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Ben Pope

A new nobility and a new urban history

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Stefan Frey, *Fromme feste Junker. Neuer Stadtadel im spätmittelalterlichen Zürich*, Mitteilungen der Antiquarischen Gesellschaft in Zürich, LXXXIV (Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 2017, 216 p., ill.)

Stefan Frey's book on the 'new nobility' of Zürich in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries sets out to rekindle our awareness of nobility as a social class and set of cultural values in Swiss history. In the process he also makes a significant contribution to the long-term historiographical trend towards a proper appreciation of the role played by 'nobility' in late medieval and early modern urban history. His object of study is a small group of families who rose to prominence within Zürich through the acquisition of economic, social and cultural resources, certain forms of which Frey terms 'noble capital'. Those in possession of sufficient 'noble capital', he argues, were able to establish themselves as the leading families within the Zürich elite, and were recognized as nobles both within the town and by outsiders.

This conclusion is perfectly aligned with the dominant themes of the past fifty years in German-language historiography on the relationship between 'town' and 'nobility'. This literature has reacted against the dichotomy of the industrious, liberal and 'progressive' bourgeoisie and the conservative, authoritarian and virile nobility which served as an important model for understanding society in post-Enlightenment, industrializing Europe. These ideas both stimulated interest in and were nourished by the plentiful evidence for conflict and animosity between late medieval towns and their neighbours from amongst the rural nobility and territorial princes, producing an anachronistic and teleological approach to the relationships between these actors.



King Matthias Corvinus of Hungary dubs Melchior Russ of Lucerne in Saint Stephen's, Vienna, 1488.

According to Schilling, Russ was ruined by the cost of presenting himself in a manner appropriate for a knight. For Frey this consideration could explain why citizens of Zürich did not always adopt the title of knight even after they had been dubbed (*Luzern, Korporation Luzern, S 23, Chronicle of Diebold Schilling, 1513, fol. 246*)

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The response of modern historians has mostly been to emphasize the ‘nobility’ of many late medieval urban elites. This thesis was pioneered by Otto Brunner in the 1950s, but only gained significant momentum in the 1980s and 1990s under the leadership of historians including Peter Johanek, Werner Paravicini, Ernst Schubert and Thomas Zotz, and through detailed studies by Ursula Peters, Andreas Ranft, Rainer Demski, Arend Mindermann and others. Research on the broader relationship between town and country also contributed to a new understanding of late medieval urban elites as less akin to the nineteenth-century middle classes and resembling more their rural noble contemporaries: lords and landowners in both town and country, and energetic participants in chivalric culture.

Late medieval discourses of antagonism between increasingly sharply differentiated ‘town’ and ‘noble’ identities have also been noted by some historians in the past 25 years (especially Klaus Graf and Joseph Morsel), but Frey frames his study very much in the terms of the revisionist paradigm. His introduction contains a concise overview of research on ‘town’ and ‘nobility’, and on definitions of nobility and social mobility across the boundary between

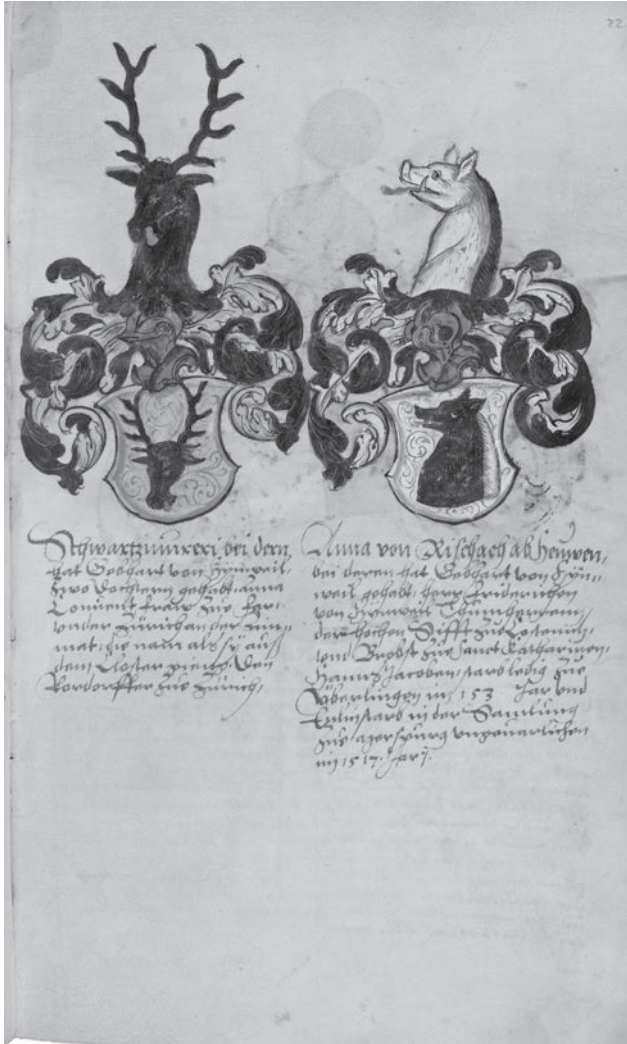
noble and non-noble. Frey also explains his use of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural, social and symbolic capital, and in particular Monique de Saint Martin's coinage of 'noble capital' as a form of symbolic capital which could (as with all types of capital in Bourdieu's model) be acquired and converted into other forms of capital, but which also had to be conserved and maintained.

Frey's book is developed from his doctoral dissertation, but its appearance is more like that of an exhibition catalogue. With an A4 format and over one hundred colour illustrations, it is a handsome volume and many of its pages are a visual delight. The majority of the images chosen are illustrative of matters discussed in the text rather than integral to the analysis, but in many cases they do substantially reinforce Frey's points concerning the various forms of capital accumulated by the Zürich elite. We can clearly see the splendour of their visual culture, and the solidity of their surviving rural and urban residences. More in line with expectations of a published dissertation is the book's use of a tightly defined case study to address broader questions. Frey makes a systematic investigation of five key families (Escher, Göldli, Meiss, Meyer von Knonau and Schwend) over the longer term, and a systematic study of the entire Zürich elite in roughly the period between 1480 and 1520. On this basis he asks what the appearance of so much 'noble capital' meant in late medieval Zürich: was it simply a pretentious display by bourgeois social climbers, or did a genuine 'new nobility' emerge within the city?

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Frey approaches this question in three steps, each with its own chapter. Firstly, he asks how families accumulated 'noble capital', and secondly whether these families gained acceptance by their contemporaries as members of the nobility. Thirdly, he considers the practical meaning of the achievement of 'noble' status: did it confer privileges beyond those enjoyed by other wealthy and powerful Zürich families? The first section of chapter two (pp. 17-86) assembles a considerable body of evidence to demonstrate that certain Zürich families show (to varying degrees) the classic symbolic markers of late medieval nobility. They had not only knighthoods, patents of nobility and imperial grants and confirmations of their coats of arms, but also rural property, lordships, and representative urban and rural residences, together with a developed dynastic awareness expressed in pious donations and foundations. In an overlap with the following section, Frey also notes their marriages with members of the old rural nobility.

Amongst the most significant findings in this chapter is evidence from the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries for the considerable extent to which the fortunes of Zürich's 'noble' families were invested in land and annuities, rather than in trade (pp. 20-21). Frey also discusses the increasingly refined distinction in imperial grants of arms between those for noble and non-noble recipients (pp. 44-48), and describes in detail the circumstances surrounding the dubbing of the 22 men from Zürich who were knighted between 1386 and 1521 (pp. 67-84). This detail is justified, as knighthood is shown to be one of the more reliably 'noble' forms of symbolic capital, although only a minority of Zürich nobles (in common with the nobility as a whole) were actually knighted. Grants of arms (in the 'noble' format) and patents of nobility are clear outward indicators of nobility, but Frey concurs with previous research in finding that they were of dubious practical value: which genuine nobleman needed a document to prove his status? Other forms of 'noble capital' outlined by Frey – in-



The two wives of Gebhart von Hinwil, from the family book of Hans von Hinwil, 1541. On the left, the arms of a lady from Zürich's Schwarzmurer family display a jousting helm, a symbol increasingly associated with the arms of burghers. On the right, the arms of Anna von Rischach display a 'noble' tournament helm. But Frey (p. 96) cautions against assuming that such fine distinctions between town and nobility were likely to have been made in the fifteenth century (*Hinwil Familienbuch*, f. 22; *Staatsarchiv Luzern*, PA 437/9)

cluding rural lordships and representative residences – were certainly markers of elevated social status, but 'noble' only because they were often associated with individuals who were considered noble. There is a reciprocal relationship here which Frey does not address: he assumes that the right sort of symbolic capital helped to ennoble the man, when we might also say that the man ennoble his capital.

In either case, however, Frey's primary purpose in evidencing the 'nobility' of certain families in late medieval Zürich is not compromised. The first part of chapter three (pp. 88-108) is the core of the study, as Frey demonstrates here that certain families were considered to be 'noble' by contemporaries from both Zürich society and from the ranks of the rural nobility. The most conclusive evidence is provided by recorded marriages between Zürich no-

bles and members of the rural nobility. As Frey points out, a marriage in itself is not evidence of social equality, but the financial arrangements between the two families are a strong indicator. Details of these arrangements are known for only eight marriages between the late fourteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and are preserved in full for just three unions, but these data show that Zürich nobles did not have to buy their way into rural noble society: their contributions to the marital settlement were matched by their in-laws (pp. 96-101). The titles accorded to Zürich's nobles are further indicators, although difficult to evaluate because there were no fixed and universal conventions. Forms of address such as 'Junker' and 'steadfast' (*fest*) are clear references to some form of nobility, however. Even less weight can be placed on admission to tournaments, certain monastic houses and collegiate churches or on the display of a tournament helm (as opposed to a jousting helm) on coats of arms, but such evidence suggests that certain Zürich families were at the very least not actively disbarred from participating in noble culture and society.

Frey also demonstrates that these families behaved as a nobility within Zürich society and in relation to 'non-noble' elements within the city's elite. They maintained a hereditary social exclusivity symbolized in particular by membership of the Society of the Hound ('zum Rüden', or the 'Stübli'), which was increasingly the preserve of elite members of the 'Konstaffel' corporation to the exclusion of members of the guilds with which the Konstaffel shared power in Zürich's council (pp. 109-113). As such, the 'Junker' of the Society of the Hound formed an elite within an elite, marrying largely amongst themselves or with external families, whilst members of the elite who were associated with the guilds married almost exclusively with other guild-elite families (pp. 115-121). Frey also uses social network analysis to show the social exclusivity of the 'Stübli-Junker' (pp. 122-126).

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As a faction within the city's elite, even as the most prestigious faction, the nobles of Zürich could never completely dominate civic government. But in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries they were disproportionately well represented in the most important civic offices for at least some of the period, as Frey shows in chapter four with reference to district governorships in Zürich's rural territory (*Vogteien*), deputations to the assemblies of the Swiss Confederacy, and important military commands (pp. 127-152). With regard to the latter function in particular, Frey emphasizes the opportunities which nobles had to both convert their 'noble capital' into other forms of capital (primarily economic) and to directly reinforce their noble capital itself.

Thus *Fromme Feste Junker* constitutes one of the most detailed and carefully argued demonstrations of the 'nobility' of a late medieval urban elite group in the German lands currently available to researchers. Although results from Zürich (as with any other individual town in the Empire) do not in themselves necessarily reveal much about the situation elsewhere, Frey's work is likely to prove extremely useful to historians engaging with the question of 'town' and 'nobility' in late medieval and early modern Germany, not least because the old dichotomy remains prominent in public discourse and so calls forth repeated repudiations from medievalists on the basis of the essential similarity of late medieval urban and rural elites.

In another sense, however, the significance of Frey's findings is not fully explored in this book. He is able to show that at least some members of Zürich's elite were widely accepted

as 'noble' in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, when elsewhere in Upper Germany 'town' and 'nobility' were increasingly regarded as mutually exclusive. For instance, a tournament held at Heidelberg in 1481 excluded not only all burghers, but also all nobles who held offices in towns. No amount of 'noble capital' could qualify a nobleman with close links to a town for entry to this social occasion. Frey does mention a general sharpening of social divides at the end of the fifteenth century (pp. 96, 112), but he does not engage with changing definitions of the nobility in relation to the towns, or with discourses which increasingly defined the nobility against an urban 'other'. Perhaps the Zürich nobles were unaffected by this development, but the apparent contrast between Zürich and other regions is an obvious place from which to continue Frey's investigation.

Readers not familiar with the political history of Zürich may wish to turn to pages 109-110 at an early stage, where a partial outline can be found; a genuine introduction will have to be sought elsewhere, however. It is also unfortunate that no index is provided, although there are useful appendices on the genealogy of the five families which are closely studied. Those without detailed knowledge of Zürich will be left with questions about the numerous other families which are mentioned as possessing 'noble capital' but which do not form part of the five-family sample. Were some of these full members of the 'Junker' group, or did they occupy liminal positions? Even though they could not be included in the systematic analysis, it would be helpful to have at least a hypothesis on their social status. But it is also a tribute to the thoroughness and importance of Frey's study that we are sometimes left wanting more.

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