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In his study about territorial school policy in Saxon cities during the early modern period (1600–1815), especially with regard to attempts to standardize ways of education, Thomas Töpfer emphasizes that changes could only take place if they met local requirements. If teachers, parents, and local authorities did not support the initiatives to reform the school system, the authorities in Dresden could not do much about the situation. Therefore, politicians in Dresden needed to make sure that the contents of rescripts and instructions were communicated well to local authorities.

In a systematic and epoch-spanning way, Töpfer concentrates on the development of urban schools from 1600 to 1815. He discovers the full range of educational needs and achievements. Moreover, when it comes to reorganizing the educational field, Töpfer judges the cities and towns as centers of great innovations.

To illustrate his basic idea, Töpfer firstly, asks about the territory’s way of shaping the school’s system up until the Thirty Years’ War, stating that the school ordinance from 1580 did not manage to organize the different types of schools properly. Secondly, he deals with the period after the war. Here he includes the great visitations of 1670–1675, which show the limits of the authorities’ attempts to pervade the given educational system. Thirdly, he focuses on the authorities’ attempts to standardize the system around 1700, offering another perspective on the relation between standardization and local requirements. Fourthly, he states that after the Seven Years’ War the whole system needed to be restored or—in the terms of the state’s authorities—modernized. Finally, Töpfer gets to the school legislation of around 1800, which was embedded in a significant political debate about the school system in Saxon.

It is striking that the study not only covers the “normative sources” such as school ordinances. Since Töpfer is very interested in local actors such as teachers, parents, and clergy who had their say within the school reforming process, he has added material from twelve city archives—and Leipzig provides a helpful amount to reach this aim.

Utilizing a large number of sources, Töpfer offers very different approaches to come to terms with them. Here, he shows that he is familiar with approaches concerning the history of everyday life, mentalities, and ideas, and he adds social and cultural historical issues. Nevertheless, in his study he does not get to the bottom of them, since he concentrates on describing persons, settings, relationships, and interaction without spending an extra chapter on embedding his findings in the research context of these approaches. Instead, he is keen to compare the situation in Saxon to that of other territories. To do so, he chooses Prussia, Austria, Bavaria, and Württemberg in order to conclude that Saxony steered a middle course when it came to reforming the school system; although Saxony was willing to adapt foreign ways of standardizing education, they neither took over the Prussian understanding of designing the school system by governmental acts nor did they join Württemberg in their effort to initiate reforms. Instead, Saxony put its trust in the local authorities and their ability to decide on education, while carefully issuing reforms.

To sum up, the study draws on an impressive number of sources. Consequently, four of the six chapters are mostly descriptive, as when the author, for instance, relates the biography of Peter von Hohenthal, a leading figure of the supreme consistory, on a larger scale. He also adds a quite more impressive chapter about so-called “Winkelschulen,” meaning private schools that were run by students and other scholars beyond the state’s schools in order to provide elementary knowledge. Here, working with sources from Leipzig, Töpfer gives striking insights into the motivations of parents in sending their children to “Winkelschulen,” the authorities’ attempts to inhibit this, and the way both sides compromised on this question by accepting local requirements. In the end, the authorities issued concessions, accepting the growing number of schools that almost excluded themselves from the authorities’ impact; in these schools, boys and girls were educated alike, and children from poor families also could learn reading, counting, and details from the Lutheran catechism.

In chapter 5 Töpfer turns from description to discussion and works on the dichotomy of school systems either as a “state’s affair” or as the result of local circumstances. Chapter 5 raises the idea that more topics could have been introduced, which would have interrupted the chronological description. For instance, coming from the study’s title, one could address the problem of freedom, since Töpfer states that the parents were free to choose the school that met their demands well and that they even argued about freedom when authorities wanted to restrict this. Here, questions arise concerning the parents’ understanding of freedom, the authorities’ wish to grant it, and the basic idea of freedom that might have changed during the epoch-spanning period under investigation.

Nevertheless, the study offers new and impressive insights into the very different approaches to standardizing early modern education by providing new sources, which neatly enlarges the normative perspective gained from research on school ordinances. By doing this, Töpfer underlines how important local authorities, clergy, and parents were for this process, which continued even after the Wars of Liberation.


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Emperor Maximilian of the Holy Roman Empire reigned as an intriguing figure in his own time, where he was romanticized as "the last knight," bridging the end of the medieval and beginning of the early modern periods. Hard realities, though, often frustrated Maximilian’s pursuit of his idealized goals. His attempts to strengthen his centralized government and respect for himself as an authority figure foundered both on lack of cash and because of determined resistance by opponents and forces within and without his widespread territories, which stretched from the Netherlands to Austria. Some scholarship therefore dismisses Maximilian as a failure.

This collection of twenty-three essays ventures to offer new perspectives on how to appreciate this complicated and creative ruler. The scholars involved largely step back from the "great man" himself and instead examine other figures around him, the symbolic activities of his court, and various people, territories, and ideas on which he had an impact. The editors’ explicit goal was to draw on the diverse regions from which the authors came, so that various perspectives could be brought to bear on revealing Maximilian. Key in this process was a conference at the Wirth Institute for Austrian and Central European Studies