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Polygyny and Monogamism in the Medieval West

I

One of the most blatant bits of ethnocentrism to ever have entered a modern document of universal validity is Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in Paris on 10 December 1948, and held to be one of the fundamental documents of our present-day political, social and legal system. So it takes some de-centring effort to see the wild extremism of the following sentence:

> 16 (1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family.

A right to *what* ? The Declaration does not explain. It is taken for granted that the meaning of the sentence is immediately obvious: that all concerned (i.e. 'all human beings', the addressees of the Declaration) know what the right granted to them by Art. 16 encompasses. Seventy years on, some of us tend to stumble about the 'men and women' bit which does not square with recent legislation on homosexual marriage in some countries, whereas others will put a question mark by the use of the word 'family'. Both wordings may lend themselves to a criticism of the Declaration as enshrining mid-20th century bourgeois values. But I think the use of the verb 'to marry' is much more profoundly interesting, presupposing as it does that the right to marry is a fundamental one (in the Declaration it sides with the right not to be tortured, arbitrarily jailed or exiled, or deprived of one's property or nationality), and furthermore, that 'all human beings' should want to marry in the first place in much the same way as they want not to be tortured, etc.

Why should this be so? Why should a peculiar form of contracting a sexual union, called 'marrying', be regarded as a fundamental human right? I should like to probe some of the implications of this assumption. One of them is obvious, too obvious perhaps to insist: Much like its sequel, Article 17 on property rights, Article 16 is part of what is liable to be viewed (and, from certain stations, criticised) as an instance of the Declaration's universalism. It is in fact privileging a special form of contracting a sexual union. For the time being, however, I am less interested in taking up the universalist/relativist debate than in asking on what basis the Declaration assumes that marriage is a fundamental human right. It has, in fact, some more things to say on the matter. The full text of Article 16 (1) reads:

> Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.

So we learn a little more: 'Marriage' is apparently a legal state which can be entered into and dissolved. Its contraction, duration, and dissolution are governed by equal rights to 'men and women'. We do not learn how many men and women are involved in it, which may or

may not reflect an attempt on the part of the redactors of the Constitution to evade the issue, but it be argued that the stress on 'equal rights' at least implies a numerical balance, i.e. monogamy. This is, indeed, the view subsequently taken by UN institutions such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discriminations against Women (CEDAW), whose General Recommendations n° 21 on 'Equality in Marriage and Family Relations', passed in its 13th Session in 1994, have some things to say about polygamy. In the face of 'some States parties'' (notably the U.A.E.'s) 'reservations' on some aspects of Art. 16 of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Committee roundly declares: 'Polygamous marriage contravenes a woman's right to equality with men, and can have such serious emotional and financial consequences for her and her dependents that such marriages ought to be discouraged and prohibited.'

Though hardly surprising in its tenor, this commentary has a interesting aside. While it would seem immediately obvious why polygamy should be thought to be at odds with the principle of equal rights in marriage (endorsed by Art. 16 of the 1979 Convention), and the remark about the financial consequences, though not really explicated, also carries conviction, it is less obvious why the CEDAW should be so concerned with 'serious emotional consequences'. What is interesting here is not just that the CEDAW should take this view, but also that most Western readers would immediately see the point it is making: Isn't it obvious how multiple wives must suffer emotionally, from pique, jealousy, anxiousness, stress? (Gaffney-Rhys 2011; Henrich et al. 2012; Lawson et al. 2015; Barash 2016). A 2006 Canadian Ministry of Justice report on *Polygyny and Canada's Obligations under International Human Rights Law* takes up the CEDAW recommendations and formulates a statement on 'Harms of Polygyny' (Cook/Kelly 2006, pp. 7-18). Of its eight sub-sections, I quote from the second one, 'The Harm of Non-Exclusivity':

> At its core, polygyny undermines the principle of exclusivity that serves to strengthen marital and familial bonds. In particular, polygyny denies couples exclusive sexual intimacy and the opportunity to build an exclusive life together. Moreover, it hinders the equal sharing of both material and emotional attention. In turn, it precludes the opportunity of creating something unique with another partner because of the expectation or at least the prospect of another party being introduced into the marital union and interrupting the relationship.

We may not be stretching textual criticism beyond reasonable limits if we feel that, behind such phrases as 'an exclusive life together' or 'creating something unique', there is a strong layer of late 20th-century songs, films, and TV series, and beyond those again, multiple layers of many centuries' production of novels, plays, and poetry, which have ineluctably shaped our views on the 'principle of exclusivity'. Taken to its extremes, this principle might be expected to result into the advocacy of one-child unions, 'monopedy' as a corollary of monogamy. It does not do so, of course – but why 'of course'? Apparently the idea that the principle of exclusivity applies specifically to sexual unions is not even thought of as needing justification in its turn; in fact, it is axiomatic. So is the idea that 'exclusive sexual intimacy' and 'emotional attention' are first principles which need no argument but on which, so the holder of the Chair in International Human Rights at the University of Toronto advises the Canadian Government, it is proper to build the legal system of a modern democracy.

II

There is, then, a heavy cultural bias in the argument. To state this is not to denigrate the advice or the advisor (unless one takes the position that cultural bias ought not to influence legal systems, a stance that would send us all down a pretty slippery slope). The historian's task is to explain this bias. The medievalist feels himself specially called upon, as the 'grand récit' of the history of marriage and the family has it that during late Antiquity a certain preference for monogamy that was already making itself felt in Roman society developed into a very strong movement in favour of monogamy. Christian teaching made the monogamous couple the equivalent of the relationship of the believer to the Church, or of the soul to God, equating fornication with apostasy. By the time the West was becoming Christian, the monogamous couple had become the religious, legal and social standard we have known since (Goody 1983; Goody 2000; Mitterauer 2003). Of course, actual human practice might be quite at variance with the standard, but however widespread and/or conspicuous adultery and fornication might be, they could only ever be an aberration from a standard that was honoured, as it were, as much in breach as in observance. Only in the latter half of the 20th century did marriage cease to be the mandatory institution for legitimate intercourse and procreation, yet by common consent the ideal of monogamy – the Couple – has proved more change-resistant than its legal form, as a thousand stories of love and jealousy, fidelity and treason show: 'Only you'... 'I'll be true to you, yes I will'... 'Alors choisis entre les autres filles et moi !...'

'Love', 'fidelity' and 'treason' are words that historians of the Middle Ages feel at home with. Indeed, it is a truism that much of our 'love talk', of the lexematics and semantics of love, is ultimately derived from 'courtly love' as formulated (and possibly practised) in some parts of the medieval West in the 12th and 13th centuries (de Rougemont 1961), i. e. the same period in which politics were structured by promises of fidelity (*fides*) and society at large by the Christian faith (*fides*). Religion, politics, and the couple are, inseparably, about love. To be unfaithful to the beloved was conceptually more or less the same as to be a traitor and a renegade.

This is only the briefest of sketches, designed more to ring bells than to supply a consistent argument. Moreover, it is not really the focus of the present chapter to explore the meaning of love in the medieval world, though it might be just as well to ponder that what Ovid or Sappho felt for the girls they 'loved' might be quite a long way removed from what we call 'love' – and while we are at it, to bear in mind that even modern 'love' has convincingly been described as a communicative code, leaving us puzzled as to the nature of the link between words and feelings (Luhmann 1982; Luhmann 2008). For the purpose of the present study, it might be advisable to apply Ockham's razor to the issue of what love has got to do with it.

We need, however, to make one other strong point: As far as the Church was concerned (and for once, it is not amiss to use the singular and a capital C), the point at issue when it came to man-women relationships – the point which had been made a central tenet of Christian teaching by St Paul and subsequently elaborated by the Fathers – was not about marriage but about monogamy. As long as there was only one man to one woman, the Church was not interested in what legal form their relationship took. The First Council of Toledo (c.400 AD), repeated more or less verbatim for eight hundred years to come, put it like this:

Si quis habens uxorem fidelis, si concubinam habeat, non communicet. Ceterum is qui non habet uxorem, et pro uxore concubinam habet, a communione non repellatur, tantum ut unius mulieris, aut uxoris aut concubinę, ut ei placuerit, sit coniunctione contentus. (c. 17)

If a believer who has a wife (*uxor*) has a concubine, he is excommunicated. By contrast, someone who has no wife but instead has a concubine must not be excommunicated, as long as he contents himself with having intercourse with one woman, be she a wife or a concubine, however he pleases.

This formula, surprisingly similar to the wording of modern European legal systems (France, Switzerland) which have 'marriage' and 'concubinage', does not really square with widely-held assumptions about marriage and the medieval Church. But during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a new concept of marriage was developed by the western Church (or rather, a school of thought within the Church which came to see its programme through). Its main principle was '*Consensus facit nuptias*', meaning that, given mutual consent, a marriage was effective *ipso facto* – or 'ipso dicto', because consent could be expressed by words as well as by deeds. Marriage thereby came to be regarded as one of the sacraments (though the ecclesiastical ceremony only became mandatory during the 16th century) and therefore very much the affair of the Church. It was, so to speak, the union of the concepts 'marriage' and 'monogamy'. This innovation of 12th-century church law is retained verbatim in Art. 16(2) of the Declaration of Human Rights: 'Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses'. Along with gender equality and exclusivity, it is one of the most profound imprints the Church has made on contemporary ideas of human rights. Replace 'Christian man' by 'any man' and CEDAW would fully subscribe to the position of Gratian's *Decretum*, the authoritative 12th-century collection of Church law (D 34,5): *Christiano, non dicam plurimas, sed nec duas simul habere licitum est* – 'it is not permissible for a Christian man to have even two women at once, let alone more'.

All in all, evidence for the master narrative of the development of Western monogamy is fairly strong. If I still propose to re-examine that narrative, it is not with a view to challenging its overall validity; in fact, re-examination might even strengthen it. Its very pervasiveness and its enormous impact on the modern world, including the foreseeable future, makes the development of Western monogamy sometimes appear less spectacular, less eccentric, less remarkable than it might. For in an overall cross-cultural perspective, monogamy has a high degree of improbability. Among the 186 historical and contemporary 'societies' contained in the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (SCCS), polygyny carries the day with almost ninety per cent, with monogamy predominant in only sixteen 'societies' (and polyandry extremely rare) (Bretschneider 1995). Let us take this observation as a starting point to help us assess the improbability of monogamy becoming a central element of the society of the extreme Western fringe of Eurasia – in other words, let us depart from the assumption that polygyny is the 'normal' state. And let me hasten to add that I am not concerned with any arguments from of biological anthropology (the baboon bit, to put it disrespectfully) of whatever kind, because they concern humankind as a species and can therefore be disregarded when it comes to differences between particular societies or 'cultures'. So, disregarding all that, what 'uses' can polygyny have, or be put to, in actual societies, in this case: post-Roman Western societies? [1]

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[1] For a full treatment, including notes and sources, of what follows, see Rüdiger 2012 and 2015.

A word of definition may be called for: Strictly speaking, no society that has embraced Christianity can formally be polygamous, for the reasons given. In what follows, I use 'polygyny' not as a legal but a praxeological term: Polygynous behaviour is for a man to entertain a socially relevant relationship with more than one woman simultaneously (I am not concerned with 'serial polygyny' here). 'Socially relevant' may be an awkwardly imprecise term, though in an early and high medieval context, given the scarcity of sources, it may be argued that any relationship that caught the eye of the beholder to the point of making a record was, by definition, considered relevant (though on the other hand, countless such relationships must escape us for lack of a record). I do not intend to introduce arbitrary criteria such as a minimum duration or the use of certain terms (*concubina*, a term with legal and moral resonance, springs to mind) because that would shift my ground. The purpose of this study is not a reconstruction of how the authors of written sources view polygynous behaviour but of what we may venture to assume how the agents themselves – the men and women forming polygynous relationships and their social milieux – performed them. (One of the merits of this view is that we need not concern ourselves with the question whether individual men and women actually did have sexual intercourse. When King Harald the Hard-Ruler invaded Denmark in 1047 and carried away 'many beautiful girls in fetters', the point was not whether he or his men slept with –or 'raped'– all or any of them, but that socially, that is, in the view of all parties concerned, they might.)

That said, the kinds of sources available obviously both condition our knowledge and shape our perception of such relationships. For instance, the Latin material will necessarily employ a vocabulary and terminology that bears the mark both of the Roman past and of Biblical and patristic traditions to a greater extent than the vernaculars, even if they too are moulded to some extent on Latin. The semantics of *concubina* are not the same as those of its Anglo-Saxon or Norse (near-) equivalents such as *cyfes* and *friðla* or of Romance vernacular words such as Old French *soignant*. To take these terms to 'mean' *concubina* (and to translate them as 'concubine') is to even out those differences, especially in view of the fact that any Christian western medieval literacy had Latin at its disposal, and therefore the use of the vernacular always marks an 'additional extra', a conscious cultural effort at particularity. Vernacular texts are comparatively good mining ground for polygynous practices – not because they somehow reflect 'lay' or even 'non- or pre-Christian' societies (they do not) but because due to their linguistic form they privilege the particular and the local over the general. What, then, can we gauge from that variegated material, in which the relationships we are after more often than not appear 'in the margins' as it were and are seldom recounted at any length, about the polygynous practices in the lay élites of the medieval West?[2]

In male-centred societies (which, according to the SCCS, most societies are, and which the 'Male Middle Ages' (Duby 1988) most pronouncedly were), women may be regarded as resources. To quote a famous dictum from fourth-century BC Athens, men 'have women for pleasurable companionship, for the satisfaction of bodily needs, or for procreation and the oversight of the household'.[3] We might add: for the production of goods (female labour was

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[2] Chronicles and annals will almost exclusively focus on the upper strata; for the use of the rare documentary evidence on early medieval peasant populations see Kuchenbuch 2009.

[3] I am aware that this is a fairly blunt translation of a passage which in itself is polemical: τὰς μὲν γὰρ ἑταίρας ἡδονῆς ἕνεκ᾽ ἔχομεν, τὰς δὲ παλλακὰς τῆς καθ᾽ ἡμέραν θεραπείας τοῦ σώματος, τὰς δὲ γυναῖκας τοῦ παιδοποιεῖσθαι γνησίως καὶ τῶν

an important factor in medieval economy, to the point that its maintenance could become decisive for a region's trade balance). Seen that way, polygyny is a means of resource acquisition and accumulation; in fact, of hoarding. The human sex ratio being, in an overall perspective, roughly 1:1, women are also a finite commodity, and the acquisition of plural women also means deprivation, on the part of certain males, of other males. Hence, polygyny implies the possibility of exacerbated competition – though by no means the necessity, not only because human society has infinite variation and never works quite as mechanically as one might at first suppose, but also because as with other forms of hoarding, polygyny and liberality are not mutually exclusive (most medieval European rulers provide cases in point). Let us therefore retain the potential, rather than the inevitable consequence, of polygyny for social stratification by way of resource accumulation and distribution, and of acerbated competition. The latter might be more acerbated still by imbalances in the sex ratio, for example in 'frontier' or settler societies such as Viking-age Iceland or eleventh-century Spain, but is structurally present in any society. 'Cultural difference' depends on the way the potential scarcity of women is modelled. It might be carrying functionalism to an extreme to view the significant role of celibacy in medieval Western thought and practice in this vein, because after all those emblematic figures of celibacy, 'the monk' and (by the 11th century) 'the cleric', were predated and quite possibly outweighed by 'the holy virgin' and 'the nun'. It does, however, lend sense to the idea that nunneries and female convents were, among other things, a game of brinkmanship on the part of medieval warrior societies.

There is, then, both an 'agonistic' and a 'habitual' aspect to medieval polygyny. Competition for women was structural, and therefore latent unless violent. Society and culture allowing for almost infinitely variety, the agon might take very different forms. What took the form of competitive bidding for a particularly famous slave girl by the emissaries of rivalling rulers at a slave market auction in 11th-century Córdoba might take the form of competitive wooing, by way of composing courtly *cançons*, between rivalling rulers in 13th-century Occitania, or the form of a literal race, over several hundred miles, between two contenders to the Norwegian kingship to be first to carry away a certain girl who had attracted their attention. It was recommendable for those rulers to be seen making successful bids for famous and desirable women (this is the 'habitual' aspect, perhaps the one which comes as the least surprise, given our contemporary views on sex, power, male dominance, and *#MeToo*, although medieval history, for one, is also rich in examples where males could gain status by abstention), and specially if they could also do down a competitor in the process (this is the 'agonistic' aspect).

Cases such as these, which might be multiplied at will, have often been dismissed by historians as expression of mere playfulness, libido, or heedlessness on the part of aristocratic males. There is a strong scholarly tradition of putting much store by matrimony being 'the cornerstone of society' (Duby 1981) and regarding any form of extra-marital union as somewhat unimportant. We need not go into the intellectual tradition for this view (see Rüdiger 2012 for the 'Augustinian distinction' *uxor*/*concubina* = seriousness/libido, and more fully, Rüdiger 2015); suffice it to say that to assess the importance of polygyny for medieval European societies, one may wish to momentarily disregard that distinction and view all forms of socially significant man-woman relationships with a sexual side to them as

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ἔνδον φύλακα πιστὴν ἔχειν. I also disregard entirely its context and only use it here by way of shorthand. Cf. for a more appropriate discussion Rheinsberg 1989; Hartmann 2002; Hamel 2003; Brodersen 2004.

'polygyny'. Indeed, it is far from clear that early or even high medieval societies shared St Augustine's and our conviction that one could make a categorical difference between *uxor* and *concubina*, between marriage and non-marriage. So many famous instances of contemporaries (let alone posterity) being unclear about whether any one among even such high-placed women as the consorts of Charlemagne were married women or 'concubines' indicate that not only did opinions vary, but also that the actors themselves more often than not found it to be to their advantage to leave some interpretational leeway as to legal status. Or rather: legal status was no main concern of theirs, though social status obviously was. This means that while within the 'shoal', as Georges Duby somewhat uncharitably calls the group of women around one powerful male (Duby 1995-96), heavy status competition between the women and their respective social contexts, groups, factions might be going on, ceremonial niceties with a 'legal' tinge, such as an elaborate wedding ceremony, might make some difference one way or the other but might be outweighed by other concerns. When Harald Haraldsson was still an up-and-coming young man on his way to becoming King Harald the Hard-Ruler of Norway (r. 1047–66), he acquired the daughter of King Jaroslav of Novgorod. It must have been a solemn occasion: a 'royal marriage'. Back in Norway he saw fit to associate himself with the sister of some of the powerful magnates he was trying to win over to his side in his struggle to gain recognition. How do we expect the two women to have viewed their respective 'status'? Was Harald what he notionally could not be: a Christian bigamist? Or was one of the two key women 'only' a concubine? If so, which one? Could Harald risk to do any less than treat both women very carefully? And wouldn't it be somewhat naïve on our part to expect those 9th- or 11th-century power brokers, who in all other fields showed themselves so apt in balancing claims, pretensions, and allegiances, to keep a field as central to issues of status and habitus as women relationships free of deft manoeuvring and instead to obey legalist ideas about whom one was 'married' to?

There is a ready objection to this possibly slightly cavalier treatment of legal status. It has to do with offspring, with 'legitimate' vs. 'illegitimate' birth. This is a valid point, which also serves to remind us that one of the obvious 'uses' of polygyny is the enhanced probability, on part of a male, to have children. (This, of course, only applies in societies which cherish the idea of biological fatherhood, but medieval Europe is among those.) Again, no natural law predicates that either a multitude or a scarcity of offspring and potential heirs to wealth, status, obligations will be desirable or beneficial. Neither are there any hard-and-fast rules about conflicting interests – say, the capacity to inherit in a given group of sons. In medieval Europe, over the centuries the double principle of primogeniture and legitimate birth grew ever more prominent without ever quite eclipsing other models. However, it is only after c. 1200 that both models gained universal recognition. 'Legitimate birth', that is, for the pretender to an important heritage to be born in a fully acceptable union, was invoked by interested parties at critical junctures in the Frankish élites by the 9th century, and was fully endorsed at the highest levels in Western Europe by c. 1100, and in Scandinavia by c. 1260. But it took a decisive swing towards more 'bureaucratic', legalist rule before it could be settled unequivocally from the outset just what unions would produce legitimate offspring and what unions wouldn't. Legal practice and law books show that up until the mid-13th century, Europe at large operated a system by which the decision who was to be a legitimate heir could be very much a matter of debate, negotiation and consensus (or feud). In a society that operated such flexible practices of inheritance, it was not only practical but even desirable that the 'status' of women was not all too fixed; indeed, it may be argued that the 'status' of a man-woman relationship was more often than not influenced by the subsequent

development of both that relationship and the fate of the common offspring (for the concept of 'retrospect marriage' see Rüdiger 2012). Detached from a certain legal form, men and women manoeuvring for acquisition and defence of resources, status, and power could use sexual unions in much the same way other social bonds between individuals and groups were entered into and dissolved, that is, with a keen view to situation, purpose, and consequences. How things developed was contingent on many factors, none perhaps more important than the persons and personalities of those involved.

This brings us to another, and possibly the most interesting, 'use' of polygyny. We readily accept that the choice of marriage partner, especially in pre-modern societies, has a 'meaning' in the sense that it makes statements and conveys messages to different recipients. If we also accept that a polygynous system (within which 'marriage' as a particularly solemn form of concluding an alliance may or may not play a role) multiplies the occasions for making such statements, then polygyny takes its place as a central arena of social semantics. We have seen King Harald the Hard-Ruler contract unions with female relatives of a Novgorod ruler, some Norwegian chieftains, and a number of Danish chieftains. Both the persons involved and the way the relationships started were 'meaningful', and to judge from the echo in the sources, the public took a keen interest: So King Jaroslav saw fit to invest in the young pretender? So the Árnasons decided to back him? So he decided to rule Denmark by force and not by consent (otherwise he might not have taken those chieftain's daughters as booty of war but nicely asked for them)? The main operator for appraisal of the 'default situation' was the degree of force applied in bringing it about, that is, whether the relationship indicated a consensual or a confrontational situation, whether it tipped the scales towards equilibrium or the opposite – very much as in other arenas of symbolic communication, it made a lot of difference whether an arrangement was reached by way of arbitrage or of judgement, or whether contenders met (literally) halfways or one of them had to go all the way to seek out the other. In other words: whether there was anything dishonourable about the relationship entered into, something someone had a reason to hide. Characteristically, the terms the Nordic law books of the 13th century (the only non-Latin legal corpus of the period) use as an equivalent of the 'legitimate/illigetimate birth' antinomy is 'conceived in full view/conceived in secret' (*skilgetinn/laungetinn*). In this respect, too, polygyny allowed practitioners to behave very 'medievally'.

Incidentally, this was only about the outset, deciding, as it were, whether the runner would take the inner or outer lane. The course of the race, the contingency of future events might make a lot of difference. For instance, several of the sons born out of relationships that began as demonstrations of force rose to be rulers, and sometimes (though not always) their mothers rose with them, such as Álfhild 'the King's slave' (*konungs ambátt*), mother to Saint Olav of Norway (r. 1016–28/30), or Gunnor, mother of Duke Richard II and possibly the single most important figure in Norman politics around 1000, while some high-born women who had started with odds heavily in their favour got quite sidelined in the process. While it might make a difference just how subtly the imbalance of power between a king and a local magnate was acted out in the actual process of the daughter entering the king's bed (the details being carefully observed by everyone concerned), there was fundamentally no social opprobrium attached to such unions, and the fate of the daughter was not settled once and for all by one sinister moment. Indeed, we might be well-advised to avoid a certain 'victimism' too easily applied in the history of women, in pre-modern times as well as in other periods. To have got hold of the wrong end of the stick is never a comfortable situation

to be in, but there is no reason to assume that daughters felt this more keenly or more painfully than sons (who might enter the retinue of the powerful in question), and more importantly, that the individual women concerned took any less active interest in these matters than the men. One of the many rewards of studying medieval polygyny is that it is a way of attributing agency to a lot more women than is normally allowed for.

III

How, then, does the study of medieval polygyny affect the 'master narrative' of the rise of monogamy and the couple? Two observations:

(i)   The traditional focus on Latin material and/or legal texts, strongly dependent as they are on the Roman and patristic tradition and the *uxor/concubina* dichotomy, favour the view that a sharp distinction between marriage and all other forms of cohabitation was not just a concept but also a dominant social practice very early on. In this view, there existed a well-established and ubiquitous model of lay marriage (the *Muntehe* dear to German legal history, or in Roman parlance, the *matrimonium legitimum*), practised by lay societies throughout, and which the Church then went on to challenge with the introduction of the doctrine of marriage by consent during the 11th–12th centuries; hence two models of marriage in conflict, with all sorts of 'concubinage' at the margins (Duby 1981; Esmyol 2001). The praxeological approach suggested here shifts the emphasis somewhat: Even if certain unions were described, in Latin or Latinate language, with the vocabulary of *matrimonium*, it might still be appropriate to view the relationship thus founded not as the one and only (disrupted on the part of the husband by a series of disreputable illicit affairs), but rather as one of several unions, privileged perhaps by specially solemn forms (and perhaps special economic and social interest) but not automatically denoting exclusivity or uniqueness. It is in this sense that I have argued (Rüdiger 2012:84) that 'the married couple' was an outlandish and rare concept in the social practices of Western European lay societies, all milieux, until the 12th or 13th centuries according to region. Early and high medieval Europe was a largely polygynous society and remained so considerably longer that the 'master narrative' normally has it.

(ii)   What changed famously between the 9th and the 13th centuries was not the advent of monogamy but of monogam*ism* – that is, the idea that there ought to be monogamy gained ever more foothold. Lay society had not always cherished the 'lay model of marriage' but came to develop it and to employ it along with the structural change that is known by the heading 'from kin group to lineage'. In fact, privileging one sexual relation over all others is useless or even harmful in an ego-centred kinship system while it is useful if not imperative in a lineage system. So polygyny – which, let it be reiterated, is not the remnant of some shady pagan past but a very contemporary social system (strictly speaking, we cannot even tell whether early pagan European societies were polygynous for lack of evidence) – was challenged by two movements, more or less interrelated, from about the 11th century onwards: on the one hand, structural changes in the élites that made apriori privileging of one certain woman increasingly advisable, and on the other hand, the ideological redress within the reformist Church that resulted, among other things, in the increase of incest legislation and the enforcement of the concept of marriage by consent. The latter has proved far more durable than the former, though at the time, both were equally controversial.

So a sum-up would be: The medieval West adhered to the cross-cultural norm of polygyny up until (according to region) the 11th–13th centuries. Structural change combined with a very old cultural bias in favour of monogamy on the part of the professional intellectuals made for the development of a strong monogamism that became hegemonial by the 13th century. Polygynous behaviour, from then on, was framed in terms of monogamism and detached from most if not all of its former social and semantic 'uses' as outlined here. Western monogamism – including 'love' – has since become a major element of culture and identity, to the point that it informs 20th- and 21st-century debates with a strong apriorism. To conclude this is not in any way to minimise either the impact or the consequences of monogamism, among which contemporary ideas of the equality of the sexes is perhaps not the least one.

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