

CIRCLES OF POWER

Evgeniya Shelina – I belong to the group of medievalists who consider that medieval society formed a radically different system from ours. For me, this implies not projecting our modern categories onto the past, but reconstructing the networks in the way they were seen at that time. In the writings of historians, the representation of power over someone, always thought of vertically with a dominant person at the top, a dominated person at the bottom, was beyond dispute. Moreover, this concept gave rise to a widely accepted model of medieval social relations: that of a social pyramid.

However, with the tools of digital humanities and computational research, we now have the opportunity to get closer to the concepts specific to the period under study. Instead of manually going through hundreds of documents, there are tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of texts that are now being digitised then transcribed and transformed into corpora that can be queried with the help of the computer. Basing my analyses on the way that the exercise of power over someone is expressed, I started from a simple question: over whom did the dominant person exercise their power, and who were these dominant people? I then searched Latin corpora and vernacular languages for prepositional segments such as "power over" to realize that this was not the only way to formulate the relationship of domination. Very often, I found expressions like "in the power of a dominant x" or "in the hands of a dominant x".

The model that emerges from these data is no longer that of a pyramid, but that of concentric circles — or better still, of sets of concentric circles that intersect, because there were many dominant people. Each dominant person constitutes a centre, from which relations radiate. Power is then thought of as an attraction: the ability to make someone or something pass from the outside to the inside. This is what medieval prelates did when they controlled membership of the social body, especially by imposing excommunication; this is also what the medieval doors at the entrance to church buildings did symbolically; this is what the Last Judgment represents: a transition of the chosen people to the all-encompassing space of Paradise, separating them from those who remain outside the bosom of the Father and go into the chaotic space of Hell.

But can we really reduce things to the "inside-outside" pattern, even if it is the most frequent? In reality, several logics of orientation are observed in the way that relations of power are represented: inside-outside, up-down, right-left. Consider an assembly at the end of the Middle Ages. The pope, the archbishop or the king are at the centre. The other participants are spread out around them: more or less close, higher or lower, to the right or to the left. To render this complexity, we may do better to abandon western concepts and look elsewhere for an image that expresses both centrality and verticality. For me, this image is

analogous to the shape of the Buddhist stupa: a circular figure, but one that also rises upwards. For the moment, it seems to me the best way to represent medieval conceptions of power in the Western world.

03 min 33 s