

CALL FOR PAPERS

GREY EMINENCES IN ACTION PERSONAL STRUCTURES OF INFORMAL DECISION-MAKING AT LATE-MEDIEVAL COURTS

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Vienna, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Institute for Medieval Research, 12-14 October 2020



*The Imperial chancellor Kaspar Schlick in his office, c. 1450/60,
Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum,
MS 68 (2001.45), fol. 23r.*

In contrast to Norbert Elias' perception of the court as a "gilded cage", historians have, over a couple of decades, agreed on concepts of courts as specific social systems that can be visualised by a series of concentric circles around the ruler. Courtiers and officers were not only domesticated by the court ("Civilizing Process"), they were rather integrated in the mechanisms of decision-making. Therefore, courts can be defined as cultural and political nexuses: places where central power encountered the subjects (yet still belonging to different sort of elites, including noble and functional elites), and where power and resources were concentrated and redistributed. Courtiers and officers were integrated in a permanent process of interaction and redistribution in the surroundings of the ruler. Possible share in power and rule, promotion and admission to offices at court and in the chancery were accordingly regarded as a consequence of the ruler's grace on the one hand or, as the quasi-institutional practice and structure of governance on the other hand. Thus, individuals who had direct and specific access to the rulers or belonged to their inner circle (gaining their trust and establishing an intellectual and even physical proximity with them), were sometimes raised to a position that enabled them to accumulate resources and develop their own influence and power.

It seems therefore crucial to understand the particular relations and interdependencies between such specific court actors, the ruler, and the different court circles, in order to unveil the functioning of

medieval courts. In order to do so, it seems especially relevant to highlight the personal structures of decision-making.

Yet, for a long time, medievalists have rather targeted their attention on the shaping of state institutions, and therefore on the staff of royal councils or the chanceries, i.e. a sample of people denoted as “counsellor” or “secretary” in contemporary sources. Additionally, scholars have focused on the organigram of the court and the position of the office holders in the complex court rankings. It is only a reassessment of research then, that medieval court studies are once again addressing questions of individual agency at court, thus bridging the gap between medieval and early modern historical concepts of court.

This international conference is a vital part of the international research project *GREMLA*, made up of two joint projects: *Grey Eminences in Action. Personal Structures of Informal Decision-Making at Late Medieval Courts* (Austrian Academy of Sciences/ÖAW, FWF project I 4076, PI Andreas Zajic, <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/en/imafo/research/editionsunternehmen-quellenforschungmir/einzelprojekte/grey-eminences-in-action/>) and its Czech counterpart *Šedé eminence v akci: neformální personální struktury na pozdně středověkých dvorech* (Masaryk University Brno, GF19-29622L, PI Petr Elbel, <https://www.muni.cz/vyzkum/projekty/44787>). Its aim is to highlight the agency of these personal structures of decision-making by investigating profiles of courtiers and officers possessing a power that superseded their ranking at court, people who exerted more influence than their social condition was supposed to bestow them, people who were to a certain extent acting behind the curtain, or in other words may be referred to as “Grey Eminences”.

The term “Grey Eminence” (“Éminence grise”) was originally coined for a figure of French early modern history, François Leclerc du Tremblay, the key adviser and *alter ego* of Cardinal Richelieu, to whose habit of a Capuchin friar the adjective “grey” was originally relating. Since historiography has hitherto only scarcely been using the term, we had to refer to a more unspecific, every day understanding of the word (“someone working in the shadow of another one”). The GREMLA project and this conference aim to provide a more comprehensive definition of the concept that seems apt to match the realities of power in late European medieval courts.

“Grey Eminence” seems a suitable label to apply to figures of the volatile shadow hierarchy of late medieval court staff. The factual gradation of access to the ruler made actually low-ranking servants attractive candidates for princely favour and promotion. Ranks and status at court were highly complex because all courts know a tension between a hierarchy based on established social rank, and an unstable “shadow hierarchy” based on favour and actual or perceived influence on the prince. Rulers could raise their “favourites” to great heights, yet steep promotions could be followed by even more abrupt downfalls. The phenomenon of rulers relying on trusted intimates of often lower rank has traditionally been investigated under the paradigm of “favourites” or “minister-favourites”, the term itself (“favori”) being coined in 17th century France and first introduced to the terminology of history in French literature. These people benefited personally from their disproportional credit with the rulers, a quality that made them prone to fall.

Only during the last few years, scholars have emphasised the importance of trust and confidence as well as loyalty as crucial factors of intimate bonds between princes and people regarded as *secundi regi/ secundi a rege* (“seconds to the king”). Courtiers whom the ruler confided, were more than just favourites depending on the potentially short-termed favour of their masters, since they possessed the confidence and trust of the sovereign.

Therefore, there are some crucial differences to be made between a “favourite” and an influential advisor at court. The term “Grey Eminence” seems appropriate to avoid ambiguities connoted with the term “favourite”. “Favourite” tends to describe a person in the surroundings of the ruler that enjoyed unusual favour with the king, but was not necessarily (or rather scarcely) applied to persons of major political

influence. This formula seems to fit perfectly with early modern minister-favourites but only imperfectly describes the position medieval key advisers of kings held as a result of their consequent rise to influence through the institutions of court and chancery. These political advisors acted as “go-betweens” or “power-brokers” at court, so that they could eventually be addressed by external and even foreign powers in order to pursue a certain policy with the ruler. On the contrary, favour demanded a bond of friendship, with easy access and a degree of personal familiarity, between king and minister. Consequently, Grey eminences cannot be reduced to the category of “seconds to the king”. It was a subtle mix of personal, interpersonal and structural factors that contributed to place them at the centre of strong power networks.

The papers that shall be presented at the conference are expected to either contribute to the working model/definition of Grey Eminences or to present case studies in order to enhance the comparative approach of the GREMIA project. Hence, papers may address the following research topics:

1. Proposing biographies to be compared with the case studies investigated within the GREMIA project:

The starting point of the GREMIA project was the idea to trace the careers and biographies of several important decision-makers of the political entourage of late medieval Emperors and King of the Romans: Sigmund Huler (Bohemian vice-chamberlain or royal treasurer to King Wenceslas), Brunoro della Scala (key figure of the Italian party at the court of Emperor Sigismund), Sigmund Prüschenk (counsellor to Emperor Frederick III), Zyprian von Northeim (named Serntein, aulic and Tyrolean chancellor to Maximilian I) and Kaspar Schlick (imperial chancellor and leading diplomat to the Roman Kings and Emperors Sigismund, Albert II and Frederick III). We are keen to confront the chosen sample of people at the Imperial court with comparable and matching figures from other European royal and princely households.

2. Discussing and assessing one or several of the proposed characteristics attributed to Grey eminences:

- Social ascent: Grey eminences often (but not always) rise to their position as the result of an advancement from comparably low social milieu (in contrast to courtiers belonging to the higher aristocracy).
- Technicians of power (diplomacy, engineering, finance, legal matters, etc.): their specific technical knowledge helped them climbing the ladder and accessing the direct service of the prince, even more so, if they had training in more than just one of these areas of knowledge or retained a good general overview of political concepts and the modes of decision-making at court;
- *Secundus regi/imperatori*, second to the ruler or to a minister in terms of power: it seems, however, that Grey eminences could not only rely on their close cooperation with the king himself; they rather had to work hand in hand with potentially rivalling courtiers;
- Powerbroker/gatherer of symbolic capital, or the Grey eminence as a node of a wide-ranging network. Grey eminences often promoted family members or clients from their patronage systems, but they could also function as go-betweens for regional elites, promoting political interests of their countrymen at court and thus ensuring or intensifying interaction between the court as a political centre and its more or less distant peripheries and vice versa;
- Founders of a bureaucratic and courtly dynasty: they pursued their own interests and expected to have their share in the redistribution of power and honours at court. Consequently, if the Grey eminence had gained a hold on power, they tried to retain it or to pass it on to their offspring, often seeking to achieve heredity of (formal) court offices or at least of landed property given to them.
- Part of a group of Grey eminences: the ruler promoted more than one Grey eminence at a time, as a deliberate strategy to establish a counterbalance between favourites, so that none of them could entirely dominate the court or the counsel.

- Rival of the sovereign: Grey eminences entering in a relationship of rivalry with the sovereign, a constellation typically appearing with the succession of a new sovereign when the office of the Grey eminence did not end with the death of the ruler.

3. Grey Eminences belonging to other political bodies/spheres of decision centres: the five reference characters selected for the GREMIA project as well as most of the theoretical material gathered refer to Grey eminences as members of a royal or princely court. However, it is true that other forms of decision centres (ecclesiastic court, city councils, republican institutions, representative assemblies) could have produced other forms of Grey eminences. Papers on such topics will also be highly welcomed.

The conference will take place at the *Institut für Mittelalterforschung* of the *Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Hollandstraße 11-13, 1st floor, Vienna, Austria), 12-14 October 2020. Conference languages will be English, German and French.

Proposals (including an abstract of **1500 characters max.** and a short bio-bibliographical presentation) for papers of **25 min** should be sent to sonja.duenebeil@oeaw.ac.at and jonathan.dumont@oeaw.ac.at before 15 April.

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