MEDIEVAL HISTORY SEMINAR 2009

Seminar at the GHI London, October 8-11, 2009. Co-sponsored by the GHI London and the GHI Washington. Conveners: Michael Borgolte (Humboldt University, Berlin), Frank Rexroth (University of Göttingen), Patrick J. Geary (University of California, Los Angeles), Dame Janet Nelson (King’s College, University of London), Barbara H. Rosenwein (Loyola University, Chicago), Miri Rubin (Queen Mary, University of London), Carola Dietze (GHI Washington), and Jochen Schenk (GHI London). Participants: Jan-Hendryk de Boer (University of Göttingen), Joshua Burson (Yale University), Alison Creber (King’s College, University of London), Daniel Föller (University of Frankfurt on Main), Leanne Good (University of California, Los Angeles), S. Adam Hindin (Harvard University), Astrid Lembke (University of Frankfurt on Main), Jamie McCandless (University of Western Michigan), Katharina Mersch (University of Göttingen), Sandra Müller-Wiesner (University of Zürich), Levi Roach (Cambridge University), Steven Robbie (University of St. Andrews), Tanja Skambraks (University of Mannheim), Gustavs Strenga (Queen Mary, University of London), Immo Warntjes (University of Greifswald).

The sixth meeting of the Medieval History Seminar, organized jointly by the German Historical Institutes in London and Washington, took place in London from October 8 to 11, 2009. Frank Rexroth gave the opening lecture, comparing "Three Doctoral Students"—John of Salisbury, Hermann Heimpel, and Kerstin Seidel—and the way their work was influenced by the discipline of their time. Papers were given by seven German, one Swiss, four American, one Latvian, and three British Ph.D. candidates and recent Ph.D. recipients, and then discussed with mentors Michael Borgolte, Patrick J. Geary, Dame Janet Nelson, Frank Rexroth, Barbara H. Rosenwein, and Miri Rubin. The seminar considered proposals from all areas of medieval studies, and the selected projects covered a broad range of thematic perspectives, methodological approaches, and periods of medieval history. Papers were distributed ahead of time, allowing the eight panels to be fully devoted to discussion. Each panel featured two papers introduced by fellow students acting as commentators rather than by the authors themselves. The intriguing papers opened a window to current research in medieval history in Germany, Great Britain, and North America, and the resulting discussion was constructive and lively.
The opening panel started with a presentation of Immo Wartnjes’s dissertation, “The Munich Computus: Text and Translation: Irish Alternatives to Bede’s Computistics.” Wartnjes stresses the importance of the study of computistical texts not only for historians of science, but also, and especially, for linguists and cultural historians. Using hitherto unknown source material, he argues that the Bede’s scientific work can only be understood as a culminating point on a line of Irish tradition, deconstructing the myth of the Bede as the only outstanding scientist of his age. Daniel Föller’s dissertation “Verfluchtes Denken: Kognitive Strategien in der Runenschriftlichkeit der Wikingerzeit” focuses on the way information was conveyed on rune stones in order to analyze the intellectual basis of Scandinavians’ acculturation to other European cultures in the ninth to eleventh centuries. He stresses that an entire network of semantic significations indicated by different media (content, form of the text, presentation, ornamentation, pictures, topography) and methods of presentation (making it mysterious, strengthening the main idea, or completing it) must be simultaneously considered by the reader in order to understand them correctly. He maintains that the complexity and dynamics of such mental processes allow us to draw conclusions about the cognitive flexibility expressed within them. This flexibility has to be regarded as the basis for the Vikings’ skill at acculturation.

The second panel began with a discussion of Gustavs Strenga’s dissertation, which focuses on the role of elites in memoria of two non-elite guilds—beer carters and carters—in late-medieval Riga. He analyzes the impact that elites had on the remembrance of the two guilds and puts forth the hypothesis that the elite members joined these guilds because they perceived them as guilds of the “poor” that would take good care of the elite’s commemoration. Next, S. Adam Hindin presented his work on the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague (founded in 1391), which has been considered unique in Central European Gothic architecture. He proposes that its atypical appearance is best understood as willful participation in an ongoing architectural and social dialogue about ethnic identity and minority status between the Czech and German populations of Prague, rather than as a conscious effort at church reform.

In the third panel, Jan-Hendryk de Boer presented his work on doctrinal condemnation at universities in the High Middle Ages. He analyzes them not as an “occupational accident,” but as a constructive
part of scholastic scholarship that established the banned texts as speech acts on the edge of the system of scholasticism. By banning books, the scholastic system of thought determined the difference between an author and his work, between right and wrong, and between belief and knowledge. Joshua Burson’s dissertation deals with one of the more “disreputable” topics in the history of Constance—drunken brawls in brothels—and uses them as a key to understanding the relationship between the city and the surrounding countryside.

In the fourth panel, Jamie McCandless analyzed how different groups competed—and justified their competition—for the control of ecclesiastical property in late-medieval Germany. Dominican reformers often relied on secular authorities (the territorial lord or the free city) to complete reform projects, yet those authorities often used reforms as a means of enhancing their own authority against each other. Reforms, therefore, brought many houses under the control of the same secular authorities. McCandless suggests that the mendicant order supported lay and prayer confraternities to offset the loss of power and prestige to the secular authorities, upon whom they had to rely to ensure the success of their reforms.

In the fifth panel, Tanja Skambraks presented her studies on the Kinderbischofsfest exemplified by the English cathedral town Exeter. Using liturgical, pragmatic, and regulatory sources from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, she analyzes the ritual and secular character of the festival, and church authorities’ attempts to regulate violations against the rules. She shows that the Kinderbischofsfest was important in reducing tensions caused by age and hierarchy, and that it can, moreover, be interpreted as a substitute ritual sustained by performative magic. Finally, it had an important function in building community. Katharina Mersch unlocked the value of late-medieval pictorial sources for the religious and social history of women’s convents. Against the grain of common assumptions in the field of gender studies and art history, she shows that Eucharistic piety in women’s convents was specific neither to gender nor certain orders. Instead, it resulted from exchange processes between the women’s convents and diverse outside influences.

In the sixth panel, Jan Hildebrandt analyzed the reception of ancient myths in the early middle ages. He stresses the diversity of approaches towards these pagan narratives, ranging from scholarly explanation and euhemeristic interpretation to allegorical explication
and a method of observation that demonized them. Moreover, he points out that the assessment of ancient myths in medieval commentaries ranged from strong skepticism to integration into the Christian worldview. Astrid Lembke studied the ways in which the protagonist of the Jewish narrative *Ma'aseh Yerushalmi* needed to prove himself in the world with its divine and paternal system of rules. The narrative focused on mastering the law.

In the seventh panel, Alison Creber’s study of imperial models for the seals of Beatrice of Tuscany and Matilda of Tuscany was discussed. The seals’ depictions of Beatrice of Tuscany (c. 1020—76) and Matilda of Tuscany (1046—1115) have been interpreted in terms of typically “feminine” priorities. This gendered approach obscured the seals’ role as *Herrschaftszeichen*, or signs of rule. Against this, Creber argued that Beatrice and Matilda were princely women whose seals expressed their political ambitions. Therefore, their seals made use of different imperial models to claim and secure political legitimacy against the Salian emperors. Next, the panel discussed Sandra Müller-Wiesner’s dissertation, interpreting the common side of the Genevan altar of Konrad Wirz, constructed in 1444. It depicted the “Wonderful Catch” and the “Liberation of St. Peter” as an expression of the struggle for city rule fought between the Bishop of Geneva and the Savoyan (anti-) Pope Felix V.

In the eighth panel, Steven Robbie presented his work on the evolution of the duchies of Burgundy and Alemannia over the period 887 to 940. Early tenth-century aristocrats are routinely characterized as players in a contest to claim the dukedom of Alemannia, even though no such office existed. His paper questions this conventional framing device and suggests that senses of Alemannian identity played no significant role in the actual politics of the region, which were driven by magnates competing for resources and access to royal patronage. Leanne Good investigated the terms used in the Freising charters to describe land during the time of the Carolingian takeover in Bavaria. Although the property descriptions in the charters became increasingly more detailed, they did not represent a developed system of ecclesiastical land administration. Rather, she finds a variety of competing “vocabularies” of land possession, of which the episcopal thrust to establish canonical jurisdiction over proprietary churches stood foremost. Levi Roach discussed hitherto unexplored possibilities for using theories developed by German historians of the Ottonian Empire to understand the performative
aspects of tenth-century English diplomas. He argues that there were notable similarities between the rituals of charter-granting in both kingdoms, but that we must also be careful not to lose sight of the important differences.

The final discussion focused on differences and similarities in medieval study and scholarship in Germany, Great Britain, and the United States. Moreover, the institutional possibilities and limits of the different university systems were compared.

The seventh Medieval History Seminar for German, British, and American doctoral students and recent Ph.D. recipients will take place at the German Historical Institute in Washington in October 2011. Please check the GHI Washington’s website at www.ghi-dc.org for further information.

Carola Dietze (GHI Washington) and Jochen Schenk (GHI London)