

The Cultural Significance of Thuringia in the Middle Ages

Until the 12th century, cultural life was religiously and clerically dominated. Around the mid-12th century, the rise of the secular territorial rulers had as consequence that the same appeared increasingly as sponsors of arts and literature. They had developed, following the rules of royal representation, an own style of rule, which was mirrored by the contemporary architecture, the mintage or the promotion of arts and sciences. They mainly promoted poetry in vernacular language that was significant to the self-perception of the nobility. The interest in mundane issues increased notably, conditioned by the cultural exchange that begun taking place with the crusades. Especially, the French social graces were adopted, as initiated by the 'House of Hohenstaufen'. As result of this, the interest of the German aristocracy was directed at the material culture (i.e. clothes, armour and household contents) as well as at novelties in architecture and courtly behaviour.

In the 14th century, the noble courts and the monasteries represented the only centres of education, knowledge and cultural exchange. Only at the end of the 14th century, with the development of the bourgeoisie, towns evolved increasingly to centres of cultural activity. Especially, the University of Erfurt (since 1392) that had derived from the 'Hohe Schule', experienced the cultural and intellectual life as impetus. The first account on Thuringian literature is to find in a document by Widukind von Corvey (~925-973); called the "Iringlied", a 'heroic song' that bequethed the downfall of the Thuringian kingdom and the subsequent Franconian rule in poetically elated manner. The only female survivor, the Thuringian princess and later 'Holy Radegunde' (518/20-587) describes, historically credible, these events, which were written down by Venantius Fortunatus (~530- 610) under the title: 'lamentations of Radegunde'.

Only 600 years later appeared the next account of literary life. Around 1150, a poet with the name "der arme Hartmann", who originally came from the area of Mühlhausen/Langensalza, propagated in his 'speech of belief' an ascetic, Christian lifestyle and criticized the courtly *joie de vivre*. The 'Tugendspiegel'¹, which the chaplain Wernher von Elmendorf wrote on behalf of the provost Dietrich von Heiligenstadt, was focused more generally on the improvement of human behaviour. The here demanded virtues, such as moderation, steadfastness and generosity, gained a central significance in the courtly poetry, around 1200.

The, at the end of the 12th century anonymously written, dramatic dialogue (of 64 preserved verses) titled 'Christus und Pilatus' possibly constituted a part of the beginning of the

¹ literally: mirror of virtues. 'Spiegel' are instructive and admonitory writings, which explain the virtues and duties of a ruler/knight etc. and lay down the fundamentals of governance or appropriate behaviour

traditional Passion- and Easter plays. Hence, Thuringia is one of the founding-places of the tradition that represents a very special form of drama, culminating in the 15th century. Already 1227, Ludwig IV had let performed a passion play in Eisenach. A fragment of a passion play script from the middle of the 13th century, originating from the monastery Himmelsgarten close to Nordhausen, is also extant. The 'play of the five fatuous and astucious virgins' was performed in front of the landgrave Frederic the Bitten (German: Friedrich der Freidige) in Eisenach, in 1321/22. Frederic was so aroused that he suffered a stroke and subsequently passed away in 1323. The 'Innsbrucker Osterspiel' (Easter play of Innsbruck) also originates from Thuringia. In the Erfurt area, passion plays and other church plays were often performed, especially after solemn processions, until the late 18th century. The rule of Hermann I (1190-1217) is known as the 'golden age' of the literary life in the medieval Thuringia. He hosted the most famous, lyric poets of his time, which made his court to a outstanding 'court of the muses'. He allowed the poet, Heinrich von Veldeke (before 1150-1190/1200) the completion of the 'Eneit', at the 'Neuenburg' close to Freyburg (after 1183).

The early, courtly minnelied about the ancient hero Aeneas represents the first work of a new, self-confident, courtly lyric. Hermann's preference was concentrated on ancient stories and themes. He entrusted Herbort von Fritzlar (~1180-after 1217) with the writing of the 'Liet von Troye' (song of Troy) (after 1190/1200) and Albrecht von Halberstadt with the translation of Ovid's metamorphosis, from Latin into German language. More poems can be traced back to the 'Thüringer Musenhof', for example, an Alexander-poem authored by Biterolf, the crusade- and minne novel 'Graf Rudolf', or the 'Eraclius', assumed to be written by the poet 'Otte'.

Amongst the many poets working at the court of the Landgraviate, Walter von der Vogelweide (~1170--1230) and Wolfram von Eschenbach (1160/80- ~1230) are to mention as the most influential, both of which worked several times and for longer periods on behalf of Hermann I and his son Ludwig IV (1217-1227). Wolfram von Eschenbach was the greatest epic poet of his time. Presumably, he came to Hermann's court around the time of 1202/03. His, partly here written, 'Parzival' (1200/1212), the Celtic story about King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, shows obvious links to Thuringia. In the VI. Book, the tumultuous household at the court of Eisenach is being criticized, in the VII. Book it is being reported of the destroyed vineyards of Erfurt. In the VIII. Book, Wolfram comments on new dances that were only danced in the correct manner in Thuringia and mentions the notable devoutness of a woman, supposedly Hermann's second wife Sophia von Baiern (+1238). Hermann himself was pictured in the figure of the impeccable landgrave 'Kingrimursel' in the VI. Book. Again, Wolfram resided at Hermann's court around 1215/18, where he translated a French poem

that was only purchased for him, about the historical 'Wilhelm von Toulouse', the 'Willehalm', a Christian-heroic story, into German language. Wolfram's not finalized 'Titurel' (1211/1218), the tragic story of a naive minne, was possibly commissioned by Hermann's wife, Sophia v. Baiern for her son Ludwig and his bride Elisabeth.

Walther von der Vogelweide, the best-known lyrical poet and minnesinger in the medieval period, stayed at Hermann's court several times, in the period between 1201/1203-1216/17. While, he advised after his first stay: "Who suffers of weak ears, this is my advice, should give the Thuringian court a wide berth (...)", he admitted around 1214/16: "I belong to the servants of the generous landgrave; it is my character that one finds me always with the most worthy (...). The flower of the Thuringian ruler gleams even through the snow: summer and winter, his praise flourishes, like in the first years." At times, Walther had the not always glorious reputation to be Hermann's courtly poet.

Alongside Wolfram and Walther, at least two minnesingers stayed at the court of the landgraviate: Christian von Hamle, by whom six minnesongs from the time around 1225 are known and the virtuous writer, who occurs in the poetry of the Wartburg war and had written eleven minnesongs. Perhaps, even Heinrich von Morungen (Henry of Morungen) had sung at the landgraviate's court. The historical tradition of the minnesong in Thuringia begins with Heinrich. The Thuringian Minnesingers, Kristan von Hamle, Günther von dem Forste, Wachsmut von Mühlhausen, Kristan von Luppin and Heinrich Hetzbolt von Weissensee were lyrical successors of Heinrich von Morungen. The literary life at Hermann's court received its first acknowledgment in the poem about the Wartburg war that was written around 1240/60.



The Wartburg

Foto LZT

Once again, there are accounts of literary life in Eisenach in the 14th century. At the 'Lossenhof' of Eisenach, around the dean of the chapter of Mainz, Rudolf Losse (~1310-1364) emerged not only new poetry, but also the susceptibility to - and accomodation of medieval literature was witnessed. At the end of the 14th century, Johannes Rothe (~1360-1434), a brilliant representative of the late medieval period, became prominent. He established himself with legal case collections, poems, a 'Ritterspiegel' and religious-allegorical work, moreover with, legends and chronicles of German literary history.

Alongside the already mentioned landgraves, also the earls of Henneberg were known as generous patrons. Poppo VI (+1245) is several times referred to as a poets' patron in the poems about the Wartburg war. In the 'Jenaer Liederhandschrift' (hand-written songbook of Jena) it is reported that he had knighted Wolfram von Eschenbach in Massfeld. Poppo's son, Otto von Botenlauben (1177-1245) was himself a minnesinger.

Also in Erfurt, a central place in Thuringia and major junction of trade and politics in the Middle Ages, developed a dynamic, intellectual-cultural life. Around 1220, the epos about the holy emperor-couple 'Heinrich & Kunigunde' emerged here. In case that the confessing poet Ebernant was indeed the, in 1212/17 known patrician of Erfurt, he would be the evidently

oldest, traceable citizen of the German literary history. In addition to the sources of Erfurt, also the, in the middle of the 13th century created, poem 'Dee vrouwen zuht' exhibits a poetry that is geared towards the mundane facts of life. Its author, 'Meister Sibote' was of bourgeois origin.

Especially, clergymen, who had lived in Erfurt, left their literary footprints. From the Dominican monastery in Erfurt, originates the 'Vitae Sanctae Elisabeth' by Dietrich von Apolda (+1228- after 1247), which serves as archetype of all other descriptions of the life of the Holy Elisabeth, until today. Nikolaus von Bibra (~after 1307) canon of the St. Peter's Church (Peterskirche) describes in his 'Carmen Satiricum' not only the daily life in the town, he also lamented against the decline in moral standards, particularly amongst the clergymen and worldly authorities of Erfurt. Meister Eckhart (~1260-1328), who came originally from Hochheim, close to Gotha, known as prominent representative of German mysticism, also criticized the institutionalized church. With his German and Latin writings, he strongly influenced the philosophical understanding. The impact of Eckhart's work, who was persecuted by the inquisition, can even be recognized in Martin Luther's work.

Secondary to the well-known names and works, there are some less-known, for example, the vulgar-drastring rhyme 'Der Minnen Klaffer' (second half of the 14th century) or the fabulous poem 'Abor und das Meerweib' (Abor und the merwoman). Next to the prominent writings like the 'Jenaer Liederhandschrift' (first third of the 14th century) exist many less-known, hand-written documents of Thuringian origin that account for the dynamic production and absorption of literature, even after the 'golden age' around 1200.

Architecture and Construction of Castles

The Ludowinger used the right of the nobility to erect fortified castles, which is in existence since the 11th century, various times. Through new building and extensions developed these representable and fortified domiciles: the Wartburg and the palace of the landgraviate Eisenach, the Neuenburg at Freyburg, the Eckhartsburg close to Eckhartsberga, the Burg Weissensee/Runneburg and the Creuzburg at the river Werra. The Ludowingian group of castles, is the most important, after the 'Reich'-castles and Palatinates'. The affiliated aristocratic houses followed suit and therefore, Thuringia became the 'Land' with the most castles across Germany. The castles served as fortresses as well as rooms of living; however, they were also places of representation. Hence, the architecture and splendid art designs were particularly eminent to the owners. The earls, for whom the castles were being built, sought to engage the best and most-renowned master builders and their orientation

was geared towards the magnificent buildings of kings and emperors and the great ideals of ancient art.

The castles, erected under Ludwig II (1140-1172), are regarded to be unusually innovative. The three-storey palace of the Wartburg is the oldest preserved of its kind (at this time, it represented a new style) and was the prototype of many imitations. The same applies to the towers of the Weissensee castle, the Eckhartsburg and the no-longer existing tower of the Wartburg. The palace of the Wartburg hosts the oldest, datable double-capitals. Under Hermann I, the Wartburg, the Neuenburg, the Eckhartsburg and the castle Weissensee/Runneburg were extended and reconstructed with great efforts.



Foto LZT

The stone-bridge across the river Werra, which is the oldest natural stone bridge in eastern, central Germany and the best preserved sandstone bridge north of the river Main.

Ludwig IV (1217-1227) displayed, despite his only 10 year long lasting rule, an unusual and extensive purchasing-, founding- and building activity. He initiated the building of a hall in the Creuzburg, as well as the construction of a stone-bridge across the river Werra, which is the oldest natural stone bridge in eastern, central Germany and the best preserved sandstone

bridge north of the river Main. At the Neuenburg, the well-known double chapel was built, which is counted towards the best and most significant/characteristic art works in the period of the Hohenstaufen. For the first time, Ludwig's building activity shows French influences, which is particularly reflected in the rotund design of the towers that are made in the style of the buildings erected by King Philippe August of France.

Out of the rich variety of magnificent churches, some particular buildings have to be mentioned: the St. Nicholas' Church in Eisenach, the church of the monastery Thalbürgel and the monastery Paulinzella are exemplary for the Romanesque Art.

The St. Severi Church (1278 - mid-14th century) in Erfurt is deemed to be one of the most significant buildings of the German Gothic period. Its design follows the example of the St. Elisabeth's Church in Marburg. The St. Mary's Church of Mühlhausen, with the highest steeple (86 m) of Thuringia is considered a masterpiece of the Gothic period.

The Art of Book Printing and Painting

In the Middle Ages, books and codices were not only considered a source of knowledge, but also served the purpose of princely representation. This is evident in the lavish and complicated production of the books with often valuable, expensive and artful bindings. Once again, Hermann I presents himself as patron of arts and literature. A Thuringian-Saxon painting school worked on his behalf. About its exact origin is not much known. The two most-renowned works, originating from this school in the early Gothic period, are splendid manuscripts: the, between 1210 and 1213 created 'Landgrafensalter' (today kept in the library of Stuttgart) and the 'Psalterium' of the Holy Elisabeth (today kept in the Museum Cividale, Italy). In both works, a stylized imagery of Hermann and his second wife, Sophia von Baiern, is illustrated. Both Psalters were made for their personal use as prayer books.

In the 'Landgrafensalter', all initials are set in golden majuscules that are integrated into blue pen/feather drawings, whereas no initial compares to the other.

Alongside to the lavish letter-ornaments, there are miniatures, apostle-imagery, - and images of the peasants' milieu, which show typical activities according to each month of the year. Lavishly and extensively used Gold and coloured designs make the ornaments particularly valuable. At times, the pictures are inlaid with medieval notations. Similarly valuable is the décor of the Elisabeth Psalter. The miniatures go back to several different sources. They are evidence of European influences (presumably French) and belong to the earliest, German accounts of the 'jagged style' (Zackenstil). The picture cycle with its 173 pages is one of the most noteworthy picture cycles of the High Middle Ages from the Thuringian-Saxon area.

The two Psalters emerged (alongside two Psalters of 'Heinrich dem Loewen' (Henry the Lion)) at the beginning of the just establishing princely art of book printing.

Mural Painting

Hessehof, Schmalkalden: The, around 1220/30 created mural paintings at the so-called Hessehof of Schmalkalden (court of Hesse), picture a variety of scenes of the 'Iwein'-novel, written by Roman Hartmann von Aue, a poem about King Artus and his knights of the Round Table. They are the oldest illustrations of the worldly Artus-theme, after the around 1210 dated frescos to the same novel at the Rodeneck castle in the south of Tirol. Moreover, they are assumed to be the oldest, profane paintings on German grounds. Although, Schmalkalden belonged to the Ludovingian territory at this time, it seems that not the landgrave himself but one of his ministeriales², had ordered the creation of the fresco-wall paintings. This can be assumed, because the 'Hessehof' was the official residence of the landgraviate's custodian. In addition, it is unlikely that Ludwig IV promoted themes in form of paintings, which as far as known, would not have been accepted at court.

Nikolaiturm, Erfurt: The discovery of the mural paintings, which had been found in the basement of the steeple of the former St. Nicholas' Church in 1978, aroused a lot of attention at this time. The paintings have been recently restaurated and are now open for public viewing. The only fragmentary preserved paintings show four scenes of the earthly being of the Holy Elisabeth: the arrival at the landgraviate's court, Elisabeth at the wedding banquet, in the marital bed and Ludwig's departure to the crusade. The, 1361 christened church belonged to the German order that honoured Elisabeth as its main patron and possibly commissioned all these frescos. But also that unknown citizen of Erfurt, who endowed a generous amount to the church, is being taken into consideration.

Liboriuskapelle, Creuzburg: At the Liborius chapel that was erected instead of the old pilgrimage chapel at the Werra bridge, mural paintings had been discovered in 1933. Those urgently require restoration and show motives of the Passion of the Christ and the life of the Holy Elisabeth.

² member of a class of lower nobility

Historiography

Three places distinguish themselves within the historiography: Erfurt, Reinhardsbrunn and Eisenach. While the historiographic tradition in Reinhardsbrunn and Eisenach is focused on the landgraviate Thuringia and its representations, due to their close relations to the landgraves, the in Erfurt written works are characterized by the universal historiography of the Middle Ages. Thereby, various dependencies and interminglings subsist between the works.

Reinhardsbrunn: Presumably, between 1198 and 1215, the 'Historia brevis principum Thuringae' was constituted - a short history of the landgraves, which documents the rise of the 'Ludowinger', from Ludwig the Bearded to Ludwig III, with an addendum on the period under Hermann I. Possibly, the lost 'Historia Reinhardsbrunnensis' originates from the same author and was the basis of the extensive 'Reinhardsbrunner Chronik' (Chronicle of Reinhardsbrunn) (~1340/49). It begins with the 6th century and continues until 1338 and is considered as one of the most important accounts of medieval historiography.

In 1228, Ludwig's IV chaplain – Berthold wrote his 'Gesta Ludowici IV'. The knowledge of the existence of the lost document derives merely from the Elisabeth vita by Dietrich von Apolda and the, after 1308 written, Vita Ludowici, which in turn is only preserved in the translation (1314/1323) by Friedrich Köditz from Salfeld.

Eisenach: When the territorial/property circumstances in Thuringia changed through the death of Baltasar (1336-1406) and the childlessness of his son Friedrich/Frederic (1384-1440), also in Eisenach arose the need to anchor the past as uniting memory. Several, chronicles were written that are decisive for the historiography of the 'Land': From the 'Predigerkloster' originates the 'Pistoriana' (Chronica Thuringorum, 1395/96). It begins with Noah's sons and continues until 1395 and ends with later entries in 1426. Apart from the Thuringian history, it also accounts for the history of the 'Reich'. The 'Ecardiana' (Historia de landgraves Thuringiae, around 1414/18) was written at the Franciscan monastery. It accounts for the time between 1025 and 1409 and reports about the flagellants (1414) in Sangershausen, as well as the Thuringian-, imperial-, and papal- history. Contemporaneous, the 'Eisenacher Franziskanerchronik II' was authored. This Latin chronicle was, amongst others, source for Johannes Rothes' 'Eisenacher Chronik' (1414/18), his Thuringian chronicle (~1418) and his Thuringian universal chronicle (Thüringische Weltchronik/1421). Rothe is

regarded as the founding figure of Thuringian historiography. His writings and interpretations belong to the most accepted and quoted sources on Thuringian history to this day.

Erfurt: The historiography in Erfurt is marked by the capacity of the town as religious centre of the 'Land' Thuringia on the one hand and by its relative independence on the other hand. Therewith, the interest is predominantly concentrated on the 'Reich' and ecclesiastical history, sometimes on Thuringia itself or the developments in the town. The most important historiographic work of the High Middle Ages and Late Middle Ages, originating from Erfurt is the Peter's Chronicle (*Cronica sancti Petri Erfordensis moderna*) from the Benedictine monastery St. Peter. It was written in several stages between 1209 and 1335 and continued with further entries. Ecclesiastical, 'Reich-' and Thuringian history stood here in the centre of attention, without a dominant concentration on the history of the 'Land'. This became only more dominant with the subsequent entries (1334-1355). The Peter chronicle was copied numerous times; amongst others, it was part of the Thuringian continuation of the Saxonian world chronicle. Nearly free from local history is the 'Minoritenchronik' (*Cronica Minoritae Erphordensis*, until 1301), a compilation of various world-historical works, which in particular, served the edification of the Franciscan monks. The 1345 begun 'Liber cronicorum' represents the first attempt by a chronist to create a Thuringian historical compendium, using the sources available in Erfurt. Apparently, in the second half of the 13th century, the 'Christherre Chronik' was authored in Thuringia – the exact origin could not be found.

An universal chronicle that was presumably dedicated to Heinrich dem Erlauchten (Henry the Illustrious) (1247-1288), the heir to the Ludovingian rule, constitutes together with the universal chronicle by Rudolf von Ems (~1200-1254) the foundation of all subsequent chronicles of this type.

Herausgeber: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Thüringen

Regierungsstraße 73, 99084 Erfurt

www.lzt.thueringen.de

Author: Dr. Sylvia Weigelt

Translation: Julia Palme

2008