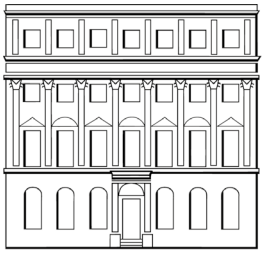

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Review of Grischa Vercamer, *Hochmittelalterliche Herrschaftspraxis im Spiegel der Geschichtsschreibung: Vorstellungen von 'guter' und 'schlechter' Herrschaft in England, Polen und dem Reich im 12./13. Jahrhundert*

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BOOK REVIEWS

GRISCHA VERCAMER, *Hochmittelalterliche Herrschaftspraxis im Spiegel der Geschichtsschreibung: Vorstellungen von 'guter' und 'schlechter' Herrschaft in England, Polen und dem Reich im 12./13. Jahrhundert*, Deutsches Historisches Institut Warschau, 37 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2020), xii + 792 pp. ISBN 978 3 447 11354 0. €98.00

Grischa Vercamer's revised habilitation thesis offers a meticulously detailed and intellectually ambitious attempt at comparative history, exploring the representation of rulership by chroniclers in twelfth-century England, Poland, and the Holy Roman Empire. The choice of polities reflects Vercamer's own career: a German, working in Poland, who studied in Edinburgh (though Scotland's chronicles, as so often, lose out to the richer materials available further south). Poland's inclusion also reflects Vercamer's observation that too often an Iron Curtain persists in the minds of medievalists between Central and Eastern Europe. Vercamer has clearly profited from his immersion in multiple national scholarly traditions and the synthesis he offers, alongside the intriguing points of comparison, will certainly contribute to the kind of international scholarly exchange of which he is both advocate and beneficiary.

The introductory chapters take up a third of the text (excluding the appendix). The introduction sets out the topic and runs through theories of *Herrschaft* (rule), ritual, *Vorstellungsgeschichte* (history of ideals and concepts), narratology, topoi, and virtues. The second chapter lists the criteria by which Vercamer narrowed down his selection of sources, provides a useful introduction to each of the six chronicles ultimately chosen, and explains why many other (at times, seemingly more appropriate) works did not make the cut. For England, Vercamer selected William of Malmesbury's *Historia Novella* (*c.*1140) and Roger of Howden's *Chronica* (1191–1202); for the Empire, Otto of Freising and Rahewin's *Gesta Frederici* (1157–60) and

the *Historia Welforum* (*c*.1170); and for Poland, Gallus Anonymous and Wincenty Kadłubek.

The third chapter sets out the general ruling structures which prevailed in each polity. Here, Vercamer is juxtaposing three realms that have rarely been compared in any depth. In his words, he wished to compare polities with as many different 'settings' as possible (p. 10, author's original term). The discussion provided here of each realm's peculiar structural characteristics acts as an important foundation for his later analysis and is particularly helpful given that readers are unlikely to be equally versed in the history of each case study. Though allocated to the introductory section, this synthesis of English, German, and Polish scholarship is one of Vercamer's most valuable contributions and will provide food for thought for any historian interested in a comparative approach. For England, Vercamer could have glanced at the similar list of features compiled in John Maddicott's own impressive discussion of England and France.[1]

With chapter four we reach the weighty core of Vercamer's analysis. Representations of rulership in the chronicles are categorized according to nine fields of activity: prince as judge; as administrator; as politician or diplomat in advisory situations; as legislator; as representative of rule or staging of power; as fighter or army commander; as a pious ruler (notably the shortest section); and the *habitus* (habits and character) of the ruler. Vercamer briefly introduces the secondary literature on each area of rulership and then proceeds through each activity, chronicle by chronicle. We thus receive, for example, a discussion of the prince as legislator in William of Malmesbury's *Historia Novella*, and then an overall conclusion comparing the prince as legislator in all six chronicles.

The fifth chapter explores the narrative strategies pursued by each chronicler, before examining the overall portrayal of rulership found in each individual chronicle and its correspondence to the deeper political structures and characteristics of each realm. This time, we proceed author by author and a list of narrative devices is identified for each: William of Malmesbury, for example, deploys verbatim

[1] John R. Maddicott, *The Origins of the English Parliament 924–1327* (Oxford, 2010), esp. 376–452.

speech, comparison, enactment, sober description, and retrospection; Roger of Howden, concise description, insertion of documents, short interjections, visions, and explicit interventions; Gallus Anonymous, staging, metaphor, exaggeration, and literal speech; and so on. In three of the most important subsections of the entire monograph (5.2.3; 5.3.3; 5.4.3), the two chronicles chosen to represent each realm are compared to identify any 'national' peculiarities. A very concise chapter six discusses the results and the advantages of the approach deployed. The conclusion is not comprehensive, however, and readers should make use of the summaries provided throughout the analytical chapters.

Vercamer's conclusions flow from a comprehensive database, compiled for the project, through which the contents of each chronicle were analysed, subdivided, and categorized. The systematic approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis, is novel, particularly in the context of traditional scholarship on the topic, which has tended to focus on a single chronicler, ruler, or kingdom. The appendix (which takes up 349 of the book's 792 pages) is the fruit of Vercamer's laborious efforts, an impressive compendium of 672 chronicle extracts and a valuable resource in its own right. Each passage is accompanied by a helpful summary and discussion which takes into account a considerable volume of secondary literature. Through abbreviations, Vercamer also further catalogues the passages according to whether the chroniclers made an explicit or implicit intervention; whether they did so from a first-person or neutral perspective; and whether the rulers (or their actions) are described with praise, condemnation, or indifference. Qualitative and quantitative analysis are combined here (as throughout the main text), with percentages given to show the attention paid by the chronicler to each field of activity. The resulting pie charts give a first, though perhaps fleeting, impression of each chronicler's priorities.

Vercamer ultimately found notable similarities between the 'bird's eye view' of the structural features recognized by modern historians and the 'frog's eye view' provided by the chroniclers. The English authors (Roger of Howden especially) preferred to portray the king as administrator. The overseas possessions of English kings always created the potential for conflict, and the expansion of the administrative centre (London and Westminster) is detectable in the course of the war between Stephen and Matilda. That English kings could

ruin rebellious subjects by financial and legal means is mirrored in the lack of attention paid to the prince as warrior (only 11 per cent, in Vercamer's reckoning, of either William's or Roger's passages on rulership). The spread of writing in England, and competition between chroniclers, results in a 'matter-of-fact, sober narrative style', one of Vercamer's key categorizing terms. Compared to the Empire, the nobility receives little attention.[2] Not all readers will find these parallels between structural features and contemporary views to be as 'truly remarkable' (p. 297) as Vercamer. As he suggests, the importance of administrative rulership and of the 'sober' descriptive style will need to be verified by comparison with other authors.

For Poland, Vercamer finds a contrast between Gallus Anonymous and Wincenty Kadłubek in the importance attached to the prince as fighter (31 versus 13 per cent) and the ruler's *habitus* (21 versus 13 per cent). The difference, he argues, is rooted in each author's respective historical context. Bolesław III was subjugating Pomerania while Gallus was writing, and the disputes over succession chronicled by Kadłubek entailed much discussion of each contender's virtues and suitability. In terms of the typically Polish elements, Kadłubek presents Casimir II as an unfinished prince with a weakness for dice and feasts. Such vices had their upsides (affability; proximity to one's subjects), but Polish princes were portrayed as undergoing a process of correction. Gruesome massacres (Bolesław I's attack on Kiev; Bolesław II's indiscriminate slaughter of pregnant women and the elderly) are not condemned, but justified by both authors. The two chroniclers also wrote in a more elaborate, metaphorical, and theatrical style than their English or German contemporaries. There are once again strong parallels with the previously identified structural features, although urban, economic, and cultural change received less attention.

[2] For this point and other contrasts, see Nicholas Vincent, 'Sources and Methods: Some Anglo-German Comparisons', in Thorsten Huthwelker, Jörg Peltzer, and Maximilian Wemhöner (eds.), *Princely Rank in Late Medieval Europe: Trodden Paths and Promising Avenues* (Ostfildern, 2011), 119–38; Timothy Reuter, 'The Making of England and Germany, 850–1050: Points of Comparison and Difference', in id., *Medieval Polities and Modern Mentalities*, ed. Janet Nelson (Cambridge, 2006), 284–99; and Björn Weiler, *Kingship, Rebellion and Political Culture: England and Germany,* c.*1215*–c.*1250* (Basingstoke, 2007).

For the Empire, with the *Gesta Frederici* and the *Historia Welforum*, Vercamer finds insufficient similarities in his quantitative analysis to identify a peculiarly German construct of rulership. As he recognizes, the two sources are so different that one would not expect an overlap (raising the question as to whether the *Historia* was really the best choice). That both authors criticized their respective princes less than authors in England is striking. The imperial authors' recognition of the Empire's structural features varied. The special position of the emperor, his competition with the papacy, and elective kingship all feature, though here one is surprised to read that the 'strong position of the princes is naturally downplayed by the *Gesta Frederici*' (p. 339). The sheer size of the Empire; the strong position of noble dynasties, such as the Welfs; the problem of Italy; and the place of the *ministeriales* as a counterweight to the nobility can also be detected. The Empire's backwardness, compared to England and France, and the conservative tradition of the monastic schools, do not feature.

More nuanced parallels and distinctions also emerge. Rulers were often contrasted to highlight poor governance (Stephen and Robert of Gloucester by William of Malmesbury; Mieszko II and Casimir II as well as Bolesław II and Bolesław I by Gallus). Princes appeared as warriors in Poland, but more often as strategists and commanders in England and Germany. Political pragmatism was recorded as the motive behind nearly all apparently pious deeds. Other characteristics (was it typical in England for favourably regarded rulers only to be criticized upon their death?) require further comparison. In a 'conjured [*gezaubert*]' (p. 352) aside, Vercamer suggests that some of the expectations hinted at by his analysis may have survived to our own day. Vercamer connects the trenchant criticism of English chroniclers in the twelfth century with the famous English habit of not taking oneself too seriously. With the portrayal of a restrained and rational Barbarossa acting through clear structures of authority, Vercamer perceives an incipient German trust in authority. He also ties the fact that Polish dukes were permitted to err, provided they made amends, to a greater and more flexible leniency in modern Poland towards political transgressions. Given the methodological rigour maintained by the author up to this point, readers are likely to forgive such whimsical reflections, even if they do sound a discordant note.

As is typical of a habilitation thesis, the author's methodology is justified in detail. Sociological, literary, and cultural theories are discussed in depth (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Max Weber, Karl Marx, Michael Mann, Michel Foucault, and Hayden White all feature). The conclusions are unlikely to surprise: that *Macht* (power) and *Herrschaft* were inseparable in the Middle Ages; that images of rulership reflected an author's personal perspective as well as 'national' or regional circumstances; and that good rulership was defined in relation to the four classical cardinal virtues, their three Christian counterparts, and by a prince's willingness to submit to the clergy's moral authority. Vercamer in general has spared no effort to guide the reader through his approach, offering a clear structure with a great many introductions, conclusions, and summaries. He is upfront, both when laying out his own thought process while tackling such a daunting task and with regard to the limitations.

Inevitably, some avenues of research are left for others to pursue. Vercamer makes the case for the twelfth century as the decisive period in which to conduct his comparison. In particular, he suggests that this was a time in which ideas of order were reassessed amid the expansion of royal government, the development of Roman law, and a growing sense of individuality. Such a 'wide-ranging bundle of innovations' (p. 9), Vercamer argues, surely transformed how chroniclers judged their princes. The suggestion is not new. In one of the few specific discussions of the representation of twelfth-century kingship, Karl Leyser suggested (in a surprising absence from Vercamer's bibliography) that the Anglo-Norman realm and Norman Sicily were particularly rich sources of 'incisive business-like comment on kings' precisely because of the comparatively advanced growth of royal government.[3] The latter would indeed have made for an intriguing alternative case study. Yet with little discussion or analysis of portrayals of rulership before or after the twelfth century, this is not a subject that can be pursued in Vercamer's book. John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* too is described as 'extremely important' (p. 29), as is the influence of the Investiture Contest, but neither are referred to again in any detail in the main analysis.

[3] Karl Leyser, 'Some Reflections on Twelfth-Century Kings and Kingship', in id., *Medieval Germany and its Neighbours 900–1250* (London, 1982), 241–67, at 249.

Vercamer's choice of chronicles can also be queried. To qualify, the chronicler had to focus on 'contemporary history' (the likes of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Geffrei Gaimar, the *Kaiserchronik*, and even William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum* are hence excluded) and observe the ruler as an eyewitness or through oral testimony. Authors who recycled earlier material, or information from other authors, need not apply. The author should also be well-disposed towards the ruling dynasty, but without deploying hagiographical topoi. Though the reader will sympathize with Vercamer's predicament and his need to justify what must be, by necessity, an arbitrary selection, the reasoning deployed in chapter two to exclude other authors will raise a few eyebrows. Eadmer of Canterbury is described as 'not concerned with the royal house' (p. 65), despite the growing body of scholarship on his attitude towards kingship.[4] William of Newburgh lived too far north, was too remote from court, and apparently recorded events from too regional a perspective. Henry of Huntingdon loses out for having insufficiently close contacts to the royal court—yet as Vercamer notes elsewhere, our best evidence for William of Malmesbury's own experience is his attendance at the Council of Westminister in 1141. Comparing William, Otto of Freising, and Roger of Howden, the degree of royal familiarity clearly varied, as did the length of each work. As Vercamer reminds us, the *Historia Welforum*, the most surprising choice, takes up only seventeen pages in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* folio edition, but in principle receives the same degree of analysis as Roger of Howden's lengthy *Chronica*.

In general, Vercamer's work provides an important reminder of the difficulty of balancing breadth and depth when making historical comparisons. Marc Bloch, the most famous advocate of this approach, is rightly invoked in the book's foreword, alongside the amusing anecdote that, having been advised by Bernd Schneidmüller to 'think big' (p. ix), Vercamer initially considered comparing six polities. That we are ultimately left with six chronicles instead inevitably diminishes some of the force of Vercamer's conclusions. Though Bloch is

[4] Mark Philpott, 'Eadmer, his Archbishops and the English State', in John R. Maddicott and David M. Palliser (eds.), *The Medieval State: Essays Presented to James Campbell* (London, 2000), 93–107; Sally Vaughn, *Anselm of Bec and Robert of Meulan: The Innocence of the Dove and the Wisdom of the Serpent* (Berkeley, 1987).

again referenced to justify the selection of at least three realms as the foundation for comparison, the choice of just two, with more material, might have provided a more secure beachhead from which future comparative forays could then have been attempted. Yet to judge this volume only by the conclusions resulting from the national comparison would be to mistake Vercamer's intention. This is very much a pilot study with a uniquely systematic approach, one that does not simply engage in 'eclectically picking and choosing the most beautiful source passages' (p. 55), but assesses each chronicler in the round. This attempt to 'weigh up' the expectations of individual authors does provide a new way to distinguish the typical from the specific in the political culture of multiple realms and periods. Whether or not future scholars follow the particularities of Vercamer's approach, they will still gain much from this diligent navigation of the challenges posed by comparative history.

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