Simon Teuscher:
“Clockwork Kinship”

in: Eric Hounshell, Ruth Amstutz (eds.):

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SHADOW OF THE TREE

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CLOCKWORK KINSHIP Dynamics of the Regime



Regimentsspiegel of the City of Zürich (1657-1798), signed by painter Hans Heinrich Schwyzer (1618-1673), [244 x 225cm (closed)], oil on wood. Zurich: Swiss National Museum, LM3611.

This ponderous object is called the "*Regimentsspiegel* of the city of Zurich." It looks a little like a winged altarpiece with its central corpus that can be enclosed by moveable wings. An audience of the seventeenth century probably also associated the revolvable disks in the center with the astronomic clocks that were en vogue at the time. Their disks showed orbits of planets and hid underlying mechanics that drove the disks across successive planetary constellations.

Video of the *Regimentsspiegel* with details and human for scale.

Regimentsspiegel of the City of Zürich (1657-1798), signed by painter Hans Heinrich Schwyzer (1618-1673), [244 x 225cm (closed)], oil on wood. Zurich: Swiss National Museum, LM3611. Video filmed and edited by Lorenz Dändliker and Julian Miguez. VIDEO ▸cache.ch/0405

The *Regimentsspiegel*, despite the painted stars on a deep blue background, represented neither divine nor profane celestial spheres but the dynamism of the city state's regime. It was placed in the assembly hall of the city council of Zurich in 1657. There it remained until the year 1798, when French troops invaded the city. They abolished Zurich's patrician constitution that the *Regimentsspiegel* had translated into a moveable diagram and stored the object itself away.[1] Today it stands in the Swiss National Museum.[2]

CLOCKWORK KINSHIP Revolving Disks



Detail from *Regimentsspiegel of the City of Zürich* (1657-1798), signed by painter Hans Heinrich Schwyzer (1618-1673), [244x225 cm (closed)], oil on wood. Zurich: Swiss National Museum, LM3611. Video filmed and edited by Lorenz Dändliker and Julian Miguez. VIDEO ▸cache.ch/0407

Each office in the city's government is represented by one of the 162 revolving disks. While the large disks are reserved to the mayor and the council members, the smaller ones represent minor offices down to the guards of the city gates. On each disk we find the names and, far better visible, the coats of arms of all the office holders. The series starts with the individuals who held the respective office in the year 1498, placed at the center of the disk, and successively spiral outwards. The names and coats of arms of newly elected officers were added at regular intervals.
The revolving orbits suggest a political order that interlocks kinship and the distribution of the city's offices. The linearity of the dynastic kinship organization is implied but suppressed to the advantage of an emphasis of rotation. The coats of arms stand for *Geschlechter*, dynasties, defined by successions from fathers to sons. The revolving disks with their succession of coats of arms do not show such pedigrees but how members of the different dynasties recur in offices over the centuries. Accordingly, the hierarchy of offices can be read as alignments of the city's leading dynasties in constantly shifting constellations. And the whole apparatus stands for the similarities between the bureaucratic hierarchies of early states and the rigidly regulated inequalities within and between the dynasties of the period.

CLOCKWORK KINSHIP Denying Genealogical Linearity



Detail from *Regimentsspiegel of the City of Zürich* (1657-1798), signed by painter Hans Heinrich Schwyzer (1618-1673), [244x225 cm (closed)], oil on wood. Zurich: Swiss National Museum, LM3611.

The insistence on rotation was programmatic. The spiral order of the entries on each disk suggest a turning movement, even when the disks stand still. This stands in contrast to a succession of officeholders that in principle was linear. In a strict sense, neither the constitution nor the actual outcome of elections provided for a regular alternation between dynasties. Even though elections were manipulated now and then, their outcomes remained largely unpredictable. In a more general sense, however, it was true that members of a relatively small number of families shared the power in the city and that the same family names year after year kept recurring in lists of officeholders. The *Regimentsspiegel* intimates that this system operated like clockwork and elevates its regularity to celestial heights. Also part of this was the suggestion that the object's interior, like the one of an astronomical clock, hid a system of gears and wheels allowing for a coordinated movement of the different disks. In reality, however, each disk turns on its own and the interior is void.

As is often the case in politics, the fantasy of harmony rested on rigid mechanisms of exclusion. The *Regimentsspiegel* takes for granted that a narrow group of families monopolized the city's office. It is all the more striking that the object itself owes its existence to an outsider's attempt at being included. It was a gift of the Swabian craftsman Hans-Heinrich Schwyzer, an immigrant to Zurich. His gift to the council was an attempt at giving his application for citizenship in Zurich – quite literally – more weight.

Notes

1 With more references: Dario Gamboni, Georg Germann (eds.): *Zeichen der Freiheit: Das Bild der Republik in der Kunst des 16. bis 20. Jahrhunderts. Katalog zur Ausstellung im Bernischen Historischen Museum 1.6-15.9.1991*, Bern: Stämpfli (1991), pp. 193-194.
2 Sammlung Online des Schweizerischen Landesmuseum, https://sammlung.nationalmuseum.ch/de/list?searchText=Regimentsspiegel&detailID=100100093.

Further Readings

Erwin Eugster: "Die Entwicklung zum kommunalen Territorialstaat", in: Niklaus Flüeler, Marianne Flüeler-Grauwiler (eds.): *Geschichte des Kantons Zürich Band 1, Frühzeit bis Spätmittelalter*, Zürich: Werdverlag (1995), pp. 298-335.

Hans-Jörg Gilomen: "Innere Verhältnisse der Stadt Zürich 1300-1500", in: Niklaus Flüeler, Marianne Flüeler-Grauwiler (eds.): *Geschichte des Kantons Zürich Band 1, Frühzeit bis Spätmittelalter*, Zürich: Werdverlag (1995), pp. 336-389.

David Warren Sabean, Simon Teuscher, Jon Mathieu (eds.): *Kinship in Europe: Approaches to Long-Term Development (1300-1900)*, New York: Berghahn Books (2007).

Simon Teuscher: "Verwandtschaft in der Vormoderne: Zur politischen Karriere eines Beziehungskonzepts", in: Elizabeth Harding und Michael Hecht (eds.): *Die Ahnenprobe in der Vormoderne,* Münster: Rhema (2011), pp. 85-106.

Thomas Weibel: "Der zürcherische Stadtstaat", in: Niklaus Flüeler, Marianne Flüeler-Grauwiler (eds.): *Geschichte des Kantons Zürich Band 2, Frühe Neuzeit – 16. bis 18. Jahrhundert*, Zürich: Werdverlag (1996), pp. 16-65.