

Paper Memory: A Sixteenth-Century Townsman Writes His World

Review Number:

1403

Publish date:

Thursday, 18 April, 2013

Author:

Matthew Lundin

ISBN:

9780674065949

Price:

£36.95

Pages:

392pp.

Publisher:

Harvard University Press

Publisher url:

<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674065949>

Place of Publication:

Cambridge, MA

Reviewer:

Dawn Hollis

In his introduction, Matthew Lundin declares that it ‘would perhaps only be slightly hyperbolic to proclaim Hermann Weinsberg the Samuel Pepys of sixteenth-century Germany’ (p. 3). This proclamation does not do full justice to the scope of Lundin’s work. Herman Weinsberg, a ‘middling burgher’ of 16th-century Cologne, produced not just a diary, but an entire chest full of genealogies, financial accounts, and – as Lundin puts it – pages of the self-exploration of a man living through what seemed to him an era of incredible change. Whilst Weinsberg may certainly have left behind a historical legacy to equal that of Pepys, he also left historians such as Lundin with a rather more complex manuscript collection to seek to understand.

Hermann Weinsberg, as Lundin points out to his credit, was not a ‘typical’ man for his time and social standing, and the intention of *Paper Memory* is not to get at a ‘representative’ burgher by pushing past his (numerous) ‘personal quirks’ (p. 6). Lundin instead sets out to write a work of microhistory by interweaving the story of Weinsberg’s life, and the problems of his accounts, into broader depictions of wider issues affecting 16th-century Germany. In doing so, Lundin hopes to answer the deeper question of why a ‘middling’ man in the city of Cologne should have chosen to so dramatically break from expectations, and to attempt to create a ‘paper memory’ for himself and his family for generations to come.

In Lundin’s words, ‘each chapter seeks to shed light on a larger sixteenth-century phenomenon’. However, Lundin succeeds in carrying out not just this proposed structure, but also in combining it with a narrative framework which enables the reader to gain a roughly chronological sense of Weinsberg’s life and the way in which he went about creating his personal and familial archive. Chapter one, ‘A secret legacy’, briefly explains the nature of Weinsberg’s archive and its recent publication history, in addition to – more

importantly – placing it within the context of ‘lay literacy’. Chapter two, ‘My father’s house’, considers Hermann’s childhood and, arguably, the very roots of his later project. Lundin argues that he grew up in an era of ‘intellectual and cultural ferment’ (p. 39), and that his father Christian’s discovery of classical literature in translation, such as Cicero’s *On the Orator*, prompted his ambitions for his son to become a man of learning. Hermann’s failure to live up to these ‘great expectations’, Lundin suggests, in turn led to the tensions which led Hermann to build his family archive. In his introduction, Lundin advertises the broader issue with which this chapter is concerned as being ‘Renaissance family life’, but this section also contains the first demonstration of one of the greatest strengths of this work. In a few brief and highly readable pages Lundin sketches out for the reader a summary of the economic circumstances, social stresses, and civic organisation of Cologne in the early 16th century. In a work such as this, such factual summaries are necessary to enable a reader to fully understand the context of the more analytical aspects, and Lundin delivers them extremely well. Certainly any student seeking a starting point for the study of 16th-century German civic life should be directed to consult these pages and Lundin’s bibliography.

The third chapter charts Hermann Weinsberg’s early adult life within the broader context of ‘patriarchal ideals’. According to Lundin, Weinsberg failed to live up to the expectations his father had laid upon him; he was a mediocre student at best, found that he was too shy to speak well in public (as Christian Weinsberg, an amateur rhetorician, hoped he would), and as rector of the law college at which he himself had boarded, found himself the target of a surly student rebellion. Finally, he fathered only one biological child, an illegitimate daughter, Anna. It was in his desire to prove himself a good and beneficent housefather that Weinsberg first conceived of the concept of endowing the *Haus Weinsberg* in perpetuity, ‘so that an honourable household might be kept there at all times’. His initial response was to consider the legal ramifications and to begin laying out a surprisingly illustrious genealogy. Chapter four (‘The middle Is best’) then places Weinsberg’s surprising ambitions in the context of ‘bourgeois values’ in 16th-century Cologne. This is an especially compelling chapter. Weinsberg provides the historian, excitingly, with a view into the lives of the ‘middling sort’, but in doing so he struggled against the boundaries of what it meant to be a member of the third estate. In Lundin’s presentation, Hermann could not understand why so many burgher families had allowed themselves to fall into obscurity, but he could also not escape the fact that – whatever he claimed his ancestry to be – he himself was not noble. His solution was to claim as his motto *medium tenere beati* – ‘blessed are those who hold to the mean’ (p. 111), and to celebrate the third estate as equally noble, and equally worthy of record.

However, Hermann Weinsberg did not model his desire to preserve his family estate and its history solely on the secular example of the nobility. Chapter five, ‘A holy household’, focuses on his response to the perpetual endowments of clerical houses, within the wider context of the various anticlerical disputes present in Catholic Cologne. Lundin points out that although elsewhere in his manuscripts Weinsberg seems first and foremost concerned with the ties of ‘blood’, he was nevertheless fascinated – and perhaps even envious – of the ‘eternal’ households of ‘monasteries, convents, hospitals, and collegiate chapters’. Just as he regarded clerical foundations as ‘households’, akin to the *Haus Weinsberg*, so too did he align himself with the clerical ‘housefathers’ who ran them. Once again, he railed against the deficiencies of ordinary burgher families, who failed to found their houses half so well as the Church had managed. Lundin goes on to explain – in another example of a brief and readable summation of a complex issue – the tensions expressed in that particular concern, issues surrounding clerical property and power which elsewhere culminated in confessional schism, but in Cologne led to less explosive, more simmering disputes. Although in general people certainly took issue with clerical abuses such as raising money through indulgences in order that the officers of the church might live in luxury, Hermann Weinsberg was particularly concerned by the fact that the church had accrued a vast amount of property through the wills of burghers. As far as he could see, many religious institutions which had lasted for centuries had originally been ‘built’ by men like him – why, then, should his household not have the benefit of a similarly long-lasting, secular institution? Once again, however, he could not go so far as to deny the authority or importance of the church so, just as he had concluded that the middling way was noble, so too did he write, for his descendants to read, that the *Haus Weinsberg* could be a sacred community.

If the earlier chapters dealt with more broadly ‘physical’ issues which affected and prompted Weinsberg’s compositions, chapters six and seven delve into the less tangible issues of memory and self-representation, respectively. In chapter six, Lundin gives a detailed overview of traditional *memoria* utilised by men and women such as Weinsberg to commemorate – and, indeed, ensure the salvation of – the dead. He points out, insightfully, that the early modern concept of ‘remembering’ is alien from our own – that ‘Medieval *memoria* posited a real (rather than purely mental) connection between the mind remembering and the thing remembered’. By ensuring that he would be remembered by his descendants, Hermann was ensuring that he would always be a part of the trans-generational unity which made up the *Haus Weinsberg*. This trans-generational unity also included the ancestors whom he claimed for himself and his family, although Lundin asserts that the family history which he wrote was fictitious for all but the most recent generations. Chapter seven (‘Spare no quill, ink, or paper’) considers both the development of Hermann Weinsberg’s self-representation – charting, among other things, the way in which one manuscript began life as a family chronicle but grew into a personal diary – and his anxieties concerning the physical preservation of it.

Chapter eight ‘A new world’, explicates Weinsberg’s attempts to synthesise conflicting sources of contemporary news in his ‘memory book’, and narrates the final part of his story: the failure of his plan to found an eternal household which, providentially, resulted in the preservation of his manuscripts in civic archives, and ultimately in their availability to scholars such as Lundin. Notably this chapter also expands upon a compelling point hinted at by Lundin in his introduction; that, whilst Hermann Weinsberg could by no means be seen as a cipher for a typical burgher, his determined and holistic record-keeping could be seen as a product of the ‘great transformations’ (p. 231) which he perceived in the world in which he lived. In the midst of the turmoil of the Reformation, Weinsberg took solace in recording his own history, whilst such turmoil in turn increased his anxiety as to the potential transience of such a record.

One particularly striking example of Weinsberg’s anxiety, at least in the context of this review, was his annoyance that he was unable to consolidate his various manuscripts, covering family genealogy, stories of his own life, and advice for future housefathers, into a single book. ‘I have not been able to bring together the memory books of my life in a single volume’, he bemoaned, ‘And no one will easily be able to do it after me’ (p. 228). Matthew Lundin has, at last, fulfilled Weinsberg’s desire, although the latter was quite correct – it can surely have been no easy task. Thus, in taking overall stock of this book, it must be duly acknowledged and credited that within one slim volume Lundin deals with both a considerable amount of manuscript material and a considerable range of historical subjects. *Paper Memory* contains not only skilful summations of difficult subjects, such as the effect of the Reformation upon a still-Catholic city, but also incidentally touches on a vast array of details of sixteenth-century life, from the nature of civic involvement to concerns as to the durability of paper as opposed to parchment. It is also certainly well-written – a not unimportant consideration, especially for a book which could be of equal interest to the casual reader as to the academic – and both Lundin’s prose and the snapshots of Hermann Weinsberg’s personality revealed through quotations make it an absorbing read.

However, as with any text, it has its flaws. Although Lundin does quote directly from the manuscripts throughout the book, he also frequently – perhaps due to space constraints – paraphrases Weinsberg’s own words. At times, this can lead the reader to feel unsure whether a particular sentence is intended to convey the sense of Weinsberg’s words, or Lundin’s own analysis of them. Moreover, the efficiency of the structure, which succeeds in combining a fairly coherent narrative of Weinsberg’s life with an analytical framework considering the relevance of his life to wider issues, can at times lead to confusion. This is especially evident in the use of the different manuscripts in the Weinsberg collection. Lundin often quotes or paraphrases from multiple manuscripts within the same chapter, which at times has the effect of ‘flattening’ Weinsberg’s thinking – although, to his credit, Lundin also takes pains in chapter seven to consider the different types of self-representation experimented with by Weinsberg in his various manuscripts. Moreover, although the reader is introduced to some of the different manuscripts as the book proceeds – such as *Das Boich Weinsberg* and the *Liber decrepitudinis* – one valuable addition to the introduction may have been a bibliographical overview of each of the different manuscripts. Through Lundin’s art one can certainly envisage Hermann Weinsberg bending over his papers – but it is a little more difficult to visualise the

organisation and format of those papers from the information provided.

There are also two points of interpretation which could be – in the eyes of some readers – problematic. There are several instances in which Lundin presents Weinsberg as ‘anticipating’ some aspect of modernity or other. This is particularly evident in the conclusion, in which Lundin wonders what the 16th-century burgher would have thought of the ‘World Wide Web’ (p. 255). It could be argued, firstly, that it is only with hindsight that it is possible to see someone in the past ‘anticipating’ that which had yet to occur, and is thus fairly irrelevant to historical analysis. Secondly, although the comparison between Weinsberg’s attempt to preserve his memory and the battle of modern technophiles to preserve their privacy is interesting as a thought experiment, one wonders if it is entirely pertinent. Coming at the end of a book which so often roots itself in the contingencies of a specific historical time and place, it feels like something of a disappointment. A second – more significant – qualm is the slightly haphazard approach that Lundin takes with the ‘reliability’ of Weinsberg’s sources. Throughout, Lundin prefaces any mention of Hermann’s genealogy with some synonym of ‘fake’, but provides no further support for the statement that he invented a ‘fictitious Ur-text’ (p. 191) for that genealogy beyond saying that previous scholars thought this to be the case. Lundin does not seem to consider the fact that there may be a middle-way between recognising that Weinsberg’s genealogy was *factually incorrect* and claiming that it was a conscious fabrication on his part. Could the explanation perhaps not be that Weinsberg did carry out ‘research’ upon his family tree, but was misled by the sources he used, and perhaps by his own wishful thinking? This scepticism regarding the genealogy seems especially problematic given that elsewhere Lundin straightforwardly accepts Weinsberg’s testimony, for example in regarding his second account of his father’s death, written 12 years after the event, as a ‘vivid account’ which added ‘new details’, as opposed to a potentially more consciously performed account.

In conclusion, these flaws do not detract from what is overall a highly cogent and admirable work. Where it has been criticised in this review, it is only in wishing that it did more than it already does, and in the 300 or so pages as they stand Lundin already deals with an impressive array of historical subjects and theoretical issues. Lundin’s intention, declared in his introduction, was not to provide an edition of the manuscripts or a complete biography of Hermann Weinsberg. It is perhaps not the book for a scholar interested only in that one individual. It is, however, a rich, and rewarding book, with depths in areas one would not necessarily expect, and should be recommended not just to those with an interest in 16th-century Cologne culture, but also to the historian seeking a unique window into the early modern period, via the accounts of Hermann Weinsberg who, in his compulsive record-keeping, was most certainly a man after our own hearts.

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1403>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/59444>