MEDIEVAL HISTORY SEMINAR 2011

Seminar at the GHI Washington, October 13-16, 2011. Organized by Miriam Rürup (GHI Washington) and Jochen Schenk (GHI London), with the help of Jan-Hendryk de Boer (University of Göttingen). Conveners: Stuart Airlie (University of Glasgow), Michael Borgolte (Humboldt University Berlin), Frank Rexroth (University of Göttingen), Patrick J. Geary (University of California, Los Angeles), Barbara H. Rosenwein (Loyola University Chicago), Miri Rubin (Queen Mary University of London). Participants: Jason Berg (University of Leeds), Johanna Dale (University of East Anglia, Norwich), Christopher Fletcher (University of Chicago), Thomas Greene (Loyola University Chicago), Angela Ling Huang (University of Copenhagen), Eleanor Janega (University College London), Christopher Kurpiewski (Princeton University), Tillmann Lohse (Humbold University Berlin), Benjamin Pope (Durham University), Ulla Reiss (University of Frankfurt am Main), Ingo Trüter (University of Göttingen), Maximilian Schuh (University of Münster), Kristin Skottki (University of Rostock), Michèle Steiner (University of Fribourg), John Young (Flagler College), and Miriam Weiss (University of Trier).

The seventh meeting of the Medieval History Seminar, which was again jointly organized by the GHI Washington and the GHI London, took place in Washington DC on October 13-16, 2011. Sixteen young medi evalists — six from Germany, four from the United Kingdom, four from the United States, one from Switzerland, and one from Denmark — were invited to join the conveners and organizers to discuss their research in the broadly defined field of Medieval History. In her opening lecture, Barbara Rosenwein outlined the emerging field of a history of emotions of the Middle Ages, which explores and illuminates historical variations in the way emotions are expressed and dealt with. During the middle ages, different emotional communities evolved, ranging from those that left hardly any room for the rhetoric of emotions to those that were characterized by highly emotional and affective ways of acting and talking.

Over the next three days, the participants’ papers, which had been distributed in advance, were discussed two at a time in eight panels. The procedure of each panel was as follows: first, two fellow participants introduced the two papers acting as commentators; then the authors replied briefly; and finally there was a general question and answer session. As in prior years, this procedure ensured that the discussions were intense and thorough.
The opening panel started with a presentation of Ingo Trüter’s paper on the social and cultural capital that men of learning living around 1500 could acquire with a doctoral degree. As an example, he introduced a jurist from Tübingen whose degree served as a prerequisite for social advancement. From this perspective, earning a doctoral degree was regarded as a costly investment that could pay off in the future. The second paper dealt with Christopher Kurpiewski’s dissertation, which analyzed the relationship between the German mystic Christina von Stommeln (1242–1312) and her Dominican confessor as a representation of the Dominicans’ acceptance of the *cura monalium*. Kurpiewski’s attentive examination of the confessor’s letters and treatises revealed these texts as stylized documents of a spiritual friendship and as an apology for *cura*, which he portrayed as integral to the Dominican mission.

The second panel opened with Ulla Reiss’s paper on the evolution of technical language in English account books during the twelfth century. She demonstrated that scribes of the royal English exchequer tentatively employed different notations and signs, which over time developed into something like an “expertise.” By adopting useful solutions and dismissing other efforts, these scribes unintentionally participated in creating a specialized accounting language. While it is often argued that organizations provide the framework within which technical languages can develop, Reiss argues that the situation was reversed in the case of the English exchequer: that is, an organization emerged from the successive development of a technical language in the Pipe Rolls. The second paper by Miriam Weiss presented the results of her close reading of the *Chronica maiora* by Matthew Paris. Comparing the different redactions of the text helps to bring into light Matthew Paris’s multifaceted strategy of “intentional oblivion” as a means of adapting his *Chronica* to changing audiences and circumstances.

The third panel began with Angela Ling Huang’s econo-historical study of the international dimension of cloth production in Hanseatic towns in the fifteenth century. Using material from London custom accounts, she demonstrated how local government agencies and officials enforced high quality standards on imported goods, thus becoming important players in Hanseatic cloth production and trade. Benjamin Pope’s paper then followed the suggestions of German *Landesgeschichte* to re-examine the relationships between townspeople and rural nobility in late medieval Erfurt and Nuremberg.
He argued that the lack of an overall narrative and the varieties on the phenomenal level should be interpreted as results of the sources’ social function as documents of the interaction between urban and rural elites: One group used the other as a means to determine its own identity.

The fourth panel started with Johanna Dale’s comparative study of saints’ feasts and royal coronation dates in England, France, and Germany in the High Middle Ages. Her detailed comparison of the coronation dates showed that they were well chosen to mark the significance of the events and to place them in a liturgical framework. This strategy served to load political events with biblical and historical symbolism. This was followed by a lively discussion of Tillmann Lohse’s finished doctoral dissertation on “the continuity of the foundation” of a collegiate church in Goslar. Lohse argued that the continuity of the foundation from the Middle Ages to present times was disclosed as retrospective abstracting from the many continuities of the foundation on different social, liturgical, and economic levels.

Michèle Steiner launched the fifth panel with her intercultural perspective on the life of Muslim subjects in the Norman kingdom of Sicily. Studying everyday interactions between Muslims and Christians, Steiner noted that Normans were willing to adopt principles of Islamic law in their legal contracts with Muslims. This she regarded as further proof of the Normans’ well-known strategy of stabilizing their power by assimilating to local traditions. John Young’s paper likewise considered everyday contacts between different religious groups: Jews and monks were frequent if unlikely economic partners in the High Middle Ages. But by comparing a vast array of documents from the German empire, Young argued that Jews and monks interacted regularly in negotiations and discussions with each other. Shifting the focus from extraordinary interactions such as religious debates to fairly unremarkable everyday interactions, he was able to present contacts between the two communities as usually normal and peaceful.

Thomas Greene opened the sixth panel with his paper on Haimo of Auxerre’s emotional eschatology, which followed the path opened by Barbara Rosenwein in her opening lecture. In order to reconstruct the standards in the emotional community that the monks of Auxerre had formed, Greene examined Haimo’s emotional eschatology in his comments on the emotions experienced by souls after
death. Christopher Fletcher followed with a presentation on another famous medieval religious author, Hildegard of Bingen, arguing that her letters became the hallmark of a subjective theology. Letters were Hildegard’s foremost means to put her theological convictions into practice to direct and save souls. Writing letters to abbots and abbesses played a crucial role in implementing her reform theology.

The unforeseen cancellation of Jason Berg’s anticipated paper on monsters and monstrous language in the Cosmographia of Aethicus Ister left plenty of time to discuss Kristin Skottki’s finished dissertation in the seventh panel. Using an intercultural perspective, she studied Latin First Crusade chronicles as historic sources and literary products. These chronicles, she maintained, should no longer be read as truthful mirrors of reality, but instead as multilayered representations of possible world views and as drafts of the role of the self and the other that seek the readers’ seal of approval.

On the last day of the conference, Maximilian Schuh opened the eighth panel with an overview of the results of his recently finished dissertation on fifteenth century humanism at the University of Ingolstadt. Turning from well-known humanists like Konrad Celtis to the more mundane ways in which the new learning evolved in the faculty of arts, Schuh was able to show how the professors and their students felt their way in order to merge new methods and insights with older traditions. Then, in the final paper, Eleanor Janega highlighted the spatial dimensions of Jan Milic’s sermons, arguing that the preacher’s calls for reform grew out of the changing urban culture in Prague during the reign of Charles IV.

The conveners used the final discussion to pass on some practical and theoretical advice on writing comprehensive and thorough dissertations. However, it was not easy to harmonize idealistic and pragmatic claims. Whereas Michael Borgolte encouraged the young medievalists to open their gaze to non-Latin cultures, Patrick J. Geary reflected on the different cultural importance of the Middle Ages to European and American scholars: Identities of modern-day Europeans have remained anchored in Europe’s medieval heritage in one way or another; Americans, on the other hand, perceive the Middle Ages as a foreign culture, comparable to that of ancient China or ancient India. There was general agreement among the participants that events like the Medieval History Seminar and institutions like the German Historical Institutes, with their ability to assemble young and senior medievalists from different countries and backgrounds,
offer researchers important and much needed opportunities to compare their methods and approaches with colleagues from different scientific communities — and thereby to acquire the competence to identify shortcomings in their own scholarly traditions.

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