

Moving Jobs: Occupational Identity and Motility in the Middle Ages

Introduction

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The present thematic section investigates the movement of people in connection with their work during the Early Middle Ages, and the repercussions of such movement in terms of construction of job identities. The development of specific professional identities and groups of professionals, such as guilds, has been amply studied for later periods in Europe. By contrast, although the picture of an immobile early medieval world has now been overcome, why and how people moved for their job in the early medieval centuries remains a largely under-explored topic. This project aims to take forward the discussion on this theme, and it does so through a reflection on the concept of motility – that is, the entirety of those factors that allow an individual to move through space – and on recent developments in the social sciences. Central questions concern the role of job mobility (considered in individual, relational, and collective terms) in the functioning of economic circuits and of social, cultural and military practices; the role of labour and one's profession in individual identity construction; and how mobility interacts with the latter. The perspective of the thematic section is an interdisciplinary and global one, with contributions reaching from the North Sea to India and the Southern Tarim Basin and including research on military and ecclesiastical elites, artisans, artists, peasants, merchants and scholars. The contributions are collected in the present volume and in volume 23, to be published in 2025.

Keywords: mobility, motility, job identity, pre-modern societies, Europe, Asia, Mediterranean world

This thematic section aims to rethink early medieval work through the lens of mobility and its conceptualisation in recent sociological theory. Mobility – voluntary or induced – constitutes a crucial factor of (re-)definition of individual and occupational identity. Job mobility, both geographical and in relation to a career, acts as a cradle for the definition of models of success, integration, and inequality: as such, it allows us to shed light on wider economic and cultural dynamics.

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The contributions consider job mobility in the Early Middle Ages as a social phenomenon and investigate it in the threefold articulation of individual, relational and collective dimensions. In so doing, mobility becomes a privileged perspective to interpret work, and the whole society with it, in a wide variety of contexts, including Continental Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle East and India.

Through this perspective, the thematic section seeks to reconsider and redefine early medieval work and to enhance our understanding of occupational identity during this period. This collective investigation enables us to widen the category and blur the hegemonic contrast between intellectual and manual work, as well as secular and religious, or pre- and post-industrial forms. This enriches and expands our understanding of job identities within and outside the concept of a »profession«. Particular attention is thus paid to the relational character of early medieval occupational identities: the scope of this inquiry encompasses the processes of building and maintaining such identities, including the adoption or abandoning of temporary ones, the adding of multiple layers of meaning, and the combination of diverse identities.

The chronological focus is the early medieval period; however, the global perspective of this project compels us to engage in a few preliminary considerations before moving forward. First, the problems inherent in the process of periodising should be acknowledged: periodisation is not neutral and is strongly connected to power; »medieval«, and the triadic division classical–medieval–modern, is a European model intertwined with colonialism and nationalism.¹ When used indiscriminately, this model is already precarious in the case of Europe – and even in the context of just the western territories: the fifth century looks very different in England and Italy; the medieval period starts later in Scandinavia; and so on. When we enlarge the focus to include non-European history, the issue of the link between terminology and colonialism is pressing and widely recognised in the scholarship. For example, this is the case for India, where »early medieval« is used to refer to the centuries between c.600 and 1200, although it remains problematic, both as a label and due to its debatable chronological compass.² Following recent reflections on the »medieval globe«, we are using »medieval« here with a »comparative meaning« that »allow[s] us to look at the larger global patterns during a particular period of history«.³

This leads to a second consideration, which regards the temporal boundaries of the investigation. While the focus of our inquiry is generally regarded as the Early Middle Ages in Europe, we have expanded it to include preceding and following centuries as well. This responds to a specific limitation connected to the object of inquiry, that is, job mobilities and identities, and the extremely diverse distribution of the evidence throughout different territories. There are periods for which we simply do not have enough material to investigate this topic – yet, as some of the contributions show, allowing for some flexibility in time does provide extremely rewarding results.

1 Chakravarty and Thompson, *Race and periodization*; Davies, *Periodization and Sovereignty*; Davies and Altschul, *Idea of »the Middle Ages«*; Davies and Puett, *Periodization and »The Medieval Globe«*; Summit and Wallace, *Rethinking Periodization*.

2 Chattopadhyaya, *Making of Early Medieval India*, xix-lxvi; Hawkes, *Chronological sequences*.

3 Davies and Puett, *Periodization and »The Medieval Globe«*, 6.

In this regard, the issue of women's work and female workers is compelling and still very problematic. The general invisibility of women in early medieval sources, indeed, makes any enquiry into the topic very challenging. Not to mention the many scholarly biases which still affect our understanding of past labour dynamics, where certain gendered divisions which are observable in the late medieval period and beyond, up to the present, are taken for granted and projected backwards into earlier centuries. Typical late medieval female »occupations«, such as childbearing, housekeeping, prostitution and so on,⁴ were also women's domains in the preceding periods, while others, such as medical and obstetrician practices and participation in religious hierarchies, saw a progressive marginalisation of women from the Early to the High Middle Ages.⁵ Furthermore, a growing body of studies has been pointing out the unexpected role of late antique and early medieval women as art patrons, writers, copyists and artisans.⁶ Contextually it is now patent that even in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, women carried out all types of activities, including entrepreneurship and »heavy manual« work.⁷ Having said that, any further investigation about female work and its relation specifically to female mobility is still extremely tentative, for the mobility of women in itself, beyond certain regulated kinds of movements, notably marriage mobility, was regarded by male legislators and political authorities as a disruptive societal factor and therefore prevented, banned and limited. This of course poses several questions about how to approach female job mobility, which interpretative categories should be adopted in the study of mobile female workers, if any, and what sources must be considered as the most promising ones – questions which will be addressed more fully in the introduction of Volume 23, to be published in 2025.

Social Sciences on Contemporary Mobility

Job mobility – both a cause and an effect of globalisation – has become increasingly visible, and increasingly central. Mobile and multi-local workers constitute a hardly negligible segment of the contemporary population,⁸ and job mobility has generated much research in the social sciences, particularly during the last decade. Although developed especially by western European and North-American scholars, this research is broad in scope and has adopted a worldwide perspective. As part of the so-called »mobility turn«, which brings a holistic approach to mobility and circulation,⁹ occupational mobility has been investigated both in terms of change of job, position or employer, and in the spatial terms related to workers' permanent or semi-permanent change of residence. As regards the former aspect, research has highlighted how job positions and the job itself are now much less central in the definition of personal identities – although they remain important for social assessment and self-esteem. In other words, one's occupation is taking on an increasingly fluid and non-normative role in self-perception and self-representation.

4 Bellavitis, *Il lavoro delle donne*.

5 Green, *Gendering the history*.

6 Marchiori, *Rogatrix atque donatrix*; Radini *et al.*, *Medieval women's early involvement*.

7 Zanononi, *Lavori di donne*.

8 Colleoni and Caiello, *Mobility and multilocal identity*.

9 Sheller and Urry, *New mobilities paradigm*.

Starting from the 1990s, a growing literature on the ways in which work is organised and felt has highlighted the gradual estrangement of meaning from the work itself. The employment crisis initiated with the »new economy« or »new capitalism« meant that, in certain contexts, »a steady, durable and continuous, logically coherent and tightly-structured working career is no longer a widely available option«.¹⁰ This has caused the decline of the idea that one's job is the principal factor in the construction of individual social identity.¹¹ Since work and work-places have become increasingly complex, individuals frequently have to manage multiple professional identities and several careers. Thus, professional identity is currently understood as composed of numerous layers, as a constant process of dynamic interaction between multiple selves. After all, careers can change, and their meaning can be transformed according to social contexts and public avenues.¹²

Concerning spatial mobility and a work-related change of residence, scholars have developed the concept of »motility«, borrowed from biology. Motility refers to the constellation of elements which allow (or do not allow) an individual or a category of individuals to move through space: key factors here are financial means, aspirations, professional and linguistic skills, the existence and accessibility of essential facilities, and – perhaps even more importantly – networks of personal relations and contacts.¹³ According to this model, all these factors constitute the potential for movement: the »capital«, both economic (income) and non-economic (level of training and networks of relations), which underlies all possible forms of mobility according to time, place and contingencies. This capital, in turn, acts as a productive engine insofar as motility then generates other capital.¹⁴ Today, a command of motility skills represents a booster for many professional careers. At the same time, the process of capitalisation (motility brings tangible results) fosters integration by promoting long-term improvement of social status. Although motility has become a major resource for the twenty-first century, its uneven distribution causes some of the deepest inequalities of contemporary society.¹⁵

Taking its steps from this sociological research and borrowing the analytical categories of multilocality, polyoccupationalism, motility and capital, this thematic section adopts an interdisciplinary perspective and uses an array of variegated evidence to investigate job mobility in the early medieval period. In addressing this theme, contributors test an understanding of occupational identity as fluid, dynamic and thus changeable, and do so under the privileged lens of mobility. Who identified themselves, or was identified by others, in terms of their labour or profession, and how did one's labour and profession overlap and interact with other social identities? Was mobility necessary or desirable to build a career, that is, to improve one's social status, economic condition and/or to obtain titles and honours? What kind of specific skills, knowledge and networks were needed to be mobile and successful? The possibility that some occupations required frequent and prolonged absence from one's place of residence and, in some cases, specific forms of itineracy will be explored.

10 Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*.

11 Standing, *Work after Globalization*; Strangleman, *Work identity in crisis?*

12 Burke, *Relationships among multiple identities*.

13 Kaufmann, Bergmann and Joye, *Motility: mobility as capital*.

14 Kaufmann and Audikana, *Mobility capital and motility*.

15 Creswell, *Towards a politics of mobility*.

A distinction will be made between voluntary and induced mobility. Ultimately, the thematic sections in the present and the 2025 issues will investigate to what extent mobility was integral to the functioning of economic circuits, mechanisms of production and practices (socio-cultural, political or military) peculiar to the period under scrutiny. The contributors are exploring these questions in specific case studies using different types of sources, written (archival documentation, treatises and narrative sources) and material (sites and archaeological finds, bioarchaeology and palaeoecology). In this first 2024 section, the contributions will focus on mobility in the Tarim Basin between the seventh and the tenth centuries, the link between the mobility of silk workers and religious networks in Greece around the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the »career« mobility of ecclesiastics up to the episcopal level during the Ottonian age in western Europe, and peasant outlook and mobility in Lombard and Carolingian Italy.

Occupational Identity and Work in the Early Medieval Period

One key issue is whether it is legitimate to talk about occupational identity and career during the early medieval period,¹⁶ and if so, how this changes geographically and can be assessed from a global comparative perspective. Even if occupational identity is nowadays becoming less and less central in certain contexts, work is still a fundamental way through which individuals define themselves and are defined in many public settings, such as social and leisure gatherings or even in professional meetings.¹⁷ How central occupational identity is in defining people, and how it does so, will naturally depend on the context and epochs. The Indian caste system is a classic example of a complex structure in which social roles, professions included, became hereditary. People born in the highest caste, the Brahmins, were generally priests and scholars; the Kshatriyas were rulers and warriors; the Vaishyas were merchants; and the Shudras included people working the fields. The outcastes were associated with impurity – in connection with jobs linked to contact with death: dealing with corpses, tanning, leather- and woodworking, hunting. Differentiations based on class are first mentioned in the R̥gveda; yet the castes, a system based on the inheritance of profession and land, which initially appeared as service tenures given by the state or the temple on a hereditary basis, only developed between AD 600 and 1200.¹⁸

Also in Europe, the long-term process through which job occupation came to represent one of the most important social markers, eventually becoming a hereditary indicator, is reflected in the »invention« of surnames that originated from occupations, such as Müller and Schmied/Schmidt/etc. in Germany or Fornero in Italy, and which have roots in the late medieval period. As regards Italy, the early medieval onomastic system, based on the single name, underwent a radical transformation between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, to the point that at the beginning of the fourteenth century almost all individuals bore names composed of two elements (*nomen* and *cognomen*).

16 See, for instance, Barrow, *Clergy in the Medieval World*, on clerical careers.

17 Unruh, Reflections.

18 Devadevan, »Early Medieval« *Origins of India*, esp. 341-386; see also Pick and Dayaram, *Modernity and tradition*.

Beyond local variations, the *nomen/cognomen* system came into play following different paths: the use of patronymics and toponymics, the use of titles or nicknames and last but not least, the indication of profession, such as *Petrus ferrarius*.¹⁹

Notwithstanding issues of regional developments and the lack of global analyses, the history of medieval labour as it is reflected in the process of »fixation« of the *cognomen* and its transmission to descendants hints at similarities and parallels in both western Europe and in northern India, where a strong watershed is observable around the year AD 1000. The divide is grounded in the reflowering of towns, the remonetarisation of the economy, and the expansion of markets in Eurasia between the eleventh and the twelfth centuries; moreover, it is embedded in the passage from forms of serfdom and corvée labour to wage labour which took place over the same period.²⁰ Medieval wage labour is not comparable to frameworks that have become familiar to us after the industrial revolution, even in territories such as medieval Egypt, where wage labour was widespread in urban and rural contexts.²¹ Yet gradual (re-)affirmation of monetary or in-kind wages represents one of the most important socio-economic transformations of the late medieval period.²² This is particularly evident in the evolution of the power relations detectable in the exploitation of the workforce in the countryside. Here, after the breakdown of the Roman slavery system, the establishment of new forms of early medieval serfdom and ties of dependency gained ground,²³ to evolve afterwards with the abolishment of the corvée work and the development of fixed rents and ultimately the sharecropping holdings (*mezzadria poderale*), which codified work relationships through specific contracts.²⁴

A further transformation, which took place in many urban contexts around Europe and beyond, is the institutionalisation of work through the formation of guilds of artisans and merchants and through the concomitant emergence of the universities. The mutual support and apprenticeship systems promoted by the corporations, and the standardisation of education and training in schools, played a role in the formation of occupational identities, in which cohesion, entrepreneurship, specialisation and self-awareness were distinctive features.²⁵

For all the importance of these later developments, recent studies have shown that pioneering forms of solidarity, agency, knowledge transfer and professional awareness existed even between the fifth and the eleventh centuries.²⁶ In order to understand early medieval work, the investigation of forms of »alternative« activities has proved particularly useful. Among these, especially noteworthy is the selective association with different individuals or groups (as seen, for instance, in the buying-and-selling process, or in matrimonial strategies), and the specific denomination (by oneself or by others) in precisely connotated contexts, ranging from funerary rites to legal disputes and documentation.²⁷

19 The bibliography is vast, see Bourin, Martin, and Menant (eds.), *L'anthroponymie*.

20 Lucassen, *Story of Work*.

21 Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat*, esp. 61-62.

22 Franceschi, Introduzione.

23 Rio, *Slavery after Rome*.

24 Tabarrini, *Estate Management*.

25 Degrassi, Organizzazioni di mestiere.

26 La Salvia, Smiths in early medieval Italy.

27 Pilsworth, Could you just sign this for me John?; Larpi, Medieval charters as sources.

Thus, when discussing early medieval *laboratores*, we can now legitimately talk about »professionals before the professions«. *Laboratores* is here used as an umbrella term covering a wider range of jobs than the category elaborated by Adalbero of Laon, who developed the ecclesiastical model of the Three Orders in which the *laboratores* were essentially connected to agriculture. This model, already traditional in the west from the ninth century but fully conceptualised by Adalbero at the turn of the eleventh century, notionally divided the orderly world between those who work (*laboratores*), those who fight (*bellatores*) and those who pray (*oratores*). As such, it is an idealised model aiming at legitimating aristocratic and ecclesiastical privileges, and therefore it does not consider the changing attitudes toward manual labour in the early medieval period.²⁸ Moreover, it cannot show the complexity and variety of ways in which workers (even peasants) supplemented their income, for instance through trade and secondary, temporary occupations.

Regarding income, our approach considers the Marxist conception of work as an activity aiming at subsistence and mere profit to be limiting, particularly when it does not include functions that are non-remunerative, albeit essential for the economic and cultural development of society.²⁹ This is, for instance, the case for domestic and care work,³⁰ and the writing and copying of documents and manuscripts. The same goes for non-remunerative activities that were essential for negotiating social position within communities, such as pastoral work.³¹ In the present study, work and workers are defined from a more inclusive perspective: not only manual work aiming at the production of specific goods (foodstuffs, buildings, manuscripts, textiles, jewellery, etc.) but also the people who traded those goods (ranging from retailers to merchants and bankers) and intellectuals, broadly conceived (notaries, jurists, teachers, doctors, administrators and ecclesiastics).³² These are all categories of workers who populated the early medieval towns and countryside, as well as the monasteries (Benedictine or Buddhist) that in this period were fulfilling similar functions in Europe and Asia. In both areas, monasteries became centres of organisation of agricultural work and land-tenure on a »feudal« basis and hubs for recruiting specialised artisans (such as sculptors, painters and builders) and for intellectual life on an international scale.³³

28 Uebel and Robertson, Introduction conceptualizing labor.

29 For Marx, work does not have an independent epistemological status. The concept of labour is articulated through the key notions of »value« and »time«. In this light, the only proper work is productive labour, i.e. that which creates surplus value. The Marxist criterion for recognising labour and evaluating it therefore fails to include an array of work activities observable in everyday life, such as artistic work, technical-scientific work and, more generally, flexible and intermittent work which cannot be measured in terms of a well-established and continuous time frame. Since the 1970s, the Marxist concept of productive labour has undergone strong criticism. The stumbling-block has mainly been domestic work and family care, predominantly carried out by women. For a general overview, see the recent book by Federici, *Genere e Capitale*.

30 Recently on domestic work, see Whittle, A critique of approaches to »domestic work«.

31 Patzold and van Rhijn, *Men in the Middle*, on the importance of local priests in the early medieval period.

32 On a more encompassing notion of work, see Bailey, Colwell and Hotchin (eds.), *Women and Work*.

33 Lucassen, *Story of Work*.

Early Medieval Mobility

The role of monasteries in mobilising the work force and knowledge highlights the key question of mobility in early medieval societies, which must be considered in its relation to occupational identity. Frequency, distance, and the volume of circulation of people should be investigated, together with the nature of the circulation and the identity of the people who travelled or moved. The considerable growth of social and physical mobility in the last 150 years, thanks to fundamental technological innovations, constitutes the change that has most interested sociologists working on the »mobility turn«. In many cases, however, this research has much more to do with technophilia than with a holistic study of mobility. In effect, mobility is often reduced here to a consequence of the modern technological advancements, such as the automobile and low-cost flights or the instantaneity of communication flows generated by the internet; the implicit assumption is that the present is mobile (or hyper-mobile), while the past was not.³⁴

With the exception of the Migration Period, the question of whether medieval people in Europe travelled or not is far from straightforward. The early medieval centuries up to around the year AD 1000 had long been considered as a period of economic stagnation and of almost total immobility of the population. This view is no longer accepted.³⁵ The first systematic challenge to this idea happened in 2001, with the publication of Michael McCormick's monumental *Origins of the European Economy. Communications and Commerce (AD 300-900)*, where the author investigates the end of Rome and the birth of the medieval economy. These are issues that have a long history in the scholarly debate. Henri Pirenne argued that the seventh-century breakage of the Mediterranean unity following Islamic expansion was restored only in the eleventh century, when the sources show growing contacts across the sea. McCormick reconsidered the question and backdated the reflowering of commerce to the middle of the eighth century. Although his argument has not been unanimously accepted (especially the crucial role he attributed to the slave trade), his methodology has profoundly influenced our understanding of the period.³⁶

Indeed, rather than on commodities and merchandise, about which surviving written sources are scanty, McCormick's investigation focuses on travellers, suggesting that their own routes followed commercial ones. In the period AD 500-900, he identified 669 travellers in the Mediterranean area who covered distances between 500 and 6,000 km. Although this data cannot be used towards quantitative or statistical analysis, the amount is surprising, as it shows that communications were much wider and more frequent than previously assumed. Travellers spanned envoys, administrators and hostages, as well as pilgrims, merchants and slaves, in addition to further categories like women married into foreign territories. Moreover, the classification was not a rigid one, and it often changed during the travel – as in the case of envoys and hostages, whose condition was particularly connected to political power (changing power at home may have resulted in envoys being held for leverage), or merchants, who were sometimes used as diplomatic intermediaries, especially thanks to familiarity with foreign lands, people and, ostensibly, languages.

34 On technophilia, see Creswell, *Towards a politics of mobility*, 28-29.

35 See, e.g., the recent thematic section of this journal on *Movement and Mobility in the Medieval Mediterranean: Changing Perspectives from Late Antiquity to the Long-Twelfth Century*, edited by Heath, Gantner and Manarini.

36 On the slave trade, see, e.g., Rio, *Slavery After Rome*.

The distinction between pilgrims and merchants may have been even more blurred – not to mention the figure of the merchant-pirate.

Thus, it seems clear that mobility over large distances did not stop during the early medieval period. Yet regional and local mobility remains to be fully understood. Did people also move over much shorter distances? If so, who moved locally, and why? A systematic study of internal mobility comparable to McCormick's is lacking. Multiple hints however suggest that medium- and short-distance movements were intense and rather common.³⁷ In the Carolingian Empire, local mobility is very likely to have been pervasive and structural to everyday activities. Two causes may be envisaged as the basis of this structural mobility: the fragmentation of the landed property of elites and the diverse administrative roles these same elites had in different places, often located at a considerable distance from one another. Thus, travelling was part of everyday life: elites travelled daily, and so did their dependants, alongside families and large quantities of things and animals.³⁸

Travel documents and the laws regulating people's mobility (regardless of their practical effectiveness) show that this phenomenon was a topic of concern for public authorities.³⁹ Crucially for the present thematic section, this was not at all an exclusively European concern. The most intrusive legislation available may be that from eighth-century Umayyad Egypt, where a major issue for the administration was the transferring (or running away) of peasants and small farmers who abandoned their land as they could not afford to pay taxes or to find better living conditions.⁴⁰ This is a picture that challenges the topos of the medieval peasants permanently linked to their land, without the capacity to move to improve their life conditions.

Summary

Notwithstanding the long tradition of study on medieval work, and the recent focus on international and regional mobility, historical research has just started to dig into the potential of connecting these two directions of enquiry. The present collection of studies seeks to examine precisely that connection, thus shedding new light on how we understand and categorise early medieval work and how occupational identities were defined during these centuries. In order to give a theoretical fundament to this combined investigation, concepts and analytical categories are also borrowed from the recent sociological literature on the field. Although these concepts are mainly used in relation to the contemporary post-colonial world, they can, in many cases, be applied fruitfully to, and enhance our understanding of, early medieval societies in a global and comparative perspective. Papers consider the economic, cultural and social significance of mobile work, both at elite level and at the bottom of society, in areas that reach from India to the North Sea.

37 Paziienza, *Mobilità interna*.

38 Patzold, *Verortung in einer mobilen Welt*.

39 Pohl, *Frontiers in Lombard Italy*. Travel documents: Morelle, Sur les »papiers« du voyageur.

40 El-Abbadi, *P.Cair.Arab* III 167.

The contribution by Tomas Larsen Høisæter focuses on different forms of mobility in the southern Tarim Basin between the seventh and tenth centuries. The author assumes a »bottom-up and travel-centred perspective« on this topic, thus inserting himself in the scholarship which has moved away from empires and long-distance exchange to investigate the local. Local mobility, and the local networks which connected the oasis communities of the Tarim Basin, indeed appear to have made up most of the movement, forming a solid ground which facilitated the travelling of various categories of people. The article investigates forms of movement related to administration, commerce, religion and diplomacy, through sources ranging from administrative memoranda, to letters and travel reports. This material shows the interconnected nature of these movements, and helps us reconsider the role of diplomatic networks in sustaining general mobility: in fact, monks and merchants could be key in facilitating official missions.

Gang Wu explores the formation and dynamics of the network of artisans involved in silk working which supported the flourishing of the Theban silk industry – a production that reached its peak in the twelfth century. This network of mobile artisans, which was spread across Central Greece, was sizeable enough to allow for the resilience of the Theban silk industry in the aftermath of the Norman plunder in 1147, when textile artisans were abducted and brought to Sicily in order to advance silk production there. The silk workers formed a highly mobile group, and the formation and functioning of their network may have been helped by a Theban confraternity founded in 1048. This institution, which had at its core religious devotion to the icon of the Theotokos Nafpaktiotissa, kept in the Convent of Naupaktian Women in Thebes, had widespread regional engagements that may have facilitated mobility, relocation and the finding of employment for the silk artisans.

The relational value of mobility for social advancement and occupational identity emerges clearly from the contribution of William North, who explores clerical mobility as an important factor in episcopal practices in the Ottonian and Salian empires. The life of Wolfgang of Regensburg, as recounted by Otloh, monk of Sankt Emmeram in Regensburg, is a precise example of the importance of moving through the geographical space (that is, the tenth-century German Empire) in order to build a career. Various forms of mobility, between cathedral schools, from cathedral to royal court, within episcopal chapters, on the road as a missionary, as well as within his own diocese, helped him gain social prominence and consolidate his position. Interestingly enough, mobility was a central factor for the same Otloh, who started his career when his talent in copying manuscripts was first noted during his training at the monastery of Tergernsee and he was sent to the monastery of Hersfeld in Franconia, to finally end his life as an accomplished and valued scribe at Sankt Emmeram in Regensburg.

The key role of non-remunerative activities, such as writing, as a catalyst of career advancement also emerges from the work of Annamaria Pazienza, who investigates peasantry and rural migrations in the forms of both shifting settlement patterns and individual micro-mobility in Italy between the sixth and the tenth centuries. By combining written sources and archaeology, the author shows how Lombard and Carolingian peasants were equipped with personal ambitions and an entrepreneurial attitude, which required them to travel frequently. The consolidation of their social prestige (social capital) back at their home location, for instance, pushed some of them to serve as »professional« witnesses of powerful local lords and, accordingly, to move around on demand.

Likewise, the prospect of economic advantage (financial capital) led others to engage in side occupations like participating in seasonal fairs, or even to leave their parental hamlet for good, venturing to a new place and getting married so as to accumulate new landed assets.

Motility as the potential for movement is one of the methodological and conceptual prisms through which to read the contributions, and it will be further explored in the 2025 volume. In many of the case studies explored in this issue, mobility for work appears as integral to defined circuits and networks and as a force underpinning specific instances of socio-economic development. In some cases, the sources let us see how mobile people relied on knowledge and channels offered by different networks at the same time, and how the latter made mobility possible. Different networks interacted in complex ways, and boundaries between networks and groups of people were often very much blurred. In the Tarim Basin, textual evidence shows that different categories of people, like monks, merchants and envoys, often travelled together and relied on each other – as well as on diaspora communities – for information such as how to deal with risks and all the practical necessities of travelling. In Greece, the network of mobile silk artisans, so prominent for the silk industry in Thebes, appears to have been aided by a different, religious, network that had an extensive reach in Central Greece and which also included people involved in silk working among its members.

In terms of motility in the early medieval period, clerics and peasants occupy the two ends of the spectrum. The first were very often in motion; they possessed the necessary skills and financial means and were inserted into institutionalised networks including episcopal churches and cathedral schools. Their career mobility was even fully regulated by canon law, which prescribed the duration and technicalities of journeys and made various forms of mobility obligatory, such as participation in synods and diocesan visitations. By contrast, in the light of the motility parameter, peasants should apparently be understood as immobile social actors. And in all likelihood, the majority of European peasants spent the entirety of their lives in the same village. Yet we can certainly suppose that in certain historical moments, and under specific political and environmental circumstances, farmers could also show the ability and potential to leave, as a coping strategy, in search of better life conditions and safer places to inhabit.

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