

The Court in the City? Aristocratic and Burgher Culture in Hamburg in the 17th and Early 18th Centuries

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Abstract

In 17th and early 18th century Hamburg – the leading trading, transport and communication centre in Northern Germany and for the whole Baltic region – there were no insurmountable barriers and demarcation lines between court and urban society. The city's "hybrid bourgeois/aristocratic secular high culture" (Ann Catherine Le Bar 1993) is characterized by an intense communication and transfer of cultural knowledge and behaviour among different kinds of nobility: aristocrats, patricians, diplomats and other functional elites. As banquets and concerts demonstrate, music was used as a kind of status symbol, with the aim of gaining esteem and ingratiating oneself with people. Such cultural acting was typical of the upper classes, but to a certain degree also of the wider urban middle classes. Re-evaluating Hamburg's famous *Collegium musicum*, founded in 1660, within this social framework, it does not appear any longer as an "urban-bourgeois model institute in the sense of a counter model to court chapels" (Arnfried Edler 2003), but more as a noble society in the broadest sense, choosing its repertory from artistic centres in Italy as well as from leading German courts for the purpose of pleasure, cultural distinction and education.

Introduction

Even in recent cultural studies the city of Hamburg is still characterized as a Burgher metropolis in a very strict sense (e.g. Rauhe 2017; Steiger, Richter 2012: 2; for a critical survey on such attributions see Schröder 1998: 2–4) – and as a city with a strong "anti-aristocratic tradition" (Stewart 1985: 32). First and foremost, it was the Hamburg historian Percy Ernst Schramm, who emphasized the Burgher habitus of the city's population (Schramm 1969: 81–82; Schramm 1963/1964). His view became increasingly influential for further research on Hamburg, leading amongst other things to a very narrow characterization of the social structure of the metropolis in the 18th century. Thus the historian Horst Möller (1974: 268) could state: "In the liberal trading city of Hamburg there was never any urban aristocracy, and neither were there patricians of any kind." In contrast, the historian Franklin Kopitzsch (1982: 143) emphasized that Hamburg "was not in opposition to the old European class-oriented world, but an integral part of it."

Since Hamburg was the largest city in the Holy Roman Empire after Vienna, it is an extraordinarily interesting place to study the relationship of Aristocratic and Burgher culture in the 17th and 18th centuries. The Elbe metropolis was not only the leading trading, transport and communication centre in Northern Germany and for the whole Baltic region, it was at the same time the seat of

the *Niedersächsischer Reichskreis*, hosting several foreign diplomats inside its walls, including for instance diplomatic residents of France, Great Britain, Sweden, Denmark, Habsburg, Saxony and Brandenburg-Prussia (Kopitzsch 1982: 140; Jacks 1997: 14–15; Krieger 2012: 805). Part of their everyday duties was the suitable representation – not to say incorporation – of the grandeur and importance of their princely houses. On the other hand, Hamburg was a city of extreme wealth. This fact favoured not only an orientation of the social elites towards the behaviour of the courtly nobilities, but also an elimination of clearly defined demarcation lines between the members of the aristocracy and the urban patriciate. With reference to the city of Lübeck, for example, the historian Alexander Francis Cowan could state:

The aristocracy and the urban patriciate overlapped on many levels. Not only did they frequently provide each other with new members, there is a good deal of evidence that the aristocratic lifestyle was a model which greatly influenced patrician behaviour at all times. (Cowan 1986: 11)

In view of this fact, one should not wonder that in historiography a precise definition and differentiation of class designations like *Stadtadel* (urban aristocracy), *Adel* (nobility) and *Patriziat* (patriciate) is rather difficult and still remains a problem (Hecht 2004: 85; Hecht 2010: 1–7).