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Gervase Rosser, *The art of solidarity in the Middle Ages: Guilds in England 1250-1550* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 256 p. ISBN: 978-0-19-820157-1.

Medieval guilds or fraternities are a phenomenon increasingly difficult for students today to understand. Estrangement from religion and a growing distance from Europe's medieval past likely play a role in this; but, at the same time, questions of cooperation, solidarity and local empowerment are very much in the air at the moment. In this erudite study, Gervase Rosser explicitly links the history of medieval English guilds to debates in contemporary society about the relationship between individual identity and community membership, and between collectivities and the state.

Since medieval guilds were very diverse in form and function, Rosser refrains from making rigid distinctions between them. In line with English historiography, he regards religious confraternities and occupational guilds (whether of merchants or artisans) as voluntary associations which had in common that they combined religious with social, economic and political purposes. Instead of providing an analysis of the institutional characteristics of these guilds, he focuses on the motives and ambitions of individuals to join guilds, as well as the effects of this membership on the individual and the wider community; Rosser thereby argues that fraternity should be understood as 'one of the "imaginative structures" through which late-medieval men and women both conceived and actively shaped their world' (9-10). The book can thus be regarded as part of a broader approach that seeks to 'de-institutionalise' the study of guilds and confraternities.

The first chapter's title, 'Immunity', signals the universal need for people (by developing a membrane, so to speak) to open themselves as individuals to external influences, but at the same time to shield the self from too invasive forces. Guilds were, according to Rosser, moral and social contexts in which individualities were shaped, and where encounters between individuals and groups, dependent on each other for survival, took place. In passing, he deconstructs much of the politically, religiously or ideologically coloured historiography on medieval guilds and fraternities, convincingly arguing for a more contextual understanding of the dynamic interrelationships between the individual and community.

The subsequent chapters on 'Ethics', 'Friendship', 'Sacrament', 'Trust' and 'Community' explore aspects of fraternal life familiar to historians, but Rosser offers thought-provoking interpretations of guilds by giving primacy to their religious intentions, the persuasiveness of which may not always convince all readers to the same degree. It is, for example, argued that although greater socio-economic mobility and insecurity after the Black Death necessitated that lay people organise themselves into guilds, these artificial communities were above all about devotional and ethical purposes and practices. Becoming a guild member shaped one's

moral identity and offered an opportunity to cultivate ties with others through devotional and charitable activities, which in turn generated social credit.

Members of guilds and fraternities achieved self-fulfilment by nurturing new ties of friendship that went beyond self-interest. The individual became part of a spiritual community, the harmony and cohesion of which were established and performed by gestures and rituals, such as entry ceremonies, feasts, processions and charitable deeds. A particularly important value of guilds was the creation of trust, which is discussed in relation to the economic activities of merchant and artisan associations. A good reputation or credit-worthiness could be drawn from guild membership, providing individuals easier access to participation in urban economic life. Finally, guilds and fraternities were not just pre-occupied with themselves; members internalised their social and moral principles, disseminating the values of friendship, cooperation and solidarity beyond the confines of these associations. The idea of community as a shared obligation underpinned the collective undertakings for the common good in which guild and fraternity members participated.

There is, of course, much more to this book than this very brief summary can convey. The author's extensive knowledge of sources, literature and debates, which extends well beyond the boundaries of medieval history, makes it an instructive pleasure to read. But despite the engaging narrative presented by the author, questions remain. Firstly, the argument is necessarily based on a selective sample of primarily English evidence, yet the conclusions are sometimes stretched rather far, leaving the reader to wonder to what extent they would hold if they were put to the test of evidence against them. Secondly, in the light of the criticism of modern understandings of the individual and community, it is remarkable that the humanistic distinction between art and nature is maintained. Solidarity may not come naturally, but does that make it something unnatural? Finally, the allusions made to the implications of the medieval art of constructing solidarity in the twenty-first century deserves a bit more explication. For example, a plea for a constructive interaction between states and localities, which have little place in modern political society, is made only in passing. But the implied relevance of the medieval past for contemporary society is also one of the many reasons that makes *The art of solidarity* a must-read for scholars interested in medieval guilds and fraternities in particular, and voluntary associations in general.

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