

war, and were also instigated at the local level and not mandated by the Saxon state, which allowed the city to assert its civic power. Yet even when the city enacted reforms in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, it changed very little about what Robilliard labels the “culture of urban midwifery.”

One other area that Robilliard might have explored further is the actual practices of midwives and their helpers. While she clearly discusses the relationships between medical practitioners, a level of detail about their activities is missing. This is perhaps a personal preference of the reviewer, but the title and subtitle—“tending mothers” and “the work of the midwife”—set up an expectation of a deeper picture of the immediate situation in the birthing chamber and the detailed actions of the midwives. Likewise, while the bureaucratic detail is key to her conclusions about the agency of midwives in relation to male practitioners and the city’s power, Robilliard’s diagrams of networks are sometimes more dizzying than helpful.

Yet these minor complaints do not detract from the importance of her argument for a more independent and consistent midwifery practice in early modern Leipzig, which undermines long-held presumptions about medical practice, gender, and expertise.

Margaret B. Lewis, *University of Tennessee at Martin*
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The Convent of Wesel: The Event That Never Was and the Invention of Tradition.
Jesse Spohnholz.

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On 3 November 1968, the German city of Wesel hosted an extravagant celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of the Convent of Wesel. A secret, underground meeting of more than fifty German and Dutch Reformed leaders, the Convent had long been considered one of the key founding moments in the history of the Dutch Reformed Church. Fifty years after this modern-day commemoration—and the book’s title negates any necessity of a spoiler alert—historian Jesse Spohnholz tells us that this famous event never happened. What follows is a master class in historical detection, as well as a thoughtful argument about the shaping of historical memory.

To be fair, Spohnholz admits that historians had been expressing doubts about the received story since at least the eighteenth century, and in the years since the four hundredth anniversary some scholars have speculated that the meeting might have taken place elsewhere at a different time. Through meticulous archival work, however, Spohnholz definitively establishes that no such group of Reformed leaders met in Wesel or anywhere else during this period, and that the document of 122 articles was the work of one man, Petrus Dathenus, transcribed by his loyal associate, Herman Moded. Not only is there no contemporary reference whatsoever to such a

gathering, but it would have been impossible for such a large assembly to debate and come to a consensus on so many wide-ranging issues within the course of one day. At the same time, Spohnholz determines that the document was truly written on the given date in Wesel, and that Moded later gathered signatures in northern Germany, the Netherlands, and England. In the end, sadly, the high hopes of the articles' drafter for a new Reformed Church were dashed, with both Dathenus and Moded dying estranged from the movement they had championed. Just as importantly, Spohnholz makes a convincing argument that the document had no impact whatsoever on future consequential meetings in Emden or Dordt (Dordrecht).

The book then turns to a fascinating analysis of the construction of a myth. The years following the Synod of Dordt, in 1618, found Reformed leaders in England and on the Continent divided over Arminian interpretations of the tradition. When the Counter-Remonstrant Simon Ruyfinck found the Wesel document in a collection of papers at the Dutch church in London, he readily included it among the succession of orthodox Calvinist synods and meetings of the past fifty years (conveniently skipping over its less orthodox components). The newly dubbed National Synod of Wesel thus served to consolidate the anti-Arminian history of the Reformed Church. A century later, orthodox Catholic nationalists similarly celebrated the Synod of Wesel as a bulwark against creeping Enlightenment thought and secularism. The two hundredth anniversary of this imagined assembly was commemorated at Wesel with numerous German and Dutch clergymen celebrating the ancient wisdom of Presbyterian values. During the nineteenth century, perhaps due to suspicions of some historians, the meeting was given the neologism of *convent*, although its significance in Reformed tradition remained strong. Not until 1971 did archivist Jan Pieter van Dooren challenge the very existence of the synod/convent, attributing the Wesel articles to an earlier meeting in Antwerp—whose existence Spohnholz also disputes.

In a powerful conclusion, the author returns to several themes that emerge over the course of the book, particularly on the imagined coherence of the Reformation movement, even among denominations. His investigation calls for close attention to archival classifications of sources, careful review of the provenance of key documents, and a philosophical acceptance of the fundamental unknowability of the past. Spohnholz fervently resists, however, heading in a nihilist direction on historical interpretations, instead counseling caution—particularly regarding the fluidity of confessional boundaries during the first century of the Reformation and the tendency of later historians, originally for denominational purposes, to ignore such ambiguity. It's hard to argue with such wise advice, which provides a fitting and satisfying coda for an outstanding product of the historian's craft in action.

Joel F. Harrington, *Vanderbilt University*
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