

Borgolte, Michael: *Weltgeschichte als Stiftungsgeschichte. Von 3000 v.u.Z. bis 1500 u.Z.*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 2018. ISBN: 978-3-534-26962-4; 728 S.

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Between 2012 and 2017, Michael Borgolte led the ERC-funded project „Foundations in Medieval Societies. Cross-Cultural Comparisons“ (FOUNDMED).¹ The ideal type of a foundation is the act of making available assets with the profits of which a certain purpose can be pursued permanently. As such, it is a „total social phenomenon“², encompassing and affecting all domains of social life. The research project resulted in three large, collective volumes, designed as a comparative encyclopaedia of foundations in medieval Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, which were published between 2014 and 2017.³ In 2018, two years after his retirement from the Humboldt-Universität in Berlin, Borgolte published this synthesis, which provides textbook-like, chronological overviews, giving countless examples and quoting extensively from relevant sources. He labels this „universal history“, which he distinguishes from global history in that the latter focuses on the study of worldwide relations and networks and their impact, while the former highlights certain cultural phenomena and analyses these in a diachronic and synchronic comparative perspective. This book is structured in two parts. Part one deals, first, with the socio-religious principles underlying foundations and, next, with rulers as founders, using their foundations to further political ends. The second part looks at the societal impact of foundations.

Part one opens with a description (p. 15–29) of the oldest foundations, dating to a time „in which the world of the Gods and the world of human being was not divided yet“ (p. 15). Next, the author traces the development of transcendence throughout the various religions (p. 30–147). Borgolte’s starting point is Karl Jaspers’s concept of a so-called -*Achsenzeit*⁴, the turning point between 800 and 200 BC which saw the worldwide dis-

covery of transcendence, that is, the separation between this world, inhabited by men, from a hereafter inhabited by god(s). From then on, it was the individual’s duty to overcome the chasm between the nether and the supernatural by moral behaviour. This led to a spiritualization of human actions, in which the intentions of religious and social acts became paramount. The author successively describes these developments in old Egypt, Zoroastrian Persia, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, in Indian religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism), and in Confucianism and Daoism. With regard to the Christian conceptualization of the hereafter, Borgolte provides an insightful overview of the development of Christian doctrine on foundations (p. 52–74). He shows how Christianity for a long time struggled to come to a somewhat coherent set of ideas concerning the Last Judgment and the abodes of the souls of the deceased. Eventually, a doctrine developed according to which salvation of one’s own as well as other people’s souls was seen to depend, first, on God’s grace, and, secondly, on human acts. These consisted of doing penance and performing good deeds, primarily praying, almsgiving, and gift giving. Offerings for the living and the dead as well as charitable foundations were part and parcel of this.

Borgolte then continues with a string of chronologically ordered and very detailed narratives describing the interplay between political history and the history of foundations (p. 148–497). No foundations without founders, of course. As foundations en-

¹ Cf. <https://www.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/de/forschung-und-projekte/foundmed> (23.01.2019).

² See also Michael Borgolte, „Totale Geschichte“ des Mittelalters? Das Beispiel der Stiftungen (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Öffentliche Vorlesungen 4), Berlin 1993.

³ Michael Borgolte (ed.), *Enzyklopädie des Stiftungswesens in mittelalterlichen Gesellschaften*, 3 Bde., Berlin 2014–2017. For a review of the first two volumes see Rainer Hugener: Rezension zu: Michael Borgolte (ed.), *Enzyklopädie des Stiftungswesens in mittelalterlichen Gesellschaften. Band 1: Grundlagen*. Berlin 2014 / *ibid.* (ed.), *Enzyklopädie des Stiftungswesens in mittelalterlichen Gesellschaften. Band 2: Das soziale System Stiftung*. Berlin 2015, in: *H-Soz-Kult*, 27.07.2016, www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/rezbuecher-25586 (23.01.2019).

⁴ Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, München 1949.

abled mighty founders to rule and to enforce obedience „beyond their own death“ (p. 148), it were rulers, above all kings, who were the main actors. The author shows how consecutive potentates manifested themselves though founding temples, cult sites, monasteries, churches, mosques, almshouses, hospitals, schools, wells, and even bridges to underpin and „eternalize“ their rulership, again from Egypt to Europe, and from the Near to the Far East, and from 3000 BC to 1500 AD.

Being familiar with the European Middle Ages myself, I cannot but be impressed by the synthesizing qualities and comprehensiveness of the paragraphs about the Byzantine emperors as founders of churches and monasteries (p. 222–265) and on royal foundations in Latin Christianity (p. 314–497), the latter of which is a monograph in itself. Yet, as the latter narrative is subdivided by only six headings, I found it hard to navigate. This part starts with the foundations by the kings of Burgundy since the fifth century (with the abbey of Saint-Maurice d’Agaune as exemplary case). It continues with a relatively short paragraph on early medieval foundations in the Irish and Anglo-Saxon world (p. 345–372). The last part (p. 372–497) exclusively focuses on the German Empire and the foundations by the Carolingian rulers and their successors, running up to the Emperor Maximilian’s foundations in memory of his father of 1493. Given Borgolte’s expertise in this field, it comes as no surprise that he pays plenty of attention to foundations of burial sites and to liturgical commemoration.

The second part, on the societal significance of foundations, focuses on the charitable, intellectual, and social impact of foundations (p. 499–612). Foundations took care of schooling and learning, support of the needy, elderly, sick, and imprisoned, of pilgrims and travellers, the burial of the dead, as well as of social needs and practical services such as roads, water supplies, baths, mills, et cetera. Once again, we travel from China and India, Greece and Rome in Antiquity, to Jewish and Islamic territories, as well as to the lands of Greek-Orthodox and Latin Christianity. Borgolte elaborates on the philanthropic motives of the providers of these endowments and, for

example, discusses the classic concept of euergetism or *liberalitas*, the practice of high-status and wealthy individuals in society to distribute part of their wealth to the community, which he distinguishes from pure altruism.

The Synthesis presented at the end of the book (p. 615–629), first of all, summarizes some of the basic insights and comparative results for the various religious traditions and geographic areas covered in this book. Once again, the central role played by royal founders is emphasized, as well as the differences in institutional context: a coordinating institution such as the church in the Christian world is, of course, absent in other religions. The main outcome of this project, so Borgolte, is a refinement of the typology of foundations. In his word of thanks at the end of the book, he adds that the theoretical and methodological principle underlying the FOUNDMED project had to be revised from early on, as cross-cultural comparison could not confirm the basic assumption that foundations were always intended to commemorate their founders and served their salvation.

Throughout the book, the author’s argument is solid and his style factual, sometimes verging on the apodictic: the narratives consist of lengthy descriptions and interpretations without much problematizing. Wouldn’t it be possible, for example, to call into question the exclusively top-down perspective taken for granted in the part on royal foundations and envision a bottom-up history of foundations, focussing on the way more humble men and women made foundations to organize their communities, charities, and religious life?

This book impresses by the scope and level of detail and is, therefore, best characterized as a comprehensive collection of sources with extensive comments. Yet, as a reader, I missed an explanation of its structure and some directory on how to read and navigate through it. Borgolte also leaves it to the reader to assess what use this monument of agglomerated knowledge may have for further research. How would this fit in a more conceptual framework besides being a magisterial overview? Certainly, those who are interested in foundations and gift giving,

their socio-religious underpinnings, and their socio-political impact in a certain area and a certain time may find clear and clever introductions here, but where could we move from here? It undoubtedly could serve as a starting-point for further cross-cultural comparative study focussing on specific foundations, for example of schools and universities, or of infrastructural works such as bridges, roads, and water supplies, or of foundations to secure the continuous recitation of prayers or psalms, to mention just a few possibilities.

An 87-pages long bibliography completes this book. Given it's universal scope, it is a bit surprising that the vast majority of references are to German language books and articles. In sum: although the aim of writing a universal history of foundations certainly is a laudable one, the practical realization of this is clearly not that easy.

HistLit 2019-1-093 / Arnoud-Jan Bijsterveld
über Borgolte, Michael: *Weltgeschichte als Stiftungsgeschichte. Von 3000 v.u.Z. bis 1500 u.Z..*
Darmstadt 2018, in: H-Soz-Kult 13.02.2019.