

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Frank Hatje. *“Gott zu Ehren, der Armut zum Besten”*: Hospital zum Heiligen Geist und Marien-Magdalenen-Kloster in der Geschichte Hamburgs vom Mittelalter bis in die Gegenwart. Hamburg: Convent-Verlag, 2002. 735 pp. EUR 39.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-934613-47-8.

Reviewed by Larry Frohman (Department of History, SUNY Stony Brook)

Published on H-German (June, 2005)

“Gott zu Ehren, der Armut zum Besten” is a history of the monastery of St. Mary Magdalene, the Holy Spirit Hospital, and the associated St. Elisabeth Hospital in Hamburg from the Middle Ages to the post-World War II era. The Holy Spirit Hospital is the oldest, and long one of the most important endowed charitable foundations in Hamburg, and this volume was published to commemorate the 775th anniversary of the founding in 1227 of the Franciscan monastery, whose properties were united with those of the two hospitals during the Reformation.

The book is divided into an introduction and four major sections that describe, first, the founding of these three institutions in the context of Hamburg’s history in the Middle Ages; second, the far-reaching impact of the Reformation on the organization of charitable institutions and religious life in Hamburg, the internal management of the hospitals and monastery 1500-1800, the social origins and daily routines of residents, the religious dimensions of life within these institutions, the disciplinary practices of hospital administrators, the architectural features of the main buildings, and the “economy” of this institutional complex; third, the renovation and expansion of the buildings occupied by these institutions across the nineteenth century and the beginning “medicalization” of Christian hospitality; and finally, a cursory account of the fortunes of these institutions from 1914 through the Third Reich (which left little trace on the internal operation of the hospital), World War II, and the beginnings of post-war reconstruction. The second part, dealing with the Reformation and the early modern period, takes up half of the book and forms its conceptual center of gravity.

The book draws on an enormous amount of archival material stretching—with varying degrees of completeness—over this entire period, and the idea of achieving narrative closure over such a long period based on an integral body of archival sources has an undeniable attraction. The most basic problem facing both author and reviewer is to make a case for why the reader should be interested in the history of hospitals and endowed charitable foundations, a problem which is especially acute in view of the length of this work. The success of “foundation history” (*Stiftungsgeschichte*) as a critical undertaking depends on establishing connections between the history of the foundation and broader historical trends and controversies so that the reader can grasp the macrohistorical implications of the microhistory of the institution and the events that transpire within it. Although *“Gott zu Ehren, der Armut zum Besten”* is long on archival detail, the book does not consistently make this conceptual leap from the particular to the relevant generality.

The book deals with four interwoven themes: endowed charitable foundations as discrete legal-administrative entities, the citizens who founded and administered these foundations, the socially weak members of the community who benefited from the assistance they offered, and the urban civic community whose values were reflected in and legitimated by these foundations (p. 27). Hatje argues, following Michael Borgolte, that foundations are total social phenomena whose religious, economic, social, legal, and aesthetic dimensions are so integrally connected, if not isomorphic, that they can not be adequately understood in isolation from each other. If this is the case, then the question is how is the

historian to enter into this total social phenomenon? According to Hatje, foundations could only perpetuate the will of their founders to the extent that they embodied the normative values of the religio-political community, and so in a properly circular, hermeneutic manner the investigation of authorial intent represents an initial approximation of the meaning of this social totality which is to be confirmed by the subsequent analysis of these other dimensions and the way that they inform and give meaning to these founding acts.

The chief problem is less this theoretical approach than Hatje's own understanding of how this interpretive problem is to be solved. Instead of developing this insight in the direction of a cultural or *Alltagsgeschichte* that might provide a thick description of the symbolic systems shared by those living within and beyond the foundation walls, Hatje argues that the hermeneutic horizons (*Sinn- und Werthorizonte*, p. 38) of the community are best revealed through the repetitive, routine features in the administration and operation of the foundation itself: "Konkret: Wie setzt sich das Verwaltungskollegium zusammen, wie organisiert es seine Arbeit, wie entsteht sein 'Gedchtnis', welche Rolle kommt dabei der Verschriftlichung und Brokratisierung zu? Wer wird warum in das Hospital aufgenommen, wie, wann, warum beziehungsweise unter welchen Bedingungen wird Konsens ber dessen Verhalten hergestellt?" (p. 38). This methodological decision determines the basic structure and approach of the book, and the result is seven hundred years, and seven hundred pages, of administrative and organizational history that only occasionally make a systematic connection between these administrative regularities and those dimensions of the social totality that

are supposed to reveal their meaning. Ultimately, Hatje's reliance on the administrative archives available to him proves to be a mixed blessing.

There are also other instances where the book promises more than it delivers. Hatje rightly suggests that the social discipline paradigm, which has provided the master narrative of most recent works on poor relief and charity in the early modern and modern periods, only captures certain aspects of the complex relations between the propertied and the poor and marginal. It is no surprise that a work which focuses primarily on hospitals for the elderly and infirm (and which also housed a number of paid pensioners) should conclude that administrators placed greater emphasis on helping than on discipline and control (p. 62), and Hatje's affirmation of Martin Dinges's characterization of early modern society as a "self-help society" (p. 67) is a defensible position. However, the narrow scope of Hatje's analysis of discipline within the hospitals and his decision to focus only on the hospitals rather than on a broader socio-carceral complex that includes both hospitals and *Zuchthaus* limit the power of his critique of the social discipline paradigm, and this limitation is further aggravated by the fact that Hatje makes only the smallest gesture towards developing an alternative interpretation along the lines suggested by Dinges.

Although Hatje makes a strong argument in the introduction for the broader relevance of the history of hospitals and endowed charitable foundations, I fear that this particular work will be most useful to people who are already familiar with the charitable landscape of the early modern city and who can bring their own questions to bear on the historical terrain covered by the book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Larry Frohman. Review of Hatje, Frank, "*Gott zu Ehren, der Armut zum Besten*": *Hospital zum Heiligen Geist und Marien-Magdalenen-Kloster in der Geschichte Hamburgs vom Mittelalter bis in die Gegenwart*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10657>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.