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**André R. Köller, Agonalität und Kooperation. Führungsgruppen im Nordwesten des Reiches 1250–1550. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2015**

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**André R. Köller, *Agonalität und Kooperation. Führungsgruppen im Nordwesten des Reiches 1250–1550*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2015 (Veröffentlichungen der Historischen Kommission für Niedersachsen und Bremen, 279). 727 pp., ill. ISBN 978-3-8353-1587-7. € 48.00.**

The nobilities' fortunes in late medieval Europe have predominantly been understood from the perspective of state formation and urbanisation. The extent to which the growing power of princes and cities challenged the traditional dominance and status of noble groups is the question most often asked, along with how they adapted to changing political and economic environments. Yet, not all regions in Europe experienced these major shifts to the same degree – the northern German lands in the later Middle Ages are a case in point. In his doctoral research, André Köller took up the task of determining how noble dynasties were formed and came to constitute a distinct social group in this region of the Holy Roman Empire around 1500, and his work resulted in an important and award-winning monograph.

The first word of the title, *Agonalität und Kooperation*, is derived from the Greek *ἀγών*, meaning contest, competition, or conflict, and should be understood as an antonym of cooperation in this context. Its usage signals the author's indebtedness to Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical work, who employs the word *agon* to denote the process of competition through which honour is acquired. Scholars from other sociological traditions might have been tempted to title this study *Konflikt und Kooperation*, but, in his rather lengthy introduction, Köller sets out a theoretical framework in which he complements Bourdieu's key concepts of capital, field, and habitus together with the more recent scholarly interest in emotions, thereby taking issue with rational choice models for explaining social action. One of the main questions he seeks to answer by combining sociological and cultural approaches is how, when, and why emotions determined the decisions and social actions of medieval noblemen. The noble *homo emotionalis* had to negotiate group interests while pursuing personal interests, but his affective behaviour also gave expression to the social norms of the noble 'emotional community' to which he belonged, making his social actions intelligible.

In comparison to the detailed discussion and justification of the study's theoretical approach – to which the author consistently sticks throughout the book – its methodology (for example, historical network analysis) and main sources (for example, marriage contracts) could have been elaborated in more detail. The study covers the very diverse area of the present region of Lower Saxony, which comprised the *Landesgemeinden*

and *Hauptlinge* of East-Frisia in the north, and the Guelph principalities of Brunswick and Lünenburg in the south-east, from the mid-thirteenth century to the first half of the sixteenth century. These regions were both politically fragmented and socially heterogeneous, even as – and this is one of the central theses of the book – the north-western part of the Holy Roman Empire became more integrated during this period, especially after the turn of the sixteenth century. Princes and territorial lordship came to dominate the landscape at the expense of the older rural communes and their elites. Köller shows how the emergence of cooperation, networks, and shared rules among the noble ruling groups played a role in the transformative process that led to the formation of local lordships and regional territorial sovereignty in the first half of the sixteenth century.

The first of the three analytical chapters discusses the reproduction strategies of the *königsferne* higher nobility in the north-western part of the Empire, which Köller differentiates from the lower nobility, which was defined by *Ritterbürtigkeit* and formed by knights, ministerials, and *Edelfreien* of lower status over the course of the thirteenth century. To a certain extent, these social boundaries were fluid, but at the same time the social differences between the princely and non-princely families among the higher nobility were real enough. The prominent position of princes, counts, and *Edelherren* was based on their *Ebenbürtigkeit*, the holding of royal tenures, their exercise of lordship, and their imperial immediacy (*Reichsunmittelbarkeit*); they were involved in a permanent competition for symbolic capital to maintain their position vis-à-vis each other. This created a social field within which members of the high nobility competed with each other to maintain and increase their *splendour familiae*. Hence the *Geschlecht*, the agnatic lineage, stood at the core of the high nobility's reproduction strategies, which were in practice determined by biological circumstances, the dynamics of the social field, and individual decisions in relation to the *Geschlechtsräson*. How this process played out in reality is illustrated by the author by means of an analysis of the practices of dividing the *patrimonium* among different branches, the extinction of families, and marriage strategies – for the latter, focussing both on the political, social, material, and confessional considerations that informed the choice of partners, as well as on the conventions and reciprocity of dowries. The main point is that the decisions underlying family strategies were not just based on calculation; instead, affection, emotions and (gender, individual, and collective) identities shaped the space of action of nobles, and their decisions often criss-crossed the rules of the habitus, even though the honour of the family was crucial to maintaining one's position within the social group. At certain points, one wishes that Köller

had fleshed out the social processes and the composition of noble groups in more detail, adding depth to his cultural-historical approach.

The third and fourth chapters are of particular interest for historians working on the history of the medieval Low Countries because they deal with the praxis of nobility in East-Frisia, neighbouring the regions of Friesland and the Ommelanden, where regional and local lordship did not become institutionalised until the end of the fifteenth century. Leaving aside the discussion about the continuity between the *nobiles* of the early and central medieval period and the *Häuptlinge* who emerged as a social group in the fourteenth century, Köller focusses on the question of how the latter group became integrated into the social field of the nobility in the surrounding regions, and examines the spread of lordship in the regions of the *Landesgemeinden*. The well-researched third chapter, adequately summarising the relevant literature and analysing a wide array of primary sources, gives a vivid picture of the efforts of the family of tom Brock in East-Frisia, which strategically accumulated symbolic capital to become recognised as nobility – Ocko I had been granted the title of knight by 1379 and became a vassal of the Count of Holland two years later, while his son Ocko II married a comital daughter. Ultimately, Ocko II's ambitions were smothered by his peers and the freeholders' efforts to defend the Frisian freedom, in a period characterised by feuding and complex political strife during which different families, towns, and foreign princes aligned themselves with the parties of the *Vetkopers* and the *Schieringers*. What stands out is the significance of the interference of foreign princes, such as the counts of Holland, bishops, and the Emperor himself, in the process through which the leading Frisian social groups gained access to the noble social field, as is also illustrated by the more successful rise of the family of Cirksena – Ulrich was conferred the title of imperial count of East-Frisia by Frederick III in 1464 (resulting in a durable separation from Netherlandish Frisia) and rose to the status of higher nobility. The integration of the rural communities and their social groups into the neighbouring 'sozialen Feld adliger Herrschaft and Kultur' (p. 267) around 1500 played out very differently per region, depending on the balance of power between peasant communities and lords – sometimes, cooperation was beneficial for both parties.

The fourth chapter gives insight into the intricate and entwined political, social, and confessional contexts in which Enno, count of East-Frisia, sought to consolidate his possessions and rights during the second quarter of the sixteenth century. He broke an agreement, made by his father (whom he had locked-up) after the Saxon Feud, to marry Enno and his two brothers to the daughters of *Häuptling* Edo of Jever, in order to

unite both territories. Instead, Enno accepted an agreement mediated by Cristian, king of Denmark, and Floris, count of Buren, in Utrecht in 1529, that he would marry the sister of Anton, count of Oldenburg, who, in return, would marry Enno's sister. Although this double marriage was intended to ease the tensions between the two families, Enno eventually failed to make any territorial gains out of it, and became embroiled in a conflict with the *Häuptling* of Harlingerland, who enjoyed the support of the count of Guelders. This case study demonstrates the extent to which East-Frisia had become subject to intentional politics and diplomacy, and exposes the degree of integration of the leading families into the noble social field of the German Empire. Köller concludes his detailed narration by stating that the involved nobles acted in accordance with their 'habitualisierten Eigensinn, beriefen sich auf die jeweilige Geschlechtsräson, hofften auf Profite, weshalb nicht nur die soziale Ordnung reproduziert wurde, sondern auch die Agonalität als integraler Bestandteil derselbigen' (p. 586).

The study itself is not an easy read, particularly due to the length of the chapters, which are sometimes slightly repetitive or tend to dwell on side issues in an effort to be exhaustive; an index is also arguably a prerequisite for a book that mentions so many names. It is noteworthy that the second chapter reads as a long exegesis of Bourdieu's work, to which the author refers on almost every page, in contrast to the more convincing and empirically substantiated following chapters. At times, the chapters' structure hampers the flow of the argument, which is that the social praxis of ruling groups was a game of ensuring and expanding their symbolic capital. Agonality was at the root of this competition, and the rules, cooperation, and group formation ensuing from it: 'Die sozialen Gruppen waren kein Wert an sich, sondern Mitteln zum Zweck in Rahmen der Agonalität, die durch Kooperation nicht vorübergehend oder abschließend unterbrochen wurde respektive werden konnte' (p. 592). As a consequence, the author concludes that the nobility in Frisia was 'ein Konstrukt des späten Mittelalters', brought about by political and social processes that affected the distribution of capital in the social field of the rural communes and *Häuptlinge*. In a sense, Köller seeks to reconcile and complement Bourdieu and rational choice theorists by bringing the individual actor back into the story, albeit as one whose social actions were informed by an indeterminable mix of habit, calculation, emotion, and identity. Although probably no historian would deny the latter supposition, this brave effort requires theoretical refinement and empirical scrutiny to be persuasive as an analytical and explanatory model. *Agonalität und Kooperation* stands out above all for its new and thorough contribution to the historical

knowledge of the formation of social groups in late medieval Frisia. The unexpected role attributed to political concentration in this process calls for further systematic exploration of the position of elites and communities in the regions east of the Ems.

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