

Attesting to Dynasty:
The Use of Images in Early Modern German Genealogy

Volker Bauer (Wolfenbüttel)

Early modern genealogy did not enjoy legal status. But it was legally important, because it provided kinship data that might become relevant in deciding legal conflicts and for the execution of legal stipulations in documents, such as provisions for the succession to the throne («Sukzessionsordnungen») or dynastic treaties («Erbverträge» or «Hausverträge»¹).

And in a political system of predominantly hereditary monarchies, genealogy moreover played a significant political role. Therefore, the bulk of genealogical literature consisted of so-called special genealogies («Special Genealogien»), dealing with a single ruling house. These publications were commissioned and financed by the dynasty in question in order to confirm its princely status.²

Any genealogical record, however, had to cope with a technical or rather a media problem: In many cases, a straightforward narrative or a simple list was unable to convey the requested information on a single sheet of paper or parchment, since the latter's limited surface could not adequately reproduce the ramifications and parallel branches so typical of kin relations.

¹ See the contributions in KUNISCH, 1982.

² BAUER, 2013, pp. 96-103.

The expedient used within the genealogical works is of course familiar to every historian: They resorted to diagrams and images which were modelled after a tree to construct and to structure complex kin groups.³

The following paper will mainly consist of the presentation and explanation of a sequence of three arboreal images that were used in a genealogical context and are in turn more closely linked to legal reasoning.

1) The classical genealogical tree (Antonio Albizzi's *Principvm Christianorvm Stemmata* from 1608)

The first image [Figure 1] is taken from Antonio Albizzis's beautiful *Principvm Christianorvm Stemmata*, published for the first time in Augsburg in 1608.⁴ This work is not a special genealogy, but belongs to the universal genealogies («Universal=Genealogien»),⁵ since it comprises the genealogies of 45 different houses, each presented in the form of a genealogical tree («Stammbaum» in German). Although this is clearly a very well-known means of visualizing kinship, it is nevertheless worth taking a closer look. It will suffice to analyse Albizzi's tree, because it is characteristic for the whole genre.

As one can see, the «Stammbaum» consists of a largely realistic picture of a domestic, European tree. Its branches bear nametags, coats of arms and symbols of power and can thus display the bifurcations of a certain ruling kin group. The main ancestor

³ BAUER 2013, pp. 90-94 and 119-123

⁴ ALBIZZI, 1608.

⁵ BAUER, 2013, pp. 103-112.

(«Spitzenahn») is shown at the root, whereas the descendants of the male lineage, the agnates, are to be found in the branches and at the top.⁶

The synchronisation of the biological growth of the tree and the development of the noble house in question is by no means self-evident, but the result of a longer process, as Christiane Klapisch-Zuber has repeatedly pointed out.⁷

It took the formula of the Tree of Jesse, developed in the course of the 11th century, to establish an arboreal model of descent in which the timeline ran from the bottom to the top. The illustration [Figure 1.1] shows a 12th-century manuscript version from the holdings of the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel. On the bottom of the page, a reclining Jesse is depicted, and a tree is growing out of (or behind) his body. In an upward movement, the main trunk features Jesse's most important descendants: the biblical kings David and Salomo, Maria, and finally Jesus Christ at the very top.⁸

In addition to its capacity to visualize the course of time, the genealogical tree also allows for a hierarchization of the members of a dynasty, since the positions at the root and on or near the trunk are the most prestigious ones, normally reserved for the most important persons, e.g. rulers. Genealogical trees hence favour the concept of an agnatic and vertically focused kin group, culminating in primogeniture and generally downplaying the dynastic role of women.

The character of the «Stammbaum» as an image has profound consequences: First of all, and unlike a diagram, an image cannot be continued over several pages. It is limited

⁶ BAUER, 2013, pp. 53-56 and 136-138.

⁷ KLAPISCH-ZUBER, 1993 and 2009.

⁸ BAUER, 2013, pp. 48-49 and 194.

to a single surface and can thus only contain a limited amount of information. Hence it either requires strict data selection (for example by only including agnatic kin), or an extremely large format, which accounts for the giant 16th-century woodcuts.⁹

An image moreover constitutes an object of perception of its own, isolated from any accompanying texts. This effect is enhanced by the fact that the usual Western reading direction is reversed by the «Stammbaum», which has to be read bottom-up, commencing at the roots.

So to begin with, the reader (or rather: the viewer) has to indentify the starting point of the genealogy being presented, and therefore the roots are very often conspicuously emphasized. Frequently they are located right in the foreground, zoomed out of the surrounding landscape. In the case of the example from Albizzi's book they are almost transformed or even solidified into a rock, bearing the name of the mythical forebear Pharamundus.

The image shows yet another trait typical of the genre: Just as the tree is obviously domestic and familiar, belonging to a European habitat, the setting usually consists of an identifiable or even named region, thus stressing the connection between the dynasty and its territory and moreover the verisimilitude of the whole picture itself.

Finally, the economic effects of using illustrations have to be taken into consideration.

In the early modern period reproducible images had to be produced in woodcuts or engravings, which were both rather expensive techniques. For this reason they are regularly found in special genealogies, which were paid for by the respective courts and

⁹ BAUER, 2013, pp. 134-135.

dynasties. Universal genealogies in contrast had to bring a return on their money on the book market and so they simply could not afford the inclusion of costly illustrations and tended to resort to mere diagrams.

From that perspective, Albizzi's publication turns out to be an exception: Among the roughly 80 universal genealogies that can be identified for early modern Germany, his *Principvm Christianorvm Stemmata* is unique in relying on images from copper engravings showing genealogical trees.¹⁰

2) Proof of nobility («Aufschwörungstafel») for Christiane Lucie von der Schulenburg (1748)

The second main image consists of a tree that indeed served as legal evidence [Figure 2]. It is based on an alternative method of rendering kinship visible, which is generally called «Ahnentafel» in Germany, sometimes also «Aufschwörungstafel».

Unlike the «Stammbaum», it assumed a fixed shape: Starting with a noble or princely person, his or her parents are registered, then the latter's parents (i.e. the four grandparents of the initial subject), then the eight great-grandparents etc. The number of individuals doubles with each generation of direct ancestors, and the female ancestors are at least as important as the male ones.

Early modern genealogical literature abounds with this type of visualization of kinship, usually in the form of diagrams based on the use of typography. Mostly these diagrams

¹⁰ BAUER, 2013, pp. 121–122.

run horizontally from the left to the right side of the page and lead the reader back in time.

The algorithmic regularity creates what basically is a form and allows for the print of general, blank «Ahnentafeln» with general terms for the different relations instead of personal names [Figure 2.1].¹¹

The identical, predefined structure of the «Ahnentafel» made it particularly suitable to serve as proof of nobility by a candidate for an office, a benefice or membership in an exclusive group. In this case, the naming of the ancestors covered was of course compulsory. Several institutions in the Reich, such as cathedral chapters and many abbeys, stipulated that candidates should provide proof of a certain number of ancestors of certain rank, and «Ahnentafeln» in the form of images drawn by hand were used to this end. In other words: They took over the function of legal documents («Urkunden»).¹²

The document at hand shows a mid-18th-century «Aufschwörungstafel» proving the knightly origin («Ritterbürtigkeit») of Christiane Lucie von der Schulenburg (1718–1787), who was applying to join the Protestant ladies' convent of Steterburg in Lower Saxony. The coloured drawing is based on the botanical model of a tree, equipped with bark and leaves.¹³

The candidate is at its bottom, near the root, while her ancestors are to be found in the symmetrical branches. At the top her required 16 great-great-grandparents are depicted.

¹¹ BAUER, 2011.

¹² See also DUCHHARDT, 1974.

¹³ BAUER, 2013, p. 154.

All these persons are labeled by name tags, but they are predominantly indicated by their family's respective coats of arms. The testimony is confirmed by the seals and signatures of four male members of the regional nobility.

The use of a picture for this kind of legal certification is by no means exceptional, but corresponds to a tradition that dates back at least to the late Middle Ages and was still observed in the 18th century.¹⁴ The outward appearance of Christiane Lucie's proof of nobility very much resembles the design recommended in a widespread practical manual on this social practice, written by the professor of law Johann Georg Estor and published in 1750.¹⁵

Still, the choice of this type of image for a legal purpose is significant. The picture of the tree itself seems at first glance quite realistic, but it possesses an uncanny symmetry and grows into the past, the crown being populated by the forebears.

The regular bifurcations are literally shielded by the coats of arms, which can easily be used by the reader to follow the descent of Christiane Lucie without even looking at the individual names. Although a valid proof of nobility required the naming of each single progenitor, its logic aimed at the accumulation of as many renowned ancestral houses as possible – which are, after all, represented heraldically.

And finally, the somewhat unusual notion of placing a descendant at the root of this tree proves to be of benefit of the reader, who sees the legally relevant 16 ancestors – upon whose verification everything depends – on the topmost row of the picture, at a first

¹⁴ HARDING and HECHT, 2011.

¹⁵ ESTOR, 1750, pp. 9-12.

glance as it were. So on the one hand, this «Ahnenbaum» (ancestors' tree) transgresses a botanically correct image, but on the other hand the resulting layout is adequate to its legal purpose.

3) Genealogy on a frontispiece (Johann Georg Cramer's *Commentarii De Ivribvs Et Praerogativis Nobilitatis Avitae* from 1739)

In 1739, Johann Georg Cramer (1700–1763), professor of law at the University of Leipzig, published a book on hereditary nobility (*nobilitas avita*) and «Ahnen-Recht» as its foundation.¹⁶ Among the noble privileges discussed by Cramer are the admission to tournaments and the membership in cathedral chapters, which both required a certain number of noble ancestors. Hence this noble group is called «Turnier=» or «Stiffts=Adel».

Cramer makes clear that the Roman definition of nobility was fundamentally different from the German one, because the latter has nothing to do with a *ius imaginum*, but instead depends on the «noble blood which propagates from the grandparents, great-grandparents and ancestors to the descendants in a continuous succession».¹⁷ Cramer likewise stresses the traditional notion of the German nobility that noble origin required a noble mother as well as a noble father, thus differing from Roman law.¹⁸

The «distinction between noblemen and commoners» and the proof of nobility cannot, he goes on, be deduced from the «law of nature», but are rather founded on the

¹⁶ CRAMER, 1739

¹⁷ CRAMER, 1739, p. 44; the translation follows ANONYMOUS, 1739, p. 625-626.

¹⁸ CRAMER, 1739, pp. 117-118; for the context see WILLOWEIT 2004, pp. 103-130.

«institutions of the peoples and the states» – which in turn are completely compatible with «sane reason and natural equity»¹⁹.

Therefore it is hardly surprising that the main sources Cramer uses for his legal reasoning on the privileges of the hereditary nobility consist of the numerous statutes of the diverse noble corporations who regarded themselves as autonomous and entitled to make their own rules. They were justified to do so, Cramer argues, because they were originally founded and endowed with their resources by those noble families that later on legitimately claimed their exclusive right to access.²⁰

The frontispiece [Figure 3]²¹ reflects this view that the noble corporations themselves have the right to decide whom to accept as their members. The image depicts a theatrical situation, marked by the curtain, the wooden frame and the label *Capitvlvm*. The whole scene obviously is set in the archive of a cathedral chapter filled with hundreds of books and manuscripts. In the foreground, two members of such a chapter verify the data of a proof of nobility and match it against the documents on the small side-table on the right. The verification of a claim to noble descent is solely the business of the respective noble institution. The legal expert can only describe this procedure from an exterior position, as an onlooker as it were, because he has no say in this matter.

The tournament taking place in the courtyard in the background supports this interpretation. Admission to a tournament was only granted to competitors of attested noble origin so that inclusion in the event itself could also serve as proof of nobility.

¹⁹ CRAMER, 1739, p. 120-121; the translation follows ANONYMOUS, 1739, p. 633-634.

²⁰ CRAMER, 1739, p. 126-127 and 146.

²¹ See BAUER, 2013, p. 156.

The control over access to the venue lay in the hands of a herald who is standing next to the left column. Here again, an institution of the noble society rather than a lawyer decides on the proper noble qualities of potential contestants.

But this also applies to any external authority, even including the Emperor²² and the Pope²³ who according to Cramer both have no rights to interfere with the self-regulation of the self-reproducing hereditary nobility.

To sum up (and slightly exaggerate): The whole layout of the frontispiece conveys the message that the privileges of the hereditary nobility and especially the proof of nobility are not subject to outside influence. They are presented in a showcase, together with the test procedures employed, and just like the early modern lawyers we spectators are only allowed to look at the scene as if through a glass pane.

4) Conclusion

Images were an important element of early modern genealogy. The widespread use of the «Stammbaum» is ample proof of that. But other forms of presenting genealogical information also relied on images. The example of the abstract «Ahnentafel», which could develop into a somewhat botanically correct «Ahnenbaum», proves that a more or less realistic image of a tree provided a particularly user-friendly arrangement of kinship data that was legally relevant.

²² CRAMER, 1739, p. 83-84, 88, 171, 234-235.

²³ CRAMER, 1739, p. 129-142.

Thus the specific functional role of the tree model within early modern genealogy in general was to a large extent dependent on the degree of natural likeness of the given image.

The final example shows that images could also serve as a kind of paratext to visualize the relationship between academic jurisprudence on the one hand and the autonomous handling of genealogical affairs by noble corporations within the Holy Roman Empire on the other hand.

The use of images within genealogy was moreover determined and in fact limited by economic conditions. The production of engravings was expensive and therefore only affordable in the case of special genealogies whose costs were covered by the courts. Universal genealogies in contrast rather relied on employing diagrams which could be made by much more cheaper typographic means.

This difference at last leads to a simple, pragmatic definition of what might be regarded as an image within genealogical literature: viz. every illustration that is not based upon typography.

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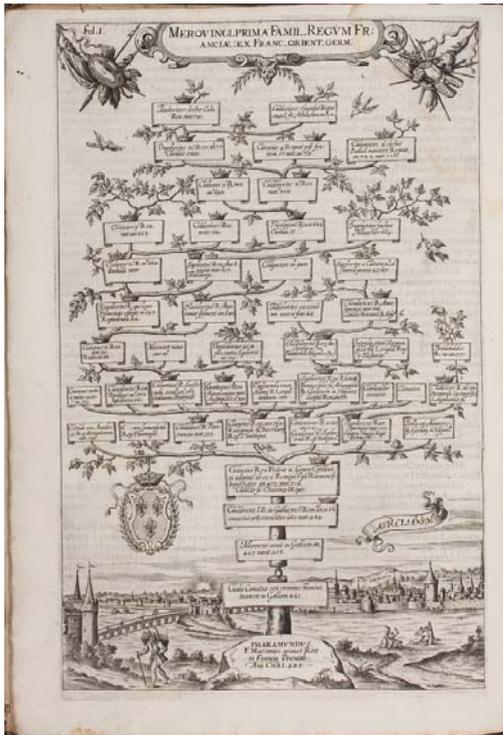


Fig. 1 : Antonio Albizzi, Principvm Christianorvm Stemmata, Augsburg, 1608, fol. I [HAB: Xb 2° 56]

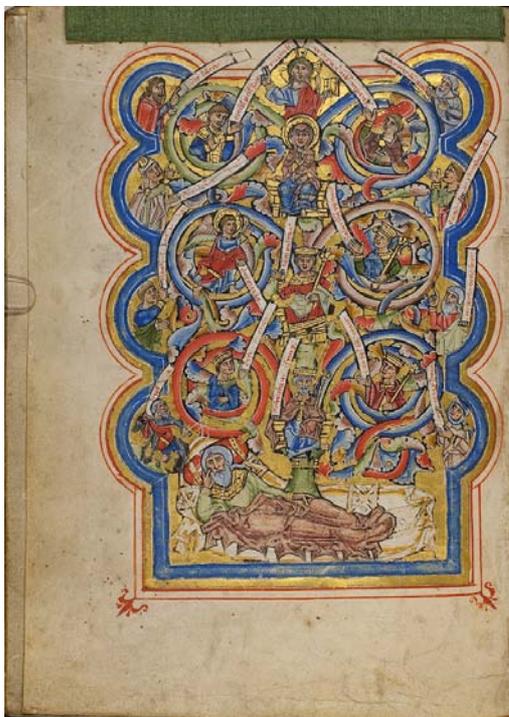


Fig. 1.1 : Älterer Wöltingerode Psalter, ca. 1220, fol. 6v [HAB: Cod. Guelf. 521 Helmst.]

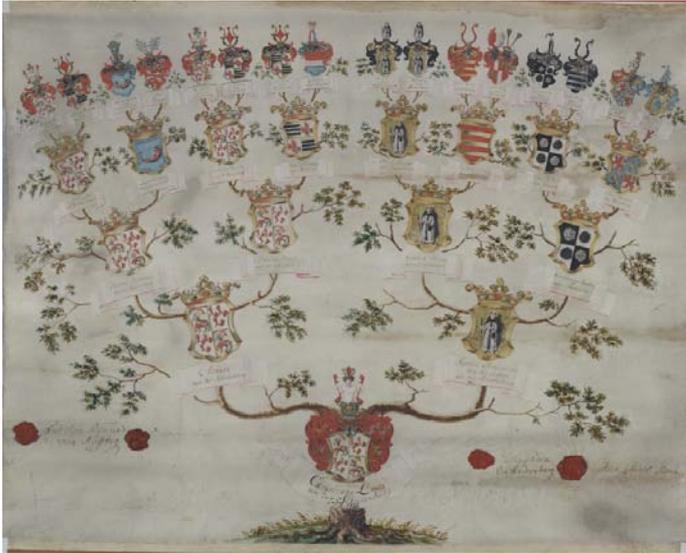


Fig. 2 : Aufschwörungstafel Stift Steterburg, 1748 [Niedersächsisches Staatsarchiv Wolfenbüttel: Neu 3 Stet Zg. 63/2004 Nr. 785]

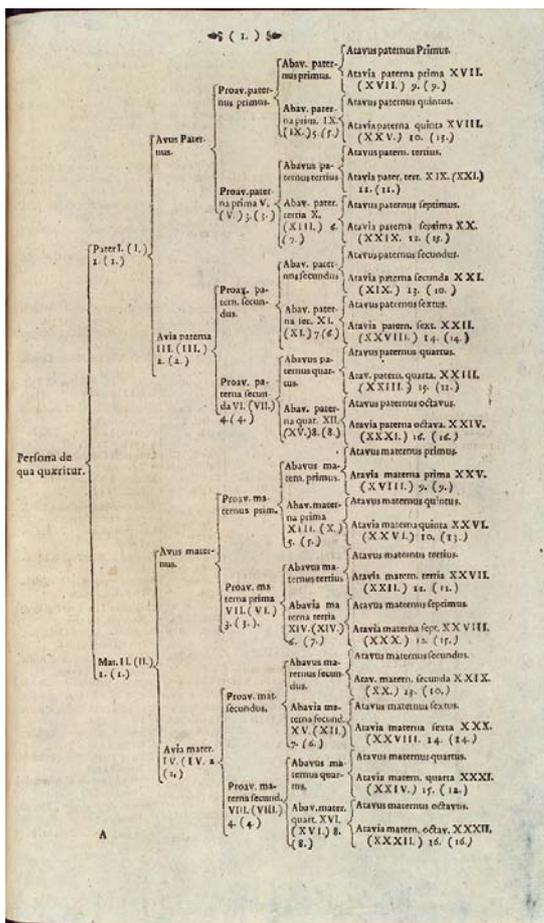


Fig. 2.1 : Philipp Jacob Spener, Tabulae Progonologicae, Stuttgart, 1660, p. 1 [HAB: Ff 4° 68 (2)]



Fig. 3 : Johann Georg Cramer, *Commentarii De Ivribvs Et Praerogativis Nobilitatis Avitae*, Leipzig, 1739, frontispiece [HAB: Graph A1: 228]