

## Rezensionen

Gerhard Jaritz, *Zwischen Augenblick und Ewigkeit. Einführung in die Alltags-geschichte des Mittelalters*, Böhlau Verlag, Wien u. Köln 1989.

The „history of daily life“ is now firmly established as a sub-branch of historical investigation, despite the carping criticism of some conservative social historians, who often seem to approach it with the same blinkered reactions once accorded their own subject. The investigation of daily life undoubtedly has its own distinctive problems of sources and methodology, not least where the middle ages are concerned. Here the difficulties of reconstructing daily life from what are often mere shards of evidence are compounded by the need to penetrate a mental world completely alien to the modern mind. Gerhard Jaritz has played a leading role in the exploration of such problems in conjunction with the broad and imaginatively conceived research programme associated with the „Institut für mittelalterliche Realienkunde“ in Krems, which has done so much in recent years to illuminate our understanding of medieval material culture. The book he offers here as an „introduction“ to the history of medieval daily life is no handbook in

the narrowly conceived sense, but more a carefully chosen set of reflections on some central themes of the topic.

A major problem is embedded in the book's title, namely, that there was little separation between the transcendent and the mundane world for people who regarded the eternal as a more powerful reality than the fleeting moments of material life. Jaritz calls attention to the need to define carefully the components of daily life in such a way that the subjective, the imaginary and the fictive, desires, ideals and values can be included alongside such realities such as diet, dress or material objects. To take account of this complexity, he suggests the researcher exploring a web of relationships between persons, objects, situations and qualitative evaluations. This elaborated understanding of the multiple components of daily life will help avoid the mistake of believing that one can reconstruct how daily life „really“ was, rather than seeing it filtered through its many representations.

It is the many forms of representation that constitute the main focus of Jaritz's interest in two illuminating chapters which show how much the researcher can learn about daily life through exploring typologies and sym-

bols, part of the basic mental apparatus of medieval people through which they classified their perceptions of reality. Examination of names and categories opens up understanding of matters as diverse as diet, dress, nomenclature, taste, social norms and classifications, perceptions of gender and sexuality, and life stages. Specific attention is devoted to publicity, advertising and communication as qualitative aspects of such everyday phenomena as consumption, economic competition, normative social behaviour or perceptions of space, time and community. Jaritz also includes a specific chapter concerned with the construction of common contrasts or polarities such as „elite“ and „popular“, male and female, the church and the world, good and evil, old and new, familiar and foreign, security and insecurity – all part of the current agenda of an anthropologically aware cultural history, but each in their own way having a special resonance for people of the middle ages. In discussing all these aspects, Jaritz's procedure is less that of definitive analysis or pronouncement and more of suggestive illustration and example, using selected source extracts or pictorial documents to tease out his wider point.

A special focus of attention is the problem of pictorial images, often naively resorted to as direct evidence of „daily life“, without reference to their highly constructed forms of representation, a trap into which both Aries and Elias fell with disastrous consequences for their wider interpretations. Jaritz

calls attention to the now numerous and sophisticated approaches to the interpretation of visual evidence, as well as to the ever-widening studies of the many functions and contexts of images as historical agents themselves, for example as instruments of instruction and propaganda, as aids to devotion or as *Gnadenbilder*, or as bearers of symbolic meaning and representations of desirable and desired ideal types.

What emerges from Jaritz's discussion is not only the necessity of commitment to genuine interdisciplinary research if we are to make any headway in the proper study of daily life. It is also the need for breadth of vision in what constitutes an appropriate subject matter, for cultural and intellectual sensitivity in approaching sources, for nuanced assessment of the widest range of possibilities in their interpretation, and for an imaginative flexibility of theoretical approach. Jaritz displays all these by example, although this sometimes makes the book look a little diffuse, like an extended reflection on one historian's practice. Therein resides its great merit, however: we can watch someone skilled in the recovery of medieval daily life thinking aloud, and profit from the example. Jaritz's footnotes are an encyclopaedic treasure trove of a rich and fascinating literature, a point of departure for the reader's own explorations, supplemented by a valuable bibliography. This is not a textbook of daily life, but one to excite interest and arouse curiosity.

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