



**Rex Rexheuser.** *Die Personalunionen von Sachsen-Polen 1697-1763 und Hannover-England 1714-1837. Ein Vergleich.* Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005. 495 S. ISBN 978-3-447-05168-2.



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## **R. Rexheuser: Die Personalunionen von Sachsen-Polen und Hannover-England**

The present volume documents 22 papers mostly given at a Dresden conference in November, 1997, on occasion of the tricentennial of the Polish-Saxon Personal Union. The conference was initiated by the German Historical Institute in Warsaw and organised in co-operation with the Polish Historical Society and the German Historical Institute in London.

In an age that still sought legitimacy of rule predominantly in the divine right of princely dynasties, personal unions were no exception. Indeed, the polities that went into the Anglo-Hanoverian and Polish-Saxon Unions already had a history of state building through personal union. Thus, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had been formed by the accession of the Lithuanian Grand Prince Jogailas (Wladyslaw Jagiello) to the Polish throne by the end of the 14th century. Similarly, the Anglo-Scottish Personal Union, beginning with the accession of the first Stuart king to the English throne in 1603, was only turned into the United Kingdom in 1706/07 as a political precondition to the accession of the Hanoverian Elector Georg Ludwig as King George I, which came into being in 1714. Many lesser or less well-known personal

unions were established during the half-centuries preceding, and following, these events. Focussing on the two best known personal unions of the age, the purpose of the volume under consideration is to cast fresh light on the political, social, economic, and last not least cultural frameworks in which those unions came into operation.

The conference organisers' and editor's task of bringing together specialists from three different national historiographies and inducing them to compare their respective fields of study with one another was certainly not an easy one. As is often the case with comparative and transnational approaches, they succeeded only in part. The papers have been divided into three groups, the first two dealing with the Polish-Saxon and the Anglo-Hanoverian unions, while only the four papers of the last group take a comparative approach. Moreover, many of the papers of the first and second groups focus on one of the two polities only, thus reflecting the fact that until now national and regional historiographies very often do not closely co-operate, even if their objects of study have been very much intertwined historically. Nonetheless, the organisers have strived to counterbal-

ance that flaw by obliging the contributors to comply with a framework of central questions and a strict thematic distribution of the subject matter. The result is a collection of essays that may constitute the empirical basis of an ensuing comparison, but not the comparison itself. Even among the four concluding papers, there is no more than one (written by Heinz Durchhardt) that makes an effort to summarise the theses and to use them as a basis for structural analysis; the others comment loosely on aspects such as political institutions and procedures (Jerzy T. Lukowski), foreign politics (Jeremy Black), and the role of the courts (T.C.W. Blanning), without following a comparative approach in the strict sense.

Such quibbles aside, the anthology undoubtedly has its merits for putting together a very diverse subject matter, and for mostly conveying good summaries of the research done into the problem of early modern personal unions until today. Still, the rationale of the comparative approach taken may be put into question. So what new can be gained from looking at the diversity of such states as the Polish-Lithuanian Kingdom and Great Britain during the 18th century when studying the concept, and practice, of their personal unions with two middling German electorates? Comparing diverse entities means first of all looking for similarities, which may be obliterated by the more obvious differences. At the same time, those differences must not be underestimated. In the Polish case, the union was with a middle state that was more advanced in the economic and administrative spheres, but was also more modern politically in the sense that the prince's absolute power at the time was generally seen as the most efficient form of government. It would be much beyond the limits of this review to reiterate the plethora of internal as well as external factors that, in the end, thwarted King Augustus II's initial efforts to introduce absolutist rule against the resistance of the Polish nobility who were decided to defend their "golden liberty" to the end. By the same token, he failed to establish the Wettins as the ruling dynasty; Augustus II, as well as his son Augustus III, were elected Polish kings, not meant as sires of a new dynasty. On the other hand, the electors of Hanover, at home invested with the power of absolute princes only marginally tempered by estate control, proved an unexpected adaptability in dealing with the much more intricate system of "king in parliament" that was established in England after the Revolution of 1688. Confession was an issue, even in the much less obvious case of the English succession. While Augustus II adopted catholicism to become eligible according to Polish law, Hanoverian lutheranism and anglicanism

seemed readily adaptable. Still, there was the undiminished English fear of "papism", closely associated with the Stuart claim for power, which stood in paradoxical opposition to the Guelphs' legitimization via the kinship with the Stuarts, George I being the great-grandson of King James I.

To a much greater degree than might be expected in nowadays history writing, many of the papers focus on the king's person and personality and on his close entourage. This is not only due to the biographical perspective taken by some of the contributors (Karlheinz Blaschke, Karl Czok, Józef Andrzej Gierowski, and others), but indeed by the central position the ruler held within the political system of absolute monarchy. Having said that, this notion must be differentiated in many ways as can be exemplified by the two cases under study. In a stricter sense, only the Dresden court of Elector Friedrich Augustus (King Augustus II of Poland) followed the pattern set by Louis XIV's Versailles; mainly for financial reasons, the Hanoverian court emulated the French example to a much lesser degree. Efforts made by the two Saxon kings to transplant some of the Dresden baroque splendour to their Warsaw residence, had their limitations. A "court society" as described in Norbert Elias's classic study could not be realised in Poland, and be it for the magnatical courts who competed with the king's in wealth and social attraction. The reasons why no "court society" came into being in London were of a different kind; here, the king's court could not form the central focus of society since the city itself offered many points of attraction to which London society gravitated more readily. The essays demonstrating, and comparing, the specifics of the four courts, are among the most lucid and interesting of the collection (Katrin Keller on Dresden; Annette von Stieglitz on Hanover; T.C.W. Blanning on all the four courts).

With the exception of Karlheinz Blaschke, who fiercely polemicalises with Augustus II's "aberration" from the Wettins' traditional policies of political self-limitation and prudential housekeeping, the majority of authors give good, if not overenthusiastic credits to the political, economic, and especially cultural balances of the personal unions. From a contemporary English point of view, the Hanoverian Electorate could be seen as a liability to British foreign interests, the king's hereditary country ever being threatened to be used as a dead pledge by Prussia or France. But this argument was mainly used by the antiroyal opposition in Britain's home politics; on the foreign scene, it could be argued to the contrary that Hanover was effective in binding large French con-

tingents and giving Britain a free hand in her overseas colonies, as during the Seven Yearsâ War. A positive re-assessment of the Polish-Saxon Union has been undertaken by Polish historians for some 30 years. Polish, as well as German, contributors confirm this re-assessment in that the overwhelmingly derogatory stance taken by Polish historians of the 19th and early 20th centuries toward Polandâs Saxon kings was not subscribed to by the contemporaries. While nothing was achieved by the per-

sonal union against Polandâs longstanding weakness in the socioeconomic and military spheres, the politics of reform after the end of the union in 1763 were made possible only by the advent of the ideas of Western enlightenment and rationalism introduced during the rule of Augustus III. This assessment was ultimately corroborated by the fact that the authors of the Polish Constitution of May 3, 1791, envisaged the Elector of Saxony as hereditary king.

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