



*Geboren, um zu herrschen?
Gefährdete Dynastien in
historisch-interdisziplinärer
Perspektive*

Ellen Widder,
Iris Hozwart-Schäfer, and
Christian Heinemeyer (eds.)

Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018

Review by: Cathleen Sarti



Geboren, um zu herrschen? Gefährdete Dynastien in historisch-interdisziplinärer Perspektive. Edited by Ellen Widder, Iris Holzward-Schäfer, and Christian Heinemeyer. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018. ISBN 978-3-16-153609-0. viii + 307 pp. € 59,00.

This edited volume publishes some of the papers from a workshop in Tübingen, Germany, in December 2012 organised within the Collaborative Research Centre (CRC) *Threatened Order – Societies under Stress*. In particular, the workshop (and thus the book) emerged from the *Dynastic Ruptures as Threats to Political and Social Order in the 14th/15th Centuries* project, led by Ellen Widder within this CRC. As such, the volume has a strong focus on the Late Middle Ages, although it does include chapters that range from antiquity (the Kingdom of Kush) until the nineteenth century (July Monarchy), and even down to today (family businesses). Things are different when the claim to interdisciplinarity is considered: most of the chapters are written by historians, and only two of the chapters expand the topic with perspectives from economics and literary studies.

This volume can be seen as part of the current trend in royal studies to look at dynasties, and to further understand their role in political, social, economic, and cultural contexts. The title translates as “Born to rule? Threatened/Endangered Dynasties in Historical-Interdisciplinary Perspective,” which sums up nicely the approach of the volume. In their introduction (translation: “Endangered Dynasties and Threatened Order”), Ellen Widder and Christian Heinemeyer immediately make obvious why this topic has so much relevance today: dynasties like the Northern Korean Kims are still active and influential, and their behaviour and strategies relate to many other dynasties like the (fictional) Buddenbrooks, the medieval Ottonians, or the ancient Argead dynasty with Alexander the Great. They all face the same problem: “to organize their succession and to establish and secure a continuity of persons who are related” (3; my translation). Dynasties are therefore understood as blood-related families trying to establish a line of succession in the same field and position. Even though the intention to understand dynasties in fields other than politics like economics, culture, or sports is clearly stated (4), it is not really realised except for the absolutely fantastic chapter on family businesses. What is well answered, however, is the leading question of the volume: how did the discussed dynasties deal with dynastic ruptures, and what strategies did they employ to deal with such ruptures, or the threat of such ruptures, such as sickness or regencies for minors? The claim to interdisciplinarity, however, is not really realised, even less so than the claim to go beyond the Middle Ages and the early modern period. As such,

this book is firmly grounded in history, with only two chapters by non-historians.

Claims to interdisciplinarity aside, this volume nonetheless offers several interesting case studies that are mostly focused on the key question(s) and themes outlined in the introduction. As such, the book offers much for scholars interested in dynastic strategies of legitimation, especially in situations in which dynastic rule and continuity are threatened.

The first chapter by Karl Ubl deals with an important source type for royal studies: the list of rulers in law manuscripts. Ubl comes to the perhaps astonishing conclusion that dynastic identity and representation was not essential for the Carolingians (other than for their predecessors, the Merovingians), and that continuity of office was much more emphasized than any familial relations. Ubl thus starts a thread that can be seen in several chapters of this book: the sceptical approach to the current focus on dynastic identity and representation that might be applied also to 'dynasties' who did not understand themselves as dynastic at all. As an alternative, Ubl suggests that competing political ideologies are a more useful explanation. If I could take just one idea from this book, this would be it. Fortunately, there are also several other ideas worth exploring.

The second chapter by Bernd Kannowski discusses dynastic and normative conditions of the German election process, mostly as a contribution to an ongoing research question on the idea and convention of this election process, based on the legal collection of Eike of Repgow, the *Sachsenspiegel*. Kannowski's conclusion that the electoral process was, in fact, a limited election based on a wider concept of family is somewhat dissatisfying, and also fairly well known, even to non-specialists.

In the next chapter, Gilles Lecuppre discusses the French succession from the Capetians to the Valois, taking one of the most prominent dynastic ruptures as a starting point for a discussion on legitimation strategies. In this context, he also discusses the one false pretender of the French Middle Ages, and the different political ideologies behind each candidate for the throne, which represent a surprisingly wide spectrum.

In the first early modern chapter in the volume, Martin Wrede analyses dynastic behaviour and the legitimation strategies of a new dynasty, which was combined from two older, lesser, houses. The heirs of the marriage of Jean de Ligne and Marguerite de la Marck formed a new house under the name of Arenberg. Wrede follows this new house, and emphasizes the different strategies used to ensure continuity, such as parental intervention if too many sons wanted to live out their piety by joining religious orders.

A different perspective on the question of endangered dynasties is offered by Christina Antenhofer, who analyses the medical knowledge

available to the Gonzaga, especially that relating to fertility. Death in childhood and in early childhood was, after all, one of the most common causes for dynastic ruptures. Antenhofer includes with this perspective recent research from the history of the body and the history of knowledge into the often political or cultural history dominated field of dynastic and royal studies.

Michael H. Zach had the difficult task to both introduce the reader to the Kingdom of Kush (c.785BC to c.350AD), and to contribute his argument to this volume. He succeeds, and his fascinating chapter adds to the approach of this volume that dynastic ruptures and legitimation strategies are an epoch-spanning problem. Zach shows how (military) power and legitimation in Kush were as intertwined in its early history as it would be in later times.

The already mentioned chapter on modern family businesses by Dominique Otten-Pappas follows Zach's chapter. The chapter demonstrates how central the question of succession is for rulers or business leaders who want to establish their relatives in the same position.

Jörg Rogge brings us back into the firm ground of well-known cases of succession crises with his chapter on the struggle for the Scottish throne after the death of Alexander III in 1286 (and the so-called Maid of Norway in 1290). The unusual request for the English king Edward I to arbitrate in the dispute has led to several problems often discussed in English, and even more so in Scottish, historiography. Once again, the role of dynastic identity and framework is questioned, and different schools of political thought appear with closer scrutiny of the sources.

Another late medieval case is presented by Iris Holzward-Schäfer, who analyses the problematic succession from Robert of Naples to his granddaughter, Joanna I of Naples, due to the unexpected and early death of Robert's son, Charles. Although Holzward-Schäfer often recounts the story in much more detail than is strictly necessary for her argument, she nonetheless shows clearly how dynastic ruptures, or the threat of such a rupture (for instance, through female succession), also opens up new spaces for political action and for a new dynastic framework.

That the death of the accepted and popular heir to the throne remains a problem 500 years later is shown in Heide Mehrkens's chapter. In addition to a discussion of dynastic strategies, Mehrkens has the chance (and uses it well) to analyse the entanglement of a new form of monarchy with a new form of dynastic identity in much changed institutional contexts. After all, the Orléans discussed here were already the alternative to the Bourbons or the Bonapartes, and in particular, Crown Prince Ferdinand-Philippe was a hope for a more moderate and liberal monarchy. His accidental death in 1842 was therefore a shock not only for his family but also for parliament, government, and the French more generally.

The last chapter by Susanne Knaeble adds to the dominant historical perspective by analysing the novel *Hug Schapler* (printed version of 1500) in regard to the discussed themes. This novel was a narrative on the succession of Hugh Capet, king of France after the Carolingians, and founder of the Capetian dynasty (whose end Lecuppre discussed). Knaeble shows how literary works allow for a broader discussion of different political ideas, adding to the oft-mentioned thread in this volume that questions the relevance of dynastic ideas.

In a well-written and well-thought out conclusion, Iris Holzward-Schäfer situates the chapters within a broader context, emphasizing that today dynastic ruling structures are often seen as unstable and undemocratic, and thereby lacking legitimation. In contrast, the historiography sees pre-modern dynastic continuity as a part of stable and secure rule, whereas frequently changing dynasties would be a sign of conflict and to the detriment of the realm. As Holz-Schäfer concludes, both hypotheses should be reconsidered. In addition to questioning the role of dynastic strategies in monarchies, this might be the other important takeaway of this volume. After all, the tendency to try to establish dynasties in different political orders and still today is, rudimentarily, shown by the spectrum discussed in this volume. As a last point, I want to congratulate the editors for a book in which I did not spot a typo or anything else which might have distracted the flow of reading. Furthermore, the extensive and very helpful index is worth a mention, too.

CATHLEEN SARTI
University of Oxford