



THE SOCIAL LIVES OF MEDIEVAL RINGS

Edited by
JITSKE JASPERSE

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PREFACE

WHILE ITS LIFE is not nearly as long and exciting as that of many medieval rings, the making of this edited volume certainly went through different stages. My fascination for rings began when I studied the seal matrix of Isabel of Hainaut (d. 1190), queen of France. When, in 1858, the French architect Viollet-le-Duc undertook excavations in the choir of the Notre-Dame, where Isabel had been buried, he found in her lead coffin a gold ring with a small stone (found near the left hand), a silver roundel, engraved with a lamb carrying a cross and inscribed AGNUS DEI (placed near the queen's chest area), and a silver seal 8.5 cm long by 5.5 cm wide, with a loop at the top. In 1860, seal, ring, and Agnus Dei roundel were stolen from the cathedral's treasury. Fortunately, the seal matrix surfaced and was acquired for the British Museum, but the whereabouts of the ring and roundel are still unknown. While the seal matrix has received ample attention, that it belonged to an assemblage of smaller artifacts remained unaddressed. Clearly, the ring—as well as seal and roundel—held some kind of meaning for Isabel and/or the ones burying her. Perhaps because of its simplicity—suggested by the description—I have always wondered whether the ring may have been a protective amulet rather than an expression of royal status. While the buried items remain enigmatic, they did animate my scholarly taste for rings and the sensory stimulation offered by small objects. This inspired collaboration with the archaeologist Karen Dempsey, who brought me on the path of the work done by her colleague Eleanor Standley. I was fortunate that Eleanor accepted an invitation to the panel “The Rich Lives of Medieval Rings,” which I organized at the International Medieval Congress Leeds in 2022, and to which Elizabeth Dospěl Williams and Amanda Dotseth also contributed. Their excellent work encouraged me to further pursue the present volume.

The research on rings would have been impossible without libraries and museums. My gratitude goes to all of them, with a special mention of the Jacob-und-Wilhelm-Grimm-Zentrum at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and Biblioteca Tomás Navarro Tomás at the Centro de Ciencias Humanidades y Sociales, CSIC (two institutional libraries I regularly visited in preparation of this volume), and the fabulous Museo Arqueológico Nacional in Madrid, where Helena Lahoz Kopiske provided me with access to the sapphire ring

that features on this volume's cover. Holding a piece of the medieval world in your hand is something magical.

I want to thank all the authors who have contributed to this volume. I am grateful that they accepted my invitation, as I have learned so much more about the social lives of medieval rings after reading their chapters. Special thanks are owed to the team of *Les Enlumineurs* (Jacky Yao in particular) and Sandra Hindman (the queen of rings), who not only brings to life rings' fascinating past, but also generously agreed to write the Epilogue to this volume. The careful reader will see references to her publications in numerous chapters within this volume. I am immensely grateful to my former intern Su'aad Redan (Art History, University of Amsterdam), whose lively discussions about rings and gender, as well as her careful and in-depth reading of the contributions, and support with copy-editing enhanced the creation of the present volume. The anonymous peer reviewer's stimulating comments sweetened the final steps on the long road of publishing. Arc Humanities Press, with Laura Macy's critical eye and spot-on remarks, and Tania Colwell's organizational talent and incredible patience, has been supportive along the way.

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