

**Generaldirektion Kulturelles Erbe Rheinland-Pfalz, Bernd Schneidmüller (Hg.), Die Kaiser und die Säulen ihrer Macht. Von Karl dem Großen bis Friedrich Barbarossa, Darmstadt (Wbg Theiss) 2020, 560 S., 9 Kt., 368 Abb., ISBN 978-3-8062-4174-7, EUR 48,00.**

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The volume under consideration here is the historical and historiographical accompaniment to the cultural exhibition of the same name presented by the government of the German state of Rheinland-Pfalz from September 2020 through April 2021, largely in the Landesmuseum at Mainz. The intention of the exhibition is to display images and artifacts that represent the complex interplay of a select group of emperors with the »pillars of their power«. These pillars are defined by the organizers of the exhibition and by the editor of this volume, Professor Dr. Bernd Schneidmüller of the University of Heidelberg, as the secular and ecclesiastical princes, bishops, as well as the Jewish communities and citizens of the emerging cities of the German realm. The particular focus of the exhibition and volume is on the Rhineland, which is presented as a key region not only for the emperors discussed in this volume, but also for European history in general.

Following a general introduction by Schneidmüller, which provides an overview of the imperial office in the West from August through the Middle Ages as well as of the »pillars« of imperial rule, the volume is divided into five major sections. The first four of these sections are concerned, respectively, with Charlemagne (768-814, emperor from 800), Henry II (1002-1024, emperor from 1014), Henry IV (1056-1106, emperor from 1084), and Frederick Barbarossa (1152-1190, emperor from 1155). The fifth major section is entitled »The Pillars of Power: The Electors Proceed to Vote«. The volume is rounded out by a series of appendices, which include genealogies of the royal/imperial families, a select bibliography, picture credits, and a register of the objects and images in the exhibition.

The volume, as a whole, is provided with hundreds of beautifully executed full color images, which reflect the overall quality and range of the exhibition. The images are included in each of the numerous articles within each of the sections, as well as at the end of each section in a »catalogue«. These catalogues bring into focus objects and works of art that have a particular connection with the emperor who is the focus of that section. The catalogue for the Charlemagne section, for example, includes images of the so-called Mainz hostage list, Carolingian swords and a winged lance, spurs and stirrups, a belt buckle associated with Duke Tassilo of Bavaria (deposed by Charlemagne in 788), the Peutinger map, and many others. Each of these objects is accompanied by a brief description.



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Each of the four sections focused on a particular emperor is organized in a similar manner, with an introductory essay to set the temporal stage, followed by eight to ten brief essays about that emperor's reign, marriages, relationships with magnates, discussion of the Rhineland as an imperial space, and art and imperial representation. As a whole, these brief articles are intended for a popular audience and do not include a scholarly apparatus, or specific references to sources and scholarship. The fifth section, which is the shortest of the volume, focuses more directly on the »pillars« of imperial rule, with essays on topics such as the participation of princes, lords, and cities in imperial decision making in 13<sup>th</sup>-century Germany, and development of the college of electors in the Golden Bull of 1356.

This volume, with its popular orientation, is not intended for either scholars or students of the western medieval empire. However, the overall focus of the volume on the »pillars of the empire« as well as the assumptions inherent in many of the individual essays reveal a great deal about the current state of the question in German-language scholarship about Carolingian, Ottonian, Salian, and Staufien history, and in some ways, the insularity of the contemporary German scholarly tradition. It is notable, for example, that the select-bibliography is focused almost entirely on German language scholarship, with some very limited exceptions regarding Charlemagne, and imperial relations with England in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The overall decision to emphasize the role of ecclesiastical and secular magnates as pillars of imperial power similarly represents a central but, in my view, highly problematic aspect of the current state of the question in the German-language historiography. The volume editor, Bernd Schneidmüller, makes explicit the prevailing assumptions in the dominant historiographical tradition by asserting that emperors, including the four representative examples chosen for the exhibit, based their rule on the nobility and the church. Without calling into question the substantial political, economic, and social assets of both the secular and ecclesiastical magnates, the views expressed by Schneidmüller, which are replicated throughout the volume, represent a myopic understanding of the nature of royal and imperial power.

Entirely missing from this discussion, for example, is any reference to the vast material resources of the emperors, which included the direct control of thousands of estates and hundreds of thousands of dependents. Similarly missing is a discussion of royal and imperial government, the monopoly by the royal government, particularly under the Carolingians and Ottonians, in appointing individuals to both secular and ecclesiastical offices, and the physical infrastructure of royal rule, including a highly developed public transportation network, royal palaces, and especially royal fortifications.

The overall conception of the volume, as well as the individual essays, also does not distinguish the unique authority of the royal/



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imperial government, during the reigns of Charlemagne and Henry II, to mobilize vast numbers of their subjects to provide military service as well as labor for military projects, such as the construction of fortifications, the maintenance of city walls, and the building of roads and bridges. This authority rested exclusively with the royal and imperial governments, and could not be exercised by any secular or ecclesiastical magnate without the direct authorization and license of the ruler. The break-down in this style of governmental organization, which took place in the context of and as a result of, the civil wars of Henry IV's reign is not addressed. As a result, the very different types of imperial structure, and concomitantly different »pillars of imperial power« during the reign of Frederick Barbarossa are not explored.

In this context it is regrettable that the volume does not include any essays focused on military matters, that is the »hard power« of imperial rule. Moreover, the only essay that deals with the power deriving from the control over land and dependents, namely Thomas Meier's essay in the section of Charlemagne, recapitulates the false narrative of the noble control of the vast majority of the population through the supposed system of *Grundherrsschaft*. The model of *Grundherrsschaft* was invented in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has as little relationship to the reality of the Middle Ages as »feudalism«. Nevertheless, Meier draws on this model to assert that ninety percent of the population in the Carolingian Empire was unfree, and was comprised of the dependent laborers on the estates of the nobility. Given the dearth of statistical data from the early Middle Ages there is no basis for such a claim. Moreover, this model is contradicted by the vast body of royal edicts, mandates, and legislation during the Carolingian period, encompassed within the overall category of capitularies, which are focused largely on the relationship of the ruler with his free subjects. Indeed, one of the glaring lacunae in the modern German-language scholarship dealing with Carolingian and German Empires is the treatment of the ruler's free subjects, who largely have been written out of history as a result of the historiographical tradition of the New Constitutional History, which arose in the aftermath of the First World War. These free people, as small and middling landowners, were a true pillar of imperial power under Charlemagne, Henry II, and Henry IV.

In sum, this is a beautiful volume that is of great value for its splendid array of images and accompanying textual accounts. The dozens of essays in the volume, which are geared for a popular audience, reflect the current *opinio communis* in the German-language scholarship, and are revealing for that reason. However, the lack of attention to alternate viewpoints, and the general lack of attention to non-German language scholarship makes this volume of little use for either scholars or students, and potentially misleading to an unwary public.



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