

 PRINCELY BROTHERS AND SISTERS

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SISTERS



THE SIBLING BOND
IN GERMAN POLITICS,
1100–1250

JONATHAN R. LYON

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In memoriam sororis meae

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ABBREVIATIONS

BUB	<i>Urkundenbuch zur Geschichte der Babenberger in Österreich</i>
CDA	<i>Codex diplomaticus Anhaltinus</i>
CDS 1 A	<i>Codex diplomaticus Saxoniae Regiae, part 1, series A</i>
CDS 2	<i>Codex diplomaticus Saxoniae Regiae, part 2</i>
Mainzer UB 2	<i>Mainzer Urkundenbuch, vol. 2</i>
MB	<i>Monumenta Boica</i>
MGH	<i>Monumenta Germaniae historica</i>
MGH Const.	<i>Monumenta Germaniae historica, Constitutiones et acta publica imperatorum et regum</i>
MGH DD F I	<i>Die Urkunden Friedrichs I.</i>
MGH DD F II	<i>Die Urkunden Friedrichs II.</i>
MGH DD K III	<i>Die Urkunden Konrads III. und seines Sohnes Heinrich</i>
MGH DD L III	<i>Die Urkunden Lothars III. und der Kaiserin Richenza</i>
MGH SS	<i>Monumenta Germaniae historica, Scriptores</i>
MGH SSrG	<i>Monumenta Germaniae historica, Scriptores rerum germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi</i>
MGH SSrG, NS	<i>Monumenta Germaniae historica, Scriptores rerum germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi, nova series</i>
MHDC	<i>Monumenta historica ducatus Carinthiae</i>
QE NF	<i>Quellen und Erörterungen zur bayerischen Geschichte, neue Folge</i>
Reg. Imp. 4	J. F. Böhmer, <i>Regesta imperii, part 4</i>
Reg. Imp. 5	J. F. Böhmer, <i>Regesta imperii, part 5</i>
UB Enns	<i>Urkundenbuch des Landes ob der Enns</i>
UB Steiermark	<i>Urkundenbuch des Herzogthums Steiermark</i>

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FIGURE 1. The German kingdom and the empire. Adapted from *Staufisches Kaisertum im 12. Jahrhundert: Konzepte—Netzwerke—Politische Praxis*, edited by Stefan Burkhardt, Thomas Metz, Bernd Schneidmüller, and Stefan Weinfurter (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2010), 19.



FIGURE 2. Saxony and its environs



FIGURE 3. The south of the German kingdom and the empire

Introduction

According to the anonymous author of the late thirteenth-century *Chronicle of the Princes of Saxony*, the brothers and co-margraves John I (d. 1266) and Otto III (d. 1267) of Brandenburg “began [to exercise lordship] in the year of the Lord 1220. . . . After they had reached the age of majority, with one deferring to the other, they lived together harmoniously as was proper for brothers; and on account of this harmony, they trampled their enemies underfoot, exalted their friends, increased their lands and revenues, and expanded their fame, glory, and power.”¹ Although chroniclers writing the histories of medieval noble lineages were frequently prone to hyperbole, sources from these two brothers’ own lifetimes confirm many of the details of this dramatic description of sibling collaboration. John and Otto issued dozens of charters together.² They intervened in the most important political crisis of their day, jointly attempting to broker peace between Emperor Frederick II and Pope Gregory IX.³ And even sources written on behalf of their territorial rivals acknowledged their many military successes.⁴ During the middle decades of

1. *Chronica principum Saxoniae*, 478.

2. Fey, *Reise und Herrschaft*, 54–55.

3. MGH Const., 2:317, no. 232.

4. *Gesta archiepiscoporum Magdeburgensium*, 422.

the thirteenth century, the brothers were seemingly inseparable as they built a strong lordship for themselves and their heirs in the northeast corner of the German kingdom.

Modern scholarship on the medieval family has rarely engaged with examples such as this one for the political efficacy of sibling relationships. During the second half of the twentieth century, historians writing about medieval families—especially noble ones—debated the origins and diffusion of the lineal model of the family across Europe. Scholars have defined the prototypical noble lineage in a variety of ways over the years, but most have stressed its role in the descent of property from father to (eldest) son across multiple generations. As a result, debates about this family structure have tended to marginalize the relationships between brothers and sisters. Since the 1990s, a chorus of critics has argued that twentieth-century historiography overemphasized the explanatory power of the lineal model. Scholars increasingly highlight the centrality of the conjugal household within noble families. In the process, they are shifting their focus to the spousal bond and to the relationships parents had with all their children—not only with those sons who succeeded to their father’s most important properties.⁵ Because of this changing perspective, siblings are also beginning to attract the attention of medieval family historians.⁶

Paradoxically, much of this newer work has unfolded against the backdrop of the general decline of family history. There are many reasons for the field’s stagnation, but one of the most important has been the steadily increasing interest in other types of social networks, most notably those based on ties of lordship and friendship.⁷ Some historians have even suggested in the early twenty-first century that scholars of previous generations grossly overestimated the historical significance of the family and kinship group in the first place.⁸ While the field of family history is certainly not dead, it is no longer at the forefront of theoretical and methodological developments in the historical discipline as it was during the 1970s and ’80s. As one historian observed, in 2007, “Today more than ever, family history has become a ghettoized area of study disengaged from broader spheres of historical inquiry.”⁹ This trend is reflected in developments within the medieval field, where the shrinking

5. See chapter 1 for a more detailed discussion of this scholarship.

6. Lett, “Brothers and Sisters”; Cassagnes-Brouquet and Yvernault, *Frères et soeurs*.

7. See, for example, Althoff, *Family, Friends and Followers*; Oexle, “Soziale Gruppen”; Bray, *Friend*, 307–323.

8. As noted by Jussen in “Famille et parenté,” 456–457. See also Lubich, *Verwandtsein*, 7, 135.

9. Milanich, “Whither Family History?” 444.

circle of family historians has yet to provide a viable alternative to the rigid model of the lineage that worked its way into grand narratives of medieval history during the late twentieth century.¹⁰

Family history's slow decline is further evidenced by the fact that scholars of the European Middle Ages currently employ the terms "brother" and "sister" far more frequently to refer to monks, nuns, and other religious than to actual siblings. A variety of metaphorical usages of "fraternity," "brotherhood," and "sisterhood" have come to overshadow the original meanings of this sibling terminology.¹¹ Nevertheless, though figurative brothers and sisters may outnumber real ones in most modern scholarship, in this book I contend that the relationships between blood siblings need to take center stage. Notions of fraternity, brotherhood, and sisterhood were invoked so frequently as metaphors for other types of social ties precisely because the sibling bond connoted a form of social equality scarcely discernible anywhere else in society.¹² Medieval people thus recognized that the relationships between actual brothers and sisters had unique qualities, and they sought to replicate those qualities in relationships outside the confines of the family with the help of metaphors of siblinghood. As modern scholars, we cannot hope to comprehend the sibling bond's powerful connotations during the Middle Ages unless we first examine the interactions between blood siblings in much more detail than historians have previously attempted.

The starting point for this analysis of medieval brothers and sisters is the simple, but nonetheless essential, fact that siblings are the contemporaries whose lives normally overlap the longest. More so than parents and children, husbands and wives, friends and lovers, or lords and vassals, brothers and sisters have the potential to develop relationships that span entire lifetimes.¹³ Margraves John I and Otto III of Brandenburg, for instance, can be observed in extant documents interacting with one another for forty-six years, and they are not exceptional.¹⁴ Moreover, the *Chronicle of the Princes of Saxony*

10. A point also made by Crouch in *Birth of Nobility*, 121–123. For examples of the lineal model's effect on grand narratives, see Bartlett, *Making of Europe*, 24–59; Moore, *First European Revolution*, 65–75.

11. See, for example, Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers*; van Eickels, "Der Bruder als Freund und Gefährte"; Oschema, "Blood-Brothers"; Blamires, "Sisterhood."

12. Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, 4; Dilcher, "An den Ursprüngen der Normbildung," 55. Already in late antiquity, *frater* and *soror* had become such common terms outside the family setting that writers increasingly began employing *germanus* and *germana* to distinguish clearly those people who were brothers and sisters by blood. See Mitterauer, "Mittelalter," 196.

13. Lett, "Brothers and Sisters," 15; Barthélemy, *La société dans le comté de Vendôme*, 527.

14. For more on these brothers, see chapter 7.

describes their decades-long relationship as a cooperative one that led to a series of political successes and territorial gains. This suggests that the longevity of some sibling bonds created opportunities for noble brothers and sisters to collaborate in especially potent ways. Analyzing intragenerational relationships from this perspective can therefore shine new light on how the medieval nobility exercised its power and lordship—while simultaneously interweaving two traditionally disparate fields, namely family history and political history.¹⁵

In this book I use the German upper aristocracy of the Staufen period (1138–1250) as a case study for examining medieval sibling relationships. Because the families belonging to this aristocracy practiced partible inheritance, not primogeniture, the interactions between brothers and sisters are an essential feature of this elite's history. I argue that noblemen—and to a lesser extent noblewomen—routinely relied on the cooperation and support of their siblings as they sought to maintain or expand their power and influence within the competitive political environment of the German kingdom. At key moments during the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, sibling relationships played crucial roles in shaping the political and territorial interests of many of the lords who belonged to nine leading aristocratic lineages in the realm.¹⁶ As will become clear in the pages that follow, an inescapable corollary to this argument is the significance of generational size for the composition of medieval political communities. How many men and women survived to adulthood in any given generation directly impacted the political efficacy of sibling relationships for the individual lords of that generation. Analyzing all nine of these upper aristocratic lineages together across the entire span of the Staufen period reveals shifts in generational size that help explain why some brothers and sisters had greater influence than others over German politics. The detailed analysis of sibling relationships thus provides an opportunity not only to reconceptualize the field of family history but also to rewrite the narrative of German political history during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Historicizing the Sibling Bond

Not surprisingly, authors living in different times and places have expressed a wide range of opinions about the nature of the bonds between brothers and

15. For a similar point about the divide between political history and family history, see Auge, *Handlungsspielräume fürstlicher Politik im Mittelalter*, 5. For some exceptions to this general pattern, see Searle, *Predatory Kinship*, and n. 20, below.

16. For my use of the term *lineage* here, see chapter 1.

sisters. Writing in the early twelfth century, the chronicler Cosmas of Prague stressed the inevitably aggressive character of sibling relationships in the dramatic deathbed speech he ascribed to Duke Břetislav I of Bohemia (d. 1055):

“God has given me five sons. It does not seem to me useful to divide the realm of Bohemia among them because every kingdom divided against itself will be brought to desolation. From the creation of the world and the beginning of the Roman Empire until today, affection among brothers has been rare, as clear examples bear witness to us: Cain and Abel, Romulus and Remus. . . . If you look at what two brothers have done, what will five do? So much more capable and more powerful do I consider them, that I predict much worse with a prophetic mind. Alas, the minds of fathers are always terrified about the uncertain fates of their sons.”¹⁷

Břetislav’s prophecy was actually Cosmas’s hindsight, for the chronicler knew when he put ink to parchment many decades after the duke’s death that the brothers had been bitter rivals throughout their adult lives.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Břetislav’s speech shows a medieval chronicler drawing on Old Testament and ancient Roman examples to argue that intragenerational strife is something universal, a constant in Western civilization. Cosmas thus offers a clear contrast to the anonymous author of the *Chronicle of the Princes of Saxony*, who describes the margraves John and Otto of Brandenburg living together in harmony, “as is proper for brothers.”

The divergent viewpoints evident in these two sources find echoes in the scattered references to the sibling bond in modern scholarship on medieval noble families. Some historians have argued that the structure of the noble lineage, which favored elder sons over younger ones, created inequities that easily generated discord and rivalry among siblings. According to these scholars, fraternal disputes over issues of inheritance and succession were virtually unavoidable.¹⁹ Other historians, meanwhile, have preferred to emphasize the strength of the sibling bond, especially in comparison to other types of social bonds, and have argued against conflict as a frequent

17. Cosmas of Prague, *Chronicle of the Czechs*, 130.

18. Wolverton, *Hastening toward Prague*, 101–103, 196–200.

19. Georges Duby has made this argument most forcefully. See especially his original article on the topic, translated as “Northwestern France.” See also Aurell, “Rompre la concorde familiale,” 23–28; Beitscher, “‘As the Twig Is Bent,’” 189–190; Martindale, “Succession and Politics,” 29–30; Leyser, “German Aristocracy,” 36–37; Howard, “‘We are broderen,’” 139–141.

occurrence. For these scholars, brothers were some of the best allies a nobleman could have in the complex and dangerous world of medieval politics.²⁰ The contrasting opinions about siblings found in both medieval and modern works suggest that variety was the norm—that every sibling relationship was different, with some noble brothers and sisters having closer ties than others.²¹ While there is undoubtedly some truth to this claim, it lacks nuance. As historians of the early modern and modern family have demonstrated since the 1990s, analyzing the interactions between brothers and sisters systematically—rather than selectively highlighting a few well-known incidents of conflict or cooperation—opens the door to developing more complex perspectives on the character of sibling relationships.²² Variety may be the norm, but patterns unquestionably emerge from close scrutiny of the sources.

To find such patterns, the interactions between brothers and sisters must be understood within their proper historical contexts. Different societies at different moments in time have different expectations of the sibling bond. In a sense, brotherhood and sisterhood are therefore performative, and a person must behave like a sibling to be recognized as one within his or her culture.²³ This perspective on the sibling bond de-emphasizes the significance of the bond's strictly biological definition and stresses that brothers and sisters had to participate actively in the construction and maintenance of their relationships. Viewed in this way, the sibling bond is not something that can be reified or deemed universal across all of human history. Instead, developments specific to individual societies play critical roles in determining whether brothers and sisters tend to form cooperative relationships, antagonistic relationships, or no relationships at all. Medieval historians are already comfortable framing other familial interactions in these terms. Various scholars have convincingly shown that both the spousal bond and the parent-child bond

20. See, for example, Crouch, *Beaumont Twins*, 96–98; Bernard Bachrach, “Henry II,” 126; Holt, “Feudal Society and the Family,” 18–19; Tanner, *Families, Friends and Allies*, 130; Zečević, “Brotherly Love.”

21. For a similar observation, see Spieß, *Familie und Verwandtschaft*, 483; and more generally, Nye, “Kinship, Male Bonds, and Masculinity,” 1660; Cicirelli, “Sibling Relationships,” 17.

22. See, for example, Johnson and Sabeen, *Sibling Relations*; Pollock, “Rethinking Patriarchy”; Glover, *All Our Relations*, 59–86; Miller and Yavneh, “Thicker than Water”; Bastress-Dukehart, “Sibling Conflict”; Nolte, *Familie, Hof und Herrschaft*; Ruppel, *Verbündete Rivalen*. This increased interest in the close analysis of sibling relationships is not confined to historians: see Davidoff, *Thicker than Water*, 29–35; Ramu, *Brothers and Sisters in India*, 3–12.

23. Van Eickels, “Der Bruder als Freund und Gefährte,” 222; and more generally, Carsten, “Cultures of Relatedness.”

looked quite different in the Middle Ages than they do today.²⁴ Recognizing the dangers of generalizations across time and space is equally vital for the study of brothers and sisters.

Thus the argument of this book is consciously grounded in developments specific to the German kingdom of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Sibling relationships played a prominent role in German politics during this period, as a consequence of certain distinctive features of the upper aristocracy under the Staufens kings and emperors. Despite the apparently narrow contours of my thesis, I address a series of much broader issues—succession, inheritance, lordship, and court politics, to name only a few—that provide a framework for examining brothers and sisters in the Middle Ages more generally. In the process, I will hopefully prompt others to pursue comparable studies in order to nuance still further our understanding of the medieval sibling bond.

Politics and Family Bonds

One of the first steps to historicizing sibling relationships—and to appreciating their potential political efficacy—is embracing the central role that family bonds played within medieval politics. Today, citizens of Western nation-states have grown accustomed to governmental structures that draw clear distinctions between the public and private spheres. From the perspective of modern bureaucratic institutions, familial influence over political office holding is a form of corruption, nepotism an affront to our meritocratic ideals.²⁵ As a result, few people in the West currently argue that family bonds should hold significant sway within the sphere of politics, that they can be a stabilizing force because of the traditions and expectations associated with kinship.²⁶

The nineteenth- and twentieth-century predilection for the bureaucratic state led generations of medieval historians to trumpet the breakdown of family-dominated political systems rather than their flourishing. Joseph Strayer, for example, argued in 1970 that the thirteenth century was when

24. For example, Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society*; Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*; Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*; Alexandre-Bidon and Lett, *Children in the Middle Ages*.

25. Vowinckel, *Verwandschaft, Freundschaft*, 166; Fox, *Kinship and Marriage*, 14. The Bush and Kennedy dynasties are clear evidence that politics and family remain interconnected in the United States today, despite the popular rhetoric that calls for them to be kept separate.

26. Exceptions to this general trend include Bellow, *In Praise of Nepotism*, esp. 1–25; Reinhard, “Nepotismus.”

the state replaced the family as the principal loyalty for politically active Englishmen.²⁷ Since then, some medievalists have drawn attention to the appearance during the twelfth century of a cadre of university-educated men who owed their positions in the church and at secular courts to knowledge and training—not family connections. These scholars have emphasized the efforts of English and French kings to cast off the influence of powerful aristocratic families and to rely on this new group of bureaucrats of lesser origins to govern their realms more effectively.²⁸

In the German historiography of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, disdain for the family's role in medieval politics manifested itself in debates about the German *Sonderweg*.²⁹ For some historians, Germany's failure to emerge from the Middle Ages as a unified nation-state was the result of the increased power and influence of princely families after the Investiture Controversy. These families, as they expanded their lordship, promoted regional diversity and particularism rather than centralized government institutions—at a time when France and England were supposedly beginning to see the emergence of more effective forms of kingship. The practice within princely families of permitting multiple children to inherit allegedly exacerbated the problems for the failed German state. According to many scholars, primogeniture was the only form of inheritance able to foster the maintenance of strong polities that could, over time, develop statelike institutions. By repeatedly dividing their patrimonies, aristocratic families instead became a destabilizing force in Germany, with little interest in promoting the structures of centralized authority.³⁰

Thus, the modern West's disdain for familial domination of political life has cast a long shadow over scholarship on the interrelationship between politics and family. Since the late twentieth century, however, medieval historians have demonstrated a growing appreciation for the complexities of this subject. Increasingly, scholars are arguing that the role of the family within the political sphere must be analyzed on its own terms, rather than through the clouded lens of modern political expectations.³¹ There was a practical

27. Strayer, *Medieval Origins of the Modern State*, 45–46.

28. See, for example, Bisson, *Crisis of the Twelfth Century*; Baldwin, *Government of Philip Augustus*; Moore, *First European Revolution*; Turner, *Men Raised from the Dust*.

29. On this strand of German historiography, see Reuter, "Medieval German *Sonderweg*?"

30. See, for example, Lamprecht, *Deutsche Geschichte*, 3:78–83; Thompson, *Feudal Germany*, 287–289, 303–321; Dungern, "Constitutional Reorganisation and Reform," 208–209, 218–227.

31. Spieß, "Lordship, Kinship, and Inheritance," 58.

logic to people's reliance on close relatives at all levels of medieval politics, and it is the task of historians to understand that logic—not critique it.³² Viewed from this perspective, research into the family's significance for politics fits within a broader framework of scholarship that argues the political structures common to past centuries can be examined effectively only if our contemporary preconceptions are set aside.³³ Studies focusing on such topics as medieval political rituals, nonjudicial forms of dispute resolution, and informal patronage networks consciously shun the public-private dichotomy and other state-based interpretive categories.³⁴ Detailed studies of the sibling bond's role in medieval politics likewise have the potential to offer a corrective to older models of political order.

Siblings, Politics, and German History

In the earliest years of the Staufen dynasty of kings and emperors, the relationship between two siblings stood at the center of political life in the German kingdom.³⁵ When the last Salian emperor, Henry V, died without a male heir in 1125, several members of the German aristocracy surfaced as contenders for the throne. One was the Staufen duke Frederick II of Swabia (d. 1147), who was related to Henry V through his mother. Frederick's familial ties to the Salians failed to swing the royal election in his favor, however, and a majority of the German princes chose the duke of Saxony,

32. Althoff, *Family, Friends and Followers*, 60.

33. This argument was made most famously by Brunner in *Land and Lordship*. See also Chittolini, "'Private,' 'Public,' State," S39.

34. For rituals, see, for example, Althoff, *Die Macht der Rituale*, and the critique of this field by Buc in *Dangers of Ritual*. For dispute resolution, see the excellent overview of the field provided by Brown and Górecki, "What Conflict Means." For informal patronage networks, see Watts, *Making of Politics*, 153–154; Huffman, *Social Politics*, 1–6.

35. Although the phrase *sacrum Romanum imperium* first appears in sources during the twelfth century, the term "Holy Roman Empire" is typically avoided by historians of the Staufen period because it brings to mind structures more common to later centuries. As a result, I will employ the (admittedly bland) term "the empire" when referring to the whole of that sprawling political entity that, during the 1100s and early 1200s, included the northern Italian and Burgundian kingdoms as well as the German realm. Labeling this third kingdom, which is the setting for much of this work, is also problematic, because its rulers titled themselves "king of the Romans" (*rex Romanorum*) prior to their imperial coronations at the hands of the pope. Since many modern readers may find this title distracting and misleading, I will follow other Anglophone historians and use "German kingdom" for this polity, which was the successor to the East Frankish kingdom of the late Carolingian period. Although some scholars prefer the term "medieval Germany," I have decided not to use it here, because several of the families I analyze were in possession of important rights and territories in regions that do not belong to the modern German state.

who became King Lothar III (1125–1137). Refusing to accept this outcome, Frederick and a small group of lords opposed to Lothar sought to elect a new king two years later, in 1127. Once again, however, the duke of Swabia was not the choice. Instead, Frederick led the way in securing the election of his younger brother, Conrad. Although this attempted coup failed, Conrad was elected again eleven years later—after Lothar III’s death in 1137—and ruled the kingdom as King Conrad III until 1152.³⁶

Why did Duke Frederick II of Swabia abandon his own claims to the kingship in 1127 in order to support the election of his younger brother? Why, in 1138, did the other princes again prefer Conrad as king and not his older sibling? Because there is evidence that Frederick lost an eye at an unknown moment during his career, some scholars have suggested that he may have suffered this injury between 1125 and 1127, thus rendering him physically unfit to rule as king.³⁷ This is merely speculation, however. No extant source explicitly states why Conrad—who is frequently identified simply as “the brother of Duke Frederick” (*frater Friderici ducis*) in texts written prior to 1138—surpassed his elder sibling and acquired the highest position in the German kingdom.³⁸

Although the surviving evidence leaves much in doubt concerning the events of 1127 and 1138, the brothers’ shifting claims to the German royal title nevertheless hint at the potential of sibling relationships to shape the course of political events during the Staufen period. As will become clear in the pages that follow, the Staufens shared much in common with the other lineages that are the focus of this book, and the significance of sibling interactions for their early history is representative of a much broader trend. Within many generations of those lineages that composed the German aristocratic elite during the 1100s and early 1200s, the eldest brother was not the only sibling who attained a position of power and authority. Nor was he the unquestioned head of his lineage, or someone who managed all his younger brothers’ and sisters’ political affairs.³⁹ Understanding Conrad’s election as king in 1138—and Frederick’s subsequent support for his younger brother’s

36. For more detailed summaries of these events, see Keller, *Zwischen regionaler Begrenzung und universalem Horizont*, 199–205; Haverkamp, *Medieval Germany*, 137–144; Fuhrmann, *Germany in the High Middle Ages*, 116–122.

37. See, for example, Engels, *Die Staufer*, 27–28; Arnold, “Western Empire, 1125–1197,” 413; and esp. Schwarzmaier, “*Pater imperatoris*.”

38. See, for example, *Annales Palidenses*, 78; *Annalista Saxo*, 765; *Annales Ratisbonenses*, 585. More generally, see Lubich, “Beobachtungen zur Wahl Konrads III.,” 312–323.

39. For more on this point, see Hechberger, “Konrad III.,” 323–333.

fragile kingship—requires a more dynamic approach to the study of sibling relationships, one that recognizes the prominent roles that *all* the members of a generation could play in German politics during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁴⁰

The relationship between Duke Frederick II of Swabia and King Conrad III is certainly not the first case in medieval German history of a fraternal bond taking center stage in the kingdom's politics. For example, two centuries earlier, in the mid-900s, Emperor Otto I's younger brothers played leading roles in the political life of the realm.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the opening decades of the twelfth century witnessed fundamental changes—in both the nature of German political life and in the organization of many prominent noble lineages—that led to a significant increase in the number of politically influential siblings within the upper aristocracy. Central to this transformation of the early twelfth century was a dramatic shift in the relationship between the rulers and the imperial princes (*principes imperii*). These magnates, who composed the uppermost stratum of the secular and ecclesiastical elite, held their principal fiefs directly from the German rulers and were therefore expected to provide counsel and support to the kings and emperors. During the decades around 1100, however, the Investiture Controversy and a series of civil wars within the kingdom made it increasingly difficult for the Salian rulers to exercise effective authority over these magnates. As a result, by the close of the Salian period, the imperial princes had come to see themselves as partners, not subordinates, of the kings and emperors in the governance of the realm.⁴²

Previous generations of scholars sought the origins of the closed, narrowly defined Estate of Imperial Princes (*Reichsfürstenstand*) in this period when the leading secular and ecclesiastical magnates became the entrenched political elite of the kingdom.⁴³ Today, however, German historians tend to avoid such rigid models for understanding the leading magnates as a group, preferring instead to emphasize the fluidity of this elite and the fluctuating number of *principes imperii* throughout the Staufen period.⁴⁴ According to

40. The relationship between Frederick and Conrad will be discussed at much greater length in chapter 4.

41. Laudage, *Otto der Grosse*, 246–252.

42. Weinfurter, *Salian Century*, 173–174.

43. The foundational work on this subject remains Ficker, *Vom Reichsfürstenstande*, 1:58–128. See also Mitteis, *Der Staat des hohen Mittelalters*, 291; Barraclough, *Origins of Modern Germany*, 194.

44. Hechberger, *Adel im fränkisch-deutschen Mittelalter*, 273–287; Moraw, “Fürstentum, König-tum und ‘Reichsreform’”; Arnold, *Princes and Territories*, 26–39; and more recently, Laudage, *Friedrich Barbarossa*, 184–187.

this newer perspective, the princes did not act collectively as the members of a distinct social class with a common set of interests. Instead, personal ambition and familial interests motivated many of the actions taken by secular and ecclesiastical magnates, leading them to compete frequently with one another for rights and properties.⁴⁵ One of the places where this princely competition was most evident was the royal court, where the magnates vied with one another for *Königsnähe* (proximity to the king) in order to benefit from royal largesse.⁴⁶ The shifting group of secular and ecclesiastical princes who attended court had an influential role to play in politics for another reason as well, because the German rulers depended on consultation with this group of magnates when making key decisions that affected the kingdom and empire. This consensual form of lordship was an essential component of political life during the Staufen period and a clear manifestation of the idea that the ruler and the princes governed the kingdom jointly.⁴⁷

Absent from these arguments emphasizing princely competition and the dynamic relationship between ruler and magnates are siblings. Throughout the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the practice of partible inheritance meant that leading magnate lineages frequently included multiple brothers and sisters who held prominent positions within the German kingdom. In some cases, sibling groups consisting of two, three, or even four *principes imperii* sought to exert influence at the imperial court—while simultaneously working to expand their lordship at the expense of their rivals at the regional level. As a result, siblings often appear together in the sources from this period, and their interactions and relationships reveal much about the practice of politics under the Staufen kings and emperors.

Methodology and Sources

The evidence for this study of sibling relationships is drawn from sources for nine of the most prominent lineages belonging to the upper aristocracy of the Staufen period. All these lineages included members who belonged to the uppermost stratum of the German political elite, to the group of *principes imperii*. While the archbishops and bishops of the kingdom, as well as the abbots of imperial monasteries, were—with very few exceptions—all members

45. Leyser, “Frederick Barbarossa and the Hohenstaufen Polity”; Hechberger, *Staufer und Welfen*.

46. Althoff, *Spielregeln der Politik*, 126–153.

47. Schneidmüller, “Konsensuale Herrschaft”; Patzold, “Konsens und Konkurrenz”; and more generally, Reuter, “Medieval Nobility,” 183–184.

of this elite, the number of secular princes was much more restricted, less than half that of the ecclesiastical princes. The exclusivity of this group means that there existed a very small group of noble lineages—approximately fifteen around the year 1200—who stood above all others and played a disproportionately influential role in the political life of the kingdom.⁴⁸

Each of the nine lineages I have chosen to analyze here was one of the preeminent noble lineages in Swabia, Bavaria, or Saxony at the start of the Staufen period. These three duchies, all of which lay east of the Rhine River and north of the Alps, had been of critical importance to the development of the German kingdom since the tenth century.⁴⁹ Focusing on lineages from these regions makes it possible to examine how and why sibling relationships could create widely divergent political and territorial strategies among nobles exercising princely lordship in key parts of the realm. Moreover, concentrating on lineages from all three of these duchies helps provide a much fuller picture of noble family politics in the German kingdom than most scholars have so far attempted. Studies of German noble lineages are typically written through the lens of regional history, in the German tradition of *Landesgeschichte*, and therefore do not seek points of comparison and contrast among Swabian, Bavarian, and Saxon families.⁵⁰

Two of the nine lineages I have chosen are the *Staufens* and *Welfs*. While the former is often equated with the line of kings and emperors—Conrad III (1138–1152), Frederick I Barbarossa (1152–1190), Henry VI (1190–1197), Philip of Swabia (1198–1208), and Frederick II (1212–1250)—these rulers were not the only influential figures in their generations of the lineage. Most had siblings who played active roles alongside their crowned brothers in shaping the political dynamics of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The Welfs, the lineage that produced the other king and emperor to rule during this period—Otto IV of Brunswick (1198–1218)—included many of the leading noble lords in the German kingdom during the years under examination here. One of these was Duke Henry the Lion of Bavaria and Saxony (d. 1195), possibly the most famous German nobleman of the entire Middle Ages. His life as an only child is central to my analysis of the significance of sibling relationships within the aristocracy of the Staufen period. The other magnate lineages are the *Wettins* and *Ascanians* from the duchy of

48. Weller, *Die Heiratspolitik des deutschen Hochadels*, 4; Wolf, “Königswähler und königliche Tochterstämme.”

49. For a good general overview, see Arnold, *Medieval Germany*.

50. Freed, “Medieval German Social History,” 9–10.

Saxony along the northeastern frontiers of the empire; the lineage known to modern scholarship as the *Ludowings* of Thuringia; the *Zähringens*, who controlled extensive territories in the duchy of Swabia along what is today the German-Swiss border; the *Wittelsbach* lineage of the duchy of Bavaria; the *Babenbergs* of Austria; and the lineage known as the *Andechs*, which is difficult to designate with a regional label, since its members came to possess properties and rights that stretched from Burgundy in the west to Carniola (modern day Slovenia) in the southeast.

The richest source base for these nine lineages are the thousands of charters—issued by kings and emperors, bishops and other churchmen, and secular noblemen—that survive in German archives. The property confirmations, agreements, and settlements described in these documents frequently provide valuable evidence for brothers' and sisters' interconnected territorial rights and interests. Moreover, the witness lists written into many charters make it possible to reconstruct the itineraries of noble siblings and to determine where and when they came into contact with one another. Extrapolating about sibling *relationships* on the basis of this dry archival evidence is difficult, however, which is why I also rely heavily on other types of source material from the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Otto of Freising's *Gesta Friderici*, the most famous narrative source of the Staufian period, is referenced frequently in the pages that follow, as are numerous other chronicles that offer insights into the interactions between particular noble brothers and sisters. Saints' lives, necrologies, and letter collections make occasional appearances as well, since many of them contain scattered clues about the nature of specific sibling relationships. By employing such a diverse array of source material for so many different lineages from across the German kingdom, I aim to highlight the centrality of the sibling bond in the political life of the realm.

One of the advantages of focusing on the highest levels of the German political elite of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries is the abundance of evidence that survives in these various types of sources. In many cases, sibling interactions and relationships within this elite can be examined using a combination of texts drawn from several different source genres. In this respect, the nine lineages under investigation here are unquestionably atypical; it would be impossible to reconstruct sibling bonds lower down the social ladder in similar detail. Rather than lamenting the paucity of extant sources for the family life of the medieval everyman, however, I embrace the rich material available for examining the significance of sibling relationships for the history of this one political elite. My analysis here is based on the lives of one hundred or so individuals who belonged to these