Moving Jobs: Occupational Identity and Motility in the Middle Ages II – Introduction

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This introduction presents the second part of a themed issue on *Moving Jobs: Occupational Identity and Motility in the Middle Ages*, whose first part appeared in volume 20 (2024). It discusses the advantages of considering the concept of motility to investigate the combination of movement and occupation, and its reflection on identity construction. Some of the issues that the contributions to both parts have addressed include how mobility could have important consequences on social advancement and the shaping of identities; the kinds of networks that helped the movement of individuals and were created by them; the importance of micro-mobilities and the local horizon of the medieval communities. The introduction also summarises the contents of the three new contributions. Irene Bavuso investigates the mobility of smiths in early post-Roman England; Robert Portass focuses on local mobilities in rural societies of tenth-century northern Spain; Joe Glynias concentrates on the highly mobile career and multiple identities of the eleventh-century intellectual Ibn Buṭlān. The introduction concludes with some reflections on how to approach female work and mobility – a theme that has been traditionally less visible in early medieval scholarship, and for which one may profit from theoretical refinements and well as from a cross-disciplinary broadening of the pool of investigated sources.

Keywords: motility, medieval work, gendered division of labour, local mobility, peasantry, craftspeople, transcultural mobility, job identity, social mobility, networks

The contributions collected here continue the reflection started in volume 20 (2024), where the authors investigate the mobility of people related to work, and how such movements had an impact on the shaping of job identities in the medieval period. The focus of our inquiry

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has mostly fallen on the Early Middle Ages – understood, however, as a broadly defined temporal span. While mobility rightly continues to receive considerable attention in scholarship, much can still be done to illuminate movement in connection to work during the early medieval period, and its relations with job identity.[1] In order to approach this topic, we have proposed that the analytical tool offered by the concept of motility may be fruitfully applied. Motility refers to and includes all those elements and factors that create the potential – the capital – for mobility.[2] Such potential extends from the network of relations that help with movement and relocation, to the presence of essential facilities, as well as to specific individual characteristics including skills, means and aspirations. These are some of the key factors and themes explored by the contributions in their respective case studies, each of which addressed the individual, relational, or collective dimension (or a combination of the three). As discussed in the Introduction to the 2024 section, the themed issue conceives the notion of work in a comprehensive perspective, thus including non-remunerative activities that were nonetheless essential to the functioning of the communities, or which were important to the shaping of social roles and positions.

Several of the contributions to the present volume and the 2024 section demonstrate that the capacity to move had significant repercussions on social advancement, as well as, crucially, on identity formation, both at the individual and the group level. People who relocated for work often relied on pre-existing networks, and in many cases were able to create new personal ones – also thanks to skills such as multilingualism and the strategic deployment of individual identities. Such networks could act as conduits for the exchange of knowledge and experience, and networks pertaining to different spheres – including, for instance, religion, artisanal crafts, trade, diplomacy, culture, political power – could intertwine with one another. Networks and movement need not happen over large distances only; in fact, micro-mobility and the local horizon are key to understanding the everyday life of medieval communities, as short-distance mobility no doubt constituted most of the movement for the majority of non-elite groups. Importantly, focusing on work-related (micro-)mobility allows us to recognise that this can be motivated by ambition and entrepreneurial attitude also in the case of ordinary men and women during the early medieval period.

In the present section, Irene Bavuso's contribution concentrates on the figure of the itinerant smith in early post-Roman England. The model of the itinerant smith is often linked to a specific understanding of the functioning of hierarchical structures: smiths are seen as crucial producers of the objects used by elites as gifts to assert their status. Yet while movement may indeed foster the smiths' upward social mobility, the reality was likely more complex than assumed in this model. The need for smiths to possess specialised skills and knowledge, to access exotic materials and the operational networks, along with a widespread distribution of metalworks – which problematises the idea of gift-exchange –, seems to point to a higher degree of sedentism, and to movement also likely dictated by resource and knowledge

1 New research on medieval mobility since the first part of this themed issue was published includes Sarti and von Trott zu Solz (eds.), *Mobility in the Early Middle Ages, and Beyond*.

2 See Kaufmann and Audikana, Mobility capital and motility; Guitton *et al.*, Defining motility; see further our introduction to the first part of this themed issue in vol. 20: Pazienza and Bavuso, Moving Jobs.

requirements (rather than solely by elite's needs). All of this, in turn, may help us to rethink the overall relationship between smiths and elite patronage.

Robert Portrass' study investigates the true nature of mobility for non-elite populations in the Early Middle Ages, challenging narratives that prioritise elite long-distance travel. Using charter evidence from tenth-century northern Spain, particularly the Galician village of Rabal, the research asserts that the lives and identities of rural cultivators were primarily structured by small-scale movements. Due to dispersed landholding patterns, journeys between home, field, and neighbouring settlements were a near-daily occurrence. Beyond agricultural labour, this micro-geography of mobility was further shaped by both economic motives (e.g. land transactions) and legal demands (e.g. appearing in court), which saw non-elite individuals perform crucial community-facing roles like witnessing disputes. The article proposes that to accurately historicise early medieval life, scholars must prioritise the preponderance of »the local« and its fundamental influence on non-elite work, identity, and social structures.

Joe Glynias' work focuses on the emblematic eleventh-century figure of Ibn Buṭlān, a physician trained in the Greco-Arabic intellectual and medical tradition, as well as a diplomat, a convert to Byzantine Orthodoxy, a teacher, and a litterateur. Highly renowned in his own time, Ibn Buṭlān consciously and flexibly deployed his multiple, intersecting cultural and occupational identities to forge a brilliant career that spanned the Islamic and Byzantine worlds. He achieved this while utilising his frequent and extensive travel through Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Constantinople, and Antioch. Through his vast knowledge of languages and scholarly traditions, he was able to expand his personal networks, fuel his popularity, and ultimately consolidate his career achievements. Ibn Buṭlān is the quintessential example of an individual who, possessing a high degree of motility, successfully navigated diverse political and cultural frontiers, both literally and metaphorically.

While the themed issue has adopted a broad geographical and chronological scope, motility has proved to be an excellent concept for deepening our understanding and opening new vistas on the theme of mobility for work and its role on identity construction in medieval societies. In future research, we hope that this theoretical lens will continue to prove useful in illuminating situations that remain poorly understood, along with groups and occupations that are less visible in the source material. In this perspective, a few words on female workers are pertinent – as they are not the subject of a dedicated contribution, yet appear intermittently throughout the collected essays.

Throughout the medieval centuries, including the Early Middle Ages, women consistently worked hard, though their labour is often obscured to modern eyes for several reasons – ranging from the nature of medieval sources to the biases inherent in historiographical inquiry. Only recently has the contribution of feminist historians cast unprecedented light on this subject. Due to their subordinate legal status, which made the very nature of female commitment often informal and intermittent, women retained little independent occupational identity. Elite and non-elite women alike were primarily active within the businesses and activities of their fathers, husbands, and sons in both urban and rural economies. In such a context, which makes any investigation into early medieval female labour a significant challenge, medievalists must employ more flexible categories and approaches – an ambition the present themed issue seeks to pioneer. Indeed, as research has progressed, the protagonism of female workers has become ever apparent. Women marketed food products and commodities alongside male artisans, worked in agriculture side-by-side with male family members, and managed estates and traded in land like many landlords. Furthermore,

the pioneering studies of Janet Nelson have shown that intellectual work, too, was open to female creativity even in the Early Middle Ages.[3] That said, gender specialisation and sexual division of labour was a well-established feature of the medieval labour market. While some specialisations were quite apparent – such as for wet nurses and sex workers, or to some extent textile production – other alleged gendered divisions were more blurred. As Jane Whittle has pointed out, the argument that women's work unfolded mainly around the house and farmstead owing to home-based duties of childcare is merely impressionistic. There was no reason why childcare had to take place entirely within the house.[4]

Especially for the poorly documented Early Middle Ages, archaeology appears to be a promising field for contributing to the history of the sexual division of labour at the intersection of gendered mobility patterns. A recent study of the sixth/seventh-century community of Corte Romana (Cividale, Italy) has shown relatively high occupational stress, as evidenced by markers found on the bones (osteological indicators). This finding is consistent with a community of artisans, breeders, and farmers. While demonstrating an equal share of workload between males and females, who experienced similar mechanical stress levels, the collected data agree with a scenario where community members engaged in physical occupational tasks irrespective of sex. This outcome fundamentally challenges the stereotyped vision of women being restricted indoors for domestic tasks while only men dealt with most physically demanding outdoor activities. The inclusion or exclusion of women from some occupations was not determined by physical characteristics, but was instead influenced by cultural and institutional factors.[5]

The mobility-and-work binary concept serves as an effective prism for understanding social and gender inequality and the roles of women in the early medieval economies. In early medieval Frankish manors, for instance, the emigration of peasants from one *mansus* to another was massive. Therein, women were not only more mobile than men due to exogamy, but they also moved longer distances, joining the marginal fringes within the manor alone or with their children, thus contributing to agrarian expansion in an unsuspected manner.[6] This displacement pattern relates to the low social status of young unmarried girls, while simultaneously disrupting the common assumption that restricts female readiness to movement and their degree of motility. As a matter of fact, throughout the Middle Ages, women were systematically disadvantaged in their participation in business because the prevailing trend dictated that they were not legitimately permitted to leave the household and travel alone. Women engaged in international trade as sedentary investors but never as traveling merchants; they participated in retail markets as traders, clothiers, and mercers, but only rarely as street vendors.[7] All in all, as far as women's work is concerned, the challenge is to overcome stereotypes by expanding the pool of available sources and renewing our interpretative categories to capture situations that are little visible but numerous and therefore significant.

3 Nelson, Gender and genre in women historians.

4 Whittle, Rural economies.

5 Martinoia *et al.*, Anthropological, palaeopathological, and stable isotope analyses.

6 Devroey, Peasant mobility and settlement.

7 Reyerson, Urban economies.

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