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Beyond the Regnum Teutonicum

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Timothy Reuter, who died in 2002, was a translator. This is literally true: supplying his fellow medievalists with English-language texts of primary sources and the writings of their continental peers was a service which absorbed much of his time. Reuter’s manner of thought and imagery were likewise a translator’s. Medieval ritual communication was a ‘meta-language’—he called it ‘Symbolic’ (p. 169)—comprehensible throughout Latin Europe, replete with ‘a grammar, a syntax and a vocabulary’ of its own, although accessible to us only through the ‘indirect speech’ of contemporary ordinances and descriptions. An accomplished linguist of prodigiously wide reading, he saw all too clearly how declining linguistic skills among British medievalists, often combined with a deeper-rooted myopia, threatened to shut doors which helaboured to keep open. Anyone teaching medieval history in a United Kingdom university will recognize the blackness of the humour in his coinage, ‘Anglolexic’ (p. 4). Only through rigorous comparative history, he believed, could medievalists discern, and therefore transcend, the constraints of the national historiographies, each with its own conceptual vocabulary, viewpoint, and post-medieval agenda, through which the Middle Ages continue to be read across the lands of modern Europe. In breaking down these barriers, and constructing bridges across them, Reuter was without peer among British medievalists of his generation. His greatest legacy, however, is a translation project of a kind beyond the merely textual. He made sense of medieval Germany for English-only readers and introduced them to the methodologies of important late twentieth-century German medievalists such as Gerd Althoff. But he did more, unfolding a vision of the development of medieval Germany enriched by his own deep knowledge of England, and rereading familiar episodes in English history, most notably the Becket dispute, through Althoff’s ‘rules’ derived from the alien world of tenth-century Saxony. Through his German comparisons, he strove to introduce ‘alterity’ (a favourite Reuter word) into the agreeably self-contained, perpetually state-worshipping, Sellar-and-Yeatman universe of English medievalism which he gently but devastatingly mocked.

The present collection of twenty-two major papers, sensitively edited and completed by Janet Nelson, crystallizes Reuter’s achievements as mediator and interpreter. Seven are translated from the German of their original publication, a further five previously unpublished. The focus is on Reuter’s later work, with most of the pieces dating from the final decade of his life, although two substantial ‘classics’ from the 1980s—on plunder and tribute under the Carolingians (Ch. 13) and his debunking of the pre-Gregorian ‘imperial church system’ (Ch. 18)—are also included. The essay was Reuter’s natural element, the main medium for unfolding his vision of the middle ages. That alone would ensure the importance of a volume of his papers. Yet this one—inevitably, only a selection
from among his major essays—was evidently assembled with thematic coherence in mind. The result is that rare thing, a collection which succeeds in being much more than the sum of its parts. The reader is able to follow the development of ideas and analytical lines, as Reuter’s own thinking advanced, between essays. From observing booty smoothing the ways of Carolingian politics (Ch. 13), we can pass directly (Ch. 14) to an examination of the consequences for political cohesion when, from the early ninth century, aggressive warfare ceased and the flow of loot dried up. The essays are organized into three broad sections, concerned with the shaping influence of modern mentalities and national traditions on perceptions of the medieval past, with the symbolic elements in medieval politics, and with the development, in comparative perspective, of European kingdoms and their institutions. However, since these themes together delineate Reuter’s main historical interests, and since he pursued them throughout his major works, the sections point at most to differences of emphasis within a very unified (though seldom directly repetitive) corpus.

These essays illuminate well Reuter’s singularity as a historian. Part of this lay in his personal history. Of German family—his grandfather was Ernst Reuter, Berlin Oberbürgermeister during the 1948 airlift—he grew up and was educated in England. His doctorate, on the Alexandrine schism, was supervised by Oxford’s Karl Leyser, another medievalist who moved with ease between the worlds of English and German scholarship. Despite their differences in temperament, Reuter’s profile had much in common with Leyser’s: expertise in both German and English history; an interest in kings, nobles and prelates, and in the ritualized personal dealings through which their politics was enacted; an avowed concern with material facts and deeds no less than thoughts and perceptions; and—most strikingly of all—the same dauntingly wide chronological field, embracing the period between the ninth and twelfth centuries.

Other elements in his writings reflect Reuter’s personal response to the past—though this too was naturally shaped by background and experience. His view of history extended far beyond the Middle Ages: he had a keen and committed interest in contemporary politics and taught on the 1964–1970 Wilson governments. In the present volume, he is found quoting E. P. Thompson with a naturalness hardly common among medievalists. These essays turn more than once, not without a note of disquiet, to the question of medieval history’s contemporary value. The long-term importance of his chosen period, in many accounts the era in which an enduring pattern of European nation-states first took shape, was a major part of its fascination for him. ‘Wherever you live, somewhere between about 900 and 1100 you can start to see where the society you inhabit (or study) has come from’ (p. 5). The approach to be found here is a restless probing, iconoclastic yet balanced, problem-orientated one, and these papers are often as much clarion calls and manifestos for future research as surveys of a road already travelled. Characteristically, Reuter aspired to extend the debates which engaged him to a broad reading public: it was his wish that this collection, which he began preparing before his death, should be more than the usual ‘bog standard’ (his words) heap of papers addressing a narrow circle of fellow-initiates.

The importance of these essays lies in the big, ambitious questions which they pose and the remarkably broad and varied evidence base on which Reuter drew to answer them. This was combined with a deep technical mastery of the sources themselves and underpinned by an optimistic conviction that fuller and better answers are yet to be had
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through their close study. It is perhaps inevitable that, having interrogated the evidence to the utmost, even Reuter is occasionally left staring at the blank wall of the tenth century. Thus, his ambitious attempt (Ch. 15) at distinguishing the agency and mentality of an early medieval ruler from his representation ultimately runs up against that ruler’s own absence from virtually everything on which we can today put our hands: Otto I remains—and must ever remain—a ‘black box’ (p. 276). Nevertheless, taken together, these studies unfold a comparative history of medieval Europe of remarkable substance and analytic power. Especially fruitful are two distinctive elements: the Germany–England comparative axis; and Reuter’s extension of the broad, comparative perspective which tends to characterize the work of early medievalists into a post-Carolingian era traditionally parcelled out into multiple, myopic and apparently irreconcilable national historiographies.

One result is a powerful rethinking of early German history. Over the past half-century, the Carolingian and post-Carolingian periods have enjoyed considerable attention from German medievalists. The outcome, in a climate long overshadowed by the traumas of the Third Reich and its downfall, has been a notably communitaire view of what most agree to have been an axial epoch. Elements of distinction and conflict between peoples and realms, which an earlier, nationalist historiography had exaggerated, were now played down almost to vanishing-point and the common origins of Germany and France talked up. The political landscape which these scholars surveyed tended (and to some extent tends still) to correspond largely to the one mapped by the Treaty of Rome. Reuter’s vision, by contrast, not only has a different and larger geographical shape; it also comes with rather more sharp edges and uncomfortable questions. He noted with regret the way in which the ever-closer union of western continental medievalists has been accompanied, ironically, by a decline in the rigorous comparative history which he so valued (Ch. 22). These essays supply some of that grit of difference and dissonance—as well as the recognition of things shared—which he found lacking in other accounts.

Reuter was firm about the historian’s duty to account for both ‘being and consciousness’ (a favourite phrase). This sets him apart from some of the most influential recent German scholars of his period, who have tended to privilege the latter. He sought to understand not only how the ruling kindreds of early medieval Germany articulated their power, but where it came from in the first place. As well as examining the role of war as a foundation for the political order, he strove (Ch. 17) to uncover the means by which, at a time when other European regions were allegedly undergoing a mutation féodale, the Ottonian elite dominated and exploited land and people. A substantial piece on the insecurity of travel (Ch. 3) represents a pioneering venture into a field—the social history of medieval crime—still little worked in Germany. At the same time, it is characteristic both of Reuter and the nature of the German evidence that much of this paper is devoted to assessing the (very limited) value of contemporary accounts for judging material conditions at all. He brought the same rigorous scepticism to the study of early medieval political mentalities (Ch. 5). No other British medievalist has applied so fruitfully and sympathetically the anthropologically-driven approaches to symbolic behaviour associated with Althoff; yet neither was he blind to the fundamental limitations of surviving sources—trenchantly delineated recently by Philippe Buc—for accessing the consciousness of (which?) contemporaries.
This is medieval German history of uncommon, some might say old-fashioned, breadth and boldness—though, unlike that older history, it is also subtle, generous and un-partisan. The history of the northern, mainly German-speaking, lands of the Reich is treated as a whole (though one composed of many parts), replete with epochal turning points and a medieval Sonderweg—the explicit focus of one paper (Ch. 20), though a major concern of several others besides. Canossa is both ritual (Ch. 9) and Wende (Ch. 19). But it was during the ‘long’ twelfth century, Reuter believed, ‘if ever, that the train was missed: if it had been caught, then perhaps the retarding of the [German] nation, and hence the coming too late of state-formation on a national basis, might have been averted’ (p. 435). Through comparison with England, the distinctive elements in Germany’s political configuration come more starkly into view. Not Ottonian Saxony but post-Alfredian Wessex was destined most fully to embrace the Carolingian template of big government. If Charlemagne’s empire really was, as some modern polemists would have it, a remote blueprint for the EU, then its instincts for top-down regulation and self-righteous meddling found a home beyond the English Channel centuries before they infiltrated the lands between Elbe and Meuse. Ottonian political culture, by contrast, is revealed (Ch. 15) as oddly shallow and one-dimensional. On political identities, Reuter was memorably aphoristic. ‘Ethnicity appears to have lit up in the presence of rulers in much the same way as fluorescent clothing does in the presence of street lighting’ (pp. 103–4). Yet no glow of common belonging is yet to be discerned among the disparate northern peoples under the Ottonians comparable to the one which already glimmers faintly from the Engla Lond of the West Saxon kings.

This is very much an early medievalist’s volume: one which indexes ‘lordship’, ‘peasants’, and ‘violence’, but not ‘merchants’, ‘money’, or ‘towns’. Its world is one for which the sources are few and intractable, in which the relationships that mattered were face-to-face and elaborately choreographed. Few historians have captured its spirit with such elegance and economy. ‘Politically, time froze except on campaigns and at assemblies’ (p. 207). Yet, as Reuter himself repeatedly makes clear, this was by the later part of his period a world in flux: one in which not all political players could any longer be counted on to know the ‘rules’ of the high-aristocratic ‘game’ (as Becket fatally seems not to have done). Reuter, who was deeply versed in twelfth-century canon law, was well capable of portraying these transformed landscapes. Here, however, it is the old world which still holds sway, and supplies the lens for viewing the new. This partly reflects the heavy concentration on Germany, ‘a polity in which magnates knew their own importance’ (p. 401) and where elements of ‘archaic’ political culture would live on into the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Abstract political values do not feature much here, except for those—honour, status—which found expression in personal dealings. Institutions of government prove most interesting as a foil for those, particularly German-speaking, regions which largely lacked them. Official documents—typically, intricate high-visibility parchments granting privileges—catch the eye primarily for their role in an essentially pre-literate aristocratic economy of public competition and display. It is much to be hoped that others might one day be found to carry forward into the study of the central and later middle ages something of the insight, vast learning and high intellectual courage which characterize Reuter’s vision of early medieval world in which he moved most happily.
Abstract
The essay evaluates the distinctiveness and importance of the work of Timothy Reuter, based on a major recent collection of his writings. It suggests that Reuter's roots in both the German and English scholarly traditions, combined with his unusually broad historical interests, enabled him to bring unique perspectives to bear upon the development of European political institutions, mentalities, and modes of behaviour during a period—the ninth to twelfth centuries—which is still often ascribed fundamental formative importance in European life. In particular, Reuter succeeded in transcending some of the structural limitations of both the English and (post-war, West-) German historiographies of the central medieval period.

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