

The Emotional Expression of Authority and Power in the Middle Ages

Later Medieval Europe

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The Emotional Expression of Authority and Power in the Middle Ages

Edited by

Flocel Sabaté



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Preface

Flocel Sabaté

In any society, wielding power and displaying authority requires at least two parties in contact. Accordingly, power, whether imposed, suffered or negotiated, supposes formulae of expression, onto which either side may graft emotion, in one sense or another, to frighten, seduce or simply to negotiate. The book you have in your hands, *The Emotional Expression of Authority and Power in the Middle Ages*, is a collective work, the product of studies by a team of specialised researchers, whose aims is to analyse the functioning of power in medieval society based on the same values that society assumed as its own.

We understand that authority and power in the late Middle Ages were expressed in four aspects: the paths for building authority, the search for emotive models with which to rule society, the formulae for dealing with conflicts, and emotional strategies in the struggle for power. That is why we have adopted these axes as the four parts this book is divided into, and have analysed each of these focussing on specific case studies as a means to approach the experiences of the men and women of late-medieval Europe. Leading researchers in the subject have taken on this challenge by analysing notable examples from late-medieval European history. However, it must be noted that we have very consciously prioritised, where possible, the study of cases from south-western Europe, precisely because this area has numerous documentary sources which have surprisingly little presence, to date, in the international bibliography as a whole.

To frame this set adequately, the book opens with the chapter by *Flocel Sabaté* in which he reviews how, in recent decades, the historiography has focussed the study of relations of power in the late Middle Ages on communication and, by extension, on the contents of the language used by those involved. From this point, it is thus easy to perceive that the paths that open for research should seek to extract the concept of power then commonly accepted, based as it was on the permanent resort to a social pedagogy rooted in fear and the social experience between the divine order and the threat of divine wrath, while constantly highlighting a generalised expressiveness.

The first section analyses the paths for building authority in three specific fields: communication in the feudal framework, the consolidation of royal power, and the acceptance of authority in personal consciences. In the former aspect, *Bernard Ribémont* delves into “The expression of power in the ‘chanson

de geste' in French language (twelfth-thirteenth centuries)" with the express purpose of capturing the "Expressivity of the word of authority". The author explains how the *chanson de geste* sought an emotional impact by drawing on a specific aesthetic of power around noble figures and adopting a range of forms adapted to various aspects of imposed power, such as abuses, mediation or promotion in line with God. The aesthetics of orality inherent in the *chanson de geste* were hyperbolic. Many songs carried essential questions for the society where they were performed, questions usually relating to power, in a context in which royal power was on the rise. Resistance to the evolution of royal prerogatives justified epic portrayals of a ruler acting as a tyrant. This is why, while playing on speeches of acute expressiveness, the jugglers worked on several registers, playing with nuances, paradoxes and so, more than it might at first sight seem, on complexity. Above all, the power of the oral word is clear, both to sustain rulers and to rebuke the abuse of power. In all cases, jugglers intervened by fostering the people's emotiveness regarding authority.

On the aspect of the consolidation of royal power, *Ulrike Becker* focusses on the passage from the thirteenth-century collection of tales *Calila e Dimna* in which a king orders punishment by cutting off noses to ask whether is this "a passionate outburst or manifestation of power?" The text, of Arab origin, was translated in the court of Alfonso X the Wise, King of Castile, among whose citizens it circulated widely. That facilitates its contextualisation in the power play. The role given to the royal surroundings is very significant, a setting where mediators appear enveloped by very different emotions, given that, in certain cases, they encourage the sovereign's cruel instincts and in others seek to promote equitable and balanced approaches. Thus, emotions take on political meaning, always involved in the message to be conveyed and directly affecting the strengthening of royal power in one way or another.

The personal internalisation of the sense of authority and the structures of power adopted by society are analysed by *Hans-Joachim Schmidt* through the philosophy of Duns Scotus in the thirteenth century. Here it is seen clearly that the transmission of authority and, with it, the governance of society, is achieved by encouraging emotions at the most elementary level: love within the family and fear of rulers. Scotus based this on his commentaries on the words of Petrus Lombardus who, at the end of the twelfth century, had written a collection of citations from the Bible and the works of patristic authors, starting with Augustine. Scotus' thought summarises a reflection about society which was expressed through his lectures at Oxford University as well as debates with his students. This is why Scotus's theory is, in reality, a profound proposal to promote social cohesion in the State as well as to increase the efficiency of power. The emotions of fear and love reached a central position for

ruling society, combining the public and private levels, that is, the family and the State. The link between these terms was based on the notion of friendship. Certainly, the citizens were motivated by the friendships they formed in order to work together in the State. Friendship should be the emotional grounds for motivating all action in the polis, and the danger lies in tyranny. Where fear and terror are spread by the tyrant, friendship and friendly feelings come to an end and justice in the State is destroyed. The proposal from Duns Scotus had a greater influence on political thought in his time than the historiography has suspected, given that he gave an original answer to the political implications of emotions in the building of authority.

The second section, dedicated to emotive models for ruling society, proposes tracing three aspects: the building of a Christian model with which to rule late-medieval society, the definition of a specific model of sovereign, and the promotion of a certain fit between different social groups. Accordingly, this section begins with a chapter by *Sari Katajala-Peltomaa* that analyses the “sensory elements in creating the sacred” by the Church as an emotive model of religion to guide popular behaviour and beliefs, through a multifaceted process involving such behavioural expectations as reverence for relics, as well as sensory and emotional responses. Signs, gestures and rituals were essential for reinforcing the sacredness of a space and even a prerequisite for its construction. The sacred was not only a product of elite domination but a joint enterprise: without devotees there was no cult. So a religious ideal was defined that inextricably combined the counterpoint of evil. Clearly, the binary forces, the sacred and the diabolical, were inseparably linked, and even necessary for each other’s existence. Late-medieval Christianity adapted to these parameters, and this conditioned a popular experience of religion grafted on an explicit emotionality which became, in itself, a regulated model of society, given the function of religion in structuring late-medieval society.

The chronicles of the kings of Aragon, in both the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, show monarchs who explained their management of power in the first person, and in which they did not hesitate to describe themselves weeping. This is an excellent opportunity for *Alexandru Ștefan Anca* to analyse “political behaviour in the Crown of Aragon”, taking note of “when the king sheds tears”. This shows, first of all, a society that externalised the expression of feelings, such as crying by men, and from this reality, how the sovereign himself resorted to emotion. He sometimes tried to impose his authority through gestures of authority that instilled fear in the population, but at the same time, in other cases and according to the situation, sought to gain popular affection and displayed closeness to his subjects. Communication with his subjects played a central role in all these cases. Contrary to the opinion of Huizinga

and Elias who, in the face of facts like these, believed that premodern humans were incapable of controlling their emotions, the analysis of the case of the Aragonese kings shows that these behaviours were coherent with the code of values of that time, the reason why the kings deliberately established a specific emotive model for royal authority.

The position of the sovereign as a guide for society does not reproduce a mere vertical scheme for the expression of power but also resorts to a dynamic of gesturality. A review based on the Angevine chronicle of the kings of Hungary, and especially the illuminated manuscript known as the *Chronicon pictum*, created around 1358 in the circle of King Louis the Great, allows *Vinni Lucherini* to appreciate how the model of consolidation of royal power resorted to emotional languages that very specifically included the images with which to accompany the books that spoke of the sovereign and the dynasty. This was how the dynamism based on the historical development of events became a counterpoint and complement to the static expressivity derived from the iconographic models from Ancient and Classical times. This was not a chance development, but more the fruit of specific communicative strategies that deliberately placed a common point in emotiveness.

The third part of the book analyses how the management of emotions played a key role in the resolution of, or at least on the perception and the evolution of, notable conflicts. Purposely, three differing conflicts have been chosen: a sudden rupture following the assassination of the holder of power, a situation of disorder and pillage, and a scenario derived from an armed conflict. In his chapter, *Rob Meens* begins by reviewing the infamous assassination of the count of Flanders in 1127, a political event that had a marked impact in its time and is well-known, especially thanks to the detailed account of the events by Galbert of Bruges, a member of the chapter of St. Donatian. This review shows that the respective emotions motivated specific political communications and affected all those involved in these events. That includes the self-same author of the narrative, who felt affected at least by his own anxiety, shocked by the atrocities committed by the townsmen in the sacred place of a church that he loved deeply, so that on writing the chronicle, he felt emotionally affected by the desecration and destruction of the church.

The impact of the routier mercenaries, especially in southern France, in the second half of the fourteenth century, is the clearest example of actions outwith the control of the authorities and that deeply troubled the population. *Tamás Ölbei* focusses on the attempts to convert the routiers into crusaders against the Muslims to follow their path through different places in the 1360s from a perspective of both their emotional impact on the population and the integration of the emotive language into the actions of the routiers themselves.

The former experienced the events immersed in a full emotiveness that varied between worry, fear, anxiety, compassion and anger. The latter, for their part, aimed to use emotions to consolidate their power, intentionally provoking perceptions of fear and terror. This was a confrontation with acts of aggression and predation, but both sides readily expressed their deeds and words with a strong emotional charge, based on the experiences they had lived through. The shared emotionality that entailed both the exercise of and response to violence and cruelty contributed to reaffirming a social identity.

War and its consequences is the scenario in which the authorities involved resort more readily to emotionality, either to justify postures or to involve their own people and punish the adversary. This is, thus, a scenario where behaviour is no longer rational and is, above all, emotional, on both sides. *Attila Bárány* focusses on the battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389 to analyse this together with the reverberations this had over the following decade and which entailed serious consequences both for the vanquished Serbs and, especially, for Hungary, which had to endure numerous Turkish incursions over the subsequent years. The long period of devastation affecting the economy and demography corresponded with prolonged political turmoil, the constant use of terror as a weapon and popular expressions of fear and trauma. The religious difference between the two sides exacerbated the negative view of otherness in all cases, encouraging popular expressions of contempt and rejection. Altogether, this situation emphasised expressions of hatred and revenge and underlined a scenario in which wielding power became entwined with promoting emotionality.

The fourth and final part observes that emotiveness not only affected the building of authority and power, the establishment of the models for ruling society or action and response in the face of exceptional circumstances, but also that the usual everyday game of power involved specific emotional strategies. This is shown by *Luciano Gallinari* in the process of consolidation of the power of the *Giudicati* between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. From an early date, these *iudices* equated themselves to monarchs by explaining what they felt as kings and by incorporating other expressions based on emotive perception into the language. In this sense, they continued to reinforce their position by the use of such sentiments as clemency and mercy, typically associated with sovereigns. They further strengthened this by assuming feelings inspired by the imperial investiture, such as amazement, sadness, contempt, respect or belonging. This way, over the chronological trajectory, the consolidation of power was based constantly on communication through language that clearly evolved with the circumstances and according to well-defined emotional strategies.

The “regime” of the late-medieval sovereign was always interpreted as agreed between the different holders of power, but clearly with each side approaching this pact from the strongest position possible. The development of powerful municipal governments consolidated this model that evidently placed the axial point on communication. A calculated approach to the monarch entailed visualising joy at his successes and sorrow at his failures, especially those of a military nature. A specific place where the municipalities and monarch were forced to negotiate was the parliament. Based on this premise, *Esther Martí Sentañés* analyses the relations between the Catalan city of Lleida and King Alfonso the Magnanimous in the parliaments called in the mid-fifteenth century and there finds communication based on a permanent resort to emotions. In fact, these emotions were present from the first moment, when the municipal government had to choose its representatives to the courts, a process which gave rise to a great overt display of emotions that varied according to the moment. These ranged from surprise, astonishment, sorrow, rage, anger and fear, to displeasure, hostility, joy or gratitude. This indicates that it was a very expressive society, where feelings were always displayed in discussions, with no need to conceal them. Then, when the municipal representatives addressed the Parliament before the king, they modulated a calculated expression of emotions and images, thus revealing the role of emotions in political power play.

Finally, if late-medieval politics meant a relation that resorted to emotions, it was natural for displays of power to include a dramatisation of the political message. *Francesc Massip* focusses on the Crown of Aragon in his analysis of this facet. The spectacle took over the streets thanks to situations such as when sovereigns entered towns and cities. These events involved not only a visualisation of the king’s supreme power, but also transmitted a specific discourse with which to flaunt his proximity to God and the intended dovetailing with local powers, whilst still emphasising ceremonies that depicted municipal acceptance of royal power. Emblems, such as the royal insignia, and spectacles on the occasion of royal commemorations of such deeds as military successes, prolonged the messages that praised royal virtues, unveiled the monarch’s divine mission, validated the continuity of the sovereign lineage and worked to promote emotive adhesions to the royal cause. The dramatisation of power led to elaborate and complex displays with which to impress the people through spectacles that became tools of vital importance for the process of centralising and consolidating the sovereign’s power.

The introduction and four parts of the book, duly developed through the fourteen above-mentioned chapters, aim to offer a balanced and innovative approach to the emotional expression of authority and power in the Middle

Ages. With this, our aim is to facilitate an understanding of the Late Middle Ages through its own traits, beginning with the expressiveness and emotionality that enveloped every-day life and, so, the paths through which it was sought to consolidate authority and power over the population. This work has been possible thanks to the sensitivity of the Agencia Española de Investigación, which has financed the research project *Expression, Feelings and Emotion (12th–15th centuries)* (HAR2016-75028-P). In the framework of this project, various seminars and congresses were held at the University of Lleida between 2017 and 2020, with the participation of a good number of outstanding researchers. This activity has led to various publications, among which three collective reflections about the aspects we consider fundamental and innovative should be highlighted.¹ The work of maturation and reflection, shared by the authors in 2021 and 2022, has made it easier now to offer a mature work, especially thanks to the enriching feedback from the anonymous reviewers, to whom we express our gratitude. In short, we are pleased to offer this work to the scientific community, and all those scholars and others interested in what medieval society was, and which we hope will somehow contribute to opening new paths for seeking a deeper understanding of late-medieval Europe through the parameters around which this complex society was structured.

1 As well as this current book, I refer to: Flocel Sabaté, ed., *Defining and Perceiving Feelings in the Late Middle Ages* (Leiden-Boston, 2025); Flocel Sabaté, ed. *Managing Emotions in the Middle Ages* (Leiden-Boston, 2025).

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