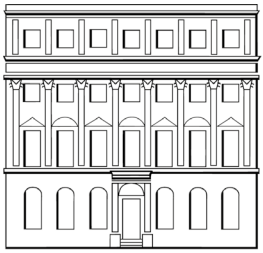

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by Levi Roach

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CLASSICS REREAD

BRINGING THE MIDDLE AGES TO LIFE

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Arno Borst, *Lebensformen im Mittelalter* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1997; 1st pub. Frankfurt am Main: Propyläen, 1973), 796 pp. ISBN 978 3 548 26513 1. € 14.99

Arno Borst (1925–2007) was one of the most active and influential German historians of the post-war era. He cut his teeth studying under Percy Ernst Schramm in Göttingen, where he completed his Ph.D. in 1951. But whereas Schramm and much of the German scholarly establishment remained wedded to political history, even when branching out into questions of symbolism and the history of ideas (as did Schramm), it was above all social history and the history of mentalities that drew the young Borst. This can already be seen in the topic of his Ph.D. thesis: the Cathars, a choice that prioritized the study of belief and local society over that of monarchs, lords, and government. The Cathars also took Borst away from traditional 'German' historiography, opening him up to important currents within French intellectual culture—above all, the fruits of the *Annales* school and its focus on *mentalités*. The resulting book put Borst on the map for Francophone scholars, earning a French translation in 1974.[1]

These interests would stay with Borst throughout his subsequent career. When the time came to do a habilitation in the mid to late 1950s, he chose to focus on the figure of the Tower of Babel and ideas about the origins of language in the Middle Ages. This work was completed at the University of Münster under Herbert Grundmann, the

[1] Arno Borst, *Die Katharer* (Stuttgart, 1953). Published in French as *Les cathares*, trans. C. Roy (Paris, 1974).

leading scholar of heresy and religious movements in the Germanophone world at the time, and went on to be published as an imposing four-volume work, spanning some 2,300 pages of printed text.[2] However, the book under review here—marking the fiftieth anniversary of its publication—is that which would earn Borst wider acclaim: his *Lebensformen im Mittelalter* ('Forms of Life in the Middle Ages', or perhaps better simply 'Living in the Middle Ages'). As a work, it combines Borst's early commitment to the history of belief and mentalities with a new-found desire to speak to a wider audience—a desire which would accompany Borst for the rest of his career, finding its final expression in a posthumously published memoir.[3] It also first demonstrated the full breadth of Borst's knowledge. While his habilitation had already spanned the entire Middle Ages, here Borst sought to encompass the lived experience of a millennium within the confines of a single volume. The result was an immediate bestseller, which remains in print to this day. What attracted readers—and continues to do so—was in no small part the originality of Borst's proposition. Whereas many earlier works of popular non-fiction had tackled the politics of what Wilhelm von Giesebrecht famously called the 'German imperial era [*deutsche Kaiserzeit*]',[4] few if any had sought to shed light on the lived existence of much of humanity in these years. It was this human element of the Middle Ages that Borst sought to capture, as he emphasizes in his programmatic introduction—the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of people from across social classes throughout the period.

Of course, it would be impossible to encompass the lived experience of an entire society in any single volume, even one as long as this one (which boasts an impressive 700 pages of text and another ninety-six of appendices and index). Borst's response to the challenge of this material was both pragmatic and enlightening. He eschewed linear narrative history, electing to approach the subject by means of a series of carefully chosen snapshots derived largely from some

[2] Arno Borst, *Der Turmbau von Babel: Geschichte der Meinungen über Ursprung und Vielfalt der Sprachen und Völker*, 4 vols. (Stuttgart, 1957–63).

[3] Arno Borst, *Meine Geschichte*, ed. G. Seibt (Lengwil, 2009).

[4] Wilhelm von Giesebrecht, *Geschichte der deutschen Kaiserzeit*, 6 vols. (Braunschweig and Leipzig, 1855–95).

hundred or so primary source extracts. These vary enormously in tone, length, and nature, from the Venerable Bede's vivid account of the conversion of the Northumbrian court through to the bloody pages of the Latin epic *Waltharius*. Most sections start with a source, which is offered in an elegant modern German translation (in almost all cases by Borst himself) and then contextualized in light of the relevant specialist literature. Those wishing to know more can then turn to the appendices at the back, where Borst lists a selection of the most relevant literature at the time of publication (1973). The sources themselves are drawn from across the Middle Ages, and while Borst is alive throughout to variation and change, the attempt is not to be comprehensive, but to offer a feel for the period—a sense of how certain moments in life were experienced and what sorts of beliefs were shared. This is the key to the book's success. Rather than building on or simply summarizing the scholarly consensus of his day, Borst went back to the sources, letting them speak directly to his readers, before offering an interpretation.

This close focus on sources is also the feature which has saved Borst's volume from the fate of so much popular non-fiction: that of dating quickly, in line with received wisdom. For with occasional exceptions, Borst's conclusions rest not on wider theories of medieval society, economy, or politics, but on what sources from the period themselves say. Of course, Borst is not immune to changes in scholarly opinion, and it is no coincidence that those sections in greatest need of revision are the ones which do not derive from a direct consideration of the sources. Thus under the heading 'lordship [*Herrschaft*]', Borst is happy to speak of 'the established gestures and forms of feudalism' (p. 465)—words few modern scholars would utter without multiple caveats.[5] Still, what

[5] The essential work is Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford, 1994). Initial responses to Reynolds' revisionism in the Germanophone world were quite hostile, but more recently the gist of her criticisms has been accepted: Jürgen Dendorfer and Roman Deutinger (eds.), *Das Lehnswesen im Hochmittelalter: Forschungskonstrukte – Quellenbefunde – Deutungsrelevanz* (Ostfildern, 2010); Steffen Patzold, *Das Lehnswesen* (Munich, 2012); Karl-Heinz Spieß (ed.), *Ausbildung und Verbreitung des Lehnswesens im Reich und in Italien im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert* (Ostfildern, 2013); Jürgen Dendorfer and Steffen Patzold (eds.), *Tenere et habere: Leihen als soziale Praxis im frühen und hohen Mittelalter* (Ostfildern, 2023). For historiographical

is surprising is not so much that a few sections creak half a century on as that it is only a few that do. Indeed, were the volume ever to be published in updated form, it is largely the appendices that would need revising to incorporate important recent work.

Borst's choice to focus on sources and themes also makes this a book one can happily dip in and out of. Some readers, not least reviewers such as myself, will wish to read it cover to cover. But many more will enjoy treating it as a coffee-table book—the kind of work one can read in small snippets, depending on one's mood and interests at any moment. The only downside of this is that there is not a strong overarching narrative thread; what the various sections have in common is simply Borst's fascination with life in Middle Ages. Yet this, too, is a strength in disguise, for any thesis-driven book from 1973 would now be sorely out of date, whereas Borst's volume remains one of the best introductions to daily life in the period available in any language.

In the end, it is the sheer humanity of Borst's work that stands out. This is a book written by someone passionate about people and mentalities of a bygone age. Marc Bloch, another great social historian of the Middle Ages (and not coincidentally, one of Borst's own inspirations), once evocatively compared the historian to a fairy-tale ogre (or giant) stalking the scent of human flesh.[6] Here, Borst shows himself to have an unusually fine nose for his prey. Be it in the pages of Bede, the food renders of Carolingian polyptyques, or the poetry of Dante Alighieri, he time and again finds ways of bringing the Middle Ages to life. Fifty years on, this volume remains an inspiration. It throws down the gauntlet to a new generation of historians to see if they can come any closer to this most evasive of quarries. Let us hope that they, now more attuned to the complexities of gender and identity, will rise to the challenge. I, for one, look forward to seeing them try. In the meantime, they would do well to start with Borst.

orientation: Susan Reynolds, 'The History of the Idea of *Lehnswesen*', *German Historical Institute London Bulletin*, 39/2 (2017), 3–20.

[6] Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (Manchester, 1992), 22.

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