Of Ancestors and Descendants:

The Genealogical Projects of Basel's Elite Families (ca. 1700-1900)

I am a doctoral student at the Department of History (University of Basel) and a research assistant for the SNF Sinergia project "In the Shadow of the Tree: The Diagrammatics of Relatedness as Scientific, Scholarly, and Popular Practice." This project is investigating the wide range of diagrams that have been used since the Middle Ages to conceptualize kinship and descent.

In my dissertation project, which I started in June 2019 and which is supervised by Prof. Dr. Caroline Arni (University of Basel) and Prof. Dr. Markus Friedrich (University of Hamburg), I examine the genealogical practices and the crafting of family trees by bourgeois families in the city of Basel during the 18th and 19th century, most of whom descended from the old patriciate and formed close-knit networks of economically and symbolically powerful kin groups.[1] My thesis should present several case studies. Each study should be based on a holistic analysis of the specific case, but also include features like the conceptualization of family and relatedness according the different sources; the role of genealogy for Basel's patriciate; the genealogical actors and their motivation; the production of genealogical knowledge[2] and the presentation of genealogical knowledge in diagrammatic form.

A selection of my research questions includes the following ones:

- Who is interested in genealogy, who tries to accumulate genealogical knowledge? What motivations are expressed?
- What are the sources from which genealogists gather their information? Are there more and less reliable sources according to the genealogists?
- How is genealogical knowledge produced? How is data recorded, stored, and processed?
- How does genealogical knowledge circulate?

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[1] Sarasin, Philipp: Stadt der Bürger: bürgerliche Macht und städtische Gesellschaft, Göttingen 1997.

[2] See for example Friedrich, Markus: Genealogy and the History of Knowledge, in: Eickmeyer, Jost; Friedrich, Markus; Bauer, Volker (Hg.): Genealogical Knowledge in the Making: Tools, Practices and Evidence in Early Modern Europe, Berlin, Boston 2019, S. 1–22.

- How is genealogical knowledge presented, in what form? In diagrammatic forms such as ancestry charts or family trees? Or in text-based forms such as family histories?

- Concerning genealogical diagrams: How do they work? What are their uses?

- Are there professional illustrators, who draw family trees based on pieces of information they receive from genealogists?

- What conceptualizations of family and relatedness are connected to different types of visualizations?

Genealogical Diagrams and Practices

Diagrammatics is an integral part of the Sinergia project and it plays a prominent role in my own research project. I concentrate on how genealogists relied on working with diagrams. Because these graphics illustrate the relations between different elements, they were and still are popular tools for genealogical data presentation. As "informational images"[3], diagrams serve as tools for problem solving, displaying information and teaching.[4] While the producers of diagrams try to "condense"[5] the information they want to convey, the recipients of diagrams try to "unfold"[6] or unpack the information rendered in diagrammatic form. Reading diagrams requires one to mentally correlate different sets of information.[7] Thus, diagrams offer more than one perspective of reading them[8] and their recipients can choose their own reading trajectories.[9]

One of the most common types of genealogical diagrams is the family tree. Its layout dates back to early modern times, when the former medieval schema of placing the founding ancestor at the top of the genealogical chart was reversed,

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[3] Elkins, James: The Domain of Images, Ithaca 2001, S. 4.

[4] Bigg, Charlotte: Diagrams, in: Ligthman, Bernard (Hg.): A Companion to the History of Science, 2016, S. 562.

[5] Bogen, Steffen; Thürlemann, Felix: Jenseits der Opposition von Text und Bild. Überlegungen zu einer Theorie des Diagrammatischen, in: Patschovsky, Alexander (Hg.): Die Bildwelt der Diagramme Joachims von Fiore. Zur Medialität religiös-politischer Programme im Mittelalter, Ostfildern 2003, S. 8.

[6] Ebd., S. 9.

[7] Bender, John; Marrinan, Michael; John: Kultur des Diagramms, Berlin 2014, S. 11.

[8] Ebd., S. 28, 199.

[9] Bogen; Thürlemann: Jenseits der Opposition von Text und Bild. Überlegungen zu einer Theorie des Diagrammatischen, 2003, S. 8.

and genealogists began to place the founding ancestors at the bottom of the page.[10] In my archival research in the Staatsarchiv Basel-Stadt, I do often come across family trees – usually arboresque diagrams that follow the agnatic line (i.e. considering and displaying only the offspring of male descendants), but I also see many other genealogical diagrams. These include ancestry charts that display a person's two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents and so on (these diagrams thus include men and women equally, unlike family trees) or even diagrams with a triangular layout.[11]

While some family trees are hastily sketched with black or brown ink, others are artful drawings that were probably produced by skilled professionals who did not only apply the image of the biological tree to the diagrams, but who also added other elements of the family's history such as an illustration of the family's *Stammeltern* (the founding ancestors), the family's coat of arms or items that were associated with the occupational activity of past family members. So far, I could identify Johann Jakob Schneider (1822-1889) as an artist who, besides his illustrations of land- and cityscapes, also drew a family tree for the Staehlin family.[12]

My close reading of certain family trees has revealed that some of those diagrams make direct references to external genealogical material: Some family trees contain numbers that work as links that refer to additional information, for example information in a notebook that narrates a family's history. This interaction between diagrams and external texts provides useful insights into how people who were excluded in the diagram, are included in other sources. For example, the children of daughters are usually not featured in a family tree, but this does not mean that they were not listed somewhere else.

A genealogical practice that was very popular among Basel's bourgeoise families focused on registering the people who had married into the family. Such registers were arranged in a tabular format with columns and rows. The first column usually

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[10] Klapisch-Zuber, Christiane: The Genesis of the Family Tree, in: I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance 4, 1991, S. 105.

[11] I am going to show some examples in my oral presentation.

[12] See Ehrenbold, Tobias; Hafner, Urs: Stähelin, Staehelin, Stehelin : eine Basler Familie seit 1520, Basel 2020, S. 18–19 and also PA 182 A 2a and Stammbäume 243.

contained the family name of a daughter's husband, followed by a second column with his first name, another one with the date of marriage and further ones containing additional pieces of information. These registers thus displayed the relations based on affinity (on marriage).[13]

The different forms of writing produced by Basel's genealogists thus pose questions about the understanding and conceptualization of 'family' and 'relatedness': What people and which relations make up a family according to the different sources? Or, for example, what does it mean if Henriette Von der Mühll-Vischer (1823-1895) creates four different genealogical notebooks, entitled "Meine Eltern"; "Die Vischer"; "Les Passavant" and "Die Werthemann", which deal with her parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins?[14] Does Henriette maybe think in categories, in different families, which are all connected together through her descent? And what implications does that have for our understanding of Basel's patriciate?

Basel's elite families

During the 19th century, Basel's political system changed through a protracted process of democratization which led to a loss of political power and legal privileges of Basel's elite families.[15] However, these families[16] who had received Basel's citizenship a long time ago, were still very wealthy due to their economic success in the silk ribbon industry as well as in banking and finance, and, as the historian Philipp Sarasin has argued, they also maintained their social distinction through their intense awareness of traditions.[17] These families not only married mainly partners that belonged to the same social group – an endogamic marriage practice that made it nearly impossible for newcomers to marry into those elites

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[13] StaBS PA 212a C 3.1.
[14] Staatsarchiv Basel-Stadt, PA 246 A2.
[15] See Opitz, Claudia: Von der Aufklärung zur Kantonstrennung, in: Kreis, Georg; von Wartburg, Beat (Hg.): Basel - Geschichte einer städtischen Gesellschaft, Basel 2000, S. 150–184 ; Wecker, Regina: 1833-1910: Die Entwicklung zur Grossstadt, in: Kreis, Georg; von Wartburg, Beat (Hg.): Basel - Geschichte einer städtischen Gesellschaft, Basel 2000, S. 196–224 ; Sarasin: Stadt der Bürger: bürgerliche Macht und städtische Gesellschaft, 1997, S. 12–14.
[16] They are often referred to as the "Daig".
[17] Sarasin: Stadt der Bürger: bürgerliche Macht und städtische Gesellschaft, 1997, S. 14.

circles –,[18] but they also shared a specific sociolect, they dressed in similar fashion and they strongly engaged in familial activities and festivities.[19]

I would argue that practicing genealogy and occupying oneself with ancestors and descendants was also one of those traditions or characteristics that helped to distinguish families like the Burckhardts, Sarasins, Vischers, Staehelins and many others from other social groups. Registering the in-laws not only provided an overview over the established familial network, but it probably also strengthened the sense of belonging together.

As genealogical research relied on providing and exchanging genealogical information, it not only helped to establish a network of genealogists, but it also reassured them of their close relationships. In a letter to his uncle Lucas Sarasin-Werthemann (1730-1802), Johann Rudolf Merian-Socin (1766-1800) asks for the exchange of the Sarasin family tree, as the Sarasin family would concern him to a great extend ("da mich nun die Sarasinische Familie sehr nahe angeht") and because he assumes that the Sarasin family would be pleased by it.[20] Apparently, Johann Rudolf himself had already sent Lucas several genealogical documents: "[e]in altes geschriebenes Cahier, in welchem von 30. Genealogien tractiert ist»; «[e]in Bernoullischer Stammbaum, den Sie vielleicht nicht so ausführlich besitzen werden» as well as «[e]in Geschlechtsregister der Jecklin, in Bündten, von welchen auch die hiesigen Jecklin abgestammt sind»[21]. This letter points towards the great interest Basel's genealogists had in other families and in their social group.

The Staatsarchiv Basel-Stadt holds a vast amount of genealogical documents, which are spread all over different so-called 'private archives'. The genealogical manuscripts of Lucas Sarasin for example[22] indicate that practicing genealogy was

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[18] Ebd., S. 102–119.
[19] Sarasin, Philipp: Reich, elitär und bescheiden. Das bürgerliche «Patriziat» im 19. Jahrhundert, in: Kreis, Georg; von Wartburg, Beat(Hg.): Basel - Geschichte einer städtischen Gesellschaft, Basel 2000, S. 353. See also: Sarasin, Philipp: Stadt der Bürger. Bürgerliche Macht und städtische Gesellschaft. Basel 1846-1914.
[20] StaBS PA 511e F 5-1 (1).
[21] StaBS PA 511e F 5-1 (1). English translation: "an old written notebook, which deals with 30 genealogies"; "a Bernoullian family tree, which you might not possess as detailed" as well as "a family register of the Jecklin family, in Grisons, from whom also the local Jecklin descend".
[22] StaBS PA 212a C3.

very time-consuming. But genealogists not only needed enough spare time to research their family's history, they also needed a lot of paper to write on, as well as the capability to read old manuscripts. These were resources that other social groups like factory workers probably did not own. Genealogy was an activity and field of interest that the less wealthy inhabitants of Basel simply could not afford at that time.

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