1   Preliminaries

(A) RATIONALITIES AND IRRATIONALITIES

Rational thought is like oxygen in an atmosphere filled with many other gasses, from which this study isolates it artificially as an 'ideal-type' – one which designates ways of thinking mingled with, but distinguishable analytically from, the other less rational kinds. 'Ways of thinking' is in the plural here because there are different kinds of rationality. The question that this study tries to answer is: how did different forms of rationality – four to be precise – relate to and react with one another in the Middle Ages? The resulting analyses of medieval forms of thought run parallel with the more general analyses in the sister volume on *Rationalities in History*.[1] The categories are from Max Weber – hence the subtitle. (It must not be misunderstood. Do not expect a 'rise of Western rationality' essay, nor discussion of whether the 'Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism' had medieval origins, nor a literature survey of earlier work on Weber and the medieval West.[2]) In this Weberian spirit, a pluralist approach to rationalities informs both studies: modern Western rationality is only one species (others being, say, Hinduism, or the ideology of the classical Greek city state), of one genus (the other main genus being instrumental rationality, found in all cultures and not to be identified crudely with the modern Western value system). Weber makes this clear, though he is not always understood in this way. Nonetheless a core concept of rationality must logically precede exploration of the variety of rationalities and irrationalities.

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[1] d'Avray, *Rationalities in History*.
[2] Notably Schluchter (ed.), *Max Webers Sicht des okzidentalen Christentums*; Kaelber, *Schools of Asceticism*.

Rationality will be defined here as: thinking which involves some general principles[3] and strives for internal consistency,[4] where the key causes of the idea or action are different from the reasons the person or people would give for it, even to themselves.[5] It could be argued that 'Rationality', used in this way, is too general a concept to be useful, especially when beliefs and practices such as magic,[6] which nearly everyone in modern academic life feels to be mistaken, are not automatically excluded as irrational. The path taken in this book is to break down the general category into a small number of key sub-concepts which enable recognition of different sorts of rationality and their interrelations. The following forms of rational thought will be defined with the precision that is possible because they are conceptual tools or ideal-types (rather than phenomena existing in a pure form in the world): value rationality, instrumental rationality, formal rationality and substantive rationality. The interactions between these ways of thinking will then be elucidated. The many other possible meanings of 'rationality' in everyday language need not be activated, just as computer software delimits the range of possible pathways to give direction to the analysis of data.

Before turning to these ideal-types of rational thought it must be stressed that 'rationality', however broadly defined, leaves much – some would say most – of medieval history unexplained. Vast areas of thought and action can be described as at least partly irrational, not only so far as the Middle Ages is concerned, but generally. 'Partly irrational' implies 'partly rational', so, strictly, one should speak of 'diminished rationality' rather than irrationality; but for convenience the latter will be used for both.

Irrationality is not easy to detect precisely because people are unaware of it. Their own utterances as reflected in the sources may direct attention away from the real explanations of their thoughts and actions. A full typology of unconscious causation cannot be attempted here but a lightning sketch is possible.

Transposition of motives into another register is one kind of irrationality. It is worth treating one example rather more fully than others to show that in principle the influence of irrational causal factors can be

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[3] 'Everything in nature acts in accordance with laws. Only a rational being has the power to act in accordance with the *idea* of laws, that is, in accordance with principles' ('Ein jedes Ding der Natur wirkt nach Gesetzen. Nur ein vernünftiges Wesen hat das Vermögen, *nach der Vorstellung* der Gesetze, d. i. nach Prinzipien, zu handeln') (Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 56).

[4] Taylor, 'Rationality', 87.

[5] Elster, *Sour Grapes*, 15–16; Davidson, 'Paradoxes of Irrationality', 176, 181 and n. 6.

[6] Kieckhefer, 'The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic'.

demonstrated empirically. The following case is one of the unpleasant stories in Rudolf von Schlettstadt's collection of *Memorable Stories* compiled around 1300.[7]

Rudolf asserts that a Jew procured a consecrated host from a 'perverse Christian' and invited some (Jewish) friends round to watch him experiment on it. He stabbed it and blood poured out; stabbed it again and it began to cry like a young boy. He went on hurting it and the child – the boy Jesus – went on crying out, until neighbours became concerned. They called over a butcher called 'Rindflaisch', who was passing. He thought that the Jews must have just killed a child, and yelled outside the door. That gave the Jews a chance to hide the host. When a mob had assembled and broken down the door the host was nowhere to be found. The Jews were nevertheless tried. They produced Christian witnesses (presumably character witnesses since there was no material evidence either way) but they were condemned nonetheless.[8]

It is worth setting aside the repugnance a modern reader naturally feels for the whole story in order to assess as clinically as may be how much of this behaviour can be described as rational in one sense or another. A modern agnostic might feel that the belief in the eucharist is as absurd as everything else in the story. That would surely be a mistake. The doctrines of the real presence and of the mass were so closely integrated into the set of interlocking beliefs constituting medieval (not to mention subsequent) Catholicism that to dismiss the eucharist as irrational would be a personal value judgement without explanatory power. What about the rest? Two beliefs about the Jews are intertwined here: that they murdered small boys and that they desecrated hosts. Modern scholars can safely assume that neither belief was warranted by actual facts. Consequently, either deception or irrationality of some sort must have played some part in the original creation and first dissemination of these deadly myths.[9] Further downstream in the delta of their reception one cannot be so sure that it was irrational for ordinary people to believe the myths, if it was thought to be common knowledge that Jews did such things. By *c.* 1300 one could say that it was erroneous, but rational, to regard Jews as likely suspects if such crimes were known to have been committed. The modern historian may know that these expectations were mistaken, find them hateful, and set about tracing the great harm they did, but they cannot be dismissed as 'irrational'.

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[7] Rudolf von Schlettstadt, *Historiae Memorabiles*, 12. For background to the following discussion see Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, *passim*.

[8] Rudolf von Schlettstadt, *Historiae Memorabiles*, no. 6, pp. 49–51.

[9] For the origins of the host desecration myth see Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, ch. 2; for the ritual murder myth see McCulloh, 'Jewish Ritual Murder'.

Whether it was rational to assume the guilt of Jewish suspects in a particular case is another matter. In the story just summarised it would appear that the only evidence was the sound of a child crying out – even if we believe everything that Rudolf tells us. No hosts were found. Nothing is said about a confession from the 'perverse Christian' who allegedly procured the host for the Jews. So even if we accept the facts as recounted, we are looking at irrational hysteria as the explanation of the condemnation of the Jews who had been accused. When we come to the end of the story, however, we move even more clearly into the realm of the irrational.

Before the Jews had been led to the place of punishment, the poor people entered the houses of the Jews, threw their things around, and turned their houses upside down. The peasants of the neighbouring villages, hearing and seeing this, followed their example, seized the Jews who dwelled among them, snatched their goods, and burned the houses and bodies of the Jews to ashes.[10]

The sack of Jewish households in the town, and *a fortiori* the murder by arson of Jews in the neighbouring villages, can be confidently described as irrational even after every possible allowance has been made for alterity, other cultures, etc., because no medieval beliefs implied a conviction that those particular rural Jews had actually desecrated hosts. What then were the real motives? Perhaps we can do no more than speculate, but it is worth noting that in this Rhineland social context, religious indignation against people whose failure to accept Christianity seemed incomprehensible and who were the object of ugly general rumours could have been the legitimation for economic resentment of Jews.

The other types of irrationality (in a needless to say far from exhaustive survey) may be treated more briefly. There are types of thinking that are non-rational[11] rather than irrational. Sometimes routines are followed out of inertia, even at the expense of efficacy: this is what Weber called 'traditional' action.[12] A late medieval case would be the survival at the papal court into the fourteenth century of a system by which senior household officials were remunerated in kind.[13] This would have made

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[10] Rudolf von Schlettstadt, *Historiae Memorabiles*, 51.

[11] My use of non-rational should not be confused with that of Gavin Langmuir when he talks of 'nonrational thinking', using the word to mean what Weber calls 'value rational': see Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, vol. 2, p. 12, and cf. Langmuir, *History, Religion and Antisemitism*, 152 n. 18. As will become clear, I strongly endorse Weber's (as against Langmuir's) characterisation of such thinking as rational. The conceptual match between Weber and Langmuir, behind the verbal difference, is nevertheless worth noting.

[12] Weber, *Wirtschaft*, vol. 2, p. 12.

[13] Dehio, 'Der Übergang von Natural- zu Geldbesoldung an der Kurie'; Baethgen, 'Quellen und Untersuchungen', esp. 142–3, passage beginning: 'Mit andern Worten,

sense in an earlier period when popes travelled round their estates living off the produce as other early medieval rulers did, but not at a time when the food and drink had to be purchased and surpluses wasted or resold.

Another possible instance (which admittedly needs further research) of the diminution, either by inertia or an absence of coordination, of organisational rationality seems to be embodied in the following passages from a formulary of the fourteenth-century papal penitentiary (included in a fifteenth-century manuscript belonging to the Cardinal Penitentiary himself:[14] '[the Cardinal Penitentiary] can absolve participants in tournaments and those who have gone to watch them from the sentences imposed on such people by the same lord pope John XXII'.[15] A couple of pages on something very similar is repeated:

Again, the same lord pope granted that the [Cardinal Penitentiary] might have the power to absolve participants in tournaments and those who have gone to watch tournaments from the sentences which he promulgated against such people in certain places.[16]

The repetition is untidy, suggesting a certain degree of administrative disorganisation, but there is another more serious problem. Pope John XXII had in fact lifted the ban on participation in tournaments that he had inherited from his predecessors, and in the decretal by which he absolved anyone who had incurred excommunication through involvement in them he begins with a disarming admission, typical of his approach, that canon law decrees can get it wrong and may need to be removed.[17] It seems unlikely that John XXII subsequently changed his

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14 die ganzen an die Kurialen verteilten Mengen' (p. 142) and ending 'keine andere Verwertungsmöglichkeit dafür hatten!' (p. 143); Frutaz, 'La famiglia pontificia'.

14 MS Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana Lat. 3994, described in Göller, *Die Päpstliche Pönitentiarie*, 71–2 (ownership of the Cardinal Penitentiary Nicolaus Albergati: p. 71). For further bibliography on the Apostolic Penitentiary and its formularies, see below, p. 155.

15 'potest absolvere hastiludiantes et eos qui ad vendendum [*videndum recte?*] astiludia iverunt a sententiis latis per ipsum dominum Iohannem papam xxii contra tales' (MS BAV 3994, fol. 30ʳ).

16 'Item concessit idem dominus papa quod possit absolvere hastiludiantes et eos qui ad videndum hastiludia iverunt a sententiis quas ipse in tales in certis locis promulgavit' (MS BAV 3994, fol. 31ʳ).

17 'Since, where future events are concerned, fallible human judgement can be so mistaken that what careful thought, based on a reasonable estimate of probability, at the time judged useful, sometimes happens to turn out instead to be harmful, it often happens that decisions made advisedly are reversed still more advisedly on more mature consideration' ('Quia in futurorum eventibus sic humani fallitur incertitudo iudicii, ut, quod coniectura probabili exnunc interdum attenta consideratio utile pollicetur, reperiri damnosum quandocunque contingat, nonnunquam quod consulte statuitur ex sanioris inspectione iudicii consultius revocatur') (Extrav. Jo. XXII, 9; Friedberg, *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, vol. 2, p. 1215. Cf. Keen, *Chivalry*, 94, and ch. 5 *passim*, for general context.

mind back, and if *per improbabile* he did, his decree removing the ban was out in the world, to end up eventually in the *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, which remained the law of the Catholic Church up until 1917. Thus the Penitentiary had a formulary that contained rules that appear to contradict canon law. Unless some more logical explanation is produced by future research, this looks very much like a contradiction within the system. Perhaps the man who drafted the formulary did not do his homework, and attributed to John XXII rules that he had in fact abolished.

Sometimes emotion overrides reason, even if the person is aware of it.[18] The power of emotions like anger and lust to overcome rational calculation hardly needs to be illustrated with medieval examples, except when excessively sophisticated over-interpretation conceals a simple truth. In a famous case described by Gregory of Tours a feud is resolved by compensation payments, after which the former foes seemed to enjoy each other's company. One day, at a dinner party, the guest remarked on the gold and silver abounding in the host's house, and commented that he had it thanks to the murder of his relatives, for which the guest had paid compensation. According to Gregory the host said to himself in his heart (which Gregory could hardly have accessed) that people would call him a weak woman unless he avenged his relatives' death, so he slew his guest.[19] An account of the incident in terms of symbolic communication has been offered by an eminent scholar;[20] this may be over-interpretation of the debacle that ruined the carefully crafted settlement of the feud: one could simply say that a man made an offensive joke and provoked a fit of rage, getting himself killed.

Next, one could mention mental illness, such as depression, schizophrenia, and perhaps anorexia. Without being unduly culture-bound, we can assume the existence of some such phenomena in the Middle Ages. Postpartum depression, for instance, probably transcends cultures, and examples from the medieval period can be documented.[21] Carolyn Walker Bynum's study of fasting points out that some of the women who found themselves unable to eat recognised that the cause was *accidia*, a sort of depressive sloth.[22] As for cases where the victims did

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[18] Cf. Weber, *Wirtschaft*, 12: 'affektuell, insbesondere emotional' ('by affect, especially emotionally').

[19] Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*, 7.47 and 9.19, in Dalton, *The History of the Franks*, vol. 2, pp. 321–3 and 387. The case owes some of its fame to the classic discussion of it by Auerbach, *Mimesis*, ch. 4.

[20] Althoff, 'Zur Bedeutung', 381–2.

[21] Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages*, vol. 1, pp. 256–7; Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, 209: 'The insights of modern psychology are helpful, for example, in interpreting the illness that Margery suffered after the birth of her first child. The description resembles "postpartum psychosis".'

[22] Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 203.

not themselves recognise depression as the cause of their quasi-anorexic behaviour, Bynum recognised that 'psychodynamic factors' cannot be eliminated from explanation of such patterns of behaviour, even though the general thrust of her argument is that fasting should be understood inside its own religious culture as a way of imitating the sufferings of Christ.[23]

Bynum showed how cautious one must be about classing the self-starvation of religious women in the later Middle Ages as a kind of 'anorexia', as Rudolf Bell did in a controversial book.[24] Instead Bynum plausibly argued that the religious culture set a high value on self-abnegation; men had more freedom than women to choose to give up sex or wealth; food was one thing women controlled, so one thing they could choose to give up.[25] Still, it is arguable that some of the fasting described by Bell and Bynum went beyond what can easily be explained in terms of the religious values of the day.

It is hard tidily to map the murky area where people lose all awareness of the real springs of their action, and motivation is transposed from one register to another – though such processes must be among the strongest forces in history. The following attempt to label some of the species is necessarily crude.

(i) Frustrated ambition may transpose itself into other more altruistic registers. A good example of how it could be transmuted into volatile religious 'extremism' may be Margery Kempe (*c.* 1373–post-1438), the upper-bourgeois housewife who 'got religion' in a big way and whose enthusiastic and emotional piety seemed overdone, not to say irritating, to many of those around her. Clarissa Atkinson has applied the findings of the social anthropologist I. M. Lewis to Margery:

religious 'extremism' (trance, possession, ecstasy and the like) . . . provides a sanctioned form of resistance or aggression or escape from narrow and unsatisfactory lives. . . . Bizarre behaviour (trance, babbling, 'fits', or possibly tears) manifests the closeness of the spirits. Shamans are not revolutionaries or even reformers; most often they are not conscious of dissatisfaction in themselves or in their group or class. Lewis points out that possessed persons do not necessarily (or characteristically) question authority or attack the status system in which they find themselves. Their anger or rage is expressed without conscious awareness of the effects of hierarchy. . . . Very often, the shaman is distinguished by some

[23] 'Thus whatever physiological and psychodynamic factors may have influenced medieval behaviour – and I dismiss neither set of factors – cultural setting was crucial' (*ibid.*, 206); 'I will, then, leave aside the fact that some of the fasting behavior of late medieval women can be described by the modern psychological and medical term *anorexia nervosa* and address, rather, the question of why so much medieval religious behavior and the religious language of these women revolved around food' (*ibid.*, 207; note the word 'fact').
[24] Bell, *Holy Anorexia*.   [25] Bynum, *Holy Feast*, *passim*.

special affliction or illness. . . . Margery's tears constituted such an affliction and became a mark of special favour.[26]

Margery lacked the opportunities of the men around her:

there was obvious conflict between the social (and domestic) role of John Kempe's wife and John Burnham's daughter and the ambitious, restless, powerful personality of Margery Kempe. . . . Margery Kempe was the daughter of a public figure. Her brother followed their father into public office . . . It must have been obvious very early that Margery's energies could not be expressed in commercial or political life.[27]

Religion may have provided an outlet:

According to Lewis's notion of the social and psychological functions of ecstatic religion, the creation and continuing legitimation of the shamanistic vocation permits its adepts to experience a sense of power, significance, and liberation from unsatisfactory lives. Such ecstasy may or may not be 'hysterical'; it certainly is not a maladaptive neurotic state but an effective and fairly common means by which depressed or deprived people improve their lives. *Obviously it is not a conscious strategy* [my italics].[28]

If Atkinson is right, Margery's ostentatious piety is an example of the common case of piety which is functional, but irrational: an important distinction which defuses many of the apparent paradoxes of rationality analysis. Call behaviour functional when it helps the person or group in some way, and irrational when the real cause is different from the reason which the person or group sees as the explanation of the behaviour. Of course there is no reason why both conditions should not be fulfilled at the same time. There may even be a necessary connection between them. Suppose we accept Atkinson's assessment of Margery Kempe: had Margery not repressed any awareness of the real motivation for her behaviour she could not have carried it off with conviction. Such interpretations are speculative, even unprovable. Analysing irrationality tends to involve more guesswork than analysing rational action. But hypotheses about irrationality cannot always be avoided. The alternative is to take everyone's understanding of his own behaviour at its face value.

(ii) Wishes can father judgements for which there is insufficient objective warrant – as when Western visitors to the Soviet Union in the 1930s left their critical faculties behind and saw the society they wanted to find.[29] Medieval examples are not hard to discover. The Crusade of the

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[26] Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, 213–14.   [27] *Ibid.*, 212–13.   [28] *Ibid.*, 215.
[29] 'A deadening of the senses is evident in their blithe discussion of the treatment of local officials held culpable for the famine and in their response to the culling of the old Bolshevik élite in the show trials from 1936. . . . Their defenders were forced to

Children in 1212[30] and the Crusade of the Shepherds in 1251[31] may fit under the rubric of wishful thinking: a rational assessment would have warned those involved that they had no chance of success. In both cases large numbers of people believed that they could reach and make a military difference in the Middle East when they had no empirical warrant for that assessment. The 'boys' who went on the Children's Crusade hoped to cross to the Holy Land dry shod.[32] The Crusade of the Shepherds

> was an enthusiasm of the peasantry, rooted in the countryside, but in contact with important urban centres, which saw socially marginal, often youthful, agricultural labourers, landless shepherds, cowherds, dairy maids, household servants – later to be joined by assorted riff-raff (*ribaldi*) . . . who were setting out to aid and avenge King Louis, and to rescue the Holy Land from the clutches of the Saracens.[33]

Was this hope warranted in the light of what they knew or believed? It seems hard to deny that wish-fulfilment played a role.

(iii) Anger may be aroused by one thing and direct itself at another, often a person or group. The transmutation of anger towards Muslims in the near East into massacres of peaceful European Jews in the First Crusade seems to be an example of the way in which aggressive emotions and desire for vengeance can be switched from a less accessible to a more accessible object. In the confusion of motivations were doubtless mixed together mental confusion – a blurring of lines between one kind of infidel and another[34] – and greed for the Jews' money. Self-deception about the real motivation must have facilitated these acts of composite irrationality. We have detailed descriptions, notably by Albert of Aachen.[35] He reports that 'the pilgrims rose in a spirit of cruelty against the Jews who were scattered throughout all the cities, and they inflicted a most cruel slaughter on them . . . claiming that this was the beginning of their crusade

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treat their soviet infatuation as a senile aberration, but it was never that. They saw what they wanted to see, no doubt, but the soviet Russia they saw was the closest approximation in practice to their exemplary socialist society – the Webbian design that they had sketched, with little deviation, over a period of fifty years.' J. Davis, 'Webb, Beatrice', 824.

[30] Dickson, 'The Genesis of the Children's Crusade (1212)', translated from an earlier French version. See now his *The Childrens Crusade*.
[31] Dickson, 'The Advent of the *Pastores* (1251)'.   [32] Dickson, 'Genesis', 7.
[33] Dickson, 'The Advent of the *Pastores* (1251)', 250.
[34] Riley-Smith, *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading*, 54–5.
[35] Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana*, i. 26–7, pp. 50–3; on p. 50 nn. 60, 61 and 65 the editor lists other sources for the attacks. For a modern account see Asbridge, *The First Crusade*, 84–8.

and service against the enemies of Christianity',[36] and that after the pogrom in Cologne the aggressors divided 'a substantial sum of money among themselves'.[37]

(iv) Frustration can turn into blind aggression, as with the orgy of violence that ensued after the capture of Jerusalem during the First Crusade.[38] There it seems to have been a matter of releasing pent-up frustration in shocking ways. There is a study to be done on the sociology and psychology of post-siege atrocities.

The foregoing could all be grouped under the rubric of 'psychological irrationality', because psychological causes which the actors did not themselves understand and which were different from the reasons they presumably gave themselves explain their behaviour. They involve a degree of self-deception or the switching of emotions from one object to another, without those who feel them understanding what is happening.

There are surely other forms of the transposition of motivation, but we must turn finally to the kind of irrationality which consists in the coexistence within the same mind, or society, of ideas which are incompatible with each other to a greater or lesser degree. A special case is behaviour which is directed towards a rational end but which contradicts the legitimisation offered to others: logical rather than psychological rationality. A case in point would be the crusading taxes levied on the Church by permission of the Pope by Philip VI of France in the 1330s, well studied by Franz Felten. Whatever people today think of the crusading movement, it was well integrated into the culture of the time, and one should hesitate to call a tax to fund a crusade irrational, however much one may feel the cause to be wrong from a modern observer's standpoint. As it happens, however, there are clear signs that the French king planned to use the money not for a crusade but for consolidation of his kingdom,[39] with an eye on the possibility of conflict with England.[40] There were no accounting controls to ensure that the money was spent on the stated object,[41] and the King had even arranged to make it easy for him to be absolved from any moral obligation to go on crusade.[42] He was able to obtain these enviable conditions by in effect blackmailing the then Pope, John XXII, with a veiled threat to treat him as a heretic for his

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[36] Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana*, i. 26, p. 51.   [37] *Ibid.*

[38] *Ibid.*, vi. 23, pp. 430–3, and vi. 30, pp. 440–3; Asbridge, *The First Crusade*, 316–17.

[39] Felten, 'Auseinandersetzungen um die Finanzierung eines Kreuzzuges', 96: passage beginning 'Selbst wenn die Herrscher' and ending 'Mittel zu verschaffen'.

[40] *Ibid.*, 92: passage beginning 'Schon im Sommer 1335' and ending 'weil kein Silber beschafft werden konnte'.

[41] *Ibid.*, 90: passage beginning 'Die Kontrolle' and ending 'Rechenschaft schuldig'.

[42] *Ibid.*, 91: passage beginning 'der Papst verzichtete' and ending 'des Kreuzzuges rechtfertigte'.