

# H-Net Reviews

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**Thomas Kaufmann.** *Das Ende der Reformation: Magdeburgs „Herrgotts Kanzlei“ (1548-1551/2).* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003. 662 S. EUR 110.00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-16-148171-0.

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In 1546, political tensions between Protestant and Catholic powers in the Holy Roman Empire erupted into the Schmalkaldic War, a brief and rather ignominious military conflict that left the defeated Protestants in crisis and Emperor Charles V at the apex of his power. Charles sought to consolidate his victory with a series of measures designed to standardize legal, financial and especially ecclesiastical life within the imperial borders. These measures failed, in significant part due to the determined resistance of the Protestant town of Magdeburg. The driving force behind the town's resistance came mainly from pamphleteers and publicists who took up residence there during the crisis—the future core of the Gnesio-Lutheran faction. From 1548 and 1551, Magdeburg's presses deluged Germany with publications, mostly (but not exclusively) pamphlets, which defended the city's policy of resistance in theological, political and legal terms. These publications, many of which survive, represent a massive, coordinated propaganda campaign of unprecedented scope and breadth.

Magdeburg's pamphlets and prints, however, have attracted only sporadic interest from historians—at least until now. Thomas Kaufmann's monograph is a magisterial study of this major corpus of texts. The work is broad and comprehensive in its coverage, but Kaufmann manages to organize it around a single key claim, which the title suggests: that by 1548, when this account begins, what most of us call “the Reformation” had ended, and—in the consciousness of Magdeburg's theologians and polemicists—a new, critical phase had emerged. From a modern perspective, this “new” phase was one of confessional formation and consolidation. To the Magdeburg community, however, living in the shadow of Luther's death, a hostile Spanish military presence and the whole-

sale collapse of Protestant political power, these dark years represented the final crescendo of struggle before the apocalypse. Whether one sees the opening of a new era or the impending end of time, these events, Kaufmann argues, represent a profound break with the previous generation—indeed, as the end of the historical moment of the Reformation. To make this point, Kaufmann deftly handles the source material using a variety of approaches, while never losing sight of the fundamentally religious character of his subjects' inner lives.

The years following the Schmalkaldic War were heady but dangerous times for Magdeburg and its fiercely Protestant leaders. As the war came to a close, the town's representatives refused to conclude a separate peace with the Emperor, claiming that they feared a loss of religious freedom. They soon found themselves isolated, under an imperial ban and finally, in 1550-51, besieged by Moritz of Saxony. They stuck stubbornly to their policy of resistance until the very end. After opening the city's gates to Moritz's men, its representatives still insisted that the city had “come to terms,” not “surrendered.”[1] During this period, a major component of the city's resistance took the form of a massive and unprecedented printing campaign. The city's two presses turned out close to 400 pamphlets, all of which, with few or no exceptions, defended the city's policies and attacked its enemies. An important target was the hated Augsburg Interim, the imperial church ordinance through which Charles V hoped to bring the defeated Protestants back into the Roman fold. Although the pamphlets present a profusion of rhetorical methods and strategies ranging from hymnody to scatology, the message is strikingly consistent: Magdeburg's resistance is religiously justified and Magdeburg's enemies are enemies of the Gospel.

These texts are the subject of Kaufmann's study.

This book is significant in several ways. First and most simply, Kaufmann documents a long-neglected body of sources and thus addresses what heretofore has undeniably been a lacuna in our knowledge of the late Reformation. The sixty-page primary bibliography alone represents an invaluable contribution to scholarship. Second, Kaufmann's strategy for handling this extremely unwieldy mass of pamphlets, broadsides and other documents is clearly the product of much careful planning, and the book's complex, multilayered perspective deserves praise. Finally, Kaufmann offers a nuanced picture of the religious worldview embraced by the texts' authors. He rightly insists on the importance of seeing the political themes treated here within a global and all-pervasive religious context. In doing so, Kaufmann (who holds a professorship in Göttingen's theological faculty) reminds historians that "religion" can take many forms, without ever being entirely separable from other areas of life such as politics, law or economics. Kaufmann, it is fair to say, seeks above all to recreate for his reader the insider's perspective. In other words, he wants to present an interpretation of the pamphlet texts that makes intelligible and comprehensible the extravagant claims and extraordinary risks assumed by the Magdeburg community. In this endeavor, he has achieved a striking success. Some will find his work insufficiently critical towards the confessional polemic that ties together all of the source material, but this criticism, while not entirely false, is also not really fair: documentation and interpretation, rather than critique, is Kaufmann's primary interest. With perhaps more justification, some readers may feel that the book's engagement with current discussions over confessionalization—a concept which Kaufmann, in earlier writings, has tended to view more theologically than historiographically[2]—is insufficiently sustained or focused. But it would be a mistake to see this book as inadequately theorized. Kaufmann's interest lies less with macro-historical questions of periodization and causality than with textual questions of rhetoric, genre and the creation of meaning.

Kaufmann begins his study with a framing overview of the political and religious situation of Magdeburg during the generations and years preceding the crisis of the Schmalkaldic War, locating his treatment of the texts squarely amidst places and events. This scene-setting introduction provides a concrete referent for the vivid sense of an impending apocalyptic struggle that would characterize the Magdeburg community's message throughout this period. This opening section con-

nects the ideas that Kaufmann will later explain in their generic and rhetorical senses with specific, concrete conflicts and interests experienced by the Magdeburg community. The second section analyzes the material by genre. Each subsection gives a close reading of representative texts from each of sixteen literary categories (dialogue, sermon, song, polemic, satire and catechesis, among others), distinguishing both between new texts written to address the Interim crisis and reprints of older texts (mostly, but not exclusively, from the 1520s) and between "long" and "short" (song, verse) forms. These close readings of individual texts comprise the bulk of the book and form the foundation of Kaufmann's research. The final section of the book is a sweeping, though comparatively brief overview of the "mental world" of the Magdeburg community. By analyzing the texts in aggregate, this section presents a counterweight to the previous one's emphasis on single documents. Kaufmann organizes this discussion, rather creatively, into four topical subheadings: "Wirklichkeitshorizont" (roughly, "world-view"), "self-understanding," "enemies" and "history."

Recent years have seen a growing consensus among historians that the mid-sixteenth century was characterized by deep-rooted apocalyptic convictions and feelings among German Lutherans (or, at least, among leading opinion-making subgroups). This book provides more evidence for this view. Its suggestively ambiguous title is apt in several ways. On the one hand, it represents a historiographic claim, namely, that the Magdeburg episode marks the definitive close of the Reformation era. On the other, however, it conveys a broader, almost Kermudian "sense of an ending," an idea that religious meaning, individual identity and local and national loyalties were all organized around a sense of universal crisis and collapse, in anticipation of a rapidly approaching Armageddon. According to this reading, Magdeburg's publicists and pamphleteers were able to find—perhaps even needed to find—a principle for ordering religious, political and cultural life in the coming of an all-consuming apocalyptic conflagration that would swallow up the trivialities and distractions of ordinary, day-to-day living. Enemies were all around, and every messenger seemed to bring new and dreadful tidings that another community or leader had fallen away from the faith; Magdeburg, the "virgin city," was the last pure remnant of gospel truth and tradition. Kaufmann's analysis suggests the immediacy and poignancy of this world- and salvation-historical self-understanding. In his view, the Magdeburg pamphleteers and their sympathetic readers saw themselves as a humble, embattled, and shrinking band of confes-

sors, beseeching God to provide constancy and courage as the massed forces of Antichrist advanced towards the city gates. Kaufmann depicts a community bracing itself to endure one last, terrible onslaught before the end of time, for which this colossal act of resistance constituted the single foundational motif of corporate identity.

This is a compelling picture, and overall Kaufmann's account is mostly very convincing. The most intriguing and provocative point is contained in the title itself: the idea that by 1546 the Reformation had definitively ended and that something qualitatively different had begun. Kaufmann presents salient aspects of the sources' literary and rhetorical qualities to make a subtle and interesting argument for this claim (pp. 65ff.). Magdeburg's pamphleteers assume that their audience will see in Protestantism a primary characteristic of their identity—that they will be aware, in H.-R. Schmidt's phrase, of "being—and of wanting to be—Lutheran."<sup>3</sup> Much of the intricate source-work that follows supports this claim. This line of interpretation suggests an important overlap between the modern historiographic notion of confessionalization, on the one hand, and the self-perceptions of early modern religious folk on the other. At the same time, it also raises several other questions.

Kaufmann's interpretation occasionally—though not always—suggests the existence of a sharp and self-evident separation between the political and religious sides of life. The pamphleteers paint a very dramatic and compelling picture in which spiritual, doctrinal and ecclesiastical themes are constantly in focus. But that is not all. As Kaufmann himself recognizes, these texts also give voice to a broad range of other concerns and feelings: rural-urban tensions, economic resentments, regional and dynastic allegiances, proto-nationalistic sentiments and even loyalty to legal traditions. (For one example of how these themes can combine, see his discussion of a dialogue by hymnist and satirist Erasmus Alberus, pp. 215ff.) However, Kaufmann sometimes frames these issues as if they were incidental to the existential crisis touched off by the Interim and the doctrinal conflicts it created. As a result, social and political issues sometimes appear merely as background, or "context," against which the spiritual drama and self-understanding of these religious virtuosi play out. This appearance is heightened by the emphasis Kaufmann places on the ide-

alistic, otherworldly nature of much of the pamphleteers' rhetoric. His analysis of Flacius's *Trostschrift* (1548) concludes with the strong claim that the writer's worldview was inseparable from his apocalypticism to such a great extent that even the prospect of a negotiated settlement to the siege of Magdeburg was virtually unthinkable—he was simply too attached to the notion of an imminent Armageddon (pp. 294ff.). In Kaufmann's words, "an elementary, human comprehension of the need for a return to the civility and normalcy of peacetime, which needs must result in assent to diplomatic options, was impossible for the prophets" of Magdeburg because they saw both themselves and their opponents as combatants in a cosmic and eternal, rather than a pragmatic and temporal struggle (p. 305). Perhaps this stubborn consistency is also the reason why, at times, the claims, arguments and appeals put forward by the pamphleteers seem to take on an odd predictability. The positions are so black-and-white, the polemics so totalizing, and the outcomes—whether promised or threatened—so grand, that it does not take very long to get the basic idea of what the Magdeburg writers are after.

Kaufmann's work is comprehensive, thorough and erudite. He offers readers a compelling picture of the Magdeburg pamphleteers' vital and complex theological commitments. In addition, his analysis of their rhetorical strategies—the tools with which they built their arsenal to fend off Antichrist—is incisive and clear. This is one of those rare works that manages to combine both solid, careful, source-based scholarship and vigorous, sharp, thought-provoking analysis. It is likely to be a standard text for many years to come.

#### Notes

[1]. Friedrich Huelsse, *Die Stadt Magdeburg im Kampfe fuer den Protestantismus waehrend der Jahre 1547-51* (Halle/S.: Verein fuer Reformationsgeschichte, 1892), p. 56.

[2]. See esp. his "Die Konfessionalisierung von Kirche und Gesellschaft," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 121 (1996): pp. 1008-1025 and 1112-1120.

[3]. "Lutherisch zu sein und sein zu wollen." Heinrich Richard Schmidt, *Konfessionalisierung im 16. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1992), p. 9.

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