

Gerhard Wolf/Norbert H. Ott (eds): *Handbuch Chroniken des Mittelalters*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2016 (De Gruyter Reference). VIII, 1042 p., 30 plates. € 149.95/\$ 210.00/£ 136.50. ISBN: 978-3-11-020627-2.

The *Handbuch Chroniken des Mittelalters*, co-edited by Gerhard Wolf and Norbert Ott and published in De Gruyter's well-established 'Reference' series, is a handbook that sets out explicitly to fill a gap in the academic book market. It is indeed the first publication of its kind to provide, to borrow Wolf's own words, a structural survey of the different genres and regional contexts of medieval chronicle writing in Europe and parts of the Orient ('einen Überblick über die verschiedenen Gattungen und Regionen der mittelalterlichen Chronistik in Europa und dem angrenzenden Orient'; 43). This it does largely successfully, thus taking pride of place alongside existing reference works and journals such as the two-volume *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle* and the periodically published proceedings *The Medieval Chronicle* (eleven issues so far; both works published by Brill). There can be no doubt that a major achievement of the book and its editors lies in bringing together the perspectives of nearly thirty experts in the fields of medieval historiographical and literary production within a solidly produced and accessible volume (there is also an ebook version available, which certainly will prove useful and popular as a study resource for university students). Rather than discussing all twenty-six chapters individually – something which, for reasons of space and scope, could not be done here in such a way as to do justice to the contributors –, this review will concentrate chiefly on the book's conceptual design and structure as a whole, as well as on its contribution to scholarship in the field(s) to which it pertains.

A logical place to start is the Introduction (Einleitung, 1–44) by Wolf. Divided into four sections (and their respective sub-sections), Wolf addresses, in the following order, the book's subject matter (Gegenstand, 1–12), its key terminology (Chronikbegriff, 12–31), the chronological, spatial and thematic framework (Zeitlicher, räumlicher und inhaltlicher Horizont, 31–42) and, finally, the current state of research (Zum Stand der Forschung, 42–43) – note that one page is reserved for a handful of general notes to the reader (Lektürehinweise, 44). To begin with, the two pages given to the fourth and final section seem slightly too few to warrant a dedicated subheading, and perhaps

it would have made more sense to incorporate these comments and observations into the preceding sections. Indeed, they would have sat rather comfortably in the discussion on the volume's subject matter, where Wolf traces, with admirable brevity and succinctness, the main developments in historical writing from ancient Egypt to the later medieval and early modern periods.

Indeed, Wolf's Introduction is a useful and clearly written survey that draws attention to some of the most influential writers and their works from the period(s) covered by the volume, though any such attempt must, by necessity, remain highly selective, rather than aiming to be comprehensive. Having treated the so-called 'birth' of Christian historiography in late Antiquity and the in many ways seminal tradition of 'origin myths' (*origines gentium*), the Introduction then moves on to a more methodological discussion of the term 'chronicle' (Chronik) and its use and/or misuse in modern and contemporary scholarship. As Wolf makes clear (26), his aim is not to revive the long-standing discussions and debates surrounding questions of genres and if/how these can be distinguished usefully (if at all), but to offer a critical overview of the main terminological, categorical and pragmatic caveats connected to the study of medieval chronicles and historical writing more generally. This he does with great precision and insight throughout, and there are only a few aspects that invite criticism.

The first point of critique concerns the fact that Wolf's discussion is based, first and foremost, in German (or German-speaking) scholarship, with a few notable exceptions such as Hayden White and Graeme Dunphy (the latter of whom is, of course, based in Germany and highly fluent in its vernacular). Whilst there can be no doubt that German(-speaking) scholars have made crucial contributions to the debates treated here, it certainly would have been preferable to see Wolf cast his linguistic net a little more widely when offering his synthesis of scholarship in a European context. Indeed, much of what is offered is rooted firmly in the substantial oeuvre of one German medievalist in particular, Hans-Werner Goetz, so much so that parts of Wolf's discussion resemble a reiteration of Goetz's main arguments (see, e.g., 24–25, with no fewer than six successive footnotes referring to the same work). Some readers might have wished for greater variety and intellectual emancipation here.

At the same time, it is quite unfortunate to see the pertinent works of some other scholars sidelined by comparison, to the degree that, in one particular instance, the author's first name is misspelled consistently (e.g., 16: read Gert

for Gerd). Finally, there are a number of rather questionable choices and/or justifications throughout the Introduction's second section; for example, annals are dismissed confidently and categorically as non-narrative texts, even though one could easily think of a handful of examples of medieval annalistic writing that exhibit, and indeed showcase, precisely such narrative qualities. Equally perplexing is the exclusion of (auto)biographies and *vitae* with the justification that they, supposedly, reveal no interest in historical events or continuities – a claim which is defied fundamentally by the works of, for example, Eadmer of Canterbury (particularly his *Vita Anselmi* and *Historia novorum in Anglia*, both of which are works of hagiography as much as they are works of historiography). Last but not least, using Geoffrey of Viterbo as the prime (and only) named example of the *prosimetrum* – an elaborate classical style of composition that combined prose with verse, and which was adopted by several earlier medieval writers such as Boethius and Dudo of Saint-Quentin – seems somewhat arbitrary.

In the Introduction's third section, Wolf defines the chronological, linguistic, spatial and thematic framework for the case studies that follow. The discussions and explanations provided here are compelling, though it should be noted that some of them are evidently (and at times explicitly) owed to the discipline-specific academic background of the two editors, both of whom are philologists – for example, the chronological extension into the seventeenth century, which stretches the definition of 'medieval' applied by most historians. It is precisely this philological and linguistic expertise that makes the sub-section on the 'linguistic-geographical horizon' (Sprachlich-geographischer Horizont, 35–39) extremely useful as a concise and highly insightful debate on the limits (or lack thereof) of medieval historical and literary culture both within and beyond Europe. If anything, one might have wished for this discussion to be given more space, though this might well have been impossible or impractical within the scope of an introductory chapter.

Turning to the subsequent contributions, the volume once more reveals itself as decidedly Germano-centric, significantly more so than is suggested *prima facie* by its title. This is true of both the list of contributors, the majority of whom are eminent German medievalists from a range of disciplines, and the relative distribution and arrangement of chapters according to their respective linguistic and geographical context(s). No fewer than eleven out of twenty-six chapters (42%) are dedicated specifically to German chronicles,

nine to so-called ‘European chronicles’ – a slightly odd terminological distinction, which seems to imply that somehow Germany (or rather its medieval equivalent) was not actually part of Europe –, three to Latin chronicles and two to Arabic and Indo-Persian chronicles. In addition, there is a fifth section on ‘visual chronicles’ (Visualisierte Chronik) which, however, only features a single chapter. This is a shame, given that visual (or visualised) historical narratives such as, for example, illustrated chronicles (*chronica picta*) are a highly fascinating subject which has yet to receive the comprehensive and wide-ranging treatment it deserves within a European context – Claudia Meier’s well-received monograph *Chronicon Pictum* (2005) has certainly made a commendable start here, though much more remains to be discovered for future generations of scholars.¹ As it stands, Tobias Tanneberger’s otherwise excellent chapter on visualised genealogy and its narrative argumentation (521–540) unfortunately seems a little forlorn within the book’s chapter structure, being singled out and situated awkwardly between two much larger sections. This important section certainly could (and probably should) have been augmented with additional contributions.

Similarly, it is surprising to see that a handbook on medieval chronicles should dedicate no more than three out of twenty-six chapters (12%) to Latin historiography – arguably by far the most common and prolific language of historical composition in Europe during the early and central Middle Ages at least until the later twelfth century. The three chapters included in this section are eminently written, opening with Alheydis Plassmann’s excellent discussion of *origo gentis* narratives (47–75), continuing with Roman Deutinger’s well-structured survey of Latin world chronicles (Weltchronistik, 77–103) and concluding with Heike Johanna Mierau’s entirely convincing chapter on papal-imperial chronicles (Papst-Kaiser-Chroniken, 105–126). Chronologically speaking, this means that there is exactly one chapter in this section dedicated to the early, central and later Middle Ages, respectively – though Plassmann’s chapter transgresses these chronological boundaries in a welcome way. Surely, the predominance of medieval Latin Europe’s *lingua franca* and the vast tradition of historiographical literature it generated over the centuries would have merited the inclusion of additional

1 C. A. Meier: *Chronicon Pictum: Von den Anfängen der Chronikenillustration zu den narrative Bilderzyklen in den Weltchroniken des hohen Mittelalters*. Mainz 2005.

chapters here which could have addressed either larger developments or specific case studies.

Indeed, when we turn to the book's second and largest section, we can see that this is exactly what has been done to great effect with regard to medieval German chronicles. Here, we find a well-balanced and nuanced combination of thematic chapters, for example, those by Stephan Müller (129–143), Joachim Schneider (225–265) and Peter Johaneck (337–398), at the same time as chapters on specific texts such as those by editor Norbert Ott (181–196), Gesine Mierke (197–224) and Thomas Martin Buck (447–481). The equilibrium achieved in this section by the two editors through their careful curation and arrangement of diverse yet in many ways complementary chapters is admirable, and it would have been preferable to see a similar rationale being applied more consistently throughout the remainder of the volume. This is not to cast a negative light on the remaining sections on European and Arabic/Indo-Persian chronicles, however. If anything, these are marked by a series of extremely readable and, at the same time, content-rich surveys of different European historiographical and literary traditions, particularly those by Sverre Bagge (543–574), Geert Claassens (577–608) and Brigitte Burrichter (663–706). All nine contributors to this section must be congratulated for their work, as must the two authors of the final section, Kurt Franz (867–950) and Stephan Conermann (951–988).

All in all, the *Handbuch Chroniken des Mittelalters* is a book that must be warmly welcomed. Though not without its conceptual and structural problems, which have been outlined in this review, it will without a doubt make a significant and lasting contribution to the study of chronicle writing in medieval Europe, albeit more so in some geographical and linguistic areas than in others. The two editors certainly should be applauded for having assembled such a fine array of scholars whose combined knowledge and expertise succeed in making this handbook a reader-friendly reference work and useful study companion.

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