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Christoph Bramann

## Representations of a Medieval “Feudal System” in German History Textbooks.

A Study of Textbooks and their Revision between 1945 and 2014<sup>1</sup>

— Abstract of Eckert.Beiträge 2017/2 —

How do history textbooks written for secondary schools deal with the latest scholarly research? And how are changes in the books affected by school curricula and aspects of textbook production and distribution? These questions form the basis of the study of textbooks summarized here (Bramann, 2017). It examines the treatment of what has long been referred to as a medieval “feudal system” – or, in German, “Lehnswesen”<sup>2</sup> – in history textbooks used in Germany. The study is based on an analysis of representations of a medieval “feudal system” in 33 editions of nine series of history textbook published for Hessian schools between 1945 and 2014 (pp. 17, 57–58, 69, 80). The aim is to identify the influence of various factors on the textbooks presentations of the construct “Lehnswesen”, whose usefulness and appropriateness have been challenged since 1974. Thus the study focuses on the textbooks’ responsiveness to (a) *scholarly research* as well as (b) *school curricula* and (c) *aspects of textbook production*, that are assumed to determine the structure and content of history textbooks (Clauss, 2007; Hessenauer, 2011). It is divided into four sections: (1) methodology and selection of data (Bramann, 2017, pp. 8–18); (2) representations of a medieval “feudal system” in the prescribed (official) Hessian school curricula from 1945 to 2015, and the historiographical challenges to the construct (pp. 18–50); (3) analysis of the textbooks (pp. 51–98); and (4) a conclusion (pp. 99–103).

Since the end of the last century, the idea of a medieval “feudal system” has been repeatedly questioned and criticized (Brown, 1974; Reynolds, 1994). German scholars have paid particular attention to Susan Reynolds’ thesis that the notions of “fief” and

<sup>1</sup> The study is based on my master’s thesis from the year 2015 (University of Frankfurt, Germany). Many thanks to Elizabeth A.R. Brown for a critical review of this text.

<sup>2</sup> In German medieval scholarly discourse the terms “Feudalsystem“ / “Feudalordnung“ / “Feudalismus“ do not correspond precisely to the term “Lehnswesen” (which is especially used to describe institutions involving the fief and vassals). However, in popular usage (and also in works aimed at school children) the terms are used more loosely, as in the so-called “feudal pyramid” (“Lehnspyramide”) (Boockmann, 1992, 365–368.). In the following, “feudal system” is used as the equivalent of “Lehnswesen”.



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“vassal” were early modern historical constructs derived from medieval legal compilations (Oexle, 1995; Fried, 1997; Krieger, 1997; Goetz, 2003; Hechberger, 2010). Especially the idea of a Carolingian feudal system has been called into question (Kasten, 2009; Costambeys, Innes & MacLean, 2011; Patzold, 2012; Jussen, 2014). Nonetheless, many popular and academic handbooks (e.g. Blockmans & Hoppenbrouwers, 2007; Busch, 2011) continue to present a “feudal system”, still following the classic and now outdated approaches (e.g. Ganshof, 1944).

The textbook study demonstrates the effect of school curricula on textbooks from the mid-1990s. Before then textbooks were sometimes given formal approval for twenty or thirty years even though they were not changed in accordance with altered curricular requirements. Little change has occurred in the presentation of a medieval “feudal system” – in text, illustrations, documents, even when textbooks have undergone substantial conceptual revision. Like in the curricular documents, the textbooks describe “the feudal system” (*Lehnswesen*) as a static social and political system that existed throughout the Middle Ages and beyond – from the Carolingian period until the French Revolution. The narratives are fundamentally similar and resemble those found in popular and academic handbooks. Recent research questioning the applicability of the concept to the Carolingian period is disregarded. In a few scattered instances attention is paid to scholarly advances, but the effect of current research appears to be minimal, coincidental and peripheral. Drawing on older textbooks, now discarded, the fundamental, accepted narrative therefore still features a medieval “feudal system”. In this context, the analysis shows that it does not seem unusual in textbook revisions to adopt text and image elements from older textbooks (even from other publishers) without questioning them – a circumstance that Erich Kästner pointed out many years ago: “Mistrust your textbooks occasionally! They were not made on Mount Sinai [...] but from old textbooks that were made from old textbooks that were made from old textbooks [...]” (Kästner, 1959, 182; trans. by the author).

Thus there seems little prospect of seeing recent research reflected in textbook narratives, particularly in light of the influence that curricula have exercised on the conceptual structure and content of textbooks since the mid-1990s. It is curricula, not scholarly research that shapes the content of textbooks. Therefore the reception of new approaches to the past in school curricula and in the textbooks’ narratives seem to be a lengthy undertaking, particularly when they fundamentally challenge such a master narrative as the medieval “feudal system”.



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