

**German Historical Institute London Bulletin**

Bd. 33

2011

Nr. 1

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OLIVER AUGE, *Handlungsspielräume fürstlicher Politik im Mittelalter: Der südliche Ostseeraum von der Mitte des 12. Jahrhunderts bis in die frühe Reformationszeit*, *Mittelalter-Forschungen*, 28 (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2009), xiv + 543 pp. ISBN 978 3 7995 4279 1. €79.00

In recent years, the nobility of the Later Middle Ages has become a popular subject for innovative research projects by German medieval historians. The source base, especially for the princely families of this period, is remarkably rich and varied, enabling scholars to explore a broad range of topics that are difficult, if not impossible, to examine for the nobility of the preceding centuries. Dynastic structures, noble court culture, and the development of territorial lordship are only a few of the themes that have been studied intensively and creatively in new work. Some of the best of this current research has been published in the series *Mittelalter-Forschungen*, and Oliver Auge's book is another welcome addition to this list. Auge completed this *Habilitation* at Greifswald under the guidance of Karl-Heinz Spieß, whose own published *Habilitation – Familie und Verwandtschaft im deutschen Hochadel des Spätmittelalters* (1993) – remains one of the most important and influential works in the field. Auge, in this book, has provided historians with one of the most ambitious studies to date of the late medieval nobility.

The focus of Auge's work is the southern Baltic region, specifically the area that today comprises north-eastern Germany and north-western Poland, in the period from the late twelfth to the early sixteenth centuries. The medieval polities that form the foundation for his study are the princely lordships of Mecklenburg, Werle, Pomerania, and Rügen. As Auge explains, the history of these polities during the Later Middle Ages is unusually complex because of their geographical location. The Holy Roman Empire, Poland, Denmark, the Teutonic Order, and the Hanseatic League all had overlapping claims and interests that significantly impacted the political strategies of individual lords in these territories. Moreover, these were lordships that lay along the frontier between German-speaking, Scandinavian-speaking, and Slavic-speaking peoples, making the region a nexus point for cross-cultural interactions. By exploring more than three hundred years of this region's complicated history, Auge has chosen an immensely challenging topic that has rarely been examined critically in the past.

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What makes Auge's accomplishment in this book even more impressive is the fact that he addresses a wide range of themes concerning noble lordship. For him, *die Handlungsspielräume fürstlicher Politik* (the spheres of action of princely politics) are best analysed through the lens of five main categories or coordinates: (1) the prince's interactions with other powers both inside and outside of his territories; (2) the prince's financial interests; (3) the prince's dynastic and familial relationships; (4) the prince's place in the constitutional framework of lord-vassal relations; and (5) the prince's cultivation of his princely identity and status. Each of these categories has been the basis for book-length studies of individual noble families or lordships in the past, yet Auge analyses all of them in detail in this work. As he explains, these five components of noble lordship must be viewed together. They all provided princes with a variety of opportunities for consolidating and expanding their authority—while simultaneously placing certain limits on the political strategies that princes were able to pursue. In trying to examine so many different pieces of the puzzle of medieval lordship across multiple centuries and several different princely territories in a complex corner of Europe, Auge has given himself an extraordinarily difficult task. That he is largely successful is a testament to his skills as a historian.

Auge's argument unfolds across a brief introduction, five chapters of widely varying lengths, and a short conclusion. As he rightly notes in his excellent introduction, scholars have analysed noble lordship effectively as a cultural phenomenon in recent years, but the political dimensions of lordship have rarely received close scrutiny. His goal of adding a 'political return' to the 'cultural turn' (p. 6) in the study of noble lordship thus provides him with the opportunity to explore a broad range of issues that have been overlooked in most current scholarship. Auge's approach to the political aspects of princely power and authority is a cautious one, however. According to him, each generation of each noble family had to devise its own strategies for successfully maintaining its position and influence. As a result, very little of princely political action involved grand plans based on long-term goals. Instead, princes tended to react to events and circumstances as they arose, and their ability to act in particular situations was impacted—both positively and negatively—by the five components that defined an individual lord's sphere of political action.

Over the course of the five main chapters of the book, Auge investigates each of the different factors that he sees as central to princely politics. In chapter 1, which is more than 150 pages in length, he examines the interactions that the princes of the southern Baltic had with other regional powers both inside and outside of their territories. Beginning with Duke Henry the Lion of Saxony and with the increased interest that both Saxon lords and Danish kings took in this region during the later twelfth century, he explores the changing dynamics of diplomatic interactions in the southern Baltic until the early sixteenth century. A principal component of his methodology in this chapter is the analysis of the abundant source material that details the creation of coalitions and bonds of friendship (*amicitia*) amongst the princes of the region. Within this context, Auge is especially interested in moments when the fluid nature of diplomatic relationships becomes evident—for example, the period following the extinction of a princely dynasty. This first chapter also examines the relationships between princes and the other lords in their territories, especially local nobilities, church institutions, and towns. In its scope, this is therefore a sweeping chapter that offers an extraordinarily rich glimpse into the political landscape of the southern Baltic during the Later Middle Ages.

Each of the subsequent four chapters is significantly shorter than the first. Chapter 2, which is only 30 pages long, focuses on princely finances. The vast majority of the evidence for this chapter is drawn from the years after 1300 because the surviving source material for the money economy of this region is scant for the preceding period. Here, Auge again emphasizes the opportunities and limitations that defined princes' spheres of action. Lords were routinely devising new strategies for consolidating their control over fiscal resources within their lands, yet they were simultaneously facing increased financial pressures that forced many of them to mortgage ever more rights and properties. In chapter 3, family and dynasty move to the forefront of the book's argument. In keeping with current trends within German academic circles, Auge stresses the ways in which bonds of kinship, friendship, and lordship all overlapped and worked together to shape political networks within medieval society. He then proceeds to examine the roles that kin played in the territorial strategies of individual lords, with an analysis of marriage patterns forming the centrepiece of the chapter.

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The theme of chapter 4 is *Verfassungsgeschichte*, specifically, the nature and significance of lord–vassal relations in the southern Baltic. Auge is especially interested in exploring the ways in which the princes of this region became members of the Estate of Imperial Princes (*Reichsfürstenstand*) during the Later Middle Ages. After this, he considers how membership in this Estate both helped and hindered the ability of these lords to pursue their own political and territorial strategies. Finally, in chapter 5, Auge turns to the symbolic dimensions of princely lordship and considers the various strategies that princes employed to protect and enhance their status within the noble hierarchy. The argument of this chapter includes many aspects that are typical of late medieval noble culture more generally, such as princely generosity and Christian conceptions of knighthood, but Auge does suggest that there are some features unique to the princes of the southern Baltic region. The book closes with a brief conclusion, in which Auge summarizes the arguments of the individual chapters and then attempts a short synthesis.

Given the complexity and the comprehensive nature of the claims about princely lordship that Auge is trying to make here, it is only to be expected that the organization and structure of the book limit the effectiveness of his argument to a certain extent. Choosing to organize his book thematically around the five key factors shaping the spheres of action of southern Baltic princes was logical because this approach highlights the multiple facets of princely lordship. However, this approach also leads to a fragmented narrative. Reading this book from start to finish does not provide a straightforward story about princely politics in this region during the Later Middle Ages. The reader comes away with a sense of the complexity, but not with a clear narrative. Furthermore, because of the scope of this project, Auge cannot be systematic in his treatment of all five factors across all of the different princely lordships he is discussing. Instead, he makes general statements at the opening of each section of each chapter and then supports his claims with two or three brief case studies of individual princes. Frequently, these examples are drawn from different centuries and different territories, making it difficult for the reader to account for change over time or for variations across all four of the princely lordships he is considering. Some princes, such as Duke Albrecht II of Mecklenburg (d. 1379) and Duke Erich of Pomerania (d. 1459), receive significantly more

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attention than other princes, making the book very uneven in its analysis.

The brief synthesis Auge gives his readers in the conclusion fills in a few of the gaps in his narrative, but his argument would have been more successful if he had lengthened this section. As it stands, the broad scope of the book is simultaneously its greatest weakness and its greatest strength. This is not an easy book to read, and given the complexity of his subject matter, Auge could have done more to convey his main points clearly and convincingly. Nevertheless, Auge's vision of politics and lordship here is an expansive one that brings us much closer than most books do to understanding the multiplicity of factors that influenced the ability of medieval princes to exercise their power and authority effectively.

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