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Ottonian Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg

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Thanks to the survival of four high quality narratives from the tenth and eleventh centuries, Widukind of Corvey's *Rerum gestarum Saxonicarum*, Thietmar of Merseberg's *Chronicon*, Lampert of Hersfeld's *Annales*, and Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, we know today much more about the Saxon *gens*, the newcomer to the Frankish realm, than of the other component peoples of the east Frankish kingdom which became Germany: the Bavarians, Franconians, Lotharingians, and Swabians. The works of Thietmar and Adam are also rich in information about Scandinavia and about the western Slavs, that is, the Poles, the Abodrites, the Liutizi, the Milzeni, and other Slavic socio-economic groups who were beginning to adjust to Saxon political pressure, or to resist it, and to the Christian missionary faith in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

It has long been recognised that in his *Chronicon*, Bishop Thietmar of Merseburg (1009-1018) was one of the more acute observers of imperial politics in their relation to Italy, the papacy, France, and the East; and of the internal state of Germany under the contemporary emperors, Otto II (976-983), Otto III (983-1002), and Henry II (1002-1024), the last of whom was a personal friend. Thietmar was also a keen commentator on Saxon society, especially in its rather violent confrontation with Slav neighbouring tribes, a process in

which he was personally involved as a Saxon aristocrat and as a bishop of Merseburg. Much of his text is involved with the spiritual and political life of the *Reichskirche*, the imperial church. Thietmar himself exemplified the model of a young nobleman trained for those ecclesiastical careers which were so powerful in local and imperial politics; in many ways the bishops and richer abbots were the mainstay of imperial rule in Germany at this time. His percipience breaks through again and again in the text, to reveal the personal inner and outer conflicts he suffered as an inadequately spiritual pastor; as a servant of the crown which had in fact done damage to his own see, suppressed for obscure reasons in 981 and then restored in 1004; and as a proud member of a rich Saxon dynasty with connexions into the highest society of Franconia and Swabia as well.

Thietmar's concern for everything around him that he could usefully observe and record renders him one of the most interesting of all medieval chroniclers to read today. Not only is he informative and instructive on what he ought to know about, that is, imperial business, ecclesiastical politics, the Saxon scene, and the view beyond, into the Slav, Scandinavian, and Italian spheres, but he is also sensitive to manifestations that make medieval life real to modern people: the piety of his contemporaries, gossip about the women and men of his time, the shockingly violent feuds amongst the members of the magnate class, judicial duels and offhand homicides, extraordinary phenomena of a medical nature, and so on. Once he was put in charge of the diocese of Merseburg in 1009, there is a good deal of material about the running of his priests and his episcopal lands, most of the time proving a great trial to him. There is, for example, even a rising by the peasants when a miscreant 'dared to attack and destroy one of my estates with a servile mob' (p. 374).

Before delving further into the text, we should consider what Professor Warner offers us in this successful and well-produced translation. It matches other good volumes in the Manchester Medieval Sources Series such as Timothy Reuter's *The Annals of Fulda* (1992). Warner's introduction is quite long, sixty-four pages, and helpfully expounds themes so prominent in Thietmar's text: Ottonian government and society; the office of the emperor and the imperial church; kingship, politics, and the sometimes disruptive effects of royal power; and Thietmar's life and career. Warner also writes about Thietmar's awareness of social distinctions and of the political role of women in his time.

Taken with Karl Leyser's *Rule and Conflict in an early Medieval Society. Ottonian Saxony* (1979), Timothy Reuter's *Germany in the Early Middle Ages c. 800-1056* (1991) parts 2 and 3, and Boyd Hill Jr's *Medieval Monarchy in Action. The German Empire from Henry I to Henry IV* (1972) pp. 17-59, Professor Warner's 'Introduction: Thietmar, Bishop and Chronicler' provides a thoroughly useful survey of the Ottonian era (919-1024) in German history. In the translation, the frequent footnotes are extremely helpful. For example, long passages of the Annals of Quedlinburg are quoted where they run parallel to and flesh out Thietmar's own text. We also get Gallus Anonymous' twelfth-century version (pp. 184-85, note 131) of what was supposed to have happened in Poland during the visit of Emperor Otto III in the year 1000. And there are other examples such as citations from the letters of Brun of Querfort. The genealogical tables, maps, bibliography, and index provide what one would expect from a translated text done to high standards.

One benefit of such translations is that they assist in opening our ear to the thought-world of medieval times. For instance, Thietmar reports (p. 170) a monstrous birth that was supposed to have occurred in southern Germany in 994 or 995. The infant had the appearance of a goose from the waist down, and was deformed in various ways in the upper part of its body. The creature was baptised, and died four days later. We are told that 'because of our misdeeds, this monster brought a great pestilence'. In this manifestation and in other events, Thietmar shared a common belief in celestial signs portending misfortune. Many times in his text he reports dreams, visions, and daylight apparitions experienced by important persons, secular and ecclesiastical, which indicated to them the proper courses of action to be taken forthwith, or were in other ways minatory. He also believed that animals might be sent by divine direction to punish humans for their misdeeds. So we need to ask whether educated churchmen such as Thietmar were superstitious, or merely reflected the usual mental modes of the tenth and eleventh centuries.

As a writer, Thietmar exhibited a flair, probably unconscious, for set pieces, dramatic interludes which function more or less as fine stories detached from the main flow of the text. For example, he introduces Ch.

23 of Book II (pp. 108-09) with 'Although I may rightly be blamed for disturbing the order of events, it will be useful to add here an account of how . ' and then the author goes on to tell an extraordinary tale of how Archbishop Brun of Cologne, Otto the Great's brother, was misled into a plot to hand back Lotharingia to the French, a foolish plan scotched in the nick of time by the archbishop's sagacious secretary. The explanation for this story remains lost. Another good example is the account of the battle in 982 against the Arabs in Calabria, a disaster from which Otto II barely escaped by the sea (pp. 143-46). This thrilling episode has already been translated by Boyd Hill Jr. in his *Medieval Monarchy in Action* (pp. 169-72). Another is the story of how Archbishop Adalbert of Magdeburg and Duke Hermann Billung of Saxony temporarily fell out of favour with the emperor because the archbishop had received the duke with royal honours at Magdeburg (pp. 112-13). It was Thietmar's maternal grandfather, Count Henry of Stade, who was so shocked that he travelled to Rome to report the pair to Otto the Great. Then there was the trial by combat in 979 when, according to Thietmar, Count Gero of Alsleben was wrongfully done to death after failing to be able to fight the combat to the finish (pp. 133-34). Emperor Otto II was legally in the right to have him executed, but was upbraided for it by his counsellors, Duke Otto of Bavaria and Count Berthold of Schweinfurth.

Not surprisingly, Thietmar took a professional interest in condemning the pagan superstitions of his Slav neighbours. One of the best pieces concerns the Redarii and the Liutizi (pp. 252-54): 'Although I shudder to say anything about them, nevertheless, in order that you, dear reader, may better understand the vain superstitions and meaningless worship of this people, I will briefly explain who they are and from whence they have come'. So we hear about their holy forest, their castle-temple of Riedegost with its decorations and idols, the habits of their priesthood, the nature of the sacrifices and the casting of lots, and so on. Such ethnographic information is very valuable because Slavic religious custom of this nature was to die out by the twelfth century.

Thietmar took good care to defend the status of bishop throughout his text. He thought it right that the emperors 'who, after the model of the Lord, exceed all other mortals through the glory of the benediction and crown' (p. 87) should govern the bishops in the pre-Gregorian mode and protect their interests from exploitation by counts, margraves and dukes, so many of whom come up as a bad lot throughout the *Chronicon*. Probably this is why Thietmar interpolated the vita of a favourite holy bishop, Ansfrid of Utrecht (pp. 174-78) who reigned from 995-1010. He put up bird-tables in the winter. But then our author, ever quirky, almost left out his own kinsman, Brun of Querfort. Brun, a good friend of Otto III and Henry II, was a missionary bishop martyred in Prussia, his story nearly 'omitted owing to my forgetfulness' (p. 299). We then get a short account of Brun's education, his consecration as bishop, and execution in 1009. The significance of Brun's life and work is now highlighted by Ian Wood in his new *The Missionary Life. Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe 400-1050* (2001) pp. 226-44.

Although Thietmar was only a bit over forty when he died, his humble sense of personal failure recurs more often as the text progresses; 'In regard to my misdeeds, I am a wretch. In terms of my abilities, I am a pauper. In either case, however, I am far worse than all men of my order' (p. 377). He claimed to be 'Impeded by that pest, lethargy' (p. 378) but we can only perceive this in comparison with the shining Reichsbischöfe of the previous generations, Ulrich of Augsburg and Brun of Cologne, Wolfgang of Regensburg and Egbert of Trier, and so on. Thietmar was perceptive about the growing religious sensibilities of his time, which would culminate in the Age of Reform (1046-1216) and in the new religious orders. In his generosity he was always looking to his own people. In the last year of his life, he recorded that 'In those days, seven serfs of my diocese ate poisoned mushrooms and quickly died from a burning fever' (p. 381), a grim reminder to all countryfolk.

Since Professor Warner's translation of the *Chronicon*, and the attendant apparatus, are so successful in bringing out the richness of Thietmar's talent, it would be a great service if he could be persuaded to turn Widukind of Corvey and Lampert of Hersfeld into English as well.

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