

[Lauer on Wysmułek, 'History of Wills, Testators and Their Families in Late Medieval Krakow: Tools of Power'](#)

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Jakub Wysmułek. *History of Wills, Testators and Their Families in Late Medieval Krakow: Tools of Power*. Later Medieval Europe Series. Leiden: Brill, 2021. Illustrations, graphs, tables. 420 pp. Open Access (e-book), ISBN 978-90-04-46144-4; \$154.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-44816-2.

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Commissioned by Robin Buller (University of California - Berkeley)

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Jakub Wysmułek's *History of Wills, Testators and Their Families in Late Medieval Krakow* is a data-driven assessment of the development of the secular testamentary tradition in Poland, where such civic documentary culture arrived later than in many other parts of Europe. This hefty work investigates the last wills of elites, aristocrats, and burghers, predominantly in the city of Krakow, for which the most robust set of wills survives. The "late medieval" period of the title is essentially 1300-1550, although the number of surviving wills dramatically increases in the late fourteenth century.

The book's fundamental argument is that this secular testamentary culture came out of a combination of the church-focused bequest system ("canonical wills") and influence from western European and Roman legal traditions. Wysmułek argues that the wills were part of a project of individualization, by which he means an evolving emphasis on individual desires, whereas kin-group goals had largely motivated earlier inheritance traditions. What also comes out of the argument, though less expressly articulated, is the role of wills as a tool of growing urban councils to assert their authority, including their authority over the ecclesiastical institutions that previously had wide jurisdiction over bequest making. Beyond this argument, the book is a social historical assessment of late medieval Krakow through the lens of the wills left by Christian testators. Its historiographic interventions remain very much focused on this Polish context. But the point is relevant far beyond Krakow: wills are not simply a reflection of social change but agents of that change as well. This agency was wielded by a diverse set of individuals and institutions, including the testator, to serve their own goals.

The book is divided into four main chapters. The first chapter considers the evolution of pious bequests and inheritance traditions in Poland, with attention to law and local custom. Wysmułek emphasizes the role of church orders in bringing testamentary culture to Poland, while also arguing that wills became increasingly connected to the secular city council and controlled by secular courts. The second chapter assesses the people who left wills, using the documents themselves to account for social and political position, occupation, and wealth status, the last of which is, in part, correlated to the worth of dowers (i.e., money and goods given to a wife) referenced in the wills. This chapter also dips into the gender of testators as well as their place of origin, highlighting how wills reflect ongoing ties to hometowns. A useful frame that shapes this chapter is the reminder that a will reveals only one moment of a testator's life and that socioeconomic status (among other features) can change over

time.

Chapter 3 moves from the individual to the family unit, with the understanding that “wills allowed individuals to shape desirable family relationships” (p. 207). Here, Wysmułek is interested in references to wives and widows, as well as the treatment of children and other relatives and dependents in wills. We see here how local customs at times overrode official statutory laws when it came to familial inheritance. This chapter engages at times with the emotional component of wills, especially between spouses. Chapter 4 attends to religious life, first thinking through the clergy to whom bequests were left and the material objects of religiosity that appear in wills, before turning to the religious communities to which testators felt attached.

As I am writing for an H-Judaic audience, let me stress that this book does not address Jews. Echoes of Jewish life appear in the topography of medieval Krakow that pervades the wills—Jewish Tower, Jewish Street, Jewish gate, Jewish bathhouse—and in the occasional reference to a massacre of Jews. But this book is entirely focused on its source base, making it so that the city of Krakow is denuded of its Jews; throughout the study, “burgher” is a remarkably capacious term, but it refers only to Christians. Because this book aims to use wills to give a sense of the urban landscape, such a lacuna does limit the text’s own goals. As a historian, Wysmułek is not insensitive to Jews; his 2022 article in *The History of the Family* focuses exclusively on Jewish households in early modern Poznan, Lviv, and Worms.[1] But that interest and attention remain absent in this book.

Much of the testamentary data conclusions drawn from it will come as little surprise to those who have engaged with wills, including Jewish wills. Most testators were those who had enough goods to make writing a will worthwhile, particularly elites, though occasionally poorer members of society left a will for their own reasons. Bequests highlight family relationships as well as connections to confraternities and guilds. Wills demonstrate the entanglement between the material and the spiritual. Sometimes evidence of bequests left out of obligation gives way to hints of affective ties, not only to spouses but even at times also to servants.

The novel takeaway here, then, is the emphasis on wills as not only a reflection of changing social realities but also as a tool promoting and facilitating those social realities. For Wysmułek, for example, the will actually changed the relationship between members of the late medieval burgher family by framing the contractual bonds between them. Wills, and control over them, actually empowered city councils and secular courts through their jurisdiction over the documents.

At many points, the book is essentially a prose rendering of a great database of information that Wysmułek has derived from wills and adjacent materials. Other moments provide thought-provoking, but often cursory, entrees into the social and spiritual world of wills. For the H-Judaic reader, these moments may be the most useful as they motivate questions relevant far beyond Christian Poland and far beyond wills. Chapter 4, on “burgher religiosity,” does perhaps the best job of considering the implications beyond the database and muses about the concentric circles of community that form “urban religiosity” in Krakow and beyond. This chapter begins as a recounting of data about the clergy and religious items mentioned in the wills and turns into a discussion on the meaning of giving one’s personal items—buckles, silver cups, buttons, spoons—as pious donations to the church. Though we may tend to think of these items as stand-ins for monetary values, Wysmułek posits that there was a tighter relationship between one’s own stuff among medieval people than exists today,

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and as a result a donated item or even an item given to be melted down and molded into a ritual object allowed the testator to give something that “contain[ed], in a symbolic way,” a piece of themselves (p. 267). Whether this argument is convincing or not, it certainly calls for more meaningful discussion about how to parse the symbolism of the material culture of wills and other bequests. Likewise, part of the chapter argues that altars and other church foundations funded by burgher bequests were part of a broader promotion of the burgher family, and not just the testators themselves, thus highlighting the “family dimension of urban religiosity” (p. 277). He then turns beyond the family, to think about feelings of attachment to the religious community on the fraternity, parish, citywide, and even broader Christian levels. A reader wishes for more analytic engagement at this level throughout the book, and chapter 4 does provide quite a different flavor than the preceding chapters through both its analysis and its attention to a wider historiography beyond the Polish milieu.

Overall, I am sure that the data offered in this book will be useful to an audience interested in late medieval Poland. For those of us thinking about last wills in a premodern context, this book certainly presents us with some fruitfully provocative questions about the relationship between political power and testaments, as well as the semiotics of bequests. It also reminds us of how we must put wills in conversation with other genres and contexts in order to get a full picture of the society in which these documents were produced, and their broader meanings.

Note

[1]. Jakub Wysmulek, "Change and Adaptation: Jewish Households in Lviv, Worms and Poznan in Early Modern Times," *History of the Family* 27, no. 1 (2022): 145-80.

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