

The Role of Women in Shaping Medieval Political Institutions

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Abstract

In the past political history in the medieval period has largely been told by kings, military leaders and male aristocrats, with little attention paid to the role of women in the creation and operation of political institutions. The present study examines the various roles of women in the development of medieval governance in a historical and qualitative way. The research draws on chronicles, royal letters, legal documents, administrative records, religious texts and interpretations, and the interpretations of historians of the time, to explore the politics of queens, regents, noblewomen, abbesses, and influential female patrons in various regions of medieval Europe. It examines how women's involvement in decision-making, diplomacy, succession politics, judicial administration, land management and the formation of alliances via marriage and kinship networks was explored. It also examines the role of social conventions, religious beliefs, and a feudal system in limiting and facilitating female political participation. The study draws on selected historical case studies to show that there are common patterns of leadership and institutional influence that are not extensively discussed in traditional political histories. The results indicate that women were an important factor in sustaining political stability in times of succession crises; they served as mediators among competing groups; they bolstered administrative structures; and they ensured dynastic continuity. They did not just participate in rituals, but also in the governance, policy making and institutional development processes. It is claimed in the study that the formal rulers were not the only ones who influenced the medieval political institutions, but also women who acted within the families, religious and feudal networks, and took strategic actions. The recognition of these contributions offers a more even-handed perspective on medieval political history and cast doubts on accepted notions about gender and power relations. The study adds to the body of research in Middle Ages studies, gender studies and political studies by introducing women's irreplaceable role in the development of governance and institutional structures in the Middle Ages.

Keywords: Medieval political institutions, women in medieval history, queenship, governance, political authority, gender and power, feudal society, historical analysis.

Introduction

Traditionally, politics has been the realm of kings, military figures, religious elites and noblemen, and the role of women has not been studied extensively. Historical tales of medieval government taught that it was a realm for men, and that women held little or no power in political decision-making. However, recent historical research has refuted this view and has shown that women had a variety of important and different powers. In medieval societies, women played an active role in the development of the political framework and government, by means of queenship, regencies, noble administration, diplomacy, religious leadership and strategic marriage alliances. In medieval times, the political sphere was tightly connected to familial claims, feuds, church and local laws. In this context, women had roles that went beyond the home. Queens were frequently advisers to kings, ruled kingdoms for missing or young kings, negotiated treaties and were involved in succession struggles. The noble women managed estates, oversaw economic resources, helped to settle land disputes, and managed political relationships that helped to stabilize the region. These obligations demonstrate that women were not just symbolic actors, but powerful actors in governance and institutional development.

Women's political status was diverse from one place to another and one time to another in medieval society. Women like Eleanor of Aquitaine and Isabella of Castile, who ruled in Western Europe, showed outstanding political skill by ruling directly over territories, initiating legal changes, and shaping diplomatic activity. Likewise, Byzantine empresses and members of royal families often played a role in imperial governance, in line with succession protocols, and in church matters. In South Asia, women such as Razia Sultan and Rudrama Devi defied gender norms and enacted sovereign rule, bolstering state institutions. The examples show that women were not just in isolated and unusual positions of political leadership, but were a central element of medieval governance in various cultural contexts. Important also was the role that women played in religious institutions in the political sphere. Abbesses were royal patrons of monasteries and women who played important roles in religious communities who had control over land, finances, education, and law. They were frequently also leaders in their own local communities, sometimes able to take part in local governance and have contact with rulers and the political elite. Women-run monastic institutions became also places of social service, economic administration and political negotiation, thus part of the mainsprings of medieval societies. Another major political tool was marriage. Marriage was yet another important political means by which women influenced medieval institutions. Dynastic marriages created diplomatic ties, gained territorial possession, and allowed for smooth inheritance by the next generation. Royal girls often served as peacemakers among kingdoms, promoting peace and harmony. They exchanged letters with each other, gave gifts, and attended ceremonies, which helped maintain the political unity and legitimacy of ruling dynasties. In many cases queens and noblewomen remained influential as regents, guardians of heirs, advisors, available for administrative continuity when needed. Even with these contributions, the history of women's political agency has been belittled as women were not accorded the respect they deserve. Yet despite these contributions the history of women's political agency has been minimized through the use of official chronicles and legal records that favoured a certain kind of male agency. New tools for historical research, such as gender history, feminist historiography or interdisciplinary research, have broadened the spectrum of evidence, which now also encompasses letter writing, accounting, religious documents, literature and archaeological finds. These sources offer increased insights into women's role in government and the various ways in which women affected medieval governmental institutions. The study of the political function of women in the medieval period helps to achieve a balanced view of institutional history. Shows that governance was negotiated amongst people in different social roles, rather than by the actions of male rulers. Through the study of women's leadership, administrative duties, diplomatic efforts, and patronage, issues of complexity in medieval political systems and the assumptions about gender and power can be explored. This research, therefore, aims to explore the contribution of the women to the development of political institutions in the Middle Ages in the context of their involvement in government, diplomatic activity, judicial administration and succession as well as the process of institutionalization. The research uses evidence from various geographical and cultural contexts to illustrate the significance of women's role in the process of medieval state formation and political stability and to enrich the modern historical debate on gender and politics.

Background of the study

Traditionally, political history of the medieval period has been told from the point of view of kings, military commanders, and male administrators giving little attention to the role of women in the establishment and operation of the political institutions. The concept of government has been regarded as a preserve of men for many centuries and only modest opportunities have been found for acknowledging the role of queens, noblewomen, regents and female religious figures. Recent historical scholarship, however, has challenged this view and shown that women have had important influences on the formation of political power, the nature of government, its

diplomacy and its continuity within various medieval societies. There were also political institutions outside of royal courts such as councils, feudal administrations, ecclesiastical institutions, judicial systems, and regional government bodies. In these institutions, women frequently wielded power through inheritance, regency, marriage connections, landowning, and patronage. Their involvement was not confined to ceremonial duties, but also included in policy-making, conflict resolution, succession and in the administration of territories. During political crises women often became de facto regents for minor heirs and/or exercised leadership, thus maintaining continuity of administration and upholding the dynastic legitimacy. Political status of women was different in different geographical and cultural contexts. During the Middle Ages in Europe, queens and princesses were involved in politics, forming alliances, running estates and advising monarchs. In the Byzantine Empire, empresses would sometimes rule in their own right and have an impact on imperial business. Elite women played a role in governance, court politics, charitable endowments, and educational patronage throughout the Islamic world. In South Asia, it was also common for women from ruling families to have important roles in the administration of kingdoms, diplomacy, and military operations, even with a strong patriarchal tradition. The varied accounts suggest that female political involvement was not unusual or localised but was a part of medieval political practice. During the medieval period, political institutions were heavily dependent on kinship networks, networks of loyalty, and networks of patronage. Women were at the heart of these networks, making alliances with marriage, helping to resolve conflicts between noble families and sustain connections between the ruling elites and local communities. Their support of religious institutions, educational and public building was also beneficial for the legitimacy of political systems and administrative stability. These activities impacted on formal governance structures and informal governance processes of political decision-making. Gender history and feminist historiography have made a tremendous contribution to the study of medieval political systems. In the past, women's presence in the governing framework has been recognized in the legal record, royal letters and correspondence, chronicles, land charters, and religious documents. Over the years, women's involvement in governance has been studied in legal documents, royal letters and correspondence, chronicles, land charters, and religious records. These studies show that social interaction and institutional processes in which women were actively and strategically involved were important ways of negotiated political power in the medieval period. This led historians to reevaluate the typical view of political leadership and to acknowledge the multi-dimensional character of medieval leadership. Although significant progress has been made, there are still numerous unmet gaps in the literature. The historical accounts still focus on war and kingship, and women's role in the development of institutions is still neglected. There are comparatively few inter-regional comparative studies and much to be explored in the interconnections of the functions of queenship, aristocratic influence, religious authority and administrative leadership. Further, the varied nature of women's political experiences have been many times neglected and confined to a few notable historical figures, while the institutional significance of women's participation has been overlooked. The study of women's contribution in the creation of the medieval political structure is thus not only necessary but also indispensable in order to create a balanced and comprehensive interpretation of the medieval history. Their contributions can be analyzed to gain a better understanding of the development of governance, the allocation of political power and the processes by which stability and legitimacy were preserved within institutions. The study aims to build upon the field of medieval political studies through incorporating women's experiences and enhance the current understanding of medieval political development, thereby creating a more inclusive knowledge.

Justification

The conventional approach to medieval political history has tended to focus on the role of kings, military leaders and male administrators and has neglected the role of women, who have been

comparatively overlooked. While the position of the queen, regents, diplomat, advisor, landholder and patron has been recognized as a source of political power for women in the medieval period, its importance for the creation and operation of the political institutions of the Middle Ages has been neglected and marginalized. This disparity has led to a substantial lack in historical research and understanding of medieval government. The present study is warranted because it aims to revisit the question of women's influence on the creation of political institutions, using their involvement in decision-making, succession, diplomacy, legal administration and statecraft as a lens to look through. Women often served as pillars of stability in times of political instability, protected dynastic succession, arranged marriages and alliances, and had a strong influence on both the legislative and administrative affairs. Their work reveals that the medieval world of politics was a more nuanced and pluralistic environment than traditional accounts have acknowledged. This is also significant research because in recent years, historians have turned their attention back to the more traditional understanding of political power. The study combines gender analysis and a textual history approach to offer a more comprehensive and balanced view of medieval political systems. It questions the preconceptions of political institutions that developed only under male leadership and points to the various types of power wielded by women in various medieval societies. In addition, the study makes a contribution to the present day historical discourse by highlighting the role of women in the construction of governance structures. It calls for a reconsideration of historical sources which have cast women's political role under the shadow and a more inclusive representation of the medieval past. The results will contribute to medieval and political history, women's history and historical sociology, and will be of interest for historians of the development of political institutions and the gendered aspects of power. In general, it is a worthwhile research for filling the gap in historical knowledge, furthering the existing historical scholarship on medieval government, and providing a subtle analysis of how women helped to shape, manage, and sustain political institutions in the medieval period.

Objectives of the Study

1. To Identify the political functions that women played in medieval kingdom, principalities and feudal societies in various parts of the world.
2. To examine the role and impact of queens, regents, noblewomen, and female rulers on the creation and operation of medieval political structures.
3. To examine how women used certain political tools such as diplomacy, regency, marriage alliances, patronage and court administration to assert political control.
4. To Examine the legal, religious and cultural influences on women's roles within decision-making and governance in the medieval period.
5. To evaluate the role played by the influential women of the medieval period in the maintenance of political stability, institutional continuity and state formation based on selected historical case studies.

Literature Review

Recent decades have seen a great transformation in the study of women's role in medieval political institutions. Previous historical research tended to focus on the politics of the Middle Ages as a man's world, owned by kings, nobles, military figures and the church. However, newer studies have called into question this view regarding the position of women in politics, as they had political influence in the form of queenship, regencies, diplomacy, patronage, estate administration, and religious leadership. The following studies show that women played a role in the formation of governance, legal frameworks, succession practices, and institutions across medieval Europe and beyond. Judith M. Bennett (1996) proposes that medieval women should not be seen as simply as passive agents in the history but as people who acted within the structures imposed on them by men. Bennett shows how women negotiated their way through

social and political constraints to effect governance, local administration, and economic decisions. Her work emphasizes the need to consider women's roles in nonpolitical capacities. Jo Ann McNamara (1996) noted that often nobles and queens served as political mediators between ruling families and competing groups. McNamara explains that aristocratic women strengthened political institutions through marriage alliances, diplomatic negotiations, and succession planning. They played a particularly strong role in times of political upheaval, when the maintenance of institutions relied on family networks. Pauline Stafford (2001) points out that queenship was not a symbolic position, but rather a legitimate political position. Through her research she shows that medieval queens ruled indirectly through their advice to kings, their presence at royal councils, their chartering powers, and when the king was absent or too young to rule, as regents. Stafford claims that the role of a queen became a part of medieval governance. The scholarship of Theresa Earenfight (2013) is an attempt to broaden the concept of female political authority by introducing queenship as a formal institution as part of medieval government. According to her, queens were politicians who affected the law, taxes, diplomacy, judicial governance and succession. Earenfight also argues that queenship helped to make the medieval monarchies more stable and legitimate. In Susan Mosher Stuard (1995) the legal and economic power of women of the nobility throughout medieval Europe. According to her, when her brothers were gone, women ran their households, handled the money, settled legal disputes, and managed their families' interests. These roles allowed women to be actively involved in local political institutions and regional governance. The work of Jennifer Ward (2006) shows that in medieval administration, women of power were involved in the administration of land and property. Female landholders were involved in judicial activities, income collection, management of agricultural production and dealing with local government officials, says Ward. These activities helped build up the regional administrative institutions and consolidate political stability. During the Middle Ages Georges Duby (1988) investigates the relationship between family structure, marriage and political power. While his primary concern is the aristocratic society, his research accounts for the role played by noblewomen in the formation of political alliances and in the process of dynastic succession and institutional continuity. Marriage proved an indispensable political tool used for influencing government in an indirect manner by women. David Herlihy (1995) has noted the economic basis of women's political influence. She suggests that the status that rights to property and inheritance and to run the household gave women allowed them to have power within their communities. The economic duties many times resulted in political power at the municipal or feudal level. Barbara H. Rosenwein (2018) stresses that political institutions of the Middle Ages must be understood in the context of social relations and the network of patronage. Her research reveals that women were engaged and involved with religious patronage, charitable endowments and community leadership, which contributed to the legitimacy of institutions and political power in medieval societies. However, recent historical interpretations have been focusing on the contributions of marginalized women in history who were not previously recognized in history textbooks, as mentioned by Janina Ramirez (2022). According to Ramirez, medieval women queens, noblewomen, abbesses, and female diplomats were prominent players in the area of legal reform, diplomatic negotiations, educational institutions, and cultural governance throughout medieval Europe. Other medieval research provides additional evidence of the political power wielded by women as leaders of the church. Abbesses were powerful, ruling vast estates of religious houses, managing the finances, overseeing the justice, and advising kings. They often served as areas of government and had the power to influence regional political structures in spite of the rule of law that prohibited women from exercising secular power. However, comparative historical study shows that there were differences in women's political involvement in different medieval states. Women in medieval western Europe wielded power in their own right through their role as queens and through aristocratic networks, whereas in the Byzantine Empire and some Islamic medieval societies, they had an indirect power through their role as members of royal

households, court administration, diplomatic representation and charitable institutions. The comparative perspectives highlight that the extent to which female political authority was regulated, or not, depended on culture, law, and religion. Increasingly, the use of archival records, royal charters, legal documents, correspondence, chronicles and monastic records is employed in the reconstruction of women's political activities in qualitative historical studies. Those methods have uncovered the presence of women authorities beyond exceptional rulers, including many who were aristocrats, local administrators and religious figures who played their share in the development of institutions. The evidence from the existing literature demonstrates that overall, women were an important presence in the development of medieval political institutions, as queens, regents, diplomats, land administrators, religious leaders and dynastic rulers. While women's role in the formation, continuity, and transformation of medieval political structures have been overlooked in the past, modern scholarship acknowledges their role as powerful actors in the process. However, more qualitative research is needed to look at regional differences, to compare political institutions in different cultures and to investigate the experiences of women whose contributions are not commonly recorded in history.

Material and Methodology

The qualitative historical research design is used for this study, which aims to examine the role of women in the development of medieval political institutions from various regions and historical periods. The research is mainly from secondary sources to scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, historical records, archival documents, biographies, royal chronicles, legal codes, diplomatic correspondence, published translations of medieval manuscripts, etc. The selection of relevant literature was done in accordance to academic databases, university libraries and credible historical sources to maintain authenticity and credibility of the evidence. The study concerns the lives of influential women, such as queens, regents, noblewomen and female political advisors, who played a decisive role in the functioning and development of institutions, in succession, administration and diplomacy during the medieval era. The sources were chosen for their historical accuracy, pertinence to the research questions and scholarly acceptance.

A documentary analysis method that was used to interpret the texts and to identify the prevailing themes in the political power of women, leadership strategies, institutional influence and the role of women in decision-making in history. Data were analyzed, organized by systematics and compared across the different kingdoms and regions in the study to look for similarities and variations in the political roles of women. It was decided to use a thematic analysis to understand and synthesize information from a variety of historical sources in order to understand the bigger picture of social, cultural, religious, and legal factors influencing medieval government. The findings were made as trustworthy as possible by triangulation of the information from several historical documents, which reduced the risk of bias that can happen with a single chronicle or an interpretation. The study was only based on existing documents and published academic literature, and there were no human participants in the primary data collection, so ethical issues for primary data were not applicable. In summary, the methodology offers a full range of knowledge regarding women's role in the establishment, stabilization and development of medieval political institutions under gender constraints in this period.

Results and Discussion

Historical sources (chronicles, royal edicts, diplomatic documents, legal documents, inscriptions, and contemporary literature) have been analyzed qualitatively in order to highlight the role of women in the medieval political institutions, which has been underestimated. While the formal power to rule lay with the male rulers, in certain instances women influenced governance roles such as queens, queen mothers, regents, noblewomen, patrons, and diplomatic intermediaries. They played a more than ceremonial role in areas of decision-making,

succession, administration, reform, conflict resolution and the strengthening of political power. The results suggest that women's political involvement was often institutional and not incidental, as they could be found in the administrative and social system of medieval kingdoms. The analysis also shows that in times of minority rule, military campaigns or political instability, queens and regents took over direct administration. It is evident from the historical records that these women were responsible for collecting revenues, approving official appointments, handling judicial affairs and maintaining diplomatic relations with neighboring countries. Many regents did not just serve as temporary rulers but provided continuity of administration and stability in the institutions between two rulers. Their leadership reduced political polarisation and increased the legitimacy of ruling dynasties, exemplifying the role of women in politics when times were turbulent.

Another important discovery relates to the importance of royal women in the politics of succession. Families' marriages were not only for dynastic purposes but for diplomatic reasons as well, changing the dynamics of alliances and influencing political power within the region. Queens often served as mediators between competing kingdoms, promoting peace and fostering political unity. The study concludes that the marriage of women in influential positions played a role in the territorial integration and long-term political stability, and that diplomacy was one of the important ways in which women influenced medieval politics.

The results also revealed that women were also significantly involved in the establishment of legal and administrative institutions through patronage and advisory roles. Elite women provided support for religious institutions, educational institutions, charitable institutions, and judicial reform and bolstered the administrative legitimacy. Their patronage helped to produce the legal documents, religious texts and architectural projects that consolidated royal power and increased institutional capacity. These activities signal the use of political power as a means of governing and as a way of influencing indirect institutional development.

Case studies from the region show a wide range of political power among the women in medieval societies. A queen mother wielded significant power in some European kingdoms, had a say in royal councils and succession in others, and in South Asian kingdoms, in some cases royal women were involved in governance through land grants, administration of temples, and advisory councils. In some parts of the Islamic world, women in royal courts made use of courtly networks to make decisions on succession, diplomacy, and appointments. The general trend seems to be that women's political role grew when there was a change in institutional structures or in dynastic stability across different cultures and legal systems.

The study also reveals socio-cultural issues that hinder women's access to formal political authority. Patriarchal expectations are often that women cannot become heir to succession or tenure but only exercise influence through kinship, marriage or regency. However, the restrictions were not to banish their political meaning. Rather, women acquired other ways of wielding power, such as informal advisory positions, strategic cooperation, religious patronage, and diplomatic brokering. These helped them to engage in governance effectively, even with institutional constraints.

One of the key points to emerge from the analysis is that women's contributions have been underestimated in traditional historical accounts as political history has not paid significant attention to the role of women. An increased focus on qualitative historical evidence shows that governance was maintained through joint networks of men and women. The focus on women's experiences highlights the importance of women as agents of institutional development in medieval political structures, not just the official rulers, and offers a more complete picture of these political structures.

Overall, the results do support the thesis that women played an active role in the creation, maintenance, and development of medieval political institutions. They played a significant role in the governance and diplomatic role, in succession planning, legal patronage and institutional continuity, which shaped the medieval states. The recognition of these contributions reflects a

new interpretation of the political history of the Middle Ages and broadens the understanding to include the indispensable and essential role of women in the process of creating political structures in various historical settings.

Conclusion

The study shows that, contrary to the traditional historical concepts, women had much more important influence in the development of medieval political institutions. In a number of medieval societies, there were no formal systems of governance, but women still had some political power, albeit in different ways. They got involved in governance, succession, conflict resolution, and the administration of territories as queens, regents, noblewomen, advisors, diplomats, patrons of religious institutions, or members of ruling families. This shows that not only were the kings and military leaders of the medieval period instrumental in shaping the institutions of that era, but also the strategic decisions and leadership of women within the medieval social and cultural structures. The research also indicates that the role of women transcended individual acts of leadership. They established political legitimacy and helped to maintain institutional continuity via marriage, land use, diplomacy, and patronage of religious and educational institutions in times of transition and crisis. They show that political power in the medieval world was more malleable and flexible than traditionally believed because they learned to negotiate power within the prevailing legal and social frameworks. Comparative study of the various medieval regions also suggests that the extent of women's political role was different across regions due to various customs, religious beliefs, inheritance systems, and dynasties. In some societies there were few opportunities for direct rule over others, but women always had other means in which to influence their governance and their public policy. The differences emphasize the need to explore the role of women in medieval political institutions in their own historical context, and not to make broad assumptions about them. The results highlight the need to rethink medieval history in a more open manner that takes into account the role of women as well as male rulers. The inclusion of women's experiences in the scholarship on the formation, governance, diplomacy, and development of administration in the medieval state offers a more balanced understanding of the state. This will not only fill the gaps in history, but will also enhance interpretations of political change. Future research can be broadened to include less-studied female political figures, comparative regional studies of women's political rule in different civilizations, and the use of newly available archival and archaeological sources. Further interdisciplinary research will increase knowledge of the interaction between gender, power, and institutions in the medieval world, and the role of women will be recognised through scholarship.

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