Changing Relations Between Rural and Urban Elites Across the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries in Upper Germany

by Ben Pope

The traditional view of relations between urban and rural elites in Germany emphasized continuity not only across the transition from late medieval to early modern periods, but also between the later Middle Ages and the nineteenth century. All available evidence for conflict and animosity between townspeople and rural nobles was subsumed into an almost timeless dichotomy of 'town' and 'nobility' which was a central component of post-Enlightenment models of European society, and of German society in particular. The dialectic of the rationally ordered, hard-working, materialistic town and the free-spirited, idealistic, authoritarian, hardy and virile nobility proved very useful for explaining and dramatizing many of Europe's social, political and cultural tensions between the Enlightenment and the Cold War. The basic contours of this dichotomy are familiar from present-day popular images of the Middle Ages, but also from the ways in which versions of the dialectic of town and nobility have become part of the mental furniture of modernity in such diverse contexts as Marxist theory and ideas about Germany's supposed 'special path' towards authoritarianism as a result of the weakness of the bourgeoisie in relation to the nobility.[1]

Only after 1945, when the triumph of bourgeois society seemed assured, did historians begin to question the applicability of this dichotomy to the Middle Ages. Otto Brunner pioneered the basic insight that the medieval burgher had little in common with the modern bourgeois, let alone with the modern citizen of a liberal nation-state.[2] Subsequent studies have strongly supported Brunner's further hypothesis that the wealthier and more powerful medieval burghers actually had much in common with their rural noble neighbours. We are now well informed about the importance of patriarchal, authoritarian lordship in the towns, about the

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[1] On the 'special path' see David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany, Oxford 1984, pp. 39–50.

[2] Otto Brunner, Bürgertum und Adel in Nieder- und Oberösterreich, in: Anzeiger der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-historische Klasse 86 (1949), pp. 495–517; Otto Brunner, "Bürgertum" und "Feudalwelt" in der europäischen Sozialgeschichte, in: Die Stadt des Mittelalters, ed. Carl Haase (Wege der Forschung 243–245), Darmstadt 1973 (first published 1956), vol. 3, pp. 480–499.

extensive rural estates owned and managed by townspeople, and about the central importance of courtly-chivalric culture to urban elites.[3]

As soon as it had been suggested that the dialectic of town and nobility might be a deeply anachronistic model for medieval society, historians were compelled to consider the development and evolution over time of dichotomies of 'town' and 'nobility'. Early responses distinguished between a 'medieval' integration of urban and rural elites and an 'early modern' opposition between them. Brunner noted that a new tendency to distinguish between burgher and noble estates becomes visible around 1500, which was also for Heinz Lieberich the beginning of the transition to a perceived opposition between 'bourgeoisie' and 'nobility'.[4] But it was soon realized that this change was part of a wider process extending across the fifteenth century and perhaps earlier. In the particular case of Nuremberg, Hanns Hubert Hofmann (in 1966) saw the late fifteenth century as decisive, but connected this turning point to a long-term process of 'inner renewal' within the nobility. Albrecht Rieber (in 1968) saw the two so-called 'Towns' Wars' of 1387–89 and 1449–50 as stepping stones towards the separation of urban and rural elites.[5]

More recently, both Klaus Graf and Joseph Morsel have emphasized the significance of the Second Towns' War in particular. Graf sees this event as the culmination of a 'Cold War' of ideological polarization and growing mistrust between town and nobility; for Morsel, it was a significant factor in the formation of mutually exclusive and antagonistic 'town' and 'noble' identities. Morsel has argued that changes in the social structure of the lower and middle

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[3] See in particular: Ursula Peters, Literatur in der Stadt. Studien zu den sozialen Voraussetzungen und kulturellen Organisationsformen städtischer Literatur im 13. und 14. Jahrhundert (Studien und Texte zur Sozialgeschichte der Literatur 7), Tübingen 1983; Rainer Demski, Adel und Lübeck. Studien zum Verhältnis zwischen adliger und bürgerlicher Kultur im 13. und 14. Jahrhundert (Kieler Werkstücke. Reihe D. Beiträge zur europäischen Geschichte des späten Mittelalters 6), Frankfurt am Main 1996. For a recent study of burghers' rural land ownership see Niels Petersen, Die Stadt vor den Toren. Lüneburg und sein Umland im Spätmittelalter (Veröffentlichungen der historischen Kommission für Niedersachsen und Bremen 280), Göttingen 2015, pp. 228–250.

[4] Brunner, Bürgertum und Adel in Nieder- und Oberösterreich (as footnote 2), p. 507; Heinz Lieberich, Rittermässigkeit und bürgerliche Gleichheit. Anmerkungen zur gesellschaftlichen Stellung des Bürgers im Mittelalter, in: Festschrift für Hermann Krause, eds. Sten Gagnér, Hans Schlosser and Wolfgang Wiegand, Cologne, Vienna 1975, pp. 68–70.

[5] Hanns Hubert Hofmann, Nobiles Norimbergenses. Beobachtungen zur Struktur der reichsstädtischen Oberschicht, in: Untersuchungen zur gesellschaftlichen Struktur der mittelalterlichen Städte in Europa (Vorträge und Forschungen 11), Stuttgart 1966, pp. 74–75; Albrecht Rieber, Das Patriziat von Ulm, Augsburg, Ravensburg, Memmingen, Biberach, in: Deutsches Patriziat 1430–1740, ed. Hellmuth Rößler (Schriften zur Problematik der deutschen Führungsschichten in der Neuzeit 3), Limburg an der Lahn 1968, p. 329.

nobility and in the relationships between these nobles and the territorial princes influenced a new discourse on 'the nobility' as a collectivity, in the process of which rural nobles largely defined themselves against the townspeople, who in turn came to define themselves against the nobility.[6] Both Brunner and Lieberich also located the origins of the growing town-noble divide in changing social structures within the nobility, but only briefly outlined their theories. Others have referred only to a 'late medieval process of social differentiation' (in the words of Peter Johanek), without specifying the nature, course or causes of this process.[7]

Questions concerning the late medieval and early modern evolution of a dialectic of town and nobility have thus received little attention. Medievalists have instead concentrated on refuting the old dichotomy and on complicating the picture, by pointing out what elite townspeople and rural nobles had in common and by emphasizing that relations between them involved a great deal of cooperation as well as conflict. This approach is especially valuable with regard to the continuing prominence of notions of a timeless, unchanging duality of town and nobility in public discourses, but it also leaves further questions open. Firstly, how can we account for the patterns of conflict and animosity between townspeople and rural nobles which were previously considered to be the consequence of a fundamental clash of cultures? Secondly, how did constructive and antagonistic forms of relationship interact with and influence one another, given that they are now considered to have been equally significant and prevalent? Thirdly, how did these direct political, social and economic relationships interact with the ways in which townspeople and rural nobles understood and discussed one another within the processes which were producing distinct and antagonistic 'town' and 'noble' identities?

This blog post therefore addresses firstly the problem of direct, interpersonal relationships between townspeople and rural nobles, using a case study of Nuremberg in the mid-fifteenth

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[6] Klaus Graf, Feindbild und Vorbild. Bemerkungen zur städtischen Wahrnehmung des Adels, in: Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins 141 (1993), pp. 121–154; Joseph Morsel, Die Erfindung des Adels. Zur Soziogenese des Adels am Ende des Mittelalters – das Beispiel Frankens, in: Nobilitas. Funktion und Repräsentation des Adels in Alteuropa, eds. Otto Gerhard Oexle and Werner Paravicini (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 133), Göttingen 1997, pp. 312–375; Joseph Morsel, Inventing a Social Category: The Sociogenesis of the Nobility at the End of the Middle Ages, in: Ordering Medieval Society. Perspectives on Intellectual and Practical Modes of Shaping Social Relations, ed. Bernhard Jussen (The Middle Ages Series), Philadelphia 2001, pp. 200–240.

[7] Peter Johanek, Adel und Stadt im Mittelalter, in: Adel und Stadt. Vorträge auf dem Kolloquium der Vereinigten Westfälischen Adelsarchive e.V. vom 28.–29. Oktober 1993 in Münster, ed. Gunnar Teske (Vereinigte Westfälische Adelsarchive e.V. Veröffentlichung 10), Münster 1998, p. 25.

century which underpinned my PhD thesis.[8] I will then outline my approach to the question of the formation of 'town' and 'nobility' as a binary pair of identities, which I am addressing in my ongoing postdoctoral study of townspeople and rural nobles' mutual attitudes and understandings, or their intergroup relationships.

Nuremberg in the mid-fifteenth century was a city of about 20,000 inhabitants governed by a relatively stable oligarchy of approximately 40 families. 26 men from these families served as full members of the ruling inner council, as either junior or senior mayor for four weeks at a time in rotation, and in the handful of senior posts at the heart of political power in the city. Registers of the outgoing correspondence of the inner council have survived in an almost continuous series from 1404 onwards, and together with financial accounts and narrative sources these registers allowed me to reconstruct certain forms of relationship between the town and its citizens and a wide range of rural nobles in considerable detail.[9] The rural nobles in question are those known to historians as the 'lower nobility', together with some counts and other titled nobles, as this was the group which was in the fifteenth century increasingly defined as 'the nobility', *der adel*, and thereby distinguished from both townspeople and the territorial princes.[10]

All of these relationships were fundamentally conditioned by a substantial social divide between all groups within the rural nobility and Nuremberg's citizens, including the hereditary elite. This can be seen most strikingly in the almost complete absence of intermarriage between urban and rural elites in the fifteenth century, especially after 1450. This was not necessarily a foretaste of the early modern nobility's claim to social superiority over the urban elite, since the endogamous marriage pattern of Nuremberg's elite mirrors that of the rural nobility within its regional communities. In a sense, Nuremberg was simply one such 'region' albeit with a much greater population density. But this lack of familial ties between town and country was both a cause and consequence of further tensions and divisions.

The town was certainly a political and social centre for the nobility: rural nobles regularly

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[8] Ben Pope, Relations between Townspeople and Rural Nobles in late medieval Germany. A Study of Nuremberg in the 1440s, PhD diss. Durham 2016, http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/11492.

[9] Most of these sources are preserved in the Staatsarchiv Nürnberg. See also the Nuremberg volumes in the series Chroniken der deutschen Städte, Leipzig, Stuttgart 1862–1968 (vols. 1–3, 10, 11).

[10] See Morsel, Die Erfindung des Adels (as footnote 6); Morsel, Inventing a Social Category (as footnote 6).

assembled in Nuremberg for occasions such as imperial diets and tournaments organized by both territorial princes and groups of nobles. An association of Franconian nobles called the Society of the Clasp held regular memorial masses and banquets in Nuremberg, often with 100 attendees, and the city council presented the nobles with gifts of wine on these occasions. Yet the Society of the Clasp's membership was exclusively drawn from amongst the rural nobility, and so even this expression of noble sociability in the town did not necessarily build social bridges between urban and rural elites or make it easy for townspeople and nobles to share urban amenities. The Society of the Clasp particularly venerated the Virgin Mary, and was strongly linked to the Church of Our Lady on Nuremberg's market place, but (as Andreas Ranft has shown) from the 1460s onwards they found it increasingly difficult to hold services there due to Nuremberg's strict control of church life within the city walls. Eventually the council simply took over the Society's redundant altar.[11]

Nuremberg was also an important economic centre for the nobility of the surrounding area, and some significant business ties between rural nobles and wealthy townspeople can occasionally be glimpsed in the correspondence registers and other sources. It seems that it was very common for nobles to have an established 'host' in the city, a burgher who not only provided board and lodging but also helped nobles to manage their business in Nuremberg from a distance. Nobles naturally bought and sold on the urban market, including from Nuremberg's well-developed armour and weapons industry. They also entered into genuine business agreements with townspeople, such as deals in which a citizen grazed their sheep on a nobleman's land, and the two partners each received half of the resulting wool and lambs. But it is also important to note that there is no evidence for nobles having had any substantial investment in the long-distance trade which was the main source of Nuremberg's wealth. This non-participation in the inner workings of the urban commercial system stood in a reciprocal relationship with the lack of intermarriage between urban and rural elites: both groups arranged their business affairs around kinship networks, and arranged their marriage alliances in line with their respective economic specialisms of long-distance trade and rural lordship.

It is therefore unsurprising that urban and rural elites also identified themselves as separate

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[11] Andreas Ranft, Adelsgesellschaften: Gruppenbildung und Genossenschaft im spätmittelalterlichen Reich (Kieler Historische Studien 38), Sigmaringen 1994, pp. 82–86.

social groups. The Nuremberg councillor Erhard Schürstab, in his report on the war of 1449–50, described the parties in the conflict as the princes, the towns and 'the nobility', *der adel*, thereby defining himself and his fellow citizens outside of the nobility even as the leading families of Nuremberg continued to practise a very self-conscious chivalric culture, to hold rural land and fiefs in the manner of nobles, and to establish themselves within the town as a hereditary elite.[12] The division between urban and rural elites at Nuremberg was perhaps more marked than elsewhere in the Empire, but the universal 'noble' self-presentation of urban elites did not necessarily go hand in hand with social links to the rural nobility. The south-western German lands are traditionally thought to have been an area of greater integration between urban and rural elites, but a recent study of Zürich by Stefan Frey shows that only a few families from the town had marriage ties with rural noble families.[13]

This social division made structured political cooperation all the more necessary. But Nuremberg formed partnerships with rural nobles to achieve specific military, diplomatic and other political ends, not directly for the purpose of building connections between urban and rural societies. With the partial exception of mercenaries hired during particular conflicts, the council preferred to work with a relatively small number of reliable and familiar nobles. For support in arbitration proceedings and other forms of peacemaking during the 1440s the council relied primarily on a network of nobles which had formed around the political projects of Emperor Sigismund (r. 1411–37), with many internal connections dating back to the Hussite Wars in particular. This group including some very significant figures on both regional and imperial levels, such as Heinrich von Plauen and the sons of Haupt von Pappenheim, but tensions with neighbouring princes such as the margraves of Brandenburg-Ansbach made it harder for Nuremberg to form extended networks of noble partners throughout its hinterland. Nuremberg also employed a relatively small number of nobles in order to carry out certain military and diplomatic tasks. This was less because the burghers needed military and diplomatic experts, as has usually been assumed – the urban elite were quite capable of undertaking these functions themselves – than because the council preferred to employ

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[12] Erhard Schürstab, Kriegsbericht und Ordnungen, in: Die Chroniken der fränkischen Städte. Nürnberg, vol. 2, ed. Karl von Hegel (Chroniken der deutschen Städte vom 14. bis ins 16. Jahrhundert 2), Leipzig 1864, p. 137.
[13] Stefan Frey, Fromme feste Junker. Neuer Stadtadel im spätmittelalterlichen Zürich (Mitteilungen der Antiquarischen Gesellschaft in Zürich 84), Zurich 2017, pp. 94–101.

outsiders with no position in the town than to empower individual citizens who might then challenge the elite's collective grip on power. The noble servitors were also a source of prestige for the city, and were prominently deployed at events such as imperial diets. For major conflicts mercenaries were hired on a short-term basis, but the town also cultivated long-term alliances with a small number of local nobles, both minor figures who undertook the bulk of the work and more substantial individuals. Wealthy and powerful nobles such as Werner von Parsberg often had an incentive to work with the town as a non-princely source of patronage which could help them to achieve greater independence from the authority of territorial princes.[14]

Image One: The funerary shield of Werner von Parsberg (†1455) in the church of St Laurence in Nuremberg. Source: Own Picture. [Lh-Pfeiler nXI; Wernher von Parsberg (†1455); Totenschild in der Lorenzkirche, Nürnberg] Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 DE.

One of the most important tasks for these noble servitors was to patrol the highways which radiated out through the countryside around Nuremberg and to ward off threats to travellers on these roads. Many of these threats came from rural nobles, though not from the impoverished and unscrupulous 'robber knights' of romantic legend. Detailed research over the past 20 years, especially by Hillay Zmora, has shown just how important feuding was to the wealthier and more powerful nobles, who needed to take decisive action to maintain their social and political credit, and who also stood to gain a great deal from pursuing feuds on behalf of territorial princes.[15] Most of these feuds were fought against territorial princes and fellow

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[14] For further details see my article: Nuremberg's Noble Servant: Werner von Parsberg (d. 1455) between Town and Nobility in Late Medieval Germany, in: German History 36 (2018), pp. 159–180. Advance online open access: https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghx135.

[15] Hillay Zmora, State and Nobility in Early Modern Germany. The Knightly Feud in Franconia, 1440–1567

nobles, but they often resulted in attacks on townspeople.

The reactions to attacks on travelling merchants and other citizens by the city council, as preserved in the correspondence registers, show that the overwhelming majority of acts of 'robbery' against townspeople by rural nobles were committed in the course of feuds against territorial princes in particular. Nobles might attack convoys of merchants under the safe conduct of the prince they wished to intimidate, or they could attack a convoy carrying goods belonging to the subject of this prince but also goods belonging to citizens of an imperial city such as Nuremberg. There were many cases of simple mistaken identity: citizens of Nuremberg were repeatedly mistaken for residents of Bamberg by nobles feuding against the bishop of Bamberg.

Because rural nobles had no direct stake in the urban commercial system, such attacks were often worth the risk for them. Hence the city council's need to create an effective deterrent in the form of rural patrols and, in extreme cases, by besieging nobles' castles, capturing them and putting them on trial in the town. All of these measures aroused considerable opposition amongst the rural nobility, many of whom in the later fifteenth century made a habit of referring to Nuremberg's soldiers as 'bloodhounds'. We should not over-estimate the depth of feeling here: the extreme cases in which nobles were executed in Nuremberg for robbery were quite rare, and much of nobles' apparent anger was a deliberate posture designed to elicit concessions from the council.[16] But there was a serious clash between the urban commercial interest and nobles' need to feud in order to protect their interests, and this fundamental tension could be exploited by those interested in stirring up antagonism between townspeople and rural nobles. Some full-scale feuds between nobles and Nuremberg emerged from these problems of rural security, whilst other feuds grew out of friction in the areas in which townspeople and rural nobles worked closely together: for instance, former servitors who felt cheated by the council, or nobles who had transacted business in Nuremberg resulting in disputes with citizens. Conflict between Nuremberg and the rural nobility arose more often than not from the places in which the two met, whilst cooperation between them was stimulated primarily by the social

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(Cambridge Studies in Early Modern History), Cambridge 1997; Hillay Zmora, The Feud in Early Modern Germany, Cambridge 2011.

[16] For further details see Ben Pope, Finding Safety in Feuding. Nobles' Responses to Nuremberg's Rural Security Policy in the Mid-Fifteenth Century, in: Virtus. Journal of Nobility Studies 23 (2016), pp. 11–31.

distance between them: nobles were valued partners precisely because they were outsiders.

This sketch of the situation at Nuremberg offers a model for understanding the interpersonal relationships between townspeople and rural nobles more generally. To what extent might this model be applicable to other regions and towns, at least for the larger imperial towns in Upper Germany? There is obviously no 'typical' town in this region, and in some respects Nuremberg is quite a marked outlier. It had an exceptionally stable hereditary elite, effectively a nobility within the city, and it had no citizens resident in the countryside, so-called *Pfahlbürger*, which were a persistent source of tensions between towns and rural nobles elsewhere.[17] Both factors might lead us to expect lower levels of antagonism between town and rural nobility at Nuremberg, but in fact the prevalence of animosity was if anything greater. This suggests that the most significant factors at Nuremberg – social separation between urban and rural elites and tensions over rural security – were the more fundamental causes of hostility, and these factors were present to some extent at all major towns.

But what of the question of changing relationships over time? The fundamental parameters of the relationship at Nuremberg show a great deal of continuity and steady, long-term evolution across the fifteenth century. The social divide between urban and rural elites developed only very slowly. Levels of feuding by nobles against princes, the cause of so much rural insecurity for Nuremberg's citizens, fluctuated across the century, but the fundamental threat remained much the same until the number of feuds began to decrease quite sharply after 1510.[18] Yet all historians agree that a process of social differentiation between urban and rural elites and of binary identity formation was taking place either across the fifteenth century as a whole or in a more concentrated period around 1500. So how did this process of identity formation, these intergroup relationships, interact with the patterns of interpersonal relationships?

The leading discourses associated with this identity formation process were twin town and noble discourses of 'oppression'. Their chief tropes remained remarkably consistent across at least the second half of the fifteenth century and early part of the sixteenth. Nobles accused the towns of seeking to 'drive them out' of their 'natural lordship' and leadership of society, and

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[17] Hermann Mau, Die Rittergesellschaften mit St. Jörgenschild in Schwaben (Darstellungen aus der Württembergischen Geschichte 33), Stuttgart 1941, especially pp. 103–110.

[18] Zmora, The Feud, (as footnote 15), p. 129.

of seeking to 'oppress' the rural nobility and to subjugate it. Townspeople accused nobles of 'oppressing' them with unjust taxes and tolls for travel on the imperial roads, and with outright robbery on the same roads.[19] They also accused nobles of supporting territorial princes who wished to subjugate the towns. But as far as we can tell given the present state of research, the intensity, vehemence and social reach of these discourses seems to have increased markedly between the early and later fifteenth century.

In the 1430s and 40s the discourse of 'oppression' was mainly associated with a relatively small group of nobles in Swabia, as recent research by Niklas Konzen has shown. This group, centred around Hans von Rechberg, was threatened by the expanding power of the counts of Württemberg, and responded with a series of spectacular feuds against imperial towns through which they hoped to gain political capital with potential princely patrons, the Habsburg dynasty in particular. To legitimize and publicize these feuds they adapted traditional pro-Habsburg and anti-Swiss rhetoric which focused on the threat posed to the nobility by the self-governing commons of the Swiss Confederation and applied it to the imperial towns of Upper Germany as a whole.[20] This vision of the towns as oppressors of the nobility was taken up by the Hohenzollern Margrave Albrecht Achilles of Brandenburg-Ansbach in his conflict with Nuremberg and the bishop of Würzburg which culminated in the war of 1449/50. But there is little evidence from the mid-fifteenth century that these ideas had much resonance beyond these particular political interests and their supporters.[21]

The situation in late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Franconia was quite different. Here again the Franconian Hohenzollern sponsored noble hostility towards Nuremberg in the service of their own political interests.[22] But nobles themselves took a more active role in this campaign

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[19] Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, ms. Cgm 4930, fol. 20r–21v. Facsimile online at: urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb00107266-8, cited fol. start here: http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/bsb00107266/image_41.

[20] Niklas Konzen, Aller Welt Feind. Fehdenetzwerke um Hans von Rechberg († 1464) im Kontext der südwestdeutschen Territorienbildung (Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für geschichtliche Landeskunde in Baden-Württemberg, Reihe B: Forschungen 194), Stuttgart 2014.

[21] For further details see Ben Pope, Identity, Discourse, and Political Strategy: Margrave Albrecht Achilles (1414–86) and the Rhetoric of Antagonism between Town and Nobility in Mid Fifteenth Century Upper Germany, in: The Fifteenth Century XV. Writing, Records and Rhetoric, ed. Linda Clark, Woodbridge 2017, pp. 73–92.

[22] Reinhard Seyboth, "Raubritter" und Landesherrn. Zum Problematik territorialer Friedenswahrung im späten Mittelalter am Beispiel der Markgrafen von Ansbach-Kulmbach, in: "Raubritter" oder "rechtschaffene vom Adel"? Aspekte von Politik, Friede und Recht im späten Mittelalter, ed. Kurt Andermann (Oberrheinische Studien 14), Sigmaringen 1997, pp. 115–131.

of defamation, with some declaring their resolve to kill the 'bloodhounds' of Nuremberg wherever they could find them.[23] The agenda was no longer driven solely by princes such as Albrecht Achilles urging nobles to join them against the towns. Now nobles such as Ludwig von Eyb demanded that princes support the nobility in punishing the towns for their arrogance.[24] When groups of nobles positioned themselves against both towns and territorial princes the role of the towns as the antithesis of the nobility only gained in significance: a pro-noble pamphlet of 1523 railed against the destruction of castles by the Swabian League as the work of townspeople's 'hatred borne of envy' toward the nobility. The towns supposedly had the princes in their pockets and planned to crush the nobility before turning against the princes and ruling without challenge throughout Germany.[25]

There were obviously many different factors driving this intensification of antagonistic discourses about town and nobility. The influence of certain territorial princes is unmistakeable, as they sought to harness town-noble conflicts in the service of attempts to subjugate towns over which they claimed authority and other efforts to enhance their status. But nobles were equally fearful of 'oppression' by princes as by towns, and certainly did not automatically identify their interests with those of princes. So how influential were princes' attempts to create a community of interest between themselves and rural nobles in opposition to the towns?

There can also be no doubt that the differentiation between town and nobility was part of a broader pattern of social differentiation and definition in the fifteenth century. The development of 'town' and 'nobility' as separate identities parallels the evolution of Nuremberg's late medieval elite into a defined hereditary caste, the early modern 'patriciate'. But although similar processes also influenced town-noble relationships, they do not in themselves explain why the urban elite was so comprehensively defined out of the nobility despite having so much in common with rural nobles. The evolution of new identities to match

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[23] Regesta Imperii vol. 14.3.2. no. 14784 (29 Dec. 1500) http://www.regesta-imperii.de/id/1500-12-29_7_0_14_3_2_2052_14784, viewed 1 Feb. 2018. See Carla Meyer, Die Stadt als Thema: Nürnbergs Entdeckung in Texten um 1500 (Mittelalter-Forschungen 26), Ostfildern 2009, p. 350.

[24] Ludwig von Eyb, Die Geschichten und Taten Wilwolts von Schaumburg, ed. Adelbert von Keller (Bibliothek des Literarischen Vereins in Stuttgart 50), Stuttgart 1859, p. 107.

[25] Flugschriften zur Ritterschaftsbewegung des Jahres 1523, ed. Karl Schottenloher (Reformationsgeschichtliche Studien und Texte 53), Münster 1929, pp. 100–112.

new social realities amongst the rural nobility has been proposed by Joseph Morsel and others as the primary stimulus for the development of a town-noble dichotomy, but why did townspeople in particular come to play the role of antagonist in this process of identity formation?

The patterns of interpersonal relationships between townspeople and rural nobles, marked by social separation and persistent tensions over rural security, were clearly a crucial factor in the formation of binary and antagonistic identities along the fault line between urban and rural elites. However, there is still much to do in order to truly understand this process. For instance, we need to think more about the possible influence of humanist thought and of the emergence of printing with moveable type on the changing discourses about town and nobility in the later fifteenth century. The evolution and reproduction of these discourses needs to be studied carefully, as they were themselves a factor in the process of identity formation rather than merely an expression of already well-established identities.

This was a very long-term development extending from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, and we should not over-estimate the decisiveness of the mid-fifteenth century. In this period we can observe plenty of anti-town and pro-noble rhetoric, but closer inspection shows that it was strongly associated with small groups of nobles and particular territorial princes. There is no indication that the 'town' and 'noble' identities which these interest groups promoted were especially widespread, or that they necessarily would be in the future, and many nobles continued to cooperate closely with towns such as Nuremberg in this period.

It is really in the 20 years either side of 1500 that we find the formation of binary town and noble identities at an advanced stage. In the 1480s townspeople began to be expressly and repeatedly excluded from tournaments organized by rural nobles, although there was considerable internal debate within the nobility about these measures.[26] Urban elites responded with extensive 'proofs' of their social equality with the rural nobility, but often had to admit that the ultimate arbiters of noble status were the established rural nobles.[27] In 1500

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[26] Cord Ulrichs, Vom Lehnhof zur Reichsritterschaft. Strukturen des fränkischen Niederadels am Übergang vom späten Mittelalter zur frühen Neuzeit (Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte Beihefte 134), Stuttgart 1997, pp. 142–144.

[27] Felix Fabri, Fratris Felicis Fabri Tractatus de civitate Ulmensi de ejus origine, ordine, regimine, de civibus ejus et statu, ed. Gustav Veesenmeyer (Bibliothek des Literarischen Vereins in Stuttgart 186), Tübingen 1889, pp. 72–76.

Nuremberg's chief noble servitor, a member of the Parsberg family which had served Nuremberg through much of the fifteenth century, resigned his post with the town to avoid having to fight against his 'fellow nobles'.[28] By contrast, in 1450 Werner von Parsberg had carried Nuremberg's standard in battle against many of his fellow nobles.

Around 1516 Joß Humpiß, a member of an old Ravensburg trading family who had moved out of the town to live on his rural property, declared that it was not the custom of the nobility in Swabia to live in the town.[29] Many of Nuremberg's patricians followed him, taking up permanent residence on the country estates which their families had owned for generations and styling themselves as rural nobles: the Kreß family became 'Kreß von Kressenstein', and so on.[30] 'Town' and 'nobility' were now mutually exclusive, and anyone with claims to an elevated social position had to chose between them.

Alongside the considerable continuity in urban life between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, this growing dichotomy of town and nobility represents one long-term late medieval development which was coming to a head around 1500 to produce a pronounced change in social structures. The formation in the later Middle Ages of a particular dichotomy of 'town' and 'nobility' bequeathed both a flexible resource and an inescapable mental framework to later generations, who would draw upon it in fashioning their own versions of this duality.

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[28] Johannes Müllner, Die Annalen der Reichsstadt Nürnberg von 1623, ed. Gerhard Hirschmann, (Quellen zur Geschichte und Kultur der Stadt Nürnberg), Nuremberg 1972–2003, vol. 3, p. 189.

[29] Herbert Obenaus, Recht und Verfassung der Gesellschaften mit St. Jörgenschild in Schwaben. Untersuchungen über Adel, Einung, Schiedsgericht und Fehde im fünfzehnten Jahrhundert (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 7), Göttingen 1961, p. 207.

[30] Peter Fleischmann, Rat und Patriziat in Nürnberg, (Nürnberger Forschungen 31), Neustadt an der Aisch 2008, vol. 2, p. 653.