

Town Chronicles in the Holy Roman Empire: Legitimacy and Historical Construction

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Within the patchwork rug called Holy Roman Empire legitimacy was a multi-polar problem as the empire was a multi-polar organism. Apart from the emperor whose legitimacy was based on the idea of *Translatio imperii*, there were various rulers who felt the need to legitimize their rule: religious and secular Electors, religious and secular princes, counts and knights. Among the smallest units were the imperial cities forming a constitutional phenomenon unique to European history. Within a feudal society these bourgeois communities were threatened by the surrounding princely territories like the duchies of Bavaria and of *Württemberg*.

Apart from defending their independence they had to stand the struggle for seat and vote at the imperial diets. Since they had been defeated by their princely enemies – especially the duke of *Württemberg* - in the great „*Städtekrige*“ [Wars of the Cities] of the late 14th century they had not been able to regain the initiative yet maintained their constitutional position. As the building of territories had not been concluded yet, many princely cities still enjoyed a high degree of freedom besides of princely spoon-feeding. The so called *Civitates mixtae* were especially successful. These were towns like Brunswick or *Lüneburg*, acting independently though being officially subject to a prince. They joined alliances and waged wars, partly even against their own sovereigns. In the case of Brunswick the Duke was only able to overcome this far-reaching independence as late as 1671. But also princely cities not enjoying so much independence, like the Saxon *Zwickau*, were trying to strengthen their position opposite to competing forces like the noblemen and competing towns.

Generally we have to state a marked non-congruence between the towns and their princes, not only with regard to the princes' superior instruments of power. Since political and social positions were completely determined by aristocratic categories of lineage at that time, the inferior status of the bourgeois communities caused a strong need for historical legitimation. One of the most important means to provide this was the writing of town chronicles¹. These have come down to us

¹ Though especially early modern town chronicles have been widely neglected some important works have appeared in the last years: cf. Heiko Droste, *Schreiben über Lüneburg. Wandel von Funktion und Gebrauchssituation der Lüneburger Historiographie (1350-1639)*, Hannover 2000; Peter Johanek (Ed.), *Städtische Geschichtsschreibung im Spätmittelalter und in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Köln, Weimar, Wien

in large numbers, from the late middle ages up to the eighteenth century. This kind of urban historiography is the subject of the *Potsdam* research project „The urban culture of memory from the late middle ages up to the eighteenth century: investigated on the basis of city chronicles“, supported by the „*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*“.² Within the framework of this project I am doing a comparative study on late medieval and early modern chronicles. I am using town chronicles from different parts of the Holy Roman Empire and from towns of different types – imperial cities, princely cities, Hansa towns, *Civitates mixtae*, episcopal towns - in order to find out whether they try to establish a collective identity of the citizens of their towns or of certain urban groups by their description of urban history.³ Generally the notion of a collective identity is based on *Jan Assmann's* theory of cultural memory.⁴

These chronicles established an urban culture of memory by painting the history of the towns in glowing colours. Many chronicles provide phantastic myths of origin of the respective cities - *Augsburg* in Swabia proves to be older than Rome and has been founded long time before the destruction of ancient Troy, while its sister town *Ulm* dates back to an incursion by the Amazons. Thus the towns were able to defy the genealogical constructions of the great dynasties like the Trojan origin of the Hapsburgs⁵ or the *Wittelsbacher* who equated their dynasty with the Bavarian country.⁶

2000; Joachim Schneider, *Heinrich Deichsler und die Nürnberger Chronistik des 15. Jahrhunderts*, Wiesbaden 1991; Peter Wolf, *Bilder und Vorstellungen vom Mittelalter. Regensburger Stadtchroniken der frühen Neuzeit*, Tübingen 1999.

² Project leader is Prof. Günther Lottes. Within the framework of this project two doctoral theses about the chronicles of *Augsburg* and *Frankfurt on the Main* have been written: Benedikt Mauer, *Georg Kölderer. Ein Augsburger Chronist des ausgehenden 16. Jahrhunderts (Forschungen zur Geschichte des Bayerischen Schwaben 29)*, Augsburg 2001, and Stephanie Dzeja, *Die Geschichte der eigenen Stadt. Geschichtsschreibung in Frankfurt vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert* (still to appear). Sascha Möbius is working on a doctoral thesis on the chronicles of *Lübeck* („*Die frühneuzeitliche Chronistik Lübecks*“); cf. Günther Lottes, *Stadtchronistik und städtische Identität. Zur Erinnerungskultur der frühneuzeitlichen Stadt*, in: *Mitteilungen des Vereins für Geschichte der Stadt Nürnberg* 87 (2000), p. 47-58.

³ I'm looking into chronicles from *Bern*, *Brunswik*, *Cologne*, *Constance*, *Eger (Cheb)*, *Nuremberg*, *Rostock*, *Ulm* and of several princely cities from *Hesse*, *Saxonia* and *Württemberg*.

⁴ Cf. Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, München² 1997, p. 50-56, 130-160 and Helmut Berding (Ed.), *Nationales Bewußtsein und kollektive Identität (Studien zur Entwicklung des kollektiven Bewußtseins in der Neuzeit 2)*, Frankfurt am Main 1991.

⁵ Cf. the lecture of Heather Madar in panel 1.

⁶ Cf. Jean-Marie Moeglin, *Das Geblüt von Bayern' et la réunification de la Bavière en 1505. Les falsifications historiques dans l'entourage du duc Albert IV (1465-1508)*, in:

Zwickau is a good example for humanist influence on these myths of origin.⁷ According to the scholarly forgeries of the physician and mayor *Erasmus Stella* the city was founded by an ancient hero named *Cydnus* or *Cygnus* - a son of Hercules.

Whereas historical constructions of this type cannot be found in every chronicle and in every town, nearly all the chroniclers relate the privileges granted by kings or other rulers. Compared to the myths of origin the quotation of privileges sounds very functional and objective. But in fact many of these privileges were forgeries, especially those ascribed to illustrious figures like Charlemagne or Otto the Great.

Regardless of their authenticity the reference to privileges stressed the legitimacy of town and town government based on legal titles by the king or the princely sovereign. This went for the foundation and the bestowment of the town charter just as for the building of a city wall and for the conferment of seals and market privileges. These privileges were not only important for the legal status but also for the self-confidence of the citizens. Contemporaries were aware that these privileges were not merely acts of mercy. Instead they had to be bargained and often dearly to be paid for.

Wigand Gerstenberg, the late medieval chronicler of the Hessian small town *Frankenberg*,⁸ made use of the loss of documents in the great town fire of 1476 by making up privileges by Charlemagne, the kings *Konrad I.* and *Heinrich Raspe* and the Hessian landgraves. In these privileges the town was granted trade fairs, judicial rights and liberties, tax privileges and seals. Their importance is highlighted by their prominent place in the chronicle's index.⁹

Such fakes also play an important role in the chronicles of *Zwickau*. Forged privileges of *Konrad II.*, Henry III. and IV. obviously occurred first time in a chronicle written by *Stella* that had been lost. Chroniclers like the baker *Peter*

Fälschungen im Mittelalter, vol. I (*Schriften der Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, vol. 33, I), Hannover 1988, p. 471-96; *idem*, *Die Genealogie der Wittelsbacher: Politische Propaganda und die Entstehung der territorialen Geschichtsschreibung in Bayern im Mittelalter*, in: *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung* 96 (1988), p. 33-54.; *idem*, *Dynastisches Bewußtsein und Geschichtsschreibung. Zum Selbstverständnis der Wittelsbacher, Habsburger und Hohenzollern im Spätmittelalter*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 256 (1993), p. 593-635.

⁷ To humanist myth-making in general cf. Frank L. Borchardt, *German Antiquity in Renaissance Myth*, Baltimore/London 1971.

⁸ Cf. the edition of the chronicle: Hermann Diemar (Ed.), *Die Chroniken des Wigand Gerstenberg von Frankenberg*, Marburg 1909, p. 377-474.

⁹ „Von fryheid, gnade unde mencherley geschichtin“ (Diemar (Ed.), *Chroniken des Wigand Gerstenberg*, p. 382).

Schumann, like *Oswald Lasan* and *David Passeck*,¹⁰ and the printed chronicle of *Tobias Schmidt*¹¹ informed their readers of their content or repeated it word-for-word. These privileges refer to older privileges of Henry I., *Otto* I. and III. and Henry II. Other privileges are presented as dating back to Charlemagne and his son.

These privileges did not only strengthen the legal position of the town – sometimes referring to current lawsuits – they also established a direct connection to the king. The demonstration of closeness to the king stressed the high rank of the town. Royal privileges often appear as a reward for the military support the citizens gave to the king. *David Passeck* for example emphasizes that the citizens of *Zwickau* gained the favour of Henry III. and important, nearly incredible privileges, far surpassing the privileges the town had got from the Saxon emperors, because of their chivalrous support.

The chroniclers of princely cities emphasize the – mainly fictitious – relationships of their towns to the throne, for instance by presenting the emperor as a mediator in the internal affairs of the city. *Wolfgang Zacher*,¹² writing in the late 17th century, uses the historically indubitable but not very clear relations of the imperial dynasty of the *Staufer* to the Württembergian town *Waiblingen* as an opportunity to make the small town the central scene of the dynastic history of *Salier* and *Staufer*. Anyway he connects the naming of *Waiblingen* to the grave of *Chlothilde*, the wife of Merovingian king *Chlodwig*, allegedly existing there – *Waiblingen* thus being deduced „*Weib*“, the old German word for woman and wife. The aim of a chronicler stressing the intimate relationship between town and king was to point out that his town had been an imperial town in former times – a claim being partly founded, partly unfounded in reality.

The example of *Zwickau* and Henry III directs our attention to the fact that – according to the chroniclers – many privileges were granted as a consequence of the citizens' bravery and military ability. *Oswald Lasan* establishes this

¹⁰ *Peter Schumann, Annalen (Ratsschulbibliothek Zwickau RSB Zwickau 43.2.16) [late 16th century]; Oswald Lasan, Chronik der Stadt Zwickau sowie auch sonstige allgemeine geschichtliche Nachrichten (Stadtarchiv Altenburg C I Nr 76) [16th century]; David Passeck, Chronik von Zwickau bis zum Jahr 1600 (Stiftung Weimarer Klassik. Bestand Herzogin Anna-Amalia-Bibliothek); as a survey from the Marxist viewpoint cf. Helmut Bräuer, Zur bürgerlichen Chronistik der Stadt Zwickau im 16. Jahrhundert, Diss. [thesis] Leipzig 1969; idem, Zur frühen bürgerlichen Geschichtsschreibung in Zwickau im 16. Jahrhundert, in: Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft 20 (1972), p. 565-576.*

¹¹ *Tobias Schmidt, Chronica cygnea oder Beschreibung der sehr alten ... churfürstlichen Stadt Zwickau, Zwickau 1656.*

¹² *Wolfgang Zacher, Chronicon Weiblingense (Württembergische Landesbibliothek Stuttgart Cod. Hist. 2^o 109).*

connection in the headline of a chapter dealing with the privileges of the town.¹³ According to *Christophorus Gerken*,¹⁴ duke *Otto* is bestowing many liberties to the citizens of Brunswik to express his thanks for their military help. More examples could be added. When the members of the town-council of *Zwickau* were knighted and granted to dress and appear like knights, the chroniclers present this as an adequate reward for the loyalty and bravery, the citizens had proved so often. According to the chroniclers the councillors had even been granted the right to knighten citizens of their town.

Christophorus Gerken from Brunswik and other chroniclers emphasize the exemplary valour of the citizens as well as their expertise in handling weapons. The dukes of Brunswik and other princes like the archbishop of *Magdeburg* can count on the help of a powerful militia against usurpers and robber barons because the military ability of the citizens was not behind their bravery. They practised martial games like the noblemen and were led by able commanders like Brunswik mayor *Hermann van Vechelde*. Besides lineage in a world shaped by aristocratic values there could be no better legitimation. This was of particular importance for the patricians who tried to legitimize their political and social supremacy by stressing the good services their ancestors had done to the towns one the on hand, and by stressing their knightly status on the other hand. They also claimed having participated in tournaments since the earliest times or even their descent from Roman patriciate, as we can see in Cologne and *Ulm*.¹⁵ When *Johannes Müllner*¹⁶ in Nuremberg dared to deligitimize the position of the patriciate by doubting their participation in tournaments since the earliest times, the patricians were not really delighted. It's true the city council of Nuremberg gave his servant a considerable reward for his troubles but it prohibited the printing of his work.

But not only the pretensions of the patricians were legitimized in the chronicles. In *Ulm* authors of craftsman background deliberately cited the so called „*Schwörbrief*“, a document containing the oath all citizens had to swear legitimizing the rule of the guilds. This appears in chronicles written in the 17th

¹³ „*Volgen Freyheytenn, Etwann vonn Kayserlicher Maiestat gegeben, den Eynwohnernn, von wegenn grosse kriegsgeschickhligkeitt der stadt Schwanfeldt*“ (*Lasan, Chronik der Stadt Zwickau*, p. 7) [the name „*Schwanfeld*“ is deriving from the legendary founder „*Cydnus*“ – as a translation of the town's latin name „*Cygne*“ or „*Cydneya*“ – and also points out to the equally legendary princess „*Schwanhild*“].

¹⁴ *Christophorus Gerken, Collectanea historica rempublicam Brunsvicensem concernentia* (Stadtarchiv Braunschweig H III 2 Nr 98+99).

¹⁵ Cf. *Rudolf Hiestand, „Civis Romanus sum“. Zum Selbstverständnis bürgerlicher Führungsschichten in den spätmittelalterlichen Städten*, in: *Peter Wunderli (Ed.), Historische und mythische Formen der Legitimation*, Sigmaringen 1994, p. 91-109, 100.

¹⁶ *Gerhard Hirschmann (Ed.), Johannes Müller. Die Annalen der Reichsstadt Nürnberg von 1623*, 2 vol., Nürnberg 1972-1984.

and 18th century after patrician rule had defeated the old guild-based constitution a long time ago. In this case legitimacy had retrospective character, referred to conditions not existing any longer. When *Christoph Schulthaiß* wrote his chronicle the imperial town Constance had already lost its independence and had become a princely city under Hapsburg rule. And *Christophorus Gerken* wrote his chronicle *after* the final subjugation by the duke of Brunswik. Partly the chronicler may not have given up completely the hope for a return to the former state of affairs, partly the legitimizing of the old ideal state of affairs may have served to deligitimize the unjust innovations they detested.

Like other chroniclers of princely cities *Gerken* stresses the sacrifices the citizens made in order to help their prince. He underlines their steadfast faithfulness and keeps on emphasizing the active military aid the princes were provided by the citizens. But unlike his colleague *Tobias Martini*¹⁷ who is writing in the 18th century and from the perspective of a loyal servant of the princes he emphasizes that the citizens were always willing to use their military ability against their prince if it was necessary to defend the liberty of their town. On the first page of his chronicle he states that Brunswik has repeatedly been assaulted by the dukes but again and again managed to defend itself. The description of abortive sieges of Brunswik by the dukes is an important topic in the chronicle. The chronicler stresses time and again that the citizens have the legitimate right to defend their privileges and liberties - even against their own prince and lord.

¹⁷ *Tobias Martini, Kurtzer Auszug Einer Braunschweigischen Chronica und Kirchenhistorie ... Braunschweig im Jahre Christi 1740 (Stadtarchiv Braunschweig H III 2 Nr. 46).*