



## MARBURG IN UPPER HESSE: A RESEARCH REPORT

Gerald L. Soliday\*

This project is a social history of the city of Marburg, Germany, from the mid-sixteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth. It investigates urban social groups and institutions in their larger regional context, somewhat on the *ville-et-campagne* model used so impressively by French historians like Roupnel and Pierre Goubert. Marburg was selected for two reasons. First, it offered an abundance of sources for quantitative social analysis. Particularly enticing were several good censuses from the eighteenth century, as well as fine series of cadasters and both municipal and territorial tax registers. Second, Marburg's functional diversity as the "central place" coordinating the economic, political, and cultural life of rural Upper Hesse made it a more complex community than its size might indicate. With population peaks of only 6000 during the early modern period, Marburg was small enough to be manageable for a single historian yet large enough to offer considerable social complexity.

Local case studies become significant, only if they put large analytical questions to controlled tests. By imposing spatial limits on the data to be considered, they

make large issues manageable topics of empirical research and give historical generalizations a degree of precision otherwise difficult to attain. A detailed analysis of Marburg society presents excellent possibilities for elucidating issues of general significance. As a small town closely tied to its hinterland, it can demonstrate the nature of this economic and social interdependence. Marburg was a territorial city subordinate to a prince; its history can help measure the effects of such political dependence on social and economic developments. As a university city, Marburg can illustrate a changing relationship between town and gown as well as the power of attraction universities exerted on natives and outsiders. Finally, its rich statistical sources can make Marburg a case study which throws light on many other problems in early modern history: demographic structure and population developments; general economic trends, both of long and short term; changes and stability in social structure over two-and-a-half centuries; the formation of different urban elites and their interaction; geographic and social mobility; and the endemic poverty of the pre-industrial era.

In this short research report, I would like to indicate the materials I have gathered from the archive and the questions I hope the sources will answer. I hasten to point out that, although I have been able to assemble a great deal of material, its systematic evaluation has only begun. This essay will focus, therefore, on my use of Marburg sources and will

\*Gerald L. Soliday is Associate Professor of History, the University of Texas at Dallas. This essay is a somewhat altered version of a project report which appeared as "Marburg in Oberhessen: ein Forschungsbericht," *Historische Demographie als Sozialgeschichte*, ed. A. Imhof (Darmstadt and Marburg, 1975), 1017-1028. Initial research for the project was undertaken in the Hessian State Archive at Marburg with the generous support of a two-year fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung.



TABLE 1.

| Sources                     | 1580 | 1620 | 1676/77 | 1731 | 1771 |
|-----------------------------|------|------|---------|------|------|
| Municipal tax registers     | x    | x    | x       | x    | x    |
| Territorial tax registers   | x    | x    | x       | x    | x    |
| Cadasters                   | —    | x    | x       | —    | x    |
| Censuses                    | —    | —    | —       | x    | x    |
| <i>Marburger Sippenbuch</i> | ?    | x    | x       | x    | x    |

indicate the direction of the research rather than anything beyond the most preliminary findings.

At the outset I decided to work with those materials which would provide the statistical framework for the entire study. I selected five points in time (1580, 1620, 1676-77, 1731, and 1771) at which several different sources would converge to give as complete a description of Marburg society as possible. The sources include municipal and territorial tax records, surveys of property holdings, and censuses; I need hardly add that they grow both more numerous and more useful with the passing of time, as Table 1 indicates. Such a wealth of data will enable me both to determine the size of the population and to examine property relations, the occupational and social structure, and the social geography of the city for these years; elements of stability and change can then be traced over the entire period. All the information obtainable for each household is being assembled and linked; correlation of the data must now be undertaken with the aid of a computer. The method is a meticulous, time-consuming one, but the rewards in terms of anatomizing an early modern German community should be well worth the effort.

Exactly what can we learn from our Marburg sources? Accurate censuses are the very best social statistics, since they give fairly reliable information on total population and on the structure of the household and family. Unfortunately, there is no Marburg census before 1731, and earlier estimates of population must rest on the numbers of households listed in

tax registers. But quite reasonable estimates (reached by using known eighteenth-century multipliers for the earlier period) are possible for my sample years; they will supplement the eighteenth-century census figures to give a good impression of long-term population trends. The estimates will also serve as general reference points for a discussion of fluctuations in births and marriages, based on aggregate counts of entries in the parish registers from 1605 through 1830. While birth and marriage rates, ages at marriage, and illegitimacy can be examined over this long period, the even more telling factor in premodern demographic history—mortality rates—cannot be ascertained before the last decades of the eighteenth century. The absence of death registers before 1765 thus reduces the value of the earlier vital records in tracing the natural history of Marburg's population. As we shall see in a moment, however, the extant parish registers are of greater importance for other aspects of my analysis.

Of the tax records which provide data on Marburg's residents, the territorial registers are superior to the municipal. Local historians (Kürschner and Stahr) have used the city's *Kämmereirechnungen*, particularly the lists of citizens paying *Bürgershilling*, as a basis for population estimates. While the municipal accounts clearly identify citizens and homeowners, and even give the general locations of houses within the city, they do not list all householders. The territorial tax registers, however, include the non-citizen residents only guessed at by Kürschner (1921; 1934)



and Stahr (1953). In addition to identifying the propertyless unable and the privileged elites unwilling to become Marburg citizens, these registers provide assessments of each taxpayer's wealth along with his tax payments. The wealth assessments will provide an important basis for analysis of economic stratification in the city and the surrounding villages. While the account for 1580 gives only total wealth, those from the seventeenth century are directly related to cadasters which indicate the nature of the property being taxed. Then a remarkable series of *Kontributionsrechnungen* from 1721 to 1771 breaks the wealth assessments into distinct categories: houses, plots of land, income from grain sales, and the value of occupations. Thus we can learn the exact nature of individual's wealth as well as the class structure of the community. The legally recognized corporations (guilds, non-guild "commoners," scholars, etc.) can also be compared; their relative positions in the economy can be followed for about two centuries. All these tax registers may serve as indicators of the city's general economic development; a preliminary analysis of the series from 1580 through 1624, for example, shows that the taxable wealth of Marburg fell sharply at the very beginning of the seventeenth century—well before the Thirty Years War, even before Marburg lost its position as residence of the Landgrave in 1604.

The *Kontributionsrechnungen* of the eighteenth century allow at least a partial escape from a major difficulty with social-structural analysis. The most cogent criticism leveled against the structural approach is that it produces too stable a view of society; it usually fails to capture any sense of historical development or change. To overcome this problem, I decided to use several samples over two centuries to examine Marburg's social structure. In addition to general comparisons of the whole society over time, I shall

use the tax registers of the eighteenth century to trace the fortunes of one generation of Marburgers closely. All heads of households under 35 in the 1731 sample can be followed at five-year intervals throughout the rest of their lives. The changes found may reflect short-term economic fluctuations of the mid-eighteenth century, as well as the life cycle of the individuals involved.

I have already noted that several Marburg cadasters will be of indispensable assistance in the analysis of wealth and property holding, especially when the territorial tax registers do not give enough specific information. Here I would like to point out another use for the cadasters: they will enable me to present an elementary social geography of the city for the years 1620, 1676, and 1771. Unfortunately only ownership of houses is known for these dates; locating renters in houses will be possible only if I use a 1790 census for that purpose. Yet it will still be interesting to see what patterns of ownership emerge: did the wealthy live along the chief commercial streets (Barfüßerstrasse, Markt, Wettergasse, Neustadt, Steinweg), or was the situation similar to that found in some English towns, where the wealthy clustered in the center surrounded by concentric circles of less and less wealthy residents?

The final major source I wish to discuss is perhaps the most remarkable of all—the *Marburger Sippenbuch* assembled by Dr. Kurt Stahr in the course of more than 20 years of (part-time) work on the parish registers and other nominal records. The 23-volume typescript is a monument to Stahr's tireless genealogical research and a gold mine of information for the social historian. While I plan to use this reconstitution of all Marburg families chiefly in conjunction with my five samples, it could be used separately to examine all completed families before 1850. In either case, the demographic characteristics of the population alluded to earlier should become

clear. And the *Sippenbuch* will tell us even more about Marburgers: their religions, occupations, places of origin, marriage patterns, occupational continuity over generations, and any evidence of secondary or university education obtained in the city. From this list it is apparent that Stahr drew material from several sources besides the parish registers. An example is his use of Dr. Eduard Wintzer's preliminary collections for a Marburger Bürgerbuch, which give additional information on officeholding as well as places of origin, culled from the minutes of city council meetings up to 1733. The *Sippenbuch* thus brings together enough reliable sources to enable me to go beyond the genealogical impulse which inspired it; my own work will focus on marriage and family networks as well as occupational and geographic mobility.

With Stahr's *Sippenbuch* I have already touched some of the non-statistical materials available in the Marburg archive, and I wish to emphasize how crucial such "qualitative sources" are for any social history. Without them the task would be only partially finished. They not only assist in using tax registers or cadasters critically but also greatly enrich the picture of social life gained from statistical records. A structural breakdown of Marburg society in the 1670s should show us much about social patterns scarcely, if at all, apparent to people of the time. Yet how fortunate to have the reports from the territorial visitation of 1666, in which all groups in the city presented their grievances, their relations with other groups, their perceptions and expectations of the community in which they lived. Such valuable reflections of social and political life—whether visitations, diaries, minutes of council meetings, marriage contracts, or the papers of the Hessian privy council, treasury, district administration, or city agencies—must share equal emphasis with statistical

analysis. Yet these sources are so voluminous, despite Marburg's small size, that I can draw on them only insofar as they serve my research purposes quite directly.

Let me conclude this report by outlining the general goals of the project. It is, first of all, a history of social structure in a small German city during the early modern period. Since Upper Hesse was a region of endemic poverty, a second focus of the study will be the poor and various private and governmental responses to their presence in the city. Marburg's functions as the economic, administrative, and educational center of Oberhessen meant the existence of at least three elites of special interest to me. I shall work out careful prosopographies of the city council, the territorial officials stationed in Marburg, and the university professors in order to examine the social relations among the men who shared power and prestige in the community. Finally, as I stated at the beginning, I hope to place the city squarely in its social and political surroundings, especially to elucidate the relations between Marburg and its "neighbors"—the villages of Upper Hesse, the Germanic Order, the territorial administration, and the university. There is a growing body of literature (particularly studies by historical geographers) which emphasizes economic development in rural Hesse, and Hertner (1975), Krüger, and Fox (1975; 1976) have undertaken promising research on both the history of local prices and the demographic and social structure of Hessian villages. This work should throw much light on Marburg's role in the regional economy and offer a firm basis for meaningful comparisons between the small town and villages. For my own part, I am focussing my research on the four villages surrounding Marburg (the *Hausdörfer* now incorporated into the city itself): I hope to trace their differentiated social development



over time and see how such diversity is related to each village's location and its economic and social ties with the city itself.

Two other "neighbors" deserve special attention, in connection with both a study of elites and an effort to fit the city into its political and social context. The competence of the territorial administration (*Regierung*) in regulating local conditions grew steadily over the early modern period, until the Hessian government could ask itself in 1814 whether the restoration of city magistracies after the Napoleonic period was at all necessary. I hope to trace the erosion of local power both in institutional and social terms: there appears to have been a tendency, for example, for the educated elite, the *scabini literati*, to exert stronger and stronger influence within the city council. Such men had close relations with the territorial administration (sometimes they were members of both the council and the *Regierung*) and also, of course, with the university. Here we come to the other "neighbor"—the institution that gave Marburg more than local significance. Various records will allow me to gauge both the educational level of the city's population and the role of the grammar school (*Paedagogium*) and university in drawing outsiders to Marburg. Printed matriculation lists will show how many and which Marburgers attended the two schools. Was education a means of upward mobility? If so, can we trace fluctuations similar to those seen, for instance, in England: greater use of schools in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, with a noticeable decrease in attendance and social mobility in the mid-or-late seventeenth century? From

where did students come to enroll at the university, and were there different patterns over the early modern period in Marburg's ability to attract outsiders? Along with these questions about the student body, I shall be concerned with the tensions between town and gown which revolved chiefly around the privileged status (especially the tax exemptions) of professors. The university professors seem to have enjoyed not only great prestige in the community but also considerable wealth. Of the Marburg residents listed in tax registers of the eighteenth century as purchasers of noble property in Upper Hesse, by far the leading groups were the professors and officials of the territorial administration. The educated elites thus provided yet another link between town and countryside in early modern Marburg.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Fox, Thomas  
 1975 "Studien zur Agrargeschichte Oberhessens 1650-1830." In A. Imhof, ed., *Historische Demographie als Sozialgeschichte*, 1029-1035. Darmstadt and Marburg: Hessische Historische Kommission.
- 1976 "Studies in the Rural History of Upper Hesse, 1650-1830." Unpublished dissertation, Vanderbilt University.
- Hertner, Peter, and Thomas Fox  
 1975 "Lebensmittelpreise in Marburg 1764-1830." In A. Imhof, ed., *Historische Demographie als Sozialgeschichte*, 855-917. Darmstadt and Marburg: Hessische Historische Kommission.
- Kürschner, Walter  
 1921 *Marburg im 30jährigen Kriege*.  
 1934 *Geschichte der Stadt Marburg*. Marburg: Elwert.
- Stahr, Kurt  
 1953 "Marburger Einwohnerschaft um 1590." *Aus der Vergangenheit unserer Heimat: Geschichts-Beilage der Oberhessischen Presse*, Nr. 126, 127, 129.