

Sammelrez: M. Prietzel: Kriegführung im Mittelalter

Prietzel, Malte: *Krieg im Mittelalter*. Darmstadt: Primus Verlag 2006. ISBN: 3-89678-577-X.

Prietzel, Malte: *Kriegführung im Mittelalter. Handlungen, Erinnerungen und Bedeutungen*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag 2006. ISBN: 3-506-75634-6; 406 S.

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Professor Malte Prietzel of the Humboldt University in Berlin is one of the very few German scholars over the past six decades to have investigated military history, particularly German military history, during the medieval period. He, therefore, deserves approbation for his foray into this exceptionally important area of research. Prietzel's study is focused chronologically on two separate periods, c. 800-c.1200 and c. 1350-c.1450. Although he does consider some materials outside these limits, Prietzel does not adequately explain the substantial gap in his coverage, a period that includes exceptionally important military developments, such as the increasing size and importance of urban military forces, and substantial technological improvements in siege artillery and long-distance weapons. The geographic emphasis of this study is on the regions of the Carolingian empire north of the Alps. Although Prietzel specifically excludes Spain, Italy, and England as foci of his investigation (p. 21), he does draw some attentions to England, as well as to the territories of the crusader states in the Levant. The investigative thrust of this work is an examination of the behavior of nobles (Adel) and knights (Ritter) before, during, and after battle. His central thesis is that the cultural milieu in which nobles and knights lived their everyday lives had a major impact on the manner in which they conducted themselves in the context of war.

Prietzel organized the volume so that he could draw comparisons between the wartime behavior of nobles in the Carolingian empire and its successor states, on the one hand, and the wartime behavior of nobles and

knights in the period of the Hundred Years' War. Prietzel identifies four specific areas of comparison that he pursues throughout the study: pre-battle practices/rituals, pre-battle single combat and its representation in narrative texts, post battle rituals, and the use of banners. It is these topics, Prietzel argues, that provide the clearest examples of specifically noble behavior in war. Part A of the study is divided into five chapters, each with several subsections, that focus on: Das Heer und die Krieger, Vor dem Kampf: Prahlen, Spotten, Provozieren, Der Zweikampf: Ereignis, Konstruktion und Ideal, Nach dem Kampf: Soldarisieren, Demonstrieren, Erinnern, and Die Fahne: Signal und Symbol. Part B of the study is divided into three chapters, also subdivided into several subsections each, that focus on: Die Ritterwürde im Wandel, Zweikämpfe als kriegerische Praktik und höfische Inszenierung, and Waffenröcke, Banner, und Standarten als Symbole der Ehre. Prietzel sets out the main argument in an introductory section and ties together the main strands of his argument in a brief conclusion. The volume is rounded out with a bibliography of sources and scholarship, and a useful index of people and places that were discussed in the text.

In evaluating Prietzel's thesis and supporting arguments, three crucial problems will be of the greatest concern to readers interested in medieval warfare and source criticism. These are Prietzel's selection of sources, his evaluation of the information provided by those sources, and the questions he asks of these sources. The first point to emphasize is that Prietzel has attempted to write military history only using narrative sources, while ignoring the vast corpus of administrative documents, military treatises, law codes, and archaeological findings, which are available for the periods investigated in this volume and are now *de rigeur* in any sophisticated study of medieval warfare.

Prietzel's failure to deploy these extraordinarily rich sources of information is compounded by his haphazard approach to the critical evaluation of the narrative sources that provide the information for this study. To his credit, Prietzel does recognize that the authors of medieval narrative texts wrote in a manner that was biased toward their own si-

de (p. 20). In addition, Prietzel recognizes that clerical authors tended to impose a Christian framework, including certain kinds of moral teachings, on their texts (p. 20). In the face of these types of bias, Prietzel deploys the very powerful observation that medieval writers found it necessary to employ the method of rhetorical plausibility in order to make a persuasive case to their audiences. Thus, Prietzel correctly observes that medieval writers included information regarding battles that was plausible to their audiences so that readers and auditors of these texts would accept as likely or true the overall *parti pris* of the account (p. 360).

Prietzel does not, however, take the additional and necessary step of considering fully the identities of the audiences and the patrons of these narrative works. As a result, Prietzel makes the flawed decision to treat the strong over-representation of aristocrats in medieval narrative texts as representing the central reality of war, i. e. the norm. Indeed, rather than treating this disproportionate emphasis on aristocrats as a further instance of the bias of his sources, Prietzel chose to focus his entire study on the representation of these aristocrats in war. In an effort to justify this choice Prietzel makes the categorical and false claim that: "Über das Fußvolk, erst recht über die Leute beim Tross äußern sich die Quellen kaum. Insbesondere kann kaum etwas darüber gesagt werden, wie sich dieser Personenkreis – zumal im 9. bis 12. Jahrhundert – im Kampf verhielt, wie er sich an den Krieg erinnerte und so fort." Rather, it is the case that the narrative sources cited by Prietzel, despite the bias toward the noble patrons of these works, make absolutely clear that foot soldiers of the middling to lower classes dominated warfare, numerically, strategically, and tactically, throughout the Middle Ages. To take but a single example, Nithard, whose work Prietzel cites to show the bias of medieval authors toward the „homeside“ (p. 53f.), emphasizes the great sadness of the Frankish levies serving under Louis the German and Charles the Bald at the battle of Fontenoy (842) when it became clear how many of their fellow Franks had been killed in the fighting.

By ignoring the vast quantities of information in narrative sources that did not sup-

port his thesis regarding the centrality of the experiences of the nobility to the conduct of war, Prietzel permitted himself to be misled by the biases of his narrative sources, which were written under the auspices of noble patronage. Because Prietzel failed to make use of information available from other types of sources, he compounded the problem. The end result of Prietzel's choice of sources and his evaluation of the material he found there is a monograph that focuses on peripheral aspects of medieval warfare carried out by a tiny handful of combatants. There is no discussion here of logistics, the manufacture of arms, military obligation, military demography, or the administration of war, topics that are now central to the investigation of medieval military history.

Prietzel likely is correct that some nobles in some contexts insulted other nobles before battle, and that some individuals engaged in single combat before the general commencement of hostilities. He may also be correct that some nobles undertook these actions because they were concerned about their „honor.“ However, even if Prietzel is correct about all of these matters, he has shed virtually no new light on the conduct of medieval warfare, the topic promised by the title of his study.

There are certain sections of this study that can be of some value to military historians if they are withdrawn from the misleading context of nobles at war. For example, the gradual development of personalized military banners for use by the contingents led by secular magnates could form the basis for a focused study, especially if Prietzel develops related material dealing with banners used by ecclesiastical magnates, as well as by urban militia forces. In sum, however, Prietzel failed to appreciate factors that all scholars interested in medieval warfare must always keep in mind, namely that throughout the entire medieval period the vast majority of fighting men, whether militia troops or professionals, were not nobles, and that the vast majority of nobles were not professional fighting men.

Ironically, contrary to the highly focused and misleadingly titled „Kriegführung im Mittelalter“, which properly should be called „Aristocratic Propaganda and the Conduct of War“, the undocumented and beautifully il-

lustrated coffee-table survey of medieval warfare, „Krieg im Mittelalter“, gets closer to the reality of war in the Middle Ages than its monographic counterpart. In this volume, for example, Prietzel follows the observations of Karl Ferdinand Werner in his path-breaking „Heeresorganisation und Kriegsführung im deutschen Königreich des 10. und 11. Jahrhunderts,“ that Charlemagne and his successors in the German kingdom had the capacity to deploy many tens of thousands of troops for expeditionary campaigns (p. 17). These figures for the size of Carolingian and Ottonian armies have been widely accepted by scholars who reject the primitivist-romantic view of the early Middle Ages as a Dark Age, and accept the much more fruitful model of Late Antiquity that is dominated by continuity with the later Roman empire.

Unfortunately, however, Prietzel's emphasis on aristocratic and knightly „warriors“ takes a prominent role in this popular work as well. Prietzel goes so far as to invoke the thoroughly discredited and technologically deterministic work of Lynn T. White (p. 25) who had attempted to connect the development of stirrups to the putative rise of the so-called „feudal knight“ in his widely read study „Medieval Technology and Social Change“, first published in 1962. Specialists in medieval military history have rejected this argument, which was based on the flawed reading of a small handful of early medieval sources and a tiny corpus of archaeological data. For more than two decades, scholars have identified sieges, which required enormous numbers of foot soldiers but very few mounted fighting men, as dominating medieval warfare. Unwary readers of „Krieg im Mittelalter“ may, therefore, come away confused about the manner in which supposedly vast armies of armored knights participated in the sieges that even Prietzel identifies as a central feature of war in the Middle Ages (p. 105-128).

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