

Straßen im 16. Jahrhundert: Erhalt – Nutzung – Wahrnehmung.
Ding, Materialität, Geschichte 5.

By Alexander Denzler. Cologne: Böhlau, 2023. pp. 544.

Mobility is a basic historical and general constant of the *conditio humana*. While historical research has repeatedly dealt with the social, religious, and cultural conditions of mobility and migration in particular, its material basis has tended to be neglected. This is the starting point for Alexander Denzler's professorial dissertation, which breaks new ground in various ways.

After a concise overview of the secondary literature with differentiated consideration of the conceptual disparities in historical scholarship on streets, the introduction explains the aim of the study, the source basis, and the methodological approach. The volume aims to examine the natural and material conditions of the street in the sixteenth century. To this end, Denzler analyzes the maintenance, locomotion, and appropriation practices of the time, thereby acknowledging his commitment to the historical praxeology that has recently shaped the discourse in the historical sciences. Furthermore, he reveals his hermeneutic premise at the outset: "Streets are thus to be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon that was 1. materially existent, 2. socially marked, 3. sovereignly-legally percolated, and 4. the result of preconditioned social practices" (p.14).

Denzler highlights the shortcomings of older research on early modern streets, according to which they were in poor condition and were chronically underfunded in the early modern period. To prove his point, he analyzes the diverse manifestations, uses, maintenance practices, and forms of appropriation of transport routes by people in relation to nature. Denzler examines the many streets and paths of the sixteenth century, focusing on the Upper German region, with the centers of Augsburg, Nuremberg, Ulm, Regensburg, and in particular Nuremberg a "traffic junction" of the sixteenth century.

With regard to the maintenance of streets in the sixteenth century, Denzler strives for an analysis of street maintenance from below and thus an appreciation of the social dimensions of street construction. A further object of investigation is the analysis of the material condition of sixteenth-century streets in the context of the tense relationship between humans and nature. Methodologically, the study follows a praxeological and environmental-historical approach that focuses on the various "doings" (practices) and "sayings" (speech acts) in relation to streets conceptualized as a "contact zone of humans and nature." By including the "artifacts" of streets in the sixteenth century, Denzler

also calls attention to the materiality of the early modern street in the sense of the material turn, centering on the concept of the “street space” defined from a pluralistic approach. Denzler applies this diverse set of research questions, research objectives, and methodological considerations to an impressively broad array of sources, including account books and official records, treatises on *Policey*, territorial and village orders, official and private correspondence, court records and cartographic representations, country surveys, leaflets, itineraries, travel reports, travel prayers, and travel guides.

Denzler’s study is divided into five systematic chapters and presents five fields of investigation: namely visualization and terminology; travel; materiality; governance; and micromobility.

Following the introduction, Chapter 2 is devoted to the blurring of many terms mentioned above. Here, Denzler shows that a schematic typology of the phenomenon “street” misses an essential aspect of the premodern “street,” which was characterized precisely by its hybrid form of use and thus also of name. In addition to this aspect of historical semantics, Denzler uses a broad and methodically differentiated selection of sources to analyze the techniques used to create visual renderings of streets in the sixteenth century, which oscillated between “aestheticizing fictionality and documenting factuality” (p.107).

With these analyses, Denzler is able to demonstrate, for example, the methods used to assert the public significance of streets in early modern leaflets or the relevance of visual depictions to emphasize the importance of the roadside. Overall, according to Denzler, in the sixteenth century there was a “typological canon of representational elements for the visual description of street space” (p.102), which was less diverse than the semantic field of “street.” Denzler describes an intensification of the administrative recording of physical space in the second half of the sixteenth century, which can be seen in the country descriptions and mapping projects. In addition, this chapter examines the roadside as an inherent component of the street space that has been particularly extensively shaped by people, also making it clear that the sacralization of the street space unfolded through roadside shrines and roadside crosses. Leaflets, on the other hand, reflected the public nature of the street in the sixteenth century and used selective depictions in specific contexts, especially in the case of street crimes.

Chapter 3 examines various anthropogenic forms of interaction and experiences with the street space. To this end, Denzler analyzes itineraries, travel reports, travel guides, and, in particular, medical and theological travel instructions (the so-called apodemics, in the discussion of which Denzler draws in particular on the two *Reißbüchlein* by the humanist physician Georg

Pictorius and the Lutheran theologian Michael Sachs). In doing so, he ultimately focuses on the plural practices of traveling, with which the physicality of the travel experience correlated significantly. Denzler seems to have three things in mind: the physical challenges of the itinerary, the constraints and possibilities for action of biomotor-induced locomotion, and the dependence on the street space as an essential point of reference for the world of experience reflected by contemporaries. In principle, according to Denzler, a direct interweaving of actors, physicality, mobility, and nature was characteristic of travel in the sixteenth century. His remarks on travel *memoria* in the sixteenth century and the “great silence” of contemporaries about the travel routes and streets they encountered are particularly fascinating. Denzler contends that a street space is constituted and produced in the first place and ultimately also categorized according to the travel itineraries he has examined.

Chapter 4, which focuses on the materiality of streets in the sixteenth century, deserves special mention. Denzler examines this aspect on two levels. In addition to the material resources of streets, he also includes the workforce that maintained the streets in the sixteenth century. Ultimately, he provides a vivid picture of the multi-layered maintenance practice of the transport infrastructure (streets, bridges, paths) in the early modern period. This is all based on the specific case study of the imperial city of Nuremberg and the municipal accounts of the street and bridge office (*Weg- und Stegamt*) from 1544 to 1562. The focus of the study is therefore on the actors and resources involved in maintenance and repair. Particularly important is Denzler’s observation at the very beginning of the chapter concerning the double dependence of infrastructure on nature (building resources from nature and deterioration due to nature). In this chapter, Denzler vividly and comprehensibly discusses the multifaceted work process for the maintenance of streets and bridges by various actors, materially and pecuniarily, through labor, knowledge, pious efforts by charitable foundations, and governmental action. Last but not least, Denzler is also able to make the various actors involved in street maintenance (including officials and building craftsmen, such as stonemasons, carpenters, foresters, blacksmiths, laborers, henchmen, peons, and unpaid peasants) tangible, and he impressively traces their scope of action and everyday work lives.

In Chapter 5, Denzler examines street rule in the sixteenth century in order to determine the significance of streets for rule and society within the territorialization process characteristic of this era. He repeatedly and convincingly points out the disparate “openness of the records,” which entails specific heuristic, epistemological, and methodological challenges. Denzler is particularly concerned with the tension between the usability of the streets

and the actions of the rulers with regard to the streets. Another aspect is the controversial and constantly renegotiated street peace in the sixteenth century, i.e., the question of safety on the streets in the sense of an increasing securitization as an “imagined ideal and practiced obligation of rule.” Denzler is able to show how streets were a “symbol and means of rule.” He sums this up in the concise formula “ruling with and over streets.” Denzler does not understand this dynamic negotiation process of “‘street-related’ acts of rule” as a mere top-down process of rulers vis-à-vis their subjects, but also focuses in particular on intermediary actors, such as tax collectors, carters, and merchants, whose street-related supplications he examines in more detail. In particular, Denzler’s analysis of cross-confessional cooperation between the Catholic prince-bishops of Würzburg and the Protestant dukes of Saxe-Coburg with regard to street maintenance policy should also be highlighted, as it allows us to question and, to a certain extent, deconstruct sometimes overly monolithic interpretations of the so-called confessional age. Questions and investigations pointing in this direction of the possible confessionality (*Konfessionalität*) of streets and transport infrastructure in the sixteenth century would be very welcome in the future. In this chapter, Denzler is also able to show that street inspections as a form of authoritative quality management already began in the sixteenth century, which had not been taken into account in earlier research.

Chapter 6, with which the book comes to a close, focuses on streets as a communal resource within the rural neighborhood and social proximity of the early modern village. Drawing on recent research on premodern rural society, Denzler assumes three levels of actors for the village in the early modern period: 1. village community; 2. officeholders; 3. governance. Here, Denzler focuses on the villagers and unpaid laborers and analyzes their scope of action as empowering interactions. He calls attention to the micromobility of rural society in the context of rural mobility and street maintenance practices, which has been largely overlooked in the earlier scholarship. To this end, Denzler focuses on the small streets that were essential for the (village) proximity of rural society and the production and use of rural street space. Denzler convincingly and quite rightly classifies these supposedly small streets as central components of the premodern street system, which were constitutive of the everyday reality of life for the majority of the village population. Denzler provides these analyses on the basis of the village orders he examined, paying particular attention to responsibilities and maintenance practices. He defines the maintenance of the streets by the village community in the field of tension between cooperation and individual responsibility. However, Denzler also identifies the divergent and sometimes very different spectrum of normative regulation in such village

orders. He takes a critical look at the relationship between authorities and subjects in the sixteenth-century village, convincingly demonstrating that the ruling and the common socage at this time were not exclusively coercive and were only reluctantly fulfilled by the subjects as a burden. Rather, the work necessary to provide such traffic-infrastructure services was fundamentally accepted, as the subjects performed unpaid street socage (*Straßenfronen*) for the government but also for themselves and the other subjects.

In general, Denzler notes an increase in the importance of the street system in the sixteenth century. He quite rightly points to the close correlation between the intensified use of streets and the changing world and spatial experiences of the people of the time. Furthermore, he repeatedly emphasizes the fundamental processual nature of mobility and locomotion, identifying the carriage as an innovation in travel, and he even speaks of an incipient carriage age in this context. Denzler draws a differentiated, convincing picture of the streets as plural-used, sensitive spaces of economy and trade, property, money, and monetary materialities, also postulating that the technology of street and road construction before the construction of the causeway was characterized by the participation of many non-experts.

The summaries at the end of each main chapter are particularly useful. Unfortunately, the book does not contain an index of persons or places, which would have facilitated more targeted and faster access for future case analyses. Some linguistic errors only slightly diminish the overall very good impression of the study, which remains a consistently pleasant read.

Alexander Denzler concludes his study with a concise summary of the important results of his analysis, projecting all the individual findings back onto the three areas of practices that were ultimately constitutive for the sixteenth-century street: 1) practices of use and transportation, 2) practices of maintenance, and 3) practices of exchange and appropriation. In doing so, he cleverly ties his findings to the fundamental praxeological methodology of his study. Denzler has offered an impressively nuanced new perspective on street history by overcoming the deficiencies (and oversimplifications) of prevailing perceptions of the early modern street system.

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