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Brigitte Funke. *Cronecken der Sassen: Entwurf und Erfolg einer saechsischen Geschichtskonzeption am Uebergang vom Mittelalter zur Neuzeit.* Braunschweig: Stadtbibliothek Braunschweig, 2001. 336 pp. No price listed (paper), ISBN 978-3-9806341-3-7.

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"Old Saxon" Attitudes

"Old Saxony"–broadly speaking, the lands lying between Weser, Elbe, and Harz–traditionally held an unhealthy fascination and promise for students of premodern Germany. In the heyday of nationalist scholarship in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the region was made the focus of a kind of alternative, "fantasy," medieval Germany, whose succession of thoroughly heroic, authentically "German" leaders, such as Widukind, Henry the Fowler, and Henry the Lion, seemed to stand in such bracing contrast to the doomed "Christian Roman" universalism of the medieval *Reich*. Not without cause were some of the region's most historically resonant sites–Verden, Braunschweig, Quedlinburg–destined to become National Socialist *Gedenkstaetten*. At the heart of the matter stood the proud Saxons themselves, who, for Hermann Loens (writing in 1907), had "preferred to bend their necks to the axe than to Frankish law and foreign ways."[1] Alfred Rosenberg was not the first to heap obloquy on their (un-German) "slaughterer," Charlemagne. A heroically self-conscious Saxon people lies at the heart of some of the most powerful and disturbing modern myths of the German Middle Ages.

Such lurid sentiments are conspicuously absent from Brigitte Funke's detailed study of historical writing in "Old Saxony" around the end of the Middle Ages. That fact is not without significance, since the elaboration in this period of a self-consciously "Saxon" past, grounded in notions of common Saxon blood, is at the root of her concerns. Funke's book, a lightly revised version of her Braunschweig doctoral dissertation (2000), focuses on the vernacular *Cronecken der sassen*, published at Mainz in 1492. Her objectives are ambitious and rather complex. Much of the book is devoted to a close examination of the *Cronecken* itself (or "themselves": Germanists remain undecided as to whether the singular or plural form was intended). The work's physical form, the relationship between text and (around 1,250) accompanying images, and the question of authorship are among the matters addressed. On the last of these points, Funke feels unable to go beyond ascribing the work to an unknown Braunschweig author, seemingly linked with the town's burgher elite (pp. 11, 158-163). Considerable labor has been devoted to tracking down surviving printings of the *Cronecken*: ninety-three are listed in an appendix.

The evidence of ownership to be found in these indicates that the chronicle reached quite a diverse public, from urban patricians and secular nobles to members of the clergy, scholars, and religious communities of both denominations–though the evidence for its penetration to lower social strata is less clear. From an early date, the *Cronecken* was circulating beyond its "Old Saxon" region of origin. For Funke, the chronicle's publication as a printed book provides a key not only to its "extraordinarily wide historiographical reception" but to its fundamental character (p. 14). Like a number of other broadly comparable histories from the same period, she contends, the *Cronecken* aimed to attain commercial success, and was

thus conceived to appeal to an anonymous, potentially diverse, reading public. What set the work apart from earlier chronicles dealing with aspects of a "Saxon" past was what Funke calls its "sowohl-als-auch" character (p. 162): the buyer was offered both a mass of locally and socially specific material–foundation myths for the principal Saxon towns, for example, or genealogical histories of the region's princely dynasties–and a coherent historical vision of the "ethnic unity" of the Saxons themselves. One specific intention of the chronicler was to link the town of Braunschweig with rulers of Saxon descent. Another was to anchor Saxon memory in its "Old Saxon" heartlands, and thus to resist the south-eastward seepage of Saxon identity into the Thuringia-Meissen zone, which the transfer of the Saxon electoral vote to the Wettiner in 1423 had threatened to bring in its wake. The range and focus of the *Cronecken* were, Funke suggests, astutely advertised on its title page in the form of nine armorials, representing the churches of Magdeburg, Bremen, Halberstadt, Hildesheim, and Luebeck, and the historic principalities of Saxony, Braunschweig-Lueneburg, Anhalt, and Brandenburg. The curious reader, whether moved by an interest in some particular locality or dynasty or by identification with a broader "Saxon" community, was assured of finding relevant materials between the chronicle's covers.

A central objective of Funke's book, however, is to examine the *Cronecken* not in isolation but in relation to a number of earlier and subsequent Saxon histories. It is here that the complexity and ambition of her project become apparent, as she sets about analyzing individually and comparatively a whole series of historical writings, alongside her monographic study of the *Cronecken*. A key aim (accomplished with considerable success) is to trace the changing ways in which Saxon identity and memory were constructed and instrumentalized by historiographers in the "Old Saxon" region, between the central Middle Ages and the post-Reformation era. Close scrutiny is accorded to the "Saxon World Chronicle" and "Braunschweig Rhymed Chronicle," both from the thirteenth century, and to the Magdeburg *Schoeppenchronik* from the fourteenth, all sources quarried in the *Cronecken*. Subsequent Saxon histories–the *Saxonia* of Albert Krantz (1520) and the "Saxon Chronicle" of Cyriacus Spangenberg (1585)–are also analyzed in depth, as are sixteenth-century revisions and continuations to the *Cronecken* itself.

The results are quite revealing, and the medieval chronicles in particular appear in a new light alongside their printed successor. Funke shows convincingly that, despite its familiar modern name (acquired in the nineteenth century), the "Saxon World Chronicle" cannot in any significant sense be considered a "Saxon" history. Instead, it is essentially a world chronicle into which, in the course of a complex textual history, diverse local materials were interpolated, reflecting the perspectives of its several clerical redactors (not all of whom were "Saxons"). The "Braunschweig Rhymed Chronicle" and the *Schoeppenchronik*, meanwhile, each drew on elements of "Saxon" history in a highly selective and fragmentary way in order to serve their own group-specific (dynastic and municipal) concerns and arguments. Elements central to any early "Saxon" history, such as the Saxons' war against Henry IV, were, by contrast, commonly marginalized or omitted altogether. None of these works, Funke convincingly shows, attained a vision of Saxon "ethnic unity" on the basis of a common imagined past comparable in breadth or coherence to the one set out in the *Cronecken*. Neither, it emerges, did the later histories by Krantz and Spangenberg, or indeed the revised editions of the *Cronecken* itself, in which the integrity of Saxon history tended to be undercut by confessional and humanistic preoccupations.

But, while Funke unquestionably has important findings to advance, extracting them from this dense book, with its workmanlike but somewhat unwieldy structure, sets the reader at times a gruelling task. From this reviewer's (unreasonably Anglo-Saxon?) perspective, her dissertation would have benefited considerably from yet further reflection, and more thoroughgoing revision and (in particular) re-structuring before going to press. The monographic, footnote-rich, no-stone-unturned handling of each individual source is, of course, an integral part of the rituals of conspicuous scholarly display required of the successful *Doktorarbeit*; and the detailed conspectus of the relevant modern literature to each text will certainly be welcomed by anyone working on these particular histories. But it does all tend to get in the way of the book's higher–or, at least, parallel–objective, of uncovering significant contrasts and comparisons between the works discussed. In places, byeways are traced in such exhaustive and labyrinthine detail that the main path of Funke's analysis is temporarily lost from view altogether. A short introductory outline of the main narrative sources from the Middle Ages and the sixteenth century bearing upon "Saxon" history would have provided some welcome context for the chronicles which Funke examines, and perhaps also a fuller, more sharply defined, view of the emergence and dissemination of elements of a common "Old Saxon" identity in the

centuries preceding the compilation of the *Cronecken*.

Indeed, the whole vexed question of "ethnic identity," and its articulation in narrative sources, would have benefited from a slightly more probing and sceptical treatment. Faced with yet another textual study of pre-modern *Bewusstseinsbildung*, the unkind reviewer is tempted to murmur "so what?" The *Cronecken* may indeed attest just such a fully formed Saxon *Stammesbewusstsein* as Funke claims (p. 251); but can we feel confident that merely the voicing of such a "consciousness" in a single, albeit influential, work constitutes a major historical phenomenon? Precisely whose Saxon consciousness would have been "formed" through acquaintance with the chronicle? How can we know? And what were the results of such a consciousness for north German society in the period? Did it cause people to behave in identifiable ways? Can it be shown to have contributed to the shaping of a political order in the region? Questions such as these might strike the medievalist as naive or unfair. Is it not enough simply to show how such ideas gained coherent expression in an important historiographical work? But these are questions which the historian of modern political identities would expect to be able to answer–and ones which medievalists and early modernists too will need to confront, if their claims on behalf of the pre-modern "ethnic" or "national" community are to carry conviction.

For what in the end pehaps most forcibly strikes the reader of Funke's book is just how fragmentary the resources available for fashioning a common "Saxon" identity were, and how partial and retarded its expression, even when set beside other political solidarities in Germany at the time. Unlike, let us say, Austrian or Bavarian (or even, more problematically, "German") collective consciousness, "Old Saxon" *Stammesbewusstsein* at the end of the Middle Ages corresponded to no distinct unit of rulership, government, common allegiance, and obligation. No princely dynasty was able to lay sole claim to the mantle of a heroic Saxon past. Towns of the region, like Braunschweig, did admittedly invoke on occasion their shared membership of a "Saxon" urban network, usually with the aim of rebuffing threats to their liberties.[2] But this was scarcely a durable or substantial basis upon which to fashion a common political identity. A little more time spent contextualizing and reflecting upon her evidence within a larger comparative framework of late medieval *Bewusstseinsbildung* would have enhanced the value of Funke's study and extended its potential readership. Nevertheless, students of medieval and Renaissance German historiography and of pre-modern political culture will find in this book plenty to repay their stamina and application. As for "Old Saxon" identity, when we observe the consequences of its far more robust modern successor, perhaps its palidity at the end of the Middle Ages is as much a cause for celebration as perplexity.

Notes

[1]. Quoted in Hans-Ulrich Thamer, "Mittelalterliche Reichs- und Koenigstraditionen in den Geschichtsbildern der NS-Zeit," in *Kroenungen: Koenige in Aachen–Geschichte und Mythos*, Bd. 2, ed. Mario Kramp (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2000), p. 832.

[2]. Bernd Schneidmueller, "Friesen–Welfen–Braunschweiger: Traeger regionaler Identitaet im 13. Jahrhundert," in *Identite regionale et conscience nationale en France et en Allemagne du Moyen Age a l'epoque moderne*, eds. Rainer Bable and Jean Marie Moeglin (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke, 1997), p. 320.

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