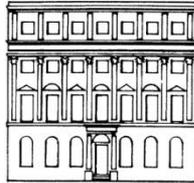


# German Historical Institute London



## BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

André Bochynski and Tobias Zober:  
*Mixed Courts: Dynasty, Politics, and Religion in the Early Modern World*  
Conference Report  
German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 35, No. 2  
(November 2013), pp161-166

Copyright © 2013 German Historical Institute London. All rights reserved.

*Mixed Courts: Dynasty, Politics, and Religion in the Early Modern World.* Conference organized by the Forschungszentrum Gotha of the University of Erfurt and the German Historical Institute London, supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, and held in Gotha, 14–16 March 2013.

Given the decades-long dominance of the confessionalization paradigm, it has taken a long time for overlaps between the confessions to come to the attention of research on early modern history. In recent years there has been a growing interest in looking at mixing between the confessions, but royal courts have largely been excluded from this. At least implicitly, it seems to have been assumed that the royal family and its surroundings were largely mono-confessional, although the existence of numerous dynastic connections, court societies of mixed confession, and confessional differences between ruler and ruled do not really support this view.

The international conference ‘Mixed Courts’, organized by Benjamin Marschke (Humboldt State University), Michael Schaich (German Historical Institute London), and Alexander Schunka (Gotha), was the first to address the problem of multi-confessional early modern royal courts in a comparative perspective. It focused on multi-confessional dynastic relations and their ceremonial, political, and theological consequences. In many cases, the meeting of several confessions at a royal court brought with it special challenges, which not only placed a question mark over dynastic rules of procedure (for example, in marriage negotiations), but also involved a heightened requirement for legitimization, which could lead to new performative acts as well as public and diplomatic controversies.

Eighteen speakers from a total of ten countries presented case studies and papers taking an overarching perspective, ranging from Britain to the Russian Empire, from Sweden to Transylvania, various territories of the Holy Roman Empire, and central Europe. There was a certain chronological emphasis on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which indicates the increasing significance of mixed confessional connections. By including selected non-European courts

Trans. Angela Davies (GHIL).

The full conference programme can be found under Events and Conferences on the GHIL’s website <[www.ghil.ac.uk](http://www.ghil.ac.uk)>.

## Conference Reports

(the Mughal Empire, Siam, the Ottoman Empire), the conference aimed to break the dominance of the three central European Christian confessions and to consider not only multi-confessional but also multi-religious relations. The aim was to expand classical early modern research on the court by the addition of aspects drawn from theological and ecclesiastical history, art history, political and diplomatic history, and the history of ideas.

The first of five sessions focused on the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. Ines Peper (Vienna) looked at lines of development related to confessional politics at the court of Charles VI and his wife, Elisabeth Christine of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. In respect of Elisabeth Christine's conversion in 1707, Peper pointed to the seemingly unchanged religious practices of the Viennese court, while also emphasizing the emerging ties of Protestant families to the imperial court. This pointed to the longer-term goal of an interdenominational exercise of power. The possibility of combining religion and dynasty, Peper argued, should in this sense be understood as a political strategy. The instrumentalization of interconfessional marriages for confessional politics was even clearer in the paper by Howard Louthan (University of Florida). He dealt with public perceptions of the marriage between the Reformed Elector Palatine Frederick V and Elizabeth Stuart in 1613, which was seen by contemporaries as a symbol of European Protestantism against the background of intra-Protestant tensions on the eve of the Thirty Years War. This was also reflected in art and literature. Looking at several bi-confessional marriages at the Saxon court in the eighteenth century, Anne Rous (Gotha/Dresden) established that mixed marriages among princes and the possibility of one partner converting linked the private practice of religion with dynastic questions and *raison d'état*, but also with career ambitions. The background to this was the fragmentation of Wettin territory after the death of John George I, imperial politics, and especially the conversion of Augustus the Strong in the context of the Personal Union with Poland.

While in Lutheran Saxony, Catholic royal marriages and conversions were the issue, the following essays shifted their focus to intra-Protestant marriage ties between Protestant and Reformed partners. Benjamin Marschke's (Humboldt State University) topic was the Reformed-Lutheran marriage strategies of the Brandenburg-Prussian court since the time of the Great Elector, Frederick William I. Mar-

riages between Reformed members of the Hohenzollern dynasty and Lutheran partners not only resulted in temporarily mixed courts, but also created opportunities for interaction with the people, the majority of whom were Lutheran. The marriage negotiations and pacts of the eighteenth century in particular, Marschke argued, increasingly revealed the claim to a Prussian 'pan-Protestantism'. Alexander Schunka's (Gotha/Erfurt) argument went in a similar direction. Analysing a number of smaller courts of the early eighteenth century in the Holy Roman Empire (Württemberg, Hesse-Kassel, Wolfenbüttel, Saxe-Gotha), he worked out the theological implications of mixed marriages and stressed relations with Protestant Irenicism. In close connection with the politics of Brandenburg-Prussia, he said, in many places it was all about positioning within a larger Protestant association or the construction of an international Protestantism.

After the first session, whose five papers had focused on the Holy Roman Empire, the second session took a global perspective, presenting case studies predominantly from Asia. Antje Flüchter (Heidelberg) looked at the problem of the co-existence of several religions in the late sixteenth-century Indian Mughal Empire (Sunni and Shiite Islam, Hinduism and Jainism, and Christian legations and merchants). Flüchter examined the challenges to consensus-building and the regulation of ideas of religious dominance, dynastic chances in the face of religious plurality, and the emergence of syncretistic practices. Speaking on the Kingdom of Siam during the Ayutthayan period under Prasat Thong (ruled 1629–56), Sven Trakulhun (Zurich) referred to the Sakadina system of social hierarchization that made it possible for non-Buddhists to be integrated into court society. Thus the Siamese court was a place which deliberately brought together people of different religions, who could hold important offices regardless of their religious allegiances.

The keynote lecture given by Jeroen Duindam (Leiden) looked at the significance of the monarch's faith and its instrumental function in relation to court and country in a comparative perspective based on Chinese, Ottoman, and European examples. Duindam discussed the situational relationship, which had to be constantly renegotiated and was therefore temporary, of various religious combinations in royal society. As the experiences of European guests at Ottoman and Chinese courts showed, belonging to other religions could sometimes provide access to local centres of power. The sovereign there-

## Conference Reports

fore had a special responsibility to preserve religious stability in the face of other faiths.

The contributions to the second session showed that religious plurality at courts and monarchical centres of power was a universal phenomenon of the early modern period, even if its specific forms might differ between Asia and Europe because of differing dynastic, political, and social circumstances. The third session turned back to European courts and territories, in particular, those of western and northern Europe. Early modern Britain provided familiar territory for the conference and was the subject of two case studies. Dagmar Freist's paper (Oldenburg) took us into the religious turmoil on the eve of the English Civil War. Charles I's marriage to the Bourbon Henrietta Maria brought the Catholic threat home to both Anglicans and Puritans, and the queen herself made use of this politically. In eighteenth-century Britain, by contrast, the monarchy tended to play down differences within Protestantism, as Michael Schaich (London) underlined. William III, like the Hanoverians George I and George II, was the country's religious leader without having come from the Church of England. In dealing with members of the court who were of other religions and their religious observances, as well as their own non-British origins, these monarchs (for example, George II in respect of the Electorate of Hanover) were forced into confessional 'cross-dressing'. Daniel Riches (Alabama) showed that the dominant motive in planning and consummating mixed marriages at the Swedish court was to benefit the dynasty. From the point of view of the seventeenth-century Vasa dynasty, such marriages were a good opportunity to take Swedish power and influence forward while placing itself at the forefront of efforts for confessional peace in Europe. Therefore the fact that potential marriage partners belonged to a different religion was seen less as an obstacle than as the main attraction in such alliances. Luc Duderloo (Antwerp) emphasized how closely mixed courts were observed within the European dynasties, and showed how effective multi-confessionality could be beyond an individual territory by taking the example of the early seventeenth-century archducal court of Albert and Isabella in the Habsburg Netherlands. As the 'most northerly Catholic court' in Europe it had to maintain close diplomatic relations with the surrounding multi-confessional or Protestant courts (the court of the Stadthaler in the northern Netherlands, London, Düsseldorf). As far

as possible, Catholic contacts were used, which meant that this type of diplomacy did not always run smoothly.

This session made it clear that in the event of mixed marriages, even the predominantly Protestant rulers of northern and north-western Europe had to deal with Catholic influences on an almost permanent basis. Multi-confessionality in the context of the Catholic-dominated courts of western and southern Europe was the topic of the fourth session, which began with Jonathan Spangler (Manchester) speaking on Bourbon marriages in the seventeenth century. While Catherine of Navarre retained her Reformed faith after her marriage with Henry of Lorraine (1599), Elizabeth Charlotte of the Palatinate, given an altered political and confessional situation, changed her faith in 1671 for her marriage with Philippe Duc d'Orléans. It became clear that while mixed marriages could be used as an instrument for gaining power, women were not always prepared to give up their faith for political reasons. Birgit Emich (Erlangen-Nuremberg) looked at relations between the Vatican and non-Catholic or multi-confessional courts. These relations can often only be elucidated by going via diplomatic history, as in the case of Saxony before 1697. Contrary to its official stance, Papal diplomacy certainly maintained contacts with non-Catholic courts and princes and tried, using unofficial channels and making political concessions, to exert its influence.

The final session looked towards eastern Europe, confessionally a particularly heterogeneous area, a factor that also affected the sphere of the courts. Maciej Ptaszński (Warsaw) discussed multi-confessional tendencies at Polish courts in the sixteenth century. Although Polish kings married Catholics, this did not mean that their courts were dominated by a single confession. Many servants of the court were of a different faith. Protestant clergy were especially important under Sigismund Augustus (1548–72), although under Stephen Báthory (1576–86) they were replaced by Jesuits. Graeme Murdock (Dublin) investigated the impact of mixed marriages on domestic and confessional policy, taking as an example the marriage of the Reformed György Rákóczi with the Catholic Zsófia Báthory (1643) in the highly pluralist Principality of Transylvania. Although the authority of the Rákóczi family rested on a Reformed basis, after György's death Zsófia and her son converted back to Catholicism, dismissed the Reformed clergy, and invited Jesuits into their country.

## Conference Reports

From the point of view of the Reformed Church, neither Estates nor courts were reliable partners. The concluding paper by Lorenz Erren (Moscow) underlined that under certain political and cultural conditions, confessional *propria* could become bargaining chips. He made it clear that in the Russian Empire, theological differences ruled out mixed marriages between members of the Orthodox Church and the Protestant denominations. Peter the Great, however, temporarily broke with traditional religious patterns of thought in order to gain access to European princely houses and continental politics. This resulted in more relaxed relations with non-Orthodox people, making it possible for several members of the Tsar's family to contract marriages with Protestant princely houses.

In his conclusion, Andreas Gestrich (London) presented a typology of mixed courts in the early modern period, emphasizing the variety of ways in which dynasties could deal with confessional pluralism (conversions, religious pluralism, occasional conformity), combined with issues of gender-specific strategies. The concluding discussion also took a political-pragmatic or functional perspective on the phenomenon. It was argued that the strong focus on the court or dynasty and its immediate environment would have to be broken up in favour of a stronger concentration on court personnel, or the impact of multi-confessional dynasties or courts on their territories. Questions such as what happened to their servants when one partner in a marriage converted, or what chances in-laws of a different faith had to influence the entourage (court chaplains, their own royal households) were not entirely neglected in the papers, it was pointed out, but were rather marginally treated.

Even if the conference was not, ultimately, able to present a clear typology of mixed courts, the comparative juxtaposition of many European and non-European case studies made the enormous power and effectiveness of the phenomenon in various areas of early modern political and religious culture clear. The lively discussions among conference participants and the fruitful dialogue between specialists in different territorial historiographies underlined this, and resulted in a valuable first survey of the field. A publication of the conference proceedings is planned.

ANDRÉ BOCHYNSKI (University of Erfurt)

TOBIAS ZOBBER (University of Erfurt)