

HPHI7009
History and Historians

Assignment 1

Review:

Lars Kjær: 'Power, Propaganda and Medieval Historiography'

Journal of Medieval History, 2025, vol. 51, No. 4 pp 466-484

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October 2026

In 2025 the *Journal of Medieval History* issued a fiftieth anniversary retrospective which revisited the contents of its first edition. As part of this project, Dr Lars Kjær used his article 'Power, Propaganda and Medieval Historiography' to reflect on developments in the study of medieval historical writing since Antonia Gransden's seminal 1975 article 'Propaganda in English Medieval Historiography'.¹

Dr Kjær is well qualified to undertake this review as he is Associate Professor of History at Northeastern University London and has written extensively on many aspects of the medieval world, including the relationship between religion and power in Europe between 1100 and 1300.²

Kjær credits Gransden with being among the first scholars to reject the view that modern historians are engaged in a similar project to their medieval counterparts. He argues that although Gransden acknowledges the importance of political motivations for the work of medieval historians, she identifies these as being more likely to be related to advancing their own political aims or those of their host institutions or patrons rather than that of the royal government. According to Gransden, there is little evidence that English medieval history writing represented something that we would recognise as state propaganda, except in times of severe political crisis such as during the Wars of the Roses.³ This is the argument that Kjær seeks to test in 'Power, Propaganda and Medieval Historiography', albeit with an expanded scope to consider a full range of authorial intentions.

While acknowledging the debt owed to Gransden's article, Kjær draws on the work of recent scholars to convincingly present his central argument that historians in the Middle Ages had many motives for undertaking their work and that it would be incorrect to view them as simply writing to further their own, or others', political ends. He also expands the scope of Gransden's article to compare English medieval historiography with that of France, Scandinavia and other European states. While

¹ Antonia Gransden, 'Propaganda in English Medieval Historiography', *Journal of Medieval History*, 1 (1975), 363–81.

² Northeastern University London, Dr Lars Kjær <[Lars Kjaer - Northeastern University London](#)> [Accessed 24 October 2024].

³ Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, 2 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974–1982).

addressing a knowledgeable academic audience, the article is accessible to newcomers to the subject, as it is well structured and the author writes clearly, ensuring that non-English specialist terms are fully translated in the text.⁴

Kjær's argument is compelling because of the breadth of his review of modern scholarship and his identification of many factors influencing the decisions of history writers, firstly to undertake the work and, secondly, to decide its scope and contents. These include complex networks of patronage, literary conventions, the theological, political and economic alignment of religious institutions, concepts of morality and family allegiances. Kjær draws on this recent scholarship to support his contention that there is an increasing understanding of the complexity and nuance which must be applied to fully understand the political nature of the work of medieval historians.

In this context, Kjær revisits the issues raised by Justin Lake about the political nature of medieval historiography and the usefulness of labelling texts as propaganda. Firstly, even if a text is identified as taking a particular political stance this does not tell us why the text was written. Secondly, before the introduction of the printing press it is unlikely that chronicles could be widely distributed. Finally, there were other means at the disposal of the state to disseminate their point of view, such as ceremonies and circular letters which could be read by heralds or in church. Kjær uses this framework to further consider the motivations of chroniclers and the purposes to which their work was put.

Kjær uses much of the article to examine the narrative strategies that chroniclers used to legitimise the authority of institutions and rulers. These included tracing the genealogies of prominent figures, drawing moral lessons from historical events and asserting divine intervention. He argues, however, that this does not infer that chronicles can be considered as political propaganda, rather that chroniclers were working within a traditional model of historiography where history writing provided an explanation of the working of divine justice through moral and providential narratives. For Kjær, it is important to make this distinction between using history writing to

⁴ The presentation of terms such as *Absicht* (purpose) and *Tendenz* (bias) in English first is an example of this. See Justin Lake, 'Authorial Intention in Medieval Historiography', *History Compass*, 12.4 (2014), 344–360 (p. 352) for more about these terms.

manipulate political opinion on behalf of the state and following the cultural norms of historiography.

It is perhaps a weakness of 'Power, Propaganda and Medieval Historiography' that Kjær does not fully address the problems involved in applying the anachronistic term 'propaganda' to the work of medieval historians. He does so obliquely towards the end of the article, acknowledging that the term was first used in 1622 and referred at that time to the deliberate dissemination of religious doctrine during the counter reformation. It would have been useful to include a fuller discussion of the modern understanding of the term and why this cannot be applicable to medieval historiography because of the limited audience for chronicles, restricted largely to the members of religious institutions or royal courts. Most readers of journals in the twenty first century would understand propaganda to be the widespread dissemination of information, deliberately omitting any uncomfortable facts, favourable to a regime for the purpose of manipulating the political opinions of a large group of people.⁵ Kjær could have increased the impact of his argument by addressing this early in the article to make his rejection of the term clearer and provide a framework on which to build his discussion of the factors that he considers were important to medieval chroniclers.

'Power, Propaganda and Medieval Historiography' makes an important contribution to our understanding of medieval historical texts and the people who wrote them. Dr Kjær makes a strong argument for the need to take a nuanced view of the purpose of medieval historical writing and the use that was made of it, acknowledging the many motivations which may have influenced authors as well as the social and cultural traditions and expectations which constrained and influenced their work.

While it is important to follow Gransden's thesis that there is evidence of political bias in medieval historical texts and political motivations for their production, Kjær agrees that this does not amount to an intention to politically manipulate the wider population and therefore cannot usefully be called propaganda. The case studies referred to in the article also highlight further areas for research into the effectiveness of other forms of political communications used during the period.

⁵ There are many definitions of the term available online. See for example [PROPAGANDA | definition in the Cambridge English Dictionary](#).

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