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Mittelalter – Moyen Âge (500–1500)

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Jürgen Strothmann, Karolingische Staatlichkeit. Das karolingische Frankenreich als Verband der Verbände, Berlin (De Gruyter Oldenbourg) 2019, XII–505 S. (Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, 116), ISBN 978-3-11-064120-2, EUR 119,95.

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Charles West, Sheffield

»The realm (*Reich*) of the Carolingians was an association (*Verband*) of associations, not of individuals.« Readers, and perhaps especially reviewers, are always grateful when authors pithily summarise their books in a single sentence as Jürgen Strothmann does at p. 449, and all the more so when the book in question is dedicated to a topic as vexed and complex as the early medieval state and its German-language historiography.

Strothmann's book can be read as an extended criticism of Theodor Mayer's influential 1930s concept of the *Personenverbandstaat*, the idea that early medieval rulership was fundamentally based on, and exercised through, personal bonds. For Mayer, and the many historians who followed in his wake, the early medieval king was simply the lord with the biggest household, and it would be anachronistic to think of him as ruling a state recognisable to modern eyes. For Strothmann, however, the *Personenverbandstaat* is a »semantic impossibility« (p. 34). A state based only on personal bonds is not a state at all.

Strothmann's counter-proposal, that there certainly was a Carolingian state, is advanced on the basis of two key premises. The first is that it is not necessary to define »the state« along the lines of the bureaucratic state (*Anstaltstaat*) of Wilhelmine Germany, or for that matter Weimar Germany, a definition which he sees as implicitly underpinning Mayer's approach. For Strothmann, if we find a people (*Staatsvolk*) with a territory and transpersonal forms of governance, then there is no reason not to talk of a state. Secondly, and perhaps more radically, Strothmann suggests that contemporaries do not need to acknowledge that power is transpersonal in theory for it to be transpersonal in practice. As it happens, Strothmann thinks (along the lines proposed by Hans-Werner Goetz) that some Franks certainly did have a conception of transpersonal rule, and he briefly explores this with special reference to Hincmar of Reims and Sedulius Scottus. But this demonstration, confined to a preparatory section, is largely incidental to his argument, which is about political function, not political representation. This position reflects Strothmann's conviction that most Frankish thinkers were unable to recognise the reality of their own political system, because they viewed it through a distorting Biblical lens, according to which kingship was modelled on King David.

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For Strothmann, the practical transpersonality (*faktische Transpersonalität*) of Carolingian rule was merely a de facto reflection of the Frankish political system that had emerged in response to the regionalisation of Frankish society, as ancient city-based politics finally faded out. It was based on the co-operation between aristocratic families, including but crucially not only the Carolingian dynasty itself, and the Frankish churches based around bishops. Both these were not simply aggregations of individuals but rather Verbände, coherent and organised groups. Senior clerics such as Alcuin may have seen the king as a ruler directly appointed by and responsible to God alone, and perhaps Louis the Pious came to believe this fiction, but in reality, he co-ruled with secular families and ecclesiastical institutions, who also had a share of power. The king was the *Verbandsvertreter*, the associational representative (p. 404). Because Carolingian rule in practice was collaborative, it did not depend upon bonds with any single individual, hence the importance of collective decision-making. It was therefore transpersonal, and accordingly not only can but should be considered as a state.

Readers not already familiar with the German-language intellectual tradition of conceptualising medieval politics will find this book a bracing read. Strothmann implicitly locates himself in what he describes as the traditional wing of German-language medieval scholarship, aiming to revise German historiographical traditions rather than abandon them (p. 22). While he rejects the notion of the *Personenverbandstaat*, he advocates the use of the concept of *Körperschaft*, on the grounds that despite its problematic Nazi-period associations, it is a useful label for a kind of group which integrates its members through hierarchy rather than through equality, as a kind of blend between *Genossenschaft* and *Herrschaft*. None of these words is easily translated into English, a reminder that the increasing dominance of English as a hegemonic language of international scholarship comes at the cost of flattening important interpretative subtleties only fully available in other languages.

This book was written over twenty years, and like all long-term projects, traces of the layers in which it was built up can be discerned. Strothmann makes frequent reference to research published since 2007, when the first draft was completed, but without always fully integrating it into his argument. For instance, in the introduction he mentions Steffen Patzold's use of *Wissen* in his 2008 book on bishops[1], which showed how knowledge and expectations about a social role conditioned its exercise, but the notion does not play a significant role in Strothmann's book.

Mayke de Jong's re-evaluation of the reign of Louis the Pious and the early medieval relationship between *regnum* and *ecclesia*

1 Steffen Patzold, Episcopus. Wissen über Bischöfe im Frankenreich des späten 8. bis frühen 10. Jahrhunderts, Ostfildern 2008 (Mittelalter-Forschungen, 25).

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is mentioned too, but the emperor is still ticked off for being too religious (e. g. p. 320 and p. 451), and the discussions of *Kirchenstaatlichkeit* – that is, of the church's supposed attempts to develop independent statehood, p. 442 – feel old-fashioned. Parts of the book are somewhat laboriously presented, such as the section on the Merovingian church which is perfectly interesting but does little to advance the overall thesis, while the argument that aristocratic families were coherent associations (*Verbände*), and that »every magnate acted with the authority of his family« (p. 369) is not quite clinched, at least for this reviewer.

Nevertheless, Strothmann has written a bold and innovative book that makes an important contribution to a long-running debate. Those interested in the early medieval state might not agree with the book's dismissal of the evidentiary value of contemporary perceptions of power, or with its arguments about the Carolingian church and aristocratic family structure, but they would be well-advised to read it.

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