



*Her Father's Daughter: Gender,  
Power, and Religion in the Early  
Spanish Kingdoms*

**Lucy K. Pick**

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017

**Review by: Jeffrey Bowman**



*Her Father's Daughter: Gender, Power, and Religion in the Early Spanish Kingdoms*. By Lucy K. Pick. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017. ISBN 978-1-5017-1432-0. xiii + 274 pp. \$65.00.

**H**er *Father's Daughter* is an ambitious and imaginative study of power in northern Iberia in the central Middle Ages. Lucy Pick examines the manifold forms of political power, economic might, and spiritual authority exercised by the sisters and daughters of kings. The author combines vivid portraits of particular women with a synthetic account of their place in a broader political order.

In the introduction, the author establishes the historiographical context. When confronted with women like Urraca Fernández or Muniadomna Díaz, historians have often suggested that a handful of elite women in the premodern world managed to transcend the narrowly circumscribed roles to which their gender consigned them. Such women are, in other words, to be understood as curious exceptions to an otherwise unremittingly male political order. Pick argues persuasively that this approach distorts our understanding of the past. Powerful, politically active women were not exceptions—they were an “integral part of the ruling system” (5). To understand royal power in this period we must focus our attention not narrowly on individual kings and queens, but instead on familial networks.

In the book's first chapter, Pick sketches a historical and legal background. In the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries, inhabitants of northern Iberia paid careful, if selective, attention to rules of the seventh-century *Visigothic Code*. The *Code* tended to be generally favourable to the property rights of women, stipulating, for example, that brothers and sisters were to enjoy equal inheritance portions. This enduring legal framework is one of the reasons that royal women in León-Castilla enjoyed such wealth and the power derived from it. Pick also traces distinctive marriage patterns. Elsewhere in Europe, kings might cement alliances by marrying their daughters to nobles. Iberian kings, in contrast, engaged in an “aggressive marriage strategy” (57). They gained power by *not* marrying their daughters. Instead of dukes and counts, these royal daughters wedded virginity. They adopted distinctive forms of consecrated religious life that often entailed the exercise of considerable power. They embraced positions that allowed them to collaborate actively in the political and spiritual projects of their male kin. Political and affective bonds between siblings were often tight, a fact that made the sisters of kings particularly powerful. Occasional allegations of incest in royal families may be an indirect reflection of the intensity of these bonds.

In Chapter 2, Pick explores in depth the religious roles of royal women, paying particular attention to connections between virginity and martyrdom. For readers not intimately familiar with diverse forms of medieval monastic life, Pick's description of how royal women were linked to monasteries without being enclosed nuns and exercised lordship over monasteries without being abbesses will be especially helpful. A consecrated status conferred spiritual authority on royal daughters without diminishing their autonomy and agency. A figure like Elvira Ramírez, daughter of Ramiro II, could exercise lordship over multiple communities and vast territories. Consecrated to God (*deovotae*), these women were also earthly *dominae*. The cult of Pelayo provides a striking case study of the engagement of royal women in the promotion of saints' cults in which political and spiritual motives were densely interwoven.

Networks of property and power are the focus of the next chapter. Pick mines abundant diplomatic evidence to examine networks of power. Each charter might be seen as "a snapshot of a network as it came together at a specific moment" (105). The author links the diplomatic and the liturgical, highlighting the performative dimension of these records. She situates individual transactions in the contexts of factional power struggles in which royal daughters were key players. The intimate collaboration between King Alfonso VI and his sister Urraca Fernández is one vivid example of the importance of sibling bonds. Urraca's restoration of the see of Tuy provides further evidence of the agency of royal women. Women benefited from institutions such as the *infantazgo*, a vast condominium of properties controlled by royal daughters. The numerous, carefully anatomized cases presented here reveal the pervasiveness and variety of the political activities of royal women.

In Chapter 4, Pick turns to the interrelated themes of memory and gift-exchange. As in other parts of medieval Europe, elite women played a prominent role in commemorating the dead. Members of elite families gave generously to monasteries at least in part because these institutions became dynastic burial sites, fostering kinship networks that endured beyond the grave. Donors often gave land, but Pick highlights the range of gifts by which people cultivated relationships: books, textiles, silver, jewellery, rock crystal carvings, and luxury vessels. Two eleventh-century prayer books reflect the particular concerns of their owners, Fernando I and Sancha. The manuscripts also share a keen preoccupation with penitence—an understandable concern given the often bloody nature of political tussles. Earlier chapters showed royal women controlling property and forging political alliances; here, we witness the voices of royal women raised in penitential and intercessory prayer.

The book's final section points to changes in this world starting in the eleventh century. The period witnessed the adoption of the Roman rite and

the arrival of Cluniac monks who professionalized some of the commemorative functions earlier discharged by royal women. Change is also evident in marriage habits. Alfonso VI had five daughters that we know of. In stark contrast to his predecessors, he did not keep them near at hand but instead married them off to nobles in Burgundy, France, and Sicily. The kings of León-Castilla were adapting matrimonial strategies to a changing environment. The power of royal daughters and sisters diminished while that of royal wives may have grown. The author examines whether lessons from León-Castilla might be more broadly applicable. Particularly valuable is the suggestion that historians of the premodern world pay more attention to family systems. The power of kings was a by-product of a broader network that involved many other men and women. The royal women of León-Castilla were in some ways particular to their place and time, but their activities surely reflect this broader truth.

This is an excellent book, richly deserving of a large and appreciative audience. Pick displays magisterial command of a truly impressive range of evidence (diplomatic, narrative, codicological, hagiographic, and material). The author moves nimbly between the granular analysis of particular pieces of evidence and broader depictions of the networks of kinship, patronage, and power. She vividly sketches the political careers of women, while offering a nuanced analysis of the broader context that shaped their opportunities. *Her Father's Daughter* leaves the reader with a richer understanding of the individuals who shaped the kingdom of León-Castilla and, more generally, a refined appreciation of how medieval people constructed networks. Royal power was a collaborative enterprise.

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