
**Reviewed by** Christopher Close (St. Joseph's University)

**Published on** H-German (January, 2022)

**Commissioned by** Matthew Unangst (SUNY Oneonta)

Over the last two decades, understanding how past societies constructed and manipulated space has become crucial to historical study. Luca Scholz’s new book offers a useful contribution to this burgeoning field spawned by the spatial turn. Using several digital humanities tools paired with good old-fashioned archival research, Scholz sets out to examine the history of movement in the Holy Roman Empire during the early modern period. His main lens is the practice of safe conduct, an often contested legal right whereby authorities could try to assert dominion over certain spaces by claiming the privilege to protect travelers moving through them. The result is an innovative study that, while it does not entirely deliver on the global comparative framework it proposes, nonetheless offers important insights into how early modern people moved through the empire and why that movement often sparked conflict and negotiation.

One of Scholz’s central ideas is the notion of “channelled mobility,” by which he means attempts by political authorities to direct the movement of people and goods to specific places along predefined routes (p. 3). He structures the book thematically around six major issues raised by these efforts. Chapter 1 centers on what Scholz terms the “ordering of movement.” It examines how different authorities tried to channel types of movement and how the resulting conflicts empowered all involved parties to influence patterns of mobility. The use of toll and customs stations marked a core strategy that authorities used to regulate movement. Collecting tolls and customs was big business in the early modern period, often accounting for a substantial percentage of local revenue intakes. Tolls did not aim at preventing the movement of goods but rather at profiting from them, as most tolls took the form of transit tolls levied on goods moving through a region. This dynamic often made them unpopular and a flashpoint for conflict. For authorities, though, the levying of tolls operated in concert with the use of safe conduct to claim jurisdiction over specific landscapes. It also provided a means to exert one’s authority to protect and regulate the behavior of certain groups of people, most notably merchants, Jews, and vagrants.

Chapter 2 examines the pageantry surrounding safe conduct processions, which Scholz characterizes as “theatres of transit.” This chapter draws heavily on another recent boom industry in the study of the empire: ritual studies. Safe conduct processions tended to focus on noble or mercant-
ile traffic, and they involved the use of armed escorts for travelers, complete with loud music and the dragooning of peasants into temporary military service. Scholz analyzes this pomp and circumstance through the lens of the county of Wertheim, a Lutheran territory in Franconia wedged between the Catholic prince-bishoprics of Mainz and Würzburg. These territories often clashed over the right of safe conduct. In this context, Scholz argues that safe conduct processions functioned as ritual spaces to assert visible claims of authority, especially in regions of contested jurisdiction. Accordingly, the right to lead processions and the specific order in which their participants marched often led to conflict and even violence. Many groups, especially from the lower rungs of society, sought to resist participation in the convoys, which exacerbated their potential for disorder. The high stakes of processions nonetheless meant that few authorities eschewed opportunities to stage them. Ultimately, Scholz concludes that safe conduct processions embodied two ideals at the heart of attempts to regulate movement: they expressed the ability to protect travelers while forcing them to process on preordained routes chosen by the escorting authority.

Scholz builds on this analysis in chapter 3, which focuses on boundaries. He argues that territorial borders were less important for controlling movement than duty and toll stations, which clustered along travel routes and were often housed in cities deep within territorial domains. This chapter includes numerous maps, both historical and created by Scholz, that illuminate how conflicts over boundaries occurred. Here Scholz offers some of his most original analysis, especially in his treatment of maps made during a conflict over safe conduct outside the south German town of Mühldorf. Scholz also effectively uses his own maps to illustrate how the location of toll and safe conduct stations had little correspondence to the boundaries of polities. Instead, they followed the logic of movement within a territory and marked locations through which rulers hoped to channel movement. This spatial analysis leads Scholz to argue for shifting attention from formal borders in the study of early modern movement, since territorial boundaries proved much less important in controlling movement than modern people might assume.

These insights lead to chapter 4’s focus on the channeling of goods and people. Here Scholz uses Thuringia as his case study. This region housed dozens of separate polities during the early modern period, which made issues of movement central to everyday life. One tool authorities used to channel movement was letters of passage. Issued to a variety of people for many different purposes, letters of passage granted the recipient safe passage through a specified landscape. They could also exempt the bearer from certain tolls and fees. Such letters often operated in tandem with a policy of forbidding traffic on certain roads in order to route travelers onto a specific path that rulers could more easily control and exploit financially. While clever, these governmental strategies frequently met resistance. Letters were often counterfeited, while attempts to prohibit movement along specific roads simply caused industrious travelers to create new routes to bypass toll stations or to shorten a trip. Scholz uses this evidence to argue that regimes of movement were shaped by a reciprocal, negotiated give and take between authorities and travelers. In the process, patterns of mobility could often emerge from the bottom up rather than being imposed from the top down.

Chapter 5 examines regimes of protection and their connection to safe conduct through analysis of the Lower Weser region, especially the water corridor that connected the city of Bremen to the North Sea. Scholz does well to show how battles over controlling the Weser represented in microcosm phenomena that occurred along most of the empire’s rivers. Years of wrangling between Bremen and the Count of Oldenbourg frequently escalated to the brink of war, with both sides de-
ploying gun boats to assert their right to police movement on the river and its tributaries. Scholz describes Bremen’s strategy of trying to control the Weser as a policy of “securitization” by which it advanced claims to dominion under the umbrella of providing necessary protection to all who traveled the river.

The book’s final chapter shifts focus to intellectual debates among early modern legal scholars and practitioners of the law regarding the right to freedom of movement. Scholz finds that legal texts often approached the issue of movement from the perspective of safe conduct and its related rights. Their discussions focused not on securing borders but rather on roads and rivers within territories, which provided the practical underpinning for their theoretical discussions. Advocates for freer movement compared roads and rivers to the open seas and bodily pathways like arteries, while advocates for restricting freedom of movement employed the language of property to justify their claims. Scholz concludes that how thinkers conceived of space often had direct repercussions for their understanding of a ruler’s ability to regulate movement through that space.

Scholz’s book offers innovative analysis of a fundamental aspect of daily life during the early modern period. Issues of movement affected everyone everywhere. Scholz often indicates a desire to take advantage of the ubiquity of these issues by comparing conditions in the empire to other parts of the world. This comparative framework is the weakest and least developed part of his study. In the introduction, Scholz argues that the experience of early modern Europeans was comparable to that of contemporary non-European societies, specifically the Ottoman Empire and Tokugawa Japan. The introduction promises some kind of sustained engagement with these global comparisons. However, in the body of the work, the book returns only infrequently to these parallels and then seemingly as an afterthought at the end of analysis focused solely on the empire. In and of itself, the lack of sustained comparison is not a problem, but since the book promises a global comparative framework, its disappearance throughout most of the body leaves the reader unsure both about the value of the comparisons and about how the empire represents wider developments in the regulation of movement during the time period. It is also surprising that Scholz does not engage with literature on the idea of “good neighborliness” in the Holy Roman Empire, since the majority of his book focuses on conflicts between jurisdictions that overlapped each other. Engagement with this scholarship would have further enriched Scholz’s analysis of his various case studies.

Ultimately, Scholz has written an excellent book that opens up new possibilities for understanding movement in the empire. He draws on a wide variety of sources from numerous archives, and his bibliography indicates extensive reading in both primary and secondary print sources in multiple languages. His effort to reveal the experience and perspectives of all levels of society is therefore largely successful, and the manner in which the realities of movement were negotiated in academic halls, court chambers, and on actual roads becomes clear. **Borders and Freedom of Movement** should be read by all scholars of the Holy Roman Empire and early modern Europe.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-german


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56554

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.