

BOOK REVIEWS

Rules and Rituals in Medieval Power Games: A German Perspective

By Gerd Althoff. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020. Pp. xii + 282. \$146 (HB). ISBN 978-90-04-40848-7.

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Many medievalists will be familiar with the name of Gerd Althoff and with the concept with which he is inseparably linked, that of the *Spielregeln*—rules of play—that governed elite political interactions in the medieval era. Non-readers of German are unlikely, however, to have had much first-hand exposure to Althoff's celebrated model, since his English-language utterances on the subject have been few and mostly confined to specialized essay collections. The present volume of seventeen essays drawn from Althoff's work between 1999 and 2017 is therefore to be welcomed. Only three have previously appeared in English, with the remainder being either translations from the German or essays based on hitherto unpublished conference papers. Taken together, they offer an excellent introduction to Althoff's view of medieval political negotiations and their public face. The collection is divided into four parts: an introductory section explaining Althoff's model and defending it against critics; a series of essays outlining the rules governing elite political encounters; a section on the rituals through which those encounters were choreographed; and two thematically specific groups of papers inspecting Althoff's themes in relation to the papal Reform movement and its aftermath and through their reflection in German-vernacular literature.

Althoff has developed and refined his account of the character of medieval high politics in numerous publications since the 1980s. The essays published here introduce and illustrate his main ideas as well as responding to the challenges which these have provoked. Challenges have come especially from Philippe Buc, who questioned the reliability of the chronicle accounts of rituals upon which Althoff's work mainly rests. Here (chapter two) Althoff counters that, regardless of whether his chroniclers always gave a fully accurate account of events, they faithfully reflected their readers' expectations about the characteristic lineaments of elite interactions. He seeks (chapter five) to show that, far from being chaotic or endemically violent, medieval societies constructed elaborate systems of conventional behavior aimed at avoiding or delaying violence and, when it occurred, limiting its extent and shielding elite figures from its force. He insists (chapter ten) that medieval political rituals did not display the unthinking, repetitive behaviors associated with supposedly "primitive" cultures but were, on the contrary, highly rational and thus adaptable to different situations.

In their main elements, rituals could be read by those witnessing them with the clarity of a written charter—and were just as binding upon participants. Political rituals reflected the imperatives of elite societies in which rank, status, and honor, and the primacy of their legitimation and protection, governed all public interactions. They were therefore contrived to communicate the participants' assent to agreed, predetermined positions, which were articulated via agreed gestures and symbols. The rivalries, dissent, and coercion that would often have marked preceding, private negotiations between the parties had no place on the public stage. Where they nevertheless did burst forth, this marked a clear breach of the rules of play. Even in more intimate colloquia, respect for rank limited the scope for free discussion or forthright expression of views. Only

limited groups—kin and friends, high-ranking clerics—enjoyed a greater license for frank speech before the powerful, and words might also flow more readily at meetings in a time of heightened tension, such as negotiations in wartime.

Althoff's vision of medieval politics is therefore relatively static. It is not, admittedly, wholly without change. He shows (chapter twelve) that by the twelfth century, the broad, agreed principles which rituals were best suited to express were increasingly supplemented by more detailed commitments and undertakings set down in writing. He assures readers that "it is no accident" that this amended, perhaps weakened, role for ritual followed the papal Reform movement and the conflicts to which it gave rise (166). But while we might imagine how the papacy's radical new claims to intervene in secular affairs, founded on textual, biblical authority, must have created an altered field for the customary rules of play, the connection might have been demonstrated more explicitly than is the case here. Althoff's pieces on papal Reform are placed instead within a self-contained section, with relatively little attempt at linking them to his larger arguments about rules and rituals.

The question of change is linked to a still more fundamental one, concerning the nature of Althoff's medieval world of power as performance. His cast of actors is small, consisting almost entirely of emperors, kings, popes, and high nobles, secular and spiritual, drawn mainly from the German-speaking lands of the Holy Roman Empire (repeatedly referred to, confusingly, simply as "the realm"—an insensitive anglicization of *Reich*?). Althoff reflects that his rules-based model illuminates no medieval society so well as it does high medieval Germany. The reason for this he makes clear from the start: Germany constituted a "pre-state society" (vii), in which, in the absence of mature institutions of government, peace and order depended upon establishing recognized conventions governing the behavior of those born to practise violence. These essays are the work of a historian most at home in the post-Carolingian East Frankia of the tenth and eleventh centuries. Althoff is, after all, the author of a book about the Ottonians subtitled "Royal Lordship without a State" (*Die Ottonen* [2000]). But this subtitle alerts us to something else, evident also in the essays in this volume. Althoff is a historian with a mission: definitively to banish the shadow of the State and its accompanying toxic language of nationalist power-worship from German medievalism. But necessary as such cultural bomb-disposal may be, its accomplishment comes at a price. It leaves us asking just how much politics, even in high medieval Germany, is omitted and obscured by a viewpoint focused only upon the interpersonal transactions of the gilded few. It leaves us wondering, too, whether Althoff's world of high-stakes performativity, in which a summit meeting might be thrown into painfully visible crisis by a spat about seating arrangements, is such an archaic one after all.

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Wirtschaft, Krieg und Seelenheil. Papst Martin V., Kaiser Sigismund und das Handelsverbot gegen die Hussiten in Böhmen

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The measures taken against Hussitism across fifteenth-century Europe increasingly attract the attention of historians. The last two years witnessed the publication of three