

### New perspectives on civic administration in 15th-century towns

**Veranstalter:** FLAG project: Finance, law and the language of governmental practice in late medieval towns: Aberdeen and Augsburg in comparison

**Datum, Ort:** 05.11.2021–06.11.2021, Aberdeen und digital

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The workshop was meant as a provisional appraisal at the mid-point of the FLAG-project (Finance, law and the language of governmental practice in late medieval towns: Aberdeen and Augsburg in comparison). In a first introduction JACKSON ARMSTRONG (Aberdeen) explained the goals of the project: Putting digitised sources – Aberdeen Records Online (ARO) and Augsburger Baumeisterbücher (BMB) – in dialogue (1), putting two different historiographies in dialogue (2), to find out more about how town government functions by comparing two dissimilar cities in two dissimilar countries with similar exceptional source survival (3) in order to examine underlying urban commonalities in everyday language of urban government (4). Experienced scholars were invited to come to Aberdeen to discuss the first results, compare them with the situation in other cities of Germany and the UK and provide input and critical remarks.

JÖRG ROGGE (Mainz) described in the second introduction the key term *urbanitas* as the feature of a proper city, including freedom, self-government, infrastructure, administration. The team of FLAG considered three subjects to be essential: order – budget – unity. They had asked the participants to take one of these subjects as a key to re-read their sources. The workshop concentrated on the 15th and early 16th centuries, looking at cities in Germany (Augsburg, Köln, Soest, Dresden, Görlitz) and cities in the UK and Ireland (Aberdeen, Dublin, Hull, Sandwich).

WIM PETERS (Mainz) and WILLIAM HEPBURN (Aberdeen) introduced the methodology and first results from the Aberdeen ARO

corpus. They outlined approaches to using text analysis tools such as AntConc for hermeneutic purposes. Some of the functionality of these tools was presented in the talk. Hepburn gave the example of giving „compt“ with quite different meanings – „good account“ / gude compt occurs on a spectrum between prosaic, functional usage and more moral and spiritual usage (giving „compt“ of the soul). The discussion was quite vivid. Some questions concentrated on the technical issues, which will be presented in a paper led by Peters soon.

REGINA SCHÄFER (Mainz) stressed that the „common good“ was behind the concept of law and order in Augsburg. While there was a transformation of court and council between the 13th and the 15th century, the older forms of law like the *Schwabenspiegel* were still valid and coexisted with other forms of law like Roman law and charters made by the council. There was a close link between council and court in Augsburg. The council held legislative, executive and jurisdictional power and these powers were only limited by *consensus* of the community and adherence to ideas of common good. Schäfer emphasised that rules show us only one part of the picture. Citizens were meant to treat each other in friendly and neighbourly ways. This was mostly achieved through arbitration, which was not written down.

AMY BLAKEWAY (St Andrews) focused on the impact of preparations for war on town finances in cases where war did not actually come to the town in question. Between 1528 and 1550, Scotland was on a war footing which caused a lot of problems, even if the English didn't actually invade. Large amounts of money were raised in tax to counter the English attacks. In addition to taxes paid to the crown for defence, a town like Aberdeen had also to pay for its own defence. Therefore, the council had to raise a lot of money in a short space of time and this led to disputes with the central government. The officials found themselves in conflicting loyalties between loyalty to crown and duty to protect the people of the town.

JULIA BRUCH (Köln) compared accounting practices in monasteries, towns and courts, giving some methodological reflec-

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tions. She explained that accounts – containing a lot of invoices describing things that were paid for – are rarely analysed according to their own logic. So, she asked: What did accounting practices look like in the Middle Ages and what was the wider significance of this for administration? She did so by taking a look at typologies of accounts (monasteries, towns, and noble households), the accounting situation and the materiality of accounting. She stressed that there was a common social practice of keeping accounts, a socially regulated, routinised form. Despite differences in detail, accounts in different spheres are very similar. In the discussion, the topic was raised that the reason behind accounting was not to have a balance at the end of the year, leading us to the question of why these accounts were made in these typical forms.

ELIZABETH GEMMILL (Oxford) addressed the language of things, focussing on the descriptions of objects and consumables in the burgh court records of late medieval Aberdeen. There are many records of items being „wrongously“ withheld in the court registers but they are rarely described. People complained most often about things that did not turn up at all or turned up in the wrong place. When goods were distrained for debts, there was a formal procedure at the market place where things were presented for appraisal. If a process of evaluation was necessary, experts (craftsmen, e.g. goldsmiths) were asked to value the confiscated good. The records are especially detailed concerning regulations about how to make meat available and about preparing royal visits. Language describing materiality was more about people's behaviour than things.

JESSICA BRUNS (Halle/Saale) focussed on book usage as a form of administrative practice from Soest. She pointed out that the archive tradition to sort charters and files (E. Pitz) was misleading and that the materiality must be considered. The *Index Librorum Civitatum* offers a platform to search for (mostly) German city books. *Stadtbücher* (city books) can be sorted into different categories taking into consideration content (books of accounting, court records, council minutes and mixed books et al.) and form (rolls, *Buchzettel*, booklets, books, codices et al.). She discussed the

advantages and disadvantages of the different form, size, material (parchment, paper) and of the internal structure (chronological order, systematic order). Therefore, by looking at the form and content of a book it is possible to trace changing ideas of organising knowledge.

ELIZA HARTRICH (Norwich) gave a deep insight in the sources from Hull and Sandwich in England and Dublin in Ireland focussing on the idea of *comone wele*, a phrase used fairly rarely. *Comone wele* is an adversarial term, meant to bolster the authority of a political faction and make people adhere to its decisions. Hartrich addressed how in the context of the Wars of the Roses, *comone wele* could be „weaponised“ (John Watts). Even though the case studies dealt with geographically dispersed cities of a different size and importance for the crown, they were all administrative hubs of their region, all royal burghs and all governed in a similar way and had striking similarities in record-keeping cultures. All cities took part in a wider trend from the mid-15th century of towns making new council registers with continuous, chronological records. Hartrich showed that *comone wele* suggests unity but was actually used in periods of intense division and that it is important to acknowledge external influences in moulding the language of urban records.

PHIL ASTLEY (Aberdeen) presented a volume of the Aberdeen Council Registers from the city archives and explained the efforts made to make the content known to a wider public audience.

According to JENS KLINGER (Dresden), the surviving records of Dresden show the typical mixed nature of city books, recording business before council and court. The book-shaped tradition began in 1404 and showed some combination of parchment and paper. Klinger concentrated especially on collections of legal texts made in the mid-15th century which give an insight in the accounting practices including wax tablets (1437–1456). The discussion focussed on the recording practices (mixing parchment and paper-sheets in one book) and on storage and access: Three keys were held by different people and the presence of all three was required

to gain access to the account books.

ANDREW SIMPSON (Edinburgh) addressed briefes in the burgh records of Aberdeen. Particular individuals would pay for a briefe to be issued. Different briefes dealt with different questions but they worked on the same assumption: questions dealt with by local courts were based on what they had „seen and heard“. The officials were mostly not trained lawyers in anything like the modern sense but merchant burgesses. An increase of briefes of right in Aberdeen between 1440 and 1444 might be related to political disorder and an increased demand for legal action. Briefes might have been a way of compelling local officials e.g. baillies to act when they were being intransigent for some reason.

Based on city books of Görlitz, CHRISTIAN SPEER (Halle/Saale) asked if town books were reliable witnesses of the past. He also discussed the aforementioned *Index Librorum Civitatum*. In Görlitz, a town of 8,000 to 10,000 inhabitants, 143 volumes of town books for the period up to 1550 are known. This enormously rich material makes it possible to examine how different sorts of city books – booklets, notes, *Kladden* (jotters), codices – were interlinked. *Kladden* were thought to consist of notes, which were later written down in a „clean copy“ in the Red Book (1305–1416). Speer proved that this is not the case; the *Kladde* is a type of fair copy too. He stressed that fair copies are the result of a complex and error-prone process of selection, rearrangement, reduction and addition. They do not represent the complete written output of town clerks but only a special selection. The questions and discussion focussed on how information was assembled. In addition, the role of a „Red Book“-type in archives should also be considered further. Only the scribes were allowed to open the chest to read from and write in the books. People paid to have items recorded in books.

The closing discussion focused on many topics. It was obvious that the ways and forms in which records were produced had to be considered thoroughly. How to frame *universitas*/unity and describe cities was discussed again. The ideas of Max Weber, the self-government of the city and infrastructure

that created common interest were especially stressed as essential for a city. In addition, the problem of public/private was mentioned frequently. When did private things become public? Could we use the differentiation between public/private, which was not used by contemporaries? Could secret/open or common/individual (Eliza Hartrich) be more useful distinctions? The limited access to court books and accounting records proves how hard the council tried to keep things secret in some cases. Concerning the topic of *universitas* it was asked if there was a shared sense of common symbolic actions or objects which were considered essential e.g. pillory, common books. Whereas the German historiography discussed the importance of rituals intensively, this is not so much the case in the historiography on Britain and Ireland. Making an inventory of common objects that are symbolic for certain aspects of *urbanitas* and then assessing their cultural role from their embedding in text could be done by using the mentioned digital humanities tool to compare the (perhaps not so different) political cultures in Augsburg und Aberdeen. The idea to focus on language/words such as good account, common, *comone wele*, *Gemeiner Nutzen* convinced the auditorium. Nevertheless, it was also stressed that it should be considered that other places such as monasteries would have had similar ideas. That is why it is important to carefully define the specific qualities of *urbanitas*, so that ideas that were a general feature of medieval life should not be mistaken as unique to urban settings.

#### Conference overview:

Joerg Rogge (Mainz) and Jackson Armstrong (Aberdeen): Welcome and introduction

Wim Peters (Mainz) and William Hepburn (Aberdeen): Digital hermeneutics: methodology and first results from the Aberdeen ARO corpus

Regina Schäfer (Mainz): Talking about law and order in Augsburg

Amy Blakeway (St Andrews): War and the burghs, 1528–1550

Julia Bruch (Köln): Accounting practices in monasteries, towns and courts. Methodologi-

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cal reflections

Elizabeth Gemmill (Oxford): The language of things: descriptions of objects and consumables in the burgh court records of late medieval Aberdeen

Jessica Bruns (Halle/Saale): Knowledge between pages. Book usage as a new form of administrative practice in late medieval Soest

Eliza Hartrich (UEA, Norwich): For the Comene Wele? Languages of unity and division in English and Irish municipal records, c. 1450–1500

Phil Astley (Aberdeen): Viewing of Aberdeen council register volume from city archives

Jens Klingner (Dresden): Texts and transmission. City books and account books from late medieval Dresden

Andrew Simpson (Edinburgh): Brieves in the burgh records of Aberdeen, ca.1400–1500: some preliminary thoughts

Christian Speer (Halle/Saale): Are town books reliable witnesses of the past? Critical considerations on the categories „note“, „transcript“ and „fair copy“ based on the Libri civitatis and Libri obligationum of Görlitz in the 14th and 15th century

Tagungsbericht *New perspectives on civic administration in 15th-century towns*. 05.11.2021–06.11.2021, Aberdeen und digital, in: H-Soz-Kult 08.01.2022.