Representations of power at the Mediterranean Borders of Europe (12th-15th c.)

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Tagungsbericht im Auftrag der Veranstalter

The department of Medieval History at Kassel University in collaboration with the Universidad Complutense de Madrid organized an international, interdisciplinary workshop on representations of power in multicultural societies of the Middle Ages. The symposium was supported by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) with funds of the Federal Foreign Office and took place on December 10 and 11, 2013. Its primary focus was on Latin Christian rulers and their responses to practices and symbols of Greek and Muslim Culture. Three regions were selected for a closer examination: southern Italy, the Iberian Peninsula, and the eastern Mediterranean. In ten lectures, experts from Italy, Spain, Germany, and Cyprus explored different aspects of the topic that Ingrid Baumgärtner (Kassel University) and Mirko Vagnoni (Florence) had put up for discussion. The workshop's aim was not only to produce comprehensive results, but also to strengthen cooperation between German and southern European researchers and to facilitate exchange between academic cultures.
Apart from being relevant to Medievalists of all disciplines, 'representations of power' proved to be an interesting topic in the light of today's issues as well. Present discussions about the European Union frequently revolve around subjects like 'European culture' and the historical origins of Europe. In Kassel, the speakers explained how medieval rulers met the need for cultural and historical affirmation especially in disputed territories.
The section on southern Italy was opened by the lecture of Errico Cuozzo (Naples) on changes in the perception and practice of falconry through Muslim influences at the Norman court during the 11th-century. Cuozzo explained, based on the treatise Dancus Rex, how falconry developed from a martial training to a demonstration of control over nature that became an essential part of courtly culture. Next Fulvio Delle Donne (Potenza) discussed cultural competence as an important sign of power at the Sicilian courts of Frederick II and his son Manfred. Through a newly developed prose style rhetorical and literary skills in particular became a mark of the ruler's and his empire's high standing. Kristjan Toomaspoeg (Lecce) utilized a perspective from frontier studies for his analysis. He examined various forms of boundary markers that where situated between the Angevin kingdom of Sicily and the papal territory during the early 13th century. Pillars, bridges, and forts were designed to promote the self-image of ruler and empire.
Then the workshop's focus shifted to the Iberian Peninsula. James Aurell (Pamplona) remarked on the frequency of self-coronations in this region. He described how their meaning changed from an act of rebellion (7th to 12th centuries) to a later practice that allowed legitimate heirs of Ara-

gon and Castile to declare their independence from the Church by crowning themselves. These highly complex ceremonies revealed a degree of secular thinking that might had been developed under the impression of Muslim rulership. In a similar vein, Maribel Fierro (Madrid) advised researchers to consider the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages in terms of a “shared culture” that connected Christians and Muslims in many ways. She discussed two tales about the founding of Castile: first, the story how Fernán González bought Castile's independence by selling a horse and a falcon to King Sancho I; second, the legend of the two judges of Castile. Fierro identified in both accounts several motifs from Muslim culture and political practice that are necessary for an understanding of the Castilian stories. Joan Molina Figueras (Girona) described how the monarchs of Aragon during the Aragonese expansion toward the eastern Mediterranean developed a strong interest in relics of saints from that region. James II, Peter IV, and their descendants acquired descriptions of relics and images of saints in the east to bring back home. The cult of relics served to bless and to legitimize the ruling dynasty. It also aided the Aragonese ambition to present their kingdom as a transcultural power in the Mediterranean. Yet another way to represent power was introduced by Rebekka Thissen-Lorenz (Kassel). Based on several sections of the famous Catalan Atlas, Thissen-Lorenz discussed how medieval maps depicted contradictory and changeable political constellations in an often equally ambiguous manner. Thus, Granada, a city under Muslim rule that was of exceptional strategic and economic importance, appears on the map under an Arabic flag but is otherwise represented by the symbol for Christian cities. Likewise Sultan Mansa Musei of Mali Empire is in contrast to his actual appearance shown carrying the regalia of Christian rulers: crown, sceptre, and orb.

The first two lectures on representations of power in the Eastern Mediterranean examined the role of architecture. Michalis Olympios (Nicosia, Cyprus) focused on buildings commissioned by the House of Lusignan on Cyprus during the late 13th century. He compared stylistic elements of Saint Hilarion Castle in northern Cyprus and Krak des Chevaliers in Syria and explained how Lusignan rulers deliberately imitated the architecture of crusaders on the mainland. The monarchs on the island, which was by then the easternmost bastion of Latin Christendom, underlined thereby their claim to the crown of Jerusalem. Margit Mersch (Kassel) analysed architecture and urban planning on Crete under Venetian rule. Taking Chania and Candia (Heraklion) as examples she examined the origins of architectural forms, of their function and symbolism, and posed the question how much influence Venetian authorities exerted on the construction of those cities. It became apparent that urban development on Crete was highly complex and incorporated Byzantine, Arabic, and Western models. Luigi Russo (Rome) discussed the early principality of Antioch under Norman rule during the first three decades of the 12th century. He called for a reassessment of 'the Normans' and their government. A closer look at social positions and political and economic goals reveals, according to Russo, a greater heterogeneity of the so called Normans than previously assumed. Furthermore, older studies on their policy tended to emphasize conflicts and warfare while there is evidence that the foreign elite regularly sought cooperation with various local groups.

Ingrid Baumgärtner and Mirko Vagnoni led the final discussion that underlined again the wide range of symbols and practices rulers utilized to represent and legitimize their power. The patterns of cultural transfers differed significantly between geographic regions, so that it is not possible to speak of a homogeneous development in the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, all lectures placed an emphasis on a dominating influence of Latin Christian culture and remarked on the lively exchange of Arabic, Byzantine, and Western symbols and customs.

By comparing many variations of representations of power in different regions the workshop made an important contribution, from which future research on the role of different cultures in the construction of political entities may benefit. The international symposium opened new perspectives on the Mediterranean through theoretically and methodically different approaches. At the very least it generated several stimulating starting points for further international and interdisciplinary study on culture, art history, and history of mentalities. The workshop's results will be made accessible to the scientific community by the proceedings that are to be published in 2014.

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