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THE CONCEPTS OF TYRANT AND TYRANNY IN MEDIEVAL POLITICAL DISCOURSE**

REFLECTIONS ON A NEW BOOK DEVOTED TO THE PROBLEM
OF THE TYRANT AND TYRANNY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

GOLD, J., C. SCHANZE, AND S. TEBRUCK, EDS. 2022. *TYRANNENBILDER: ZUR POLYVALENZ
DES ERZÄHLENS VON TYRANNIS IN MITTELALTER UND FRÜHER NEUZEIT* [IN GERMAN].
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The concept of power and authority is one of the central motives of the so-called “new political history” (Le Goff, 1981). The approach to rulership as a complex social phenomenon, not reducible to formal institutional design of the state or society, has allowed historians to immerse deeper into the understanding of how the political systems of various communities functioned in a historical period. Going beyond the study of the institutional framework of the state and its legal system, historians began to pay considerable attention to the very concept of power, its content and functioning in different historical periods. Medieval history traditionally was a “methodological laboratory” in this research field. Particular interest in the European Middle Ages in this regard is largely due to the desire to determine how the political system functioned in pre-modern society. Starting with the studies of Mark Bloch (Bloch, 1924), Ernst Kantorowicz (Kantorowicz, 1946; 1957), and Percy Ernst Schramm (Schramm, 1954–1956), the study of medieval perception of rulership has given us hundreds of works devoted to the issues of representation of power, its self-determination, communication with society, and the formation of its political space. One of the central motifs of medieval perception of rulership is the concept of “tyrant”. Attracting the attention of researchers of political thought in the 19th century

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(R. W. Carlyle, A. J. Carlyle, 1903), the topic of the perception of tyranny turned out to be especially relevant in the context of research on the “new political history”, nevertheless such a multifaceted phenomenon can hardly be called fully explored¹.

The idea of a bad ruler responsible for the dysfunction of the political system was formed in ancient philosophy, especially by Plato, Aristotle and Cicero. It became especially relevant in the medieval era, in connection with the active entry of Christian doctrine into political practices. The reception of ancient political thought, the appealing to the Holy Scriptures and the rich political context of the medieval era forms a complex, often contradictory and heterogeneous set of views on church and secular power, their nature, purpose, forms of legitimation, methods of communication with the elite and the people. Medieval political thought, if it could be discussed as a whole in the strict modern sense of the word, was in fact inseparable from ethics and theology and therefore reasoning about virtues and vices played a colossal role in its system. The adaptation and development of the concept of tyrannical rule goes hand in hand with the profound structural changes that engulfed the entire political and social system of the Mediterranean and Europe in the early Middle Ages. The Roman late imperial political structure, overgrown with a complex, multi-level bureaucratic apparatus, is being replaced with seemingly primitive, but stable forms of government, which are based on a system of personal and inter-clan, hierarchical relations of various political subjects: the king, the nobility, the clergy. The atomization of society, the deprivation of the people of political subjectivity, the convergence of the power structure with the church organization, the strengthening of the role of the Church as the “ideologist” of power led to the emergence of new ideas that actually legitimize the established political and social order. The search for an ideal political system, so topical in ancient political thought, is a thing of the past: for medieval political thought, monarchy is the only possible form of government. That is why the central figure in the political discourse becomes the king (emperor) as the executor of God’s will on Earth. The function of the good king in his every political action is to establish within the social order a justice that mirrors the perfect unchanging celestial order. He is the human exponent of God’s law, and his role is to imitate Lord’s rule of the universe. And for

¹It is not possible to indicate in the review all the researches devoted to tyranny, a more complete list of published works with a detailed historiographical analysis can be found in the introduction to the reviewed volume. See, e.g.: Mandt, 1990; Green, 1993.

this reason, the inconsistency with this moral content, as well as its complete opposite, remain the focus of attention of medieval intellectuals.

Investigation of the tyrants and tyranny in this regard is the key to understanding how power existed, what it is determined to be and how it functioned in the perception of medieval society. The depiction of the nature of the tyrant and his actions or the functioning of tyranny and their evaluation are generally undertaken from an external perspective, which already refers to the functional and instrumental potential of the terms “tyrant” and “tyranny”. One of the latest volumes devoted to the problem of the tyrant and tyranny in the Middle Ages is *Tyrannenbilder: Zur Polyvalenz des Erzählens von Tyrannis in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, edited by Julia Gold, Christoph Schanze and Stefan Tebruck (University of Giessen) (Tyrannenbilder, 2022). The volume became the result of the conference *Polyvalenz der Tyrannis. Figurationen eines Herrschaftskonzepts in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* that took place 24–26 September 2018 in castle Rauischholzhausen, representing a collection of more than twenty case-studies made by a group of German historians in which the Medieval and Early Modern concept of a bad ruler is analyzed using examples of specific images and narratives. The articles of the volume are united by a common theoretical framework: the political categories “tyrant” and “tyranny” are considered as a form of reflection on the political system, its functioning, normative restrictions and ways to overcome its deviation.

The scale of the volume and variety of sources analyzed by a team of authors is striking. Medieval political treatises, commentaries on the Holy Scriptures, liturgical texts, chronicles, epics, lives of saints, letters, plays and even cinema have become the objects of the authors’ research. The researchers answer a host of questions related to the reception of tyrannical rule in medieval culture. Some of them address questions that are already classical for studies on the history of political thought: what is the nature of the power of a tyrant, what biblical images are used by medieval authors to construct the image of a tyrant, how ideas about tyranny develop as ideas about power and rulership transform, is it permissible to commit a regicide over a tyrant and under what conditions, is a pagan ruler able not to be a tyrant? Others are more likely to address the functioning of the image of a tyrant in literature: what is the role and plot trajectory of a bad ruler in hagiographic and instructive literature, can a tyrant have good qualities or is he presented as a negative caricature figure, what distinguishing features and actions allow the reader to conclude that the character is a tyrant? Also, the authors pay special attention to

the very concepts of “tyrant” and “tyranny,” their distribution in language and literature, the search for analogues in vernacular languages. The concept of wicked rulership in the context of ecclesiastical authority is not left without attention: in which terms and to what extent the medieval authors could define the papal rule as tyranny? Therefore, reflection on the political system and rulership as an abstract category was largely embodied in personalized images of the ruler. As the authors themselves write (Tyrannenbilder, 2022: 9):

In any case, the attribution “tyrant” is a category of exclusion and demarcation, which evokes an “us against him” constellation both on the level of the text and on the level of reception.

Articles devoted to specific cases are preceded by a detailed introduction, in which the authors reflected the complex methodological observations of their research, presented a very extensive list of already published works devoted to the image of a tyrant and tyranny, and also described in general terms the evolution of ideas about wicked rulership. In my humble opinion, the introduction is a bit lacking an immersion in the broader context of the development of medieval political thought, taking into account the political and sociocultural changes that accompany the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages and from the Middle Ages to the early Modern period. Such a description, albeit not claiming to be complete, would allow the authors to better orient the reader in the system of ideas about power and domination, so it might be much easier to understand specific author’s case studies. Moreover, this would greatly facilitate the task of the authors themselves, since most of them have to turn to the political and cultural context of the creation, distribution and functioning of the sources they analyze.

The volume is divided into three parts, each frames a certain period, source genre or scientific approach. The first section combines articles devoted to the study of images of tyrants in narrative and prescriptive sources. The specificity of the sources studied by the authors is determined by the fact that all of them are aimed at communication with the rulers, and therefore, they represent a kind of instruction on what should be avoided in the government. Daria Jansen (University of Tuebingen) and Hans-Joachim Schmidt (University of Freiburg) refer in their research to the Old Testament images of Nimrod, Judith and Holofernes, their reception and evolution in the medieval intellectual environment. Christian Buhr (University of Würzburg) and Elke Ukena-Best (University of Heidelberg), referring to hagiographic

material, consider how the image of a bad ruler is constructed and its functions in relation to the story arc of a saint. Gesine Mierke (Technical University of Chemnitz), Mathias Herweg (Karlsruhe Institute of Technologies) and Julia Gold (University of Giessen), exploring the German chronicles of the 12th–14th centuries, examined educational role of the images of tyrants, paying attention to violent painful deaths and mental deviations as elements of the bad ruler’s narrative construction. Marion Darilek (University of Tuebingen), Matthias Standke (University of Paderborn), Thomas Poser (University of Zurich) and Michael Schwarzbach-Dobson (University of Cologne), studying medieval literature through the prism of cultural studies, investigated the problem of forming the image of a tyrant as a part of storytelling. The focus of their research is the inhumanity of the tyrant, the opposition of the images of a good and bad ruler, as well as the intra-plot communication of rulers and philosophers (wise men).

The second section, called “tyrant in political conflict” depicts both the strategies in which the term “tyrant” could be purposefully used and the performance logic of the tyranny image. Christian Stadelmaier (University of Giessen), Albrecht Dröse (Technical University of Dresden), Oliver Landolt (Schwyz), Alexander Jendorff (University of Giessen) and Markus Debortol (University of Innsbruck) drew attention to the discourse of tyranny, that is applied in various political realities, either by pointing to a deviation from the intended ideal in political practice, or forming a conceptual framework in which the tyrant is presented as a counterexample. Started with the image of tyrant as the instrument of Carolingian “renovatio” propaganda, the chapter continues with the “papal tyranny,” shows tyranny as an image of “foreign” in the construction of Swiss national identity or political entity of Europe, or the usage of “tyranny” terminology in the way of stigmatization and marginalization that supports and accompanies legal arguments. DS Mayfield (University of Heidelberg) and Giulia Frare (Ca’ Foscari University of Venice) are dedicated to Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* and Gryphius’ *Leo Armenius* to depict the discourse of tyranny and those meanings that reflect the image of a tyrant in the drama of the Early Modern period. This section ends with the article of Till Nitschmann (University of Hannover) that deals with the modern reception of medieval and early modern images and forms of rulership, which are presented in a rigorous political negotiation process. The investigation of the image of Jeffrey Baratheon from the *Game of Thrones* series leads the author to the conclusion that the author and showrunners built the whole image of the world of Westeros as the absolute opposite of modern Western democracy.

The third part, much shorter than the previous two sections depicts the development of the image of tyrant and its linguistics aspects during the early modern period. Karl Gerhard Hempel (University of Salento) explores the way German humanists adapted and transformed the tyrant discourse in their German translations of ancient texts. An article by Johannes Kaus Kipf (University of Munich) questions the specific use of the word “tyrant” in the writings of Martin Luther and explores how and to what extent this word could become a key concept for Luther’s political theology. Both studies address the question of how the discourse of tyranny is transferred to the vernacular language.

The structure of the volume is a little puzzling due to its disproportion and scatter of similar research topics in different blocks. More harmonious and logical should be the division into blocks that was formed during the conference itself, with a more detailed division into blocks depending on the type of sources under study. For example, it would be appropriate to divide the block “the image of a tyrant in narrative and normative texts” into three parts, setting apart the studies of the chronicles and epic from the studies of the biblical and hagiographic tradition, and to separate into another chapter the articles devoted to the image of a tyrant in discourse and ideology.

The variety of approaches and methods used by the authors, directed to the study of the categories of “tyrant” and “tyranny,” made it possible to reveal a very complex and multifaceted, but at the same time rather monolithic structure of the image formed in the Middle Ages. The main characteristic feature that distinguished a tyrant from a good ruler is his deliberate opposition to God, caused by pride. The tyrant rebels against the Lord, rejects the order established by Him, pursuing his own earthly goals. He is overcome by other vices, among which anger, greed and cruelty are especially common in medieval sources. He elevates of power through usurpation, rules without advice and assistance, his obsession often manifests itself in the form of mental insanity, even reflected in his inhuman, beastlike appearance. His reign is always short, full of wars and rebellions, and a sudden, painful, violent death awaits him, what will inevitably be followed by Divine punishment. Even more interesting is the revealed variety of contexts in which the image of a tyrant and the idea of tyranny are used. The image of a tyrant can be an invitation to talk about the sinfulness of secular power, an appeal that legitimizes the rebellion and overthrow of the ruler, an example “ex negativo” for the ruling elites, an instrument of church propaganda, a figure that sets off the image of a righteous man,

a saint or a good ruler in literature, and even a construct that acts as one of the foundations of the community's identity.

The potential for further study of the topic is huge. It remains to be hoped that the authors of the collection will not limit themselves to a one-time conference on the image of a tyrant and ideas about tyranny, and the result of their work will be more than one volume that will expand the chronological and geographical scope of the study area. On the one hand, addressing the problem of tyrannical power in late antiquity and early medieval period will allow to better understand how ideas about power spread and evolve, which ideas and images cease to be relevant, and which acquire a "second life" as political systems transform. In this regard, it would be especially interesting to pay attention to the Merovingian, Visigothic, Anglo-Saxon and Early Irish tyranny-discourse and the extent of its influence on Carolingian concept of rulership. On the other hand, research on the image of tyrant in the Orthodox Byzantine and Russian, as well as in the Muslim tradition, would significantly expand the context in which the ideas of tyrannical rule developed, spread and applied in practice. This would make it possible to have a much richer field for comparison, to trace the similarities and differences in the functioning of the concept at the level of political ideology, genre features, literary topoi, practical application, and a variety of language forms.

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ПРЕПОДАВАТЕЛЬ

РОССИЙСКАЯ АКАДЕМИЯ НАРОДНОГО ХОЗЯЙСТВА И ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОЙ СЛУЖБЫ (МОСКВА)

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РАЗМЫШЛЕНИЯ НАД НОВОЙ КНИГОЙ
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TYRANNENBILDER : ZUR POLYVALENZ DES ERZÄHLENS VON TYRANNIS IN MITTELALTER
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