

Ionut Epurescu-Pascovici, Human Agency in Medieval Society, 1100–1450, Woodbridge (The Boydell Press) 2021, X–304 p., ISBN 978-1-78327-576-2, GBP 65,00.

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What factors drive human action? This is the fundamental question addressed by Ionut Epurescu-Pascovici, a research fellow at the University of Bucharest, in his examination of human agency in medieval society. Epurescu-Pascovici defines agency as »the capacity of human beings to affect their own life chances and those of others as well as to play a role in the formation of the social realities in which they participate« (p. 2). The main body of the volume comprises five chapters, which are book-ended by a substantial introduction and a conclusion. Epurescu-Pascovici's source material comprises what he denotes as »ego documents« through which the intentions and actions, although not necessarily the inner thoughts, of the authors can be determined through careful textual analysis. Each chapter provides one or two case studies in which Epurescu-Pascovici examines a different genre of »ego documents«, with the intention of showing the ways in which the authors either articulated their own agency or discussed ways in which others could play a role in shaping the social realities in which they participated. Despite the rather broad scope suggested by the title of the volume, Epurescu-Pascovici's geographical focus is actually much narrower, considering selected regions of the later medieval French kingdom, and the city of Florence. Similarly, the temporal range of the volume is limited largely to the 13th–15th century, with just one case study dealing with the twelfth century.

In the introduction to this study, Epurescu-Pascovici describes his purpose as historicizing the individual as a social agent, which he distinguishes from the scholarly investigation of medieval concepts of free will. Rather than conceptualizing »agency« as a strict category, he argues that this concept should be understood as a discursive field that encompasses a range of related but somewhat eclectic issues. He also acknowledges that the limited geographical scope of the study and the use of case studies do not provide a basis for wide generalizations. Instead, the volume is intended to »give a mosaic view of the possibilities for social action in the Middle Ages« (p. 7). Nevertheless, the driving thesis of the volume is that efforts by sociologists as well as some medieval and modern historians to prioritize systems and structures in their treatment of the European Middle Ages has had the effect of denying agency to individuals, and that these case studies will demonstrate that historians should, in fact, emphasize individual human decision making.

In chapter one, Epurescu-Pascovici examines two historiographical works by Galbert of Bruges and Salimbene de Adam of Parma,



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respectively, in order to show that each author emphasized human agency rather than divine intervention as the catalyst for the events they describe. In this context, the author offers a detailed and compelling discussion of the compositional history of both works, detailing inter alia both the immediate and contemporaneous nature of Galbert's depiction of the murder of Count Charles the Good of Flanders in 1127 and his subsequent reworking of the text in a later format to describe the supposed martyrdom of the count at the hands of his political enemies.

The second chapter focuses on the cartulary of the lords of Picquigny, a region located near Amiens, during the rule of the father and son Enguerran (1192–1224) and Gérard III (1224–1248). Through a meticulous examination of the documents imbedded in the cartulary, Epurescu-Pascovici develops a series of arguments regarding the strategies employed by the two lords to secure and expand their power. Throughout the chapter, he emphasizes the agency of both Enguerran and Gérard, and rejects traditional explanatory models, including structural power, feudal relations, and even kinship ties.

Epurescu-Pascovici turns in the third chapter to genre of the *liber rationis* (livres de raison). Works in this tradition expanded upon the genre of the private family cartulary to include a range of other types of documents, including both family histories and autobiographical accounts. The first *liber rationis* discussed by Epurescu-Pascovici was composed by a man named Gérald Tarneau, a royal notary and lawyer, in 1425, and recorded the chaotic and violent events that followed the imposition of a royal tax in the town of Pierre-Buffière, located near the city of Limoges. Through an analysis of the unadorned but highly detailed text produced by Tarneau, Epurescu-Pascovici concludes that the royal notary prioritized individual agency, even while recognizing the importance of collective agency with respect to the resistance offered by the townspeople to the royal tax, the ensuing violence against the town, and the denouement of the struggle with the payment of the tax. The second *liber rationis* was composed by a man named Pierre Esperon, a judge in the town of Saint-Junien also located near Limoges, over the course of the later 14th and early 15th century. This text was concerned largely with the economic affairs of Esperon, and Epurescu-Pascovici argues that the well-considered pattern of acquisitions, which permitted a diversification of sources of income, illuminate the author's conception of his own agency in maintaining and expanding the wealth of his family.

The fourth chapter considers the genre of text known as *ricordi* or *ricordanze*, which were very similar in conception to the *liber rationis*, but often much more elaborate, and survive in considerable numbers from the wealthy cities of Northern Italy. The two texts examined by Epurescu-Pascovici were composed by the Florentine merchants Giovanni de Pagolo Morelli (1371–1444) and Gregorio Dati (1362–1445). He argues that both of these authors sought to use a combination of autobiographical accounts



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and anecdotes to teach members of their families how to succeed in commercial affairs, but also maintain a moral life. He argues that each of the texts describes in clear terms the strong socio-cultural norms in Florentine society, but also made clear that it was the individual who shaped his own goals and priorities.

Epurescu-Pascovici devotes the final chapter to an examination of vernacular conduct literature which experienced an enormous period of growth from the 14th century onward. The two texts that form the basis for the case studies in this chapter are »Chemin de povreté et de richesse«, composed c. 1342, and »Ménagier de Paris«, composed c. 1393. He argues that these texts are much more theoretical than discussions found in works from either the *liber traditionis* or *ricordanze* genres. Nevertheless, the authors of both of these works emphasized the role of the individual, albeit only male individuals, in shaping their own path through the decision to follow the advice provide in the text.

In the conclusion Epurescu-Pascovici reiterates the main points of the individual chapters and recapitulates the arguments set out in the introduction regarding the importance of examining medieval society through the aegis of individual agency rather than relying on abstract concepts of structures. The volume is equipped with an extensive apparatus of notes, a bibliography divided between sources, including those found in manuscript form, and scholarly works, and finally a useful index.

In assessing this volume, it is important to stress that Epurescu-Pascovici does an excellent job of analyzing the nine sources across the five genres that provide the case studies for the book. He offers a close and insightful reading of each text and makes clear beyond any doubt that the author of each text presents individual agency as an essential element in the human experience. But what broader picture does the analysis of these case studies paint, or what broader question do they serve to answer? Here, Epurescu-Pascovici's discussion falls short. Beyond the value of the analysis of the individual texts, the purpose of this book is predicated on the absence in current discussions of medieval history of the agency of individuals, or a large-scale belief among medievalists that the people whom we study did not have individual agency. But neither of these conditions hold.

Epurescu-Pascovici certainly provides examples of some historians and social scientists who cling to a model of the medieval »other«, or who prioritize abstract concepts such as lordship, or feudalism, when discussing human behavior. But there are far more medieval historians who implicitly or explicitly emphasize human agency in many different contexts. One might think here of the multitude of biographies of medieval rulers, lesser officials, as well as intellectuals and artists. At a much lower social and legal register, Alico Rio's recent study, »Slavery After Rome«, emphasizes agency by individuals who chose either the pursuit of freedom or a status as unfree in period between 500–1100. Epurescu-Pascovici's decision to limit his case studies to the later Middle Ages also



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problematically leaves the impression that individual agency, or at least written expression of individual agency in »ego documents« is a late medieval phenomenon. But this is certainly not the case.

A wide range of texts, which express the views of the author about individual agency, survive from the early medieval period. These include, but are not limited to, autobiographical accounts, historiographical works with substantial autobiographical content, letters, instruction manuals, and a wide range of prescriptive texts, which both illuminate the agency of their drafters and the expected agency of their audiences. In sum, the individual chapters will be of considerable interest to specialists, the book as a whole offers many useful models for analyzing human agency, but the volume does not break new ground or revise current understanding regarding the role of individual agency in human society.

Mittelalter – Moyen Âge (500–1500)

DOI:

[10.11588/frrec.2021.3.83606](https://doi.org/10.11588/frrec.2021.3.83606)

Seite | page 4



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