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Paper Memory: A Sixteenth-Century Townsman Writes His World (Book Review)

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Matthew Lundin, *Paper Memory: A Sixteenth-Century Townsman Writes His World*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012. Pp. 352. \$49.95 hardcover.

Reviewed by John B. Roney, Sacred Heart University

Ever since Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's pioneering work of microhistory, *Montaillou, village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (1975), historians and students alike have found this an interesting and important addition to traditional "history-from-above." At the heart of microhistory is a detailed study of everyday life, of the small things in one's daily routine, personal experiences and feelings, beliefs, hopes, and fears. The discovery of microhistory came at the same time as modern historians began using the methods and theories of anthropology and other social sciences. Soon Carlo Ginsburg, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Robert Darnton developed the field even further and produced very popular microhistories. But, whereas most microhistory is the careful work of modern historians who painstakingly comb civil, church, or prison archival records to reconstruct daily life, Matthew Lundin has examined the work of a sixteenth-century lay Catholic lawyer from Cologne, Hermann Weinsberg, who self-consciously recorded the details of his own everyday life. Thus, his writing is unique and gives students and scholars a window into a life in sixteenth-century Cologne—evidence of how the Renaissance brought new ideas, and at a time when the Reformation had created upheaval and change throughout the German lands.

During his career as a successful lawyer, Hermann Weinsberg collected extensive records of his own life and his extended family, as well as much material based on his humanistic studies of antiquity. In 1555 he consolidated his collection and constructed a *Gedenkbuch*, or Memory Book, that over the decades eventually contained over 7,000 manuscript pages in three volumes. All of this activity was done in almost complete secrecy, and he kept this office door locked at all times. After his estate was finally settled by his grand-nephew, the *Gedenkbuch* was hidden away in the Cologne archives until it was discovered in 1859. Matthew Lundin is not the first modern scholar to examine this book, but *Paper Memory* is a significant and comprehensive study of the *Gedenkbuch*, placing it in historical context, establishing which elements reflect the norms of the time, and underlining the unique elements that were far ahead of his time.

Lundin shows how Renaissance humanism was not only an elite movement, but found an audience in a "middling" (*mittelmässig*) lawyer from Cologne. Educated under the influence of the Brethren of the Common Life and in the spirit of the northern *Devotio Moderna*, Hermann Weinsberg embraced the work of Erasmus through his irenicism and work of reform. Like Erasmus, he could well understand why so many Protestants were incensed by ecclesiastical corruption, yet he found a need to keep tradition, and understood the spiritual and psychological needs of retaining stories of the saints and collections of relics. "Reports of religious violence and destruction stimulated in him a discomforting historical awareness—a sense of the contingency and fragility of things that had once seemed timeless" (256).

The single most important humanist discovery for Weinsberg, however, was the power of writing and recording thoughts and actions for posterity. After reading the lives of famous men, he feared falling into oblivion, which was not solely an

individual problem, but was strongly connected to his household. Thoroughly taken by Cicero's writing on duties and other Stoic virtues, he set out to construct a worthy picture of his life set in the context of an illustrious family Weinsberg. He would take the rightful position as the housefather and forever establish a lasting legacy. Although he was aware of his commoner status, Hermann fabricated a rich history of the *Haus Weinsberg* that paralleled late medieval aristocratic records. Thus, this is a good demonstration of the earliest upward movement of bourgeois households away from peasants and urban workers. Lundin points out, "It was a rare author in the fifteenth or sixteenth century who set out systematically to preserve for posterity the mundane affairs of the household, the workshop, the dining room, the bedroom, or the street" (203).

The *Gedenkbuch* became a very personal quest for Hermann Weinsberg, and it betrays a "deep loneliness—a need for acknowledgement and recognition" (188). Yet beyond his personal need he saw this as an important spiritual quest (*geistlich wirck*), a demonstration of a providential story of survival and continuity and his own place in a household blessed by God. Lundin points out that in the place of donations to the established Catholic Church, which had become parasitical, Weinsberg believed he was following God's providential plan as displayed to ancient Israel, where patriarchs cared for human needs. Thus *Haus Weinsberg* became a "'holy household,' in which the secular tasks of child-rearing and household industry were fused with the spiritual work of prayer, memory, and catechesis" (157).

Lundin's most surprising discovery is how Hermann Weinsberg transformed the medieval warnings about vanity into the modern concept of a self-conscious individual. While the medieval sin of vanity necessitated the avoidance of all earthly goods and pleasures, and especially self, humanist studies had underlined the important actions of eminent men of antiquity. Lundin shows how Weinsberg stood in the emerging tradition led by Michel de Montaigne: "In an ingenious, if opportunistic, reversal of traditional *vanitas* motifs, Weinsberg came to argue that it was selfish, even vain, not to record the everyday lives of common folk for future readers, who would otherwise know nothing about them" (205). Like Dutch artists of the seventeenth century who used *vanitas* paintings to guide merchants in their active trading, he understood the *vita activa* of urban bourgeoisie in a new way and was determined to preserve for posterity his own accomplishments. It is clear, Lundin warns, that Weinsberg did not yet understand an "imagined community" much less what Habermas defined as a publicizing of the private. But clearly he had taken a step forward in creating an "imagined audience" that contained his future housefathers and family who he hoped would continue his recording of the honor due the *Haus Weinsberg*. Lundin's study will enable scholars and students to place Hermann Weinsberg in history and demonstrates the complexity of religious ideas and practices in the sixteenth century as well as the birth of a new sense of history and one's own place in time.

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