

Martial Culture in Medieval Towns

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Urban history of Swiss towns (1350-1550)

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This SNSF research project (2018-2022) focuses on towns as producers, organisers, and brokers of martial culture within the rapidly changing political world of late medieval Europe, examining how towns helped transform and were transformed by trend-setting military techniques and urban 'martial culture.' This martial culture developed at the intersection of legal prerogatives, political requirements, physical skills, knowledge, and the evolving societal significance of the ownership and use of weapons.

The project will thus integrate a number of historiographical approaches that are usually explored separately: urban institutional, social, and political history; military history; the history of weapons and weapon use; the history of urban martial competitions; the history of knowledge production and dissemination; the history of fighting expertise, and the transformation of the urban space itself.

The research will be carried out by three independent, but connected subprojects with a common point of reference in the town-dweller who owned and used military weapons. It will concentrate on towns in the centre of the European urban belt in what is today Switzerland and southern Germany, from the 13th to the early decades of the 16th century.



→ Martial training and display

How martial skills were trained and displayed?

This subproject will investigate the evolution and use of urban public festivals encompassing shooting competitions and other public displays of skills useful to the citizen-soldier. These festivals were stages for representation and promotion of urban honour and military prowess, and functioned as hubs of communication concerning martial knowledge. A comprehensive investigation of these events in the late middle ages, and of the people promoting, organising, participating in, and profiting from them, will shed light on the each of these elements and how they interrelated, and will enable a tracking of the ways individual expressions of martial urban cultures merged to form regional patterns.

→ Urban military organisation

How city authorities did regulate armed groups?

This subproject will address origins and impacts of new developments in the military organization of town dwellers, in the light of changing political circumstances, and with a special focus on social effects. A particular spotlight will be directly at the right and duty to carry weapons. This connected right and duty was central to feudal and pre-modern intra-communal interactions, because weapon ownership simultaneously implied a right to individual and collective autonomy while also comprising feudal duties. This project will seek an integrated understanding of the legal prerogatives and practical provisions of the town's rulers, developments in urban military organization and questions of legal status related to stories of social promotion through warfare. Useful broader insights into political developments of the late middle ages may also be anticipated from this project.

→ Martial urban space

How martial culture (re)shaped urban spaces over time?

This subproject will center on physical changes in the late medieval urban fabric. The combined effect of technical innovations (e.g. rise of long range weapons, including firearms), organizational changes and societal developments was a marked alteration in the character and layout of urban spaces, buildings and walls subject to military use. New building types (arsenals, armories, power houses), and areas cleared for shooting-ranges and town squares reshaped the physical appearance of 15th century towns considerably. The subproject will also probe resulting changes in the way urban space was experienced and, in turn, impacts upon urban martial culture generally.

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