

SUMMARY

*A Fragmentised Special Group? Reflections  
on Processes of Group Building and  
Differentiation in the Great Guild in  
Riga at the End of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*

This article argues with Max Weber's thesis of the unity of the occidental city and underlines the existence of different factions within the cities' population. The analysis has its focus on the Great Guild's leading institution, the Bench of Elders, explains its political role both within the city and within the Guild and asks questions about its (re-)generation and cohesion. There is evidence that the means and markers used for the group building process of the elders were always combined with creating a border more between them and the ordinary members of the Great Guild than between the Guild and the other inhabitants of the city. Thus, future research should not take the cohesion of the Great Guild for granted and rather take into account that it might not have been the type of unified community in Riga's public life which the older literature usually referred to. In discussing such internal fragmentation, this article focusses on three aspects:

Political participation in Riga depended on membership in one of the two guilds. All political functions carried out by the guilds were staffed both by the eldest and ordinary members of the guilds. Therefore, it was quite obvious that the Great Guild did not act as a monolithic unit. In contrast, its inner segregation was thus carried into Riga's political public practice.

There were special prerogatives for the elders that differentiated them similarly from the ordinary guild members, in the first place. The segregation from the population of Riga was only of secondary importance. For instance, the elders could borrow the guild's silver plate for free. Gifts and book's dedications were made to them as the elders, and they had special church pews in St. Peter's Church where nobody was allowed to sit but them. Again, the inner separation of the guild was carried visually into the public sphere.

Finally, there was a certain spatial, ceremonial and processual separation as well. During all meetings there always was a clear demarcation between the elders and the ordinary members of the guild: for instance, at the Shrovetide-feast as the most important annual meeting of the Great Guild, or at ordinary political discussions with the magistrate, which were carried out exclusively by the elders. Whereas the guild members assembled in the Great Guild's Hall, the elders assembled in the Bride's Chamber. Discussions between both groups took place only in a highly ritualised

manner: one or two elders met the speaker of the guild-members at the statue of Mother Mary in the Guild in order to learn about the resolutions of both parties.