

Regional History as a Decisive Indicator of Social Change:

Franconia in the Middle Ages

An Introduction

by

HELMUT FLACHENECKER, Würzburg

The following three articles are based on a conference session convened at the International Medieval Congress in Leeds, UK, July 2, 2018. We thank the organizers of the Leeds Conference for this possibility to present research on a Central European region which, until now, has seldom been the main focus of common research. The Session was an experiment, shouldered by two Franconian scholars and one American scholar, yet the lively discussions about the papers during and after the session demonstrated the warm, interested response the topic engendered.

Nowadays Franconia – a place-name first mentioned in 1180 – constitutes a cultural landscape in southern Germany, more precisely in the north of the State of Bavaria, but with a completely different regional history than that of the former Duchy. It is now “only” 200 years ago that the region north of the Danube river joined – more or less voluntarily – the Kingdom of Bavaria (1806), thanks to the “grace” of the French Emperor Napoleon and the ongoing processes of secularization and medialization, which together put an end to the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. The history of Franconia in the high and late Middle Ages, and also Early Modern times, is characterized by an amazing diversity of territories and types of rulership. A huge number of smaller, self-governed territories collectively constituted (and still do so today) an impressive cultural landscape, made up of castles, towns with impressive – and today most romanticized – wall systems and monasteries, all of which give the present observer’s eye a vision of the variation of former political structures. The political variation, in simpler words, informed or even defined the region’s culture.

Franconia never became a unified political entity in these eras. Instead, the region was divided by powerful clerical lords: the bishops of Würzburg, Eichstätt, and Bamberg, as well as the abbot of Fulda, to list only the most significant. The bishoprics were installed by Frankish kings in the eighth century and again by the Ottonian king Henry II at the beginning of the eleventh century. These princes exercised both ecclesiastical and secular power. The only large secular principality was that of the Hohenzollern family, who started as burgraves of Nuremberg in the year 1192 and became margraves of Brandenburg-Ansbach and Brandenburg-Bayreuth at the turn of the fifteenth century. The margraves joined the three bishops as the only secular imperial princes in the region. At the social level of the counts, the families of Castell, Rieneck, Wertheim, Henneberg, and Hohenlohe managed to build middle-sized estates in the north and west of Franconia. Other noble families founded smaller territorial lordships: examples include the Marshalls of Pappenheim in the Altmühl valley, the Thüngens north of Würzburg, and the Guttenbergs in what is now Upper Franconia. Few former imperial cities are reminiscent today of the former strength of royal rulership, especially during the Salian and Hohenstaufen periods and most particularly in the powerful trading city of Nuremberg, which formed the most significant royal center throughout the Middle Ages. In this vein, one should also mention Rothenburg on the Tauber, much visited by American and Japanese tourists nowadays. Franconia offers a huge variety of social groups for a relatively small region. The diversity is the result of a former royal landscape¹ which split into different political units at the end of the thirteenth century, when the king's power in the region vanished – though admittedly this was true not only in Franconia but throughout the once-formidable empire. Only Nuremberg acted still as a center of royal activities: since the Golden Bull of 1356, every new elected king was required hold his first imperial diet in the city. The Holy Roman Empire was never forgotten in Franconia, as many coats of arms depicting the Imperial Eagle keep it present in the daily life of the people.

Another important component of the social and cultural landscape of medieval Franconia were the monasteries of different orders, many of whom fostered and relied upon their connections to the kings: Benedictines to the Carolingian Kingdom (Münsterschwarzach, Amorbach, etc.) and Cistercians to the Hohenstaufen dynasty (e.g., Ebrach, Bronnbach). One must certainly

¹ The kings stayed in Würzburg nearly 100 times between 1140 and 1240, also they were very often in Bamberg.

mention the region's relationship with the Teutonic Order, for whom Mergentheim became the chief administrative center after 1525. The different Mendicant Orders could be found in every city or larger town, as could Carthusians in both cities (Würzburg, Nuremberg) and the countryside (Grünau, Tüchelhausen). With the exception of Mendicant houses, these monasteries were owners of enormous landholdings which they cultivated (e.g., Praemonstratensians in Oberzell as in Veßra). In the process, they also afflicted peasants with huge fees and taxes. Most of the vineyards on the rivers Main and Tauber were possessed by monks, canons, and clerics, and the dependency of the poor seasonal workers on employment therein was severe. This was one of the main reason for the peasants' uprising after 1500.

Diversity of power was matched socially; one encounters nobles, citizens, peasants, canons, monks, and nuns in the historical records, and, besides them, a large Jewish population. An examination of the hierarchies that organized these diverse personalities should prove very fruitful, and should bring to light, for example, the tension and terms of coexistence between "outsiders" and "locals" in diverse urban spaces. The research on such identities is very interesting, even though the relatively scarce documents – official charters, city statutes, and court decisions – give us only a few insights into this social diversity.

The article by John D. Young (Flagler College, St. Augustine, USA) focuses on the longstanding relationship between the Jews of Würzburg on one side, and the canons of St. Kilian and the clergy of the prominent canonry of Neumünster in Würzburg on the other. In the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the canons turned many of their properties over to the Jews in exchange for annual payments and other service obligations. Setting these interactions in the context of the development of normative relations between Jews and Christians in the Holy Medieval Empire, which was never called a German one because of its wider range, the paper argues that such business partnerships were a key component of this normativity, along with shared physical proximity and similarly privileged legal positions of Jewish communities and Christian religious institutions.

The social life of an imperial town is brought into focus by Markus Naser (University of Würzburg, Germany). In the center of his discussion is the aforementioned Rothenburg ob der Tauber and its social hierarchy. He emphasized a general lack of urban sources in his paper at Leeds, but, in his essay, he shows more precisely the external influence of the civil community,

either with its legal transactions, which were affirmed by a special town seal, or with its coat of arms. In contrast to the seals, the coat of arms had a different function. It was attached to the public buildings of Rothenburg, as well as to the towers and gates of the city. And this coat of arms could be found on urban buildings outside the walls in the city's territory, in the so-called *Landwehr*, and at the boundary stones of the land as well.

Our third contributor, Benjamin Heidenreich (University of Würzburg, Germany), discusses a culmination point of social tension in the region with his analysis of the uprising during the Peasants War of 1525 and the self and external perception of the involved parties, especially in Franconian towns. According to the view of contemporaries, unrest was the result of misrule. The uprising was against "excessive taxes and duties, as an approach to implementing new religious beliefs and as an attempt to reorganize society according to the values shared by the inhabitants of villages and towns," according to Heidenreich. Religious reformers like Huldreich Zwingli, on the other side, tried to strengthen the values of equality and the common good in connection with new beliefs. The example of Coburg, situated in the border region between Franconia and Thuringia, shows very clearly the different expectations of the citizens and of the peasants living outside of the town. The Princes and Lords reacted in a variety of ways to the uprising, punishing people in some cases while deescalating the situation in others.

Due to the relatively small size of the dominions within Franconia, social groups in the region were perhaps more permeable than in larger territories. None of the rulers in Franconia could achieve a dominant position, and for most people the low-kilometer distance to neighboring territories proved a relatively easy way to change lordship. This trend applies both to the Middle Ages and to the Early Modern period. The regionally-based research-access to Franconia is therefore very suitable for recording social changes in a micro-analysis, which then provides the basis for further comparative examinations across larger areas.

Prof. Dr. Helmut Flachenecker
Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg
Institut für Geschichte
Lehrstuhl für Fränkische Landesgeschichte
Am Hubland
D-97074 Würzburg
helmut.flachenecker@uni-wuerzburg.de