



**Stephanie Dzeja.** *Die Geschichte der eigenen Stadt: Stöckische Chronistik in Frankfurt am Main vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003. 294 pp. EUR 51.50 (paper), ISBN 978-3-631-50419-2.



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## Constructing Identity and Community in Historical Chronicles

Stephanie Dzeja's 2003 monograph is her doctoral dissertation, completed in 2002 at the University of Gießen, where she worked as part of a group studying the culture of memory in early modern German cities. The overarching plan of the research group is to complete several individual city studies, and eventually to develop a comparative study of the culture of memory in cities across the Holy Roman Empire in the late medieval and early modern period, defined here as the fourteenth through the eighteenth centuries. This study is an excellent survey of Frankfurt chronicles, and it presents new and interesting ideas about the construction of identity through the understanding of history.

The theoretical structure of Dzeja's work builds on the definition of cultural memory developed by Aleida and Jan Assmann, who argue that cultural memory is a shared understanding by individuals within a community, and because it is undertaken by members of the community, it also serves to build the community.[1] Dzeja uses city chronicles as her major sources for an inquiry into the ways in which the people of Frankfurt understood their own history. Because she is interested

in the self-construction of identity, she limits her study to chronicles whose authors lived in Frankfurt for a significant period. She also limits her study to chronicles that deal primarily with the history of Frankfurt and are more city-centric in their scope than mere private diaries or family histories. While not all of the chronicles she cites were printed, they were not intended to be private documents.

The body of the work is divided into three major parts. The first and second parts are considerably longer and more detailed than the third, while the third builds upon the details and arguments developed in the first and second. The first section combines description of the chronicles under consideration with a discussion of the known authors, the sources, the distribution and the reception of the works. The second part analyzes the chronicles as constructors and bearers of the city's communal historical memory. Dzeja is most interested in the differences between the chronicles and what those differences can reveal about the perspective of the chroniclers. Finally, the third part of the book analyzes the intentions of the authors and the functions of the chronicles in the

development of the city's historical identity.

Dzeja's organization is clear and well structured. The first section, which describes the chronicles, includes discussions of the physical characteristics of the documents, a general summary of the contents of each one, and a discussion of the social, political and religious standing of the author, insofar as these things could be determined. The section goes beyond pure description, as Dzeja divides the chronicles into those written as annals, chronological listings of events and those few written in other forms. One of the earliest chronicles, that of Johan Latomus, is the only chronicle in narrative form and also the only source from a Catholic perspective. Another, the eighteenth-century work of Achilles August Lersner, is arranged in topical chapters, but is chronological within the chapters. Lersner's work is also notable because it is a compilation of other sources, rather than an originally created work or an unacknowledged copy of earlier works.

In keeping with her thesis that the circumstances of their creation influenced the contents of the chronicles, Dzeja groups the chronicles into four categories: critical chronicles, which were written in opposition to the ruling powers; patrician chronicles; chronicles written by city administrators and others who had access to the records of the city council but were not themselves patricians; and chronicles written from outside the patriciate and the administration. When, in the second section, she turns her attention to the similarities and differences in the content of the chronicles and therefore in the understanding of the city's history presented by each chronicle, this distinction forms a major part of her analysis.

In the second section, which focuses on the content of the chronicles, while acknowledging their similarities, Dzeja is most interested in the differences between the chronicles. Her analysis focuses on a series of topics that provide contrasts in coverage from chronicle to chronicle. The main points of interest are the status of Frankfurt as an imperial city and as an election city; the understanding of the city's privileges; *guildunrest* of the fourteenth century; the city's defeat in the Battle of Kronberg in 1389; and the experience of flooding, which resulted in the development of the Mary Magdalene procession in the fourteenth century. She argues that all of these events, as constructed by the various chroniclers, suggest that there is no unified view of the city's history evident in the chronicle tradition (p. 209). The status of the creators of the chronicles, and the contemporary historical conditions in which they worked, influenced their

views of the city's history in particular ways. Latomus, who wrote from the Catholic perspective, described the city as a sacral community and ended his chronicle in 1524, when the religious unity of the city was broken. The view of the city as a sacred community was not evident in any of the later chronicles. The chronicles written by patricians placed more emphasis on the role of the city in the Holy Roman Empire. The descriptions of the *Reichsversammlungen* and elections held greater significance in the patrician chronicles than they did in chronicles written by those with no connection to the hereditary elite or the city government. Non-elite chroniclers were more interested in events within the experience of average citizens than in events which were open only to the elite.

Dzeja challenges some of the received wisdom about city history in the early modern period. She argues against Gerhard Dilcher's idea that cities were associations of citizens bound by common privileges (*Bürgererschaft als Privilegiengenossenschaft*).<sup>[2]</sup> The idea of the binding nature of common privileges was not evident in the chronicles. Instead, Dzeja argues that areas of consensus established basic common ideas, amounting to civic identity. These included agreement about the venerable age of the city, its connection with the Franks and its status as an imperial city where election of the emperor took place. More specific accounts lack consensus and the stories of election conflicts, battles, floods and processions provide a series of different views that can be traced to the different perspectives of the chroniclers. The lack of a strong medieval chronicle tradition in Frankfurt, she argues, accounts for the lack of a strong consensus about the details of the city's foundation and makes the early modern chronicles good sources for historians attempting to grasp the construction of self-understanding by Frankfurt's citizens in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. The variety of chronicles gives a broad overview of the construction of the city's understanding of its own history, and therefore the creation of its own identity. The chroniclers tended to avoid dealing with conflicts and problems of their own time, instead projecting their own views backwards onto their understanding of the city's history. The chroniclers tended to smooth out conflicts between groups within the basic civic community, and attempted to construct a unified vision of the urban community even though historians, when comparing the chronicles, can see differences.

The strengths of Dzeja's work lie in her detailed discussions of the varied Frankfurt chronicles and her effort to place each one in its social, economic and reli-

gious context. The appendix contains a description of each source that will be useful to any researcher unfamiliar with the chronicle tradition of Frankfurt. Her analysis tends to conflate the idea of the city's construction of its identity with the idea of the city's understanding of its own history. This problem is, perhaps, the result of basing the study exclusively on chronicles. To her credit, she recognizes the boundaries of her work, and ends the book with a call for more research on the construction of communal memory and identity using a broader variety of sources, and for comparative studies involving more than one city. *Die Geschichte der eigenen Stadt* will be of interest to any historian working in the history of German cities, in the use of chronicles as historical sources, in the construction of historical memory or in the con-

struction of communal identity.

#### Notes

[1]. Aleida Assman, *Erinnerungsraum. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1999); Jan Assman, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung and politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1997).

[2]. Gerhard Dilcher, "Zum Bürgerbegriff im spätmittelalter. Versuch einer Typologie am Beispiel von Frankfurt am Main," in *Aber Bürger, Stadt und städtische Literatur im Spätmittelalter*, ed. Josef Fleckstein and Karl Stackmann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1997), pp. 59-105, at 71ff.

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