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Marriage, Inheritance, and the Balance
of Power in Twelfth-Century England
and France

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Abstract

This project attempts to chart the importance of the social institutions of marriage and inheritance in giving rise to political change in England and France during the period 1100-1215. It benefits from the study of diverse primary sources that include chronicle histories, legal and financial documents, charters, diplomatic treaties, letters, and contemporary works of imaginative literature. It also takes into account the extensive secondary literature dealing with the period both in the area of historical research and in related fields such as anthropology, political science, and literary criticism. The thesis is broadly divided into two parts, with four chapters devoted to an extended analysis of major themes and a further four providing a narrative reading of the period to illustrate the ideas put forward.

The central argument contends that a ‘multipolar’ balance of power existed among the quasi-independent states under the nominal lordship of the kingdom of France (and also involving England) around 1100; that this arrangement was disrupted frequently in the following years so that by around 1200 any remaining balance was more ‘bipolar’ in nature with the Plantagenet and Capetian kingdoms now dominating the smaller territorial units; and that the most important factors in creating this change were the political ramifications of marriage and inheritance episodes. The idea of a balance of power is developed and discussed by reference to similar ideas prevalent in the study of international relations among European states during the eighteenth century.

To support the argument several chapters are devoted to a close examination of the social practices and restrictions surrounding marriage and inheritance during the twelfth century. Issues such as the need for consent between marriage partners, marital restrictions on the basis of consanguinity, and the prevalence of primogeniture in the handing down of estates are all discussed at length. A central theme is the contested and provisional nature of all these issues during the period, with rules that were either unclear or not universally accepted creating opportunities for political advancement by members of the social elite. Further, this thesis

contends that earlier historiographical models describing a simple and consistent opposition between ecclesiastical leaders and lay magnates on questions of marriage are unrealistic. It looks to identify points of overlap and temporary alliance in secular and ecclesiastical policies, as well as noting the conflicts that occurred between them on other occasions. The project also aims to use the techniques and advantages of cultural history to add a significant extra dimension to the central political argument, by examining prevailing beliefs and value systems surrounding the institutions of marriage and inheritance.

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Abbreviations

MGH-SS	<i>Monumenta Germaniae historica – scriptores</i>
MHB	<i>Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury</i>
PL	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus</i> (commonly <i>Patrologia latina</i>)
RHF	<i>Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France</i>
RS	Rolls Series