Seminar Report: Postgraduate Advanced Training Seminar on Political Ideas and Medieval Texts, October 2014

A group of 12 postgraduates and early career researchers from universities across Australia and New Zealand were privileged to attend the recent ANZAMEMS Postgraduate Advanced Training Seminar on 'Political Ideas and Medieval Texts: Methodologies and Resources'. The seminar was hosted at Monash University and facilitiated by Professor Constant Mews and Associate Professor Megan Cassidy-Welch of the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. An engaging group of speakers – Kriston Rennie (University of Queensland), Chris Jones (Canterbury University), and Clare Monagle (Monash) - addressed the theme of medieval political ideas across the three broad domains of law, literature, and theology.

The seminar considered a variety of approaches and methodologies for uncovering and analysing the political in sources that are not overt works of political theory or practice, but that nevertheless deal, either implicitly or explicitly, with questions of power and authority. Kriston Rennie kicked things off by putting a series of episcopal letters into dialogue with related legal texts. His approach offered a way into exploring political ideas underpinning the law, ideas that are not fixed but that shift over time through moments of innovation which are illustrated by deviations from the formula of legal language. This highlighted the importance of recognising what is formulaic in order to analyse more closely the potential political significance of those moments when the formula does not appear.

Chris Jones' exploration of politics and literature used the chronicle genre to demonstrate that the canonical texts of medieval political theory may not be the only or even the best means to discover how contemporaries approached questions of power, consent, and legitimacy. His examples showed how authors writing from and for the 'peripheries' can offer us perspectives that differ in significant ways from the 'centre' of royal courts, political theorists and legal thinkers. Chris noted that the places where chronicles depart from standard tropes and narratives can often tell us much about the diversity of political views and voices. This session also sparked some productive discussion about the potential risks we run of reading the 'political' into texts where it was not originally present.

Finally, Clare Monagle's discussion of politics and theology used a selection of Canons from Lateran IV to give us the opportunity to work through the very idea of 'polis'. It was invaluable to spend some time teasing out the connections between politics and ethics, and returning to lingering questions about the nature of political community the location of political authority. Clare's example of 'finding' Peter Lombard in Lateran IV was also a compelling lesson in recognising that even those texts that have been extensively analysed by scholars can still generate fresh interpretations and offer new insights.

The seminar was run in a workshop format that promoted a sense of collaboration, and allowed for plenty of conversation and exchange of ideas. Attendees were asked in advance to prepare a brief overview of their research and their expections of the seminar, and these were woven in throughout the day to foster real engagement. We weren't merely being given ideas to contemplate, but were being asked to form and inform them from our own work.

One striking feature was the variety and richness of meanings of 'political' that participants brought to the table. There were social, cultural and gendered inflections of the term operating in our different working definitions, in addition to the legal, literary and theological angles that our presenters asked us to consider. A number of attendees were engaged directly with the history of medieval political ideas or with the practice of medieval politics, while others came from backgrounds in literary studies, cultural studies, and art history. For those attendees working with sources that are, at least in part, self-consciously political, it was useful to consider how other types of sources could be used to inform our understanding of medieval ideas about power. For others, it was valuable to think about how 'politics' and the political might be found anywhere, in genres and domains which have seemingly little communication with politics *qua* politics. For the attendees, these ranged widely, from letters, poems, chronicles, and early modern novels and fairy tales through to art, architecture, clothing, and other facets of material culture.

For everyone who attended, perhaps the most important theme raised in various ways over the course of the day was the need to constantly probe what we mean by 'politics' and the 'political'. There was much fruitful discussion about the differences between ideology and politics, and the degree to which each must or can contain multiple voices. We were also alerted to the need to explore the distinctions between politics, ideology and the political imaginary present in our sources.

In one participant's words, the best phrase to sum up this PATS would be 'mutually enriching'. By gathering together scholars at various stages of their academic careers to foster collaboration and discussion, the seminar created an atmosphere conducive to open dialogue and intellectual risk-taking that can be rare in academic circles, the value of which should not be underestimated. For many of us, academic scholarship is an often-solitary pursuit. Having this opportunity to discuss our work and to share experiences and advice about pursuing medieval research in the southern hemisphere was not only intellectually stimulating, but also a genuine pleasure.

The PATS attendees would like to extend our gratitude to the presenters and facilitors for organising such a stimulating and valuable research seminar. We would also like to thank ANZAMEMS for their support, which included travel bursaries for out-of-state participants.

Amanda McVitty
PhD Candidate, Massey University
NZ Postgraduate Representative, ANZAMEMS