

**Gerd Althoff, Rules and Rituals in Medieval Power Games. A German Perspective, Leiden (Brill Academic Publishers) 2019, XII–282 p., 4 ill. (Medieval Law and Its Practice, 29), ISBN 978-90-04-41531-7, EUR 121,00.**

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This collection of 15 articles from the prolific *opus* of Gerd Althoff represents yet another effort to provide Anglophone scholars access to his seminal concept of »Spielregeln« or »rules of the game« in the power politics of the East Frankish-German realm during the Ottonian, Salian, and early Hohenstaufen dynasties (ca. 800–1200). The volume is therefore designed to provide some German-language historiography on the »pre-state society« of medieval Germany. Yet since three of the articles are previously unpublished English-language conference papers (Oxford in 2005, Durham in 2015, and Rome in 2016) and another three of the articles had already been published in English elsewhere, only nine (or 60%) of this volume's articles are peer-reviewed Althoff scholarship newly available in English. And as in all such reprint editions of scholarly articles and conference papers, there is much redundancy, periodic thinly sourced assertions, and an *ex post facto* opportunity to address his critics.

Nonetheless, this volume is a welcome contribution. Gerd Althoff is a major German historian of the early Middle Ages whose generation of scholars developed a new perspective on German political history. As a whole, they overturned long-held certitudes about an easily discerned formation and disintegration of a medieval German *Staat* (nation state), and replaced this *Deutsche Kaiserzeit* historiography with one that »others« medieval German society. The early medieval German kingdom appears instead to be an unfamiliar »pre-state society« with mentalities, beliefs, customs, and institutions that are actually quite foreign to the modern world of nation states and national historiographies. Indeed, medieval German society followed entirely different political rules than today. From an Anglophone (and French) perspective, one could describe this as a German version of the »cultural turn«, in which politics are no longer understood through the lens of legal historians and their constitutional preoccupations but rather through the lens of social and cultural phenomena.

As Althoff himself recognizes in the preface, even this late-20<sup>th</sup>-century historiographical movement has become historical, being now increasingly overshadowed by new turns toward trans-cultural and global historiographies. Yet he rightly sees a common thread between his generation's cultural turn historiography and the new post-cultural-turn historiography: both have replaced *nationalistic* concepts of history by rewriting parts of Germany's



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national history as social and cultural formations. And so for Althoff the origins of the medieval German kingdom are not to be found in constitutions and legal codes, but rather in the cultural code of conduct – the »rules of the game« – for power politics and political communication among its monarchs, aristocracy, and princely churchmen<sup>1</sup>. The articles in this volume therefore serve as a retrospective reiteration of the *Spielregeln* thesis, illustrated with studies of various illustrative passages in medieval German chronicles and letter collections. The volume is ordered with the following themes:

Part I: Rules

Part II: Rituals

Part III: Gregorian Revolution

Part IV: History in Literature

Part I begins with a fulsome reiteration of the *Spielregeln* thesis. Though not as explicit »rules« in the sense of games like chess or a sport, medieval German noble society still maintained and *implicitly* understood a set of cultural norms for power politics and the public communication of that power. These norms were never fixed in written or governmental forms any more than clothing style or good manners or deportment; rather, they were taught and sustained in *oral* communication. Such *Spielregeln* were more important for the maintenance of order in medieval society than in contemporary western society, as the latter contains a comprehensive, written legal basis for political gaming (i. e. constitutions) which are fully sanctioned by the power of the modern nation-state. Medieval German nobles instead held their society together with rules that reinforced trust through rituals of kinship, friendship, and status affirmation (i. e. rank and honor). Such *Spielregeln* were adaptable enough to be used not only to resolve conflicts but also to extend into novel conundrums by a process of collective counsel and judgment. Finally, the historian can discern the *Spielregeln* through rituals, accounts of which

<sup>1</sup> His *Spielregeln* thesis first emerged in the last chapter of: Gerd Althoff, *Verwandte, Freunde und Getreue. Zum politischen Stellenwert der Gruppenbindungen im früheren Mittelalter*, Darmstadt 1990, translated into English by Christopher Carroll: *Family, Friends, and Followers. Political and Social Bonds in Early Medieval Europe*, Cambridge 2004. It was then more fully articulated in: Gerd Althoff, *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter: Kommunikation in Frieden und Fehde*, Darmstadt 1997; 2nd ed. 2014 – a collection of eleven papers and conference papers delivered between 1989–1996. Althoff then explored the historiographical implications of *Spielregeln* in medieval political chronicles in his monograph: *Insenzierte Herrschaft. Geschichtsschreibung und politisches Handeln im Mittelalter*, Darmstadt 2003. He also applied this *Spielregeln* thesis to his analysis of the emperor Otto III in his biography: *Otto III., Darmstadt 1996* (*Gestalten des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*); translated into English by Phyllis G. Jestice: *Otto III*, University Park 2003.



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survive in chronicle sources and letter collections. And though these accounts are literary constructions, Althoff fully embraces them as »reliable evidence« since his focus is on the *cultural norms* themselves instead of the factual veracity of the narrative accounts. Again, this is cultural history, not narrative political history of events<sup>2</sup>.

Part II considers the rules of the game themselves, best expressed in rituals serving as a vehicle for symbolic communication of political acts which maintained or restored public order. Rituals therefore did not so much illustrate already existing reality, but rather they *created* it themselves by their performance. Such public performances at court reinforced and protected the order of rank (e. g. seating at table, order in processions, proximity to those with power – political or sacral). The fusion of noble warrior culture and Christian values were thus expressed in the code of chivalry, filled as it was with ritual acts and gestures of virtue (e. g. *humiliatio*, *clementia*) defined by the unspoken *Spielregeln*.

The articles in Part II catalog the core purposes inherent in the unwritten rules or code of *Spielregeln*: regulation of the use of violence (both royal and noble); regulation of royal mercy and restoration of friendship as a means of preserving noble rank; regulation of conflict resolution through *satisfactio* and *deditio* to restore wounded honor; regulation of secret and/or open *colloquia* through *familiares* who lobbied for peaceful solutions acceptable to all; the evolving regulation of bishops from mediators to arbitrators between monarch and nobility. In essence, the *Spielregeln* provided a means to resolve conflict and preserve rank in order to save the honor of all – both those whose honor had been wounded as well as the peaceful return of those who had wounded. A peaceful equilibrium within the nobility was the ultimate goal of the *Spielregeln*.

Part III provides studies of specific rituals themselves that inscribed the reality of the long-for peace and restoration of rank. These included participation in *convivia* (public feasting together) as moments of bonding and alliance fashioning through ritual gestures and non-verbal signs (from smiles to eye contact) as well as verbal negotiations; the ritual of surrender (*deditio*) with all its theatrical expression of self-accusation and pleading for mercy (e. g. rent clothing, arriving barefoot, sometimes carrying a switch or sword for punishment), prostration; the equally theatrical ritual

<sup>2</sup> This thesis has sparked a controversial international discussion, and many have been the objections to this loosely defined »know it when you see it« anthropological methodology. See for example: Johannes Fried, *Wissenschaft und Phantasie. Das Beispiel der Geschichte*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 263 (1996), p. 291–316; Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual. Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory*, Princeton 2001; Warren Brown, *The Use of Norms in Disputes in Early Medieval Bavaria*, in: *Viator* 30 (1999), p. 15–40; and id., *Violence in Medieval Europe*, Harlow 2011, p. 137–139.



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of pardon after *deditio* with its raising up of the prostrate penitent (with varying degrees of mercy thereafter); rituals of *clementia*, *misericordia*, and *iustitia* preceding the coronation ceremony of a king; the ritual of gift-giving with theatrical expressions of both honor and reciprocity (we find here the origins of wrapped gifts). We are reminded that in all these acts and gestures, »He who dominated the rituals also mastered the scene« (p. 111). Indeed, Althoff rejects the social scientific analyses of Weber, Habermas, Cassirer and others that rituals were »empty«, »dim«, and »irrational« cultural expressions. Rather, he sees elaborate staging and scripting of rituals with specific, rational acts tailored to specific needs of the moment (though again, there are no surviving accounts of such pre-event staging or scripting negotiations behind the scenes). Just how staged or spontaneous a particular ritual act was still remains a debated point though, since its performance unavoidably allowed for personal agency and »upstaging« others.

Such public rituals took on the cast of legally binding events (not unlike a marriage), as an audience had witnessed the ritual and its attendant gestures, words, and acts. No need for written documentation here, though by the 13<sup>th</sup> century such was indeed sought as a memorializing of the ritual (e. g. alliances of *amicitia*). In spite of this development, Althoff still concludes that »Ritual behavior had the same function and created the same obligations as an oath or a written treaty« (p. 141). Such public rituals have the hegemonic power to enable cross-cultural communication, as evidenced by the Polish and Bohemian nobility; yet what seems to have been missed here is that these Slavic communities had recently been Christianized and so had learned cultural cues of Christian Saxons and Bavarians. Other non-Christian Slavic peoples were not invited to participate in such cross-cultural communication in an effort to bind ethnic communities together in alliances and marriages.

Althoff's final article in this section addresses the critical issue of the *ambiguity* of symbolic actions. Though rituals and symbols can and were interpreted differently by observers, there is no evidence anywhere that medieval folk felt this ambiguity was a problem; indeed, ambiguity provided the space necessary to establish a broad enough consensus to enable peace and to restore broken bonds between the powerful. Only when written documents from the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century onward demanded increasing specificity was this interpersonal space of ambiguity compromised and a formal governmental negotiating process entered into the ambiguous space with notions of diplomacy as a conversation of government power.

Part IV takes a major departure from the core theme of the volume, with its focus made clear in the title »Gregorian Revolution«. Here Althoff provides three articles exploring and explaining the radical Gregorian agenda (a preoccupation of German historians since Gerd Tellenbach), from the use of biblical texts as justification for Gregory VII's claims to obedience of all bishops and monarchs,



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to the appearance and contested resilience of said claims in subsequent canon law collections (the *libelli de lite* as the primary conduit), to subsequent papal use of Gregorian claims (again not entirely unchallenged) to justify papal use of violence on behalf of the Church »to pursue their interests« (e. g. to call crusades and to punish recalcitrant kings, schismatics, and heretics). How these articles advance the volume's avowed study of German noble *Spielregeln* remains unclear except to give the volume the needed size for publication.

Equally puzzling, though more rewarding, are the articles in Part V. This concluding set of two essays were originally published in German literary studies. Here we see the by now obvious affinity of Althoff's cultural history approach to chronicle and letter narratives with the narratological and poetics of literary scholars. In the first essay Althoff poses the question, »Do Poets Play with the Rules of Society?« and concludes that indeed they do for dramatic narrative or poetic purposes. Here he considers literary fiction like the »Ruodlieb« and the »Nibelungenlied« as a »broader source base« for historiographical purposes. In the second article he assesses the fictive poem of Duke Ernst and his violent breach of the *Spielregeln* in an attempt to assassinate a rather tyrannical version of the emperor Otto I.

Then Otto himself breaks the rules of the game by publicly repenting of his harshness toward the duke once Ernst returns seeking restoration after years away on a crusading pilgrimage. What is most salient in Althoff's analysis, however, is not an analysis of the literary work itself, but his assertion that – in real history – this peculiar poem had been sponsored by the bishop of Bamberg in 1208 just after the actual assassination there of the Hohenstaufen king Philip (of Swabia) by Count Palatine Otto of Wittelsbach. The poem appears to have been an episcopal attempt to legitimate the regicide of a tyrant. The line between literary fiction and historical reality remains smudgy in this section of the volume.

The inclusion of literary fiction as a source for the historical study of unwritten *Spielregeln* in actual noble society begs the perennial question inherent in Althoff's thesis. How do we know if the chroniclers of noble rituals have played with them in the same fashion as the poets, and for the same type of rhetorical or political effects? Are we in fact observing actual *Spielregeln* at work in rituals, or are we reading a literary representation of them by chroniclers with an ulterior purpose in mind? In this volume and generally in all his individual articles Althoff does not systematically present a set of codified political rules as a coherent subject of historical study, but he has instead presented them as evocative yet incompletely unpacked vignettes of intriguing themes.

To his credit, Althoff acknowledges the unavoidable conditional clause for his entire source analysis methodology: »if the representations of many [chronicle] authors are not totally misleading« (p. 115). He then addresses Johannes Fried's same



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critique of his methodology (one of many disputes between the two historians over the years), by concluding: »After much discussion about this question I here and now contend, without repeating the arguments for the position, that little or nothing speaks for the assumption that the world of descriptions should be fundamentally different from the world of real customs of communication« (p. 115).

But elsewhere he concedes much less confidently, »It may be doubtful that the [chronicle] authors describe the scenes as they happened, although it is not possible to prove this one way or another. Nevertheless, the stories told by medieval authors can be used in our questions about the forms and functions of public communication, because the authors telling these stories had to consider the common rules and customs governing behavior if they wanted their contemporaries to believe them. [...] On the whole, the description had to correspond to the usual practices of communication. These stories can be used for the investigation of these practices, but not for the history of events« (p. 142). So for Althoff's cultural history, the method serves only a formal analysis of political rules with the goal being »to strive to regain the point of view from which medieval contemporaries looked at ritual. This is a necessary first step, after which we should of course add our own evaluation« (p. 142).

Whether historians, Anglophone or otherwise, will be satisfied with relying on chronicle and letter narratives as sources for a narrowly crafted cultural history of the social history of medieval political history will depend on the type of history they prefer to pursue. The *Spielregeln* thesis is a fascinating starting point for navigating parts further removed, yet the fundamental source analysis of the discipline of history is different in kind from analysis of literary fiction and for good reason. Yet the value of the cultural turn as found in the work of Gerd Althoff and his generation of historians has provided a signal service – most especially in German historiography – of separating medieval German history from the awfully destructive legacy of an intense nationalistic modern historiography centered on the German state. For helping provide this specific »German Perspective« we are in his debt and can appreciate the import of this volume in his honor. Still to be done is testing the *Spielregeln* thesis beyond medieval Germany through a comparative study of other European kingdoms and their noble societies and cultures, both before and after the dawn of administrative kingship in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.



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