Contemporary accounts of the meeting of Pope Gregory VII and King Henry IV of Germany at Canossa in January 1077 have always had a ‘mythical’ quality: a penitent king humiliatingly forced to stand in the snow for three days to grovel before the pope in order to be restored both to Christian communion and the kingship of the German Reich. Such accounts have challenged historians ever since to interpret the nature of the meeting, its significance, and whether it marked a fundamental transformation in papal–imperial relations and, indeed, in European history more broadly. Yet, as Johannes Fried argues in this new book, whose title could be translated as ‘exposing’ or even ‘de-bunking a legend’, it is time to dismantle not merely the mythical image but also the historical interpretations of what led to and, in fact, happened at Canossa once and for all. Building upon a distinguished body of previous work on cultural memory, Fried looks to apply his methodological approach ‘der Memorik’ so as better to understand what occurred between Gregory VII and Henry IV between 1076 and 1077, the nature of the meeting at Canossa, and also why the ‘Canossagang’ and ‘Canossa als Wende’ myths have been, and continue to be (as he contends), perpetuated in modern historiography as well as popular culture.

Building upon his far from universally accepted 2008 article, ‘Der Pakt von Canossa’, in which he argued that Canossa marked a peace alliance between the pope and king, Fried here extends his discussion over six chapters. In the introduction, Fried assesses what he terms ‘the dubious success story of the legend of Canossa’, and sets out his ambition to strip away the erroneous layers of historical myth which have led historians consistently to misunderstand what took place. In chapter 1, he briefly outlines the methodological considerations developed in earlier work and addresses how historical research needs to circumvent false memory with a brief analysis of the key sources we possess for Canossa and their problems. In chapter 2, Fried ques-

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tions past readings of the sources, especially historians’ neglect of the significance of the terms ‘pactum’ and ‘pacis federa’ in the texts and what he sees as too great a reliance on post-1080 sources. These have highlighted the issue of the non-restoration of Henry IV to the German kingship and have led historians wrongly to focus on the status of Henry’s kingship in the period 1077 to 1080. Here Fried also addresses issues of dating, the transmission of reports and, indeed, the travel itineraries of the pope and the king, which he argues present a very different sort of relationship. A very brief chapter 3 turns to the issue of whether and how far we can trust the contemporary historians: Lampert of Hersfeld, Bruno of Merseburg, and Berthold of Reichenau.

In chapter 4, Fried assesses what he terms ‘deformations in cultural memory’ by examining how the perspectives and agendas of humanist and early modern authors reading the contemporary accounts contributed to a ‘Canossa complex’. In chapter 5, Fried outlines his reconstruction of the events by examining the preparations for the meeting between the pope and the king at Canossa, the alliance concluded there, the nature of its content, and the way in which this guaranteed mutual honour for both parties. In light of this, a brief chapter 6 then reassesses the relationship of Gregory and Henry following the reconciliation until the second excommunication of the king at the Lenten synod of 1080. In the conclusion, Fried reaffirms his argument and underlines the paramount need of historical research to recognize and circumvent the ‘deformative power of memory’ that has led to an erroneous interpretation of Canossa both in the historiography and in popular culture. The volume includes, as an appendix, a chronology from 1076 of Henry’s ‘progress’ to Canossa in support of Fried’s position.

This is a difficult work to characterize, given that it combines the methodology of ‘Memorik’ with extended analysis of the proof for Fried’s contention that Canossa was a peace alliance between the pope and the king. At the same time, although Fried indicated that it was for others to judge whether or not the book was a ‘Streitschrift’ (p. 7), the tone is highly polemical and Fried, in fact, dismisses almost all previous historiographical interpretations of Canossa as misguided or incorrect. There is considerable refutation of the critics of his ‘Der Pakt’ article, one of whom—a highly respected German historian—is rather regrettably referred to as the DAMALS-Autor (after the
journal in which this historian’s review was published). The uneasy marriage of the two seemingly principal ambitions of the book, the reinterpretation of the events and the refutation of past historians and critics, the latter of which one senses might have been curtailed, make the monograph a far from easy read.

That said, Fried’s overall argument is relatively simple to summarize and is perhaps not quite as revolutionary as he seems to believe. There are essentially five key elements to his thesis. In the first place, the accounts of Lampert, Bruno, Berthold, and Bonizo cannot be trusted at face value and must be subjected to critical remembrance theory and also be more rigorously counterpoised by Gregory’s letter to the princes (*Registrum Gregorii VII.*, 4.12), the Königsberg Anonymous, and Arnulf of Milan’s account. Second, when an appropriate critical assessment of the sources is undertaken, Fried contends that we have an entirely new understanding, namely, that Canossa was far from being about the absolution of the king or the exaltation of the pope as judge of the German kingship, but rather about cementing a peace treaty and alliance between the two men. Third, as a consequence, Canossa was neither a fundamental turning point nor a key moment in the Investiture contest writ large. Fourth, the peace alliance failed not because of Henry or Gregory, but rather because of the precipitous act of the princes to elect Rudolf of Rheinfelden at Forchheim in March 1077, something which Gregory did not explicitly condemn. Fried concludes that only critical remembrance analysis can work out the full extent of the modulations and deformations of the events in the memories of the witnesses (p. 146).

There are probably few historians who would dispute the need for careful, critical reading of the highly partisan sources of this period. Yet one can hardly avoid concluding that the issue of the kingship was in Gregory’s mind, even if this only crystallized after Forchheim. The characterizations of the factual errors and omissions of Lampert and Bruno as ‘errors of memory’ (pp. 73, 76) seem a bit of a stretch; after all, both writers had clearly defined agendas for their characterizations of Canossa, which is in many ways the more interesting question, at least for this reviewer. At the same time, dates and rates of travel, which are key elements of Fried’s chain of evidence, are often unreliable.

The key contention in the end is the question of what precipitated the meeting: the falling away of German support for Henry after the
Lenten synod of 1076 and the force exerted by the princes at Tribur, as many historians would favour, albeit with variations, or whether there was a long-planned meeting to make a formal peace alliance in 1077, as Fried contends? It seems unlikely that such an event would go so wholly unnoticed in the sources. Fried is, of course, correct to underline that that this was scarcely a spontaneous penitential act on Henry’s part, but his reading of ‘pax’ is perhaps too narrow. Whilst the list of signatories to the ‘iurisiusurandum’ to which Henry committed himself before he and his German companions received the kiss of peace clearly underlines the collective (and hence clearly also well-planned) nature of the meeting, the ‘pax’ signified a peace and concord between the Church and the kingdom that Gregory had long sought even before the events of 1076 (Registrum Gregorii VII., 4.12), and wished to better secure by travelling to Germany from Canossa. Moreover, there has been considerable debate and revisionist work on the nature of the meeting, all of which has more nuance than Fried perhaps allows. For example, in an article ‘Contextualizing Canossa: Excommunication, Penance, Surrender, Reconciliation’ published posthumously in 2006 (seemingly unknown to Fried), Timothy Reuter argued that one would do well to think of Canossa in terms of ‘deditio’, a ritual public surrender of a rebel to a lord, in which the very public surrender was just an integral part of a less public compromise; something originally explored in different contexts by Gerd Althoff and also touched upon by H. E. J. Cowdrey. Canossa, in this view, was a ‘deal’, a way out of present difficulties for both parties. But as ritual, Canossa was inherently ambiguous because the king ‘submitted’ both as a penitent and as a rebel, and we find it hard to tell the difference because contemporaries also did.2

In the end, Canossa: Entlarvung einer Legende is unlikely to be the last word on Canossa or to find universal acceptance. Yet Fried’s arguments will challenge medieval historians to think further about what led to the events that transpired in Tuscany in January 1077.

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