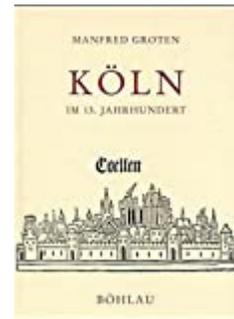


Manfred Groten. *Köln im 13. Jahrhundert. Gesellschaftlicher Wandel und Verfassungsentwicklung.* Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 1998. xii + 342 pp. DM 78,00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-412-07998-7.



Reviewed by Heiko Droste (Uppsala University)

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A Prosopographic Study on Cologne

This study on social and constitutional change in Cologne during the thirteenth century is part of a very broad and intensive debate on medieval German town history and Cologne's history in particular. To understand the study, the reader has to have the broader context in mind, which, by the way, is not mentioned in the study itself. This is an important strength, but also the main problem, again, as sketched below. But it can be situated in the field of highly specialized studies on social crises in the late medieval cities (and nearly every bigger city did have those crises, that usually were about the demand for participation in the city council or the town's debts). These studies often use the town's historiography as a source, and they are usually limited to just one or two cities. As a classic in this field, the study of Johannes Bernhard Menke—*Geschichtsschreibung und Politik in deutschen Staedten des Spaetmittelalters* in *Jahrbuecherdes Koelnischen Geschichtsvereins* 33/1958, pp. 1-84, and 34-35/1959-1960, pp. 85-194—is still valuable. It is not even mentioned by Groten, which is embarrassing.

German town history, especially of the middle ages,

is an old branch of history and is very strong and highly specialized. There are hundreds of German towns, founded between the eleventh and fourteenth century, that mostly experienced similar developments. Cologne is one of few well known exceptions, as: 1) it had existed from the time of the Roman Empire, before it started growing again in the early middle ages, 2) for centuries it was the biggest city within the Holy Roman Empire north of the Alps, 3) it developed considerably faster and earlier than other German towns, and 3) it had a very remarkable social development.

This last point is decisive for Groten's book. The constitutional development and the history of the town's liberation from its former ruler (that is, the archbishops of Cologne) is not primarily connected with the city-council, but older elites, the *Schoeffen*, lay assessors, and the *Richerzeche*, a guild that united the richest and most influential citizens. Both groups were interwoven. The town's mayors were chosen equally by these groups. *Schoeffen* and *Richerzeche* were the leading *institutions* in Cologne during the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth century. It was they that pushed the city's libera-

tion from the archbishops' rule. The city-council on the other hand developed only later, during the thirteenth century, and succeeded in the attempt to take over the town's rule by the end of this century.

Groten's study examines this constitutional change. When did the council come into being? When did it start playing a decisive role within the city? And when did the council take over the town's government from Schoeffen and Richerzeche? Groten's main argument is that the constitutional change in fact was a social one. Contrary to older studies, he stresses the importance of social disturbances within the social elites as decisive for this development, and not those outside the town, such as the archbishops' role. Groten's method is mainly prosopographic, and his sources are threefold: the main sources are the towns *Schreinskarten*, where there are legal documents of all kind which were stored in parochial shrines/chests, *Schrein*. Another main source is all sorts of urban records that can be used to identify their writers. Town writers were, due to their comparatively high education, important figures in the history of cities, not only in Germany. Finally, Groten uses the two existing contemporary historiographical sources, an anonymous Latin fragment and one Low German rhyme-chronic, written by the town writer Gottfried Hagen. Groten combines these sources to examine the major events of Cologne's history from 1198 on. In this year, the *Thronstreit* between Otto of Poitou, a member of the Welf-dynasty, and Philipp of Schwaben, member of the Staufendynasty, started. Cologne took a shifting position in this quarrel about the reign in the German parts of the Holy Roman Empire, which Groten explains by examining changes in the social elites of Cologne. Other events followed, described by Groten in chronological order. They were mainly caused by the archbishops' efforts to force the town back under their rule. During the first decades of the thirteenth century, there occurred several signs of the building of a city-council that tried to establish itself in concurrence with the existing elites. Groten's explanation of the city-council's breakthrough in the middle of the century—the decade of the upheaval, 1258-1268, where the archbishop Konrad von Hochstaden tried to force the city under his rule by a *revolution from above*. He concentrates on the violent dissent between the two major family-groups within the city, which he dubs jointly a *Meliorat*. These groups, formed by families built around the leading families von der Muehlengasse on one hand and Overstolze on the other, tried to take over the leadership by forcing out the other group. The Overstolze would succeed in the long

run, but the town's weakness in these years gave way to the establishment of the city-council as a part of the city-government, that no longer could be outweighed by Schoeffen and Richerzeche. On the contrary, the leading families were step by step incorporated into the council.

Groten's hypothesis seems convincing on the whole and is able to explain Cologne's history during this century better than older research. However, there are some critical points about his methods that need to be mentioned. First of all, there is no explanation whatsoever about the methods Groten applies. There is no substantial introduction into his sources and approach, although there is a very brief description of them on page x, the second page of his two-page introduction. Groten's use of prosopography, declaring conflicts according to the membership to one of the two mentioned family groups, is not really convincing in every case. The amount of available sources, often not more than a list of witnesses to a legal document, is therefore not sufficient in the long run. The same is true of his interpretation of the antagonism between the two families as reflecting two different sets of social mores, the von der Muehlengasse being more *noble* and the Overstolze more *knightly*. There is no real evidence for such a sharp distinction. Finally, one searches for an explanation of this long conflict between the two families. Given the long-standing interest in economic causation in German urban historiography, it is interesting that Groten chooses neither to assume nor to explore any economic reasons for the conflict, see p. 316. The mentioned lack of evidence or the mere lack of sources on the whole is of course no new problem. Although the sources are exceptionally rich for Cologne, compared to most other cities in Germany, there are shortcomings that Groten can not possibly overcome. And his efforts in this respect—that is, to take into consideration every accessible document from the time—are highly laudable. The reader still needs some kind of theory or a full-grown method, that would explain Groten's procedure and his arguments. They would also make it easier to follow the study. Unfortunately, there are no such explanations.

Groten's book is therefore an important contribution not only to the social but also to the constitutional history of Cologne. It offers a detailed analysis based on a broad prosopographical material. But there are shortcomings in his argumentation, mainly due to the fact that the reader does not benefit from any methodological or theoretical reflections from Groten's side. There is also, unfortunately, no statement about the book's position in the broader debate about medieval German town history.

Therefore, this book cannot be recommended for *beginners* in this field, as it is actually written for experts, that already have the background information and know the discussed literature.

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