GERD ALTHOFF, Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter: Kommunikation in Frieden und Fehde (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 1997), ix + 360 pp. ISBN 3 89678 038 7. DM 68.00

Seven of the eleven articles plus introduction in this volume have previously been published elsewhere, six of them having appeared in the journal Frühmittelalterliche Studien between 1989 and 1996. What Gerd Althoff has to say in this collection is, therefore, hardly unknown. Nevertheless, the volume is an extremely important one. Until comparatively recently, medieval historians knew that they had to apply a great deal of technical knowledge in reconstructing the remote past, avoiding anachronism and respecting the alterity (to use a more recently fashionable word) of the Middle Ages. But in spite of this training they routinely assumed the existence of a state even when its existence was hardly self-evident.

They also routinely assumed that the practice of politics was, at least in its deepest substrata, timeless. Policy, rationality, and calculation could be presupposed for the tenth century as much as for the twentieth. They could be presupposed, moreover, in much the same way: medieval political leaders were viewed as first forming and then implementing (or failing to implement) policy. The considerable difficulties which such a view of political activity presents—modern historians might here recall the ‘high-politics-as-game’ school of British political historians, or the tensions in a rationalistic view of politics revealed in the debates between intentionalists and functionalists—were overlooked.

Policies were to be inferred, moreover, primarily from the study of objective data, such as could be found in the letters and charters issued in the names of rulers and prelates, and in what we know about their landholdings and buildings. What contemporary observers have to tell us about the major actors on the political stage—Widukind for Otto I, William of Poitiers for William the Conqueror, for example—was undoubtedly useful in supplying a chronological framework which it might have been difficult to reconstruct from other data, and in offering occasional touches of anecdotal colour which could be treated as corroborative detail, intended to give artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative. But the working assumption of earlier medievalists was that such writers, even when well-informed about the surface flow of
events, were not privy to the real intentions of the figures whose sto-
ries they narrated. Historians who allowed themselves to be distract-
ed by the rhetoric and anecdotalism of medieval authors would find
themselves in the same position as a modern historian trying to write
political history from the gossip of journalists rather than the ‘gold-
standard truth’ of archives and private papers.

Althoff’s work is a significant contribution to the current attempts
by medieval historians to reframe the conceptual apparatus with
which they approach the study of medieval political activity. He is by
no means alone in his interest both in medieval historiography and
in the practices and rules of medieval political interaction. Among
German historians, one might mention the work of Klaus Schreiner,
recently retired from Bielefeld, and there are a number of Anglolexic
historians currently working in this area: Patrick Geary, Geoffrey
Koziol, and Phillipp Buc in the USA, Janet Nelson, Stuart Airlie, and
the present writer in the UK, not to mention the late Karl Leyser, a
pioneer here as in so much else. But Althoff’s writings are among
those most frequently cited by scholars working in this area, and they
do indeed offer an unusually coherent and focused view of political
interaction in the period between the ninth and thirteenth centuries.
For those not yet familiar with them, it will be helpful to give a brief
account of them as they are laid out in the volume, before turning
more generally to the methodological progress they represent and
the methodological problems they raise.

After setting out his stall in a thoughtful introduction, Althoff
divides the work into two sections. The first, on conflict and conflict
regulation, consists of five articles. The first of these is also the oldest:
a groundbreaking study of conflict and conflict resolution in the
Ottonian and early Salian era (‘Königsherrschaft und Konfliktbe-
wältigung im 10. und 11. Jahrhundert’). Althoff here examines the
apparently rather strange fact that those who rebelled against rulers
in this period rarely paid for it with their lives (unless they were
unlucky in battle). Not only did they, it seems, feel justified in ‘re-
belling’, but they behaved as if they were conducting a feud with the
king (and he in turn with them). Such conflicts were generally
resolved by a seemingly unconditional surrender to the ruler, but this
would normally be followed by release from captivity after some
times quite a short period of imprisonment, and not infrequently the
‘rebel’ was restored to office. Althoff concluded that the sense of right
and wrong on both sides was inconsistent with a view of kings as set above and quite apart from their ‘subjects’.

This is followed by two case studies. The first investigates the feud between Count Hugh of Tübingen and Welf VI in the 1150s and 1160s (‘Konfliktverhalten und Rechtsbewusstsein. Die Welfen im 12. Jahrhundert’). Like the conflicts in the first article, this ended with a formal submission by Hugh, mediated and supported, remarkably enough, by Frederick Barbarossa himself; equally, the Welfs’ own conflicts with Conrad III were conducted more through feud and feud-resolution than through formal judgements by the royal court (there were some, but they were ineffectual). The second, previously unpublished, reconstructs the course of the fatal conflict between Rudolf of Habsburg and King Ottokar of Bohemia between 1273 and 1276. Here too we can perceive a much more ‘private’ kind of conflict than the one which has been conventionally depicted: Rudolf did not act like a ruler dealing with a ‘treasonable’ subject, and Ottokar’s death was not a planned outcome of the conflict.

The following chapter (which has now appeared in its originally intended place of publication, the Festschrift for Karl Ferdinand Werner) is a study of the practice of _deditio_—(apparently) unconditional surrender—in the course of political conflict, and takes the insights of the opening chapter further. Althoff shows how this form of conflict resolution was open to certain groups (notably high aristocrats): unconditional surrender in public, but normally with a clear understanding that the punishment would be nominal. You could only do it once, however; renewed rebellion following a public _deditio_ would rarely if ever be treated with the same clemency. In order to do it, moreover, you needed friends and intermediaries, who would clear the arrangements in advance and act as guarantors that they would be observed. To surrender without these precautions was a risky act indeed.

What has emerged from these chapters is a view of medieval politics which does not see rulers as occupying a qualitatively different role from that of their magnates. Conrad II treated Ernst of Suabia as a rebel, especially after he had gone back on the agreement implied in a _deditio_ in 1027, but nevertheless even the final phase of the conflict, in which Ernst was killed, was conducted much like the aristocratic feud between Hugh of Tübingen and Welf VI; Rudolf of Habsburg’s behaviour towards Ottokar was much the same. The
implication of all this is that the ruler and at least the greater mag - 
nates formed a Führungskollektiv, and it is this implication which is 
explored in the final chapter of the first section ('Staatsdiener oder 
Häupter des Staates: Fürstenverantwortung zwischen Reichsin - 
teresse und Eigennütz'), which shows (using among other things the 
interesting history of how the princes forced Henry V to make peace 
with the papacy in 1120-22) how this Führungskollektiv operated as a 
collective, with a degree of responsibility for the common weal.

What also emerges from this section of Althoff’s book is the 
importance of rules and norms of behaviour for the conduct and res - 
olution of conflict, and it is these rules and norms which he explores 
in the second section. The chapter on the different kinds of colloquy 
in medieval politics ('Colloquium familiare—colloquium secretum— 
colloquium publicum: Beratung im politischen Leben des früheren 
Mittelalters'), deals with the dangers of publicly saying what you 
meant. In a world sensitive to questions of honour and injury, any 
public statement, unless carefully prepared and orchestrated, risked 
generating offence and feud. It was, nevertheless, often essential to 
be able to speak more clearly; the medieval equivalent of ‘Chatham 
House rules’ was to declare a meeting as ‘secret’ or ‘familiar’. Here 
things could be said more openly and frankly, and the staged and 
stagey proceedings of public assemblies could be prepared for.

In the following chapter ('Verwandtschaft, Freundschaft, Klientel. 
Der schwierige Weg zum Ohr des Herrschers') Althoff takes up one 
of the themes of an important book, Verwandte, Freunde und Getreue: 
Zum Stellenwert der Gruppenverbindungen im früheren Mittelalter 
, which he published in 1990. Rulers controlled access to their pres - 
ence; favoured relatives (including queens), ‘friends’ (who might, but 
need not, be blood kin of the ruler) and followers could, provided 
they remained aware of their limitations, dispose over this deliber - 
ately restricted time, much as lobbyists in today’s polities depend on 
private and informal forms of access. The next three chapters are the 
core of this section, examining as they do some of the key forms of 
political behaviour in the period under review. ³ The first ('Huld. 
Überlegungen zu einem Zentralbegriff der mittelalterlichen Herr - 

¹To these studies one should add two others by Althoff: ‘Genugtuung ( satis - 
factio). Zur Eigenart gütlicher Konfliktbeilegung im Mittelalter’, in Joachim 
Heinzle (ed.), Modernes Mittelalter (Frankfurt, 1994), pp. 247-65 and
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`schaftordnung') examines the nature of ‘favour’ or ‘grace’ as prac-
tised by rulers and others, which gives us a very different world from
the modern one in which all who have not broken the law are equal
before the state. *Huld* could be bestowed and withdrawn, and the
ruler was not accountable in doing so (though to withdraw it might
have the consequence of provoking an aristocratic feud directed
against him). The second (*Demonstration und Inszenierung. Spiel-
regeln der Kommunikation in mittelalterlicher Öffentlichkeit*) sets
out in full a paradigm which Althoff makes frequent use of in other
chapters: the importance in the public conduct of medieval politics of
careful stage-management, even, and indeed especially, of the appar-
etly spontaneous—not least for the reasons given in his study of the
differences between public and private colloquy. He uses, among
others, the examples of Gregory VII and Henry IV at Canossa to
show how even extremely dramatic public displays might be orches-
trated by the participants and their helpers in advance. The third,
(*Empörung, Tränen, Zerknirschung: Emotionen in der öffentlichen
Kommunikation des Mittelalters*) takes up a theme of the previous
chapter, and shows how amongst members of the political élite even
the display of intense emotion—outrage, contrition, joy—was not a
spontaneous matter of the individual psyche but carefully regulated
as to both when and how, much as present-day managers receive a
good deal of advice about how to conceal their anger or pleasure
when it is inappropriate and how to ‘stage’ it, even when they do not
privately feel it, should this be instrumentally useful.

The final chapter (*Ungeschriebene Gesetze. Wie funktioniert
Herrschaft ohne schriftlich fixierte Normen?*) in effect sums up not
only the section but the book as a whole. Althoff’s primary thesis is
that the actors on the medieval political stage (a metaphor he would
explicitly endorse) worked within a strict set of rules and expecta-
tions, of which those who observed them and recorded their actions
were also perfectly well aware. They show their awareness by
dwelling on what historians of a positivist or statist disposition have
often dismissed as casual or irrelevant or uninteresting details. It is

‘*Compositio. Wiederherstellung verletzter Ehre im Rahmen gütlicher Kon-
fliktsendigung*, in Klaus Schreiner and Gerd Schwerhoff (eds), *Verletzte Ehre: Ehrkonflikte in Gesellschaften des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit*
(Cologne, 1995), pp. 63-76.
no accident that Althoff here and elsewhere in the work makes extensive use of the richer and juicier narrative sources for the period: it is here that the aristocratic clerics who were by and large the authors of these works reveal their understanding of what was really happening in an aristocratic world with which they were very familiar.

As always when considering a focused body of work by a single scholar one notices a certain repetition, and at times, especially in some of the later pieces, one even has a sense that earlier insights have become formulae which no longer need to be examined. But this is both inevitable and necessary: it is, alas, not enough to say something useful or valuable once only in today’s scholarly climate, if one wishes it to be heard or taken note of. Overall, the richness of insight offered in these studies is undeniable. They have helped to bring about a paradigm shift in the way we approach medieval politics, and they are clear and sharp enough to provoke further thought. I will close by examining two issues which Althoff himself does not consider but which his work undoubtedly raises.

The first is that of regional specificity. Althoff’s examples are almost all drawn from the history of the Reich. Those who work on other areas and other periods of European history will certainly find much that is familiar to them. Some of what Althoff analyses had already found a pre-echo, for example, in Jolliffe’s remarkable and undervalued study of the political practice of Angevin rulers (*Angevin Kingship*, 2nd edn, 1963). Moreover, his paradigms clearly have applicability elsewhere: Knut Görich, for example, is currently engaged in re-examining the history of Barbarossa’s relations with Italian cities, and more generally of the practice of politics in twelfth-century northern Italy, using Althoff’s work. Nevertheless, it is not yet clear whether Althoff is describing a universal grammar of the language of medieval politics, or merely the dialect current in the Reich. There is room for a lot more work here, not least on the very rich narrative sources for English history between 1050 and 1250, which have been rather neglected by historians in this as in many other respects. A pan-European view of these matters in Althoff’s chosen period may, however, be difficult to achieve, not least because there are large swathes of Europe which do not have the kind of detail-rich narratives which would allow an Althoffian approach. There is nothing, for example, which would now tell us whether the Rudolfing kingdom of Burgundy knew similar ‘rules of the game’ to
those analysed here, and even tenth- and early eleventh-century west Francia or England would offer relatively little support for such analysis. More promising might be an extension of the approach to the later Middle Ages, where detail-richness is more widespread. It would also be useful to know more about when and how the kinds of behaviour analysed here first emerged. Certainly the Francia of Gregory of Tours looks at first glance very different from Althoff’s world—but if high politics were not always like that, when and how did they come to be so?

My second issue is that of the narrative sources on which Althoff relies so much. We need not worry overmuch about the question of how (and what) their authors knew; but we may be slightly more concerned by the possibility that they knew what ought to have happened and described that. More serious still is the problem presented by the nature of the recording. The set-pieces on which Althoff dwells in these studies were a Gesamtkunstwerk, drawing on gesture, costumes, theatrical props (swords, for example) and locations with specific associations. Any rendering of these by a historian or hagiographer is necessarily a rendering in ‘indirect speech’: nuances have gone, and so quite possibly have details which were important to the onlookers but have not been recorded, and would give the scene a quite different meaning were we to be informed about them. We can say this, because whereas for many of Althoff’s examples we have only a single narrative account, from the mid-twelfth century onwards we often have two or more accounts of the same assembly. It is striking to find how often the accounts diverge, not so much in their general tendency as in the details related. When we are dealing with Wipo or Widukind we do not have the same advantage; yet it would be wrong to suppose that they have always told us everything we need to know. Nevertheless, that is all we now have or are ever likely to have: the methodology developed in these pages allows us to decode medieval narratives of political interaction in a new and much more interesting way than was previously possible.

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Rules of the Game in Medieval Politics