STUDIES IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

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BREPOLS
Talking Heads:
Assemblies in Early Medieval Germany

STUART ARLIE

The assemblies that are the concern of this paper were high society, gatherings of a ruling elite. These gatherings dealt with the great business of the realm: war and peace, condemnation of rebels and the rewarding of the faithful, judgement and legislation. In Nelson's words, they were 'the one thing that held political systems together'. We should not make the assumption that, since kings were the leading actors in such systems, assemblies were simply vehicles for the exercise of royal power and theatres for its display. Assemblies were venues for collective action which meant that the identity and authority of their participants were constantly asserted, displayed, and maintained. This feature was well caught by Reuter in a wide-ranging paper on assembly politics: 'it was through embodying itself as an assembly that the [...] political community was empowered and enabled to practice politics'. But if we should not imagine such meetings as overshadowed by untrammelled royal authority, it seems that we should also not imagine them as venues for frank speech and fierce arguments.


Important work by Althoff shows that members of a ruling elite anxious to defend their honour could not take the risk of using language of open challenge and insult in public assemblies, as these assemblies were not sufficiently flexible structures to contain potentially explosive episodes. This means that the great emotional set-pieces in our narrative sources of sudden grantings of mercy, of shedding of tears etc., have to be read as elements in a system of calculated display and representation, a system that was carefully stage-managed and where displays were far from spontaneous but agreed upon in advance, usually in 'secret' meetings involving only an inner circle of key players. But could all meetings be really so tightly controlled? And did all participants in such staged encounters read them in the same way? While drawing on the ideas of Althoff, this paper seeks to develop and test them further, and will argue that assemblies were neither so controlled nor as rigid as some influential current thinking suggests.

The focus of this paper is on early medieval Germany, a question-begging term which should be understood here as referring to the Carolingian east Frankish kingdom and its Ottonian and Salian successors. We are less informed on this area than we are on its west Frankish counterpart (at least for the ninth century), and some of the gaps in our sources may reflect gaps in the organization of the kingdom. We have, for example, no east Frankish equivalent of the treatise On the Governance of the Palace by Archbishop Hincmar of Rheims (c. 806–82), with its description of assembly management. Nor is there anything to compare to the great body of capitularies issued

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4 General surveys and definitions in Timothy Reuter, Germany in the Early Middle Ages c. 800–1056 (London, 1991), and Benjamin Arnold, Medieval Germany, 500–1300: A Political Interpretation (Basingstoke, 1997).

5 Ed. with a German trans. by Thomas Gross and Rudolf Schieffer, Hinkmar von Reims, De ordine palatii (Hincmarus De ordine palatii), MGH Fontes, 3 (Hannover, 1980).
by Charles the Bald († 877). Further, tenth-century Ottonian government is generally seen as having had a much less substantial apparatus than its Carolingian predecessor. It certainly generated much less documentation, and that tells us something about its character. Reuter echoes Leyser’s warning to historians not to be seduced into writing up the Ottonian period ‘in terms of a shadow-history of institutions that did not exist’.

Such warnings are salutary, but assemblies did take place east of the Rhine and did so before the establishment of a Carolingian kingdom there. We do not need to turn to Tacitus (c. 55–116/20) to establish this point. Before the Carolingian take-over of 788, the Agilolfing dynasty of the dukes of Bavaria had a palace in Regensburg and assemblies and meetings must have taken place there, though Duke Tassilo III (749–88/94) seems to have preferred Salzburg to Regensburg. The pagan Saxons held assemblies, if we can trust the vivid account of one in the mid-ninth-century *Life* of Saint Lebuin (Liawwine). This describes how the saint travelled to the site of the Saxons’ annual assembly where their leaders (the Saxons did not have kings) gathered to make laws and prepare for war etc., and how he enraged some of them with his warnings of the military catastrophe which the Christian king of the Franks, Charlemagne (768–814), would visit upon them if they did not convert to the worship of the true God. Ian Wood has recently warned us against assuming that the *Life* of Lebuin opens a window onto actual Saxon practice in the eighth century, noting that part of what looks like an account of distinctive Saxon political structures actually derives from a text by Bede (672/73–735).

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6 To be found in *Capitularia regum Francorum*, vol. II, ed. by Alfred Boretius and Viktor Krause, MGH Capit. 2 (Hannover, 1890–97).


who himself was drawing on the Old Testament. All this, with the Life’s author’s distance in time and culture from the society he was purporting to describe and the likelihood that Charlemagne’s conquest of Saxony destroyed much of its original culture, makes this text an unreliable witness. It is not, however, intrinsically unlikely that the Saxons did hold assemblies of some kind. While Charlemagne’s conquest did undoubtedly bring changes to Saxony, it cannot have obliterated all traces of native organization. The new order seems to have depended on interlocking with existing institutions such as assemblies to discipline Saxony.

It was not, however, a case of business as usual. The setting up of the Carolingian kingdom in the east resulted in a massive expansion in the scale and nature of assemblies as they became royal and, indeed, imperial. Regensburg, for example, was no longer a focus merely for the followers of the Agilolfing dukes, but saw Charlemagne himself hold court there almost continuously from the winter of 791 to the autumn of 793 to muster and launch his armies against the Avars. Magnates from all over the Carolingian empire streamed there, and the business of the assemblies was not simply military, as the ranks of these magnates included bishops from beyond the Alps who sat in judgement on heresy.

In Saxony, the transformation was even more spectacular. The importing of the full-blown and fully functioning apparatus of royal assemblies can best be seen in Paderborn. Charlemagne held an assembly there in 777, one attended by Franks, Saxons, and envoys from distant Spain. All this, with the Christian baptism of many Saxons, made Paderborn a show-place for the new royal power that was from now on to dominate. This assembly at Paderborn was not a demonstration that a new order actually existed in Saxony, but was rather another way of trying to establish that order. Charlemagne unfortunately took it for the former rather than the latter and, tempted by the prospects for adventure in Spain set out by the Spanish envoys, allowed himself to be dazzled by his own ceremonies at Paderborn into thinking that his hold on Saxony was secure. The Saxons, however, had not been so dazzled, and the king’s absence and troubles in Spain gave them the opportunity to try again to cast off the Frankish yoke.

15 Annales Regni Francorum, s.a. 778, pp. 50, 52; King, Charlemagne: Translated Sources, pp. 79–80.
meaning of the ceremonies at the Paderborn assembly had been not so much contested as flatly denied.

None the less, the form and apparatus of Frankish royal assemblies were ultimately established in the new territories. After all, in 799 no less a personage than the pope found himself in Paderborn to meet the Frankish king. Troubles in Rome had driven Pope Leo III (795–816) north to seek refuge and help from Charlemagne, events that were to lead to Charlemagne’s imperial coronation by Leo in Rome in 800. It was not surprising that the pope should turn to such a protector. It was, however, surprising that the pope should meet him far in the north-east of the Frankish realm in Paderborn. Charlemagne deliberately chose Paderborn as the site of the meeting. He had himself been planning to travel there in the summer of 799 to participate in the dedication of a new church ‘of wonderfully great size’ which he had had built there. Thus, Charlemagne could be seen to be greeting the highest spiritual authority in the west in a christianized landscape that had only been recently won from paganism by himself, the greatest Christian warrior of the west.

The meeting at Paderborn actually took place after Charlemagne had held the ‘general assembly’ of the kingdom. There had been a general assembly at Lippeham on the Rhine, and then the king had moved on to Paderborn, sending his son off with part of the army further east. The meeting between Charlemagne and the pope stretched from July to October and has to be seen as a special type of assembly. We need not see this whole time as an assembly, though it is tempting to see it as an assembly unfolding in slow motion, so to speak. The comings and goings of the pope, princes, high-ranking ecclesiastics, and envoys fit precisely Reuter’s definition of an assembly as an expanding of the ruler’s entourage.

A particularly striking feature of this assembly is


18 Annales Regni Francorum, s.a. 799, p. 107; Balzer, ‘Paderborn: Zentralort der Karolinger’.

the role of the army. As we have seen, Charlemagne's going to Paderborn in 799 took place in a military context. He had previously mustered an army there in 783 and had set out from there on a military progress in 785, after holding a general assembly.\textsuperscript{20} If the poem \textit{Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa} can be trusted here, and there seems little reason not to do so, the army played a key role in the ceremonial greeting of Pope Leo in 799. This poem tells how Charlemagne, on hearing the news that Leo's arrival is imminent, urges his followers to arm themselves. They duly bustle about, donning armour, mounting horses, raising banners, sounding trumpets, and forming a circle of mounted warriors, in the midst of which is the king, resplendent in a golden helmet and mounted on a mighty horse. Leo is greeted by the clergy and the army in a great performance of salutations and prayers. Thus, the army is a key actor in these ceremonies and we are told that Leo was much impressed by its weaponry.\textsuperscript{21} But the warriors were spectators as well as actors and formed an audience for ceremonies designed to display the status of pope and king and their relationship, and thus to convince any waverers in the host of the righteousness of prospective intervention in Rome, if matters should come to that.\textsuperscript{22} The ceremonies at Paderborn did not so much reflect a consensus as create one whose significance would only become clear in retrospect once Charlemagne's momentous trip to Rome had been decided on.

This presence of the army brings us to some general points on the nature of assemblies and on problems of approach and definition. First, there is an overlap between armies and assemblies, seen most obviously in the institution of the Marchfield.\textsuperscript{23} The army could be a political audience, as at the famous swearing of the oaths of Strasbourg in 842 where the context in Nithard's (c. 800–44) contemporary account of the ceremony and its aftermath is military, and masculine; assemblies were predominantly male affairs.\textsuperscript{24} Although Carolingian rulers may have tried to avoid campaigning or summon

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Annales Regni Francorum}, s.a. 783 and s.a. 785, pp. 64, 68, 70; King, \textit{Charlemagne: Translated Sources}, pp. 82–83.


\textsuperscript{22} McCormick, 'Paderborn 799', pp. 74–78.

\textsuperscript{23} Reuter, 'Assembly Politics', p. 435.

\textsuperscript{24} Nithard, \textit{Histories}, III, c. 5 and III, c. 6, ed. by Philippe Lauer, \textit{Histoire des fils de Louis le Pieux}, Les classiques de l'histoire de France au moyen âge, 7 (Paris, 1926), pp. 100–08, 110–12. Warriors and churchmen displayed contrasting masculine roles in assemblies; on the dubious
ing the host in Lent, as Garrison has reminded us, the military rhythms of assemblies could cut across the rhythm of the liturgical calendar. In 872 Louis the German (840–76) held an assembly in the middle of Lent which included an oath-taking ceremony. His sons took an oath to be faithful to their father and did so ‘in sight of the whole army’. Later, a hostile annalist described the 882 alliance of Charles the Fat (876–88) with the Viking leader Godefrid as ‘a shame inflicted on the army’. The audience that Charles sought to impress and reach with this ceremony of alliance becomes, for the annalist, the key institution whose degradation symbolizes the wider disgrace of the kingdom of the Franks.

Nor was the army simply a passive spectator. It was by the ‘enraged judgement of Arnulf’s army’ that the rebel Count Ambrosius was hanged in 894 in Italy. One recalls here how the king and the host pronounced Earl Swegn to be nithing, a scoundrel and outlaw, in England in 1049. Thus, Carolingian armies could have an active political dimension and a cultural one too as witnessed, for example, in the manuscript of saints’ lives copied out by a scribe from Regensburg who accompanied the army on campaigns against the Avars in the summer of 819. Armies, let alone assemblies, were not purely secular.

The full significance of the role of the army in Carolingian political culture awaits further study, but if assemblies and armies could overlap, they could also remain distinct. When Louis the Pious (814–40) summoned an assembly to meet at Nijmegen during the troubles of 830–31, Abbot Hilduin of St. Denis turned up in military array (‘hostiliter’) when this had been forbidden, and an angry Louis packed him off to spend

nature of the evidence that has been thought to show that contemporaries worried about women speaking up at public assemblies, see Janet L. Nelson, *The Frankish World, 750–900* (London, 1996), pp. 202–03.


29 This is MS Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale 8216–18; David Ganz, ‘Book Production in the Carolingian Empire and the Spread of Caroline Minuscule’, in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, ed. by McKitterick, II, 786–808 (p. 792).
the winter in a tent in Paderborn. Similarly, Arnulf’s encountering Charles the Fat in 887 with a strong force was not a simple response to the latter’s summons to an assembly in Tribur, but a declaration of hostile intent towards Charles, with the instrument to carry it out. In these cases, armed followers had not been foreseen as participants in the envisaged assemblies.

All this means that assemblies can sometimes be rather difficult to define. Of course, assemblies could be formally announced and generally expected; but variety of terminology, problems of definitions posed by our sources, and the flexibility of contemporary practice means that, even for the Carolingian period, where assemblies may be a more clear-cut phenomenon than in the Ottonian era, we cannot improve on Reuter’s statement that ‘we are dealing with [an assembly] whenever the ruler had in his presence a substantial amount of people who were not permanent members of his entourage’. Sources are not always clear in labelling assemblies as such, and the status of meetings as assemblies has sometimes to be deduced by historians as, for example, for the gatherings held at Frankfurt in 892 and 951. Of course, assemblies could have a clear status: Otto I’s anger at the failure of some rebellious nobles to attend an assembly in 938 suggests no fuzziness of definition and expectation about assemblies on his part. Still, there are severe limits to our knowledge. We know, for example, that in 897, at a time of great trouble for his rule, the east Frankish ruler Arnulf held at least three assemblies, in Regensburg, Worms, and Tribur, but we do not know anything of the agenda for the last meeting of this important series.


Most of what was said at such assemblies remains unknown to us. This is partly because of our lack of east Frankish capitularies, though we know that kings such as Louis the German did issue them, for example, at an assembly at Erfurt in 852. But much of the essential business of assemblies may not have been recorded anyway. The discussions that went on escape us, and there surely was some discussion, even if assemblies were ‘staged’. Kings, their warriors, and their bishops all talked; some kings thought that their bishops talked too much. It is hard to believe that the prepared ceremonies (declaration of the royal will, acclamations, receptions of envoys etc.) were all that contemporaries understood the experience of assemblies to be, even if we have to accept that sometimes assemblies could be essentially liturgical in nature. There has been much work on orality and literacy in the early medieval world, but we still need more work on early medieval conversations, or rather, on the different registers employed by political actors in their encounters. As Nelson has reminded us, the fact that the west Frankish king Louis the Stammerer (877–79) actually did have a stammer, mattered to contemporaries. It is here that Althoff’s work is especially valuable. His survey of the ‘secret’ meetings that preceded and accompanied assemblies shows that the former were characterized by a special sort of speaking. The best known example of such frank arguments and fierce remarks comes from the tense encounter between Margrave Ekkehard of Meissen and Margrave Liuthar, when the former was hoping to gain the throne after the death of Otto III in 1002. The Saxon magnates had gathered and Ekkehard was hoping that his candidacy would be successful. Liuthar, however, drew the leading men aside for a ‘secret session’ (‘secretum [...] colloquium’) and got them to agree to postpone any decision on the succession until a later meeting at the Saxon assembly site of Werla. This angered Ekkehard who demanded to know what Liuthar had against him. Liuthar’s reply is really the eleventh century’s tonal equivalent to our ‘You just don’t get it, do you?’ Drawing attention to Ekkehard’s flaws, he replied, ‘Don’t you understand that your cart lacks its fourth wheel?’ Althoff is surely right to

36 AF, s.a. 852, p. 43; Reuter, Annals of Fulda, p. 34, and n. 10; Reuter, Germany in the Early Middle Ages, pp. 85–90.
39 Thietmar of Merseburg, Chronicon, IV, c. 52, ed. by Robert Holtzmann, Die Chronik des Bischofs Thietmar von Merseburg und ihre Korrektur Uberarbeitung (Thietmari Merseburgensis episcopi Chronicon, MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum, Nova series, 9 (Berlin, 1935), p. 190, and in English translation in David Warner, Ottonian Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg, Manchester Medieval Sources (Manchester, 2001), p. 189; the remark may be
argue that this sort of taunt, explosive if uttered in public, could only be made in private. It does not necessarily follow, however, that all utterances and behaviour in the 'public' part of assemblies could always be controlled and predicted. The idea of secrecy itself is in fact not straightforward. Chafing at his father's stern authority, prince Louis the Younger held a 'secret meeting' in Francia ('secretum colloquium') with some of his father's counsellors in 874. However, the news of this meeting leaked out and was alarming enough to bring the father, Louis the German, all the way from Bavaria to Francia. Surely the 'secret' meeting had been designed to be leaked to warn the father to heed the son's rising discontent. Categories could leak into one another; the secret was here the public.

If much of the detail of agenda and proceedings at assemblies eludes us, we also cannot even be sure of who attended. Of course, we know that magnates were meant to attend and that to refuse to obey a summons to an assembly was dangerous. We know that numbers at some assemblies must have been quite high. A meeting of three Carolingian kings in 862 was attended by at least two hundred bishops, abbots, and nobles, who would have had their own followers. Trying to find out exactly who attended assemblies can be a frustrating business. As Depreux has shown, even for the reign of Louis the Pious (814–40, a better-documented reign than those of the east Frankish kings) we do not know who was summoned to assemblies, how summonses were issued, how assemblies were announced, etc. Some sense of the limits to our knowledge as far as Carolingian east Francia is concerned can be gained from the great survey of the palace of Frankfurt by Orth. Some thirty-one assemblies were held at Frankfurt between 794 and 893. Thanks to Orth's survey, we can calculate how many named individuals can be seen from the sources to have attended these meetings. Not counting the kings themselves, we get a rough total of 202. This total includes members of the royal referring to Ekkehard's family or to his lack of one of the four cardinal virtues. On this meeting, see Althoff, Spielregeln, pp. 170–71.


family, churchmen, vassals, scribes, envoys. If we have 202 known individuals for thirty-one assemblies, we have an average figure of between six and seven known individual participants per assembly. To say that our information lacks precision is to understate the case.

What do we know? What did go on at these assemblies? To stick with Frankfurt for the moment, we can see that a palace there provided a site and focus for assemblies and in doing so acted as a concrete symbol, an objective embodiment of royal authority. Palaces existed and functioned in the landscape even when the king was not there. If he was absent, his queen might be in residence, as Charlemagne’s wife Fastrada probably was in 793–94. Fiscal officials operated near Frankfurt whether the king was there or not. Substantial economic resources were poured into the palace, as when Louis the Pious had new buildings erected in the 820s. Many power-holders of the east Frankish realm would have had cause to visit Frankfurt; around thirty assemblies were held there between 855 and 893. As well as simply existing as a maintained symbol of royal authority and a focus of royal resources in the landscape, Frankfurt would have also existed in the memory and mind-set of those assembly participants. It is no surprise to find it described by the chronicler Regino (c. 840–915) at the close of the Carolingian period as the ‘principal seat of the eastern kingdom’. As such, it existed in a royal landscape where kings could initiate dynamic developments.

We can confirm this impression if we look south of Frankfurt to Bürstadt, lying east of the Rhine between Worms and Lorsch. Unlike Frankfurt, Bürstadt did not possess a particularly elaborate palace complex. Nor was it a regular assembly site; only one assembly is recorded as taking place there in the reign of Louis the German (840–76). What Bürstadt did have was a good location for communications, and much room. Broad meadows stretched from the royal hall and church to the river Rhine. This provided a good space for mustering armies, whether in Charlemagne’s time or during the Second Crusade. More significantly, from our point of view, such space could be not simply physically necessary, but also politically or diplomatically so. It was on the

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44 Even if some persons attended more than one assembly, the number of identifiable persons participating remains staggeringly low.


meadows by Bürstadt in May 984 that Duke Henry ‘the Quarrelsome’ met supporters of the child Otto III (983–1002) to try to win them to his side in the dispute over the succession to the boy’s father Otto II (973–83). We do not know how many people attended these negotiations, but we know that the negotiations themselves were tense, and we are told that Henry did not relish the prospect of combat. This suggests that Otto III’s supporters were there in force and Henry himself had probably travelled there with supporters from Bavaria. The open space was necessary here for these wary rivals, and their debate was real.

This open space was surely among the resources of Bürstadt that appealed to Louis the German when he held an assembly there in the spring of 873. Here he received envoys from the Danes and Slavs and, more significantly, his sons Louis and Charles (the Fat) heard cases and gave judgements, and Louis the German himself gave judgement in some cases. One suspects that it was the great spaces of Bürstadt that allowed this multiple display of Carolingian lordship, a display of hierarchy and harmony rendered even more impressive as it followed directly on the young Charles’s breakdown in Frankfurt earlier in the year and from earlier squabbles between the old king and his sons. And all this was rigged up out of the blue, as it were. Louis the German had visited Bürstadt in 870, but that was a ‘liturgical’ visit to celebrate Pentecost. No assembly had been held in Bürstadt before 873, as far as we know, and there was no great palace complex at the site. Louis the German’s ability to take such a site and activate it so that it could sustain a full-scale assembly shows something of the royal political creativity made possible by the existence of a Königslandschaft.

It remains difficult to decide whether those members of the aristocracy who were gathered at Bürstadt were more impressed by this apparent harmony of the royal house or by its tensions behind the scenes, more impressed by Louis the German’s fatherly supremacy or by the sons’ flexing of their political muscles. It is important to realize how ambiguous such carefully stage-managed scenes could remain. Kings and their immediate counsellors could certainly act as producers or directors of assemblies, but they could not always control audience response. Even such an experienced manager as Louis the German could get it wrong on occasion. The year 871 saw a flare-up of rebellion led by his sons. After tough negotiations in February, the king and his sons agreed on an armistice and to meet at Tribur in May. Here Louis asserted his authority by blinding a vassal of Count Henry, an ally of his sons. But Louis had miscalculated.

49 Thietmar, Chronicon, IV, c. 4, p. 134, and for the uneasy meeting a few months later between Otto and Henry here, Chronicon, IV, c. 8, p. 140; Warner, Ottonian Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar, pp. 151–52, 155; Gockel, ‘Bürstadt’, pp. 66, 68–69, 72–73.

50 AF, s.a. 873, pp. 77–78; Reuter, Annals of Fulda, pp. 69–70; Arnold, Medieval Germany, pp. 130–31.

51 Gockel, ‘Bürstadt’, pp. 65, 69, 72. The landscape around Bürstadt was of course not simply a void, to be filled by the royal will; on local landowners, see Michael Gockel, Karolingische Königshöfe am Mittelrhein, Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte, 31 (Göttingen, 1970), pp. 232–312, and Innes, State and Society in the Early Middle Ages, p. 107.
His sons were not intimidated and, outraged, they refused to attend the meeting in Tribur. Louis had to travel south to Gernsheim to meet them and patch things up by making concessions. One assumes that the blinding of Count Henry's vassal had been intended as a set-piece demonstration of Louis's authority after the sons had challenged it, and thus to act as a severe message to these sons while they were on their way to Tribur. But it had misfired badly and Louis had to abandon the stage at Tribur for a more improvised encounter. Assemblies could be fluid, their outcomes could be argued over, and a net of urgent communications could be woven around them. We do not know how the sons were informed of the blinding of the vassal; had swaggering envoys from their father been sent to them to announce this menacing act, or had furious supporters of their own rushed from Tribur to stoke the fires of outrage? Either way, Louis's demonstration had failed.

Rumours could sweep assemblies, as at Frankfurt in 885; kings' performances at assemblies could be reviewed with a critical eye as in the *Annals of Fulda* noting that Charles the Fat 'passed decrees of little use' at the Worms assembly of 882. The assembly held by Arnulf at Forchheim in 889 saw consensus over the succession being displayed by recalcitrant nobles eventually 'giving their right hands'. This was subject to reservations, however, and the arguments leading to the hard-won compromise seem to have taken place at the assembly itself, not at a secret meeting. Participants here would surely have placed differing weight on the various aspects of the succession agreement, depending on their views. Assemblies were not monolithic. Assemblies could reveal weakness and danger. In 897, Arnulf held an assembly at Regensburg and, according to the *Annals of Fulda*, 'because of his illness decided to spend the winter in Bavaria in hidden places' ('secretis locis'). Presumably, the failure to alert people to the details of the royal itinerary was itself news here. What should have been public had become secret; the secret of royal weakness was now public.

These examples need not, apart from that of Arnulf in 897, be seen as illustrations of royal weakness. But they do illustrate something of the need for royal authority to be negotiated and, above all, of the active role played by assemblies in this process. This can also be seen in Ottonian Germany, where the apparatus of royal government was much lighter than in the Carolingian kingdom. This need not mean, however, that royal authority was weak. A king such as Otto I (936–73) was a dangerous man to defy, and Otto III ruled with real glamour. Nor were all Carolingian practices abandoned. It is well known that Ottonian rulers spent more time in Saxony than in other parts of their realm.

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53 *AF*, s.a. 885, s.a. 882, pp. 103, 99; Reuter, *Annals of Fulda*, pp. 98, 93.
and Saxony was thus governed more intensively than other regions of the Reich, but assemblies continued to be held in what had been the heartlands of earlier Carolingian government, in the Rhine-Main area and lower Lotharingia. What mattered, then, was not the fact that the itinerary of the Ottonian kings failed to cover the whole of the Reich with equal intensity so much as the fact that magnates of the Reich attended (or did not attend) the assemblies held, and that the king remained in touch with the 'political nation'. In a stimulating article on Ottonian rule, Kränzle has warned us against making a simple equation between royal presence equalling the functioning of royal rule and its absence equalling its breakdown; he has stressed the need to focus on contemporary forms of communication, interaction, and integration.

We can turn to an instructive example of an Ottonian assembly, that at Werla in Saxony in 968. Just north of the more famous later palace of Goslar, which was to become prominent under the Salian rulers, and linked to routes connecting it to important sites such as Gandersheim and Quedlinburg, Werla's roots stretched back into prehistoric times. Perched on a hill, like many palaces of the Reich, Werla was a site enclosing an area with a diameter of some 140 metres with various buildings, one of which was elaborate enough to have a form of underfloor heating. Werla should not be seen, however, as an exclusively royal site. Although Ottonian kings did stay here (some thirteen royal stays are recorded for the Ottonian period), they did not attend the Saxon regional assemblies held here.

The assembly of 968 was held while Otto I was away in Italy. Dukes Hermann and Thiadrich were presiding over the assembly and received a letter that Otto had sent from Italy. In this letter, Otto breathed fire against the Redarii, a Slav people, and urged the Saxons not to make peace with them but to work with Duke Hermann for their destruction. In his Deeds of the Saxons, Widukind (c. 925–after 973) tells us that the letter was read out at the assembly in the presence of high and low, but that it was decided to maintain the peace with the Redarii because war with the Danes

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was looming and the Saxon forces did not stretch to fighting two wars.\textsuperscript{59} Otto’s express
commands were thus flouted and historians have tended to see this as revealing the
weakness and limitations of Ottonian government, features exacerbated by the absence
of the ruler in Italy. Since it was probably at this very assembly that the son of a noble
who had conspired against Otto’s life with fatal results was made Bishop of Halberstadt,
Werla in 968 does not look like an assembly that was trying to please Otto.\textsuperscript{60}

There is, however, another way of looking at it. After all, the Saxons were not being
stubbornly contumacious. As far as the military situation was concerned, they were in
a better position to assess the dangers of a campaign than the distant Otto was. Perhaps
there was some memory among the assembly’s participants of how Otto’s father Henry I
(919–36) had had to secure himself and his followers in Werla in the face of over-
whelming military pressure from the east in the 920s. Not all memories of royal stays
at Werla pointed to Ottonian military supremacy. Above all, the fact that a letter from
Otto in Italy was sent to Saxony and read out at an assembly at Werla shows the govern-
mental machinery of interaction and communication actually working in ways that
Kränzle’s article should make us sensitive to. Commentators who stress the disobeying
of Otto’s commands have not paid sufficient attention to the very fact of the letter’s
existence and to its other contents. The letter announced a variety of political achieve-
ments: the imperial coronation of Otto’s son Otto (II) at Christmas 967 and Otto (I)’s
successful meetings with envoys from Constantinople. Otto further informed the
assembly that his wife and son would return to Germany in the summer as indeed he
would himself, once he had destroyed the Saracens based at Le Freinet.\textsuperscript{61} If Otto’s
wishes regarding the Redarii were disregarded at Werla, these wishes were not pre-
sented in a vacuum. Those present at the assembly heard news of Otto and his family

\textsuperscript{59} The text of the letter is transmitted only in Widukind and thus has to be approached with

\textsuperscript{60} Karl J. Leyser, \textit{Rule and Conflict in an Early Medieval Society: Ottonian Saxony} (London,
Weinfurter (Sigmaringen, 1991), pp. 309–30 (pp. 313–14), links the disregarding of the letter and
the choosing of the bishop; idem, ‘Saxony and the Elbe Slavs in the Tenth Century’, in \textit{The New
Cambridge Medieval History}, ed. by Reuter, III, 267–92 (p. 270); Kränzle, ‘Der abwesende
König’, p. 145, refers briefly to the letter’s being disobeyed at Werla as evidence for the problems
of communication. On Duke Hermann’s role at Werla in Hildiward becoming the new Bishop
of Halberstadt, see \textit{Annalista Saxo}, s.a. 968, ed. by Georg Waitz, in \textit{Chronica et annales aevi
Salici}, ed. by Georg Heinrich Pertz and others, MGH SS, 6 (Hannover, 1844), p. 122; and on the
materials drawn on here by this late source-compilation, see Klaus Naß, \textit{Die Reichschronik des
Annalista Saxo und die sächsische Geschichtsschreibung im 12. Jahrhundert}, MGH Schriften,

\textsuperscript{61} Widukind, \textit{Res Gestae Saxonicae}, III, c. 70, pp. 146–48; for Henry I’s retreat to Werla,
Widukind, I, c. 32, p. 45, and for vicissitudes of memory focusing on royal palaces and
and were given a glowing picture of the dynasty’s achievements, status, and prospects. They were reassured, or warned, that the formidable ruler and his family would soon return. Furthermore, the nominee for the see of Halberstadt was summoned to Otto in Ravenna so that his loyalty could be tested and confirmed, something that Otto did in dramatic fashion. To see the assembly at Werla as a site remote from the royal will is to miss a dimension of its broader significance in the structure of the Ottonian Reich. It was a nodal point in a web of negotiations and communications.

The assembly at Werla had not, however, been a royal assembly. Assemblies and associations were bigger than a royal framework. Even dissident and resentful nobles planning to challenge the king had ‘official’ sites where they could meet and conspire. Saalfeld in the north and Breisach in the south-west are well-known examples. Such horizontal forms of association were a prominent feature of the Reich’s political world. If assemblies offered this world a mirror in which it could see and understand itself, the royal presence in that mirror was sometimes more suggested than definite. Otto I’s physical remoteness from Werla in 968 was a consequence of the imperial dimension to German kingship, a dimension that required regular absence in Italy, particularly in the Ottonian period. Germany here differed from the west Frankish and Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, even allowing for the Danish dimension to the rule of Cnut (1016–35). Duchies such as Saxony held their own assemblies while the king was absent. Saalfeld and Breisach held assemblies where the king would have been very unwelcome indeed. Disputed successions resulted in assemblies where kings had to be found, as at Frohse and Werla (where division, rather than consensus, was staged) in 1002 and at Kamba


in 1024. Tricky successions were hardly unique to Germany, but the geographical scale of the Reich, the absence of rulers in Italy, and specific circumstances of the mid- and late eleventh century meant that assemblies could and did become venues where royalty, or at least the king, could be questioned, and where consensus itself could fail to be expressed.

Such developments were accentuated by the events of the reign of Henry IV (1056–1106). After a minority, which ended with a stormy assembly at Tribur where Henry was compelled to dismiss his chief counsellor, Archbishop Adalbert of Bremen (archbishop from at least 1043 until 1072), Henry was engulfed in Saxon revolt and struggles with Pope Gregory VII, struggles that drew in the German princes. These struggles involved not only fierce fighting but also a series of meetings where disputants gathered and argued hotly the rights and wrongs of their cases. We have some vivid descriptions of such encounters, though Leyser noted that the eloquent deployment of the rhetoric of the Roman historian Sallust (86–34 BC) by contemporary writers can hardly be a transcript of the angry speeches of such enemies of Henry as Otto of Northeim. These accounts do show that even men as angry as Otto of Northeim continued to take care that their public demonstrations of outrage at Henry were carefully preceded by ‘secret meetings’ to ensure that such outrage did not fall on stony ground. But the pace of events and the deepening of the political crisis meant that contemporaries had to improvise, to sail in uncharted waters. Men who attended assemblies were now on a very steep learning curve and were taking steps into the unknown. Archbishop Siegfried I of Mainz (1060–84) found himself at an assembly in Worms in 1076 where he joined in Henry’s denunciations of Gregory VII as a false pope, but in little over a year’s time he found himself at the assembly at Forchheim that elected

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65 Thietmar, Chronicon, IV, c. 52, V, c. 3, c. 4, pp. 190, 222, 224; Warner, Ottonian Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar, pp. 188–89, 207–08; Wipo, Gesta Chuonradi imperatoris, c. 2, ed. by Harry Bresslau, Die Werke Wipos (Wiponis opera), MGH SS rer. Ger., 61 (Leipzig, 1915), pp. 13–14, with English translation by Theodor E. Mommsen and Karl F. Morrison, Imperial Lives and Letters of the Eleventh Century, ed. by Robert L. Benson, Records of Civilization: Sources and Studies. 67 (New York, 1962), pp. 60–61. Wipo describes Kamba (without explicitly naming it) as a place suitable for large numbers of people but as also providing suitable sites for ‘secret’ discussions; his account of the debate over the election surely features ‘public’ divisions, as well as the more confidential ones noted by Althoff, Spielregeln, pp. 164–66. Reuter, Germany in the Early Middle Ages, pp. 183–91, and Arnold, Medieval Germany, pp. 174–79, offer nuanced views of ‘elective’ kingship, but the disputes were real enough.

66 Ian Stuart Robinson, Henry IV of Germany, 1056–1106 (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 59–60, for the fall of Adalbert at the assembly of Tribur; Robinson’s book provides a valuably full survey of the entire reign.


68 Althoff, Spielregeln, pp. 172–73.
Rudolf of Rheinfelden as anti-king to Henry. Assemblies became the venue for the snapping, rather than the forging, of bonds. Assemblies themselves threatened to disintegrate. During the summer of 1075, assemblies in Saxony became the venues, not for the assertion of a common Saxon identity, but for clashes between the 'common people' ('plebs') and princes as the rebellion's pressures bent the structures of that society. Henry's reign may have been particularly crisis-ridden, and extreme cases make bad law; yet our brief survey of assemblies in early medieval Germany has shown them to be not mere ceremony, but venues for contest as well as consensus, and channels through which flowed real political articulateness. It was precisely because assemblies could not always be counted on to be meekly governable that made them so important to government of the community.


70 Lampert of Hersfeld, Annales, s.a. 1075, ed. by Oswald Holder-Egger, Lamperti monachi Hersfeldensis Opera, MGH SS rer. Ger., 38 (Hannover, 1894), p. 228; Robinson, Henry IV, p. 101. My thanks to the editors for their patience and suggestions.