

*Schirmer, Uwe. Landstände im thüringisch-
-obersächsischen Raum (1231–1498). Ein Beitrag
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In his fundamental monograph published in 1951, Herbert Helbig presented the formation of the socio-political structures of the composite polity ruled by the Wettins until the Leipzig partition (1485) as an achievement of the dynasty, who gradually succeeded in bringing heterogenous elements into one more-or-less consistent whole. This process was difficult for both the rulers and their counterparts, among which there were strong noble families, ecclesiastical institutes, and towns, which had righteous claims to broad immunity and/or direct relations rather to the Royal than to the margravian or the landgravian power. In such a story, there was actually not much room for the Estates as a counterweight and partner for the dynasty, the “social factor” in the developing constitutional structure of the realm. Since then, much research has been done concerning particular institutions, social actors, their entanglements, and – last but not least – new approaches have been applied thereby. Eventually, 66 years after Helbig’s book, the questions of the forming of the Estates in the Wettin realm was addressed in newest book by Uwe Schirmer, professor of Thuringian history in the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena. The chronological framework chosen by him differs from that applied by Helbig. The book begins with the symbolic date of the definition of basic rights of the estates in German territories by the sentence of Henry VII from May 1st 1231, and ends in 1498, with the first joint convention (*Landtag*) of the Estates of all the Wettin lands after the 1485 partition.

Like in many other territories of Germany, the question of the formation of the Estates in the Wettin lands comprises actually two different issues: firstly, how the prelates, nobility, and towns were effectively engaged in common action with the territorial rulers, and secondly, how the Estates evolved as the “social factor”, able and ready to control the powers of the Margraves, Landgraves, and after 1423 also Prince-Electors from the Wettin dynasty. In Schirmer’s book this two parallel but entangled processes were not addressed separately. On the contrary, the author attempted to analyze the historical process in all its tones, and details, in a synchronic manner, having divided his work into eleven chapters, each of which covers relatively short period of time. Such a method enabled him to discuss the addressed facts and developments on the background of their specific conditionings, including e.g. the characteristics of particular monarchs, the policies pursued by them, and the state of their treasuries (which was possible thanks to i.a. studies concerning the silver mines in Freiberg, and financial administration of the Wettin realm, conducted by other scholars and Schirmer himself). Although Schirmer’s narrative provides the reader with crucial information on the contexts of facts discussed in subsequent chapters, it consequently avoids digressions, which makes it rather compact and concise. It does not mean that author’s reasonings are always easy to follow, which is, however, generally a result of the fragmented and diverse source basis rather than his style of writing.

In the first three chapters of the book, covering more than a century (1231–1347), one could find the “prehistory” of the Saxon and Thuringian estates, composed most carefully from scarce and dispersed pieces of evidence. According to Schirmer, the most important platform of collaboration of the Wettins and the emerging “social factor” were the *Landfrieden*, which not only were solemnly founded, but also used to practically function as judicial bodies. Schirmer rightly emphasizes that the cooperation of rulers with lords and towns was more of necessity caused by the weaknesses of the *Landesherren* than their choice. The situation changed in this respect during the rule of Frederick II, who reinforced the political structures of his realm, and defeated the opposition of Thuringian counts during the so-called Counts’ Feud (*Grafenfehde*) in the 1340’s. That is why in the following Chapters IV and V, covering the years 1349–1403, there is not much to read about representatives of the “social factor” giving consent to any decisions or moves of the monarchs. Despite that, Schirmer’s narrative lets the reader observe the social and political processes that eventually lead to the development of the Estates, i.a. the integration of a group of “useful” lower nobility through their employment as margravian and landgravian functionaries, and obligees, and the birth of a genuine taxation system.

The situation changed again at the beginning of the 15th century, when financial shortages of the rulers’ treasuries, and the need to adequately divide the Wettin lands among the members of the dynasty encouraged their cooperation with the nobility again. Thus, in the Chapters VI and VII, Schirmer analyzed in detail the documents which reflect this process of the nobility having their rights confirmed, and defined, including, i.a., the charters which were issued during the *Naumburger Örtterung* (1410), the *Naumburger Teidigung* (1422), and the *Wittenberger Vertrag* (1423), and the homages to Prince Elector Frederick I from 1428 and 1431. Unlike some of his predecessors, he tends to interpret the privileges from the 1420’s not as a testimony of the very

birth of the constitutional position of the Estates but rather the crowning of a process, lasting for some time already. As aptly observed by Schirmer in the beginning part of the Chapter VIII, position of the Wettins against their subjects diminished even more in the 1430's due to their exploding financial needs, and falling incomes. Rescue for the rulers' treasuries was taxation, which meant, however, also the consolidation of the Estates. A milestone on that road was the ground-breaking general diet in Leipzig in 1438. In the final part of the Chapter VIII, and in the Chapter IX, Schirmer depicted the complicated situation in the Wettin lands during the evolving conflict between the Prince Elector Frederick II and his brother William III. During that conflict, especially the Thuringian nobles cooperating actively with William III, expanded their rights, and improved their position against the ruling dynasty. An important testimony of that process was the *Thuringian Landesordnung* from 1446: never actually applied, but nevertheless illustrating in detail the ambitions and possibilities of the Thuringian nobility in the mid-15th century.

An important contribution to the study of the evolving Estates of the Wettin lands is the Chapter X of Schirmer's book, in which the author commented on what is actually known about the Estates in both Saxony and Thuringia in the years 1451–1482, and to what extent particular conventions (*Landtage*) known from the historiographic tradition were reflected in the sources of administrative and financial practice. Schirmer is rather cautious in this respect: he e.g. pointed out that from among the nine alleged conventions in Saxony in those years only one third may be treated as being backed up with adequate bulk of source information. In the final, eleventh chapter of his book, covering the years 1485–1498, Schirmer continued the discussion of the complicated position, and structure of the emerging Saxon, and Thuringian Estates after the Leipzig partition. He wrote there i.a. on the ambiguous situation of the bishops, counts, and Royal towns, which were listed as parts of the Estates, and invited to the conventions, but actually still did not appear as taxable subjects in respective registers. On the other hand, there are premises, carefully gathered by Schirmer, that the practical mediatisation of even the bishops was already on its way in the period discussed, but it did not yet result in the bishops, counts, and the councils of Royal towns treating themselves as obliged to attend the *Landtag*. A very interesting thesis presented in this chapter is that the strange limitations of the Albertine, and Ernestine possessions in Thuringia were drawn in Leipzig in order to break the unity of the self-aware Thuringian nobility, by destroying the compactness of that territory.

What seems missing in the new book of Uwe Schirmer, is the comparative context (even the monetary reform of the 1330's was addressed on p. 38 without mentioning the closest analogy, i.e. the introduction of *grossi Pragenses* in neighbouring Bohemia). It appears, however, to be an effect of a deliberate decision of the author, who consequently tried to avoid multiplying sub-plots, and side-notes. It seems justified, due to the complicated matter, and diversified source basis. Schirmer brought all those various pieces together, trying to present the process of the formation of the Estates in all its aspects, including the very important financial ones, such as the evolution of taxation from an equivalent of *auxilium et consilium* into the modern form of managing the financial obligations of the monarchs, and the states. In Schirmer's new book also other important issues were discussed, many of which are of special interest for the students of German,

and Imperial history, but cannot be ignored also by other medievalists, e.g. how the land, and the Estates were defined by the people of the late Middle Ages. All those issues have been referred to by the author not as abstract questions but with close correspondence to respective sources, which makes the latest book of Schirmer very useful not only for scholars interested in Saxony and Thuringia.