IMC 2018 proposal – Commemorating – or Not – Queens and Common Women in the Verses of the Carolingian Poet Ermoldus Nigellus (fl.826).

Ermoldus Nigellus was a working poet if not secular clerk at the court of King Pepin of Aquitaine in the first third of the ninth century. Sometime around 827 or 828, he was exiled to Strasbourg; it was a punishment, he tells us in verse, for a crime that he may have been guilty of, but not as guilty as his punishment warranted. Consequently, he wrote three poems in a bid to flatter Pepin and Pepin’s father Louis the Pious, the Frankish emperor, in hopes of release of his exile. His poetry has served historians in the 20th and 21st century as a source of the lively picture he paints of both the secular and sacred activities especially of Louis as a warrior, Christian king – scholars have plumbed his poetry for imagery and discussion of palace artwork, royal processionals, frontier battles, barbarian conversions, and splendid banquets and hunts. One aspect of the poet’s subject left unaddressed, however, are the character of the women who popular his poems: Louis’s two wives and Pepin’s Queen – women who are specifically remembered by name -- and the queen of the evil Moor Murman, a woman left with no name, as in a Classical *damnatio*.

In light of the theme of memory and commemoration, this paper will examine the portrayal of these women in Ermoldus’s poetry, with especial focus on the contrasting characters of Judith (Louis’s queen) and the unnamed queen of Murman. They act in contrast to each other, but both play the role of intermediary to their husbands in terms of policy – Ermoldus appeals to Judith to intercede on his behalf to Louis; Murman’s wife deliberately and adversely affects his policy with the Franks. The paper will examine the domestic roles of these women within royal or noble households as wives and mothers: those qualities Ermoldus commemorates as worthy of admiration, and the inversion of these roles: the wicked woman who seduces her husband out of a positive alliance and into a war. Throughout his poetry, Ermoldus draws many of his allusions and references from Classical, Late Antique, and contemporary sources. These antecedents will be considered in discussion of the women in the poems as this paper explores those scenes and character of which Ermoldus chooses to remind his emperor – the commemorative (Judith and her child; Judith and her musical talent; Judith and her loving, forgiving nature) or to condemn (the unnamed wife’s seduction and ‘wicked ways.’)

As Godman noted, Ermoldus’s verse is under-rated; his verses ably juxtapose his knowledge of Classical and early medieval poetry with private memories, personal relationships, and humour as a means to ingratiate himself back into favour with not only with the personable king Pepin, but also with an imperial majesty by whose grace Nigellus’s return to favour rests. Ermoldus appealed not only to the powerful men who could control his fate, but also acknowledged the influence of the women in the royal households. This paper will thus serve a dual function at the 2018 IMC. First, it will provide a fresh look at obscure, but important, Carolingian source. Second, it will consider themes of Carolingian women and the roles of the wives of ruling monarchs, an area of growing and vibrant scholarship that would benefit from investigation of the earlier medieval period.

Keywords: Medieval wives and mothers, female roles in rulership, household, Carolingian women, exile, memory, reminding, forgiveness, character, identity.