recording and sorting material. This has been of particular help in the analysis of Spanish and Anglo-Saxon charters, two examples where variations in spellings in a morass of names present great obstacles to the correct identification and linking of individuals. Information extracted is presented on a "full text" basis, including in most cases quotes from the primary sources in the original language (mainly Latin). Translation has not been attempted, to avoid

misinterpretation. This systematic approach has been fundamental to the reconstruction of the mini-biographies of each individual. It has also facilitated comparison of different sources consulted, and has enabled better judgment to be applied before proposing conclusions where information is contradictory. Where the same facts are repeated in different sources, these have not been duplicated unless it helps provide corroboration in cases of conflict.

The results of the research are presented as narrative outline genealogies, broken down into small family sub-groups. Marriages and other connections between families are hyperlinked to enable easy navigation between different documents. The period covered is approximately the thousand year period between the years 500 and 1500, although more source material has been analysed for the first six hundred years or so of this timeframe. The introductions to each document provide a commentary on the results presented, summarise important background information about the development of the territory concerned, and highlight comparisons with other territories where this is instructive.

Medieval Lands aims to present full background material and arguments to explain the basis for postulating relationships. Where a connection is doubtful, the reasoning is fully discussed in the context of the available source material. Doubtful connections are shown in square brackets. In the case of well-known historical figures, summaries of their careers have been added to place them in their proper historical context. The biographical details are brief. The purpose is not to repeat detailed information which is widely available elsewhere, but to shed light on the lives of lesser-known members of each family.

It must be emphasised that many areas still remain to be checked as the research is far from complete. When consulting the documents, it should be assumed that any information which does not include any references to primary source material falls into this category and should therefore be treated with the appropriate caution.

Some Surprises

The "back-to-basics" approach to source material has produced many surprises. It has enabled numerous new discoveries to be made and many challenges to traditionally accepted family relationships to be proposed. By way of example, browse for Æthelberht King of Wessex (ANGLO-SAXON Kings) and the wives of Péter Orseolo King of Hungary (HUNGARY). The approach has also highlighted many cases where little supporting source material has so far been found, despite extensive research, although it is probably premature to draw definite conclusions at this stage as many sources remain to be consulted.

The aim of the genealogies is to show all known descendants of the families in the male line, including children who died young. Also shown are all known illegitimate children, as well as children of morganatic or private marriages. Descent is shown in the male line in each document, the female lines being traceable to other documents by following the hyperlinks. Descent in the female line is shown by exception in a particular document, either because the main title of the family was so transmitted, or where an individual, whose own family is not set out elsewhere, played an important role in the history of the territory concerned.

The extent of completeness of the documents is not uniform, and reflects the types of sources so far consulted. Much new information is contained in the documents which cover Germany, the northern half of France, the Italian Lombard kingdom and principalities, and the Anglo-Saxon kings and nobles. By contrast, the coverage for

later periods in northern Italy and the British Isles, as well as the Balkans (except early Byzantium), is less extensive. In these cases, complete narrative genealogies are shown in outline form, fully hyperlinked to the other documents in the series. This provides the framework into which future research results can be incorporated.

Sources Consulted

Information from a wide range of primary sources has been checked and incorporated into *Medieval Lands*. A full list is included in the BIBLIOGRAPHY document. This has resulted in a dramatic expansion in the amount of research results, which are now only suited to publication in electronic format. The wide availability of source material over the internet or on CD-ROM has been essential to the project, and has enabled most of the research to be done from home. Worthy of particular mention are the digital *Monumenta Germaniæ Historica*[2], produced by MGH in conjunction with the Bavarian State Library in Munich, and the *Gallica* website of the French National Library[3]. Many other web-based databases with more limited coverage have also been used, for example the State Archives of Turin[4] which provide useful information on the family of the counts of Savoy, and the *New Regesta Regum Anglorum*[5] which publishes on-line translations of the royal diplomas of Anglo-Saxon England. The *Editions en ligne de l'Ecole de Chartes*[6] provides an expanding collection of French cartularies, mainly from the Paris region. Extensive material is also available on CD-ROM, for instance the *Prosopography of the Byzantine Empire* produced by King's College, London (Martindale, 2001) has been of vital importance in researching the families of the early Byzantine emperors, and many German primary sources are included in an easily searchable format on the two CDs produced by the Berlin-based publisher Heptagon (Bogon *et al.,* 1999). Many sources as yet available only in hard copy have been consulted in the library of the Institute of Historical Research in London, their on-line catalogue being of immense benefit when planning visits[7].

Future plans

It is hoped that *Medieval Lands* will be of use and interest to a wide audience, and will inspire others to undertake further work on those areas which have so far received only limited coverage. The FMG website provides a link for general feedback and specific comments. I would also be interested in serious offers of more extensive collaboration in preparing for a second edition, on the understanding that the current format, arrived at after a long process of trial and error, should be retained.

References

Martindale, J R (2001, editor) *Prosopography of the Byzantine Empire I: (641-867)*. Ashgate.

Bogon, W, Müller, T & Pentzel, A (1999, editors) *Quellensammlung zur mitteralterlichen Geschichte/Fontes medii ævi*, and the companion CD *Fortsetzung/Continuatio*. Berlin: Heptagon GbR.

---

2 http://www.dmgh.de/

3 http://gallica.bnf.fr/

4 http://ww2.multix.it/asto/asp/inventari.asp

5 http://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/chartwww/NewRegReg.html

6 http://elec.enc.sorbonne.fr/cartulaires/

7 http://www.history.ac.uk/