The evolution of social and political ranking in medieval Europe

An EU-funded project comparatively examined how princely elites were formed and differentiated in premodern European rank societies. Research focused on the period of the late Middle Ages (1200-1500) in the geographical locations of England and the Empire.

RANK (The formation and visualisation of the social and political order of princes in late medieval Europe. A comparative study between the Empire and England) studied the formation of aristocracy in Europe during the late Middle Ages.

Historians from different disciplines conceptualised rank as a tool to analyse processes of social differentiation and configurations of socio-political order in hierarchically structured societies. Rank can be defined on a collective level but also as a hierarchical relationship, in terms of difference and inequality. The aspects that influence rank can change overtime and are different from one socio-political order to another.

Research showed that the Empire, England and France had their own ranking system based on the respective ruler. Ranking at a European level was only developed during the 15th century, after a decision of the councils of Basle and Constance.

England and the Empire shared most of the factors that determined ranking; however, differences persisted in the importance of these factors, such as military service or blood relation to the king. Money wasn’t a factor, unless it served to display splendour or largesse.

While both experienced processes of social differentiation of their respective aristocracies, individual grades were more significant in England than the Empire. This was largely due to inheritance patterns favouring primogeniture in England while inheritance was divided among brothers in the princely families in the Empire.

Finally, different concepts existed about who represented the realm. Until the end of the 13th century it was the responsibility of the emperor and imperial princes, but this changed with the emergence of electors, who represented the Empire together with the emperor. In turn, political estates developed alongside the grades of aristocratic ranking during the 14th century. In England, the emergence of the parliament brought together aristocrats and representatives of the gentry and the commons, who were crucial to the development of a socio-political order.

For members of the later so-called House of Lords, the notion of ‘peer’ was influenced by the formation of the later so-called House of Commons and does not take into account their different grades of rank. As a result, the political estates developed according to the houses of parliament, not along the different ranks of the upper aristocracy.
Related information

Report Summary

Final Report Summary - RANK (The Formation and Visualisation of the Social and Political Order of Princes in late Medieval Europe. A Comparative Study between the Empire and England)

Subjects

Social sciences and humanities

Keywords

Medieval Europe, rank societies, Middle Ages, aristocracy, social differentiation, socio-political order

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