



Eberhard Fricke. *Die westfälische Veme im Bild: Geschichte, Verbreitung und Einfluss der westfälischen Vemegerichtbarkeit.* Muenster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2002. 336 pp. EUR 34.80 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-402-06900-4.

Reviewed by Len Scales (Department of History, Durham University)

Published on H-German (June, 2004)

Under the Linden Trees

Under the Linden Trees

There is something paradoxical—if not downright Pythonesque—in the notion of an illustrated history of the Westphalian secret courts. Not for nothing, after all, has modern German freemasonry laid claim to the legacy of this most self-consciously mysterious, avowedly “silent,” medieval institution, which met under open skies beyond the town gate. “World’s-shortest-book” quips prove, however, to be out of place, since Eberhard Fricke has managed to pack nearly four hundred illustrations into this attractive and accessible survey of the Veme (not, please, “Vehme,” still less “Feme”: Fricke is firm on this point) and its legacy. Merely the act of assembling so many images proves eloquently what I take to be one of the book’s underlying points: that the Veme’s very secrecy was a calculated, carefully-advertised strategy for drawing attention, and thus business, to the Westphalian courts. The success of this strategy has long outrun the institution whose ends it once served, and popular memory has proved tenacious, at least in the homeland of the *Freigericht*. A survey of the institution’s contemporary public profile in Westphalia—through “Veme” trees (authenticated and alleged), civic armorials, monumental chunks of outdoor furniture, memorial plaques, the names of streets, public places, *Gasthoefe*, and even a municipal car park—underlines its enduring visibility for those with eyes to see, even at the start of the twenty-first century. These modern mementoes, and others besides, are exhaustively catalogued and illustrated by Fricke.

If their existence owes much to local pride, and to the long shadow of Romantic myth-making, some roots go deeper. A colored map of the Countship of Steinfurt, dating from 1597, clearly shows a *Freistuhl*—a designated meeting place for the Veme—standing in open country south-west of the town, shaded by three meticulously painted trees (pp. 34-36). The Veme, however, had lain on the mental roadmaps of Germans long before that. The penumbra of sylvan isolation which the Westphalian courts cast about themselves was never even half the truth. Accessibility was the key to their popular appeal, and the busiest courts seldom lay far from “the king’s highway” (*konyngesstraete*). For all the connotations of folkloric archaism, or even brutalized “underdevelopment,” that cluster around the Veme, an important element of context is the growing intensity of communications—or, as Peter Moraw would say, the *Verdichtung* of German society—in the heyday of the secret courts.[1] As rumors of their sinister power spread, denizens of regions far remote from Westphalia hurried to secure their own advantage before the courts by joining the circle of sworn initiates—the “judgement-finders” (*Freischoeffen*) of the Veme. The poet Oswald von Wolkenstein journeyed from South Tirol to the Lower Rhine in order to make those contacts, with the archbishop of Cologne and duke of Berg, which would ease his way into that secretive, powerful band. The Veme’s affairs sent its ministers far and wide throughout the Reich—and beyond: in 1428, six free counts (the courts’ presiding judges) are found in Serbia, receiving enfeoff-

ment from Sigismund of Luxemburg.[2] Court sessions were themselves evidently substantial gatherings, which hundreds of judgement-finders might attend, as well as neighboring free counts and, at “public” sittings, further representatives of the *Land*. [3] Anyone familiar with medieval English institutions will be put in mind of the shire court—which drew comparable attendances, and has been ascribed immense importance as a forum not only for judicial business but for political communications and community-building.[4] The political and constitutional contexts of English judicial institutions were, of course, quite different from those of fifteenth-century Germany; but so too (and surely no less significantly) are the historiographical benchmarks against which they have traditionally been measured.

By the end of the Middle Ages, the Veme had fixed Westphalia on the German map. Hartmann Schedel, writing in 1493 in distant Nuremberg, deemed it otiose to describe in any detail the “Westphalian court, that is called secret,” since its customs and practices were “common knowledge in the German nation” (pp. 16-17 for text and image). By Schedel’s day, the court’s influence had long penetrated throughout German-speaking Europe, from the Netherlands to Livonia, from Luebeck to Salzburg. Westphalia, however, remained the hub—an important point, which complicates somewhat the familiar view of this (*koenigsfern*) region as a political backwater of the late medieval Reich. While the Empire’s rulers were seldom seen there, and their chancery dispatched relatively few documents to the region, the Veme insistently championed the imperial idea in the lands between Rhine and Weser.[5] Although the origins of the Westphalian courts are debated (a debate perhaps too little examined by Fricke), by the fifteenth century they were representing themselves as a sovereign source of imperial justice: the “chapter” of the Veme which met at Dortmund in 1430 was headed by a self-styled “free count of the imperial chamber” (p. 197). The emperor Sigismund was himself a Westphalian *Freischoeffe*—though his more cautious Habsburg successor, Frederick III, declined the honor. It is maybe no coincidence that “taciturn” Westphalia was home to a whole series of imperialist treatise-writers—Dietrich of Niem the most familiar and prolific among them—in just the period in which the Veme was at its height.[6]

But how successful is Fricke’s book in placing the Veme on maps larger or more complex than those of the *Heimatsforscher*? Are we dealing here with a serious work of historical scholarship? The publisher, Aschendorff, is associated with general and illustrated vol-

umes on Westphalian topics, but the book’s author is a well-established expert on the Veme. The illustrations, the volume’s original element, are certainly sometimes eye-opening: alone their service in rendering their subject so indisputably manifest should not be lightly dismissed. The numerous depictions of documents issued under the auspices of the secret courts are particularly illuminating, underlining the flexibility and sophistication of the Veme’s diplomatic practices, and revealing something of its impressive communications capabilities (see, for example, a letter of summons sent in 1442 to Frankfurt am Main, produced in a full fifteen copies, [p. 156]). Some effort has been made to enhance the interest of such images, by superimposing in blown-up form text passages referring explicitly to the Veme. The book’s modest format (240 x 160) and dense layout, however, combine to hinder somewhat the legibility of potentially valuable illustrations (such as Albert K. Hoemberg’s maps [pp. 35, 37]). A considerable number of the images—above all, the many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century engravings of towns connected (sometimes only tangentially) with the Veme—have little of obvious relevance to say, and appear to have been included mainly in order to fill up the volume. Some objects are handled in a surprisingly offhand way: thus, the reader, presented with the “oldest seal” of the town of Siegburg, is offered no indication even of its approximate date (p. 188). It is tempting to feel that, in a book so avowedly concerned with the visual, some of the more interesting illustrations might have been scrutinised more closely. In particular, the fascinating images to be found in the fifteenth-century “Veme book” from Soest—the sole surviving contemporary depictions of the Veme’s customs and practices—perhaps represent something of a missed opportunity (pp. 18-20, 136). One, justly famous, colored drawing shows a free count, flanked by two judgment-finders, behind a wooden table on which lies a naked sword, symbolising the court’s power of capital justice. No less arresting is another drawing in the same volume, of “Saint Charles,” or Charlemagne, legendary founder of the Westphalian courts, decked out in fifteenth-century plate armour, with crown, halo and orb, and in his right hand a large (Veme?) sword. As Fricke shows, this image was the direct inspiration for at least one, perhaps two, later drawings, now in the Muenster archives (pp. 20, 21). But what is their date? What was their significance? Perhaps these are not questions that can be answered with confidence; but it is odd that they should not at least be raised. Nor is any serious connection made between these three, Veme-related drawings and the two further portraits of Charles which immediately follow (pp. 22,

23, from Brixen and Nuremberg). Yet they too each show the monarch with a sword in his right hand—not the most usual way of portraying a medieval emperor. Does this common element not serve, above all, to underline the Frankish ruler's medieval reputation as the author of law and good order—the context for his supposed establishment of the Veme? It calls to mind, too, the monumental, sword-bearing statues of Charlemagne's paladin Roland, which proliferated in the *koenigsfern* north of Germany in the time of the Westphalian courts. All in all, then, it is a pity that the volume settles for a descriptive, rather than an analytical, approach to the rich visual materials which it presents.

On the supporting text, too, a mixed judgement must be returned. The illustrations have been grouped into six sections, each prefaced by a concentrated introductory essay ("Legend," "Reality," "Power," "Impotence," "Fame," "Posthumous Reputation"). Taken together, these constitute a dense, wide-ranging, and quite coherent survey of the Westphalian courts in historical perspective. Additional detailed information, as well as some reiteration, is provided in the captions which support the images. Fricke's text is enriched by lengthy quotations from the principal studies of the Veme, by such luminaries as Theodor Lindner, Friedrich Philippi and Hoernberg (though, regrettably, no page references are supplied). A substantial scholarly bibliography enhances the book's value as a point of entry to the subject. Yet the abiding impression is more of a scrapbook compilation of historical judgments than of a strong, synthetic overview. A more firmly-stated, and conceivably also a slightly less sanguine, unifying authorial viewpoint on this troubled and troubling late medieval institution would have been welcome. The book certainly contains much of interest and value; but it also bears within it a number of tensions which are never satisfactorily resolved: between image and text; between Westphalian and broader perspectives;

and between *Heimatkunde* and critical historical scholarship.

Notes

[1]. See Peter Moraw, *Von offener Verfassung zu gestalteter Verdichtung: Das Reich im spaeten Mittelalter* (Berlin: Propylaen, 1985).

[2]. Theodor Lindner, *Die Veme*, 2nd ed. (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1896), p. 436.

[3]. K. Kroeschell, "Feme," in *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, 4 (Munich: Artemis, 1989), col. 347.

[4]. J. R. Maddicott, "The County Community and the Making of Public Opinion in Fourteenth-Century England," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 28 (1978), pp. 27-43.

[5]. See Peter Moraw, "Vom Raumgefuege einer spaetmittelalterlichen Koenigsherrschaft: Karl IV. im nordalpinen Reich," in *Kaiser, Reich und Region: Studien und Texte aus der Arbeit an den Constitutiones des 14. Jahrhunderts und zur Geschichte der Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, ed. Michael Lindner, Eckhard Mueller-Mertens and Olaf B. Rader (Berlin: Akademie, 1997), esp. p. 70.

[6]. See Herbert Grundmann, "Politische Gedanken mittelalterlicher Westfalen," *Westfalen*, 27 (1948), pp. 5-20.

Copyright (c) 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Len Scales. Review of Fricke, Eberhard, *Die westfälische Veme im Bild: Geschichte, Verbreitung und Einfluss der westfälischen Vemegerichtbarkeit*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9446>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.