

Some questionable activities attributed to Simon Dreisbach in the period before April 1735

Yet another "Word of warning" to the reader.

We are about to enter a period in Simon Dreisbach's life for which we have certain shards of evidence that may or may not be fully factual. Some of this information – for which we lack a fuller context and/or explanatory information – may be viewed as unwelcome. However, the records exist, and we must both consider and evaluate them.

Statements which may or may not be true.

Up to now, the DERR has for the most part presented information based on extant and trustworthy records. We have tried to integrate these new facts into what we know, or believe we know, about the lives of Wittgenstein Dreisbachs. Recently so much rich and surprising material about Simon Dreisbach has emerged from the Princely Archive of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein that it was deemed necessary to devote the entire *Research Notes* section of DERR number 11 to a comprehensive listing of these discoveries.¹

The whole of DERR no. 11 was conceived as both background and preamble to the archival material readers will meet here in no. 12 and in subsequent DERRs. For example, in no. 11 the section "*Simon and horses*" was based in part on Simon's letter to Count August in early 1727, where he stated that he was a carter by profession. From then on we could follow, in the administrative lists of obligatory service, the change in Simon's feudal duties as he went from using his own horses in the Count's service to being listed as one of the Count's manual laborers.

We also saw how the villagers farmed widely scattered pieces of land, most of it the Count's, and rarely, some of it their own. The amount of land associated with Simon's tenancy of *Am Aberge* is difficult to estimate. Originally there were few fields and meadows connected with that house, but in the time of Simon's grandfather, the master cooper and builder Johannes Sassmannshausen, more private lands were acquired, and it is possible that the house was enlarged and improved. In any event, *Am Aberge* did not stand in the village itself but was a short distance from the village center (see Fig. 4 in DERR no. 11), which seems to have contributed to Simon's later troubles.

We turn now to some of the illicit activities which were ascribed to Simon Dreisbach in the holding *P 464*. The principal source is a man of dubious character, speaking some five years after the fact, under judicial oath, and hoping to save his own skin. We shall see later that one activity he imputed to Simon Dreisbach was indeed confirmed in a 1737 letter of supplication from Simon to the Count. For the rest, we are dependent on a rogue's statements.

¹ At the end of DERR no. 11 under "*Research notes*", there is a list of those archival holdings in which Heinrich Imhof has discovered texts connected with Simon Dreisbach. This is the first time this source material is made public.

Our source is a rogue, Johann Adam Milchsack, a petty criminal who committed many offenses.

Johann Adam Milchsack, born in Münchhausen in Hessen in 1695, was three years older than Simon Dreisbach. He married a woman from Feudingeng, established himself there, and became Count August's forester and game-keeper for the Feudingeng district. At an unspecified date he lost that position, and had to vacate the house which the Count provided for his Feudingeng gamekeeper. After a career in petty but persistent crime that lasted through the 1730s to 1740, Milchsack was finally apprehended and arrested in early 1740.

Our present knowledge of Milchsack's (and to some extent Simon Dreisbach's) doings is based on his lengthy self-defense in archival holding P 464. This holding is a collection of documents or, rather, extracts copied from court documents that had been recorded at varying times between 31 March 1735 (Simon Dreisbach's testimony in Count August's court) and 9 June 1740 (Johann Adam Milchsack's testimony in Count Friedrich's court).

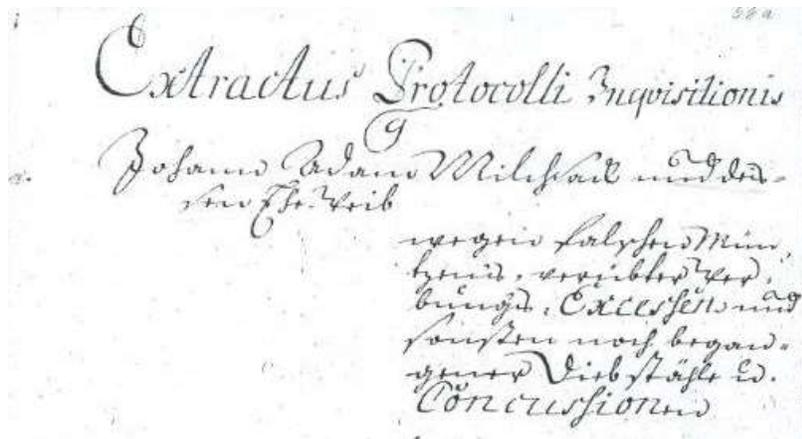


Fig. 1. The first page of extracts from the 1740 inquiry into the misdeeds of Johann Adam Milchsack and his wife. This is the first of the photocopies provided by Heinrich Imhof from holding P 464 in the Princely Archive of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein in Bad Laasphe.²

To learn something of Milchsack's and Simon Dreisbach's relationship

one must first of all wade through the forty numbered page-sides (69b to 88a) of Milchsack's long and detailed attempt at self-defense in June 1740. Milchsack's interrogation was divided into five parts:

- 1) his involvement in counterfeiting activities
- 2) his other criminal activities of various types
- 3) his intended arson in Feudingeng in March 1735
- 4) his denial of having committed theft together with Simon Dreisbach on the same occasion
- 5) his illegal kidnapping of young men for the Prussian army.

Only parts 1, 3 and 4 record what Milchsack chose to say about Simon Dreisbach. The events, as Milchsack presented them in these three parts, are also in approximate chronological order. Part 1 is concerned with counterfeiting activities inside and outside Wittgenstein's borders prior to April 1735, and we must remember that what Milchsack tells the court is always slanted in his own favor. Parts 3 and 4 are Milchsack's accounts of events first in Feudingeng, then at the Count's farm Augustenhof and finally at Simon Dreisbach's house in Oberndorf, all on the evening and night of 23 March 1735. Fortunately, there are other

² The title, roughly translated, is: *Extract from the court record of the questioning of Johann Adam Milchsack and his wife on the grounds of counterfeiting, excesses committed in the course of military conscription, and any further thefts and offenses committed.*

court records that can to some extent refute Milchsack's statements. They place Simon Dreisbach in a better, though not totally innocent light, and all of this will be discussed in a subsequent DERR.

Simon Dreisbach is named in the counterfeiting section of Milchsack's interrogation.

The transcript of Milchsack's testimony on counterfeiting activities in Wittgenstein-Wittgenstein is lengthy (page-sides 69b to 77b), and names a number of accomplices. One of Milchsack's two most frequently mentioned 'fellows in crime' was Johannes Wunderlich, another of Count August's foresters/game-keepers. Thus he and Milchsack had the same duties under Count August, but had responsibilities for different forest regions. In the 1730s Wunderlich was based in the village of Stünzel. The other principal dabbler in counterfeiting was, rather surprisingly, the elderly Leonhard Franck, one of the more wealthy inhabitants of the village of Grossenbach near the western border of Wittgenstein. Franck was introduced to DERR readers in no. 5 where, on p. 8, there was a sketch of the main room in his house and his involvement in 'crime' was mentioned. In Milchsack's testimony we find that Franck is given a central role in local counterfeiting activities. We cite here the principal doings that Milchsack ascribed to Franck and Wunderlich in his detailed testimony, and note that some of the counterfeiting activities were said to have taken place at Leonhard Franck's house.

Our Wittgenstein-born cousin, Martin Dreisbach, who has family connections in Grossenbach, has kindly identified certain houses still extant there which were in existence in the eighteenth century. *Fig. 2* shows that Leonhard Franck's house, like that of Simon Dreisbach in Oberndorf, was at some distance from the other village houses.



Fig. 2, View of Grossenbach from Google Earth. Most of the houses are in a compact central area, but the house that was Leonhard Franck's, indicated by a white arrow, stands alone in the upper right part of the picture. Photo and information courtesy of Martin Dreisbach.

Franck, born in Grossenbach in 1669, was a generation older than Simon Dreisbach and Johannes Wunderlich. With the permission of Count Gustav, he built his house in Grossenbach between 1698 and

1702.³ Like other inhabitants of Grossenbach, Franck was active in various aspects of the lucrative trade in charcoal, i.e. charcoal burning, charcoal export and charcoal transport. As early as 1717 he was in a position to make a sizeable loan to Count Henrich Albrecht. Later, under Count August, he was not only arbitrarily stripped of a piece of land, but for many years afterward he and subsequent tenants in the house he had built were forced to continue to pay taxes on this land that they no longer possessed. Finding himself with no means of redress, it is quite possible that Leonhard Franck had no scruples about making his own versions of the coins circulating in Count August's territory.

Franck seems to have had some expertise in finishing coins. According to Milchsack, Johannes Wunderlich, having produced some copper half-pieces (*halbe Kupfferstück*), did not know how to 'whiten' them. He turned to Leonhard Franck who whitened them for him. Wunderlich had also received from Franck a die for making copper half-pieces. Further, Milchsack rejects the accusation that he had received false Hessian and Palatine coins, presumably from Leonhard Franck, via Wunderlich. Milchsack also denies that he had supplied twenty *reichstaler* for Wunderlich to procure copper half-pieces for him from Leonhard Franck.⁴ Franck, it appears, was more skilled in producing counterfeit coins, whereas Wunderlich was better at making and repairing coinage equipment, or *Münzwerk*. According to Milchsack, Franck had not only had Johannes Wunderlich repair his old coinage equipment, but he had also ordered a new *Münzwerk* from him as well. It is at this point that Milchsack introduces Simon Dreisbach into his testimony.

Simon Dreisbach, an amateur among the Wittgenstein counterfeiters?

Compared to Franck and Wunderlich, Simon Dreisbach is given only a small place in Milchsack's account of counterfeiting in the last years of Count August's sway.⁵ The following are the scattered mentions of Simon Dreisbach's involvement in counterfeiting activities (*Falschmünzerei*) prior to April 1735, as recorded by a court clerk from Milchsack's testimony.

• Coinage equipment was kept for a time in Simon's house.

From page-side 72a:

"Dreisbach of Oberndorf had also obtained coinage equipment from Wunderlich and had kept it for some time in his house, and in order to use it in secrecy he had made a special wall in his house, above which he had opened a hole in the ceiling so that he could operate the coinage equipment between the two walls; Dreisbach had told him this, but Milchsack had not seen it and could not say whether, or what kind of coins Dreisbach had made. He told Milchsack that he was not able to complete anything, as Wunderlich had taken the coinage apparatus back and sold it to someone else."

• Simon was present when Wunderlich made some coins in Milchsack's bedroom.

From page-side 73b:

"Milchsack himself had got an old coinage outfit (Geschirr) from Wunderlich, and had kept it for a while in his bedroom; it had been operated there in Milchsack's presence by Wunderlich, who minted kreutzers and

³ The house was called "Stracks" after later occupants. The information on Leonhard Franck's house and his career in the charcoal trade is taken from Werner Wied, *Die Feudinger Höfe*, Ortsheimatverein "Auf den Höfen", Bad Laasphe-Rückershausen, 1991, pp. 363-366.

⁴ WA P 464, 70a, 70b, 71a..

⁵ Count August of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein died in Castle Wittgenstein, Laasphe, on 27 August 1735.

groschen and also made them white. ... Dreisbach and Bode⁶ were also present. ... They used a false groschen to pay for beer, which was however given back to them."

• **Simon made one or more trips to the town of Siegen in Nassau-Siegen, successfully exchanged some coins for good money and procured dies for coins from a Siegen locksmith.**

From page-side 74a:

"Via Simon Dreisbach something (coins) had been sent to Siegen and he had received good money in return, but it was probable that the coins exchanged in Siegen had been made by him (Dreisbach) or had come from Wunderlich. Further, he (Dreisbach) and Anton Boden had got an old coinage apparatus from Wunderlich, and for it they had dies for kreuzers and groschen made by locksmith Johannes Jahn in Siegen. Upon their return from Siegen they wanted to try to smelt together some silver and copper in a crucible; it could not be said for sure if he (Dreisbach) had brought the crucible back with him from Siegen."

• **Simon was apparently blackmailed by Milchsack.**

From page-side 74a:

"He (Milchsack) denies that he had made an agreement with Dreisbach and Wunderlich that in connection with the counterfeiting they were to give him three reichstaler so that he would not report them."

What can we infer from Milchsack's statements about Simon Dreisbach?

Milchsack's testimony in court on 9 June 1740 should not be read as one long monolog. His statements were in fact responses to questions put to him during his interrogation. This can be seen in the previous paragraph where it is clear that Milchsack's examiners had already heard of the forced 'agreement' by which Simon Dreisbach and Johannes Wunderlich were to pay Milchsack 'silence' money. Three reichstaler was a significant sum for Wittgenstein's village farmers who were more inclined to pay in kind than in coin. This attempt at extortion must have taken place prior to 1735, during the time when Milchsack was still Count August's official forester/game-keeper, and was thus a representative of the Count's authority in the Feudinggen forest district.

Was Simon a leading counterfeiter? Clearly, he was not. Milchsack, always ready to minimize his own involvement in counterfeiting, tries to show that Franck in Grossenbach was the real producer of false coins, not himself. He also highlights the involvement of Johannes Wunderlich, a forester/game-keeper like himself, in both counterfeiting and in distribution, and in the supplying and maintenance of counterfeiting equipment. Even when the counterfeiting took place at his own house in Feudinggen, Milchsack minimizes his participation by stressing that it was Wunderlich who produced the coins and, further, that Simon Dreisbach and Anton Boden were there too.

Had Simon Dreisbach actually made for himself a secret room in his *Am Aberge* house? It may be so, though getting access to it through a hole in the ceiling sounds impractical. There would have been really no need for Milchsack to invent a secret counterfeiting space for Simon in his house for, as Milchsack readily states, Simon never managed to complete the counterfeiting process and produce a coin. Thus, Milchsack did not even try to lessen his own guilt by pointing to the coins Simon had produced there, for they never existed. His account of Simon's secret workshop did, however, shift some of the onus of counterfeiting to yet one more person.

⁶ Anton Bode or Boden (1700-1760), a Feudinggen farmer and participant in counterfeiting activities.

Further, Milchsack did ascribe to Simon a serious offense committed beyond Wittgenstein's borders in Siegen, the major town in neighboring Nassau-Siegen. According to Milchsack, some coins were sent to Siegen via Simon Dreisbach, coins which, Milchsack opined, were probably made by Simon or by Wunderlich. (Here Milchsack contradicts himself as to whether or not Simon had produced negotiable coins.) These coins were successfully exchanged in Siegen. Producing and willfully passing on counterfeit currency was of course a crime in Nassau-Siegen as in all German territories, and had Simon been caught, he could have been arraigned and punished there. Milchsack does not say who sent Simon to Siegen with false coins, but given Simon's previous experience as a carter, he was doubtless a likely person to perform such a function. Indeed, being in all likelihood familiar with Siegen, Simon may have had contacts of his own there.

It seems to have been on another occasion that Simon went to Siegen with Anton Boden to fetch dies for producing kreuzers and groschen, dies which they had ordered from the Siegen locksmith Johannes Jahn. These were to be used with the old coinage equipment that they had got from Wunderlich. The dies probably saw some service in the first stages of the counterfeiting process, but if Milchsack can be trusted on this point, Simon produced no finished coins. Wunderlich's taking back the coin-making equipment can have meant that that particular trip to Siegen for dies was more or less in vain.

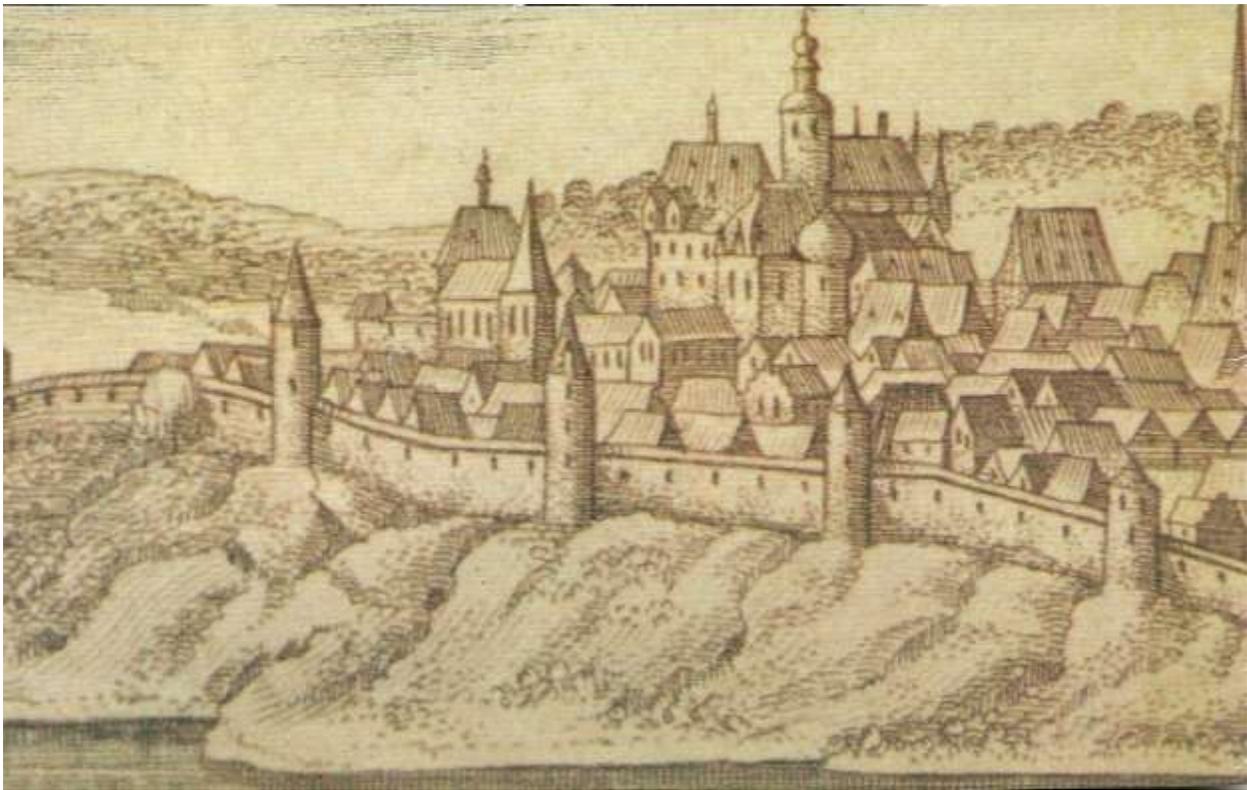


Fig. 3. A partial view of Siegen, made a century or so before Simon Dreisbach is said to have gone there on errands that were connected with counterfeiting. The Sieg River is in the foreground, and the town itself continues to the right, being at least twice as large as the part shown here. (Detail of a partial image from a brochure produced in about 1990 by Touristikverband Siegerland-Wittgenstein e.V., Siegen.)

There is no way of knowing if and when Simon made these trips, but it would probably have been at a time when he still owned a horse, for as seen in DERR no. 11, by 1735 Simon no longer had any horses at all.

What eventually happened to the Wittgenstein counterfeiters?

Johann Adam Milchsack's arrest and interrogation in 1740 led to a prison sentence of three years and eight weeks.⁷ The records show that his first documented crime had taken place as early as 1732, and we know also that his wife continued to live in Feudingingen until her death in 1762.⁸ Milchsack was forty-five when sentenced, and would have regained his freedom at age forty-eight, if he served his full sentence. Thereafter he is absent from the extant Wittgenstein records, and it is not known when or where he died.

Leonhard Franck was in his early sixties when, as we can deduce from Milchsack's testimony, the Wittgenstein counterfeiters were at their most active. In early 1735, when the authorities began investigating various local criminal activities, including that of counterfeiting, Franck was about sixty-five. In any event, he had only one more year to live, dying in Grossenbach on 14 April 1736.

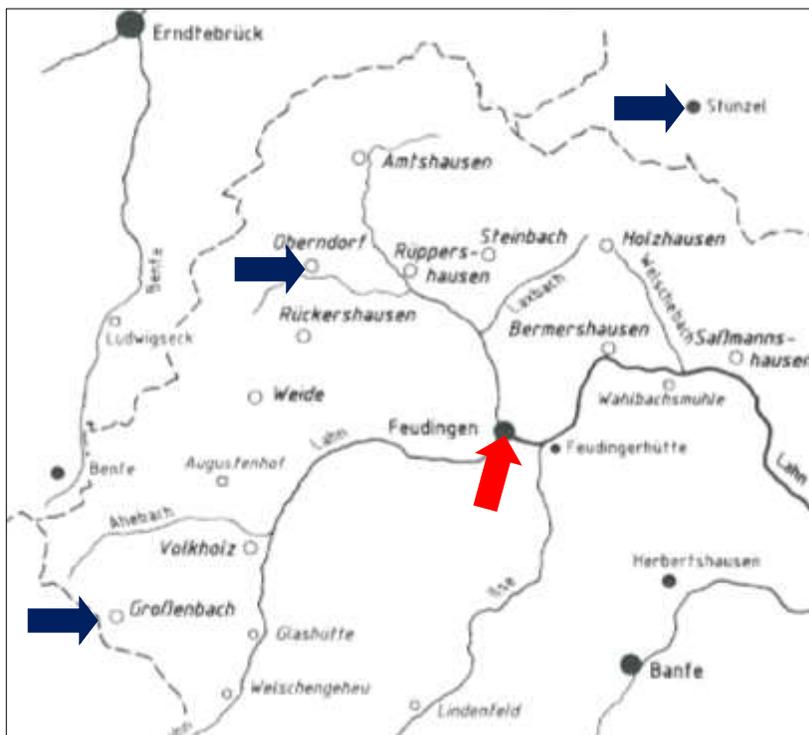


Fig. 4. The scattered villages in the Feudingingen district where, according to Johann Adam Milchsack, certain counterfeiting activities took place. Feudingingen, as the largest village and the administrative center of the Feudingingen district, is indicated by a red arrow. The black arrow points to Stünzel, where Johannes Wunderlich lived, which lies to the north-east, in another district. Simon Dreisbach and Leonhard Franck lived in Oberndorf and Grossenbach respectively. Detail of a map appearing on p. 12 of W. Wied's *Die Feudinginger Höfe* (see note 3).

⁷ Information on Milchsack's sentence communicated by Heinrich Imhof on 20 August 2012.

⁸ We are indebted to Jochen Karl Mehldau for supplying biographical information on Milchsack, including the fact that as early as April 1732 he was fined 150 reichstaler for inflicting a gunshot wound in the course of a military kidnapping attempt. The fine, later reduced to 68 reichstaler, was paid not by himself, but by his brother Otto Milchsack.

It is not known if Leonhard Franck was ever suspected of involvement in any crimes. Nor do we know if Anton Boden of Feudingingen was ever prosecuted. From the scant information found in footnote 6, we can see that he lived another twenty years after Milchsack's arrest and incarceration.

The other principal counterfeiter, Johannes Wunderlich, may have escaped arrest and interrogation, though we can wonder if he was subjected to another form of retribution. Wunderlich appears to have continued to live in Stünzel until 1741, being found in Count Friedrich's lists of subjects from 1736 to 1741. However, he was transferred to another of the Count's territories outside Wittgenstein, that of Homburg, where he was placed in the village of Morkepütz, perhaps in a similar capacity to that which he had had in Wittgenstein-Wittgenstein. Wunderlich presumably died in Morkepütz.⁹ It is possible that his transfer away from Wittgenstein was in effect an exile.

What are we to make of this fragmentary material?

We must keep in mind that Milchsack was not a reliable witness. After his capture, it was to his advantage to cast others in an unfavorable light. However, we can see from the number of crimes he did admit to committing that he had a career of almost constant criminality.

On the other hand, there is no indication that Simon Dreisbach was involved in any serious criminal activities apart from trying to produce false coins of low value, and two attempts to pass on such coins, one failed and the other successful, according to Milchsack. Simon was in no way associated with Milchsack's acts of violence or his kidnapping of unsuspecting young men to be sent to the Prussian army. Still, as we shall see in the next DERR, Simon did associate with Milchsack, and in one instance did help him with a minor theft of grain from a farm of the detested Count August. In that DERR we shall let Simon speak for himself.

As readers of the DERR know, much of the information presented here is the result of chance discoveries in the Wittgenstein records. New findings can cause us to drastically revise what now seems plausible. At present we can only wonder at the obvious amateurism of this little group of would-be counterfeiters. Some of them, perhaps Simon and Anton Boden, can have had motives that were primarily economic. Franck (and Milchsack too, as we shall see) felt that the Count owed them money. In a society that was so tightly regulated, the mere act of attempting to produce false coins can have had a daring air of boldness, of independence and revolt.

Counterfeiting – a dangerous business.

This handful of counterfeiters, however fuelled by need, by revenge or adventure they may have been, would have been well aware of the dangers involved. Although the Wittgenstein counts had ceased minting their own coins in the late seventeenth century, and the coins of several other territories were the accepted tender, the act of counterfeiting remained a serious crime, in Wittgenstein as elsewhere. A small nest of counterfeiters was discovered in Wittgenstein-Berleburg in 1715 that was similar in many ways to the group we have been following here. Their several fates will be considered when we present the punishment meted out to Simon Dreisbach in September 1735.

A.D.G. 12 November 2014

⁹ We are indebted to Jochen Karl Mehldau, Heinrich Imhof and Andreas Sassmannshausen, all of whom provided data on complementary aspects of Johannes Wunderlich's life in their communications in February 2013.