

Rulership in Medieval East Central Europe: Power, Rituals and Legitimacy in Bohemia, Hungary and Poland.

Edited by Grischa Vercamer and Dušan Zupka.

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The recent decade has seen an increasing number of works dedicated to Medieval East Central Europe published in English. The volume under review is another example of this trend, providing a broader academic audience with regional contributions on the popular historiographical topic of rulership. The publication has its roots in a series of conference sessions, the last three of which were organized at the *International Medieval Congress* at Leeds in 2019. The organizers of these sessions and editors of the volume, Dušan Zupka and Grischa Vercamer, aimed at providing an overview of the theory and practice of rulership in East-Central Europe, gathering contributions from well-established scholars from the region. With East-Central Europe being notorious for eluding straightforward geographical demarcation, the editors decided to focus on the three polities at its core—Bohemia, Poland, and Hungary. Nevertheless, with studies covering late-eighth-century Pannonia and sixteenth-century Lithuania, ninth-century archaeological data and fourteenth-century manuscript illuminations, the reviewed volume can be called anything but narrow in scope. Following the recent trends in political and cultural history, and taking up questions of legitimacy, rituals, power, originality, and imitation in political culture, the volume focuses on the four corresponding main research issues.

The introductory part sees Dušan Zupka introducing the aims and scope of the volume, as well as sketching an outline of the evolution of the sovereign power in Bohemia, Poland, and Hungary. Grischa Vercamer examines the approaches to the concept of ‘rule’ in sociological works and past historiography, also proposing his own methodological framework for the study of the ideas about rulership captured in the medieval narrative sources through the systematic analysis of rulers’ activities

divided into different fields. His contribution is worth highlighting here, as it is the one most concerned with the theoretical concepts at the core of the volume.

After the introduction, the second part of the volume is devoted to the origins and legitimization of the rulership of the oldest dynasties of East-Central Europe—the Přemyslids, Árpáds, and Piasts. While the authors—Martin Wihoda, Márta Font, and Zbigniew Dalewski—emphasize slightly different aspects of the problem, their analyses outline the similarities and differences between burgeoning Central European polities. The chapters presented in the third part of the volume focus on political communication. Dušan Zupka and Robert Antonín present contributions which center on rituals, with the latter describing rituals staged by the Luxembourg monarchs of Bohemia and the former analyzing the role of the religious rites and rhetoric of religious warfare in East-Central Europe. Marcin Pauk highlights the importance of understanding the political language used in the past by offering a reassessment of the guiding principles of the political culture of thirteenth-century Poland—although the praiseworthy boldness of this reevaluation might be lost on readers less familiar with the particularities of Polish historiography. The chapter by Julia Burkhardt offers a comparative overview of the role of late-medieval assemblies in the Holy Roman Empire and polities of East-Central Europe, importantly shifting the focus away from rulers towards the political communities they shared their power with.

The fourth part of the volume deals broadly with the institutions through which Central European rulers expressed and exercised their power. The contributions by Paul Knoll and Bożena Czwojdrak, when read together, provide plenty of insights into the role of tradition and innovation in political culture at a time when the local Piast dynasty had been replaced with the foreign ruling houses of Angevins and Jagiellons. With papers by Attila Bányai and Vinni Lucherini that focus on the early Angevin rule in Hungary, the issue of change and continuation in systems of legitimization and governance in East-Central Europe emerges as an important theme of the volume. While the question of outside influences on East-Central European rulership appears in many of the contributions, it is the last, fifth part of the volume that specifically broaches this subject. Grischa Vercamer and Stephan Flemmig provide a sketch of the interwoven network of personal ties, cultural transfers, and economic exchanges between East-Central Europe and the Holy Roman Empire in the High and Late Middle Ages, while Monika Saczyńska-Vercamer describes the relationship between the late-medieval papacy and the region. The contributions by Panos Sophoulis, Christian Raffensperger, and Felicitas Schmieder go beyond presenting the region as the periphery of Latin Europe, pointing out its role as a place of mutual contact with other political centers like Byzantium and steppe Empires. This outlook has interesting implications for any future reflections on the place of the region in the Global Middle Ages.

The papers collected in the volume offer a breadth of insights into the diverse aspects of rulership in East-Central Europe. While not all of them adopt a comparative framework, oft-drawn parallels between Bohemia, Poland, and Hungary and highlighted peculiarities can be found in all of the contributions. This outlook makes the volume particularly valuable for those interested in comparative approaches, be they inter- or cross-regional. Barring a few editorial mistakes scattered throughout the copy provided by the publisher, the only issue one may have with the presented volume is that some topics, while touched upon briefly here and there, would certainly benefit from further elaboration. Issues like the ‘composite monarchy’ and itinerant rulership bring up the question of absentee authority—a research problem vigorously discussed by historians of medieval political culture, and relevant to the Angevin and Jagiellon domains. The role gender played in rulership in East-Central Europe, despite the manifold interesting examples, is similarly overlooked, albeit not for the lack of interest of Central European historiography in the topic. In fact, Grzegorz Pac’s monograph on the issue entitled *Women in the Piast Dynasty: A Comparative Study of Piast Wives and Daughters (c. 965 – c. 1144)* was published in April in the very same Brill series. Nevertheless, these omissions speak not of the shortcomings of the volume but to the vast scope of research questions concerning East-Central European rulership that still await answers. It is my hope that this excellent contribution will further facilitate discussion about medieval rulership in East-Central Europe both in the region itself and in anglophone academic discourse.

