



# FRATERNAL BONDS IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

by **ANETA PIENIĄDZ**  
translated by **ANNA KIJAK**

**ARC** HUMANITIES PRESS





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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AA SS	<i>Acta Sanctorum.</i>
ArFranc.	<i>Annales regni Francorum.</i>
BHL	<i>Biblioteca Hagiographica Latina Antiquae et Mediae Aetatis.</i>
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina.
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio Medievalis.
ChLA	<i>Chartae Latinae Antiquiores.</i>
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum.
MemLuc	<i>Memorie e documenti per servire all'istoria del Ducato di Lucca,</i> 4–5 (in 5 parts). Lucca: Bertini, 1818–1844.
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica.
MGH DD	MGH Diplomata.
MGH Epp.	MGH Epistolae.
MGH LL	MGH Leges.
MGH SS	MGH Scriptorum.
MGH SS rer. Germ.	MGH Scriptorum rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi.
MGH SS rer. Mer.	MGH Scriptorum rerum Merovingicarum.
PL	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina.</i> Edited by Jacques Paul Migne, Paris 1844–1855.
SC	Sources Chrétiennes.
TrFr	<i>Die Traditionen des Hochstifts Freising.</i>
UStG1	<i>Urkundenbuch der Abtei St. Gallen, 1.</i>
UStG2	<i>Urkundenbuch der Abtei St. Gallen, 2.</i>



## PREFACE

**THIS BOOK WAS** inspired by Paul the Deacon's well-known poem addressed to Charlemagne, in which the author asked the ruler for the release of his brother Arichis, exiled from Italy after Duke Rotgaud of Friuli's failed rebellion (775–776). The poet described his loss in a dramatic fashion:

Listen with serenity, highest of kings, to the words of your servant, look upon my tears with kindness.  
I am more unhappy, and with reason, than almost anyone in the world;  
for me there is always mourning and hours of sadness.  
For seven years now a violent change has been creating many anxieties and has broken my heart.  
For so long my brother has been a captive in your land, desolate and disheartened, naked and needy.  
In our homeland his poor wife goes begging for food by the highways and byways with trembling lips.  
By this shameful means she brings up four children whom she scarcely manages to cover with rags.<sup>1</sup>

As I was reading the poem, I asked myself what was behind the poetic formula. What were the mutual obligations between Paul and Arichis, the two sons of Warnefrid and Theodelinda? What role was played by the fraternal bond in the maintenance of the cohesion of the family group and the position of its members in society, also in case of a threat? What were the relations between the brother, sister-in-law, and the nephews? What models and values shaped the author's idea of these relations? What did it mean to be a brother in the late eighth century?

Much to my surprise, a preliminary bibliographic survey showed that the question of the relations among brothers was not explored in any great detail in the literature. In fact, the only question analyzed extensively was that of the relations among Louis the Pious's sons and their rivalry over power. However, the authors of these studies focused primarily on systemic and political questions. On the other hand, scholars carried out intensive studies of the forms of medieval communities that drew on a metaphorically

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**1** *Pauli et Petri diaconorum carmina*, 47: "Verba tui famuli, rex summe, adtende sereus, / respice et ad fletum cum pietate meum. / Sum miser, ut mereor, quantum vix ullus in orbe est; / semper inest luctus, tristis et hora nihi. / Septimus annus adest, ex quo nova causa dolores / multiplices generat et mea corda quatit. / Captivus vestris extunc germanus in oris / est meus, afflicto pectore, nudus, egens. / Illius in patria coniunx miseranda per omnes / mendicat plateas ore tremente cibos. / Quattuor hac turpi natos sustentat ab arte, / quos vix pannucciis praeavalet illa tegi." Translation from Godman, *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance*, 83.

understood brotherhood. This lack of research into biological brotherhood seemed all the more surprising to me given that, when I studied various topics relating to the history of women and the family, the role of brothers often turned out to be of key importance. In the language of early medieval sources the terms “brother” and “brotherhood”, used both literally and metaphorically, are omnipresent.

The present study is an attempt to answer the questions posed above. I focus on an analysis of the relation among biological brothers—what it was in society’s life and how it was perceived. Yet mine is not a typical study on the history of the family. I believe that an analysis of the institutions of social life cannot be limited only to what can be described as “social practices,” which are usually the focus of such studies. In order to understand the functioning and the transformations of these institutions I also need to study the system of ideas, of models which determined thinking about relations among people and influenced the actions of various groups as well as individuals. In the case of the early Middle Ages such a research approach is particularly justified. This was a period marked by a profound redefinition of the ideological foundations of the social order, also on the level of relations within family groups. The conflict between various normative systems, legitimized by both tradition and religion, was reflected, for example, in the eighth- and ninth-century disputes over the institution of marriage.

When embarking on this study of fraternal relations as an independent research topic, I am aware of the fact that such a distinction is somewhat artificial. After all, fraternal relations were only one part of a complex system of connections constituting what is called the family or, more broadly, the kin group. I believe, however, that these relations do require a separate treatment for several reasons. First of all, the very definition of early medieval terms of “brother” and “brotherhood” is not as obvious as it might seem. While scholars are willing to note the historical changeability of the institution of marriage, and even of motherhood or fatherhood, relations between brothers are usually treated as constant and as such not requiring explanations. Consequently, they are marginalized. Yet even a perfunctory perusal of the sources suggests that the situation was, in fact, different. However, in order to capture this changeability, we need to change our research perspective and abandon the belief, firmly established in historiography, in the key role of marriage and of the resulting bond between ancestors and descendants in family relations.

It also needs to be stressed that fraternal relations occupy a special place in the medieval system of ideas, because they simultaneously function in two dimensions—the literal and the metaphorical. The notions of opposing fraternal communities born of the flesh and of the spirit—*fraternitas carnalis* and *fraternitas spiritualis*—play an important role in the early medieval model of society, evolving under the overwhelming impact of St. Augustine’s thought. Restoring the harmony between the carnal and the spiritual dimensions of brotherhood becomes an important topic in theological reflection. One of the questions I would like to answer concerns the way in which these deliberations among intellectual elites influenced the perception of relations among brothers, their legal definition and daily practice.

I embarked on this work fully aware of the source barriers restricting research into such a complex subject matter as the relations between people and the motivations of human actions. We always and inevitably remain bound to writing, which was a more or less elitist tool, irrespective of whether we are dealing with a theological treatise or a private document. What we can learn thanks to the available evidence is just a small fragment of the whole picture, created by authors whose ways of seeing and describing the world was shaped primarily by the Church's teachings and conforming to literary linguistic and rhetorical patterns.

The source-related limitations cannot be avoided, but we can certainly expand the field of observation. That is why I opted for a justifiable approach: to use a variety of sources, from theological treatises, through normative sources, to private documents. Obviously, such a huge and diverse body of material required some selection. I am aware of the fact that the expansion of the scope of my preliminary research may have resulted in some sources being left out. In many cases I have also been forced to give up detailed source analyses, undoubtedly important and interesting, but driving me away from the main topic. Adopting such a broad perspective enabled me to view the subject from different angles and, even more importantly, to follow the existing (or non-existing) connections between sophisticated theological reflection and the law and collective ideas concerning the essence of fraternal relations.

I have decided to limit the chronological scope of this study to the ninth century, only rarely reaching for older, mainly eighth-century sources. There are several considerations behind this decision. First of all, I consider the ninth century to be a key moment in the evolution of the model of the Western European family. This was a time when the Christian models of relations among relatives became gradually internalized. This process was accompanied by displacement of older practices and customs, which often led to conflicts. The many diverse texts originating in that period provide scholars with extensive research material. Its systematic analysis required me to give up my initial plan to include in this study also tenth-century sources. I can only hope that I will be able to return to them one day.

The topics I discuss have been arranged thematically. In the introductory part I examine the current state of research and our source basis. It is an important part of this study, because I try to demonstrate how interpretation patterns established in historiography, as well as various theoretical inspirations concerning the form and functioning of the family, have influenced the perception of brotherhood, and, more broadly, how they influence the formulation of research questions relating to the role of the bond of kinship in medieval societies. I have been forced to go beyond the area of historical reflection closest to me and to think about the role played by theoretical inspirations coming from the humanities and social sciences generally. I have also devoted much space to a description of the source basis—although it resulted by no means in an exhaustive description. Given the multiplicity of sources used in this study and their diversity in terms of genres, I have tried to signal at least the most important problems of interpretation and explain the limitations I came across in my research.

Chapter 2 is devoted to a discussion of the basic terms and concepts used by the authors of texts writing about brothers and the relations among them. A more detailed analysis reveals that the language used by them hides contents different from those which are ascribed to them in contemporary society and which scholars are often inclined to see in them intuitively. In this part of the study I also try to show how the terminology associated with fraternal relations was used in the Middle Ages in a metaphorical sense. The metaphor referred primarily to an ideal model of fraternal relations emerging from theological and moralist reflection going back to the beginnings of Christianity. I have decided not to carry out a detailed analysis of the development of the significance and function of the brotherhood metaphor with regard to medieval communities such as religious confraternities or monastic congregations. This is a separate and vast research topic, which has been amply analyzed in historiography, and goes beyond the main focus of this study.

A large part of my reflection is devoted to the question of hierarchical relations among brothers. This is a key issue in a historiographic discussion, which has been going on for some time, about the order of inheritance in pre-Carolingian and Carolingian Europe. The question is essential both when it comes to explaining the principles of the functioning of the medieval family group as the foundation of the social order and to better understanding specific cases—above all those relating to the inheritance policy in the Carolingian dynasty and the conflicts arising in connection with that policy. What has turned out to be particularly interesting in this context is an analysis of the legal position and the ideas, rooted in the biblical tradition, of the role of the firstborn and his relations with his younger brothers. Conclusions that can be drawn from such an analysis suggest that greater caution is needed in our approach to historiographic patterns referring to, for example, the uniquely early medieval egalitarianism of fraternal groups—patterns usually built on the basis of an analysis of just one aspect of the relations among brothers. Another aspect is the perception of relations among brothers: the early medieval sources reveal the Janus-faced nature of the fraternal bond, stretching between ideal love and hate, loyalty and rivalry, sometimes even leading to fraternal bloodshed. I have tried to demonstrate the role of the biblical tradition in the conceptualization and consolidation of the ambivalent image of the relations among brothers and how these ideas overlapped with social practice.

The social practice of relations among brothers is the focus of my attention in the last part of the book. Analyzing references recorded primarily in diplomatic sources from various parts of the Carolingian realms, I have demonstrated the ways and tools used in the fulfilment of brothers' mutual obligations and exercise of their rights as well as the interactions between brothers and other relatives. My reflections in this part of the book also serve to compare social practice with the models discussed in the previous chapters, that are present in various sources: models shaped, on the one hand, by often archaic custom, and on the other by Scripture and the teachings of the Church.

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