Death at Court

Veranstalter: Karl-Heinz Spieß, Universität Greifswald
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Bericht von: Immo Warntjes, Universität Greifswald

The conference Death at Court, held at the Alfried-Krupp-Wissenschaftskolleg (Greifswald) on 12-14 July 2010 on the initiative of the Greifswald medievalist Karl-Heinz Spieß (with financial support from the very same organisation as well as the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and the University of Greifswald), was only the most recent of a number of events organized by a rather informal group of scholars interested in global perspectives to court culture. At this stage, this informal group consists principally of scholars from the United States, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Germany. The history of the court culture group was outlined in Karl-Heinz Spieß's and Pauline Yu's introductions to the European and non-European sections of the conference respectively. The first initiative came in 1994, when David Knechtges and Eugene Vance decided to open their own discourse on court culture at the University of Washington to other scholars further afield; since then this group has met, with constantly changing personnel due to its informal character, about fourteen times, according to Yu. These meetings were either seminars, workshops, or conferences, the places chosen to host these events mainly universities in the West or South-West of the United States (Seattle, UCLA, Berkeley, Santa Fe, Calistoga, Sedona). Two conferences, in 1998 and 2005, were held in Taiwan, while the Greifswald conference is the second time after Coburg in 2006 that the court culture group assembled in Europe. It is the pronounced objective of this group to study court culture from as many perspectives as possible, to investigate the same or similar phenomena in completely different cultural contexts, to approach them methodologically from differing scientific backgrounds. Historians dominate the group, the cultures under investigation are primarily European and Asian, while most scholars specialize in the medieval period. Yet, linguists and literary scholars complement this core, the chronological boundaries are generously extended into antiquity and the early modern period. Likewise, the discourse is not supposed to be confined to the mentioned gatherings of the court culture group. Two publications have already appeared[1] to make the results of previous conferences known to a wider public, to invite as many scholars as possible to participate (in written form) in the discourse, to stimulate debate and controversy, to set trends and formulate perspectives, and most of all to start considering culture as being global. It is hoped that the proceedings of the Greifswald conference will add to this picture.

The conference itself was divided into two major sections: the first day was devoted to European, the second to non-European courts. The more general foci of the theme chosen for this conference, Death at Court, were outlined in KARL-HEINZ SPIEß (Greifswald, Germany)'s introduction: Before eventual death, most nobles would have taken provisions for their inheritance, both political and material, by drafting a will. Dying and death itself were political acts, with many surviving records being apparently constructed to match certain ideals rather than to mirror reality. Even more so, the burial and funeral services served not only as a homage to the individual, but even more so as a representation of the grandeur and prestige of the dynasty, in many cases also as a legitimisation of the successors. There were many ways to decorate the tomb, depending on the material used and the fashion of the day. Very prominent in medieval life was the presence of the dead among the living, most notable in memorial services.

In the following section on European courts, three courts received particular attention due to the research interest of the speakers: The Burgundian, the English, and the Portuguese courts. By a detailed study of Jean Molinet's poem Trosne d'honneur, GERT

[1] Lin Yaofu (Ed.), Selected Essays on Court Culture in Cross-Cultural Perspective, Taipei 1999. David Knechtges / Eugene Vance (Eds.), Rhetoric and the Discourses of Power in Court Culture: China, Europe, and Japan, Seattle 2005.

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MELVILLE (Dresden, Germany) highlighted the god-like veneration that a nobleman - in this case Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy (1396-1467) - could receive, if capable writers were kept at a court to promote the glory of the dynasty. In the ensuing discussion, special attention was given to Jean Molinet's scheme of correlating the nine letters of Philip's name (PHILLIPUS) with nine virtues starting with the respective initial (e.g. P – prudentia) as well as with nine mythological, biblical and Christian figures (three of each category); it was concluded that the order of the figures was relative to the virtues rather than world chronology (as they do not follow the pattern of the three Biblical figures first, then the mythological ones, then the Christian ones). Philip the Good was also prominent in the following paper by WERNER PARAVICINI (Kiel, Germany). Seven years after Philip's death, his son Charles the Bold organized the translatio of Philip's remains from Bruges in Flanders to Dijon in Burgundy; at the same time, the corps of Philip's wife Isabella was brought from Gosnay in Artois to join the procession in Gembloux, so that eventually the couple could find a united resting place in Dijon. The reconstruction of the pomp of the procession and the route taken led to the question why Charles the Bold went through so much trouble staging this event, and this at a most unfavourable time of year, in the winter of 1473-1474. The answer, Paravicini argued, lies in Charles's expectation to be elevated to the rank of king by the Emperor of the Reich in autumn 1473, an event that Charles wanted to commemorate with the pompous translatio of the remains of his parents; even though the coronation itself failed, he still proceeded as planed with the follow-up ceremonies.

SCOTT WAUGH (Los Angeles, USA), then, moved the focus from 15th-century Burgundy to 11th- and 12th-century England. He stressed that most Anglo-Norman kings would not have died at court, but rather campaigning or hunting. Accordingly, when it came to present an exemplary death-bed scene, the model chosen was that of the saintly Edward the Confessor, the last of a line of Wessex-rulers of England, as outlined in the Vita Ædwardi Regis. In the following reworkings of this model, the ecclesiastical connotation was slowely but surely lost, so that it ultimately also set a trend of more and more courtly death-bed scenes in Norman historiography, culminating in the description of William Marshall's death in the Histoire dedicated to him. Waugh also drew particular attention to the fact that the court served as a linkage between the old and new regime, and this led the subsequent discussion to deal with strategies of avoiding crisis at a noble's death.

Two papers on this first day specialized on Late Medieval Portugal. First, RITA COSTA GOMES (Towson, USA) opened the case of Duke Pedro of Coimbra, who had died on the battlefield of Alfarrobeira in 1449. Two texts in particular provide evidence for his death, the official report to the Castilian court written by Pedro's enemies and the orationes of the Burgundian ambassador Jean Jouffroy, who was sent to Portugal by Pedro's sister, Isabella. The first of these documents accuses Pedro of tyrannic rule and may suggest, in Gomes's opinion, that the duke's body was mutilated after death, as this was the customary treatment of the corpse of a tyrant and traitor. In fact, the history of Pedro's body confirms this hypothesis: The corpse disappeared from its first resting place at the arrival of Jean Jouffroy, apparently to hide the evidence; it was then properly buried again only some six years later. Only a modern scientific analysis of the remains, however, could provide conclusive evidence, as was stressed in the following discussion.

The second paper on medieval Portugal, by HERMÍNIA VASCONCELOS VILAR (Évora, Portugal), analysed the changes in location of the burial sites of Portuguese kings. After the foundation of the kingdom of Portugal, the first rulers were buried in their centre of power, Coimbra. With the reign of Afonso II (1185-1223), however, the Cistercian house of Alcobaça was chosen as the dynastic burial site, while king Dennis (1279-1325) later preferred the newly founded St Dennis of Odivelas, situated close to Lisbon. In Afonso II's case, the change of location can be explained by the deterioration of the importance of Coimbra, by his apparent break with the politics of his predecessors, and especially by political gratitude to the Cistercians; for Den-

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nis, on the other hand, it was a show of power, combined with the aspiration of being considered as the founder of a dynasty (he also appears to have modelled the French kings by creating a Portuguese St Denis and had hoped for the acceptance of a new national saint bearing his own name). The ensuing discussion also highlighted a certain pattern in the shift of the Portuguese regnal burial places, a southward movement of the power-base correlating to the successes of the reconquista.

Besides these regional and/or case studies, two papers concentrated on more general phenomena. IMMO WARNTJES (Greifswald, Germany) discussed the separate burial of body and heart prevalent among European nobles in the late middle ages. After outlining the reasons for this custom originating in the 12th and early 13th centuries, he analyzed the spread of separate burial of body and heart in England and France, whence it came, through family relations and conquest, to Southern Italy and certain parts of Spain. Quite strikingly, this burial custom has never been popular among secular nobles in central Europe, most notably the Reich, at least in the medieval period. Possible reasons for these geographic limits of this phenomenon were sought in the functions that double burial served, particularly at the time of its formation, in the 13th century. It was argued that double or split loyalties in each of the categories office, dynasty, and family, or between two of these three (e.g. between office and dynasty), were of special importance for the initial attraction to and later establishment of this practice. The following discussion revolved around the question why the heart was the part of the body chosen for separate interment. It was agreed that the heart was not considered a relic (as heads would in that case have been more appropriate), but that the veneration for the heart in high and late medieval theology, as well as the heart being the embodiment of love and courage in bardic poetry, were the principal motives for its special treatment.

KLAUS OSCHEMA (Bern, Switzerland), then, focussed on the death of favourites at court. He pointed out that, in contemporary sources as well as modern historiography, the death of a favourite is mostly depicted as a brutal end to an immoral life. Three aspects, however, speak, in Oschema's opinion, strongly against a generalisation of this picture: First, there is the statistical argument; only the most infamous cases are recorded, while the majority of favourites, of whom we have no records, would probably have passed away peacefully. Second, in the accounts dealing with a favourite's downfall, literary strategies were followed to portray the favourite as negatively as possible, as the epitome of immorality; the authors of these accounts were, more often than not, associated to the favourite's enemies; thus, this extreme bias has to be taken into account, the literary topoi have to be deconstructed. Third, if the burials of and memorial services for these favourites are analyzed, it becomes apparent that the reception of them at court at the time of their deaths and the years following was not as negative as their opponents' records would want to make us believe. The subsequent discussion focussed mainly on the terminology of 'favourite' in Latin and the vernacular languages of the time as well as the question if and when these terms received a negative connotation.

The section on European courts was concluded by PATRICK GEARY (Los Angeles, USA)'s public keynote lecture on the death and burial of Carolingian kings. The main argument presented was that in Carolingian historiography the king's death was supposed to reflect his rule and life. A good king would have died peacefully, a bad king would have met a cruel end. The deaths of all Carolingian rulers were discussed from this perspective, with a special emphasis, however, on the death of Louis the Pious as outlined by the Astronomer. Louis's deathbed scene resembles that of a monk, surrounded only by men, mostly churchmen, explicitly refusing to see his wife at the hour of death; his final words, transmitted by the Astronomer in the vernacular rather than the Latin of the rest of the text, even made Louis appear like a second Christ. By this example in particular, Geary revealed the literary topoi in Carolingian accounts of the deaths of their rulers, deconstructing them by comparison with other sources.

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The second day, with its focus on non-European courts, started with a brief introduction by PAULINE YU (New York). She emphasized three aspects in particular: the importance of certain acts performed at a rulers death for questions of legitimacy and succession; the fundamental difference between what contemporaries wanted to make us believe by rhetorical strategies as against what really happened; and, particularly when the topic death at court is approached from a global rather than a purely Christian-Western perspective, the differences that religion and the various believes of afterlife made for the rituals and acts performed.

Religion, then, played a major part in CLAUDIA RAPP (Los Angeles, USA)'s paper on death at the court of the Byzantine Emperor. The development of funerary services for Byzantine Emperors were demonstrated by a comparison of Eusebius's account of Constantine's death in 337 with the detailed description of such events in the book of ceremonies, composed under Constantine VII (905-959). Death itself was a family matter, a private act; the increasingly more monastic attitudes towards death at the Byzantine court in the 10th to 12th centuries are represented by the fact that the Komnenos Emperors chose the monastery of Christ Pantokrator as their burial site, replacing the Church of the Holy Apostles, which served as the imperial burial place from Constantine I up to 1028. The ensuing discussion concentrated on the dependency of early Byzantium on Rome as well as rarther widespread and to the present day common (in certain societies) feature of female lamentation as an integral and formal part of funeral services.

EUGENE VANCE (Seattle, USA) moved back into late antiquity with a paper on the depiction of St Lawrence in the so-called mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna. In the lunette over the southern wall, St Lawrence carries a processional cross over the right shoulder, resembling Christ in similar mosaics in Ravenna churches. On the shaft, hardly legible Hebrew letters can be found, distinguishing the shaft proper from the halo. Vance interpreted this as a statement that Lawrence did not die for, but with and in Christ, with the gospels in the nave to his right representing the presence of Christ.

The final three papers of this conference focussed on three Asian cultures, India, China, and Japan. RUBY LAL (Atlanta, USA) analyzed death at the Indian court in the early Mughal period, c.1500 to 1605. The Mughal court had a wandering character, with the lack of a residence placing an even bigger emphasis on personal bonds, on the group defining the court. In order to counter unjust claims to the throne and to provide legitimacy for dynastic heirs, chronicles were commissioned, the most famous being the Akbarnama, compiled under the auspices of Akbar the Great (1542-1605). Part of this chronicle is the Memoir of Gulbdan, Akbar's aunt; this imperial document is especially interesting as it meticulously records deaths, not only of the more prominent men of the court, but also of children and childless women. The same detailed record can be found for births at court, giving the impression that the peripatetic character of this court necessitated a comprehensive record of its royal members, with some of these details owing to the female perspective of the author. Male chronicle writing and increasing institutionalisation of the court in the decades following Gulbdana's own death, then, led to a noteworthy decrease in the recording of these details. The ensuing discussion then highlighted the special role of the harem in the courts of Arab societies, as well as the more general and global question of the role of women in succession.

JOE CUTTER (Tempe, USA) turned the attention to 5th-century China. Between the end of the Han dynasty in 220 CE and the beginning of the Sui dynasty in 581 CE, rule changed quickly in southern China with part of the 5th century being dominated by the Liu Song dynasty. When Lady Xuan, the favourite consort and probable cousin of the third king of that dynasty (Liu Jun), died in 462 CE, her death initiated the production of numerous texts, one of them being the Dirge for Honoured Consort Xuan. In his paper, Cutter provided a translation and detailed analysis of this fascinating piece of Chinese literature, while the following discussion stressed the differences in the types of sources available in different societies.

The final paper of this conference, pre-

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sented by BERNARD SCHEID (Wien, Austria) concentrated on the formation period of Early Modern Japan under the three rulers Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu. The military campaigns started under Nobunaga eventual led to the forceful unification of Japan under Hideyoshi. At Hideyoshi's death, his relatives and followers instrumentalized the Hachiman veneration prevalent among the Japanese warrior class by creating a shrine for Hideyoshi's spirit, with this elevating him to the status of a deity. Ieyasu followed his example, and Scheid explains these unprecedented deification by the immense power held by these warlord during lifetime, as well as, and more importantly, an attempt by their descendants to establish and maintain a dynasty.

In summary, besides many noteworthy differences between the cultures under discussion (particularly in terms of sources and religion), four patterns emerged to be of special importance and worth exploring further in the future when approaching Death at Court from a global perspective: First, in any of the societies discussed, the death of a ruler had a severe impact on questions of succession as well as dynastic considerations. Second, in this context, the burial of a ruler was often arranged and instrumentalized by those who desired to succeed in the respective office; it was an act of staging the succession or of other political ambitions. Third, the political instability and crisis at the point of a ruler's death were felt most at the ruler's court, as political change initiated by the successor would quite naturally have led to a rearrangement of the court; the mechanisms applied by courtiers in order to stay in office under a new ruler are yet to be fully analyzed, and likewise is the way in which a successor dealt with the court of his predecessor; under what kind of circumstance was the transit of power achieved collectively (i.e. the members of court remaining largely the same), and when and why did this not materialize? Fourth, a certain rhetoric of death or dying was applied in the accounts of a ruler's death in every culture, often refering to his character in life rather than the immediate circumstances of his death; a comprehensive comparison of these literary strategies would probably provide new insights into cultural differences. Still, the conference has also shown that the comparative global approach is most fruitful when the thematic specialisation is met by chronological limits, as moving back and forth in time when moving straight east in space sometimes appeared confusing. Finally, in an informal meeting at the end of the conference, the court culture group decided to organize a workshop in Sedona (Arizona, USA) next year in order to prepare a follow-up conference in Portugal in 2012 under the title: The Court and its Critics.

Conference overview:

Death at Court in Western Europe
Chair: Karl-Heinz Spieß (Greifswald)

Karl-Heinz Spieß (Greifswald): Introduction

Gert Melville (Dresden): Death and Apotheosis at the Burgundian Court

Werner Paravicini (Kiel): Theatre of Death. The Transfer of the Remnants of Philip the Good and Isabel of Portugal to Dijon in 1474

Scott L. Waugh (Los Angeles): Deathbed Scenes in Medieval England

Immo Warntjes (Greifswald): Burial Customs of the Nobility in Late Medieval Western Europe

Rita Costa Gomes (Towson): Alfarrobeira: the Death of the Tyrant?

Hermínia Vasconcelos Alves Vilar (Évora): Between a Lineage and a Territory: Royal Death and Burial at the Portuguese Court

Klaus Oschema (Bern): The Cruel End of the Favourite - Clandestine Death and Public Retaliation at Late Medieval Courts in Europe

Patrick Geary (Los Angeles): Tod und Begräbnis der Karolinger (Carolingian Royal Death and Burial)

Death at Court in Byzantium and Asia
Chair: Pauline Yu (New York)

Pauline Yu (New York): Introduction

Claudia Rapp (Los Angeles): Death at the Byzantine Court. The Emperor and his Family

Eugene Vance (Seattle): St. Ambrose's Eulogy of Theodosius the Great and the Ideology of

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the True Cross

Ruby Lal (Atlanta): Invocations of the Dead in the Early Mughal World

Robert Joe Cutter (Tempe/Arizona): Threnodic Writings for Royal Women in Early Medieval China

Bernhard Scheid (Vienna): 'May the leaves and twigs of my descendants bloom forever'. Posthumous Deifications among Political Rulers in Pre-modern Japan

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