

Denzel, Markus A. (Hrsg.): *Europäische Messegeschichte 9.-19. Jahrhundert*. Weimar: Böhlau Verlag 2018. ISBN: 978-3-412-50794-7; 434 S.

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This edited book is the result of an international conference „Internationale Messen in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart“ held in Leipzig on the occasion of the 850th anniversary of the Leipzig Trade Fairs. The volume deals with the history of trade fairs in Europe between the early middle ages (9th century) and the end of the 19th century. It compiles over 18 contributions, which in itself indicates the wide variety of historical experiences of fairs held in different parts of the European continent. The book contributors clearly identify fairs as having the following properties: an economic event with long duration (2 weeks), the presence of credit and capital arrangements that allowed for cashless payments, and in bringing commodities, buyers and sellers together over long-distances. This separates fairs clearly from the bewildering number of other trade markets in European history, that were more locally organized or involved selling to end-customers.

The aim of the book, according to the editor Markus Denzel, is to assert the importance of fairs as key innovative commercial institutions, of commercial exchange, regional development and economic integration, that have marked European economic history in the last millennium (p. 12). A typical contribution of this book highlights the development (and demise) of a fair system in a set location, for instance in England or Switzerland, and how it connected geographically dispersed areas and spawned long-distance commerce. In doing so, it becomes clear that the importance of fairs as innovative commercial institutions differs significantly, in terms of periodization and space. In Western Europe, especially the low countries, England and France, fairs generally lose their importance as essential institutions of organizing long-distance commerce at the expense of maritime trade and permanently organized business during late medieval times. In contrast, other contributions emphasize the continuing

role of fairs in European economic history, especially in organizing overland trade between the Eurasian land mass with central Europe, until the late 19th century.

The key strength of this book is that it succeeds in offering an encompassing overview on the history of fairs in Europe, as drivers of long-distance trade. The individual book contributions cover the history of fairs in most parts of Europe, from the Ottoman empire to Spain, and even beyond, with contributions of Scheltens on Eurasia and of Pieper on the Spanish oversea empire. The ambitious geographical focus makes this book unique and sets a new standard in the historiography of fairs. Other key publications in the history of European fairs have typically focused on individual fairs, especially on the experience of the Leipzig Trade Fairs.¹ In that regard, it represents a major step forwards. In addition, most of the contributions follow a *longue durée* perspective, questioning why fairs in a certain era emerged, in what constellation, and what cities and people that were connected by it, but also explaining their demise. These system-approaches make it possible for the reader to identify major cleavages, trends and patterns of the European trade fair system, or to look for particularities of fairs in a certain area. Lastly, the book is also remarkably rich in indicating new horizons of research. The overview chapter of Manfred Straube in the beginning of the book reveals a number of missing links that remain under-researched, like the traders that connected the fairs, or the transport systems, but also the organization of trade on fairs itself. Other individual contributions also provide new avenues of research, like Scheltens on the historiography of the trade fairs in Russia. These indications turn the book into a very useful instrument for scholars who are pursuing new research into the history of European fairs, as well as for medieval and early modern economic historians more generally.

The main disadvantage of this work is its struggle with balance and structure. The 18 contributions are for instance not subdivided in a number of themes, due to the similarity of approaches, i.e. geographical case-studies.

¹ Hartmut Zwahr (Hrsg.), *Leipzigs Messen: 1497-1997. Gestaltwandel - Umbrüche - Neubeginn*, Köln 1999.

There are few contributions that use a different perspective, and there is a lack of comparison and contrasting. As such, there is little systematic attention for the various causes and consequences of the fair trade system, and related facets, like patterns of mobility and financial innovations. These issues are tackled indirectly. True, the individual chapters feed us of course with much detail and valuable explanations, but remain rooted in single case-studies making it more hard for the readers the find answers to more general (and related) questions of fairs in Europe. The volume is also not well integrated. While the chapter of Straube sets out a number of issues in the historiography of fairs in the beginning of the book, few of the contributions directly engage with some of these issues (mobility, finance, transportation systems) raised in this chapter. In turning the conferences papers into a book, the editors have thus missed the opportunity to better integrate the individual contributions in an overarching whole. The book would have profited from a more extended introduction that identifies key points and results of the ensemble, rather than letting the reader search them in the web of case-studies. Yet it should be noted that the lack of balance surely does not discredit the quality of the individual contributions, which are generally well researched, informed and written. Lastly, the imbalance also refers to the periodization of the book. It is regrettable, while the book takes the early medieval ages into account, that it does not consist of any contributions that deal with the fairs in 20th century and even today. Especially after World War I, there was a strong revival of fairs in Germany (Frankfurt, Berlin), but also in Europe more broadly (Utrecht, London). The revival was inspired by the successful introduction of the sample fairs, by the Leipzig Trade Fairs, in the 19th century.² A few chapters on this development would have made the book even more complete.

In spite of these imbalances in the structure and periodization, this book is a landmark in medieval and early modern economic history, as it focuses on one of the most important - yet sometimes undervalued - economic institutions in organizing long-distance commerce in Europe. It is a unique and exciting work in the

sense that it pioneers the history of fairs from an European perspective, as well as it highlights avenues for further research. It will be of great interest to readers that are interested in finding answers to the general importance of fairs in processes of economic integration and commercial organisation, and thanks to its breathtaking geographical coverage, as well as for those that are looking for the economic history of particular areas.

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²Stephen Gross, *Export Empire. German Soft Power in Southeastern Europe, 1890-1945*, Cambridge, 2017, p. 72.