

Representation of the Acts of Political-Symbolic Communication in the Narrative Sources of the Ottonian Age

The topic of my project is closely connected with one of the most significant academic debates in medieval ritual studies of the last decades: the discussion regarding possibility to reconstruct politic rituals on basis of the descriptions of contemporary medieval authors, who often were bias because of their own politic sympathies and antipathies and therefore purposely misrepresented real symbolic acts. Problem of author subjectivity in such descriptions was extensively treated by Ph. Buc in his monograph “The Dangers of Ritual”¹; this work attracted attention of his colleagues and provoked a heated discussion between such prominent specialists in medieval ritual studies as G. Althoff, G. Koziol, J. Nelson and many others².

If in the historiographic tradition the subjectivity of narrative sources was regarding rather as an impediment, preventing correct reconstruction and interpretation of politic rituals, in my PhD thesis I would try to look at the same problem from another perspective. I am going to analyze political ritual descriptions as complex combinations of eyewitness accounts, of adoptions from previous and contemporary literary tradition and, in some instances, even of fantastic or semi-fantastic images created by medieval writers themselves. So my object of research is not mere political ritual as such, but also description of ritual as a particular phenomenon of the medieval political culture.

The chronological framework of my research is relatively narrow: I will focus on the periods of government of Henry I. (919-936) and Otto I. (936-973). The time of establishment of the Saxon dynasty and of rise of the Ottonian empire seems especially representative for studies of “political symbolism”. By this example is possible to observe the formation of a new “symbolic language”,

¹ Buc P. *The Dangers of Ritual. Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory*. Princeton; Oxford, 2001.

² Koziol G. *The Dangers of Polemic: Is Ritual Still an Interesting Topic of Historical Study?* // *Early Medieval Europe*. № 11. 2002. P. 367–388.; Nelson J. L. *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* by Philippe Buc. *Review* // *Speculum*. 2003. Vol. 78, № 3. P. 847-851.; Althoff G. *Die Macht der Rituale. Symbolik und Herrschaft im Mittelalter*. Darmstadt, 2003.

necessary for legitimation of the Ottonian dynasty, – taking into consideration, that behind these “newly-made” rulers from the Saxon ducal family initially didn’t stand any deep tradition of the representation of royal and imperial power. Among those who elaborated such “language” were Ottonian court historiographers and chroniclers – and in my research I would try to investigate what was their role in this complicated process.

Owing to the long and influential historiographic tradition of researches in that field, the investigation of the Ottonian politic culture became an important trend of the medieval studies. So, in my project I have to consider methodological approaches of some different and even confronting scientific schools. It is especially important to mention the so called “liturgical school”, the most influential in the first half of the 20th century, the structuralist anthropological studies flourished in the 1970-1990, and the “skeptical” post-modern approach, developed in the beginning of our century³.

To explore various strategies of the description of symbolic acts and to reveal some patterns and approaches, common for different authors, I am going to use a comparative method. I would like to focus on the most significant narrative sources depicting political history of the time of Henry I. and Otto I. My source base includes the works of different genres (*historia*, chronicle, hagiography) and of different periods (created by contemporaries of Otto I. or by the subsequent authors, working under the late Ottonians). Crucial for my research are such figures as Liutprand of Cremona, Widukind of Corvei, Adalbert of Magdeburg, Thietmar of Merseburg, Hrotsvith of Gandersheim.

The main problem of my work falls into groups of subquestions, which will be answered successively in the three chapters.

In the first chapter I am going to characterize Ottonian symbolic act descriptions. Starting with the problem designated by Ph. Buc, I would try to

³ Here I use periodization of ritual studies, introduced by D. Warner: Warner D.A. Rituals, Kingship and Rebellion in Medieval Germany // *History Compass*. № 8. 2010. P. 1209-1220. Among the most significant researchers of the “liturgical school” he mentioned, first of all, P.E. Schramm and E.H. Kantorowicz; eminent representatives of the “structuralist ritual studies” are historians of the “Annales School” (primarily J. Le Goff, J.-C. Schmitt) and G. Althoff. Ph. Buc could be considered as a bright representative of post-modern approach.

compare the modern historiographic concept of “political ritual” with the symbolic actions described in the Ottonian narrative sources. I am going to explore some significant differences of such descriptions: so, for example, the symbolic acts represented by Ottonian writers often were not reiterative, as the concept of ritual implies, but unique, “individual”. Consequently, more correct would be use a general term “symbolic communication act”⁴. I will explore the vocabulary used by medieval authors in the passages dedicated to these acts. Focusing on the high frequent terms and the recurring motives, I would try to show how did Ottonian authors understand and interpret symbolic acts (which details seemed crucial for them; what was especially important to underline or, on the contrary, to conceal).

The second chapter regards the place of the Ottonian symbolic communication in cultural context. For the Ottonian age, study of cultural interactions between different regions is a problem of primary importance. The centers that had an old and powerful tradition of political symbolism often gave a model for imitation, – “symbolic mimesis”⁵, – to the “cultural provinces”. So, rulers of the Ottonian dynasty, trying to establish themselves in a new, higher status, had to borrow elements from the “symbolic language” of influential cultural centers (first of all, of Byzantium and Carolingian West Francia). At the same time, they faced a difficult problem: how to transform borrowed elements into the unique symbols of their own power. Ottonian historiographers often played the role of intermediaries by such interactions and adoptions (the classical example is Liutprand of Cremona, whose biography was connected with Italy, Ottonian Germany and Byzantium). So, I am going to analyze that combination of “borrowed” and “original” elements in their symbolic acts descriptions.

The third chapter will be directly devoted to the crucial question of my work: which way political rituals were reflecting in the “literary reality” of Ottonian narrative sources? I subdivide symbolic act descriptions into three types: (1) first-

⁴ Term referring to the concept of “symbolic communication”, defined by G. Althoff: Althoff G. *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter. Kommunikation in Frieden und Fehde*. Darmstadt, 1997. S. 232.; Idem. *Zur Bedeutung symbolischer Kommunikation für das Verständnis des Mittelalters // Frühmittelalterliche Studien*. Bd. 31. 1997. S. 373.

⁵ Term, introduced by M. Bojcov: Bojcov M. *Symbolische Mimesis – nicht nur im Mittelalter // Zeichen – Rituale – Werte / Hrsg. von G. Althoff unter Mitarbeit von Chr. Witthöft*. Münster, 2004. S. 225-257.

hand testimonies about the events seen by historiographers with his own eyes or described according to an eyewitness account; (2) adoptions from previous literary tradition; (3) symbolic acts, “constructed” by authors themselves in their narratives (often, also on the basis of revised literary tradition). In one description could be combined elements of different types. I am going to analyze the specificity of each type of description by the numerous examples from different sources.

I hope that my project could contribute to not only a better understanding of individual authors, their motives and approaches, but also of the whole dynamic process of formation of the Ottonian political-symbolic language. I believe that the participation in your PhD and post-doctoral training school would greatly help me achieve these goals, develop my ideas and improve the level of my work.

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