Visual exegesis often entails more than a cognitive process directed towards the understanding of an image in itself. The exegesis of fifteenth-century Italian donor portraits, for example, has been shown by Michael Baxandall to offer clues about the social status of the donor through the material value of the pigments used. The case I am going to present here is less known but runs along the same lines, with an even stronger accent on the pictures’ reference to the person who commissioned them; in its own time, Hieronymus Beck’s portrait book served primarily as an index of the high social rank and ambition of Beck himself, thus demanding a mode of exegesis that would focus not so much on the artifice or iconography of the single portrait, but rather on the societal framework that the images reflect and the sponsor’s position within this framework.

Hieronymus Beck von Leopoldsdorf: A Biographical Sketch

Hieronymus Beck von Leopoldsdorf was born the eldest son of Markus Beck von Leopoldsdorf on 8 October 1525. His father had been a commoner

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2 The book is now at the Kunsthistorisches Museum (Vienna), Gemäldegalerie, Inv.-Nr. 9691.

who rose swiftly and smoothly in the hierarchy of the Viennese court.\footnote{Cf. Möschl C., \textit{Dr. Marcus Beck von Leopoldsdorf. Ein Staatsmann Ferdinands I. (1491–1533)} (Vienna: 1969).} Markus Beck had begun his career as Royal Chamber Procurator and was knighted by King Ferdinand I in 1530 at the age of 39.\footnote{As early as 1523, Markus Beck by the then archduke (later king) Ferdinand I had been endowed with the title “von Leopoldsdorf” together with a coat of arms and the privilege to take part in tournaments (of which there is no report).} The king subsequently appointed him Vice-Regent of Austria and, finally, Chancellor of Lower Austria. Markus Beck’s affiliation in 1525 with a wide spectrum of political dignitaries was sufficient to ensure that an illustrious group stood sponsor for his son Hieronymus: Theoderich Kammerer, bishop of Wiener Neustadt; Albin Greffinger, rector of the university of Vienna; and Katharina Gutrater, the wife of Gabriel Gutrater. Gutrater had been the university’s rector in 1500 and was a high-ranking administrative official (‘Stadtschreiber’) of the city and mayor of Vienna from 1522 to 1524. He Hellenized his name to ‘Eubolius’ to mark his standing as a scholar and as a member of the renowned ‘Sodalitas Danubiana’, in the context of which he had become friends with the eminent humanist Johannes Cuspinianus.

Markus’s high standing with the king was such that in 1527 he was granted the privilege of having his son educated together with Ferdinand’s eldest son, who would later become Emperor Maximilian II. In 1532, Hieronymus went to Innsbruck to be educated there together with the then five-year-old Maximilian and the rest of the royal children under the guidance of Caspar Ursinus Velius, another eminent humanist and poet laureate and a friend of Erasmus.

It is impossible to establish exactly when Hieronymus returned from Innsbruck to his parental home in Vienna. In January 1543, however, he left Vienna again, this time for Zwettl in northern Lower Austria, to receive further education from Dr. Johannes Rosinus. Rosinus was poet laureate and royal court chaplain, and had been, like Ursinus Velius, educator of King Ferdinand’s children. Between 1536 and 1544 he held the positions of provost of the Cistercian monastery at Zwettl and provost of St. Stephen’s cathedral in Vienna. When in 1544 Rosinus became chancellor of the university of Vienna,\footnote{Cf. Aschbach J. von, \textit{Geschichte der Wiener Universität}, 3 vols. (Vienna: 1865–1888) III 10f., 29f., 56.} Hieronymus probably also returned to the capital. On 1 October 1544, however, he moved on to Padua to read law