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***Medieval History and Medieval Studies in Germany:
from Cultural to Transcultural***

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MEDIEVAL HISTORY AND MEDIEVAL STUDIES IN GERMANY: FROM CULTURAL TO TRANSCULTURAL

Michael Brauer

The Status of Medieval Studies

In Germany, medieval studies has not been a subject offered at universities until recently. German medievalists, i.e., scholars dealing with the Middle Ages, are normally trained in one discipline such as art history or literature and specialize in the Middle Ages in the course of their studies. This paper – written by a historian of the Middle Ages – will therefore review the main trends in the field from the perspective of history. This is, however, not meant to be defensive; I am, on the contrary, convinced that the division into disciplines is fruitful for the study of the Middle Ages. After giving an overview of the institutional structures and of selected research trends before and after the millennium, the paper will return to the question of medieval studies and suggest cultural history and transcultural history as recent fields of interdisciplinary study.

The main place for doing research is still the university.¹ The number of positions in medieval history is rather high because it is part of the history teachers' exam and is thus offered at most universities. At present, there are 118 professors of medieval history (including regional history [*Landesgeschichte*] and auxiliary sciences) at 63 universities and similar institutions,² a number that has doubled from the 1960s onwards as a result of the reform process in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1970s with the founding of new universities and an increase in staff.³ Another factor was the German (re-)unification of 1990, after

¹ For institutional structures see Hans-Werner Goetz, *Moderne Mediävistik: Stand und Perspektiven der Mittelalterforschung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999), 126-152 (hereafter: Goetz, *Moderne Mediävistik*); Peter Johanek, "Zu neuen Ufern? Beobachtungen eines Zeitgenossen zur deutschen Mediävistik von 1975 bis heute," (hereafter: Johanek, "Zu neuen Ufern?") in *Die deutschsprachige Mediävistik im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Peter Moraw and Rudolf Schieffer, Vorträge und Forschungen 62 (Ostfildern: Thorbecke, 2005), 139-174, esp. 140-146, 154-158 (hereafter: Moraw and Schieffer, ed. *Mediävistik im 20. Jahrhundert*).

² Figures based on the list of the *Mediävistenverband e. V.*, June 2008; the number of ten professors of regional history and three of the auxiliary sciences, respectively, was added to the number of 105 medieval historians; see www.mediaevistenverband.de/download/Lehrstuehle/Lehrstuehle20Juni2008/geschichte.pdf.

³ In the 1960s, there were about 60 professors, by 1975 already 85; see Johanek, "Zu neuen Ufern?," 154f.

which the 17 chairs in the former GDR were added to the pool.⁴ Since that time of plenty, however, the number of positions has slowly diminished.

From the 1970s onwards, the focus of research funding in the humanities has turned away from the individual scholar at his desk towards coordinated programs. The main sponsor in the public sector, the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (German Research Foundation, DFG), has introduced Collaborative Research Centers (*Sonderforschungsbereiche*, SFB) based on individual university and Priority Programs (*Schwerpunktprogramme*, SPP) which connect universities throughout Germany; in the 1990s, Research Training Groups (*Graduiertenkollegs*) were added. At the core of these programs are two ideas: First, the emancipation of younger scholars, since they are mainly the ones who organize and conduct research. Second, interdisciplinary approaches are encouraged through the collaboration of different disciplines within these programs. As always in reality, there are more and less successful examples, but coordinated programs have often contributed to the establishment of new approaches.

Research in Germany has a strong base outside the universities, too. Most prominent are the Academies of Science.⁵ As often in Germany, there is not one central academy, but a number of them in different regions, with different historical roots, namely, Berlin, Göttingen, Munich, Leipzig, Heidelberg, Mainz, Düsseldorf, and Hamburg. The academies house long-term research in Germany, which may span several decades or even go back more than a hundred years, such as the *Regesta Imperii* in Mainz or the *Constitutiones* in Berlin.

The most famous institution is probably still the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (MGH), the large-scale edition project of (in a broad sense) “German” sources of the Middle Ages. There are also a number of more specialized research institutes associated with universities.⁶ The Thomas Institute (directed by Andreas Speer, Universität zu Köln) has a philosophical focus on the Middle Ages; at the University of Muenster, Peter Johanek directs the Institute of Comparative Urban History (*Institut für vergleichende Städteforschung*); Michael Borgolte (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) is the director of the Institute for the Comparative History of Europe in the Middle Ages (*Institut für vergleichende Geschichte Europas im Mittelalter*, IVGEM) with a focus on comparative and transcultural history.

⁴ 15 of the 17 newly appointed professors came from the west of Germany; see Johanek, “Zu neuen Ufern?,” 155.

⁵ See Goetz, *Moderne Mediävistik*, 127f.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 132, and list of institutions below.

Scholarship is no longer only a matter of books, articles and editions, but in a growing sense a matter of conference presentations and discussions. Every other year the Association of Historians of Germany (*Verband der Historikerinnen und Historiker Deutschlands*) organizes a large conference, the *Historikertag*, with a loose general theme, hosted by a different university, where medieval historians organize sections of their own. The Association of Medievalists (*Mediävistenverband*), which encompasses the German-speaking countries, also attracts medievalists with a biennial, more focused conference.⁷ The oldest and, for a long time only, network with regular conferences is the *Konstanzer Arbeitskreis* with its *Reichenau-Tagungen*. In earlier days, its topics set the research agenda, and today it represents the mainstream of the subject of medieval history.⁸ In 1994, younger medievalists formed the *Brackweder Arbeitskreis* as a (partly ironical) competing event which was to provide a forum for new approaches of social history and cultural studies.⁹

As for research trends of the past 15 years, a glimpse at the 1970s and 1980s is necessary to put the new topics into perspective.¹⁰ In the 1970s, medieval history was, on the one hand, dominated by constitutional history, which was a specific combination of political, legal, and regional history (*Landesgeschichte*) and concentrated on the state and the relation of the king and nobility. On the other hand, the history of ideas sought the motivation for political action.¹¹ In the course of the 1970s – the decade of social history in Modern History – constitutional history was not replaced by social history in the medieval departments but rather evaluated and put on a new basis, in particular through the use of prosopography.¹²

⁷ In 2009, the topic is “Farbiges Mittelalter?! Farbe als Materie, Zeichen und Projektion in der Welt des Mittelalters” (March 2-5, University of Bamberg).

⁸ For an internal perspective see Moraw and Schieffer, ed., *Mediävistik im 20. Jahrhundert*.

⁹ It is part of the strategy that the contributions are not published in a conference volume; see www.brackweder-ak.de for the list of past topics.

¹⁰ Before the millennium, there were a number of attempts to summarize the state of research; see Goetz, *Moderne Mediävistik*; idem, ed., *Die Aktualität des Mittelalters*, Herausforderungen 10 (Bochum: Winkler, 2000); idem and Jörg Jarnut, ed., *Mediävistik im 21. Jahrhundert: Stand und Perspektiven der internationalen und interdisziplinären Mittelalterforschung*, Mittelalter Studien 1 (Paderborn: Fink, 2003) (hereafter: Goetz and Jarnut, ed., *Mediävistik im 21. Jahrhundert*); see also some older contributions: Michael Borgolte, ed., *Mittelalterforschung nach der Wende 1989*, Historische Zeitschrift Beiheft N. F. 20 (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1995); idem, *Sozialgeschichte des Mittelalters: Eine Forschungsbilanz nach der deutschen Einheit*, Historische Zeitschrift Beiheft N. F. 22 (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1996); Otto Gerhard Oexle, ed., *Stand und Perspektiven der Mittelalterforschung am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Göttinger Gespräche zur Geschichtswissenschaft 2 (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1996).

¹¹ See Goetz, *Moderne Mediävistik*, 104.

¹² Johaneck, “Zu neuen Ufern?,” 150-152.

The 1980s were characterized by an unease with grand structures and theories, and a number of scholars therefore turned to the individual human being: One direction was the history of everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte*) or – even more focused – microhistory. The works of the French Annales school, which have a similar emphasis, were only then taken note of in German medieval history, especially the history of mentalities.¹³ All of this prepared the ground for an “anthropologization” of history, although it did not represent the mainstream in research.

This background was necessary to understand the slow diffusion of cultural history in medieval history departments in the 1990s and later – about a decade later than in Anglo-American and French scholarship.¹⁴ Cultural history is characterized by the multiplication – sometimes explosion – of topics held worthy of research on the one hand, and by a closer look at how contemporary people in the Middle Ages interpreted and made sense of things on the other hand.¹⁵ In this paper, I will only give one example of how an established topic in German scholarship was given new direction by applying cultural studies, although this happened with other topics, too.¹⁶

“Ritual” is probably the most successful concept to enter medieval history in the past 15 years, and this success is connected to the name of Gerd Althoff (Muenster) who applied it to political history.¹⁷ This anthropological concept helped to answer a crucial question which had been a puzzle in previous scholarship: How come a realm with hardly any transpersonal institutions like the Ottonian kingdom functioned and survived a number of crises?¹⁸ The answer in brief was that rituals produced

¹³ See Goetz, *Moderne Mediävistik*, 106-112; cf. František Graus, ed., *Mentalitäten im Mittelalter: methodische und inhaltliche Probleme*, Vorträge und Forschungen 35 (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1987).

¹⁴ For a summary of the scholarship see Peter Burke, *Was ist Kulturgeschichte?* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005).

¹⁵ See Ute Daniel, *Kompendium Kulturgeschichte: Theorien, Praxis, Schlüsselwörter* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), 7-25, esp. 17: “Die ‘Objekte’ der Kulturgeschichtsschreibung ... umfassen das Ensemble all dessen, was Geschichte hat. Nichts davon ... läßt sich begreifen, beschreiben, oder erklären, ohne die Bedeutungen, Wahrnehmungsweisen und Sinnstiftungen der zeitgenössischen Menschen in das Verstehen, Beschreiben oder Erklären einzubeziehen.”

¹⁶ The concept of “memory” influenced research on liturgical and aristocratic *memoria*, see Otto Gerhard Oexle, “Memoria in der Gesellschaft und in der Kultur des Mittelalters,” in *Modernes Mittelalter: Neue Bilder einer populären Epoche*, ed. Joachim Heinze (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1999), 297-323; “the oral and the written” marked new dimensions of communication, see Goetz, *Moderne Mediävistik*, 339-365; also, the traditional auxiliary sciences were renewed with respect to signs and symbols, see Peter Rück, ed., *Symbole in mittelalterlichen Urkunden* (see list below, part II, no. 4).

¹⁷ Gerd Althoff, *Die Macht der Rituale* (see list below, part II, no. 8).

¹⁸ This follows the brief sketch in Frank Rexroth, “Rituale und Ritualismus in der historischen

coherence in a society which lacked a written constitution and was characterised by “royal rule without a state.”¹⁹ In times of conflict, there was a set of “rules of the game” (*Spielregeln*), shared by both ruler and nobility, which stabilized the political order.²⁰ In the meantime, two assumptions have been questioned: that one can take the presentation of rituals by medieval chroniclers for “real” rituals²¹ and that an allegedly “archaic” society such as the early medieval German one has a higher level of “ritualism” than a more complex society.²²

At the beginning of the paper, I advocated the training in a discipline as a basis of collaborating with other disciplines. One of the effects of cultural history was a blurring of the disciplines’ traditional borders because of the general nature of the terms and concepts. For example, can a historian’s understanding of the meaning of rituals in society be adapted by a literary historian to take a fresh look at his texts? Vice versa, can a historian be encouraged by the complexity of memory (*memoria*) to analyze new kinds of sources which usually “belong” to art history or literature. On the whole, this interdisciplinarity is rather conventional in the sense that history, literature, and art have a long history of collaboration and that the focus is mostly on the same country or region.²³

More innovative is the collaboration of disciplines in European and transcultural history, which is one of the most promising fields at the beginning of the third millennium.²⁴ In medievalist tradition, Europe is usually conceived as the Latin West (the Occident, *Abendland*) dominated by the Roman Catholic Church. In the approach initiated by Michael Borgolte (Berlin), Europe is seen as a geographically and culturally diverse historical space: as the continent in its geographical entirety which contained the East Slavic and Byzantine World, as well

Mittelalterforschung: Eine Skizze,” in Goetz and Jarnut, ed., *Mediävistik im 21. Jahrhundert*, 391-406, esp. 397-399.

¹⁹ See the subtitle of Gerd Althoff, *Die Ottonen: Königsherrschaft ohne Staat* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2000).

²⁰ Gerd Althoff, *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter: Kommunikation in Frieden und Fehde* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997).

²¹ Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton: PUP, 2001).

²² Bernhard Jussen, “Diskutieren über Könige im vormodernen Europa: Einleitung,” in *Die Macht des Königs* (see list below), XI-XXIV, here XVII, with respect to the Later Middle Ages and Byzantium.

²³ For an exception see the SFB 619, “Ritualdynamik,” established in 2002 at the University of Heidelberg, with a multitude of cooperating disciplines (www.ritualdynamik.de).

²⁴ Other recent approaches include historical semantics and the spatial turn.

as the Muslim border areas in Spain and Italy.²⁵ This approach goes beyond the boundaries of traditional medieval studies towards Slavic, Byzantine, and Arabic Studies. A subsequent transcultural phase went along with the establishment of the Priority Program (*Schwerpunktprogramm*, SPP) 1173 in 2005, directed by Michael Borgolte and Bernd Schneidmüller (Heidelberg).²⁶ The SPP 1173 is based on the idea that Europe in the Middle Ages was never defined by one unifying culture such as Latin Christianity. From this the thesis is derived that the encounter of different European cultures led to constant processes of integration and disintegration which gave birth to the specific dynamic of European history compared to other parts of the world.²⁷ A particular emphasis is laid on the role of the three monotheistic religions – Christendom (where the Roman and the Orthodox Church haven to be differentiated), Islam, and Judaism – in this process.²⁸ These ambitious theories are put into practice by setting up small groups of scholars which meet on a regular basis and work on a collaborative publication.²⁹ The transcultural history of Europe, however, is not the end of the story. The hypothesis of a special European dialectic has to be tested against other regions with similar conditions, be they in the neighborhood or far away. As a consequence, the upcoming phase will move towards global history.

Fifteen Important Contributions of the Past Fifteen Years: A Chronological List

Fögen, Marie Theres. *Die Enteignung der Wahrsager: Studien zum kaiserlichen Wissensmonopol in der Spätantike*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993.

Fried, Johannes. *Der Weg in die Geschichte: Die Ursprünge Deutschlands bis 1024. Propyläen-Geschichte Deutschlands 1*. Berlin: Propyläen, 1994.

²⁵ Michael Borgolte, *Europa entdeckt seine Vielfalt: 1050-1250*, Handbuch der Geschichte Europas 3 (Stuttgart: Ulmer, 2002).

²⁶ I hold a research position at the SPP 1173.

²⁷ Michael Borgolte, "Europa im Bann des Mittelalters: Wie Geschichte und Gegenwart unserer Lebenswelt die Perspektiven der Mediävistik verändern," *Jahrbuch für Europäische Geschichte* 6 (2005): 117-135.

²⁸ Michael Borgolte, *Christen, Juden, Muselmanen* (see list).

²⁹ For the results of the first phase of the SPP 1173 see Michael Borgolte, Juliane Schiel, Bernd Schneidmüller, and Annette Seitz, ed., *Mittelalter im Labor: Die Mediävistik testet Wege zu einer transkulturellen Europawissenschaft*, Europa im Mittelalter 10 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008).

Wenzel, Horst. *Hören und Sehen, Schrift und Bild: Kultur und Gedächtnis im Mittelalter*. Munich: Beck, 1995.

Rück, Peter, ed. *Symbole in mittelalterlichen Urkunden: Beiträge zur diplomatischen Semiotik*. Historische Hilfswissenschaften 3. Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1996.

Rexroth, Frank. *Das Milieu der Nacht: Obrigkeit und Randgruppen im spätmittelalterlichen London*. Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 153. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999.

Bredenkamp, Horst. *Sankt Peter in Rom und das Prinzip der produktiven Zerstörung: Bau und Abbau von Bramante bis Bernini*. Berlin: Wagenbach, 2000.

Görich, Knut. *Die Ehre Friedrich Barbarossas: Kommunikation, Konflikt und politisches Handeln im 12. Jahrhundert*. Symbolische Kommunikation in der Vormoderne. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001.

Althoff, Gerd. *Die Macht der Rituale: Symbolik und Herrschaft im Mittelalter*. Darmstadt: Primus, 2003.

Mitterauer, Michael. *Warum Europa? Mittelalterliche Grundlagen eines Sonderwegs*. Munich: Beck, 2003.

Brather, Sebastian. *Ethnische Interpretationen in der frühgeschichtlichen Archäologie: Geschichte, Grundlagen und Alternativen*. Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 42. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004.

Fried, Johannes. *Der Schleier der Erinnerung: Grundzüge einer historischen Memorik*. Munich: Beck, 2004.

Jussen, Bernhard, ed. *Die Macht des Königs: Herrschaft in Europa vom Frühmittelalter bis in die Neuzeit*. Munich: Beck, 2005.

Borgolte, Michael. *Christen, Juden, Muselmanen: Die Erben der Antike und der Aufstieg des Abendlandes 300 bis 1400 n. Chr.* Siedler-Geschichte Europas 2. Munich: Siedler, 2006.

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Teuscher, Simon. *Erzähltes Recht: Lokale Herrschaft, Verschriftlichung und Traditionsbildung im Spätmittelalter*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2007.

Groeber, Valentin. *Das Mittelalter hört nicht auf: über historisches Erzählen*. Munich: Beck, 2008.

Institutions of Medieval History and Medieval Studies in Germany

For a more detailed review, consult John Eldevik.
Medieval Germany: Research and Resources, Reference Guide 21. Washington, DC: German Historical Institute, 2006.

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Associations and Organisations

Verband der Historikerinnen und Historiker Deutschlands

Website: www.vhd.gwdg.de

Deutscher Historikertag (biennial): www.historikertag.de

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