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Historical analysis of medieval brothers and sisters from the German upper aristocracy during the Staufen period (1138-1250) offers the opportunity to both rethink the field of family history and to rewrite the story of German political history during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (4, 15). Jonathan Lyon argues that studying the bonds between siblings from nine leading princely families, the Staufens and Welfs perhaps being the most famous, allows for comparisons on the strategies these families employed to acquire and maintain their elevated positions in society. Moreover, by studying these families in the period from 1100 to 1250 it is possible to establish how, why, and with what effects these bonds changed over time. In fact, this is one of the strongest arguments of Lyon's research.

The first two chapters of this book can be seen as an extension of the introduction and as the foundation of his contention that relationships between medieval blood siblings need to be investigated (4). Not only are the nine families, which are at the heart of this book, introduced briefly, but their rise to success is also placed in a wider frame of crucial developments around 1100. The Investiture Controversy, with its weakening effect on the emperor, was one of the factors positively stimulating the influence of the territorial princes, demonstrating that the impact of this clash affected many. That bonds between siblings could be forged through different channels is evident from Lyon's discussion of succession (the eldest brothers not necessarily succeeded their fathers), inheritance (the monastery could be divided to provide several sons with a territory), and church careers (most sons destined to serve the church were placed in cathedral chapters, offering the opportunity to keep in close contact with other siblings). Although not explicitly mentioned in the chapter's title, Lyon states that sisters were also part of the sibling bonds. He explains that the lack of sources makes it difficult to establish if and how brothers and sisters supported each other to maintain their positions in the upper aristocracy. Charter evidence leads him to conclude that sisters seem to have been almost absent when decisions about the family's patrimony were made. Even though sisters are invisible he could shed more light on their positions by discussing their absence more prominently. A reference to the Codex Falkensteinsis, which was extensively discussed by John B. Freed, could have been made. [1] In this text Count Sigiboto made it clear that his sons and not his daughters were to receive his properties after his death. The absence of the daughters from the image accompanying the text underscores the message. More in line with the selected dynasties, a charter featuring the eldest daughter of Henry the Lion, Gertrud, also seems to corroborate that daughters were involved in patrimonial affairs only in specific circumstances. The absence of male heirs perhaps enticed Henry the Lion to include his only child--and presumed heir--as a consenter to the donation of property. [2]

A discussion of women provides an excellent opportunity to make some related remarks with regard to Chapter 3, which focuses on the developments that are discernable in siblings bonds within different generations. When Lyon introduces Conrad of Zähringen in Chapter 3, as fathering four sons, he fails to mention Conrad's daughter Clementia (74). This is peculiar, since Lyon discusses the letter Clementia's brother Duke Berthold IV sent to King Louis VII of France in the autumn of 1162, which had immediate consequences for Clementia. In the letter Berthold seeks Louis' support to side against Frederick Barbarossa, whose cousin Henry the Lion was married to Berthold's sister. As a consequence Henry had his marriage with Clementia dissolved, because Frederick ordered or persuaded him to do so. Although the annulment of the marriage is mentioned later on in the book, on page 102, in order to underscore the relations between Emperor Frederick and Henry the Lion, an earlier reference on page 74 would have revealed that 'wrong' decisions of one sibling could have an immediate impact on the other and that women, as sisters, perhaps were in a more precarious position than their brothers. That women were not only affected by the presence of brothers, but also by their absence is evident when turning to Henry the Lion's mother, Gertrud. After her first husband, Henry the Proud, had died Emperor Conrad III arranged that she married his half-brother Henry Jasomingott in order to secure their position in Saxony. Although it must remain speculation, there probably would have been no marriage were Gertrud to have had brothers. Looking beyond the fact that she was unlikely to have been the successor of the Saxon patrimony if she would have had male siblings, they would have supported her in upholding her position, i.e.--as Lyon has demonstrated--other brothers did for their other siblings.

Conrad's scheme failed to work, since Gertrud's son Henry the Lion became one of the most powerful territorial princes, expanding his territories in Saxony. Although historians have acknowledged that Frederick Barbarossa supported his cousin in this claim to fame, Lyon emphasizes in Chapter 4 that this was strategically motivated. Frederick had no brothers to rely on and was therefore forced to seek his support elsewhere. He could turn to the husbands of his sisters, Bertha of Upper-Lotharingia and Judith of Thuringia, a topic that merits further investigation. Yet until the beginning of the 1170s Henry the Lion was his closest ally. Duke Henry equally lacked siblings and therefore also supported the emperor. Ironically, Henry's absence of brothers became an obstacle. Instead of explaining the famous story of Henry's downfall in the 1180s from the perspective of the bloodthirsty magnates, Lyon demonstrates that Henry's lack of support from his natal family, as a consequence of the absence of brothers and the young age of his sons, contributed to his loss of his duchies in 1184. Both cousins realized the importance of sibling bonds and did everything in their power to secure offspring. They each had four sons reaching majority and a large part of Chapter 5 is devoted to them and to the ways the siblings of each family cooperated. The importance of sons to Frederick is visualized in a full-page miniature in the Historia Welforum made between 1185 and 1191, yet it is not discussed by Lyon. The emperor, holding the imperial insignia, is depicted enthroned flanked by his two sons, King Henry VI and Duke Frederick of Swabia. Both sons turn to their father. Their gestures, together with the inscription above the miniature, stating In medio prolis residet pater imperiale (Between his children resides the father and emperor), indicate that their father is in the center. Like some of the hagiographical sources Lyon discusses, this pictorial source perhaps not immediately reflects Frederick's ideas or wishes, but that of the monastery at Weingarten where the Historia was written, around 1170. [3] Nonetheless, the miniature visualizes a sibling bond and the bond between a father and his sons, possibly as a result of the knighting of the two boys in 1184. It is therefore surprising that Lyon did not include the image in his book, since his use of visual sources on other occasions suggests that he regards them as useful. 

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In Chapter 6, Lyon analyzes the fourteenth-century ‘family portrait’ of Duke Berthold III of Merania and his wife, Agnes, with their eight children. He concludes that the ideal family picture painted here, is actually a family tree, containing family members from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which functions as the starting point for his investigation. Although not directly related to the topic of his book, Lyon leaves the reader puzzled why so much value was attached to this family structure and why this specific composition—separating men from women and depicting Mechthild in the middle at the feet of her parents—was chosen. Lyon underscores that the cooperation of siblings can also be established from the survival of visual sources, such as seals. Although he briefly mentions the iconography of the seals of Landgrave Henry IV Raspe and his brother Conrad of Thuringia, discussed in Chapter 7, it would have been worthwhile establishing to what extent their seals relied on those of their father and grandfather and what we must make of this. If there indeed existed a practice of appropriating a dynastic iconography, the question arises whether Lyon is right when he, in his conclusion, states that the sibling bond offers a new perspective, independent from debates about family (Sippe or Geschlecht). From the material he gathered it seems that siblings went through great lengths to promote their families’ power.

While focusing on Germany, Lyon’s insights undoubtedly prove inspiring when turning to other countries as well. This book is useful for those interested in twelfth- and thirteenth-century nobility and family ties because it convincingly demonstrates the importance of sibling bonds in the formation of power. As a consequence Lyon touches upon matters important for the study of lordship in the Middle Ages, such as the division of patrimony, the proximity to the emperor (Königsnähe), the absence of heirs and the effects of mobility. Moreover, his study tells us that lordship and power are all about cooperation, change, and chance.

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