

# *Absolutism and the Middle Class :*

## *The Case of a Northwest German Burgher Family in the 17th Century*

by Gerhard BENECKE \*

The annual bulletin for the local history of Lippe in 1956 published a list of 132 men with wives and children who were all directly related to each other in the male line, and who all carried the name of Wippermann. The first was Tyle, born in 1431, a merchant in Lemgo. The last was Georg Karl Theodor, born in 1851 in Karlsruhe/Silesia, an army captain. Where possible date of birth, baptism, marriage, name and family of wife, death, remarriage, remarriage and death of wife, and profession are given. Below this is listed the number of known children, and biographical details wherever possible of children, especially female, not taken up as a separate entry. The evidence is taken from marriage, Comital court, chancellery, Imperial Chamber Court, local court, taxation and town records in the Detmold archives. The records of the Lemgo merchants' guild and of the Comital register of servants have also been used.<sup>1</sup>

The family of Wippermann (von der Wipper) is one of about 90 ancient and renowned families in the Lippian Hanseatic town of Lemgo.<sup>2</sup> They were merchants and craftsmen, also lawyers, councillors and mayors.<sup>3</sup> The mayor in 1954-6 was Wilhelm Wippermann, of a collateral branch which has lived in Lemgo since 1834.<sup>4</sup> In 1593 there was a law-suit over an inheritance brought by the Lemgo burgher family of Cothmann against their Wippermann half-brothers.<sup>5</sup> The records of the trial are in the Detmold archives. The case qualified for consideration by the Imperial Chamber Court.<sup>6</sup> It is based on an inheritance treaty of 1532, which is of no mean proportion, as the widow is bought off for 500 gulden.<sup>7</sup> This sum is indicative of the wealth of Lemgo burghers. Until 1654 the Imperial Chamber Court was expected to handle relevant appeals in civil cases of a minimum value of 300 gulden.<sup>8</sup> The minutes, recording what witnesses said when

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<sup>1</sup> K. BRENKER and F. MEYER, "Die Stammtafel des Geschlechtes Wippermann etwa 1450-1850", in *Lippische Mitteilungen*, 25, 1956, pp. 218-47.

<sup>2</sup> K. MEIER, *Geschichte der Stadt Lemgo*, Lemgo, 1962, pp. 332-4.

<sup>3</sup> MEIER, p. 334.

<sup>4</sup> MEIER, pp. 331, 334.

<sup>5</sup> D. SCHEPPER, "Zur Genealogie der Lemgoer Familie Wippermann. Ein Erb-streit aus dem Jahre 1593 als genealogische Quelle", in *Lippische Mitteilungen*, 25, 1956, pp. 204-17.

<sup>6</sup> SCHEPPER, p. 204.

<sup>7</sup> SCHEPPER, p. 209.

<sup>8</sup> *Jüngster Reichsabschied*, Augsburg, 1654, cap. 112. Minimum value of civil cases which the Imperial Chamber Court could deal with was raised from 300 fl. to 400 Rtlrs. in disputes over capital sums.

called to give evidence in 1593, have been printed.<sup>9</sup> The trial followed the hierarchy of courts and used the evidence of informed neighbours, for which arrangements had been made at the Imperial Assembly of Augsburg in 1555, even for burghers, peasants and other subjects who were of more mediate status.<sup>10</sup> This was an effort to get justice by due and efficient process in the principalities of the German Empire, and to abolish once and for all the process of "Fehde" which had enabled the aggrieved in the 15th century to take the law into their own hands, thereby breaking the peace of the land. This does not necessarily imply that the burgher family of Cothmann was prepared to do violence to its Wippermann relations on the mother's side. It does however imply that Imperial jurisdiction had been made available during the course of the 16th Century to burghers like the Cothmann family in 1593. It shows that the Imperial Chamber Court is not to be dismissed lightly as an overburdened court without an efficient executive.

Lemgo was the largest town in the county of Lippe in the later medieval and early modern period. The County had Imperial status. In 1590 it has been estimated that the County numbered c. 35,000 souls, of which under 10,000 lived in five towns, the biggest being Lemgo with c. 4,000 inhabitants.<sup>11</sup>

A first analysis of 200 odd Wippermann males, who lived between the 15th and 19th centuries, reveals the fact that they were not content to stay at home in Lemgo. During the Reformation Lemgo right from the 1520's became increasingly Lutheran. Christian Wippermann, 1506-63, remained true to the Catholic faith and left Lemgo "for confessional reasons".<sup>12</sup> He founded a Catholic branch of the family in Wiedenbrück. It was in the Bishopric Paderborn, where one of his descendants (d. 1632) took a leading part in the Counter-Reformation.<sup>13</sup> Protestant branches of the family settled in Minden and Brakel. A Wippermann who married after 1580 is recorded as having fled from Brakel because of his Protestant faith. From the 17th century Wippermann families were growing up in Bremen, Herford, Bückeburg, Salzuflen, Rinteln, Detmold, Weilburg (near Giessen), Paderborn, Ludwigsburg (near Stuttgart), Quedlingburg, Blomberg, Pyrmont, Halle, and especially Stadthagen in Lippe-Schaumburg. One may have grown up in Silesia and another had a son in 1811 who later emigrated to England.<sup>14</sup>

Of great interest are the professions and how they change emphasis over the centuries. Starting with merchants, town councillors and mayors in the late 15th and 16th centuries, the accent by the 17th century is on professional civil servants, usually backed by law studies at universities well

<sup>9</sup> SCHEPPER, pp. 211-3.

<sup>10</sup> *Kammergerichtsordnung vom Reichstage zu Augsburg, 1555*, part 2, Tit. 1, 3, 4.

<sup>11</sup> M. KUHLMANN, *Bevölkerungsgeographie des Landes Lippe*, Remagen, 1954, p. 27; E. KITTEL, *Geschichte des Landes Lippe*, Köln, 1957, p. 88.

<sup>12</sup> SCHEPPER, p. 206.

<sup>13</sup> BRENKER and MEYER, p. 224.

<sup>14</sup> BRENKER and MEYER, p. 242.

outside the county of Lippe-Detmold.<sup>15</sup> From the later 17th century we find law professors at Rinteln,<sup>16</sup> a university founded in 1621, in defiance of both the economic crisis and the Thirty Years' War. It survived until 1809.<sup>17</sup> From 1778 to 1797 a Wippermann with a law-doctorate from Marburg was a Professor of History at Rinteln.<sup>18</sup> Over the whole period Lutheran pastors and parish clergymen appeared regularly in the family. Frequently they were sons-in-law. The Wiederbrück Catholic branch produced at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries Catholic priests and nuns, one Jesuit and one auditor at the Rota Romana.<sup>19</sup> There seem to have been no Calvinist ministers in the family, except for possibly one preacher.<sup>20</sup> There was only one medical doctor in the records, who practised in 18th century Stadthagen in Lippe-Schaumburg.

The first army officer made his appearance in the 1670's. He was Lieutenant-Colonel in the pay of Münster, who is said to have died before 1675.<sup>21</sup> The year 1675 is significant because during that summer there occurred a devastation of the Calvinist-Lutheran county of Lippe-Detmold by 6 to 7,000 mercenaries under the Catholic Prince-Bishop of Münster, Christoph Bernard von Galen, which was thought to have been worse than anything that had been experienced in the hostilities of the first half of the 17th century.<sup>22</sup> It is thus perhaps no wonder that the record should like to make it clear that Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander Wippermann had died before 1675. However, professional soldiers and officers, although not absent from the lists, occur only occasionally. Many remained comfortably well-off burghers, but many others became professional lawyers and civil servants in the princely administrations of their native Lippe-Detmold and Lippe-Schaumburg, or in Brandenburg-Prussia or even Hesse-Nassau, Paderborn, Holstein. As *Amtsmänner* many were local administrators on salaries from the princes they served in the 17th century.<sup>23</sup> Several entered into chancellery or secretarial service with various princes, but many more remained advocates and officials in various town administrations with their own burgher, as distinct from princely, traditions of government.

<sup>15</sup> A. SCHMIDT, "An welchen auswärtigen Schulen und Hochschulen haben Angehörige der Grafschaft Lippe bis zum Beginn des 19 Jahrhunderts ihre Ausbildung gesucht?" In *Lippische Mitteilungen*, 15, 1935, pp. 232-302. 20 Wippermanns are found in Schmidt's High School Matriculation Schedules. The schedules of the Academic Gymnasium at Paderborn and the University of Rinteln have been lost. These would probably have provided many Wippermann entries. From the list in Brenker and Meyer one can surmise that at least 60 had a higher education.

<sup>16</sup> BRENKER and MEYER, pp. 223, 245. Engelbert Wippermann in 1621 bequeathed a chair of law to the University of Rinteln to be occupied by suitable members of the families of Wippermann and Heistermann. The latter was his mother's family.

<sup>17</sup> SCHMIDT, p. 284.

<sup>18</sup> BRENKER and MEYER, p. 239.

<sup>19</sup> BRENKER and MEYER, p. 221.

<sup>20</sup> BRENKER and MEYER, p. 239.

<sup>21</sup> BRENKER and MEYER, p. 228.

<sup>22</sup> J. HEIDEMANN, "Die Grafschaft Lippe zur Zeit des beginnenden Absolutismus (1652-1697)", in *Lippische Mitteilungen*, 30, 1961, pp. 59-60.

<sup>23</sup> H. KIEWNING and A. GREGORIUS, *Lippische Geschichte, Detmold*, 1942, p. 208. "Berechneter Amtmann", a 16th century development in Lippe-Detmold.

There does, however, seem to be a real divide between the professions of those living before the first half of the 17th century and those living after the middle of the 17th century.<sup>24</sup> This makes c. 1600-50 a transition period in the fortunes of the family. The family Wippermann in the 16th century mainly combined commerce with town politics. In the transition period we still find a mayor, a dyer and a merchant in Lemgo. However, we also find three privy-councillors in princely service, several doctors of law, and an interesting man was both merchant and ruler's judge in Salzuflen in Lippe-Detmold. But the term "merchant" tends to give far less information than the other professional labels which are recorded.

Using such professional labels, we obtain evidence to show that from urban origins in the 15th century and earlier 16th century, the solidly burgher Wippermann family became more and more a family of academically trained bureaucrats, who were in direct princely service after a period of professional transition, which in the case of this family was around 1600-50. The Wippermanns were drawn into expanding princely administrations which coincided with the Thirty Years' War period. Once the transition was made, there was no return to pre-1600, nor were there any further transitions as striking as the one in 1600-50, as one might have expected for example in the Napoleonic period. True, the family continued to have burghers outside princely or vocational service after the transition period, but we no longer usually hear of them as merchants, mayors and councillors in town politics. Some became professional lawyers in town, and some indeed are only known by the oath of citizenship that they took. There are five of these in 18th century Lemgo. The mayor of 18th century Ermsleben reflects the last pale glow of the civic status of his 16th century Lemgo ancestors. Thus apart from a line of bakers and inn-keepers, reminiscent perhaps of a 15th century ancestor who had been a wine-merchant and distiller in the same town, there seem after the middle of the 17th century to have been no more prominent merchants, councillors and mayors in the family, compared with the talent that went into the princely civil services of North Germany from the family after the earlier 17th century.

What caused this transition? The answer may lay in the provision of higher education which in the case of the Wippermann family usually entailed university law studies.<sup>25</sup> However, even the 16th century Wippermann lists produce an unspecified doctor, who was a Lemgo merchant and mayor, a Lemgo schoolmaster, who need not have studied his Latin grammar at any university, a magister and headmaster in Lübeck, a Comital judge in Lemgo, and a pastor in Lüneburg, who had studied theology in Wittenberg. The academic tradition in the family was thus established long before the transition period and the rise of bureaucratic employment with the princes. Talented sons continued to pursue studies and became professionals all through the 16th century and beyond, but they were first really finding

<sup>24</sup> For the following hypothesis see appended Tables.

<sup>25</sup> See SCHMIDT, and BRENKER and MEYER.

jobs in princely administrative machines after the earlier part of the 17th century. Seventeenth century princes were offering administrative jobs to members of the burgher family of Wippermann which 16th century princes had not offered to members of the same family.

If any Wippermann aspired to noble status, it seems that he was not successful. While becoming civil servants and even privy councillors and courtiers, the Wippermann family did not enter the nobility. They remained burghers in status, despite the sporadic successes of those who since the 16th century either married, inherited or administered an estate, thus obtaining the title of *Erbherr* or *Gutsbesitzer*. Such men in fact became landed gentlemen, indistinguishable from the landed nobility, but their numbers are few. Even so, no Wippermann was specifically ennobled by Imperial decree or at the fiat of a territorial ruler. Privy councillors the Wippermanns may have been, but noblemen they were not.<sup>26</sup>

The burgher family of Wippermann adapted very well to the changing circumstances of society in the 17th and 18th centuries without changing very much themselves. They remained burghers as in the 15th and 16th centuries. They continued to send their sons to university as in the 16th century. Their commercial and civic life in Lemgo gave way to responsibilities as administrators and they outlasted the Napoleonic period of German history to continue as professionally trained government officials at the local administrative level in the first half of the 19th century.

The dangers of tracing the history of a large and successful family are great, especially as one tends to fill little or no social injustice in the evidence, let alone those tragedies that properly belong to larger groups of human beings rather than to individual families. The records show one Wippermann who left his town for confessional reasons and who rose to be a mayor in his new home town. How seriously did the religious upheaval which had made him move affect him? He was a successful and prosperous burgher much as if the Reformation had hardly occurred. The Wippermann males of 1450-1850 displayed burgher-like solidarity adapting themselves to different political systems and yet retaining their social and professional status through the centuries. They were not penalized by the rise of princely absolutism in North Germany after the Peace of Westphalia, nor did they change in status by taking successful part in the administration of princely absolutism. They had, one may feel sure, never heard of class, but they were quite definitely conscious of being and remaining of the born status of burgher.

After 1600 the number of those taking jobs in towns, trades and politics decreased to one-third of the pre-1600 figure, at which level it approximately remained (see Table I). The number of sons and sons-in-law

<sup>26</sup> Nobility was naturally very much a matter of birth. An aspirant had to produce 4 noble ancestors in the 16th century and 16 by the 18th century. For discussion about those of mediate status see J. J. MOSER *Grund-Riss der Heutigen Staatsverfassung*, 7th edn., Tübingen 1754, lib. 6, cap. 1 (esp. p. 561).

with different professions always far outweighed the number with the same professions as their fathers and fathers-in-law (see Table II). But until 1600, 17 sons and sons-in-law had taken on the same professions from 18 fathers and fathers-in-law, 15 of them in towns, trades and politics, and none in Princely Service (see Table IIa). After 1600 only about one-third took the same jobs as their fathers and fathers-in-law at which level it continued (see Table II).

There were 82 Wippermanns in Princely Service (see Table I). Only 7 sons and sons-in-law have been found to have approximately the same posts in princely service as their fathers and fathers-in-law (see Table IIB). Thus offices in princely service did not become family property, which could have been handed down from generation to generation among the Wippermanns. A Wippermann hardly ever succeeded to the same office as his father or father-in-law had held. Princes used Wippermanns as burghers of talent and merit, without letting them make family apanages of their offices. Wippermanns were neither suppressed nor advanced beyond their station, but rather consolidated as officials of burgher status by their rise in princely service after 1600.

### THE LEMGO WIPPERMANNS

TABLE I

Of 123 fathers, the professions of 104 could be determined.

Of 164 sons, the professions of 61 could be determined.

Of 122 sons-in-law, the professions of 63 could be determined.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Towns, trades &amp; politics</i>	<i>Vocational</i>	<i>Princely Service</i>
1450-1600	52	36	11	5
1600-1650	33	10	6	17
1650-1700	42	10	16	16
1700-1900	101	30	27	44
	228			

The group *Towns, trades & politics* is made up of the following:

- Member of the merchant guild in Lemgo
- Oath of citizenship which gave the title of burgher
- Town clerk, official or councillor
- Mayor
- Merchant, craftsman or more specifically brewer, distiller, innkeeper, apothecary, baker, haberdasher, dyer.

The group *Vocational* is made up of the following:

- Catholic priest, Canon, Dean
- Lutheran pastor, Canon, Dean, Deacon, Cantor
- Calvinist preacher
- University professor
- School teacher
- Medical doctor
- Practising lawyer
- Unspecified academic doctor, magister, licentiate.

The group *Princely Service* is made up of the following:

Judge, prosecutor, fiscal, soldier, army officer, army commissioner, clerk servant at court as chamber servant, as master of stables  
 Privy Council, chancellor, treasury official, lawyer, diplomat  
 Local official as amtmann, amtsrat, regierungsrat, auditor, excise officer  
 Official of the estates as tax-collector, recorder, clerk  
 Gentleman farmer, rural official, tenant on princely domain.

TABLE II <sup>27</sup>

The number of men taking the same posts as their fathers-in-law is compared with the number who took different employment.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Fathers and fathers-in-law</i>	<i>Sons &amp; sons-in-law with same posts</i>	<i>Sons &amp; sons-in-law with different employment</i>
1450-1600	18	17	42
1600-1650	10	4	33
1650-1700	12	4	31
1700-1900	30	10	58

TABLE IIa

An analysis of those with the same posts as their fathers and fathers-in-law:

<i>Date</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Town, trades &amp; politics</i>	<i>Vocational</i>	<i>Princely Service</i>
1450-1600	17	5 Members of Merchant Guild in Lemgo 2 Burghers 1 Merchant 7 Mayors	2 Pastors	—
1600-1650	4	—	1 Lutheran Canon	1 Amtmann 2 Chancellors
1650-1700	4	1 Haberdasher 1 Apothecary	—	1 Erbherr 1 Chancellery Secretary
1700-1900	10	1 Innkeeper 4 Bakers	1 Lawyer 1 Professor 1 Cantor	1 Master of stables 1 Privy Councillor

TABLE IIb

An analysis of those in princely service with the same Posts as their fathers and fathers-in-law:

1450-1600	—
1600-1650	Father, Amtmann in Alverdissen — Son, Amtmann in Obernkirchen. (Both were under the Ruler of Schaumburg, Alverdissen being a Lippe-

<sup>27</sup> The discrepancies in totals analysed between Table I and Table II are due to the fact that many men are necessarily counted twice in Table II — once as sons and once as fathers. This double counting has been carefully avoided in Table I. Table I thus accounts for the actual number of Wippermann men and men married to born Wippermann women used in this survey, which comes to 409 who lived between 1431 and 1892. Of these 228 could be analysed.

- Detmold Amt which then came under apanage rule.)  
 Father-in-law, Chancellor of the Prince Bishop of Paderborn —  
 Sons-in-law *a*) Chancellor of Paderborn and Hildesheim  
                   *b*) Chancellor of Paderborn.
- 1650-1700 Father, Gräfl, Schaumb. Lipp. Conduktor auf dem Lohhof bei Stadthagen —  
 Son, Gräfl, Conduktor auf dem Lohhof. (Estate-managers.)  
 Father, Secretary in Rinteln — Son, Chancellery secretary. (Rinteln was  
 then under Schaumburg-Hessian authority.)
- 1700-1900 Father-in-law, Master of stables in Württemberg service —  
 Son-in-law, Master of stables in Baden-Durlach service.  
 Father-in-law, Regierungsrat in Lippe-Detmold service —  
 Son-in-law, Kammerrat in Lippe-Detmold service.