Beat Kümin

Peasant Portraits. Rural Self-Representations in the German Lands Since the Middle Ages

Portrety chłopskie.
Wiejskie autoportrety na ziemiach niemieckich od średniowiecza

ABSTRACT

This article examines self-representations of peasant communities in the German lands since the Middle Ages. It focuses on two well-documented contexts of collective expression: key political ideals in the records of imperial villages (i.e., rural polities without an intermediate territorial lord) on the one hand, and shared cultural meanings emerging from numerous writings as well as objects deposited in the tower spheres of prominent buildings on the other. Consultation of charters, law books and visual evidence suggests that autonomy, agency and accountability were three principles that imperial villages held in high regard, while (divine) protection, adequate portraiture (of user communities at specific points in time) and projection (of messages as well as customs to posterity) appear as salient features in tower capsule deposits. Taken together, these so far neglected sources provide important insights for deepening our understanding of peasant values and priorities.

Key words: Holy Roman Empire, Middle Ages, early modernity, politics, villages, local memory

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł analizuje sposób, w jaki społeczności chłopskie na ziemiach niemieckich przedstawiały siebie od średniowiecza. Skupia się na dwóch dobrze udokumentowanych kontekstach zbiorowych wypowiedzi: z jednej strony na kluczowych ideałach politycznych w dokumentach wsi cesarskich (tj. społeczności wiejskich bez pośredniczącego władcy terytorialnego), a z drugiej strony na wspólnych znaczeniach kulturowych wynikających z wielu pism oraz przedmiotów zdeponowanych w wieżach znanych budynków. Analiza statutów, ksiąg prawnych i dowodów wizualnych sugeruje, że autonomia, sprawczość i odpowiedzialność były trzema zasadami, które wioski cesarskie ceniły sobie najbardziej, podczas gdy (boska) ochrona, adekwatne portretowanie (społeczności użytkowników w określonych momentach czasu) i projekcja (przekazów, a także zwyczajów dla potomności) wydają się być istotnymi cechami depozytów w wieżach. Podsumowując, te dotychczas pomijane źródła zawierają ważne wskazówki, które pozwalają nam lepiej zrozumieć wartości i priorytety chłopów.

Słowa kluczowe: Święte Cesarstwo Rzymskie, średniowiecze, wczesna nowożytność, polityka, wioski, pamięć lokalna

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, scholars have refined our picture of the premodern peasantry. Social and economic historians have uncovered varying types of agricultural production and lordship[1], generating strong internal differentiation rather than universal precarity. Depending on the context, individual positions ranged from personally unfree cottagers labouring on seigneurial estates via middling-sort tenants with some surplus resources to yeoman elites holding extensive landed property[2]. Rather than general subjection, sustained research on village and parish records similarly produced evidence of political agency – in local government, court juries, diets, resistance movements – and informed investment into local religion, be it through embellishment of churches, membership of guilds or the foundation of intercessory institutions[3]. Remarkable documents

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[1]   W. Abel, *Agricultural Fluctuations in Europe from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Centuries*, New York 1980; W. Rösener, *Peasants in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge 1992; O. Brunner, *Land and Lordship: Structures of Governance in Medieval Austria, transl.* H. Kaminsky, J. van Horn Melton, Philadelphia 2015.

[2]   *The Peasantries of Europe: From the Fourteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. T. Scott, London 1998.

[3]   P. Blickle, *Obedient Germans? A Rebuttal*, transl. Thomas Brady Jr, Charlottesville 1997; W. Te Brake, *Shaping History: Ordinary People in European Politics 1500–1700*, Berkeley 1998; R. Head, *Early Modern Democracy in the Grisons: Social Order and Political Language in a Swiss Mountain Canton*, Cambridge 1995; H.R. Schmidt, *Dorf und Religion: Reformierte Sittenzucht in Berner Landgemeinden der Frühen Neuzeit*, Stuttgart 1995; M. Forster, *The Counter

such as the Wendelstein Ordinance, presenting members of a Franconian congregation as lords over an incoming clergyman during the early Reformation in 1524, suggest considerable self-confidence accumulated in the course of late medieval communalization[4]. The rise of cultural approaches has added further texture to our understanding of rural societies, illuminating kinship structures, gender relations, collective values and sociability customs[5]. Alongside these textual sources, there are suggestive, if often heavily coded visual depictions, for instance in Albrecht Dürer's woodcuts featuring peasants in the German lands, or the 'everyday' scenes in Dutch Golden Age painting, represented by artists like Pieter Bruegel[6].

Building on such foundations, scholars have come to challenge lingering stereotypes of countryfolk as silent masses approachable only through the eyes of elites. Time and again, particular occasions prompted peasants to (re)present themselves. Far from being universally illiterate, individuals have left behind personal records in commonplace books, diaries or other ego-documents, sometimes extending over many years – seventeenth-century examples include the chronicles begun by Caspar Preis in Hesse during the Thirty Years' War and by Jost von Brechershäusern in Bern, who wrote in the context of the Swiss Peasants' War[7]. This essay proposes to explore two sets of collective perspectives available for the territories formerly associated with the Holy Roman Empire from the Middle Ages[8].

Reformation in the Villages: Religion and Reform in the Bishopric of Speyer 1560–1720, Ithaca–London 1992; D. Mayes, *Communal Christianity: The Life and Loss of a Peasant Vision in Early Modern Germany*, Leiden 2004.

[4] Translated in a digital edition for *German History in Documents and Images*, https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=4322 [access: 30.06.2024].

[5] D.W. Sabean, *Kinship in Neckarhausen 1770–1870*, Cambridge 1997; H. Wunder, *He is the Sun – She is the Moon: Women in Early Modern Germany*, transl. T. Dunlap, Cambridge MA 1998; R. Blickle, *Politische Streitkultur in Altbayern: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Grundrechte in der frühen Neuzeit*, eds. C. Ulbrich, M. Hohkamp, A. Griesebner, Berlin–Boston 2017; B. Kümin, *Drinking Matters: Public Houses and Social Exchange in Early Modern Central Europe*, Basingstoke 2007.

[6] See e.g. A. Dürer, *Drei Bauern im Gespräch* (woodcut, Nuremberg, c. 1497), held by the Kunsthistorisches Museum Magdeburg: https://st.museum-digital.de/object/36625 [access: 30.06.2024]; P. Bruegel the Elder, *The Peasant Wedding* (*c*. 1568), in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna: https://www.khm.at/en/objectdb/detail/330/ [access: 30.06.2024].

[7] *Bauernleben im Zeitalter des Dreißigjährigen Krieges. Die Stausebacher Chronik des Caspar Preis 1636–1667*, eds. W.A. Eckhardt, H. Klingelhöfer, Marburg an der Lahn 1998 (*Beiträge zur Hessischen Geschichte*, vol. 13); *Die Chronik Josts von Brechershäusern*, ed. A. Bärtschi, "Burgdorfer Jahrbuch" 1958, 25, pp. 79–132; on personal writing genres more generally see *Selbstzeugnisse in der Frühen Neuzeit: Individualisierungsweisen in interdisziplinärer Perspektive*, ed. K. von Greyerz, Berlin 2016.

[8] P. Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire: A Thousand Years of Europe's History*, London 2017.

The first section draws on select written, visual, and material sources connected with 'imperial villages'. As rural communities immediately subject to the emperor without intermediate lords like princes, prelates or cities, they managed their affairs with unusual autonomy, offering relatively 'unfiltered' insights into bottom-up principles and ideals. Second, using the tiny *Reichsdorf* of Gersau as a bridge between the two perspectives, the essay turns to the writings and objects placed into spheres located on top of towers when prominent buildings were erected or repaired. This source genre of *Turmkapseleinlagen* provides evidence that has hardly been examined so far, revealing how rural (and indeed urban) people viewed themselves and what messages they wished to transmit to posterity. Through closer examination of political agency on the one hand and broader cultural reflections on the other, the contribution aims to identify important components of rural self-representations, with a view to fostering more nuanced assessments of peasant identities and priorities. In terms of methods, the study combines quantitative analysis (of numerical significance) with qualitative examination (of cases with particularly rich evidence). The working hypothesis is that, alongside numerous differences of economic regimes, social profiles and change over time, there were overarching principles and shared priorities in rural society.

Closer engagement with such questions, facilitated by the Lublin conference 'The Image of Peasant Communities in European Written Sources, Culture, and Art from Antiquity to the 20th Century', where an early version of this paper was presented, seems timely. In 2025, Germany commemorates the Quincentenary of its Great Peasants' War, an occasion marked by numerous new studies and public events[9].

RESEARCH AND RESULTS

Political Self-Representation in Imperial Villages

Compared to intense historiographical engagement with a few dozen cities like Augsburg, Nuremberg or Hamburg, i.e., *Reichsstädte* with the right of representation in imperial diets, there has been little

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[9]   Examples include the monographs by Gerd Schwerhoff / Lyndal Roper and a major exhibition in Thuringia entitled "freyheit 1525": https://www.bauernkrieg2025.de/en [access: 30.06.2024]. Meanwhile, Polish scholars – as participants from other countries learnt in the course of the Lublin discussions – are conducting a lively debate about the challenges and complexities of 'people's history': Ewa Solska (Maria Curie-Sklodowska University, Lublin), *People's history" as a category: discursive turn and the issue of metascience*.

research on their rural equivalents[10]. Yet the fact that over 300 communes were – or regarded themselves as – *Reichsdörfer* at various points in the medieval and early modern periods suggests that they deserve greater attention as distinctive parts of a wider phenomenon of rural freedom, which also included peasant leagues (Forest Cantons, Grisons), parish republics (Dithmarschen) and associations of free people (as e.g. at Eglofs or on Leutkircher Heide). Many rural communes, furthermore, defended their special status with all disposable means, including careful archiving of privileges, diplomatic exchange with external protectors, as well as protracted lawsuits stretching over decades if not centuries[11]. Closer examination of how villages without territorial lords presented themselves to the outside world, it will be argued here, reveals a particular emphasis on '3 As', i.e., the high value placed on principles of autonomy, agency and accountability.

The most distinctive and cherished attribute of *Reichsdörfer* was their direct relationship with the – physically distant and perennially distracted – Emperor, meaning that there were no intermediate territorial lords, such as princes or city councils, pursuing early modern state-building agendas. This special, quasi-independent status was rooted in the commune's location on imperial land, in constitutional privileges acquired at specific points in time, or in the monetary purchase of all political and legal rights of lordship. The first and most prominent message to emerge from self-representations, therefore, is autonomy—the villages' political freedom from outside encroachment. The near-universal symbol deployed is the imperial eagle, appearing for example on a seal affixed by the 'free court of Sulzbach' (an imperial village near Frankfurt a.M.) to a legal document of 15 January 1512; or in the coat of arms officially granted by an imperial agent to Gochsheim (a *Reichsdorf* near Schweinfurt in present-day Bavaria) for 'eternal' use 'in all honest affairs, field camps, military campaigns, seals and pleas' in 1568[12]. It also appears, rendered in glorious colour and with highly representative intent, in the first preserved law book of the imperial

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[10] Survey works like Helmut Neuhaus, *Das Reich in der Frühen Neuzeit*, 2nd edition, Munich 2003, p. 38, and Joachim Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire*, 2 vols., Oxford 2012, vol. 1, p. 44, touch on imperial villages only very briefly and Ekkehard Kaufmann, *Reichsdörfer*, in: *Handwörterbuch zur deutschen Rechtsgeschichte*, vol. 4, Berlin 1990, col. 561–564, emphasized the need for further research.

[11] B. Diestelkamp, *Ein Kampf um Freiheit und Recht. Die prozessualen Auseinandersetzungen der Gemeinde Freienseen mit den Grafen zu Solms-Laubach*, Cologne 2012. The following passages draw on: B. Kümin, *Imperial Villages: Cultures of Political Freedom in the German Lands c. 1300–1800*, Leiden 2019, where Appendix 1 lists the known examples.

[12] These examples, preserved in the archives of Frankfurt and Gochsheim respectively, are illustrated in B. Kümin, *Imperial Villages*, p. 170: Figures 25b-c.

village of Gersau (on Lake Lucerne in Central Switzerland), which collated
the commune's fundamental laws in 1605 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The crest of the imperial village of Ger-
sau adorning its 'small land book' of 1605 consists
of two shields with the commune's blue and red co-
lours positioned beneath the double-headed eagle
and the imperial crown. The arrangement resem-
bles similar coats of arms carried by the neighbour-
ing – and similarly immediate – rural and urban
republics of the Swiss Confederation. The scroll
at the bottom features the designation 'The Land
of Gersau' and the year.
District Archive of Gersau, LB 6, p. 13, reproduced
with kind permission by the District Council.

In written communications, this constitutional autonomy was reflected
in emphases on collective political *agency*, which meant that the villages
had the capacity to pass laws, exercise jurisdiction and liaise with other
powers, with elected officials acting on behalf of the corporate community
rather than by personal birthright. Accordingly, Gersau referred to itself
as a *Gemeinde* (commune) in 1510, a *Land* ('land' in the sense of a distinct
political unit) in 1605 (cf. Figure 1), and even as a *freie Republic* (free repub-
lic) in 1756; the latter, after the various entities belonging to – or associated
with – the Swiss Confederation had drifted out of the orbit of the Holy
Roman Empire following the Peace of Westphalia[13]. At Gochsheim
we encounter equally suggestive terms like *Reichs dorff* (imperial village)
in 1457, *gantze Gemeinde* (whole commune) in 1568 (in the grant of a coat
of arms mentioned above) and – together with the adjacent, equally

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[13]   District Archive of Gersau, Urkunden, no. 18 (tax assessment of 1510); State Archives
of Lucerne, Akt 11/290 (letter by the land mayor and council of Gersau to the City of Lu-
cerne in 1756). Gersau had entered into a defensive alliance with the Forest Cantons in 1359,
but was not a full member of the Confederation. Unless stated otherwise, translations from
German into English have been made by the author.

immediate village of Sennfeld – *Gericht und gantze Gemeindt beder Reichs Dörffer* (lawcourt and whole commune of both imperial villages) in 1575[14]. In terms of material culture, corresponding messages found expression in the form of imposing village halls (a multistorey timber-frame building from the sixteenth century, which might easily adorn a medium-sized town, survives at Gochsheim; cf. Figure 2), inscriptions on buildings (a commemorative note to Johann Veit Siebenbürger on the churchyard wall of Sennfeld from the late 1700s highlights his rank of *Reichsschultheiss*, the highest village position of imperial avoyer) or works of art (in the eighteenth century, Gersau commissioned a cycle of paintings for its council chamber: some depicted examples of good government known from Antiquity, others landmarks of its own history, such as the purchase of political freedom in 1390 or the imperial confirmation of privileges in 1433, mirroring iconographic programmes in major cities)[15].

The third principle of *accountability* has already surfaced in the context of officials acting for – and being answerable to – their fellow burghers. In the archives today, this emerges most explicitly from the many books of reckonings that postholders submitted for communal approval annually or at the end of their terms. At Gersau, a bewildering range of such sources survives, documenting transactions carried out by treasurers managing secular finances, as well as by fabric, poor, tithe, and benefice wardens responsible for ecclesiastical funds at both parish and chapel levels. In most imperial villages, as in principalities and city-states, increasing areas of church governance had come under lay supervision from the late Middle Ages. In this tiny Alpine polity, appointments and monitoring of multiple officials ultimately came under the authority of the twice-yearly communal assembly (*Landsgemeinde* for worldly matters) or parish meeting (dealing with church affairs), both sovereign institutions composed of the same few hundred burghers, i.e. nearly all male inhabitants of adult age, meeting – as it were – with different 'hats' on[16]. This was a highly inclusive, almost 'democratic' model, but

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[14] F. Weber, *Geschichte der fränkischen Reichsdörfer Gochsheim und Sennfeld*, Schweinfurt 1913, p. 309 (1457); Gemeindearchiv Gochsheim, GO-ZM25002-UI/1-(021) [1568] and 04.08.2006 018 A (2) [1575].

[15] Images are accessible at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gochsheim_Rathaus_001.jpg [access: 30.06.2024] (Gochsheim village hall); https://brill.com/download-pdf/display/book/9789004396609/back-2.pdf, p. 230 [access: 30.06.2024] (Sennfeld inscription); https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/000711/2006–12–08/ [access: 30.06.2024] (painting depicting the confirmation of Gersau's privileges in 1433).

[16] The parish archive in Gersau preserves e.g. a *Kirchenvogtrechnungsbuch* (a fabric account book, starting 1734), while the district archive holds eighteenth-century *Pfarrhelferpfrund Abrechnungen* (reckonings of the official administering the resources

some villages maintained more 'aristocratic' forms of governance. A very elaborate system of checks and balances was enshrined in the Gochsheim constitution between 1572 and 1802, far more complex than one might expect in a village setting. At the core were the full burghers, known here

Figure 2: This inscription on a window frame of Gochsheim's historic village hall commemorates the eight members of the court in 1561, headed by imperial avoyer Hans Dentzer and listing the names of seven jurors. Photograph by the author.

of the assistant priest), a *Rächnung Büöchlin* (showing what the soul wardens collected / spent), *Pfrundvogtrechnungen* (an account book kept by the benefice warden), the *Zentenbuch* "A" (documenting tithe) and "C" (for poor relief funds) alongside the *Rechnung Buch für das Kapelgestift beÿ Mariahilf* (i.e. the accounts of the warden looking after the chapel of St Mary on the lakeshore).

as 'neighbours'. They (originally) appointed a village court as the principal legislative and jurisdictional organ, chaired by the imperial avoyer and staffed with seven jurors, who effectively formed the governing council and subsequently replenished its membership whenever individuals left or died (Figure 2). Through separate processes, neighbours and court both elected men to a second body called 'stool', with primarily financial and administrative responsibilities. Exemplifying this dual structure, the court selected two principal executive officials (the senior mayor and senior churchwarden), while the stool chose their counterparts (the junior mayor and junior churchwarden). All communal operations were overseen by the Emperor's representative, the imperial bailiff (for extended periods the Bishop of Würzburg), whom the neighbours swore allegiance to – not as subjects of the bailiff's own territory, but as members of the Empire. In cases of dispute, Gochsheim could appeal directly to the central imperial courts of the *Reichskammergericht* and *Reichshofrat*, which it did on many occasions[17].

Cultural Self-Representations in Tower Capsule Deposits

From the late Middle Ages to the present, communities associated with prominent buildings – such as churches, castles or fortifications – have placed written and material messages into the golden spheres located on top of their towers. Deposits can take the form of engraved metal plates, manuscript notes or printed matter, but also various objects considered representative of local society at specific points in time. Sealed in *Turmkapseln* (cartridges placed within the outward containers), the contents remain hidden until recovery during subsequent repairs, when they often get supplemented with fresh materials, typically at intervals of one to two generations. Many sites have thus acquired multiple layers of deposits, which can help us to trace the history of the respective localities back over several centuries (Figures 3–4). While individual sets have been edited and/or discussed in scholarly publications, the custom has never been examined for the German lands as a whole[18]. The latter is the ultimate aim of an ongoing research project, supported by the Gerda Henkel

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[17] Details extracted from Walfried Hein, *Reichsschultheiß und ein Ehrbares Gericht: Bürgerliches Leben im freien Reichsdorf Gochsheim*, Gochsheim 1994, supplemented with information from the village archivist Elmar Geus and visualized in Kümin, *Imperial Villages*, p. 50.

[18] A sample edition for an urban parish church is *Der Knopf von Sankt Marien: Eine Dokumentation der Zeitzeugnisse von 1745, 1820, 1839, 1911, 1965 und 2018*, ed. U. Herrmann, Osterode 2018. Some Austrian sets are collated in Siegfried Haider, *Kirchturmurkunden vornehmlich aus Oberösterreich*, "Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung" 1998, 106, pp. 1–30, and tower capsules feature in Stefan Dornheim's recent

Figures 3–4: The golden globe on top of St Marzellus's parish church at Gersau has attracted deposits on at least seven occasions, between 1655 and 1983. Photograph by the author. At Untermaßfeld in Thuringia, the metal sphere (i.e. oval shape with a neck visible bottom right) had lost its shine when taken down in 2007. In front of it are the two cartridges or *Kapseln* which held the documents and objects, while the weathervane bears the dates of previous repairs/deposits in 1709 and 1928. Picture and reproduction permission kindly provided by the Burg- und Heimatverein Untermaßfeld e.V.

Foundation, which uses Austrian, German and Swiss case studies to arrive at a more general assessment of the phenomenon from its origins to the twenty-first century[19].

To date, over 1800 sites with known tower capsule contents have been identified. They exist in town and country locations, Alpine or coastal environments, monarchical and republican regimes as well as areas belonging to different confessions, although numbers tend to be highest in densely populated regions with strong communal structures (Figure 5). Minimal notes merely record the date, nature, and people in charge of the respective repairs, but the most expansive deposits include extended pieces of narrative writing (sometimes from several authors' perspectives), supplemented with a wide spectrum of illustrative materials (like printed tracts, Bibles,
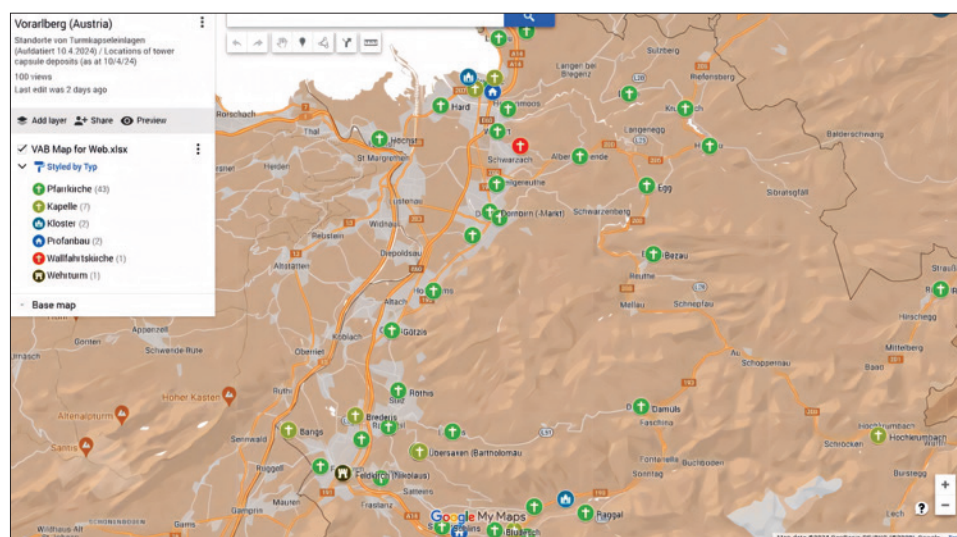

Figure 5: Work-in-progress map of different types of tower capsule sites in the Austrian district of Vorarlberg, showing the prevalence of parish churches, considerable density in centres such as the capital Bregenz (at the south-eastern tip of Lake Constance) and the spread throughout the (inhabited) Alpine valleys. Source: Project Homepage, https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/myparish/projects/towerballs/sites/#Vorarlberg [access: 10.04.2024]

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monograph on parish memory in early modern Saxony: *Der Pfarrer als Arbeiter am Gedächtnis*, Leipzig 2013.

[19] The project homepages offer source extracts, bibliographical guidance and visualizations of tower capsule sites in the case studies: https://warwick.ac.uk/towercapsules [in English; access: 30.06.2024] and https://towercapsules.warwick.ac.uk/ [in German; access 01.11.2025]. Preliminary observations and interpretations can be found in an open-access article, *Nachrichten für die Nachwelt. Turmkugelarchive in der Erinnerungskultur des deutschsprachigen Europa*, "Historische Zeitschrift" 2021, 312, 3, pp. 614–648.

anniversary brochures and, most recently, even Covid masks) and objects (especially coins and relics). The authors tend to be local dignitaries, most frequently parish clergy, mayors / wardens, village scribes or the owners of the respective buildings. In the case of the imperial village of Gersau, our bridge between sections 1 and 2 (cf. Figure 3), the last opening of the sphere in 1983 revealed a series of chronicles collated by priests and officials since 1655 (reporting on church building or embellishment plus notable events – such as floods, military conflicts or diseases – from both the region and wider world, alongside requests for intercessory prayers) as well as a wooden box with objects of Catholic devotion most likely deposited in 1810 (containing pictures of saints, an extract from the Gospel of St John, and a small bag with relics)[20].

Returning to our main theme, what were the salient features of self-representations found in these sources? To stick with the mnemonic tool of alliteration, the '3 Ps' of *protection*, *portraiture*, and *projection* can be highlighted here. A first common trait is that nearly all writings start or end with a religious component, be it expressions of gratitude for heavenly help, declarations of Christian loyalty or requests for divine assistance, particularly in times of threat or uncertainty. At his rural residence, the castle of Schauensee near Kriens (in Lucerne's territory) in 1595, the patrician owner Hans von Mettenwil (or his scribe) offered 'the Almighty commendation, honour and praise', imploring that he 'may bless and favour this place with his grace, Amen.'[21] 'Gloria in excelsis deo, et in terra pax...' similarly featured among a range of invocations addressed to God, Jesus and the Trinity in a tower capsule document for the Catholic church at Innerthal (Schwyz) penned by parson Hegner in 1777[22]. In turn, Michael Häberli – chapelwarden at Fischbach (Lucerne) – happily recorded that, in 1798, 'all [crops] grew very well, with corn, oats, fruit and wine all plentiful', so 'God be praised and thanked'. The same year also saw the French invasion of the Swiss Confederation, so he added 'may God protect us all from war and other evil, in both soul and body, if it accords with his divine will'[23]. In much more recent times, the Lutheran pastor in charge of Wentdorf (Brandenburg), a chapel

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[20]   *Turmkugel-Dokumente der Pfarrkirche Gersau*, ed. J. Wiget, "*Mitteilungen* des *Historischen Vereins* des Kantons *Schwyz*" 1984, 76, pp. 161–175. All contents are preserved in Gersau parish archive.

[21]   State Archives of Lucerne, PA 134/1: Turmakte Schloss Schauensee (1595).

[22]   *Die Turmknopf-Dokumente der alten Pfarrkirche Innerthal*, ed. A. Jörger, "Marchring: Volks- und Heimatkunde der Landschaft March" 1985, 25, pp. 32–68, here p. 43.

[23]   State Archives of Lucerne, PA 342/2: Kapellen-Verein St. Aper, Fischbach, Turmakte (1798).

of the parish of Cumlosen, entrusted future readers with the 'sad' state of Christianity under the German Democratic Republic in 1959, where – after a lightning strike – permission to repair the tower required 'long and difficult negotiations' with secular authorities. According to Mr Gleininger, however, he and his flock would not be discouraged:

> We now live in an age where belief in Jesus Christ can no longer be taken for granted. The state is markedly atheist and materialistic. It obstructs the work of the Church in many ways. The children of Christian parents face difficulties, as they are taught different things at school... [but] may our tower stand as a sign that the kingdom of God shall not be destroyed by any empire of this world[24].

In Catholic areas it was quite common to add devotional items for additional protection, in the apotropaic – and not entirely orthodox – belief that sacred objects could help ward off evil. At Silbertal (Vorarlberg), for example, roof repairs involved the opening of the tower sphere in 1794, when parishioners discovered 'several kinds of consecrated things to avert storms', likely candles, wax figures, rosaries, or relics deposited back in 1717[25].

A second main feature, *portraiture*, highlights the evident desire to provide an adequate depiction of local life and events, in other words to do justice to the people and conditions of the time. Tower capsule deposits afforded rare opportunities for self-reflection, to think about what 'made' this moment and community distinctive, compared to all other circumstances in which the building had existed before or would exist in the future. Sometimes, scribes were in a hurry (because the sphere was due to be set up imminently), prompting them to jot down only a few spontaneous thoughts, but with more leisure, they had the chance to consult with others, perhaps when previous deposits were presented or read out at a sphere opening ceremony, and spend some time gathering relevant information[26]. The core variables that countless writers covered for this purpose were the current holders of village and parish offices, both lay and clerical (many, in fact, beginning with the highest dignitaries in state and Church, followed by a list of others all the way down

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[24]   Cited in an article published in the "Märkische Allgemeine" newspaper on 2 December 2018, when the document was found under completely different political circumstances.

[25]   *Die Silbertaler Turmknopfurkunden*, ed. H. Netzer, in: *Montafoner Museen: Jahresbericht 2017*, ed. M. Kasper, Schruns 2018, pp. 47–57, here p. 49.

[26]   Crowdsourcing is documented e.g. at Windisch (Argovia), where parishioners' ideas for the next tower capsule chronicle were collected on a flip chart: see the report in "Aargauer Zeitung" 11 April 2016.

to organists and sextons); the prices of key victuals and commodities (grain, wine, beer, animals); and the coins and / or notes in circulation in and around the community. The 1595 Schauensee chronicle we have already encountered mentions Pope Clemens VIII, Emperor Rudolf II, all Lucerne councillors, the owner's family members and the fact that a standard measure of corn cost 7.5, oat 2, rye 4, and Alsace wine 16 fl.[27] With regard to monetary items, large numbers were deposited in the spheres of the turret and later the tower atop the minster at Doberan in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Examples include a Rostock silver coin from 1647, a Prussian 10 Mark gold piece from the reign of Wilhelm II and an entire set of Euro denominations dated 2014, alongside several commemorative medals minted in various periods[28]. In combination with other transmitted information on, for example, dynastic accessions or marriages, peace treaties, anniversaries, crimes, conflicts or natural disasters, and new technologies (printing press, steam engine, telephone, space travel etc.), the resulting portrait was unique, as similar combinations of names, dates, prices and novelties were unlikely to arise more than once, even though the point of reference (i.e., the building in construction or undergoing repairs) remained the same. Depending on circumstances, the overall tone could be pessimistic and fearful ('As long as the current inhabitants remain alive, they will remember the [hunger] year 1817 with horror': Bezau / Vorarlberg in 1821) or decidedly upbeat, even enthusiastic ('We now live in a time of unstoppable progress': Dornbirn-Oberdorf / Vorarlberg in 1870)[29].

Thirdly, tower capsule fillers were concerned with *projection*, appealing to posterity very directly. 'Dear Reader!' was the salutation chosen at Uster (Zurich) in 1656 by Hans Jacob Balber, son of the then pastor, immediately after an invocation of the Trinity, indicating that he firmly envisaged a future audience[30]. Our Fischbach chapelwarden combined the same expectation with a touch of self-interest, when he wrote in 1798 that 'if the letter were found and read when the church needed further repair, pray to God for those who wrote it'[31]. Sometimes projection was

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[27]   State Archives of Lucerne, PA 134/1: Turmakte Schloss Schauensee (1595).

[28]   Martin Heider, *Das Doberaner Münster im September 2014*, https://www.ostsee-netz.de/174/2014–1452/doberaner-muenster-september-2014.html [access: 30.06.2024].

[29]   Vorarlberger Landesarchiv, Talschaft Montafon, Urk. Nr. 7642 (Bezau 1821); Stadtarchiv Dornbirn, Miszellen, Dornbirn-Oberdorf, St. Sebastian, Turmknopf (1870).

[30]   Archiv der Evangelischen Kirchgemeinde Uster, II A, no. 3: Akten vor 1798 (Turmknopfschrift 1656).

[31]   State Archives of Lucerne, PA 342/2: Kapellen-Verein St. Aper, Fischbach, Turmakte (1798).

joined to a closely related additional ambition, *perpetuation*, of both cherished customs in general, and the tradition of tower capsule deposits in particular. The scribe of Bezau's 1821 document hoped to tie future generations to the established political and ecclesiastical order: 'Listen, dear kids, grandchildren and great-grandchildren to the words of your deeply loyal Catholic ancestors of the honourable commune and parish of Bezau! Follow in our footsteps [by being obedient to the authorities]. We are descending into our graves, you will be next, may God's spirit allow us to reach everlasting life together'[32]. At Silbertal in 1794, this activating ambition clearly achieved its intended effect, when the villagers opening the capsule not only found the writings and objects, but resolved to heed their ancestors' prompt. What past inhabitants had done 'pleased the assembled parish so well that it decided unanimously to leave a similarly compact message from the present [...], for it is a pleasure when children can hear their forefathers and –mothers as if they were still alive and present, even though they have long been rotting in their tombs'[33].

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The former Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation was a vast and enormously complex entity composed of hundreds of secular and ecclesiastical principalities, city states, rural republics, and noble estates. With its multiple landscapes, socio-economic structures and language groups it resembled something like a mini-Europe, allowing niches of comparatively light lordship on the one hand, and providing scholars with a rich basis for comparative investigation on the other. This essay has examined self-representations of its peasantry in two contexts: primarily political statements issued by imperial villages and broader cultural messages preserved in tower capsule deposits. Both offer us relatively unfiltered, bottom-up perspectives preserved in substantial bodies of multimedia evidence left by local communities rather than merely individual testimonies. In the first section, the argument scrutinized charters, law books, visual evidence and the built environment to identify *autonomy*, collective *agency* and *accountability* as key principles of exchange in immediate micro-polities. Part II highlighted pervasive concerns with (divine) *protection*, attempts at adequate (self-) *portraiture* of user communities and conscious (forward) *projection* of messages to posterity as salient features of the writings and objects that countryfolk selected for inclusion

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[32] Vorarlberger Landesarchiv, Talschaft Montafon, Urk. Nr. 7642 (Bezau 1821).
[33] *Die Silbertaler Turmknopfurkunden*, p. 49.

in their caches. It has been argued that all of these sources constitute under-used windows into the values and priorities of rural societies in the German lands.

Naturally, these findings cannot be simply extrapolated to the peasantry as a whole. Decades of research by rural specialists such as Wilhelm Abel, Heide Wunder and Peter Blickle have alerted us to the marked internal differentiation of this social group, which was by far the largest in premodern times and derived its livelihood in a wide variety of ways. What we hear are still often male 'elite' voices of literate individuals with a certain personal standing, some of whom were patrician laymen and others members of the clergy, although humbler authors—such as churchwardens and village scribes—also contributed, and all were firmly rooted in their localities (rather than communicating from courts, cities and universities). Imperial villages, with their special constitutional privileges, represented only a tiny fraction of communities in the former Holy Roman Empire, and even well over a thousand tower capsule sites cannot comprehensively reflect its vast territory. Still, the messages from Gersau and Gochsheim provide valuable insights into the political ambitions of peasants. They indicate how local governance might have functioned if peasants had enjoyed a comparable degree of autonomy, instead of being subject to the authority of nobles, prelates, or the emerging state. Taken together, tower capsule deposits from all kinds of different settings reveal sufficient similarities to suggest that the available sets might reflect more generally held priorities, some of which have persisted from the Middle Ages through to the present. Today, turrets continue to receive fresh materials – as at the church hall of the Moravian Brethren at Neuwied in the German Rhineland[34] – and it seems high time that historians engage with such unusually direct records more intensively in order to enhance our insight into peasant communities.

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[34]   The taking down, refilling and setting up of this sphere is documented in "Rhein Zeitung" 3 February 2024, p. 18.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Beat Kümin – Professor of Early Modern European History at the University of Warwick, U.K. Having studied at the universities of Bern and Cambridge, he became a Junior Research Fellow at Magdalene College, Cambridge, in 1993 and then directed a project on public houses funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation 1997–2000. In 2001, he joined Warwick's History Department and has since held fellowships / visiting appointments at Bielefeld, Brussels, Greifswald, Konstanz and Montreal. He works on social interaction in parish churches and public houses. Apart from serving on the scientific council of the European Institute for the History and Cultures of Food, he co-ordinates the Warwick Network for Parish Research. Publications include the monograph *Drinking Matters: Public Houses and Social Exchange in Early Modern Central Europe* (2007) and the essay collection *A Cultural History of Food in the Early Modern Age* (2012). He has also edited the textbook *The European World 1500–1800: An Introduction to Early Modern History* (4th edition, 2023).

NOTA O AUTORZE

Beat Kümin – profesor historii nowożytnej Europy na Uniwersytecie Warwick w Wielkiej Brytanii. Po studiach na uniwersytetach w Bernie i Cambridge w 1993 r. został młodszym pracownikiem naukowym w Magdalene College w Cambridge, a następnie w latach 1997–2000 kierował projektem dotyczącym lokali gastronomicznych finansowanym przez Szwajcarską Narodową Fundację Naukową. W 2001 r. dołączył do Wydziału Historii Uniwersytetu Warwick i od tego czasu był stypendystą/wykładowcą wizytującym w Bielefeld, Brukseli, Greifswaldzie, Konstancji i Montrealu. Zajmuje się interakcjami społecznymi w kościołach parafialnych i lokalach gastronomicznych. Oprócz zasiadania w radzie naukowej Europejskiego Instytutu Historii i Kultur Żywności, koordynuje on działalność Warwick Network for Parish Research. Jego publikacje obejmują monografię *Drinking Matters: Public Houses and Social Exchange in Early Modern Central Europe* (2007) oraz zbiór esejów *A Cultural History of Food in the Early Modern Age* (2012). Jest również redaktorem podręcznika *The European World 1500–1800: An Introduction to Early Modern History* (wydanie czwarte, 2023).