

Transfer, Entanglement and Regnal Traditions. The Mobility of Ideas, or How to Define Princely Rank in England and the Empire in the Fourteenth Century

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This paper addresses the theme of mobility in the context of late medieval political thought, more specifically, the rhetoric of royal charters issued in England and the Holy Roman Empire in the fourteenth century.

As shown by Benoît Grévin's excellent [2008](#) study, the letter collection of Peter de Vinea (d. 1249), one-time chancellor of Emperor Frederick II, served royal chanceries across Europe in the late thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as an aid to draft their charters (Grévin [2008](#)). He thus spoke of the formation of a European political language. In what follows I will shed further light on this process and on the extent to which we can speak of a European political language by looking at royal charters issued on the occasion of the promotion of an imperial prince in the Empire or an earl, duke or prince in England in the fourteenth century. I am particularly concerned with the *arengae* of these charters, that is to say their opening part, which states, in very general terms, the reasons for issuing the charter.

A convenient starting point is William VII of Juliers (Jülich in German, Gulik in Dutch). Born around 1299 as a son of the count of Juliers, he made a remarkable career as a leading diplomat in Anglo-German relations at the beginning of the Hundred Years' War. In 1336, Emperor Louis IV of the Holy Roman Empire, to whom William was a brother-in-law, made him margrave of Juliers and imperial prince. In 1340, King Edward III, another brother-in-law of William, promoted him to the rank of earl of Cambridge. In 1356, Emperor Charles IV elevated him

even further to the dignity of duke of Juliers. William was the only one in the fourteenth century to be promoted to the dignity of an imperial prince of the Holy Roman Empire and that of an English earl. The charters of 1336 and 1340 survive and provide not only an opportunity to look at the entanglement of the political rhetoric in England and the Holy Roman Empire in general, but also at a possible transfer of ideas or rhetorical formulae via William.

The *arenga* of Emperor Louis's charter states that it was up to his imperial highness to change the order of things. His glory would shine brighter across the world if he bestowed significant honours, such as the promotion to an Imperial Prince, on those who were worthy of them, shown by nobility of blood (*sanguinis generositas*), decency of character (*morum honestas*), and probity of deeds (*actuum probitas*) (*Monumenta Germaniae Historicae* 2012). As the existing socio-political order was the result of divine will, its change required great authority. The emperor, it is claimed, had this authority. We also learn that not only the future prince benefited from the promotion, but also the ruler himself. This may allude to the well-known proverb of Solomon that the honour of the king was based on the number of people he ruled (Proverbs 14, 28). The argument that the emperor's glory will shine brighter makes use of light as metaphor. While in this case the light metaphor appears rather dimly, it played a much brighter role in other promotion charters. The starting point was the charter containing the promotion of the duchy of Austria to a kingdom, drafted in 1245, but never issued. Its *arenga* equated the imperial throne with the sun, from which emanated the dignities like beams (*Monumenta Germaniae Historicae* 1896). It is emphasized that the beams by no means diminish the clarity of the original light. This metaphor thus communicated a hierarchical relationship between the centre and origin, the ruler, and its dependencies, the other dignities. This draft entered the letter collection of Peter de Vinea and henceforth exercised great influence in chanceries across Europe.

The light metaphor was not the only one used by the imperial chancery to describe the role of the princes in the socio-political order of the realm. Two further metaphors were prominent: the Empire as a house and the Empire as a body. In promotion charters, these metaphors are used less often than the light metaphor, but in other royal documents they appear frequently. Overall, it was the image of the prince as a column that dominated the scene. The famous *Golden Bull* of Charles IV, issued in 1356–1357, is a case in point: All three metaphors were used, but the architectural image occupied centre stage. The *Golden Bull*, the central document on the socio-political order of the Empire, defined the electoral princes as the columns of the Empire (*Monumenta Germaniae Historicae* 1992, 535–633).

Turning to England, the *arenga* of Edward III's charter for William of Juliers states that the more magnates are under royal authority, the higher the royal sceptre is elevated and the stronger the royal throne supported, because a great number of nobles is 'eminent ornament and most powerful support of the kingdom'. King Edward, therefore, who strives to increase the ornament and strength of the kingdom of England, bestows honours not only on the nobles of the realm, but also on illustrious others recommended for their generous nobility, strenuous deeds, and wise counsel, so that the kingdom of England is honoured by them in good times and supported in bad times (Peltzer 2019).

In contrast to Emperor Louis's charter, the *arenga* of Edward's charter contains no explicit reference that God empowered the king to change the existing societal order, but later the charter states that Edward created William earl *de regie plenitudine potestatis*. This reference to the fullness of the royal power is noteworthy, because it is the only time that this formula is used in Edward's promotion charters in this context. It seems therefore possible, if not probable, that Louis's charter inspired its deployment in Edward's charter, because there this formula was used in precisely the same context. The *arenga* clearly marks the king's responsibility for the realm. In equally clear terms it alludes to the Salomonic Proverb 14, 28: the more magnates, the better for the kingdom. Finally, it repeatedly stresses the role of the earl as pillar and ornament of the realm.

The role of the earls as pillars of the realm is repeatedly emphasized in the charters. The term, however, is not *columna* or *membra* as in the imperial charters, but *fulcimentum* (*fulciri*). The English charters do not make explicit use of the architectural or the body metaphor. Yet, it is very likely that contemporaries associated the term *fulcimentum* with the idea of the realm as a body. There are a number of references to the body metaphor in contemporary writing, but the most significant in our context is a sermon given by John Stratford in 1327, when the magnates assembled in London to discuss the deposition of Edward II. Stratford, then bishop of Winchester, chose the Book of Kings 4, 19: *caput meum doleo, caput meum doleo* to discuss the situation of the realm (Fryde 1979). He likened the realm to a body and judging from the chronicles, which paraphrased his speech, his message was clearly understood. In 1337, John Stratford, now archbishop of Canterbury, was also chancellor when the first promotion charters were drafted that made use of the term *fulcimentum* (*Reports from the Lords Committees* 1829, 31). He certainly understood it to refer to the *membra* of the body.

In subsequent years the English chancery developed further variants of *arengae* for promotion charters, but the result was not a multitude of metaphors for the socio-political order. The pillars remained, literally, the stable element. There was, however, one notable exception: promotion to the rank of prince. In the British Isles, the title of prince was exclusively tied to Wales and, since 1301, was reserved for the heir to the English throne. When Edward III invested his eldest son Edward, the Black Prince, as prince of Wales in 1343, the chancery turned to the 1245 draft for Austria and copied its *arenga* almost entirely (*Reports from the Lords Committees* 1829, 43–44). Consequently, the light metaphor entered the language of the English promotion charters. Its radius, however, remained limited. It was exclusively deployed in promotion charters to the rank of prince. We encounter it again in 1362, when Edward became prince of Aquitaine (*Reports from the Lords Committees* 1829, 50–52). The prince was thus clearly distinguished from the dukes and earls, who themselves were not set apart from each other by different *arengae* during the reign of Edward III. The prince clearly appears in a league of his own. Moreover, his promotion charters conveyed a different image of the social and political order of the realm. The king and the magnates were not pictured as parts of a body, but in a much more exclusive way: the king as the sun and origin of the princely dignity.

Turning again to the *arenga* of Louis's charter for William, we also note the enumeration of personal criteria justifying William's promotion. The nobility of his blood, the decency of his character, and the probity of his deeds were emphasized. The *narratio* of the charter referred to his famous ancestry, his fidelity and merits towards Emperor and Empire. In terms of content and of form, Louis's charter contained old and new elements. Merits and noble descent had previously been used to justify promotions. Yet, it was the first time that they were formulated as part of the *arenga*. Noble descent, decency of morals and probity of deeds thus became general, abstract criteria for the rank of an imperial prince. Also new was the combination of these three elements. In previous promotion charters, they had never been used together. This trias, however, combined nobility by birth and nobility by virtue, and thus the two competing ideas of what constituted true nobility. This combination very much reflected a major contemporary academic accomplishment, the fusion of these two ideas to define the nature of nobility (Castelnuovo 2008, 105–155). In 1336, the combination of nobility by blood and nobility by virtue found its way into the *arenga* of an imperial promotion charter. This was, however, a short-lived phenomenon limited to Louis's reign. The chancery of his successor, Emperor Charles IV, did not continue this practice, but returned to the older tradition. Personal criteria were no longer enumerated in the *arenga*, but in the *narratio*, where they referred concretely to the person in question. The criteria thus lost their abstract character. Consequently, nobility by blood and nobility by virtue could be combined in the narration, but this was a mere option, not a necessity.

We have already noted the appearance of the formula *plenitudo potestatis* in Louis's and Edward's promotion charters for William. Looking at the rank criteria we observe further striking similarities between the two pieces. Edward's charter named noble descent, strength of the deeds, and maturity of counsel. Just as in the imperial case, this was the first time that the criteria for promotion appear in the *arenga*. It seems likely that William's imperial charter played a role in the drafting of his English one. In the run up to 1340, close contacts existed between William, Edward and other members of the royal entourage, including the chancery. In 1339, Edward named William even the *privé et très espécial souverain secrétaire* of his council (Bock 1956). William, who had arrived in England a couple of weeks prior to his promotion, could well have influenced the drafting of his charter. Yet, while the English chancery might have taken some inspiration from William's imperial charter, it did not simply copy it. The wise counsel, for instance, did not appear in Louis's charter, and the other motifs can also be found in previous English charters. If the English chancery made use of William's imperial charter, this was caused more by curiosity and the particular care taken to justify the promotion of an alien to the rank of an earl rather than the need to look for formulae.

The English chancery also needed no imperial instructions on the dual nature of nobility. When, in 1337, it drafted for the first time *arengae* for promotion charters, the chancery already linked nobility by blood and nobility by virtue. In fact, the chancery even created its own formula for it: *geminata claritas morum et generis* (*Reports from the Lords Committees* 1829, 32). Unlike in the Holy Roman Empire, this formula remained a constant in English promotion charters throughout the century.

To sum up: letter collections, formularies and the academic debates on the nature of nobility provided chanceries across Europe with a European or perhaps more neutrally formulated interregnal pool of formulae for promotion charters. The history of the rhetoric of royal chanceries in late medieval Europe is a truly entangled one. It would be unwise to look at them in isolation. In the case of the promotion charters of William of Juliers, we can probably even observe a direct transfer of terms and structure from the Imperial to the English chancery. Yet, while the chanceries made use of a common repertoire of formulations and ideas, each did so in its own way. The metaphors they used to portray the socio-political orders of their realms were partly identical. In particular, the 1245 draft of Austria's promotion to a kingdom was used in England as well as in the Empire. Yet, both chanceries developed distinct regnal traditions. In England, the metaphor of the king as a sun was reserved for the prince of Wales, and while the idea of the prince/earl/duke as a pillar of the realm was dominant on either side of the channel, it did not refer to the same concept of the social and political order. In England, the idea of the *res publica* as a body governed the perception of the earl as a pillar. In the Empire, the idea of the *res publica* as a house was more dominant. The difference between these two conceptions is small, but significant. The image of the body is more inclusive than that of the house, for all parts of society contribute actively to its well-being. The ideological differences were reflected in political practice. In England, the parliament represented practically all groups of society. Through its negotiations with the king significant political and social dynamics were created. In the Empire, by contrast, the diets did not have the same effect. The static idea of the house corresponded very much to the lack of dynamics of the diet. To put it more pointedly: while in England Parliament was the engine of the realm in the fourteenth century, in the Empire the diet was the frame that preserved the existing social and political order.

Despite the similarities between William's promotion charters, and despite the probable transfer from the Imperial to the English chancery, the full story of the promotion charters is rather one of different regnal styles than of a common European political language. In the Holy Roman Empire the innovation to place personal criteria, in particular the combination of nobility by blood and by virtue, in the *arenga* did not survive Louis's reign. In England, by contrast, the idea of the twinned nobilities (blood and virtue) shaped the promotion charters in the long term. Looking further, it is remarkable that the English chancery, in particular under Edward's successor Richard II, made more use of the language offered by the discourses on virtues and good lordship than did their Imperial counterpart – an aspect, which due to limitations of space, I could not develop in appropriate detail here (Peltzer 2019, 61–67, 77–82). The existence of a European, interregnal pool of formulae and vocabulary, therefore, did not lead to a standardization of the languages used by the chanceries. They had common elements, but they were by no means identical. If, therefore, we speak of a European political language, we should stress its strong regnal dialects. Thus, mobility of people and their ideas did not necessarily result in total homogenization. This might be well worth remembering when we discuss the effects of globalization today.

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This paper summarizes in a very condensed way some of the findings of my study Peltzer (2019), where the argument is much more fully developed and detailed references are provided.

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