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Gabriele Annas. *Hoftag - Gemeiner Tag - Reichstag: Studien zur strukturellen Entwicklung deutscher Reichsversammlungen des späten Mittelalters (1349-1471).* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004. Bd. 1: 443 S. + Bd. 2: 673 S. + zzgl. CD-Rom. EUR 176.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-525-36061-3.

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Lighting up the Reichstag

Anyone studying the political history of the Holy Roman Empire in the late Middle Ages quickly encounters the "older series" (*Ã¤ltere Reihe*) of the *Deutsche Reichstagsakten*–one of the greatest mountains of raw materials for the study of Germany's medieval past that nineteenth-century editors so indefatigably heaped up. If Gabriele Annas's own monumental study of late medieval imperial assemblies rests upon–and, in the period of its coverage, approximately recalls–that vast work, her title alone signals just how substantially scholarly perspectives have shifted in the intervening century and a half.

Her core narrative and thesis are neatly condensed in her title. Out of the ("medieval") *Hoftag*–an expanded meeting of the ruler's court, where he took counsel with his high-aristocratic followers–emerged first, during the 1420s and 1430s, a "common" assembly of the embryonic estates of the Reich, more detached than before from the monarch and his entourage: the (*all*)*gemeiner Tag*. Only at the century's close, however, did this in its turn evolve into the early modern Reichstag, though a crucial stage towards its emergence had, Annas contends, already been reached with the great Regensburg *Christentag* of 1471, with which her study ends. Whereas older scholarship has blithely designated as "imperial" diets (*Reichstage*) all late medieval assemblies held under the monarch, the current consensus discerns instead a much more protracted, broadly evolutionary–though, chronologically, distinctly irregular–process, within which traditional vertical ties to the Empire's ruler persisted longer than once thought. The origins of this insight, like so many other fundamental modern perspectives on the late medieval Reich, we owe to the groundbreaking studies which, since the 1970s, have flowed from the prolific pen of Peter Moraw.[1] Annas reveals at every turn the magnitude of her own debt to Moraw, even as she seeks to refine and in some respects modify his seminal view of the pre-history of the Reichstag.

Her work, which has its origins in a dissertation written at the university of Cologne, represents a quite stupendous feat of scholarship, the fruits of more than ten years' research. The bare figures speak for themselves. The two printed volumes which form its core together run to over 1,100 pages of text. Annas's bibliography

alone weighs in at over seventy pages. Volume 1 provides an analytical account of the development of late medieval imperial assemblies, resting particularly on the study of eighty selected meetings held between 1349 and 1471. Volume 2 supports this account with an exhaustive delineation of the makeup of each of her eighty assemblies, based on a full and meticulous scrutiny of the sources. *Tag* for *Tag*, all individuals and groups known or believed to have been present are listed, under a series of systematic headings: the ruler, his entourage and officials, "foreign" powers and their envoys, the prince-electors, other spiritual and temporal princes, counts and lesser nobles and the representatives of towns and religious communities. Finally, an appended CD-ROM (the equivalent of a further thousand pages!) sets out a clear and comprehensive overview of individual participants, organized by social estate.

These detailed inventories of meetings and those who came to them (and, if it is known, those who were summoned but did not come) constitute an immensely valuable research tool, which no one concerned with the political life or constitutional development of the Reich in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries will be able to ignore. Although inevitably selective in their coverage of assemblies, focusing on the most important and the best-documented, these volumes make available an immense quantity of data in a clear and convenient form. Annas herself is at pains to stress that the objectives of her research are structural and not biographical or prosopographical, even though her findings amount to a rich resource for reconstructing individual careers and group profiles. Her approach to the material and the manner of its presentation here serve her purposes admirably. As well as delineating the social and regional makeup of individual assemblies, she is able to illuminate both fluctuations in attendance between meetings (reflecting such specific factors as location, the ruler's presence or absence, and the matters scheduled for discussion) and longer-term patterns of change over more than 120 years. Annas's findings mark a real step forward in our picture of the relations of the Empire's rulers with a wide range of individuals, groups and regional and local political communities and thus, our understanding of the role and importance in late medieval German life of that troubled and diminished institution, the imperial monarchy itself.

For Annas's own judgment on the matter, we must turn to her first, analytical, volume, which is organized in four main sections. First comes an immensely erudite survey of German historical scholarship since the nineteenth century, tracing the various ways in which medieval imperial assemblies have been understood and scrutinizing conceptions of medieval "constitutional" history more broadly. Anyone seeking an introduction to older and more recent debates around the political character of the late medieval Reich will find this a valuable primer. Occasionally, it is true, expository drive falls victim to the concern of the conscientious doctoral student to peer beneath every historiographical stone: do we really need ten densely footnoted pages on the controversial work of Otto Brunner, which is surely only of general, methodological relevance, at best, to Annas's main subject (pp. 34-44)?

The second section is concerned with the key terms and concepts which her study deploys, in both their contemporary and their modern, scholarly meanings. It is thus, once again, predominantly historiographical in approach. Annas traces the general banishment of Reichstag and its replacement, for periods before the mid-fifteenth century, by *Hoftag* as the currently favored term of art. As Moraw famously observed, "Reichstag" first appears in the sources as late as 1495, probably as an informal contraction of "Unser [that is, the king's / emperor's] und des Reiches Tag" (a point Annas reiterates on at least two separate occasions [pp. 128, 131] and a further sign that her very dense text might have benefited from a little judicious editing). The term is not, Moraw has argued, a helpful basis for understanding earlier assemblies under the ruler, which were inseparable from his court. Yet, as Annas justly points out, his own favored designation, *Hoftag*, is itself a neologism, not attested to *at all* in the late Middle Ages. Other terms are less troublesome, and more revealing of contemporary perceptions. The vernacular (*all*)*gemeiner Tag* and Latin *dieta*, increasingly common in fifteenth-century sources, each seems to signal the same growing sense of distance between court and assemblies, a key conceptual development of the period. The section also, however, underlines the grave methodological difficulty of even identifying a discrete category of assemblies, however we choose to name them, concerned with "imperial" business and distinguishable from the innumerable other meetings of the period at which the affairs of ruler and Reich would also have been aired. This problem was frankly acknowledged, though not resolved, as long ago as 1867, by Julius WeizsÃ¤cker, the first editor of the *Reichstagsakten*; and it is not one to which, so far as I could discern, Annas herself has a watertight solution (see pp. 77-97 for the discussion).

She proceeds in the third section to establish a con-

ceptual and historiographical framework for the main matter of her study: patterns of attendance at her selected assemblies. The principles, procedures and practices which surrounded these meetings in the late Middle Ages–summonses, safe conducts, representation by envoys, the costs of attendance and so on–are thoroughly and helpfully elucidated. Annas emphasizes that, whatever the duty which, in principle, still lay upon the empire's subjects to attend, by the fifteenth century powerful forces were eroding the ruler's capacity to compel their presence–not least, the protracted absence of the monarchs themselves from the German lands of the Reich and the fragmentation of those lands into a series of distinct territorial blocs (pp. 189-197). Against this backdrop Annas is able to unfold the fourth–and principal–element in her study: a reign-by-reign analysis of the composition of the assemblies themselves, locating elements of continuity and change in relation to the subject's complex historiography and particularly to the work of Moraw.

Annas traces fundamental shifts in the relationship between assemblies and the Empire's ruler, with a key focus falling in the first half of the fifteenth century, during the reigns of Rupert of the Palatinate (1400-10) and Sigismund (1410/11-37). Under Charles IV (1346-78), with whose reign Annas's study begins, assemblies still had the form of "the traditional royal *Hoftag* of the high Middle Ages" (p. 443), convening at the ruler's behest, shackled to his itinerary, their deliberations reflecting his goals and concerns. Examination of the groups and individuals who attended under Charles' son Wenceslas (1376-1400) reveals, essentially, an institution unchanged in character, though diminished in scope under the indolent and beleaguered Luxemburger. Only in the troubled final years of Wenceslas's rule in the Reich are there new straws in the wind, as a party among the prince-electors began meeting in the king's absence, ultimately to arrange his overthrow. Under his successor, Rupert, the electors established their position as an increasingly autonomous element in assemblies, the nucleus of a self-sustaining group, potentially independent of the ruler and his court. In a related development, the king's opponents, who in an earlier time would have indicated their dissent by their absence from court, are now to be found mobilizing *within* assemblies. Further key changes in Sigismund's reign–including the ruler's own protracted absence from Germany and the urgent threats menacing the Reich, particularly from the Bohemian Hussites–reinforced the growing detachment from ruler and court of assemblies addressing the Empire's affairs. This period, and the decades that followed under the Habsburgs Albert II (1438-9) and Frederick III (1440-93), witnessed the consolidation in Germany of a group of mighty princely dynasts, holding sway over vast, supra-regional "systems." These princes and the electors would constitute, in the second half of the century, the core of a nascent constitutional community of the Reich, which would engage the–commonly absentee–monarch through the Reichstag. Out of an assembly which the king's followers had attended in fulfillment of a vassalic *duty* (a *Gefolgschaftstreffen*, in Moraw's words) had emerged a meeting to which the nascent estates of the Reich came as of *right*.

Annas's account of developments thus recapitulates, in many key elements, Moraw's–though now formidably underpinned and elucidated by detailed reign-by-reign snapshots of the changing structure of meetings. His stress on the ruler's centrality to the traditional system is reaffirmed. Indeed, as Annas shows, the prospect of the monarch's personal attendance remained in the fifteenth century an important factor in drawing visitors to assemblies. Occasionally, however, her findings do challenge Moraw's account, or at least his emphasis. This applies particularly to the role of the electors, and the significance of the "king-less assemblies" (*kÂ¶nigslose Tage*: another neologism) which convened under their leadership in the fifteenth century. Whereas Moraw stressed the oppositional character of these meetings, Annas is at pains to minimize (though not wholly dismiss) this aspect, pointing out that such assemblies were often only accidentally "king-less," that they frequently convened in the monarch's name and at his behest and that the electors themselves rarely constituted a united opposition party. Structurally, in terms of those who attended, "king-led" and "king-less" meetings are shown to have differed little.

Inevitably, doubts and uncertainties remain, even (or particularly) in a work of this thoroughness. One question concerns the periodization of Annas's study, and thus her narrative of constitutional change. Charles IV's reign is treated as a datum, exemplifying the last hurrah of an old-style "medieval" regime. While this conclusion *may* hold good if his assemblies are taken in isolation, does not such a view risk obscuring the distinctive, specifically "*late* medieval" features of Charles's rule (his vast dynastic patrimony, for example, or his wide-ranging concessions to the princes)–and thus the novel and extravagant life-support system that sustained those "traditional" *Hoftage*? Indeed, a closer look at the *political* dynamics of some of Charles's assemblies

(the "Golden Bull" *Hoftage* of 1355/56 here come particularly to mind) suggests a picture of concessions, thwarted aims, and ascendant princely power which sits uneasily with Annas's principle of firm monarchical leadership.[2] In addition to this point, is not Charles' reign, with its relative absence of constitutional crises, clashes with the Church or external dangers, too unlike both what had gone before and what would follow to supply fully reliable ideal types for *any* constitutional formation, "traditional" or otherwise?

Questions of a different kind are prompted by the very survival–and, indeed, development and consolidation–of imperial assemblies during the troubled fifteenth century, a time of further crisis and retreat for the already enfeebled power of the monarchy. What, under such circumstances, were the main factors impelling attendance? Did a "fundamental consensus" of the kind posited by Moraw, here play a part in cementing adherence among the political classes of the Reich to a set of common, unifying values?[3] What role did the Empire's distinctive ideological heritage–particularly, in time of schism and heresy, its traditional ties to the doctrines of the Catholic Church–play in sustaining a concern for its affairs? The period in which the Reichstag first attained maturity was one in which many European monarchs of a more potent stamp were suppressing and curtailing parliaments and estates. How far, then, should the very weakness of the Empire's rulers, and the modesty of their court, be ascribed "positive" value in the emergence, by the end of the fifteenth century, of at least a basic core of unifying constitutional structures in the German lands of the Reich?

That Annas's book stimulates such fundamental questions is, of course, testimony to its scope and importance. Without doubt, the richly detailed materials which she has assembled will allow readers to pursue them, and other questions besides, even beyond her own judicious conclusions. This book offers more than just an examination of the medieval roots of the early modern Reichstag. It is a dissection, from the perspective of the evolving forms of imperial assemblies, of the constitutional development of the late medieval Reich itself. Its author's Herculean labors in the sources, meanwhile, make her work a worthy heir, and an indispensable companion, to those volumes of *Reichstagsakten* upon which scholars continue to depend.

Notes

[1]. For a concise summary of his views on imperial assemblies and their development see Peter Moraw, "Reichstag," *Lexikon des Mittelalters* 7, cols. 640-643.

[2]. See Heinz Thomas, *Deutsche Geschichte des SpÃ¤tmittelalters 1250-1500* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1983), pp. 240-243.

[3]. For this concept see Peter Moraw, "Bestehende, fehlende und heranwachsende Voraussetzungen des deutschen NationalbewuÃtseins im spÃ¤ten Mittelalter," in *AnsÃ¤tze und DiskontinuitÃ¤t deutscher Nationsbildung im Mittelalter*, ed. Joachim Ehlers (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke, 1989), pp. 101-102.