



Stiftung Thüringer Schlösser und Gärten, Doris Fischer und Susanne Rott (Hrsg.); Fürstliche Feste. Höfische Festkultur zwischen Zeremoniell und Amüsement (Jahrbuch der Stiftung Thüringer Schlösser und Gärten. Forschungen und Berichte zu Schlössern, Gärten, Burgen und Klöstern in Thüringen und seinen europäischen Nachbarländern 23, 2019); Petersberg: Michael Imhof 2020; 304 S., 156 farb. u. 47 s/w-Abb.; ISBN 978-3-7319-0978-1; € 39,95

One might find 2020, a year ravaged by a pandemic, to be an inopportune time to publish *Fürstliche Feste. Höfische Festkultur zwischen Zeremoniell und Amüsement*, a book about festivals. Already the cover offers a view of a mass event organized in Vienna in 1667 (fig. 1) – a gathering that is difficult to imagine in today's (socially distanced) world. However, this book, published by the Stiftung Thüringer Schlösser und Gärten (Thuringian Palaces and Gardens Foundation) as their yearbook of 2019, proves that festivals were, are, and will continue to be an important aspect of human life; and therefore, festivals deserve to be studied. The past demonstrates us that health crises, such as the Black Death, can be overcome, and that there will once again be time for celebrations.

The study of festivals has a long tradition. Over the past decades, the Society for European Festivals Research, based at the Centre for the Study of the Renaissance at the University of Warwick, has significantly influenced this research. New research by various scholars is continuously published in the series *European Festival Studies (1450–1700)*, which takes an interdisciplinary approach to all kinds of festivals.¹ Published as monographs and essay collections, these books discuss various places and centuries. Numerous other monographic or thematic studies – a few that were also published in 2020 or are planned for release in 2021 – deserve mention here. Some of the most prominent publications include: two volumes of *Europa Triumphans. Court and Civic Festivals in Early Modern Europe*, which provide an extensive overview about diverse European court and civic festivals.² More specifically court festivals are also thoroughly discussed, amongst others, in *Court Festivals of the European Renaissance. Art, Politics and Performance* and, more recently, in *Court Festivals in the Holy Roman Empire, 1555–1619. Performing German Identity*.³ *Fürstliche Feste* approaches the topic of festivals in a different manner, as Doris Fischer, the director of the foundation, explains in the introduction: this publication focuses on “the most important, decisive centres of power in

1 The general editors of this series are Margaret M. McGowan, Margaret Shewring, and Marie-Claude Canova-Green and the publishing manager is G. Carney.

2 Cf. *Europa Triumphans. Court and Civic Festivals in Early Modern Europe* (Publications of the Modern Humanities Research Association 15), 2 volumes, ed. by J. R. (Ronnie) Mulryne and Elizabeth Goldring, Aldershot et al. 2004.

3 Cf. *Court Festivals of the European Renaissance. Art, Politics and Performance*, ed. by J. R. Mulryne and Elizabeth Goldring, Aldershot et al. 2002 and R. L. M. Morris, *Court Festivals in the Holy Roman Empire, 1555–1619* (European Festival Studies: 1450–1700), Turnhout 2020.

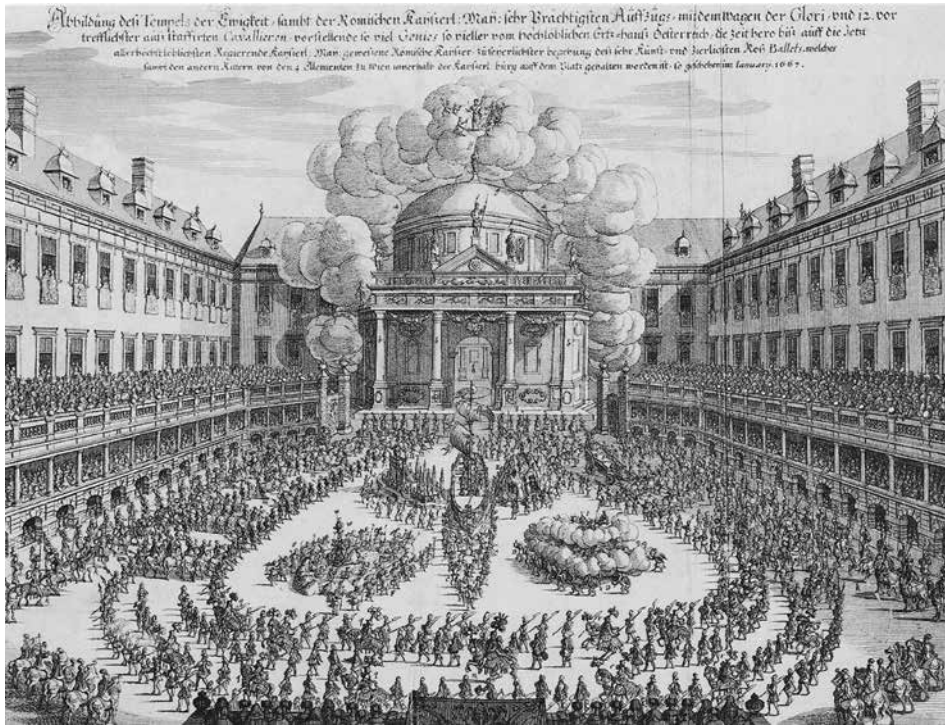


Fig. 1: Nikolaus van Hoy and Jan van Ossenbeck after Carlo Pasetti, Equestrian ballett "La contesa dell'aria e dell'acqua" in Vienna 1667, undated, etching (40)

Europe, the Bourbon, Habsburg, Hohenzollern, and Wittelsbach courts" (7) and the aim "to understand the phenomenon of festival culture as a whole in its genesis, function, meaning, and artistic quality" (8).⁴ The resulting publication expands the field of court festivals with its primarily cultural-historical contribution.

In addition to the Thuringian Palaces and Gardens Foundation's studies and reports from 2019, the publication comprises 15 articles dedicated to the main topic: princely court festivals. The contributions were originally presented at the annual 'Herbstsymposion', taking place in 2019. The authors discuss various countries, periods of time, and types of festivals. They take the reader, amongst others, to Versailles, Vienna, Brandenburg-Prussia, Rome, Thuringia, Arnstadt, and Gotha, as well as back in time to the 15th until the 19th century. The authors employ profoundly different approaches and methods in their interdisciplinary investigations of festivals such as weddings, festivities for childbirth, and celebrations for achievements during build-

⁴ The original German text reads: "die wichtigsten, maßgeblichen Machtzentren in Europa, die bourbonischen, habsburgischen, hohenzollerischen und wittelsbachischen Höfe", see Weißmann 2020, p. 7 and "das Phänomen der Festkultur als Ganzes in seiner Genese, Funktion, Bedeutung und künstlerischen Qualität zu verstehen", see *ibid.*, p. 8.

ing processes, which have not been extensively studied. Although one might include brief reviews of each tremendously inspiring and thoughtful article in this collection, I have decided to discuss two articles in greater detail: the article by Michael Maurer (12–19) and, more briefly, the contribution by Tobias C. Weißmann (158–173). In my opinion, these articles represent two opposing approaches that both function within the scope of this publication.

In his article *What functions do courtly festivities fulfil? An overview from a cultural and socio-economic perspective* (12–19), Michael Maurer raises the complex question of the functions of court festivals.⁵ He pursues the answer to this question through a cultural-historical approach which originates from his background as a professor of cultural history at the University of Jena. First, Maurer gives an overview of the nineteenth-century interpretation of ‘court festivals’, found, for example, in the treatises by Friedrich Nietzsche. By analysing these different interpretations, Maurer provides possible reasons for the course of the development within the discipline. Maurer concludes that, over time, court festivals were no longer solely evaluated according to religious values where the “religious sovereign” (“geistliche Herrscher”, 12), the “ecclesiastical pomp” (“geistliche Prunk”, 12), and confessional restrictions determined the critical debates. Instead, the social implications of court festivals, which were symbols for the courtly way of living, came to the fore. Scholars always focuses on the court festival as an occasion during which primarily the ruler demonstrates his power towards his court.

For Maurer, the studies by the twentieth-century sociologist Norbert Elias are a crucial approach to identifying the functions of court festivals.⁶ According to Maurer, Elias deduces that court festivals provide a profound insight into courtly society. Elias takes the human being into a closer consideration, analysing his behaviour – mainly forced by the ruler and his rules – and status within courtly society. Maurer refers to Elias for a descriptive example of such a festival or, rather, ritual: the process of the King’s awakening in the morning, the ‘lever’. (15) Maurer takes also into account the conclusions by the American sociologist Thorstein Veblen and the German sociologist Max Weber, Maurer notices that Elias especially describes courtly society rather than the court festival itself. However, Maurer is convinced that Elias’s theoretical approach to the analysis of court festivals is reasonable and, even more, needs to be applied and further developed in cultural-historical research.

On this basis, Maurer establishes four components which characterize the festival in the society of its courtly environment: first, courts and court festivals had a

5 This is a translation from the article’s original German title *Welche Funktionen erfüllen höfische Feste? Ein Überblick aus kultur- und sozialgeschichtlicher Perspektive*.

6 Cf. Norbert Elias, *Gesammelte Schriften in 19 Bänden*, vol. 2: *Die höfische Gesellschaft. Untersuchungen zur Soziologie des Königtums und der höfischen Aristokratie*. With an introduction: *Soziologie und Geschichtswissenschaft* [1969], ed. by Claudia Opitz, Frankfurt am Main 2002. Based on Elias’s lost habilitation treatise with the title *Der höfische Mensch. Ein Beitrag zur Soziologie des Hofes, der höfischen Gesellschaft und des absoluten Königtums* from the year 1933; quoted after Maurer 2020, p. 13.

“central function” (“Zentralfunktion”, 16). The attention of all artists, craftsmen, and other professionals sought employment at the court. The court, therefore, fostered also a competitive environment and provided career opportunities. Second, especially within the Holy Roman Empire, the court created an increasing professionalization, development, career opportunities in the respective areas, and consequently, this courtly environment also promoted competition between different regions. Third, court festivals led to restrictions on, a reduction of, and the regularization of other festivities in cities and towns. Maurer calls this phenomenon “monopolization of the festival” (“*Monopolisierung des Fests*”, 17). Fourth, through the mobility of people, products, and information, court festivals provided more ‘international’ exchange between different ‘main’ courts. Maurer determines “relatively uniform forms of art and behavior” (“*relativ einheitliche Kunst- und Verhaltensformen*”, 17) resulted from this practice. Ultimately, court festivals provided the ruler with an instrument of representation to demonstrate the order of the divine and the society he or she governed.

Determining the functions of court festivals may be characterized as the holy grail of festival research. Like artworks, complex moments in history, such as festivals, had more than one function. I believe it is difficult to pinpoint characteristics that are common among so many disparate court festivals from various periods of time and locations. Here, however, two of the critical elements historians often levelled against Elias, as Maurer points out, must be levelled again: it is difficult to draw conclusions on all court festivals and courtly societies without analysing a significant number of cases. Moreover, often, (archival) documentation is lacking while comparisons and general conclusions require similar historical evidence. Nevertheless, the cultural- and socio-historical overview Maurer presents in his article is important, and his argument about the four traceable characteristics of court festivals are fascinating and applicable to similar phenomena. He provides crucial insights into court festivals, which he describes correctly as symbols of courtly society. Yet a related question deserves further scholarly investigation: did court festivals actually solely function as a representation from the perspective of the ruler to demonstrate courtly rules, hierarchies, rituals and, in fact, to demonstrate power? Might courtly festivals have also functioned as a dialogue between ruler and ‘the ruled’, as has been discussed in recent years in the context of civic festivals, such as joyous entries?⁷

By considering court festivals in a broader sense, Maurer’s article is extremely useful, since his approach introduces a more theoretical, cultural-historical conception of the subject. Maurer’s contribution provides the methodological context for the succeeding articles, which concentrate more on single case studies. Tobias Christian Weißmann’s article *From design to event – the artist as ideator and the festival indus-*

⁷ One of the most recent examples that also provides a useful overview of this question is: *Occasions of State. Early Modern European Festivals and the Negotiation of Power* (European Festival Studies: 1450–1700 6), ed. by J.R. (Ronnie) Mulryne, Krista De Jonge, R.L.M. (Richard) Morris and Pieter Martens, London and New York 2019.

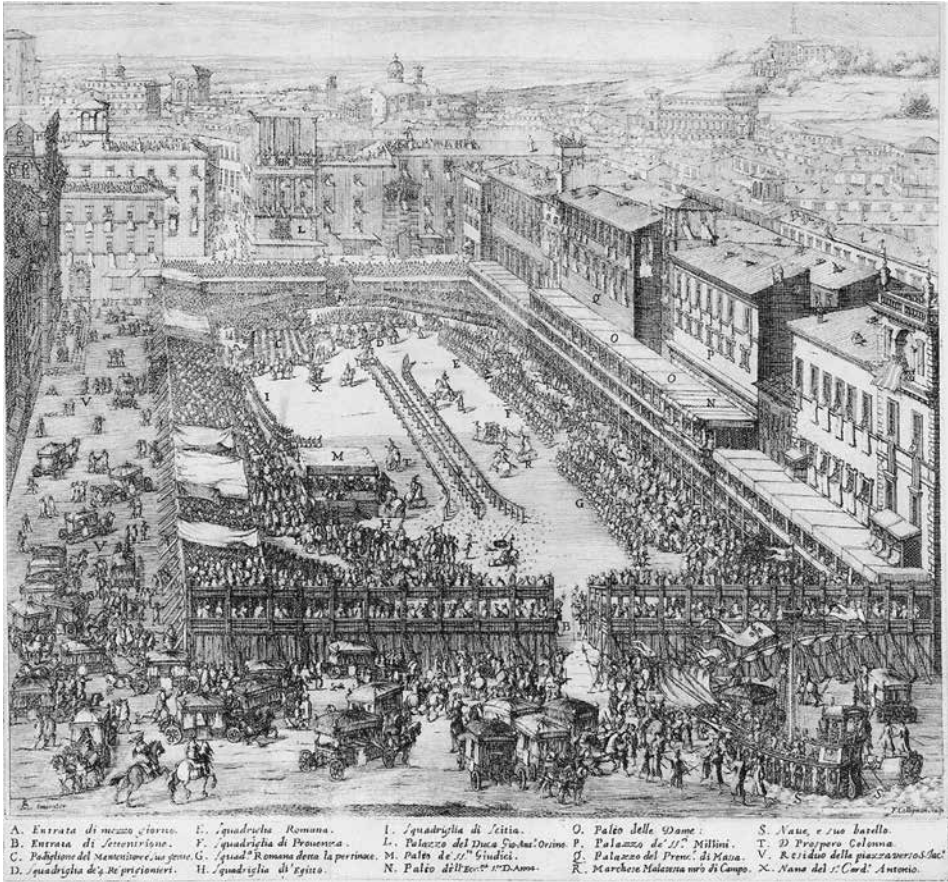


Fig. 2: Andrea Sacchi (design) and François Collignon (etching), *Feast of Cardinal Antonio Barberini to the honour of the Polish Prince Alexander Karl Wasa on the Piazza Navona in Rome 1634, 1634, etching (160)*

try in baroque Rome (158–173) is an example of the single-case-study approach.⁸ The art and music historian primarily dedicates his analysis to the city of Rome and the festivals held there during the 17th and 18th centuries. In his analysis, which originated in his dissertation project, Weißmann employs an interdisciplinary approach that is, indeed, necessary in investigations of such large-scale multi-media events like early modern festivals (fig. 2).⁹ He is correct in his statement that scholars have

8 The original German title reads: *Vom Entwurf zum Ereignis – Der Künstler als Ideator und die Festindustrie im barocken Rom*.

9 The title of Weißmann's unpublished dissertation is "Gran teatro del mondo. Kunst, Klang und Musik im Dienst der internationalen Festkultur im barocken Rom" (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin 2018).



Fig. 3: Giovanni Paolo Pannini, *Feast on the Piazza Navona in Rome 1729 on the occasion of the birth of the dauphin Louis Ferdinand*, 1731, oil on canvas (158)

not dedicated many studies to festival preparations. Thus, the most intriguing part of this contribution is that he shifts the perspective from the festival event to its preparatory phase. Weißmann describes what occurred during the preparations (fig. 3) until the event took place, mainly using the example of the celebration of the birth of Louis Ferdinand, son of King Louis XV. and Maria Leszczyńska, and heir to the throne in 1729. For this occasion, large decorations were installed on the Piazza Navona and formed the setting for horse races, a concert, and a giant firework, among other festive elements, organized on the streets of the Holy City. Weißmann addresses the many employees from different professions who had to collaborate to realize this event. By analysing archival records, as well as artworks, he succeeds in presenting an interdisciplinary approach for a specific case in Rome. He offers a valuable foundational study that may function as an exemplar for further comparisons with other Italian examples and festivals beyond Italy. Analysis of such 'non-traditional' aspects of festivals – thus, not addressing connoisseurship to exclusively identify involved painters – is becoming even more popular among scholars from different disciplines worldwide.

In summary, Doris Fischer's affirmation in the introduction proves true: while many festivals have not been amply studied before, this richly illustrated publication gives an excellent overview of festivals that took place at different European courts and at different times, and it offers both a broad methodological perspective and several focused studies on specific aspects crucial to festivals. By doing so, this publication stimulates further research on the fascinating topic of courtly festivals.

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