In what way and when does a historical occurrence or experience become a significant historical event? According to one widely-shared view, it is largely the later history of an event, and above all the interpretations of historians, that decide, for it is primarily they who engage in the process of assessment and, from a more or less great temporal distance, determine the character of an occurrence as a significant historical event.\(^1\)

Such a view cannot be upheld for the capture and destruction of the city of Magdeburg on 20 May 1631.\(^2\) In this case, contemporary ideas, experiences and representations already elevated the factual event to the status of a historical one. In a certain sense, one might even say that the historical significance of this incident as a key event in the Thirty Years’ War was cemented even before it happened. At any rate, Magdeburg was already a site of heroic memory for Protestant Germany long before the occurrences of 20 May 1631. The city had acquired this ‘fame’ in the mid sixteenth-century wars of religion, particularly during and after the Schmalkaldic War, when it successfully defied the imperial declaration of proscription as well as siege by the troops of Moritz of Saxony in 1550–51. Even this earlier siege had been less a play for domination over a strategically and economically-important commercial and fortified city than an intervention in a symbolic centre of Protestant Germany. Magdeburg was considered ‘our Lord God’s chancellery’\(^3\) – a rebellious centre of Lutheran Protestantism in the north of the Holy Roman Empire, which had ‘stood up well to the emperor’. Magdeburg also lived up to its reputation in 1629, when it resisted the siege of Wallenstein’s troops until a favourable accord could be reached and the army retreated. ‘Hold fast, Magdeburg, thou well-built house: foreign guests are coming to cast thee out...’ was a song that, according to the contemporary account of the Premonstratensian provost Zacharias Bandhauer, was sung in 1629 and in the period immediately following ‘in all the city’s taverns and in the streets’.\(^4\) This song invokes a historically-developed consciousness of the threat to the city’s religious and political liberty, as well as of Protestant resistance.

When the siege of the city by the troops of the emperor and the Catholic League under Field Marshals Tilly and Pappenheim began in the autumn
Fig. 1. Downfall and Hope for Swedish Revenge in the Summer of 1631. The Sleeping Maiden Magdeburg Holding a Weapon-Sprouting Tree of Life. Copperplate engraving of 1631.

Fig. 2. Siege, Bombardment and Devastation of Magdeburg in May 1631 from the Perspective of the Victors. Copperplate engraving by Daniel Mannasser, Augsburg 1631.
of 1630, perceptions of Magdeburg’s situation were thus already well established both within and outside the city. On the one hand, the conviction dominated that ‘God’s chancellery’ played a central role in the history of Protestant liberty. On the other, it was accompanied by uncertain expectations for the future, which hovered in a liminal state of ambivalence, caught between a sense of peril and assertions that the city could resist. Attitudes towards resistance among the population were ambivalent, at any rate. Thus the city’s Lutheran clergy, together with a small group of the council elite and the overwhelming majority of merchants and artisans, supported a position of determined partisanship for the Protestant cause. They drew their hopes not only from the coalition that the city had entered with Sweden and Gustavus Adolphus’s promise of intervention. Even more important were the eschatological and apocalyptic expectations that gained strength particularly in the years 1631 and 1632. According to this view, the city’s fate was inextricably interwoven with God’s plan of salvation and the life to come. Thus a capture and destruction of the city brought about by a Catholic ‘anti-Christ’ as divine punishment was also considered possible. It was precisely in these expectations that Magdeburg was assigned a historical role parallel to the warning example of Jerusalem. ‘May God mercifully prevent this from being an evil omen and Magdeburg from going the way of Jerusalem’, said Dr Reinhard Bake in his Sunday sermon at Magdeburg Cathedral on 1 August 1630. He preached on the text prescribed for that Sunday, Luke 19: 42–4, in which Christ predicts the downfall of the city of Jerusalem with the following words:

For the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another in you; because you did not know the time of your visitation.

With his sermon, Bake placed the city’s immediate future in a situation of choice between divine punishment and salvation. At the same time, he attempted to promote the Swedish coalition, which the town council reluctantly resolved that same day. The greater part of the patrician council elite – among them Otto von Guericke – believed that the city was less endangered religiously than politically. Far removed from any partisanship for the Lutheran cause, the supporters of this position were primarily concerned to preserve the integrity of the ‘Maiden Magdeburg’ from outside incursions, that is, to preserve the city’s communal autonomy and a remnant of political independence within the Holy Roman Empire. They thus referred to the ‘example . . . of the neutrality of the other neighbouring electors and cities’, and sought compromises with the imperial and League forces. According to Otto von Guericke, the Lutheran party within the city and its Swedish coalition partners, in contrast, aimed to make a true example ‘and
to draw the state of war \((\textit{status belli})\) and all the smoke of war to Magdeburg... and... to install and create there an impregnable Ark and seat of war \((\textit{inexpugnabilem arcem aut sedem belli})\).\(^\text{10}\)

For contemporaries outside the city as well, perceptions of the siege had already been influenced by the consciousness of an approaching decisive ‘historical’ situation. These expectations determined military strategy and theological interpretation alike, not to mention the ‘news reporting’ in the secular information media of the time. If for Marshal Pappenheim and, somewhat less crucially, for Tilly rule over Magdeburg represented ‘the foundation and centre of the war’,\(^\text{11}\) and the cornerstone of a possible confessional reconquest of the north and east of the empire, this was also reflected in theological perceptions on the Protestant side: the song ‘Of the Noble, Afflicted and Hard-pressed Lower Saxon Maiden or Virgin and of her Fortress, Faith and Trust’ \((\textit{Von der Edlen, betrübten und bedrängten Nidersächsischen Magd- oder Jungfrauen von derselben Burgk, Glauben und Vertrauen})\) appears here as a sort of fighting song. It was to be sung to the melody of ‘A Mighty Fortress is Our God’ and was printed together with the closing prayer of the Leipzig convention of Lutheran princes held in the spring of 1631. The men besieging the city were portrayed as ‘Roman blood-hounds’ who, in dominating the ‘mighty fortress of Magdeburg’, sought ‘primacy in Germania’ and thus the dominion of the papal anti-Christ over the emperor.\(^\text{12}\)

The siege of Magdeburg was treated not only in song but also in accounts in newspapers of a neutral, Swedish-Protestant or imperial-Catholic persuasion published between Hamburg, Munich and Vienna. It is striking here how early on the siege was emphasized and continuously reported.\(^\text{13}\) The impending event already began to crystallize in December 1630. It became the focus of an atmosphere of anticipation conveyed by the media: the siege was perceived and portrayed as a process that was moving towards a religiously and politically-significant decision and thus towards a determining event. The liminal perspective here is also remarkable, though. What I mean is the widespread uncertainty about the outcome of the event, which persisted, astonishingly enough, even after the city fell on 20 May 1631. There was a wide discrepancy between the news and any certain belief in it. This resulted only in part from problems of information and communication at the time. On the Lutheran side, at least, it may also be attributed to a religiously-inspired resistance to unbelievable bad ‘news’. For a few days, expectations of the ‘mighty fortress’ managed to outweigh the sober factual reports of the citys capture and destruction. Thus a report of 29 May from Erfurt, which appeared in the \textit{Leipzig Postzeitungen}, noted that news of the capture of Magdeburg was still being met with scepticism there, even eight days after the event: ‘Although many doubt the capture of Magdeburg, it is all too certain, and the misery scarcely to be described’.\(^\text{14}\)

This uncertainty and the conflicting opinions on whether the Magdeburg incidents had actually taken place, and what the outcome had or had not
been, were manifested in different forms, even including the placing of bets. It is striking, in any case, that in larger cities such as Leipzig and Nuremberg people were still betting money on the successful defence of the city even after news of Magdeburg’s fall had reached them. Thus the Munich Wochentliche Ordinari Zeitung printed the following report of 24 May from Nuremberg:

With the capture of the strong and fortified city of Magdeburg large bets continue to be placed upon it here. We await more certain news as to whether the greater part of the city has been burnt down and so many people struck down causing great misery, as is claimed and has been made public here.15

In the postal and information centre of Leipzig, in contrast, the ‘sad news’ from Magdeburg was already considered ‘certain’ on 22 May, as the pro-Swedish Reichs-Zeitungen reported:

Leipzig the 12th [22 May by the new calendar] ditto. It is certain that Magdeburg has been taken by storm, the administrator and sergeant-major Übler taken prisoner, the citizenry, along with many women and children horribly slain, the city, save twenty houses, burnt to the ground, in sum, [the besieging army] proceeded with barbarity beyond all measure.16

It took longer for word to reach Vienna, and even longer for it to be believed. The (from the imperial-Catholic standpoint) ‘happy and fortunate news’ was not immediately or widely accepted. For two days, people remained unsure about the truth of reports. Only Tilly’s official courier brought ultimate certainty:

On Monday [26 May], just at noon, a man arrived here from Magdeburg with the happy and fortunate news that on the 20th of this month at ten o’clock in the morning Your Excellency took by storm the world-famed fortified city of Magdeburg, which had heretofore been a virgin, but having brought no details of it, the non-Catholics living here did not wish to believe it, until the evening of the day before yesterday [29 May] when a special courier from Your Excellency General Tylli [sic] arrived with the particulars, which will soon be specified in more detail.17

Only at a distance of several days did the news thus become increasingly ‘certain’ that the ‘military stronghold’ (Wehrstadt) of North-German Protestantism (as Gustav Droysen, the son of Johann Gustav Droysen called it, in contrast to Wittenberg as the didactic centre or Lehrstadt)18 had been stormed by the troops of the imperial and League armies under Field Marshals Tilly and Pappenheim on 20 May 1631 and a large proportion of
its inhabitants annihilated, by the violence of the conquerors, but above all by a terrible conflagration. With this, the historical significance of this event as a 'hideous tragedy'\textsuperscript{19} was established. It certainly did not need to be 'invented' by later historians.

It is remarkable, at any rate, not only how news of the event elicited consternation, and indeed horror, among contemporaries, but also how quickly a process of assessment and historical categorization set in. This was the case for Christian II of Anhalt-Bernburg, for example. This Calvinist prince, who had fought as a regimental commander on the side of Frederick V of the Palatinate at the beginning of the war but had since made his peace with the emperor, experienced the capture and destruction of the city in his palace only a few miles outside Magdeburg. He was not an actual eyewitness, but as a contemporary he was directly confronted with the consequences of events. He was moved not by the distant glow of the burning city on 20 May, but by the 'news' and 'reports' of immediate observers of the capture, pillaging and destruction of the city, which he received the next day. Only they rendered the event indisputable. 'This was no doubt the great and mighty fire that we saw burning yesterday.' The prince recorded the news and the impressions it aroused in him extensively in his diary, one of the most extraordinary autobiographical accounts from the period of the Thirty Years' War.\textsuperscript{20} Typical of these entries is not just the interweaving of perceptions and evaluations of events, but also his political conclusions and historical categorizations. If he conceded the politically and religiously revolutionary character of the event as a 'mighty victory ... both for his imperial majesty and the Catholic cause, and more especially for General Tilly, to the greater glory of his reputation and name', this admission was not restricted to his diary. It inspired the prince to take immediate political action: he congratulated Field Marshal Tilly on his victory. He obviously did so under duress and despite inner resistance. He was reluctant to admit it to himself even in his diary. Strikingly enough, the corresponding entry was written in French:

\textit{(Wednesday), 11th May [21 May, new calendar].
News that yesterday morning at 8 o'clock Magdeburg was captured, plundered, set ablaze, men, women and children struck down, administrator taken prisoner, Field Marshal Falkenberg remained. This is no doubt the great and mighty fire that we saw burning yesterday. Now the imperial forces have attained their intention, and can bend the entire Upper and Lower Saxon Kreis to their will and make such changes on behalf of religion (if God does not intervene) as they wish. This is the mighty victory and both for his imperial majesty and the Catholic cause and more especially for General Tilly, to the greater glory of his reputation and name.}

After hearing the sermon the provost came to me and reported more of the circumstances in Magdeburg. News that the king of Sweden is supposed to be in Zerbst.
J'ay escrit derechef de ma propre main a part au gl. Tilly le remerciant fort des sa intercession et luy congratulant sa victoire de Magdebourg, desirant une bonne paix en Allemagne etc. (I wrote once again in my own hand to Gen. Tilly thanking him warmly for his intercession and congratulating him upon his victory at Madgeburg, desiring a good peace in Germany etc.)

Prisoners brought here from Magdeburg report that the slaughter continued this morning and the city is completely burnt down, that no building remains but the cathedral. . . . If this mighty and beautiful city has been destroyed in such a short time and reduced to ashes, it is much to be pitied and its downfall to be lamented.21

Only four days after the event, on 25 May, he was already drawing historical conclusions. He did so, however, within an uncertain moral and theological framework:

One should not, to be sure, judge ex eventu [by the outcome] whether a matter be unjust or not, but it is sometimes permitted, especially when one has gained knowledge of something of the Circumstantiis injustitiae [unjust circumstances], which injustice then ravaged the land and people, as we can read in the prophets of Tyre, Sydon and Babel. General Tilly offered them [the people of Magdeburg] mercy on different occasions, but to no avail.22

The prince's diary entries portray the fall and destruction of the city as a 'tragedy' in which the inhabitants were not wholly innocent victims, thus justifying a moral, theological and historical judgement immediately after the event. The event assumed a particular historical status as 'tragedy' precisely because of the city's partial responsibility for its own fate: it appeared striking to the prince not just in comparison to the catastrophes in the history of his own dynasty and country and the Holy Roman Empire, but also in the broader context of world and Christian history, including the destruction of Jerusalem and the fall of Babylon:

It recalls to me the destruction of the city of Jerusalem, and no such tragedy has befallen such a city in the German empire and lands, and no such excellent city fallen so rapidly and been so suddenly and ultimately ruined (which reminds me of the fall of Babylon . . . ) since the time when Bardewyk, out of whose rubble Lüneburg was built, was taken by Henry the Lion against Bernhard I of Anhalt elector of Saxony and finally destroyed.23

It is remarkable, not only in the text of this almost-eyewitness, how early, practically simultaneously with the perception of the incidents, the capture and destruction of Magdeburg were elevated to the rank of an extraordinary
historical event. This also applies to a number of other contemporary reports, ranging from autobiographical accounts and letters to newspaper reports, pamphlets, broadsheets, songs and sermons.

Regardless of whether the fall of Magdeburg was portrayed from the perspective of the victors, or that of the vanquished, or by neutral observers, and of whether it seemed to be a ‘barbaric’ deed, an act of divine justice or a ‘tragedy’, its devastating nature was frequently emphasized by historical comparison. In this way, an occurrence that was still fresh and incomprehensible was transformed into a ‘historical’ event. To be sure, this mode of historicization assumed diverse forms and contents. Thus a few days after the terrible events a Magdeburg eyewitness described what he had experienced in a letter as a barbaric deed beyond any historical precedent:

May God have mercy upon us henceforth, for this was a spectacle that has not seen its like in horror and cruelty in many hundred years, for it was beyond all measure. They drove small children into the fire like sheep, sticking them with spears; God knows Turks and barbarians would not have done otherwise.²⁴

Other almost contemporaneous accounts also applied a historical yardstick. Here, the events were historicized by reference to specific events of biblical or ancient history. By analogy with the destruction of Jerusalem or Babylon, or of Troy, Thebes or Sagunto, the capture and destruction of Magdeburg were elevated to the rank of a world-historical event. What was experienced as excessive and unprecedented was thus, to a certain extent, rendered exemplary. This historicization offered the possibility, in the face of catastrophe, not just to gain and demonstrate composure but also, at the same time, to reach a moral, theological and political judgement and to draw a lesson from it. In making these references and comparisons contemporaries were not primarily concerned with historical categorization, but rather with examples, creating links to other great historical events in light of which Magdeburg would itself attain exemplary character.

In this way, then, the destruction of Magdeburg became a lesson for all sorts of morals and intentions. Victors and vanquished alike claimed it as an historical example. Thus, for instance, the victors could use the reference to the destruction and decline of Jerusalem as justification. Just one day after the capture of the city Pappenheim made his laconic statement of 21 May in which he took the ‘destruction of Jerusalem’ as a point of reference in order to characterize the massive destruction of Magdeburg by his troops as a ‘terrible work’ and at the same time to justify it as ‘divine punishment’:

I believe that over twenty thousand souls were lost. It is certain that no more terrible work and divine punishment has been seen since the destruction of Jerusalem. All of our soldiers became rich. God with us.²⁵
On the Protestant side, the reference to the historical example of Jerusalem was necessarily more complex. It was needed in order to lend some sense and significance to the defeat of the ‘German Jerusalem’,26 the ‘Magdeburg Israel’.27 Seen in this light, the destruction of the city had to be portrayed on the one hand as deserved divine punishment for the disunity and sinfulness of its inhabitants. This by no means excluded a sober view of matters, as is evident in the memorial sermon given by the Madgeburg pastor Christophorus Thodaenus on the first anniversary of the destruction on 20 May 1632:

Let us learn: that terrible things tend to happen when a city and fortress is not merely severely besieged by the foe, but also and finally captured by a furious hand; we have seen this in Jerusalem, in Magdeburg and other great cities and fortresses which were taken by force.28

On the other hand, the storming and destruction of the city also had to be portrayed as the work of the Catholic foe, as occurred in the second of the ‘Three Christian Memorial Sermons’ of the Kassel pastor Theophil Neuburger on 1 August 1631, ‘Of the Destruction of Jerusalem, Lucae XIX, 41 et seqq. In Pitying Memory of the Destruction of the Ancient, Praiseworthy, Evangelical, Christian City of Magdeburg’.29 In this sermon the destruction of the city of Magdeburg was regarded as ‘more cruel still . . . than the destruction of Jerusalem’ primarily because ‘this devastation of a city’ was the work not of heathens but rather of those who ‘themselves wished to be considered the people of God, as if they were the best friends and protectors of our country’. Yet a part of the historical reference set up on the Protestant side between the destruction of Magdeburg and the example of Jerusalem was also grounded in the hope that the destruction of the ‘German Jerusalem’ would lead to a resurrection of Lutheran liberty.

Victors and vanquished alike also referred to key episodes in ancient history. For the latter, this reference to classical antiquity served particularly to cement the endangered foundations of Protestantism. Recourse to heroic examples from antiquity helped them to depict the defeat and destruction of the city as a selfless sacrifice for the cause of Protestantism more generally. Thus they drew on the heroic example of the resistance and sacrifice of the city of Sagunto (allied with Rome) to Hannibal’s powerful troops, or compared the violated ‘Magdeburg Maiden’ to steadfast Lucretia, who had committed suicide after being raped, thus, according to the antique saga, sending a political signal that unleashed the downfall of the Roman monarchy. Both the resistance of Magdeburg to the Catholic foe and the destruction and downfall of the city thus attained the meaning of a surrogate sacrifice for Lutheran and at the same time German liberty.

It is remarkable that the (even today) highly-controversial part played by the inhabitants in causing the conflagration that almost completely destroyed the city on 10 May 1631 is also not simply mentioned in this connection, but interpreted in a positive light. It was portrayed as an act of
heroism and sacrifice with both classical-antique and Lutheran-Protestant echoes. While later Protestant confessional propaganda and the Protestant national historiography of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries portrayed the city’s destruction by fire exclusively as the barbaric deed of the Catholic imperial conquerors, especially Pappenheim and Tilly, a portion of those Protestant testimonies written down immediately following the city’s capture contradict this view. At any rate, the fire was also interpreted here as an act of desperation and self-destruction on the part of the Protestant inhabitants themselves. This occurred in exemplary and poetically exaggerated fashion in a poem that probably emerged shortly after 10 May 1631 from the milieu of the city’s Lutheran defenders:

Saguntina Prosopopeia Once the Laudable Hansa
City of Magdeburg Now Torn Asunder

Unfortunate fortune, what dost thou recall?  
Give it me, leave that for thee,  
That I may have joy eternally.

Maid and castle, mighty city  
To God through Roman deed  
Did sacrifice her virginity.

Just as silver and all metals pure  
Must everywhere be assayed  
Seven times by fire:

So the Lutheran Lucretia  
Righteous German Constantia  
Am I in eternal glory;

Before I recognize the Papist League  
And call it master  
Id rather run into the blaze.

Refuse to dance with Carl the Fifth,  
Ill stand no more from Tilly too,  
And chase the bloodhound through my fire.

Ancient German bravery  
Arm yourself for valiant strife,  
Earn the crown of constancy.

Innocent chaste maiden I,  
Tormented by the bloodhound dire,  
Many a mothers child roasted in the fire.
The Destruction of Magdeburg

For suffered martyrdom Cologne on the Rhine
Lauds eleven thousand virgins
I mourn thirty thousand souls!

It must pain any feeling heart,
That babes still suckling at the breast,
By cruel foe into the flames are cast.

Hamburg gunpowder, lead and fuse
Delivered unto the Popes bloodhound
Are the ruin of me, poor maid.

My own brother indeed,
Betrayed me poor maid
Through counsel of a false Judas.

Disloyal sisters I also accuse,
Who failed to aid me in my need,
Ill not forget on Judgement Day.

The one dear Swedish hero true
Gave me tons of gold coin two
I praise his name to all the world.

But those who him no passage gave
And severed him from all succour
Must now look to their property.

Bremen, Brunswick through the foe’s cunning
Towards Nuremberg too the Bavarian blasts,
Hamburg and Saxony at the last.

The Bavarian speaks pretty words,
But with his troops he strides ahead,
Putting all Lutheran folk to the sword.

Awake, thou German honesty,
And take up arms in my strife,
Thou shalt be praised eternally!33

When contemporaries sought to locate the destruction of Magdeburg ‘historically’, they frequently referred to a failure to recognize omens and warnings before the actual event. In retrospect, falling masonry, fire-signs in the heavens and the air, the destruction of several church steeples and roofs by storm, a monstrous birth34 and a prophetic warning of the city’s downfall from the era of the sixteenth-century siege35 were read and portrayed as
warning signs that, had they been heeded in time, could have prevented the catastrophic act of divine punishment. A particularly impressive example of this confrontation with ‘past signs of the future’\textsuperscript{36} as a means of orientation in – otherwise scarcely comprehensible – present events is the chronicle of the master baker Steffan Neuwirdt in nearby Eisleben.\textsuperscript{37} Shortly after 20 May 1631 he tried to lend some meaning to the great misfortune in Magdeburg in the light of these ‘omens’ (\textit{vaticinien}). The accumulation of omens in his memoir reflects his reluctance to interpret and his bewilderment, which in the end permitted him only a quick prayer and the following account:

Such a miserable wretched state prevailed in the city of Magdeburg that a stone in the ground would have felt pity and the sad state that reigned when the much-famed city of Magdeburg lost her bridal wreath is scarcely to be described \ldots Before this terrible misfortune there were storm winds of various extent, and a sign appeared on the moon on 4 May before, which as it were announced the great calamity in advance. May the good Lord take His poor flock under His divine protection and save us from anti-Christian tyranny, lest we be utterly lost. \ldots

I must also record here yet more omens, which preceded the destruction of the much-famed city of Magdeburg and were recounted by the fleeing Magdeburg citizens themselves; years ago blood seeped from the wall of the city moat, so that the water became blood-red, the same happened to the Elbe \ldots Once a whole stretch of the city’s shore became quite blood-red, also the great wind anno [16]30 the 26th of November, which shook Magdeburg so hard that one of the steeples fell off, also at the time of the same storm wind there was such a strong earthquake that many towers \ldots cracked, and above the Elbe in the woods some 100 trees were torn from the earth, also the great news of the citizenry with the council, for the old council was dismissed and a new one elected, and the old council opposed the new, and the new one the old, and the citizenry between them rose up in rebellion, furthermore there is a great iron gate in the cathedral, which opened by itself at midnight during the siege, also several days before the capture a white man clad in armour was seen in the sky above the city, whose colour changed to blood-red. God sent these and other signs to announce the righteous wrath he intended to visit upon the city of Magdeburg, and I wanted to record this here.\textsuperscript{38}

Neuwirdt’s testimony, like the other texts, reveals an attitude that viewed the disregard of the ‘past signs of the future’ as one of the factors that lent the Magdeburg ‘misfortune’ the appearance of (in the understanding of the time) a self-inflicted tragedy. The ‘historical’ significance that the destruction of Magdeburg had for contemporaries did not, however, find its fulfilment in the retrospective view. It was translated by Simeon Parthicum von Spitzberg (pseudonym) into the chiliastic expectations of the age and itself interpreted and portrayed as a ‘divine sign \ldots of a final conjunction’,\textsuperscript{39}
which announced the end of the Holy Roman Empire and thus promised to be a part of those historical transformations that prefigured the last days. The violated ‘Magdeburg maiden’ was elevated to a prophetic Sybil who, in the light of the promised but absent intervention of Gustavus Adolphus in the decisive phase of the siege, now both demanded and prophesied the Swedish ‘riposte from the North’. Her ‘Sybilline interpretation of the present ruin of the city of Magdeburg’ came down to the expectation that

now they must truly perform their tragic play from the midnight scene. This business of war, once begun, with bloodshed, murder, plunder, pillaging, devastation and destruction will not end until God’s intention of making the Roman Empire disappear from Germany is put into practice and confirmed.  

Werner Lahne, and more recently Johannes Burkhardt, have pointed out that the extraordinary importance accorded to the event by contemporaries and later historians cannot be separated from the role that contemporary journalism played in the form of newspapers, pamphlets and broadsheets. One could go even farther, though, and focus on the capture and destruction of Magdeburg as one of the first modern ‘media events’. The 205 relevant pamphlets and forty-one leaflets that Lahne was able to track down for 1631 alone argue for this as do the pictorial broadsheets or representations in printed songs and poems. This was, however, a media event that was not created by the media. The meaning of the media event itself, its value and its effect cannot at any rate be explained solely as the consequences of media and propagandistic dramatization. They cannot be separated from the substantive interpretations produced by contemporary imagination itself. It was above all this imagination that proves to have been powerfully effective and to have defined the resonance that the Magdeburg events had among contemporaries. Only on the basis of this resonance did the capture and destruction of Magdeburg come to epitomize the cruelty, violence and horrors of war as well as a catastrophe that could be repeated at any time for friends and enemies, Protestants and Catholics, soldiers and civilians, clerics, aristocrats, peasants and artisans alike.

The notion and the knowledge of the excidium Magdeburgense (destruction of Magdeburg) was by no means the product solely of official or semi-official pamphlet propaganda from the Protestant and Catholic-League sides. It was conveyed to contemporaries via a broad range of pamphlets and leaflets, newspapers, official and private correspondence, but also via sermons, songs, victory celebrations, funeral services and other forms of oral communication and public announcement; and perceived, internalized and further developed. And precisely that knowledge of the broad dissemination of these perceptions and this information was in turn deployed to excellent effect by the combatant parties. Thus in 1632 it sufficed for General Pappenheim to threaten the town council of Mühlhausen with
utterly ruining the city and giving it the same treatment as Magdeburg to convince the local authorities to move quickly in paying a penalty of 60,000 Reichstaler for their collaboration with the Swedes. Pappenheim extorted a further 20,000 Reichstaler by taking sixteen councillors as hostages, including the mayor, Georg Andreas Selig. This practice of Magdeburgizing, as it was known, began soon after the original event; thus in a report of 25 May 1631 from Hamburg, only five days after the fall of Magdeburg, the North-German Protestant *Reichs-Zeitungen* remarked of the reaction of the imperial troops in the Bremen area:

The imperial [troops] garrisoned around Bremen and its lands have set off their guns and had all of the bells rung, saying it was Magdeburg's funeral, and also that they would ill use Brunswick, Bremen, Lübeck and Hamburg in the manner of Magdeburg. Thus all Lutheran and inconstant cities can see their own fates reflected in the tyranny exercised at Magdeburg if they do not take proper measures betimes. This city [Hamburg] helped to hasten the ruin of Magdeburg by loyalty aiding the imperial army with powder and munitions, not considering how this might in future be used and turned by one or another to its own detriment. The imperial troops may also well say that no city at all is better than a heretic city, and that heretics deserve nothing better than fire and conflagration.45

The noisily-demonstrative victory celebration of the imperial troops before the city of Bremen and their threat of Magdeburg conditions had consequences for other North-German cities, not least Hamburg (the source of the report in the *Reichs-Zeitungen*). Here, the town council adopted a policy of wait-and-see. It avoided any open support for the Lutheran side in the face of the perilous military and political situation, but also because of the interests of important members of the patriciate in selling arms to the imperial-League side, which had also continued during the siege of Magdeburg.46 Where such partisanship did arise, as in support for refugees from Magdeburg, the council actively sought to prevent it. Thus, for example, the minutes of the Ministry of Church Affairs for 3 June 1631 (13 June, new calendar) contain the entry:

an exiled preacher from St Peter's in Magdeburg, Josephus Wilhelm, preached for 2 1/2 hours at St Jacobs here and spent an entire hour recounting what had happened before, in and during the capture of the city. The preachers of St. Jacobs were questioned about this by the council, which deeply offended them.47

Foppius, the Dutch agent of the Netherlands in the Lower Saxon Kreis, was so shocked by the indifference of the Hamburg council elite to reports of the destruction of Magdeburg that he wrote to his nephew Leo von Aitzema, the
agent of the Hanseatic League in the Netherlands, 'so little pity do the ... Hansa cities have, and so little concerned are they by the outrageous event, that it might as well have occurred in India. They scarcely permit the few survivors who arrive here naked and wounded to collect alms'.

In Bremen, too, reactions to reports of the 'misfortune' in Magdeburg and to the threat of imperial-League troops outside the city were divided. While the council played a waiting game, the Lutheran clergy demonstrated determination and sympathy with their coreligionists. Twelve days after the catastrophe in Magdeburg, on 2 June 1631, Petrus Zimernann, pastor at St Stephans in Bremen, preached a sermon calling to repentance, which was also published as a pamphlet entitled 'Sermon of Lamentation, Comfort and Warning Concerning the Terrible and Piteous Misfortune of the Good City of Magdeburg, which on 10 May of This Year of 1631 Was Suddenly Conquered, Cruelly Devastated and Made a Wretched Spectacle and Exhibition for all Other Cities'. In this sermon, Zimernann presented his congregation with the 'piteous misfortune of Magdeburg' as a 'terrible mirror ... of bloody persecution ... in which we can see quite plainly the great wrath of Satan towards us, which can also befall us should we pass into the hands of the enemies of the Gospel'. In this critical situation, Zimernann was chiefly concerned to strengthen a Protestant identity that was threatened in and through the fall of Magdeburg by drawing a sharp distinction from the Catholic 'Satan'.

This intensification of opposing confessional perceptions and conflicts as a reaction to the Magdeburg events is revealed in radicalized form in remarks that the Calvinist pastor Nicolaus Michaelis in Hechtsheim near Mainz entrusted to an (unpublished) autobiographical account:

All Protestants were terribly saddened and appalled by the wretched downfall of the city of Madgeburg [he wrote of the reactions in his parish in early June 1631], but the Papists rejoiced and were glad. At Mainz there were joyful gun salvoes because of the capture of the city of Magdeburg ... They marched in procession to the Church of Our Lady with drums and pipes, and gave thanks to her for such a victory, as if the blessed Virgin Mary up in heaven had such a murderous bloodthirsty heart as (them) the Papists who cannot get enough of innocent human blood here on earth. It is said that some sixty thousand souls lost their lives at Magdeburg.

The contemporary notion of the horrors and fears associated with the fall of Magdeburg extended beyond confessional perceptions of the enemy, however. The image of the burning and devastated city of Magdeburg became a sort of metaphor of terror, which moved Catholics and Protestants alike. It became the very model for imagination in the storehouse of fear and horror of the Thirty Years' War. It provided a framework for feeling fear and adjusting one's behaviour. The perceptions of the Dominican nun Maria
Anna Junius will serve as an example of this feeling that crossed denominational lines. In her autobiography she describes the threatened occupation of Bamberg in March 1632 by imperial-League troops under Tilly in a liminal situation in which Swedish troops were still billeted in her convent:

We looked out the window of the choir and saw them [the Swedes] digging trenches, then we saw a great [quantity] of smoke rising up from the Koppenhoff [a nearby farm], and then two majors rode by past our walls, and one of them said, ‘what mighty smoke that is!’ When Magdeburg burnt there was scarcely such smoke; then we were even more frightened, and the smoke and fire became even greater.53

Here the role of the horrifying image of the fire and the destruction of Magdeburg in shaping perception and imagination becomes clear. It expresses the fear not just of fire, but of military violence more generally. Those about whom the nun speaks, whom she associates with Magdeburg and at the same time refers to in this context as ‘ours’, are the imperial-League troops in a place far removed from Magdeburg, both geographically and confessionally.

This makes the following questions all the more urgent. How were the capture, plundering, burning down and devastation of the city experienced, perceived and recorded from close up? How was the experience of the destruction of Magdeburg reflected in contemporary (eyewitness) accounts written by those who had themselves participated in the events as victims or perpetrators?

In what follows I shall attempt, with the help of excerpts from some testimonies of survivors chosen for their exemplary character, to take a sort of micro-historical probe.54 To be sure, such testimonies reflect the contemporary experience of destruction only selectively. They are the record of those who escaped and thus to a certain degree leave out the accident of the teller’s own experience of survival. They also follow the conventions of literary representation that we find in contemporary tales of deliverance and miracles. For all this, as autobiographical accounts they remain much closer to experience than other contemporary texts referring to the destruction of Magdeburg. We need to ask what view of behaviours and experiences during Magdeburg’s catastrophe, but also of their subsequent processing and representation, can be found in these testimonies? In a first attempt I will draw upon three testimonies from civilians and victims that I selected from among a total of seven relevant texts:55 the notes of Christophorus Thodaenus, pastor of St Katherines;56 the particularly interesting account by Daniel Friese, son of the town clerk of Magdeburg, who was twelve years old in May 1631 and wrote down his recollections later from a child’s perspective;57 and finally the testimony of Simon Printz, gunsmith and constable.58

The three texts by civilians present themselves ‘from outside’ as stories
of the deliverance of those who escaped the catastrophe. The interpretative framework here is not, as in Protestant or Catholic journalism, the invocation of a tragedy or of divine wrath or punishment for a sinful or rebellious Magdeburg citizenry, but rather the repeated hinting at a plot of miraculous deliverance with divine assistance from a situation of extreme suffering and violence. And yet this interpretative framework of a Protestant miracle tale by no means wholly determines the perspective of the depictions. Indeed, it remains rather in the background. What dominates instead is the precise description of the survival-oriented actions and behaviours of the protagonists and their family members. They appear as the victims of violence, plunder and extortion, it is true, but never as wholly helpless ones. They are always portrayed as acting and reacting, and as trying even under the most extreme duress to turn any room for manoeuvre to their own advantage. Although the emergency situations and the attempts to overcome them differ in the three texts, all contain parallel tales of male heads of household. By paying protection money to officers or soldiers of the conquering army all three managed to gain military escorts out of the burning and pillaged city and thus to save their families.

What is remarkable, however, is that in all three accounts it was not the quick thinking and action of the male family heads and persons of quality alone that produced the desired effect. The clever conduct and negotiating skills of other family members are also portrayed as crucial or at least significant. In two cases, that of the pastor Christophorus Thodaenus and the gunsmith Simon Printz, it was their wives who fashioned or influenced the family’s rescue on one or more occasions. They took advantage of the inhibitions that, even in the extreme situation of plunder and capture, surrounded the use of violence – at least against wives and children – to save their men. Pastor Thodaenus described how his wife ‘plucked up her courage’ as follows:

Soon afterwards several men arrived, among them one who looked like the devil himself, he had two muskets and in his mouth a ball in each of the cheeks, he looked at me with a grim expression and said: Priest give money . . . When however I excused myself that I had no more upon me . . . he was not satisfied, but rather . . . aimed his musket at me, but when the fuse refused to catch fire, he blew upon it and pulled. In the meantime my wife plucked up her courage, struck his musket upwards so that the ball flew over my head into the wall, and she held him by the arms so that he could not move. And because he demanded money, but we had no more of it, he said: Give me silver instead. Then it occurred to her that she still had silver hooks on her bodice, which she cut off and gave to him, but he stood before her, watching, but did not lay a finger on her.59

In the third case, that of Daniel Friese’s family, it was the children who
screamed, wept, begged and symbolically paid for their parents’ lives:

Then he came at father with a pick-axe. Mother ran up to them straight-way screaming and we children stood around the soldier begging and crying that he should please let father live. Christian, my fourth brother, then a small child who could barely walk and stammer a few words, spoke in the greatest fear to the soldier: oh, please let father live, I’ll gladly give you the three pennies I get on Sundays . . . This, coming from an unformed and in those days simple child, touched the soldier’s heart, perhaps by God’s merciful providence, so that he immediately changed and turned to us in a friendly rather than a cruel manner. He looked at us children as we stood about him and said: what fine little lads you are . . . and then said to our father: if you want to get out with your children leave immediately, for the Croats will be here in an hour and you and your children will scarcely survive.60

Sunday pennies and silver hooks, combined with childish pleading or female intervention, produced a way out in two of the violent situations portrayed here. In the majority of such scenes of violence and plunder described in the testimonies, however, only the relinquishing of considerable reserves of money or valuables proved helpful. It is also remarkable, indeed, that apart from paying or being forced to pay money and booty, in two cases social connections to ‘distinguished officers’ ultimately proved life-saving. They were deliberately sought out by the two protagonists Thodaenus and Printz, with significant help from their wives, in a situation in which there was literally no way out, and successfully used after corresponding payment or promise of payment. These ‘relations befitting their station’ were most likely to offer the degree of recognized and enforceable military protection that, in the midst of murder and mayhem, opened the way out from the burning city to the protection of the nearby military camp. The case of Daniel Friese shows that even a mercenary soldier could – when offered the right incentive, in this case a promise of 200 taler and immediate booty – provide escort and protection, albeit at a substantial ‘social’ cost to the civilians who found safety. After their arrival at the military camp the Friese family was not ‘treated’ at the officers’ table in a manner appropriate to their social status as the Thodaenus and Printz families had been, however unwillingly. The wife of the town clerk was instead compelled to serve as cook and nursemaid to the mercenary’s family, while he and his wife went off to plunder the burning city.

A second means of survival, which is described far more briefly in the autobiographical accounts, was to co-operate in the plunder by serving as a civilian scout, carrying booty or providing local knowledge, that is by offering services otherwise unavailable to the city’s foreign conquerors. This would have been one of the few options for members of the lower classes
to secure some limited agency or at any rate a chance of survival. ‘And there were two means of saving one’s life’, wrote Simon Printz, ‘those who could help them to carry away their booty or who could give them money and promise to ransom themselves once they got out, all of which will doubtless be described historically by men of understanding’.61

The eyewitness accounts of the capture and destruction of Magdeburg thus certainly portray a world gone awry. The depicted reality of the ‘ravaging’ of the city (Thodaenus), is, however, still clearly removed from a ‘total ruin of the whole world, that is, the final judgement’, which Thodaenus speaks of as ‘at the door’ in his sermon for the day of repentance.62 In the published version, the text of this sermon is accompanied by an autobiographical account as an ‘appendix or addition’. It was a world in which military violence and random plunder as well – since the morning of the capture on 20 May – as a galloping and all-engulfing conflagration dictated the rules of action and behaviour. Violence and violent death – more than killing – are by no means ignored. What is remarkable about these testimonies, though, is that the images of horror remain within limits. We can see this in representations of the dead and dying. Even accounts written in retrospect frequently describe them as individuals, as ‘faces in the crowd’ (to use Raphael Samuel’s phrase). This contrasts with the overwhelming and anonymous phalanx of numbers that later journalistic reports saw as fluctuating between a realistic 20,000 and a fantastic 60,000 dead. Thus Daniel Friese writes:

When we had . . . walked through a few streets we saw various dead lying atop each other, and in the great crowd often had to walk and step over the corpses. Among others we saw a peasant jump down off a gable who was scalded by hot water and smoking mightily. He lay in the street writhing and crying piteously. And a maidservant also lay in the street who had been carrying meat in a basket, she had been shot and a dog stood nearby eating the meat . . . We saw many dead people in the streets and a number of women lying quite uncovered with their heads in a great beer barrel, which stood full of water in the streets, into which they had fallen and drowned, but half their bodies and their legs were hanging out, which was a wretched spectacle.63

The world of violence and death described here was at the same time by no means devoid of possibilities for survival, social relationships and residues of civil order and conduct. In the situation of conquest, plunder and devastating conflagration the Magdeburg testimonies reveal a remnant of human infrastructure. It bound the civilian victims and the intruding warriors. The human relationships between civilians and warriors proved highly fragile, no doubt, but under the commercial imperative of plunder and demands for ransom and protection money they held up at least to some extent. In this respect the booty economy acted as a ‘brake on violence’ (Wolfgang
Sofsky). The possibilities of survival, of temporary protection and with it of escape from the violence-dominated situation of conquest, were however socially restricted and gradated. They rested on the individual’s ability to pay and to do business in the economy of booty and plunder. Without this, the danger of exposure to violence with a deadly outcome rose. But what seems important is that under these conditions – as the examples discussed here show – the principles of the civil order of estates and gender were by no means suspended, even if their efficacy was limited. Of course the autobiographical accounts, as textual representations by those who survived and escaped, are bound to foreground success. At the same time, their findings are highly instructive. They reveal that certain taboos involving the use of violence, particularly in relation to women and children, remained in place – in sharp contrast to later representations in religiously partisan pamphlets. References to rape and molestation are not wholly absent, it is true. Neither, however, are they elevated to a dominant image of mass rape (including of young girls), collective virgin suicides and large-scale child murder, as they would be in later Protestant propaganda.64 This was a preconceived image, which had already attracted media attention earlier in 1631 in the metaphor of the maiden Magdeburg violated in the blood wedding.65 Even Tilly, contrary to his subsequent demonization in the Protestant topical literature, which only truly began after he had lost the battle at Breitenfeld against Gustavus Adolphus in September 1631, was not portrayed as an incarnation of inhumanity who permitted or actively encouraged violence on a grand scale. Ultimately, it was Friedrich Schiller who over a century later made of Tilly the initiator of a ‘scene of slaughter . . . to depict which history has no words and poetry has no paintbrush’.

I would like to close with a parable-like image: in the case of Magdeburg, the autobiographical accounts permit us to peek behind the fire that, as memory and object of horror, later consumed everything, down to the nineteenth and twentieth-century historians’ debates over ‘guilt’. These debates revolved (and still revolve) around the question of whether Tilly’s and Pappenheim’s troops deliberately set the city ablaze on orders from their commanders or whether the Magdeburg citizens did so themselves in an act of self-defence and self-destruction. In the seventeenth century the all-engulfing sea of flames, which was visible from a great distance, had already expanded into a significant symbol. Even then it was portrayed as the most impressive visual memory, but at the same time also as an exemplary image of annunciation. We should still take this seriously, but also submit it to the close scrutiny of micro-history. ‘This night’, wrote Daniel Friese, looking back as an adult at the decisive experience of his childhood,

at about eleven o’clock, the entire city of Magdeburg was ablaze, and our late father led us out of the huts so that we could speak of it all our lives. In the camp, which was at quite some distance from the city, it was so bright that you could have read a letter by the great glow of the fire.67
The historian’s exploration ‘behind’ the fire can certainly start with contemporary eyewitness accounts and texts and their – more or less memorable – visual recollections, but we should not stop there. A deeper answer to the question of the capture and destruction of Magdeburg as a historical event must go beyond contemporary discourse. The answer remains open in many respects, even after the investigation presented here, and subject to future historical reconstruction. Further research will need on the one hand to approach the complex contexts of action, conflict and events and attempt to determine the direct and indirect consequences of the capture and destruction of the city. On the other hand, it will need to address the memory of the Magdeburg events from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries: from the wealth of contemporary texts and oral tradition to later commemorative writings and three centuries of interpretation by historians. This memory is an important part of the history of the event’s consequences. It is responsible not least for the fact that Catholicism did not manage to develop a power base in northern Germany beyond the Thirty Years’ War.

A sentence such as that in Friedrich Schiller’s history of the Thirty Years’ War, according to which ‘German freedom rose from the ashes of Magdeburg’, does more than point to the mythopoeic role of the memory of the Magdeburg events in the German-Protestant historiographic tradition. It also highlights a historically-loaded and fateful patriotic cult of blood, wounds and death, which, beginning with Magdeburg and the Thirty Years’ War, put its lasting stamp on the ideas and practices of German history well into the last century. In this respect, it was not all that far from the Magdeburg of 1631 to the Stalingrad of 1943.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Not wholly free of such a view is Andreas Suter’s thought-provoking essay, ‘Theorien und Methoden. Für eine Sozialgeschichte historischer Ereignisse’, Zeitschrift für historische Forschung 25, 1998, pp. 209–43. Suter begins by speaking of historical events primarily as ‘achievements of cultural creation by collective actors’ (pp. 210, 211), but his conclusions emphasize too one-sidedly the analytical primacy of the historian:

The decisive criterion according to which events qualify as historical is now no longer the collective experiences and expectations of contemporaries. Rather, what is decisive is the experiences and expectations of the historian, which develop on the basis of the results of scholarly research. (pp. 213–14)

The problem treated in the present essay, of the contemporary creation of meaning around an event, from its anticipation to its interpretation ex eventu [according to its outcome] by contemporaries and, finally, its long-term effects, is indeed noted by Reinhart Koselleck in his pioneering essay ‘Darstellung, Ereignis und Struktur’, but he does not incorporate it into his reflections on the interference of event and structure. See Koselleck, Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten, Frankfurt a.M., 1979, pp. 144–57, 144–5.

2 On the run-up to and chronology of the events see Friedrich Wilhelm Hoffmann, Geschichte der Stadt Magdeburg nach den Quellen bearbeitet, Magdeburg, 1850, pp. 3–195. For
a more recent overview see the text section of the exhibition catalogue ‘... ganz verheeret!’ Magdeburg und der Dreißigjährige Krieg, Magdeburger Museumsschriften 6, Halle, 1998. For some critical notes on this catalogue see n. 30 below.


6 Hoffmann, Geschichte der Stadt Magdeburg, p. 84.


8 On the symbol of the maiden as an expression of urban independence, honour and order and its specific condensation in regard to the self-understanding of Magdeburg, as expressed in the city’s coat of arms, see Ulinka Rublack, ‘Wench and Maiden: Women, War and the Pictorial Function of the Feminine in German Cities in the Early Modern Period’, History Workshop 44, autumn 1997, pp. 1–21, on Magdeburg, pp. 2–3, and 7. See also Martin Knauer, ‘... das Mägdlein ist nicht todt, sondern es schlafft ...’. Die Eroberung Magdeburgs als heilsgeschichtliches Ereignis’, in ‘... ganz verheeret!’ Magdeburg und der Dreißigjährige Krieg, pp. 11–79, esp. 72–3.

9 Guericke, Geschichte der Belagerung, p. 4.

10 Quoted according to the variants of the unpublished original version of Guericke’s history of the siege, capture and destruction of Magdeburg, documented in Wittich, Magdeburg, Gustaf Adolf und Tilly, vol. 2, part 1, pp. 17ff, here p. 41. Here (p. 40) one also finds a far more open account of the differences and parties in the city than in the version published by Hoffmann in 1860, which was intended for the public.


13 Based on the extant copies of contemporary newspapers in the collection of the centre for research on the German press (Forschungsstelle Deutsche Presseforschung) at Bremen University. I mainly studied three papers: the Hamburg PostZeitung (ed. Johann Meyer), the Vienna Ordentliche Zeitungen and the Munich Ordentliche Wochentliche Postzeitungen. The most intense and continuous coverage was in the Hamburg PostZeitung, which begins with a report from Halberstadt of 18 Dec. 1630: ‘It appears that they are seeking to take the city of Magdeburg by ordnance, contrary to previous practice’. The quotations from newspapers that follow also come from the collections of the Forschungsstelle Deutsche Presseforschung.

14 Ordentliche Wochentliche Postzeitungen no. 23, 7 June 1631.

15 Wochentliche Ordinari Zeitung Auff das 1631. Jahr (printed by Niklaus Heinrich). The first entry in the newspaper is a report of 22 May from Leipzig. It makes it clear that in Leipzig only two days after the Magdeburg ‘event’ there was already certainty about the capture and destruction of the city.

16 Reichs-Zeitungen.

17 Ordentliche Zeitungen. Auß Wien, vom letzten May, 1631.


19 The Reichs-Zeitungen no. 24 (late May, 1631) carried the unusual headline: ‘Darin auch von unterschiedlichsten Orten berichtet wird, welcher Gestalt Magdeburg erobert und wie eine erbärmliche Tragoedia damit vorgangen’ (In which we also report from various places in what way Magdeburg was captured and how a hideous tragedy occurred there).


The Destruction of Magdeburg

23 Aus dem Tagebuch, p. 103.
24 Letter from Magdeburg, signed Zobell, 1631. The letter was written during the week when the city was destroyed [on 10 May of the old calendar], since it refers to 8 May as ‘Sunday last’. Quoted in Wittich, Magdeburg, Gustav Adolf und Tilly, vol. 2, part 1, pp. 62–3.
26 The reference to the use of this name for Magdeburg ‘in neighbouring towns and lands’ in the situation immediately following 20 May 1631 can be found in a fictitious Protestant funeral sermon written by a Catholic, probably the provost of the Premonstratensian monastery at Jerichow near Magdeburg, ‘Copey einer Christlichen Leich-Predigt/über den schmerzhaften Todes-Fall, und das Ableben vieler Tausend Bürger, Weib und Kinder, samt andern Innwohnern der Stadt Magdeburg, u. in erschrocklicher derselben Eroberung und Bestürmung, Gehalten Von einem benachbarten Fromm-Evangelischen Prediger . . . Geschehen und im Geist gepredigt auf dem Berge vor Magdeburg, der Evangelischen Concordi, so (leider) auch zerstöhet, Den 20. Brachmonats, so war der 30. Der Bestattung’ (1631), in Seth-Heinrich Calvisius, Das zerstöhrete und wieder aufgerichtete Magdeburg . . . , Magdeburg, 1727, pp. 194–210, 196.
28 Thodaenus, Threni Magdeburgici.
29 Kassel, 1631.
30 The first and until now most extensive critique of this viewpoint, as it was cultivated above all in the kleineutsch [i.e., favouring a unified Germany without Austria] Protestant historiography of the nineteenth century on the Thirty Years’ War, particularly by Magdeburg local historians, can be found in the work of Karl Wittich, Die Zerstörung Magdeburgs im Jahre 1631, Berlin, 1870, and Magdeburg, Gustav Adolf und Tilly. On the continuities in this view up to the present see the contemporary portrait of Tilly showing him before a destroyed (city) wall and a sea of flames and describing him in the caption (from 1998!) as the ‘destroyer of Magdeburg’, between the introduction and the text section in the exhibition catalogue ‘… ganz verheeret!’ Magdeburg und der Dreißigjährige Krieg. Albert Heising’s critical remark of 1854, ‘The Magdeburgers simply prefer to have been burnt down by Tilly’ (Albert Heising, Magdeburg nicht durch Tilly zerstört. Die Politik Gustav Adolfs in Deutschland, 2nd edn, Berlin, 1854), appears in a certain sense to retain its validity for the present.
31 See Wittich, Magdeburg, Gustav Adolf und Tilly, vol. 1, pp. 54ff, especially the account of the sober testimony of the Magdeburg Stiftssyndicus (syndic of the cathedral) Dr Adolf Marcus who escaped the city after its capture, cited on p. 58.
Welt./Der aber ihm den Pas nit gab./Allen Succurs geschnitten ab./Dem kombet es nun auf seyne Hab./Bremen, Brunseweig durch Feyndes List/Nach Nurmburg auch der Beyer schiest./Hamburg und Sax zum letzten Frist./Der Beyer gibt zwar gute Wort./Doch mit seyn Lager rücket forth./Den Rest von Luthrisch Volckt ermodirt./Wach auf, du teutsche Redligkeyt/Und rüste dich zu meinem Streyt./So hastu Preys in Ewigkeyt!

Reproduced in the collection of sources in the appendix to Wittich, Magdeburg, Gustav Adolf und Tilly.


36 Reinhart Koselleck’s essay ‘Vergangene Zukunft der frühe Neuzeit’ (in his Vergangene Zukunft, pp. 17–37) explores the significance of apocalyptic ideas and prophecies for historical perceptions in the early modern period. He does not address the everyday belief in prodigies (which was quite distinct from apocalyptic notions and prophecies) as a fundamental mode of historical interpretation. On the belief in prodigies as a form of retrospective interpretation rooted in religion in the period of the Thirty Years’ War, see Benigna von Krusenstjern, ‘Prodigienlaube und Dreißigjähriger Krieg’, in Im Zeichen der Krise. Religiosität im Europa des 17. Jahrhunderts, ed. Hartmut Lehmann and Anne-Charlott Trepp, Göttingen, 1999, pp. 53–78.

37 Steffan Neuwirt, ‘Memorial oder Gedenck undt Haus Register’, Museumsbibliothek Eisleben: H 42 (Rühlemann transcription); on Neuwirts memoir see Krusenstjern, Selbstzeugnisse der Zeit des Dreißigjährigen Krieges, pp. 175–6.


39 Simeon Partichum von Spitzberg, Himmlische Sternwarnung von sehr grossen schrecklichen Veränderungen so auff die grosse Zusammenkunfften der beyden höchsten Planeten Saturni und Jovis in dem ewrigen Triangel von Anfang derWelt biß auffs jetzige 1631 Jahr her erfolget, Amsterdam, 1631.

40 Die jammerliche Prophetin Fraw Sybilla Magdeburg. Das ist: Historische Ausführzung, was die erbarmliche Verderbung der Stadt Magdeburg und ihrer Einwohner in künftigen bald nacheinander mit sich bringen will (1631); c.f. Die jammerlich-betrübte Prophetin Frau Sybilla Magdeburg erzeuht hierinnen und beweist auß den Uhr-alten Historien, daß gleich wie nach etlicheal der Zerstörung allzeit grosse Vererberung vorgangen, Also auch die im 1631. Jar, den 10. May, erbarmliche vergangene Verherung grosse Haupt-Vererberung im Römischen Reich bringe und nach verursachen werde. Welche Erzahlung . . . wird . . . beyfall geben, 1632.

41 Lahne, Magdeburgs Zerstörung in der zeitgenössischen Publizist, appendix.


43 This was the heading given to a report by a Berlin correspondent of 29 May 1631 in Wittich, Magdeburg, Gustav Adolf und Tilly, vol. 1, part 2, p. 63.


45 Reichs-Zeitungen V. 26 Anno 1631, ‘Hamburg von 15 Maij 1631’. This dating is a typographical error; the true date will have been 15 May by the old calendar, that is 25 May by the new calendar.

46 On this see the above report in the Reichs-Zeitungen. On Hamburg’s involvement in the arms trade during the Thirty Years’ War see Julia Züncel, ‘Rüstungshandel im Zeitalter

47 Staatsarchiv Hamburg, Ministerium II.1, p. 85. The council’s attitude towards Magdeburg exiles was by no means only temporary. The minutes of the Ministry of Church Affairs (Geistliches Ministerium) for 9 December 1631 contain an entry that M. Andreas Cramer (1582–1640), formerly a prominent pastor at St John’s in Magdeburg, who had found refuge in the city of Mühlenhausen with his (still extant) ‘Magdeburg Blood Bible’, wanted to give a sermon but was refused permission ‘because he is considered suspicious’. Staatsarchiv Hamburg, Ministerium II.1, 120. I thank Frank Hatje for drawing my attention to this. See also his ‘Auf der Such nach den Flüchtlingen und Exulanten des Dreißigjährigen Krieges in Hamburg’, in Der Krieg vor den Toren. Hamburg und der Dreißigjährige Krieg, ed. Sven Tode and Martin Knauer, Hamburg, 1999.


50 Klage, Trost und Warnungs-Predigt über den erschrecklichen und erbärmlichen Unfall der guten Stadt Magdeburg, welche am 10. Maij dieses 1631 Jahres plötzlich erobert, grausam verwüstet und allen anderen Städten zum elenden Spectacul und Schauspiel worden ist, 1631.

51 Klage, Trost und Warnungs-Predigt, p. 8.


55 A detailed study of these texts is planned. See also Michael Kaiser ‘... aber ich muß erst Beute machen.” Die Zerstörung Magdeburgs im Spiegel von Selbstzeugnissen’, in ‘... ganz verheeret!’ Magdeburg und der Dreißigjährige Krieg, pp. 63, 70.

56 Thodaneus, Threni Magdeburgici.


59 Thodaneus, Threni Magdeburgici.

60 ‘Historischer Extract aus einem Manuscripto’, pp. 311–12.


62 Thodaneus, Threni Magdeburgici, the third and last ‘Magdeburgische Klag- und Trawre-Predigt’ (unpaginated, towards the end of the text).

63 ‘Historischer Extract aus einem Manuscripto’, pp. 316–17. For another depersonalized but indifferent perception and portrayal of violence from the perspective of imperial-League military field correspondence, see Michael Kaiser, ‘“Excidium Magdeburgense”. Beobachtungen zur Wahrnehmung und Darstellung von Gewalt im Dreißigjährigen Krieg’, in Ein Schauplatz herber Angst. Wahrnehmung und Darstellung von Gewalt im 17. Jahrhundert, ed. Markus Meumann and Dirk Niefanger, Göttingen, 1997, pp. 43–64. In his anthropologizing conclusions (pp. 59ff), however, the author is taken in by the violent perspective he describes, which leads him to make generalizations that fail to do justice to the evidence.


67 Historischer Extract aus einem Manuscripto’, p. 319.
68 Geschichte des Freißjährigen Krieges, p. 525.

69 I gratefully acknowledge the correspondence I received from the Austrian novelist and poet Gertrud Fussenegger in response to my article ‘Vom totalen Ruin der Welt. Die Zerstörung Magdeburgs im Jahr 1631 als Modell der Angst und die List des überlebens’, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, no. 212, 12 Sept. 1998. Fussenegger wrote her historical novel Die Brüder von Lasawa (Salzburg, 1948; reprint Heidelberg, 1996) with its chapter Magdeburg (pp. 232–47) in 1943 as a critique of the German nationalist cult of sacrifice under the impact of the catastrophe of Stalingrad.

For me, the story of the embittered Falkenberg [the Swedish commander of the Swedish troops stationed in Magdeburg] and the Herostratian Wilke was in those days – in 1943 – a sort of paradigmatic anticipation of what we in Germany could expect of the further course of the war: stubbornness maintained to the point of madness and ‘scorched earth’, heroic self-destruction.