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Book Review: Princely Brothers and Sisters: The Sibling Bond in German Politics

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JONATHAN R. LYON. *Princely Brothers and Sisters: The Sibling Bond in German Politics, 1100–1250*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2013. Pp. xiv, 294.\$65.00.

Much has been made of wider kinship networks and their roles in medieval aristocratic political life, yet little attention has been given to relations between the closest lifetime kin: siblings. Jonathan R. Lyon provides an engaging study of the most prominent aristocratic families in the German Kingdom between 1138 and 1250, making the case that networks of brothers, and sisters (to a lesser degree), served successfully to curb the authority of Staufens kings and emperors.

Lyon challenges the normative European model of lineal descent and title holding based on primogeniture by pointing out that medieval German aristocrats practiced partible inheritance. Furthermore, he emphasizes the key element of generational family size as a second factor determining the composition of medieval political communities. Should there prove to be the opportunity to endow more than one son with title and lands, goes the logic, siblings would not have been in constant conflict over inheritances, but rather enabled to function collaboratively as natural allies. Indeed, like Gerd Althoff before him, Lyon questions the received view that partible inheritance is to blame for the so-called German *Sonderweg* in which centralized authority structures did not develop by the later Middle Ages.

Lyon's point of departure is the newly reformulated politics resulting from the Investiture Controversy, in which an always fluid group of imperial princes (*Reichsfürsten*) came to consider themselves partners with, not subordinates to, the monarch in governing the German kingdom. Lyon analyzes the nine most preeminent princely lineages to emerge during the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries: Staufer (Swabia), Welf (Saxony), Wettin (Saxon *Ostmark* and Thuringia), Ascanian (Saxony), Ludowig (Thuringia), Zähringer (Swabia), Wittelsbach (Bavaria), Babenberg (Austria), and Andechs (Burgundy to Carniola). Asserting rightly that Karl Schmid's lineage formation theory only explains office and landholding, but not the role of continued nuclear family or cognatic/affinal bonds, Lyon concludes that "lineage never became a framework for organizing all intrafamilial interactions" (p. 17–18). Brothers (and only rarely, sisters, who tended to marry at a great distance from their homelands) were therefore capable of forming political alliances between their new territorial lordships. And when they did, they caused a veritable explosion of new and hereditary titles: burgraves became counts, margraves, and even dukes at times. The

wholly new invention of the title landgrave is evidence of this title inflation, with toponymic dynastic identities replacing the old administrative units of the post-Carolingian German kingdom.

Case studies of this development showcase examples of siblings who collaborated to advance their own natal family's lineages, even as they became more distant from the interests of their extended kinship networks. Concomitantly the "baby boom" of the early twelfth century assured that there would be multiple adult male siblings with overlapping political and territorial interests as well as equal claims to family rights and properties. Hence younger sons were in fact not held in abeyance as potentially unwelcome heirs-in-waiting, or placed in ecclesiastical careers as an alternative (there were remarkably few clerics in the nine dynasties studied here). These case studies are exemplary in their attention to detail, and though genealogical discourse can often be hard to follow, Lyon guides deftly. The five sons of Conrad of Wettin (1098/99–1157) and the four Wittelsbach sons of Otto I (d. 1156) provide instructive studies, and the Andechs dynasty over several generations also merits close attention. Finally, Lyon's framing of Emperor Frederick I and Duke Henry the Lion as sibling-poor cousins in an "Age of Brothers" (p. 89) sheds new light on the dynamics of their famous political conflict. We are also wisely reminded more than once that there was precedent in the German kingdom for younger brothers, like Conrad III and Otto IV, ascending the throne.

Lyon does, however, recognize that partible inheritance, while amenable during the "baby boom" era of the early twelfth century, did lead in the long run to the fragmentation of family patrimonies. Thus the *Sonderweg* thesis is not entirely overcome by this research. Indeed, there may be too much weight put on this first generation of the Staufens period, which looks quite atypical when compared to those of other eras. Furthermore, there needs to be more evidence for sibling agency at the imperial court. Appearances on imperial charter lists are evidence of *Königsnähe*, but not necessarily of concerted sibling collaborations for specific goals. Similarly, nine elite families of about one hundred men over a 150-year period is a rather thin base on which to build broad assertions about the development of the medieval German aristocracy. Did the demographically larger lower aristocracy (*niederer Adel*) share the same social and political trajectory as the elites of the early Staufens upper aristocracy (*Hochadel*)? And since most of the episcopal clergy were drawn from local aristocratic families, they could serve equally well as examples of sibling collaboration (e.g., the powerful brothers Archbishop Walram of Cologne and Duke William of Jülich). Nonetheless, this book is definitely evocative and important. May it inspire others to join Lyon in further sharpening our vision of the roles that siblings played as allies rather than enemies in shaping the politics of their time.

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