Introduction

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All the articles in this volume have been inspired by the life and the work of Elisabeth van Houts. All are in one way or another reflections on the book’s chosen title and of her remarkable range of interests and sympathies. In assembling the group of scholars who have written these essays, the editors are profoundly aware that Liesbeth has influenced so many people as friends, colleagues and students. We hope that all will regard this volume as an appropriate tribute to her.

The early years of Liesbeth’s career were spent in the Netherlands at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, where work on the *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* was undertaken as a doctoral thesis under the supervision of Professor L. J. Engels. Its publication followed. It was the basis for her magisterial two-volume edition of the *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* published in the Oxford Medieval Texts series in 1992–5. Her formal introduction to British academic life occurred in 1980 when she presented a paper to the third Battle Conference on Anglo-Norman Studies. From the early 1980s she became a frequent visitor to the University of Cambridge where she has since spent all of her subsequent professional career, first as Visiting Associate and Visiting Fellow at Clare Hall in 1983 and 1984, then as Eugenie Strong Research Fellow at Girton College (1985–9), Fellow and Tutor (1990–2) and Fellow and Lecturer in Medieval History at Newnham College, and as Fellow and Lecturer in Medieval History at Emmanuel College from 1997 until the present. The University of Cambridge awarded her a DLitt in 2001 and the title of Honorary Professor in European Medieval History in 2011, as far as we are aware, the only Honorary Professorship conferred on a college teaching officer in the humanities.

Those who know her well are very aware how profoundly influential her early life and her connections with the Netherlands have continued to be. At the time of this book’s publication, she is collaborating with Professor

1 E. M. C. van Houts, *Gesta Normannorum Ducum. Een studie over de handschriften, de tekst, het geschiedwerk en het genre* (Groningen: Rijksuniversiteit, 1982).
Ad Putter of the University of Bristol on a Leverhulme Trust project on Anglo-Dutch relations in the medieval and early modern periods. In the foreword to her book *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe 900–1200*, published in 1999, she mentioned as inspirations the handing down of memory within her Dutch family as well as her British one.² The movement of people and peoples into new environments is a constant theme in her work, as are the role of women in history and, always, individual lives. How individuals could have multiple simultaneous and fluctuating identities and how this is intertwined with the retention of memories of actual and possible status has been superbly set out in an article on remarriage published in 2013.³ Her intellectual training in the Netherlands enabled her to work outside of the institutional and legal frameworks and references that were so long dominant in English medieval history, a fresh and novel take that many have found profoundly stimulating.

In her research and her teaching Liesbeth has always considered historical figures as real people, an approach that takes into account the experiences and life events that shaped their attitudes and actions. Her method to achieve this is both persuasive and ambitious: she often envisages possible situations and interactions that may not necessarily be explicit in the historical record but that enable us to take mental leaps that expand our understanding of medieval people and culture. Her wide-ranging and holistic approach to the medieval world has created communities of researchers and students, all with their distinctive interests and emphases. Her and their contributions continue to richly enhance our knowledge of the Middle Ages. The seeds of all this were present in that 1980 Battle Conference paper, with its treatment of the *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* as a dynamic text.⁴ Walking then in the footsteps of the late Marjorie Chibnall, whom Liesbeth has always acknowledged as a great support and an inspiration, Liesbeth made her mark as an editor who made important texts accessible and comprehensible and who then proceeded to make a massive contribution to the interpretation of the history that depends on these texts.⁵ From the early 1990s, her work

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expanded to take in, within a broader European dimension, women’s history and the complex subject of memory. In 1995 she published a groundbreaking article that assembled and analysed opinions about the so-called Norman Conquest of England from across the whole of Europe.\(^6\) Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe 900–1200 truly announced the European significance of her work, something that is even more evident in her remarkable Married Life in the Middle Ages, which appeared shortly before this volume went to press. This book, her latest magnum opus, showcases the range of her interests, the breadth of her knowledge of sources, and her inventive and fruitful methods.\(^7\)

Women’s history and gender have been ever-present in Liesbeth’s work over the last thirty years. These have always foregrounded an interest in individual lives. Lived experience has indeed often taken precedence over more overtly theoretical types of argument in ways that are often both profoundly thought-provoking and moving. Among her many publications during these years are articles that tackle major issues such as intermarriage in the aftermath of conquest and clerical marriage.\(^8\) A major contribution that must also be acknowledged is to the dissemination of knowledge outside the academy through translations of sources and the editing of volumes that communicate the latest scholarship to all with an interest in the study of the Middle Ages.\(^9\)

Identities have been a very fashionable topic among historians of all periods for some time. This volume is intended to intertwine the study of identities with other strands of current medieval scholarship, such as the study of lives and histories – two overlapping but different subjects – as well as cultural and social approaches applied to an ever-widening range of sources, from legal texts to hagiographies and biblical exegesis. In all of this, it is important to adopt a more complex and wide-ranging notion of what constituted ‘identities’ by going beyond family and regional or

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\(^7\) E. van Houts, Married Life in the Middle Ages, 900–1300, Oxford Studies in Medieval European History (Oxford University Press, 2019).


national belonging: social status, gender, age, literacy levels and displacement are among the many considerations that must be taken into account. Multi-layered, sometimes contradictory identities can thereby be considered in their full depth and complexity, to counteract the temptation to see a specific individual only as a woman, a monk or a legal scholar. This volume therefore aims to enrich the understanding of people’s identities – both as defined by themselves and by others, as individuals as well as members of groups and communities – through a multiplicity of approaches and sources. It is intended that new figures and new concepts of ‘identities’ will emerge from the dialogue between the chapters. An approach based on life-histories, lived experience, ethnogenesis, theories of diaspora, cultural memory and generational change will bring this out.

The essays that follow can mostly be left to speak for themselves. Their diverse approaches to a central theme must nonetheless be emphasised. All treat of generalised identities, male and female, social and ethnic. Many are set within the context of lived experience. Miri Rubin writes about motherhood through the prism of the drama of the murdered child William of Norwich; Fiona Griffiths about women's prayers and the commemorative and intercessory roles of nuns; Julia Crick about Flemish migration into south-western England; Elma Brenner about the charitable work of Cistercian monks and nuns; Patricia Skinner about trauma as the lived experience of Walchelin the Priest and his vision of the procession of the dead as recorded by Orderic Vitalis; Nicholas Vincent about new charters of the Empress Matilda and how these change the narrative of the life of a remarkable woman so brilliantly written about by Marjorie Chibnall; and John Hudson about what we can know about the identity of the author of the law-text known as Glanvill.

Anna Abula and Julie Barrau focus their attention on biblical men and women and how the twelfth and thirteenth centuries explored their identities, in the first case Jacob and Esau in the context of Jewish–Christian debate and in the second, Ruth. Mathieu Arnoux, Pierre Bauduin and David Crouch all tackle broad issues through an examination of specific texts: the first, about economic management and the well-being of labourers through the medium of the works of William of Malmesbury; the second looks at the identity of the Normans and the changing early eleventh-century world through the writings of Ademar of Chabannes; the third does so through a twelfth-century Occitan conduct poem addressed to a woman. David Bates, George Garnett and Leonie Hicks write directly about the Anglo-Norman historians to whom Elisabeth van Houts has devoted so much attention. The first suggests that an analysis of lived experience of historians writing in Normandy
should make us think differently about the public role of these historians and the vexed subject of Norman identity. The second highlights how the two Canterbury monks Osbern and Eadmer wrote about and assessed England’s pre-1066 past, again raising questions about lived experience and historical writing and about how the present can be seen as shaping the past. Leonie Hicks uses an analysis of gender in Wace’s *Roman de Rou* and *Roman de Brut* to illuminate once more the identity of the Normans and how the two poems reflect the concerns of Wace’s own times.

The people – real or fictional – under scrutiny in this volume are diverse, engaging and fascinating in their complexities (and sometimes their contradictions). The editors and contributors of this volume hope that the multifaceted medieval humanity that emerges from the volume will be a welcome and familiar crowd to Liesbeth, who has contributed so much to make medieval people more real and three-dimensional to all of us.