



*Das Europa der Könige*

**Leonard Horowski**

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**Review by: Juliane Märker**



*Das Europa der Könige*. By Leonhard Horowski. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2018. ISBN: 978-3-499-62913-6. 1120 pp. €20,00.

Leonhard Horowski is a German historian whose research is focused on early modern European nobility, especially the courts of Louis XIV and of Prussia. His accumulated knowledge about the structures, traditions, and the mindset of this world—the so-called “Europe of Kings”—is on display in this book.

*Das Europa der Könige* is not a typical academic work; instead, it is a cultural history survey. As Horowski states in his introduction, the book makes no claim to develop a new thesis or argument. There are no references, although the author included a very extensive list of publications about the early modern period, its nobility, and its rulers. The aim of the book is not to introduce a new argument to the research of early modern European nobility, but rather to deliver a detailed, thorough, and comprehensive panorama of the world in which they lived. As Horowski calls it, “a trip through worlds bygone, which is strictly following a historically reconstructable path, but nevertheless tells a story” (10. All translations are by the reviewer). The book is essentially a collection of anecdotes. Throughout, Horowski illustrates and analyses numerous themes that are essential in understanding the world of European nobility and monarchy, woven together by his extensive knowledge and thorough explanations of the underlying structures and concepts. The result is a densely written but highly enjoyable read that offers an almost intimate view into the lives of European nobles; it highlights their motivations and circumstances and presents the contemporary logic that permeated their actions and thinking. The subjects of these anecdotal sketches are wide-ranging and include naming conventions, daily life at court, the roles and influence of women, the inner workings of governments, the distribution of political power, and utilisation of dynastic polity.

There are several topics of significance that are emphasised repeatedly throughout the book. One of these themes is the inherently different mindset and almost foreign “logic” or “rationality” of early modern nobility when compared to the understanding of rationality or reason today. Horowski explains at different points how behaviour that appears highly idiosyncratic or even utterly nonsensical to the modern reader was actually a sane, reasonable choice in earlier centuries. His examples range from public, physical scuffles between diplomats to be the first in offering congratulations to the king, to the seeming madness of the use of the line formation, which is the marching of long lines of soldiers straight at each other on an open plane, as a battle tactic. It is impossible to judge the behaviour of the past by today’s standards, a subject Horowski is obviously passionate about and upon which he lectures

repeatedly. Instead, he advocates exploring the logic of the early modern period with an open mind, to reconstruct the worldview of their nobility and ruling class, and to judge their behaviour according to their standards instead of our current ones. Only there, he argues, one can begin to understand how this “Europe of Kings” worked.

Another issue that is discussed in almost every chapter is the influence of networks. Horowski emphasises the importance of networking for the functioning of early modern statecraft, dynastic decision-making, and the gathering and distribution of political, symbolic, financial, and social power. Favouritism and nepotism (far removed from modern connotations and interpretations of corruption) were inherent attributes of this network and were fundamental practices essential to its functioning, and they were manifest in the complex structures of patronage. In early modern Europe, it was not the state that served as a unifying factor or one that commanded the loyalty of its nobles, civil servants, and subjects. Instead, except in a republic of course, it was the sovereign, usually the monarch and his or her family to a lesser extent, who served as the symbol of the state, perpetuating an idea of a common origin and identity. The monarch personified the state. In this world, argues Horowski, it is no surprise that the most permanent, most stable connections were of personal rather than institutional or structural nature.

Horowski paints a detailed picture of early modern Europe from the perspective of the nobility. He describes the process of formation for the early modern states as a “grand machine,” which was designed to create work for the nobility by providing careers in the military and the government and therefore to bind them to their ruler (25). The author emphasises the international orientation of European nobility, where familial and feudal connections transcended borders, and one’s confession was usually a far stronger force of unification than geographical or national origin. He describes the daily life of nobility, at a time when concepts like privacy did not exist, traditions were highly revered, and change was usually seen with suspicion and often outright rejected.

Most of his examples derive from the so-called Calvinist network (75) as well as the court of Louis XIV. Horowski showcases numerous examples of the inner workings of these networks, and explains how a family of civil servants could rise to almost worldwide fame in the span of a generation thanks to their familial, religious, and feudal connections with various noble families and dynasties across Europe, which enabled their sons to gain some of the highest offices in several territories. Other examples detail the complexity of noble relations, which were not only based in blood, but also in contracts, fealty, and, again, religious confession. The author shows clearly just how difficult it could be to find fitting marriage candidates for the sons and

daughters of royal blood. Since a marriage had not only personal, but also profound political consequences, parents needed to be discerning in judging potential spouses and alliances for their children. Horowski uses these examples to demonstrate how personal and structural circumstances were deeply interwoven in the world of European nobility and the elements that influenced those circumstances.

Horowski also criticises several practices in modern research and their impact upon the portrayal and interpretation of early modern Europe, especially the tendency of many historians to try and differentiate between relevant and irrelevant history. According to Horowski, there is no such thing as “irrelevant” history, using the tradition of ceremony as example, which was treated as superfluous by historians for decades. He argues that it is necessary to see the whole picture, and retrace a system down to its roots, to be able to thoroughly understand its inner workings.

Overall, *Das Europa der Könige* is an incredibly detailed and thorough treatise about early modern Europe. It is presented as a kaleidoscope of various anecdotes and stories that encompass all the themes which currently occupy research of the period. The book offers fascinating insights into a world that is utterly different from, and strange to, our modern-day perspective and advocates a careful, critical, and open-minded approach in engaging the matter at hand. Orientation inside the text is difficult because of the lack of a systematic approach and the sheer quantity of topics. The chapter titles rarely help in determining what is discussed where. Additionally, the dense writing style—the wealth of information Horowski manages to convey inside a single page is sometimes truly astounding—can be tiring in the long term. Nonetheless, a highly recommendable and enjoyable read for everyone interested in acquiring an in-depth understanding of early modern Europe and its nobility.

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