

Ernst-Dieter Hehl, Gregor VII. und Heinrich IV. in Canossa 1077. »Paenitentia« – »absolutio« – »honor«, Wiesbaden (Harrassowitz Verlag) 2019, 142 p. (Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Studien und Texte, 66), ISBN 978-3-447-11246-8, EUR 35,00.

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Ernst-Dieter Hehl provides a crisp and articulate case for what may be called the Mainz School of Salian Studies' consensus view of the encounter between Pope Gregory VII and King Henry IV at Canossa in 1077¹, following as it does the arguments of Alfons Becker, Stefan Weinfurter, and Ludger Körntgen. This volume therefore represents the latest installment of a long-standing debate among German historians about Canossa, most recently stimulated again in the past decade by the controversial series of publications of Johannes Fried².

Hehl includes Fried among those (including Gerd Althoff) to whom he owes an intellectual debt, and the two do share the common purpose of stripping away the centuries-long accretions of historiographical and political interpretations of Canossa by returning solely to the core primary source documents for a close philological analysis of their original terminology and immediate contexts³. Yet Hehl and Fried reach quite different understandings of these same texts in the final analysis.

Both rightly abandon the historiography popularized in the 19th-century era of Prussian nationalist and *Kulturkampf* propaganda, which saw Canossa as a site of tragic memory when a German king was humiliated by a power-hungry pope who thereby weakened German kingship and inflicted a lasting wound to the unity of the German empire. Fried concluded instead that Canossa was actually the carefully staged result of extensive preparatory negotiations between the king and pope, which produced a formal

¹ Hehl's career: *Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter* at the Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur in Mainz (1978–2009); *Habilitation* in 1992 (with Alfons Becker and Stefan Weinfurter); *außerplanmäßiger Professor* at the Johannes-Gutenberg-Universität Mainz (1998).

² Fried's consideration of the meaning of Canossa in German cultural memory was preceded by Matthias Wemhoff, Christoph Stiegemann (ed.), *Canossa 1077. Erschütterung der Welt. Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur am Anfang der Romanik. Eine Ausstellung im Museum in der Kaiserpfalz, im Erzbischöflichen Diözesanmuseum und in der Städtischen Galerie am Abdinghof zu Paderborn vom 21. Juli– 5. November 2006*, Munich 2006.

³ Hehl has maintained an interest in Canossa since his doctoral studies, as evidenced by his review of Harald Zimmermann's book *Der Canossagang von 1077. Wirkung und Wirklichkeit*, Wiesbaden 1975 (Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften und Literatur, geistes- und sozialwissenschaftliche Klasse, 1975/5) in: *Philosophy and History* 10/1 (1977), p. 126–127.



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peace treaty (whose specific contents, however, remain unknown) releasing the king from his excommunicate status before the two as partners engaged the German bishops and nobles in a long-planned Augsburg assembly to restore political peace and order to the empire. Fried carefully distinguished and separated the ecclesiastical-religious-canon law-liturgical forms of Canossa from its (for him) essential political function, and focused solely on the latter as the ultimate meaning of the event⁴. No struggle between secular and spiritual titans, no epochal »turn« in medieval political or cultural history, and no »disenchantment« of sacral kingship afoot here, only secular diplomacy operated at Canossa. And this attempt to deescalate the crisis was ultimately undermined by Gregory VII's Lombard opponents and Henry IV's Saxon opponents, again a political rather than an ecclesiastical act.

In contrast, Hehl's volume provides an articulate and detailed rejoinder to Fried's thesis, largely following the previously published criticisms of Stefan Weinfurter, Steffen Patzold, and Gerd Althoff. He adds his own philological analysis of the primary source documents closest to the event itself, which leads him to conclude that Canossa was an ecclesiastical-religious-canon law-liturgical ritual consistent with the *ordo* for releasing an excommunicate from anathema (i. e. *paenitentia* and *absolutio*)⁵, yet a ritual enabled only by the king's promise (as evidence of his repentance) that he would respect the *honor* of both the papacy and the German magnates by justly settling his dispute with the latter under papal auspices at Augsburg. For though pope and king had reaffirmed each other's *honor* at Canossa, only by Henry's reaffirmation of the German princes' *honor* in Augsburg by acting with justice could he hope to recover his own *honor* in their eyes. Hence the volume is built around the three medieval concepts of *paenitentia*, *absolutio*, and *honor*.

Relying on Gregory VII's »Register« and the letters of the pope (*epistolae vagantes*) and king as his sole philological filter for interpreting the later (and partisan) narrative accounts of Lampert of Hersfeld, Berthold of Reichenau, Bonizo of Sutri and others, his chapters provide as much a critique of Fried's thesis as of these chronicle sources. Wisely reminding us in his introduction that Bonizo of Sutri had declared Gregory VII's excommunication of Henry IV, and not Canossa, as the event that »shook the world«, Hehl proceeds to consider the nature of the repair work required at Canossa after this papal earthquake.

⁴ Johannes Fried, Der Pakt von Canossa. Schritte zur Wirklichkeit durch Erinnerungsanalyse, in: Wilfried Hartmann, Klaus Herbers (ed.), Die Faszination der Papstgeschichte. Neue Zugänge zum frühen und hohen Mittelalter, Cologne, Weimar, Vienna 2008 (Forschungen zur Kaiser- und Papstgeschichte des Mittelalters. Beihefte zu J. F. Böhmer, Regesta Imperii, 28), p. 133–197; id., Wir sollten nach Canossa gehen und die Legende vergessen, in: [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung](#), 28 February 2009; id., [Canossa. Entlarvung einer Legende. Eine Streitschrift](#), Berlin 2012.

⁵ As found in Burchard of Worm's »Decretum« and in the »Pontificale Romano-Germanicum«.



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In the first chapter he analyzes the supposed »oath« Henry IV took at the insistence of the pope (the text is found in Gregory's letter to the German princes announcing the results of Canossa), and roundly rejects Fried's assertion of a »peace treaty« between the two as embodied in the »oath«, which would enable Henry IV to preside over the anticipated Augsburg assembly. Following Steffen Patzold and Gerd Althoff instead, Hehl asserts that Henry serving as judge in his own case is an erroneous extrapolation not supported by the text itself. Indeed, the king never actually took a formal oath (it was impossible for an excommunicate to do so), but rather instead made promises (using future tense verbs) to do justice (*iusticiam faciam*) at Augsburg according to the pope's ruling and to establish concord (*concordiam faciam*) between himself and the German princes according to the pope's counsel: in essence, the king promised to actively place himself before a legal process regarding his worthiness for the royal office and to accept the decision rendered by the pope and princes.

Surely this wording was carefully negotiated by the intermediaries of pope and king to assure negotiating room that preserved Henry IV's nebulous royal status while keeping him under the judgment of the Augsburg assembly – he was thus not to be a mere passive object of judgment at the assembly but rather an active participant seeking to make satisfaction and affect reconciliation with the German magnates, for whom it was natural to share in the protocols and procedures of any imperial court session. Pope and king-suspended therefore would approach the German princes together and seek peace between the king and his magnates, but not by means of a private and formal peace treaty between Henry and Gregory.

Chapter two provides a close and technical read of Gregory VII's letter to the German princes after Canossa to document in convincing fashion that the protocol followed at Canossa (as mentioned above) followed exactly the canon law requirements for absolution from excommunication. The letter therefore was more than a proffered narrative, argument, justification, or apology by the pope for decisions reached at Canossa (i. e. his preempting the anticipated assembly at Augsburg with the German princes), it was also an integral component of the liturgical ritual of releasing an excommunicate from anathema since such decisions had to be announced publicly. Henry IV's humility at Canossa was therefore no humiliating *deditio* to the pope, but rather a self-humbling act of *paenitentia* as the first step toward *absolutio* and reconciliation as an excommunicate⁶. Thus Gregory VII used ecclesiastical language to describe Henry IV's repentance and absolution, not the political language of *deditio*, and the pope had been persuaded by his counsel and the advocates for Henry IV that the excommunication

⁶ This protocol appears as early as Regino of Prüm's 10th-century »Libri duo de synodalibus causis et disciplinis ecclesiasticis« (large portions of which were included in Burchard of Worms' »Decretum«, including his »ordo reconciliationis«. Bonizo of Sutri appears to be using this ordo when describing Canossa in his »Liber ad amicum«.



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had fulfilled its purpose (*paenitentia*) and thus as a priest he could not deny *absolutio*.

But what was the *satisfactio* performed by the king which gave the pope confidence in his claimed repentance? Chapter three argues that it can be found in the *securitates* given by the king to the pope *before* the excommunication was lifted. Though Fried had bifurcated the spiritual and political aspects of Canossa and emphasized the latter, Hehl sees the two as inextricably bound together as the *absolutio* required the *securitates* promised beforehand and thus a spiritual act of contrition held within it the moral act of promising political assurances. And these assurances were to respect the *honor* of both pope and German princes when seeking peace and reconciliation north of the Alps, which the pope made clear in his letter to the princes.

Indeed, as another sign of the inextricably linked religious and political dimensions of Canossa, in his letter to the German princes opposing the king Gregory VII refers to them as those »defending the Christian religion« in their allegiance to the papacy. In fact, several of the German bishops, Siegfried of Mainz for example, had recently abandoned the king in favor of the pope's cause. Such therefore was the king's promise (not an oath or peace treaty), which thereby *bound* the pope's current settlement with the king to the future political negotiations between the king and the German princes. But for Gregory, all this was essentially a matter of faith and defense of the church, and in this spirit he too was a guarantor of the *honor* of those magnates in Germany defending the Christian faith.

Only later did Henry IV's promise at Canossa enter canon law as an oath: Cardinal Deusdedit's »Liber censuum« added to Gregory's »Register« text *Si me deus adiuvet et haec santa evangelia*, as though the king had sworn on the gospels, and then excised the many German bishops and even Abbot Hugo of Cluny who pledged themselves as guarantors for the king's promise. But the original texts contain no reference to a formal oath by the king, which would have been impossible as an excommunicate could not take a Christian oath and Henry was still excommunicated when he promised the *securitates* via his pledges.

Chapter four offers a complete dismantling of Fried's proposed new chronology of events, based (in Hehl's assessment) on a misuse of Arnulf of Milan's term *foedere pacis* (from Arnulf's »Liber gestorum recentium«) as a formal peace treaty. Hehl reminds the reader that Henry's promises of both doing justice and seeking concord at Augsburg as well as of the *securitates* regarding papal and princely *honor* were prerequisites for *absolutio* and thus offered *before* he was released from excommunication, not after as part of some thoroughly negotiated political treaty wholly apart from ecclesiastical-religious-canon law-liturgical requirements of the *absolutio*.

Chapter five considers the reasons behind the failure of the Canossa formula in affecting reconciliation and peace north of the Alps as the Augsburg assembly was abandoned. Hehl concludes that the opponents of Henry IV in Saxony felt betrayed by the pope's unilateral action after they had openly rebelled, that and they were further disappointed when he did not immediately



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recognize their election of Rudolf of Rheinfelden as their new king in Forchheim on 15 March 1077. Two papal legates attended the Forchheim assembly but were unable to prevent the election, which undid the Canossa formula for reconciliation.

Furthermore, the religious basis for their support of the papacy was also undermined by the pope's slow process of recognizing Rudolf as king, and when he finally did at the Lenten Synod of 1080 (in his second excommunication of Henry IV) the religious component of the transalpine struggle was once again foregrounded by the pope. Hehl rejects Fried's explanation that the German princes and the northern Italian bishops refused to seek peace and as a result were responsible for dismantling the empire. Here one hears the uncomfortable echoes of the *Kulturkampf* interpretation. Instead, Hehl returns to the ecclesiastical-religious-canon law-liturgical sphere for an explanation: those at Forchheim had themselves concluded (after so many previous cases of Henry IV's perfidy) that the king's *securitates* were not offered sincerely, and thus his *paenitentia* was fake, and thus his *absolutio* was ineffectual.

In essence, the king's own untrustworthiness and lack of *honor* persuaded the electors at Forchheim that he was unworthy to be taken back as king. His opposition felt forced to assert their own *honor* on behalf of the empire and the church in the face of their king's deceitfulness, and thus they refused to offer their own *editio* to Henry IV. In his second excommunication of Henry IV three years later one sees that Gregory VII finally affirmed this conclusion.

Chapter six is a recapitulation of the various themes of the first five chapters, complete with reminders of the failures of the Fried thesis on multiple counts. This chapter is an effective summation of the case for interpreting Canossa as a matter of a king's soul addressed within an ecclesiastical-religious-canon law-liturgical world of discourse. This was a world in which that discourse contained within itself what later moderns (along with Fried) would consider a separate political sphere. And in this world Canossa had no diplomatic negotiations for a political alliance, a formal treaty, or an oath; rather, repentance (*paenitentia*) shown by the promise of future *securitates* was followed by *absolutio* complete with a public announcement of the return of a penitent king into the Christian community – all according to the proper canon law protocol from start to finish. Embedded in all this was the essential social provision of protecting the *honor* of king, pope, princes, and the Christian faith. What came after Canossa was a result of the legacy of burned transalpine bridges between king and princes.

Chapter seven concludes the volume by considering what if any historical or cultural »turn« occurred as a result of the Canossa event. Hehl concludes that (a) a king's public renunciation of a pope, and (b) the excommunication of a king by a pope in response, complete with the release of loyalty oaths to that king and a prohibition of that king to govern, were indeed unprecedented developments. As well the intertwining of a conflict between king and pope with a conflict between king and princes of his own empire, resulting in an »alliance« between pope and princes – with all the polemical writing against German kingship



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that went with it – was also surely a turn to a different world. Yet Canossa was not the creator of this emerging new world, but rather a mirror of it. Hehl concludes with the statement: »Canossa war ein Ereignis in einer Welt, die im Wandel begriffen war. Canossa ist nicht die Ursache dieses Wandels, spiegelt ihn aber auf dramatische Weise⁷.«

In historiographical and philological terms, it is intriguing how serious and rigorous scholars (e. g. Fried and those like Hehl who disagree with him) can read the same limited number of surviving texts and see two different narratives embedded in them. One sees a sphere of treaties and politics *separate from* religion, and another sees a sphere of spiritual rituals for excommunication-repentance-absolution in which politics were *intertwined with* religion. One focuses on an ecclesiastical-religious-liturgical interpretation which *absorbs* the political into itself; the other focuses on the secular-political-diplomacy interpretation which *separates* the two spheres. This result is not solely a matter of Canossa, and can be found throughout medieval historiography, even apart from 19th-century political contexts regarding Canossa. A reader of texts is invariably drawn to her/his most immediate way into them, which one most often finds through asking questions of primary interest to oneself. And thus the answers found seem the most satisfying and complete given the questions chosen at the outset.

Could it then be here that *both* an ecclesiastical-religious-canon law-liturgical interpretation and a political interpretation are useful here – since both were *deeply intertwined* with one another at Canossa? We all must admit that the source base for this immense conversation is exceedingly small, a handful of letters, mostly from Gregory VII himself. It would therefore seem reasonable to conclude that Hehl has deftly articulated the discourse of the pope and thus the pope's own experience of Canossa. But does this mean that we have thus excavated the entirety of everyone's experience of Canossa?

Perhaps then Johannes Fried has also excavated what may well have been Henry IV's perspective as a political creature in a desperate, existential crisis. And ultimately, the German princes do not seem to have been fully persuaded by the discourses of either protagonist at Canossa, whether it be about the events or their meaning, as the princes chose their own new path forward with the election of Rudolf of Rheinfelden at Forchheim. This reader finds the present volume quite a persuasive presentation of the Gregorian discourse it assiduously reconstructs. But Fried's pioneering thesis has done much to reconfigure all scholarship on Canossa (and by extension on the Investiture Struggle as a whole).

That one scholar asks questions about the ways in which medieval life was understood in ecclesiastical-religious-canon

⁷ In view of his contribution to this key question, it seems odd that though cited in the bibliography his seminal publication was merely inserted deep in a footnote without comment: Hartmut Hoffmann, *Canossa – eine Wende?*, *Deutsches Archiv* 60 (2010), p. 535–569. Hoffmann rejects the thesis that Canossa was a turn toward the desacralization of kingship and thus a secularization of politics.



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law-liturgical terms while another asks questions about the ways in which medieval life was understood in its social and political-diplomatic terms need not require an either-or answer as we may learn from both. Surely Gregory VII himself understood the two as intentionally combined in his own actions, however naïve or flawed others may see them. In his letter to the German princes he declared: »We absolved him [Henry IV] from the bond of anathema and received him into the grace of communion, but we made no other arrangements with him, except what we thought would be for the safety and honor of you all.« And so the debate about whether these two spheres should be understood as separate or integrated may say more about our own sensibilities than about the participants at Canossa.

There is also an insight missed here regarding the value of ambiguity while negotiations are ongoing – *Handlungsspielraum* as German scholars would call it, which maximizes the space for resolution and restoration, both in matters of public politics as well as of the soul, before final judgment comes. We must therefore be satisfied with the measure of intentional ambiguity found in the primary source documents of Canossa (e. g. those aspects left out in Gregory VII's letters), and not fill in their ambiguities with our own certainties – be they from the *Kulturkampf* experience, from an ecclesiastical-religious-canon law-liturgical conviction, or from a political-diplomatic conviction. Perhaps a close study of what *honor* meant to pope, king, and German magnates would be the next historiographical step, as it appears that an overriding concern by all was the restoration and respect for one's *honor*, which never came back to Henry IV because of his own diminishment of his princes' *honor* through his own actions.

Perhaps in his own mind he thought that he had achieved an expedient settlement with the pope, but he could never achieve the same north of the Alps. Thus, Canossa alone only absolved Henry but did not fully restore his kingship. Yet Henry himself was persuaded that he *had* been fully restored to his kingship and its *honor*. Herein lays a story to be told outside the bounds of this particular monograph.

Hehl has for his part rendered a significant service in documenting the ecclesiastical-religious-canon law-liturgical realities of Canossa and its immediate aftermath in this dense yet easily accessible slim volume. This monograph therefore continues the best of the »MGH Studien und Texte« tradition.



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