

Marriage in Premodern Imagination (Potsdam/Berlin, 31 Aug-4 Sep 26)

Potsdam / Berlin, Aug 31–Sep 4, 2026

Deadline: May 30, 2026

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Marriage in Premodern Imagination. Gender, Art and Cultural History of an Institution and a Sacrament.

In premodern societies, marriage was central to religious, political and social conflicts and subject to continuous transformation. It was a key institution of social order, regulating property and inheritance through family networks. It structured kinship strategies, consolidated social status, and mediated access to resources.

The event marks the follow-up to the highly productive summer school held in Paris in September 2025. Thanks to the Potsdam Research Center Sanssouci's commitment to join our initiative, we are delighted to bring the summer school across the Rhine – both geographically and confessionally. We therefore invite research proposals relating to premodern marriage, examining its role as a complex junction of theology, law, art and social practice in early modern Europe.

Marriage in Premodern Imagination

In premodern societies, marriage was far more than a private matter - it was central to religious, political, and social conflicts and subject to continuous transformation. Between the Synod of Verona (1184) and the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the Church consolidated its control over marriage by elevating and affirming it as a sacrament. Throughout the post-tridentine era and the Enlightenment, this process entailed not only theological clarification but also the institutionalisation of ecclesiastical jurisdiction over marital disputes, questions of consent, and the regulation of clandestine unions. Since the 16th century, Reformation and the confessionalisation process further transformed concepts of marriage (and with them those of gender): while the Reformers denied marriage's sacramental character and even recognised divorce in (exceptional) cases of adultery or abandonment, the confessional diversification process led to a religious reevaluation of marriage in Protestant territories. Marriage thus became a key marker of confessional identity and moral discipline within emerging territorial churches.

Beyond confessional transformations, marriage remained a central institution of social order, regulating property and inheritance claims within family networks through all social groups. It structured kinship strategies, consolidated social status, and mediated access to all kinds of resources (economic, social, symbolic, and so forth) across generations. Prominently, dynastic marriages were essential tools of premodern policy - as instruments of diplomacy, conflict resolution, and territorial consolidation. Marriage shaped the political map of Ancien Régime Europe. Yet dynastic unions were not merely pragmatic arrangements: they were embedded in a theological framework

that interpreted marriage as part of divine providence and the ordering of Christian society. The language of covenant, sacrament, and divine blessing endowed political alliances with eschatological and moral significance. At every social level - from princely courts to urban patriciates and rural communities - marriage operated at the intersection of norm, practice, and negotiation. Theologically grounded notions of indissolubility, consent, and the procreative purpose of marriage informed legal argumentation, pastoral care, and everyday expectations. Debates over the sacramental character of marriage, the nature of spousal consent, and the limits of ecclesiastical authority reveal how deeply doctrinal reflection shaped social realities. The Summer School is aimed at early-career researchers in the historical & cultural sciences, religious & literary studies, & related disciplines. We therefore invite young scholars to present and discuss their research projects in a cross-disciplinary dialogue.

Objectives and Organisation

The summer school's objective is to shed light on 'premodern marriage' as a vibrant interdisciplinary research topic, to develop new perspectives on the symbolic, cultural, legal, and social dimensions of marriage. We invite young scholars to present and discuss ongoing or planned research projects and to engage in cross-disciplinary dialogue. Moreover, it aims to provide an international platform for young scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds to discuss questions, methods and exchange approaches to premodern "marriage" and its transformations, drawing on confessional traditions, normative frameworks, and social practices. It brings together scholars from France, Germany and beyond to examine developments within Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed traditions while also addressing tensions between theological norms and social realities.

The program combines lectures, workshops, expert discussions, and excursions to castles and museums in and around Potsdam, creating a varied framework for in-depth engagement with current research questions. This thematic and methodological exploration of premodern marriage in literary, art, and cultural history particularly focuses on integrating and cross-fertilising disciplinary approaches. Students from Viadrina and Sorbonne participate as auditors, contributing to the interactive character of the atelier.

Beyond the programmed sections on Representation & Mediation; Contestation & Consolidation; Negotiation & Integration, we would like to reflect on:

- How did theological doctrines of marriage, such as sacramentality, indissolubility, or covenant, shape legal norms and social practices in different confessional contexts?
- In what ways did marriage function as a site of negotiation between ecclesiastical authority, secular power, and local communities?
- How did artistic, visual, or literary representations of marriage reflect and transform theological and legal understanding of the marital bond?
- To what extent did dynastic and political marriages translate theological concepts of order and providence into concrete strategies of governance and alliance?
- How could standards and legal frameworks be adapted to specific local challenges (demography, prosperity, social stability, and so on)?
- How did these transformations reshape household hierarchies and internal relationships, particularly considering gender roles and parental authority?
- What new insights / perspectives for Enlightenment research can be cultivated in this transdisciplinary context?

The conference language is English. French and German can be spoken as working languages (but are not mandatory). Participants will have the opportunity to publish their contributions via hypotheses.org and H-Soz-Kult to the broader relevant research community. Print documentation is also considered and will be made possible through the third-party funding raised for the project.

Application

We welcome proposals from doctoral and post-doctoral researchers with projects in all phases of progress. To register your interest in participating in and/or contributing to the event, please submit your paper title along with a brief abstract (350 words max) and a short CV (or link to your institutional website) to: summerschool_marriage26(at)posteo.eu

Deadline to submit a proposal is May 30 2026.

Notifications to applicants will be sent no later than June 15, 2026.

Contact and Further Information

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We look forward to receiving your proposals and to welcoming you on board for this second trans-disciplinary Franco-German research exchange!

Reference:

ANN: Marriage in Premodern Imagination (Potsdam/Berlin, 31 Aug-4 Sep 26). In: ArtHist.net, Mar 29, 2026 (accessed May 27, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/52101>>.