

Pauline Stafford and the (Other) Empresses: Inspirational Figures, Then and Now

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1983 SAW TWO GREAT events: I began my graduate studies and Pauline Stafford published *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*. That these two milestones coincided has shaped the entirety of my professional career. I read Stafford's book for the first of many times early in my graduate coursework; fortunately, my mentor fancied himself a feminist and assigned it right away. As a result, I not only became really aware of historical gender issues for the first time but was exposed to a brilliant example of how to weave a convincing analysis from limited sources. I shall always be grateful.

Starting Ph.D. studies in medieval history in 1983, I am not sure I could have named any medieval women besides Eleanor of Aquitaine, Joan of Arc, and Marie de France. The small number of works I had encountered dealing with women were all social history, studies that laid plain that medieval households could not survive without women's work but in which the women were almost entirely faceless. Certainly, the political history I had read was exclusively about the reigns of kings, with women only appearing as pawns in the occasional marriage alliance. Discovering, thanks to *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*, that the women of royal families played central roles and could to some extent be known as individuals was a revelation. Even more revelatory was the window Stafford opened to understand how medieval government as a whole actually functioned.

I never imagined myself as a historian of gender. For quite a few years my engagement with the theme of Stafford's book was limited to a greater sensitivity to the dynamics of rulership—both male and female—when teaching (well, and I also named a beloved cat Theophanu, after one of the main figures of Stafford's study). But I frequently found myself returning especially to the kings' wives of the tenth century, tantalized at their semi-visibility, wanting to explore in greater detail the influences to which Stafford had first introduced me. The final result was my own *Imperial Ladies of the Ottonian Dynasty*, a work that grew organically from Stafford's own.¹⁵

¹⁵ Phyllis G. Jestice, *Imperial Ladies of the Ottonian Dynasty: Women and Rule in Tenth-Century Germany* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

It can be difficult to study medieval women, even royal ones. As Stafford laid out on the very first page of *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*: “Women have usually stood half hidden in the wings of the historical pageant. This is true of all periods, but is an acute problem in the early Middle Ages.” Perhaps the single most valuable contribution of this seminal book is the way Stafford demonstrates how to get the most possible mileage out of our scant, confusing, biased, and sometimes downright misleading sources, lessons that can be applied whether studying gender or any other medieval topic. It was from this book that I first really learned how to take proper account of bias, how to argue from analogy when the direct sources failed me, how to read taking full account of the societal context of the source—and how not to speculate too far. Throughout my career, I have repeatedly used her approach as a model of how to “do” medieval history, both in my own writing and when teaching students. Thirty-five years after its first publication, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers* remains as valuable as ever.

Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*

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IN HIS 1991 BOOK *Germany in the Early Middle Ages*, Tim Reuter remarks that everyone who works on that subject “has had the experience of working through the literature on a topic and arriving at a conclusion, only to find that it had already been formulated more than 100 years ago in a crisp aside by Georg Waitz.”¹⁶ Those who work on early medieval queenship will all have had much the same experience with the oeuvre of Pauline Stafford. Of course, with *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers* we are dealing with a book that was first published in the 1980s, rather than Waitz’s 1880s, and that in itself is telling—it is easy to forget how little, comparatively, was written on this subject before *QCD*. Flicking through the bibliography shows how shallow the roots of the subject were. Beyond some important articles from the 1970s by Janet L. Nelson, Jo Ann McNamara, Suzanne Wemple, Karl Leyser, and others, one would have

¹⁶ Timothy Reuter, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages, c. 800–1056* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2014), xi.