

Family, Friends and Followers: Political and Social Bonds in Early Medieval Europe. By Gerd Althoff. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; pp. ix + 195. £16.99).

This is a most welcome English translation (by Christopher Carroll) of *Verwandte, Freunde und Getreue. Zum politischen Stellenwert der Gruppenbindungen im früheren Mittelalter* (Darmstadt, 1990) by the distinguished German medievalist Gerd Althoff, Professor of History at the University of Munster. Althoff's study focuses on one of the main interests of much of his previous work: the analysis of the social structures that helped to unify medieval society, and of the rituals in which these structures found their expression. He evaluates the relative importance of three social bonds he sees as crucial to social cohesion in the Middle Ages – kinship, friendship, and vassalage. Althoff's positive perception of the cohesiveness of medieval society is not novel. A number of contemporary historians writing in English, such as Barbara Rosenwein and Matthew Innes, have similar views.¹ Althoff does, though, bring great clarity and erudition to the argument that medieval European society should not be viewed as one subjected to feudal anarchy.

Althoff agrees that, if a stable society were to be defined only in terms of a modern, institutionalized state, then those proponents of a medieval 'feudal anarchy' would indeed be correct. However, he points out that in the absence of strong state institutions the stability of society was maintained by personal bonds, and that these bonds were interconnected. He also claims that these bonds were sustained by ritual actions and behaviour, in the absence of a coercive state power to enforce stability from above. Althoff studies medieval society like an anthropologist, looking at case studies of social behaviour and then deducing social norms from them. Moreover, he compares his own observations of medieval society with Tacitus' anthropological observations of German tribal society centuries earlier: 'even if there are reservations about using Tacitus' opinions too freely when seeking to understand medieval relationships, it must still be said that a great deal of what Tacitus wrote does seem to apply to the Middle Ages also' (p. 15). In effect, Althoff sees medieval society as internally coherent, with an understandable set of social rules and structures, even if they differed from those of modern society.

Althoff looks first at kinship bonds. He describes them as being fundamental to social cohesion in the Middle Ages, although he probably makes too much of the idea that kinship bonds have no importance in the modern world. He gives numerous examples of the importance of social bonds within the immediate family, and within wider kinship groups. He also demonstrates how these bonds of kinship affected wider society, and not always in a positive way. For instance, a feud between two noble families was only stopped from boiling over into war by the Merovingian queen Fredegund, who invited both families to a meal and then ordered them all to be killed

when they were drunk (p. 33). Althoff also shows how these kinship bonds changed over the course of the Middle Ages, arguing convincingly that aristocratic families became increasingly exclusive. He attributes this to the fact that the growing prevalence of ideas of primogeniture and hereditary landholding greatly strengthened the bonds of kinship within these families. Although he is at pains to show that the bonds between kinsmen took many forms, and could be weak or strong, Althoff rightly emphasises the importance of consanguinity as a factor affecting most people's actions.

In the second part of the book Althoff looks at the social bonds that existed between friends, and more specifically between those people or groups that took public oaths of *amicitia* to support each other. Althoff views these as extensions of kinship groups: 'Such bonds extended the family circle, as it were, to include friends and associates, thereby increasing the number of people who were obliged to give protection and help in any situation' (p. 65). These bonds seem to have been particularly important in keeping the peace between noble families. Leagues of nobles called *coniurationes* were even able to act together against their king. A *coniuratio* of Saxon nobles acted against Henry IV's harsh rule in Saxony, saying that they would 'rather die and sooner attempt the most extreme things than weakly lose the freedom they had inherited from their fathers' (p. 94). Thus, by stressing the importance of the unofficial private bonds of kinship and friendship, Althoff shows clearly the extent to which medieval society could be regulated and kept stable without the level of governmental power that existed in later centuries.

Only towards the end of the book does Althoff look at the legal bonds between lords and their vassals. Vassalage was another source of social cohesion, and while followers had obligations to their lords, lords also had obligations to their followers. However, Althoff sees these bonds as weak in comparison with those between family members or friends, particularly as individual vassals of the same lord had no obligations towards one another. He gives the dramatic example of Otto I's followers swearing an oath to help each other before the battle of Lechfeld. An oath such as this was taken before many battles, and Althoff writes that: 'Vassals undoubtedly swore this oath because otherwise they were not actually obliged to help one another at all. By contrast, all members of family and co-operative groups had a duty to support one another' (p. 107).

Drawing together these related but different types of social bonds, Althoff concludes with a chapter describing how such bonds were expressed in rituals. In a largely illiterate society, public gestures and rituals were the primary means of expression for social relationships. One example cited is that of Otto I and Louis IV, who entered the synod of Ingelheim in 948 at the same time in order to emphasize their equality (p. 137). As Althoff writes, all such actions 'communicated a great deal more than was possible with words alone' (p. 136). There was obviously much scope for violence

and strife in medieval Europe, yet the social bonds that could be formed between people, and groups of people, meant that society in the Middle Ages remained fundamentally stable. Underlying this society was a system of formal and informal social bonds that had their expression in rituals, because ‘a society with limited opportunities for verbal communication almost by necessity developed a wealth of signs and rituals as a substitute for words’ (p. 165).

The narrowness of the scope of Althoff’s book is notable, although the title describes the book as a study of the whole of early medieval Europe. There is a thematic narrowness: ‘human bonds and relationships can be diverse and complex, so this book will be concentrating on just a few’ (p. vii). It would have been interesting, for instance, to see what role the author thought the medieval Church played in binding society together, particularly since religious rituals such as coronations were so important. There is also a geographical narrowness as the author’s case studies come almost exclusively from German sources. This is understandable given his familiarity with this material, but it would have been interesting to see his ideas about medieval society being applied to other areas of Europe such as Spain and Italy. The greatest omission, however, is that this book makes very little mention of the lower classes in society. Althoff’s assessment of social structures is based almost entirely on the nobility and royalty, except for a brief section discussing the association of town workers in guilds (pp. 95-101). This can be explained by the fact that he relies heavily on narrative historical sources, that themselves concentrated on the rich and powerful members of society, for his evidence. Other sources such as charters and archaeological evidence could have been used to give a fuller picture of medieval society, and such sources have been used to good effect by other historians.² Yet Althoff’s book, at under two hundred pages long, is a lucid and well argued statement of his influential views on medieval society.

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NOTES:

¹ See for example, Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Negotiating Space: Power, Restraint and Privileges of Immunity in Early Medieval Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Matthew Innes and Yitzhak Hen, *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

² Good instances of this are the books in *The Peoples of Europe* series, published by Blackwells, which draw upon both archaeological and historical evidence to give a picture of different European ethnic groups; e.g., Neil Christie, *The Lombards* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).