

## **Introduction:**

What I'm going to tell you now is part of my master thesis. This work is a regional one, and really close to the sources. My master thesis was a research about the economic situation of one single farm, which was in possession of a dominican convent. The geographical region I am talking about is north-eastern Switzerland.

## **Theses:**

There are two thesis I want to discuss here:

- 1) You need more than one category of written sources to get close to historical reality. It's only the combination of several categories of sources which gets you to see what really happened in the past.
- 2) The landowner who wanted the tenant farmer to pay his dues, were ready to make compromises; they were able and willing to collaborate with the tenant farmers beyond the fixed rules. But there were also limits in his willingness of cooperation.

## **Context and sources:**

The convent of St. Katharinen in St. Gallen was founded as early as in 1228. In these days, the building of the convent was located outside the city wall of St. Gallen. At the beginning, their only possession was only a garden next to their house. With time and thanks to important donations, they got more and more goods and rights. In 1418, the whole city of St. Gallen burnt down. In the meanwhile, a suburb grew around the buildings of the convent St. Katharinen. This suburb called Iravorstadt was then integrated in the city, so that the new city wall surrounded the the old city as well as the suburb with St. Katharinen.

In 1566, the famous benedictine abbey of St. Gallen built a wall around its building. It has always been located inside the city wall, but after political, economical and also personal conflicts, the abbot wanted to protect his abbey from the city. So they enclosed themselves inside the city walls.

In the contrary, the convent of St. Katharinen mentally, not only geographically, really close to the city of St. Gallen and their inhabitants; the convent even bought the citizenship of St. Gallen. Their close link was also proved by their personal composition: Most of the members of the convent originated from upper class families of the city.

One example of a upper class family member is the prioress Angela Varnbühler: She brought the convent to its economical and cultural zenith. Around 1480, Angela Varnbühler started to write a kind of an in-house chronicle, the so called Konventsbuch.

In this book, she wrote down all the things which were important for the convent as well as for her personally. Sometimes the entries were quite short, but sometimes, they filled several pages. You can find inventories of things they needed for mass, lists of farms in possession of the convent, lists of rents tenant farmers had to pay them, reports about conflicts with the tenant farmers, but also accounts of all kinds of food they had consumed during a year.

You can see a detailed report about the conflict the sisters had with the tenant farmer on a farm called Frankrüti. We will watch this conflict, or better, these conflicts, in detail later on.

By the way, you can see what happens when a book is restored carelessly: The person doing this work cut the pages and cut the text as well.

Under the prioress Angela Varnbühler the sisters began a rent-roll. In fact, it's not a roll, but a book. The structure of this book is the following: Every farm in the convent's possession had two pages reserved. The first entries were made in the early 1480s. All the later entries and additions prove that the sisters began this rent-roll not only to know about their properties and their rights, but that this book was in use for years and years. The page you can see is the page dedicated to the farm Frankrüti. In addition to all the updates about the tenant farmers, the charters in relation with this farm were listed.

The last kind of source which we have thanks to the prioress Angela Varnbühler are the account registers. The first book of the account registers was begun in 1481. Their structure is the following: Every farm was reserved several pages. The first entry was the so called "Grundeintrag"; There the taxes which that specific farm had to pay every year were fixed. Sometimes, there are additional information, so this entry got longer.

I have three books of account registers, but I can not say when a new book was begun; Plus I can not say, why the different kinds of dues were not listed in the same book.

The last category of sources I want to watch is the charters. I want to separate them to sub-categories: Firstly, there are the charters talking about selling and leasing farms. As an example, you can see a so called "Erbzinslehenrevers". This kind of document was written when the landowner leased a farm to a tenant farmer and the tenant farmer confirmed this

act. Generally, the tenant farmer's confirmation copies word by word the original charter written by the convent. If the tenant farmer does not have a seal on his own, he ask someone to seal the document in his name; This is what happened here. This document here dates from 1477.

Secondly, there are charters which were produced while or after a conflict to put the things in order. As an example for this you can see a so called "Appellationsinstrument". After a sentence spoken in court, the convent did not accept the sentence and appealed. So, this is the document written for that purpose, and it's written by a notary. This legal step was new in these days and it was not necessary anymore to put a seal on the end of the document. The notary's signature was enough to prove that the document's content was true. This "Appellationstrument" dates from 1513.

### **typology:**

I want to group the sources I mentioned in three The rent-roll and the charters talking about selling and leasing farms are the first group. They're written in the landowner's perspective and they only give us information about the landowner's demand; And these demands differ quite much from the real situation. The second group of sources brings together the entries in the account registers and those charters which were produced while or after a conflict to put the things in order: These entries and charters give the reality of the very moment they were written. So they reflect reality best. The third group of sources is represented by the Konventsbuch: It gives only the convent's point of view.

You can ask the same questions to all of these sources, and they all give you answers; but all of them give different answers to the same questions. Combining those different answers, we are able to get as close as possible to the historical truth.

The questions I am asking these sources concern the landowner's willingness of cooperation with their tenant farmers, more precisely the convent St. Katharinen's willingness of cooperation with the tenant farmers at Frankrüti.

## **Geography:**

This map shows the geographical situation I am talking about: Frankrüti lays in some 9 kilometres distance from the convent St. Katharinen. At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, one square kilometre of land belonged to the farm.

## **Example 1: consensus: rents: responsibility**

The first kind of consensus between the two parties I want to show you is about the responsibility related to delivery of the rents.

In October 1477, four men gave the convent an "Erbzinslehenrevers" saying that Hans zur Aich, Hans Müller von Goldach, Wetzol Müller von Steinach and Haini Blum von Roggwil had the farm Frankrüti as an entail. According to the charters we have today this situation did not change until 1509. So we assume that the person bringing the rents to the convent will be one of those four men.

In 1501 however, other names were listed as deliverer in the account registers: It is Wetzol Müller's brother who carried a wine barrel, and it is Wetzol Müller's wife who brought cash to the convent.

According to the charters, it was clearly one of the four men I mentioned having the responsibility related to the delivery of the rents; no charter says anything about Wetzol Müller's relatives. Nevertheless the sisters of St. Katharinen accepted those two people as deliverer of the rents and did not insist on the situation fixed in the charters.

## **Example 2: consensus: rents: sort**

The tenant farmers of Frankrüti had to deliver five different kinds of rents: that was spelt, oats, chickens, eggs and cash. I want to concentrate now on the rents in cash. During the period of time I examined, the amount of money the tenant farmers had to deliver per year was stable: It was 15 shillings. This was fixed in the rent-roll, in the Konventsbuch and in the first category of charters.

But the tenant farmers did not only deliver cash: Between 1493 and 1527, 33 times cash was delivered, but 8 times wine barrels were carried, 4 times a kind of jam, 2 times empty barrels were carried and apples were delivered, and once fruits, must and a hen was delivered instead of cash.

This means that in some 38% of the deliveries the material delivered was not cash but some alternative material or activity. According to what was fixed, no alternative was accepted. But this is what the convent did: They accepted the alternative deliveries. There are no traces of them refusing these alternatives. Quite the contrary: The sisters estimated the carrying of a barrel of wine to 5 shillings. One moment, they realized that earlier, the value of this work was 6 shillings. To repair this mistake, the sisters paid the tenant farmer the amount of money they owed him!

### **Example 3: consensus: rents: date**

As it was fixed in the charters and the rent-roll, the rents had to be delivered fully every year at Martinmas, at the 11<sup>th</sup> of november. The fiscal year, so to speak, ended this day. It didn't matter if parts of the rents were paid before, plus it didn't matter how many times the tenant farmer went to the convent to pay a part of the rents; All the five kinds of rents had to be fully paid on Martinmas. You can see the entry in the rent-roll and the detail of the famous "Erbzinslehenrevers" of 1477.

In this charter, it was fixed as well what would happen if the five kinds of rents were not fully paid every year on the 11<sup>th</sup> of november: The farm in question would fall back into the hands of the convent. In good old latin, I would say: The dominium utile, the right to use the farm, would be torn away from the tenant farmer and he would have to leave the farm immediately.

In reality, the situation was a little bit different: When we take a look at the rent in oats, we see that there was no delivery during the financial year 1484 / 1485. During the next three years, the rents of the year before were delivered. Then again in 1488 / 1489, there was no delivery at all. In this situation, the convent of St. Katharinen would have had the right to expulse the tenant farmer; but nothing happened. We have already heard of the tenant farmer in question: It was Wetzell Müller. And he held Frankrüti until 1509.

In spite of the irregularity related to the rents' delivery the sisters did not chase the tenant farmer out even though they would have had the right and the possibility to do so.

The three examples I mentioned are proving the convent's generosity. But I don't want you to believe that the sisters of St. Katharinen accepted everything. Their generosity was not limitless. The next and last example will show you this.

#### **Example 4: conflict without consensus: entail**

Wetzel Müller, the tenant farmer you already know, had the farm Frankrüti together with his three brothers-in-law as an entail since 1477. In 1508 the convent accused Wetzel Müller to have neglected the farm and to have put additional rents on the farm, even though he had confirmed in 1477 that he would not do this. They wanted to expulse him. But Wetzel Müller himself accused the sisters. An arbitral court was formed and it pronounced a sentence in favour of Wetzel Müller.

Half a year later, Wetzel Müller sold the farm to his son, called Wetzels Hans. But then, the conflicts did not end, quite the contrary: In 1513 again the sisters accused the tenant farmer, this time Wetzels Hans, for having hocked the farm, for having divided the farm, for not having paid the rents and for having sold wood. The sisters wanted to expulse him, like his father a few years earlier.

Thanks to the charters and the account registers, we can prove that Wetzels Hans had taken a loan and had paid the rents in cash very irregularly. After long hearings the sentence was pronounced – in favour of the Wetzels Hans. He was allowed to stay where he was.

The sisters didn't accept this sentence and appealed against the judgement. There were more hearings. Once again, the court decided in favour of Wetzels Hans.

But the convent did not give up. The sisters asked a notary to write the "Appellationsinstrument" we have already seen. The sisters claimed to be heard and judged by the abbot of the benedictine abbey himself, and not by his deputy.

Finally they got what they wanted. After the last hearing held by the abbot himself the sentence was spoken: Wetzels Hans had to leave the farm. The convent of St. Katharinen attained its goal after four long years of dispute.

#### **Conclusions:**

Let's go back to the beginning: First, we saw that we must consider all the available sources to reconstruct historical truth: the rent-roll and the charters give us information about the legal background; the account registers inform us about the economical circumstances; and the Konventsbuch gives us precious background information from the convent's perspective.

Second, we learnt that the convent of St. Katharinen was ready to make compromises and to collaborate with their tenant farmers. The sisters were not interested in realizing their

rules letter by letter. If the conflicts with one specific tenant farmer were too numerous, the sisters were able to implement their rights thanks to long and expensive negotiations.

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