

1 Saxon Comparisons

The Reformation as a Game Changer

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Introduction

Histories of the German Reformation are the tales of a landslide victory. In the euphoria of the early days, it seems, nothing but an Italian pope and a Dutch emperor stood between Martin Luther and the renewal of Christianity. Some even suggested that the Germans were naturally inclined towards Protestantism. This, of course, was too simple to be true. When the papal nuncio Girolamo Aleandro reported from the Diet of Worms that ‘nine out of ten Germans cry “Luther!,” while the other tenth [...] shout “Death to the Roman curia!,”’ these were the woes of a man under pressure, not an objective analysis.¹

While there is evidence pointing to a strong revival of German Catholicism in the seventeenth century, from the very beginning, the Reformation involved a real contest – a clash of ideas, powers and people. It is time to realise that, in this respect as in many others, the German Reformation was not so different from that in the rest of Europe. Some of the earliest Catholic strongholds, including the sacred city of Cologne or the stubborn duchy of Bavaria, have long been acknowledged by historians. But if we look closer, we find that the response to Luther was mixed even in his homeland of Saxony, the very place where the Reformation began.

While its name was applied to different places at different times, Saxony in the sixteenth century encompassed the vast principality ruled by the House of Wettin. It covered most of what today is called central Germany (i.e., the federal states of Saxony-Anhalt, Thuringia and Saxony). These self-acclaimed heartlands of the Reformation were once the home of Martin Luther, who lived there his entire life. Specialists, however, have long been aware that there had been two Saxonies in the sixteenth century and that they responded to Luther quite differently. The master narrative of the Reformation always

¹ Girolamo Aleandro’s report to Rome [Worms, 8 February 1521] in Paul Kalkoff (ed.), *Die Depeschen des Nuntius Aleander vom Wormser Reichstage 1521* (Halle, 1886), 42–53, at 43. In contrast, at the closure of the Diet, Aleandro was rejoicing that nine out of ten of his supporters had abandoned Luther, showing again that his numbers are not to be mistaken for statistics. See Hubert Jedin, *Geschichte des Konzils von Trient* (Freiburg, 1951), vol. 1, 165.

recounts the events in the Electorate, which after its founder, Ernest, is also known as Ernestine Saxony. Ruled in succession by Elector Frederick the Wise (1463–1525), and his younger brother, John the Constant (or the Steadfast, 1468–1532), through the personal influence of Luther himself, it became the very first country in history to adopt Protestant doctrine and form a Lutheran state church.²

The other Saxon principality, however, founded by Duke Albert and therefore called Albertine Saxony, remained fiercely Catholic. Under the rule of Albert's son, George the Bearded (1471–1539), Luther's works were proscribed, his followers were persecuted and the Reformation was quite effectively suppressed. The historian Otto Vossler has highlighted this by dubbing Albertine Saxony, 'the birthplace of the Counter-Reformation'.³ Thus, Saxony was the first country in history divided over the issue of Protestant faith. This precisely is what makes it so interesting for a volume focused on *Reformations Compared*. It represents Europe's dilemma in a nutshell. The question is: Why did it happen thus? Why was a message intended for everyone, as original as Luther's, not able to unite even those in his very vicinity?

Answering this question might tell us something important about the Reformation itself. Wherever it went from Wittenberg, it divided countries, cities, communities, but it also forged new loyalties. Family ties were disrupted, and sometimes reordered, old allegiances were destroyed and new coalitions formed. Everywhere the Reformation proved to be a real game changer, a decisive force in bringing about a new age. Yet as successful as the early Reformation might seem to have been, it was never unchallenged. Therefore, nothing could be farther from the truth than the old German academic tradition of narrating sixteenth-century history in consecutive epochs; first the Reformation, then the Counter-Reformation. By looking at Saxony, we learn that the opposite is true. Reformation and Counter-Reformation were alternatives, right from the very beginning.⁴

² Numerous handbooks or exhibition catalogues have told this master narrative. See, for instance, *Glaube und Macht. Sachsen im Europa der Reformationszeit*, 2 vols. (Dresden, 2004). Recent publications with special focus on the princes include Armin Kohnle and Uwe Schirmer (eds.), *Kurfürst Friedrich der Weise von Sachsen: Politik, Kultur und Reformation* (Leipzig, 2015); Armin Kohnle, 'Die Frömmigkeit der Wettiner und die Anfänge der Reformation', *Lutherjahrbuch* 75 (2008), 125–40; Uwe Schirmer, 'Die ernestinischen Kurfürsten bis zum Verlust der Kurwürde (1485–1547)', in Frank-Lothar Kroll (ed.), *Die Herrscher Sachsens. Markgrafen, Kurfürsten, Könige, 1089–1918* (Munich, 2013), 55–75; Doreen von Oertzen Becker, *Kurfürst Johann der Beständige und die Reformation (1513–1532): Kirchenpolitik zwischen Friedrich dem Weisen und Johann Friedrich dem Großmütigen* (Cologne, 2017).

³ Otto Vossler, 'Herzog Georg der Bärtige und seine Ablehnung Luthers', *Historische Zeitschrift* 184 (1957), 272–91, at 272: 'Geburtsland der Gegenreformation'.

⁴ I am indebted to Enno Bünz, whose recent essays on the topic are a starting point for these thoughts. See Enno Bünz, 'Getrennte Wege. Die Reformation im Kurfürstentum und im Herzogtum Sachsen (1517–1539/40)', in Frank-Lothar Kroll, Glyn Redworth and Dieter J.

Saxon Comparisons: Two Countries or One?

Before assessing the Reformation in Saxony, however, it is vital to establish that our case study is indeed valid for the purpose of comparison. Were there, perchance, underlying structural reasons that predestined the separate experiences of the two principalities? In fact, sixteenth-century Saxony was forged by the House of Wettin, an old dynasty that historians trace back to the lords of a small border post at the banks of the Saale. They rose to power by aiding the Holy Roman emperors in their conquest of the Slavic tribes east of the river. By assimilating these new territories, and successfully developing them with the help of settlers from the West, the Wettins forged a power base that kept them in charge for more than 800 years. Serving as Margraves of Meissen since 1089, they inherited a more developed province in the West, the Landgravate of Thuringia, in 1247. In a third step dating to 1423, they were elevated to the status of dukes of Saxony. The latter honour was bestowed on them by the emperor in acknowledgement of the Wettins' defence of the empire against the raids of the Hussites from Bohemia. At that point, fighting heresies became an integral part of Wettin identity.⁵

The fief of Saxony, it was true, had lost much of its former glory in the fifteenth century. It consisted of no more than a sparsely populated patch of land around the small town of Wittenberg.⁶ However, the title itself was still very prestigious. To be the duke of Saxony carried the right to be one of the seven electors of the realm and governor in the emperor's absence. For the powerful, but inglorious Wettins, this was the perfect match. Establishing themselves as the new House of Saxony, they gained a standing, reflecting the power they had already accumulated. Their principality, of which the fief of Saxony was only a small part, contained extensive arable lands farmed by peasants who were free. It included hundreds of towns, and though most of them were rather humble, they included the city of Leipzig, with almost 10,000 burghers, which was a

Weiß (eds.), *Deutschland und die Britischen Inseln im Reformationsgeschehen. Vergleich, Transfer, Verflechtungen* (Berlin, 2018), 275–301; and 'Nähe und Distanz. Friedrich der Weise und Herzog Georg von Sachsen (1486–1525)', in *Kohnle and Schirmer, Kurfürst Friedrich* (n. 2), 123–41. I also make use of my own research, in particular an essay comparing the Wettin princes, their piety and response to Luther: Christoph Volkmar, 'Zwischen Devotion und Repräsentation. Fürstliche Heiligenverehrung in Mitteldeutschland vor der Reformation', in Klaus Herbers and Enno Bünz (eds.), *Der Jakobuskult in Sachsen* (Tübingen, 2007), 145–73; and *Catholic Reform in the Age of Luther: Duke George of Saxony and the Church, 1488–1525* (Leiden, 2017) [German edition: *Reform statt Reformation: Die Kirchenpolitik Herzog Georgs von Sachsen, 1488–1525* (Tübingen, 2008)]. For a long time forgotten, the pioneer of research in early Catholic responses to the German Reformation was a young professor at Leipzig, Wilhelm Maurenbrecher; see his *Geschichte der katholischen Reformation* (Nördlingen, 1880).

⁵ Enno Bünz, 'Wettiner', *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, vol. 27 (Berlin, 2020), 912–18.

⁶ Lorenz Friedrich Beck, *Herrschaft und Territorium der Herzöge von Sachsen-Wittenberg* (Potsdam, 2000).

boomtown boasting an imperial privileged fair, a papal privileged university and a vital printing industry.⁷ Furthermore, the Wettins could claim advocacy over the two largest cities of central Germany: the old Saxon metropolis of Magdeburg and Erfurt, the capital of Thuringia. Erfurt was home to 20,000 inhabitants, Magdeburg had more than 30,000 inhabitants and both aspired to become free imperial cities. The Wettins supported the burghers in their struggle for independence against their local lords, the archbishops of Magdeburg and Mainz respectively. Although they were not entirely successful, Wettin influence in the region grew constantly.⁸

The most valuable asset of the Saxon princes lay deep below the Ore Mountains. The silver mines of Freiberg and Annaberg, prosperous mining towns almost as populous as Leipzig, generated a constant flow of cash for their coffers. Their coinage, the Meißner Groschen, was the most stable silver currency of the age. That was what set the Wettins apart from most princes, and even the emperor. They were rich, and, more importantly, they were always solvent.⁹

Why then do we speak of two Saxonies in the Reformation era? It is because, for dynastic reasons, the territory had been split between the princely brothers, Ernest and Albert, in 1485. This had not been the first time that Saxony had been divided. Following Saxon law, the Wettins used to divide their heritage equally between all surviving sons (except, of course, those who joined the clergy). The Chemnitz partition of 1382 had split the principality into three parts, while the Altenburg partition of 1445 resulted in two territories. However, this latter partition had proven disastrous. By separating the historic provinces of Meissen and Thuringia, the Altenburg partition revived old rivalries. The noble estates of Thuringia felt themselves particularly disadvantaged. Mistrust and intra-dynastic controversies resulted in five years of civil war.¹⁰

⁷ On Saxony around 1500, see Karlheinz Blaschke, *Geschichte Sachsens im Mittelalter* (Berlin, 21991); and now, with a comparative approach, Enno Bünz, 'Raum und Herrschaft um 1500: Kurfürstentum Sachsen und Hochstift Würzburg im Vergleich', in Enno Bünz and Wolfgang Weiß (eds.), *Bischof Lorenz von Bibra (1495–1519) und seine Zeit. Herrschaft, Kirche und Kultur im Umbruch* (Würzburg, 2020), 125–207 [in print]. On Leipzig, the university and printing industry, see Enno Bünz (ed.), *Geschichte der Stadt Leipzig, Vol. 1: Von den Anfängen bis zur Reformation* (Leipzig, 2015); Enno Bünz, Manfred Rudersdorf and Detlev Döring, *Geschichte der Universität Leipzig 1409–2009, Vol. 1: Spätes Mittelalter und Frühe Neuzeit 1409–1830/31* (Leipzig, 2009); Enno Bünz (ed.), *Bücher, Drucker, Bibliotheken in Mitteldeutschland: Neue Forschungen zur Kommunikations- und Mediengeschichte um 1500* (Leipzig, 2006).

⁸ Dieter Stievermann, 'Die Wettiner als Hegemonen im mitteleutschen Raum um 1500', in Jörg Rogge and Uwe Schirmer (eds.), *Hochadelige Herrschaft im Mitteldeutschen Raum (1200–1600): Formen, Legitimation, Repräsentation* (Stuttgart, 2003), 379–93.

⁹ Uwe Schirmer, *Kursächsische Staatsfinanzen (1456–1656): Strukturen, Verfassung, Funktionsebenen* (Stuttgart, 2006).

¹⁰ Jörg Rogge, *Herrschaftsweitergabe, Konfliktregelung und Familienorganisation im fürstlichen Hochadel. Das Beispiel der Wettiner von der Mitte des 13. bis zum Beginn des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 2002).

Thus, when the principalities were reunited in 1482, only to be separated again three years later, the princely brothers Ernest and Albert tried to learn from previous mistakes. Remembering the unrest caused by the last partition, they adopted a new strategy. Instead of following historic boundaries, the Leipzig partition of 1485 took only revenue into account. The income of each castle, district, ore mine and vassal was calculated. While one prince drew up the assets in two equal accounts on a very long piece of parchment, the other one was to choose.¹¹

As a result, Ernest and Albert did not get neatly shaped territories but parts of a jigsaw puzzle. Ernest claimed lordship over cities like Wittenberg, Torgau, Zwickau, Altenburg, Weimar, Gotha and Eisenach. Albert could count among his subjects the citizens of Leipzig, Freiberg, Annaberg, Dresden, Meißen, Chemnitz, Weißenfels and Langensalza. In effect, each prince took over several districts of Meissen as well as districts of Thuringia. They shared arable lands and ore mines, advocacies over bishops and monasteries. Only the electoral fief of Wittenberg went to the elder brother in one piece, since it was indivisible according to imperial law as stipulated in the Golden Bull of 1356.¹²

The Leipzig partition was not designed to separate but to keep the Wettin lines in touch, not to say, in mutual dependence. Most importantly, the estates were not again forced to take opposing sides. The mighty families of the gentry, who had proven loyal to the Wettins for centuries, held fiefs in both parts of Saxony. To avoid mistrust, assets that were difficult to estimate, such as the newly discovered silver mines of Schneeberg, remained in common possession. Why is all this important to us? Because it means that we can hardly speak of different entities when we talk about the two Saxonies of the Reformation era. The electorate and the duchy had much more in common than could set them apart. They shared a mutual history, they shared common social milieus and they were intertwined by trade routes, as well as by family ties. Whether we look at social, economic or administrative structures, there were no substantial differences. The two Wettin principalities of 1517 were, in essence, similar, and what is more, they were almost like conjoined twins. Nothing set them apart until the 'Luther affair'.

1517: Who Was Interested in Reforming the Church?

The two Saxonies provide us with almost perfect laboratory conditions for comparing opposite reactions to the Reformation. As there were no differences in structures, there must be other factors to explain the diametrically different responses to Luther.

¹¹ Ibid. Mathias Kälble, 'Die Leipziger Teilung von 1485', in Bünz, *Stadt Leipzig*, 269–73.

¹² Ibid.

Arguably, one of the most relevant parameters to assess the state of public affairs prior to the Reformation was the issue of Church reform. How much were the two Saxonies affected by this European debate? Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that a well-informed contemporary like Erasmus of Rotterdam travelled to the Wettin lands. What could he have witnessed? That is not as far-fetched as it may sound, since Erasmus did indeed receive invitations to teach at Leipzig University in 1517. A Cambridge scholar played a role in that. Returning home to England in spring 1517, the Latinist Richard Croke carried a bunch of letters from Leipzig. Hieronymus Emser, a noted humanist and court chaplain at Dresden, wrote one of them. In the name of his patron, Duke George of Saxony, he invited Erasmus to accept a position at the local university. The *Alma mater Lipsiensis*, founded in 1409, was one of the most frequented schools of academic learning in the empire.¹³ Introducing himself by means of a *captatio benevolentiae*, Emser told Erasmus that he had only recently edited a work of the great humanist.¹⁴ Croke carried two other letters for Erasmus: one written by Hieronymus Dungersheim, professor of theology, and the other by Petrus Mosellanus, Leipzig's first regular lecturer in Greek. Both scholars tried to lure Erasmus by their description of the *studia humanitatis* at Leipzig.¹⁵ While the Dutch humanist was not inclined to take up the offer, he did start a long-lasting correspondence with his Albertine counterparts. Not only Emser but also the duke himself received Erasmus' compliments for the surge of humanist studies at Leipzig. Over the next decade, no prince in Europe exchanged more letters with Erasmus than George of Saxony. It was a connection that was to prove useful later on when both men found themselves locked in public controversies with Martin Luther.¹⁶

What if the acclaimed champion of humanism had indeed agreed to accept a visiting professorship in Saxony? What might he have witnessed? One of his first strolls, one can easily assume, would have taken him to Leipzig's bookshops. Being interested in his own impact on readers, as many scholars tend to be, Erasmus might have perused the shelves for copies of his own works. He would not have looked in vain but would have found, among others, a brand-new edition of his own *Enchiridion militis christiani*, printed locally by Valentin Schumann. That was the book that Emser referred to in his letter, and it was a prominent edition as well. According to the VD 16, it was the first stand-alone imprint of the famous *Handbook* in German-speaking lands. It appeared in Leipzig on 27 August 1515, independent of another early edition

¹³ Büinz, Rudersdorf and Döring, *Universität Leipzig* (n. 7).

¹⁴ Hieronymus Emser to Erasmus, Dresden, 15 March 1517, P. S. Allen (ed.), *Opus Epistolarum Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, 12 vols. (Oxford, 1906–58), ep. 553. See also *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, tr. R. A. B. Mynors et al. (Toronto, 1974–), vol. 4, 284–86.

¹⁵ See Allen, *Opus Epistolarum*, ep. 554, 560. ¹⁶ See Volkmar, *Catholic Reform*, 559–84.

published later in the year at Antwerp. The Leipzig print of 1515 marked an important moment in the history of this text, which first appeared obscurely in an anthology of theological tracts but only truly gained fame after Erasmus himself authorised an edition at Basel in 1518.¹⁷

Why was the Leipziger so keen on making this text available? It was Erasmus's plea for reform, his 'critical piety' (C. Scott Dixon),¹⁸ which resonated. The lengthy title given by Emser proves this. It translates as the *Handbook of a Christian Soldier by Brother Erasmus of Rotterdam*, in which he criticises public superstitions and with the clarion call of classic eloquence harkens back to the purity of early Christian piety.¹⁹ Emser's edition presented the *Enchiridion* as an appeal to renew lay piety, an idea very vital to the reform debates in Albertine Saxony. Presented in this way, the book seems to have resonated with many readers. Three subsequent print runs appeared until 1521.²⁰

However, there was more to Leipzig in 1517 than just an interest in Christian Humanism. If Erasmus had joined the university staff, he might also have witnessed fierce debates about ecclesiastical abuses and the reform of the Church. And no one in Leipzig could have missed the affirmative echo that Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* had found with Duke George of Saxony. Later, George recalled his first impression in a letter to Luther:

We do not wish to hide from you the fact that we were (in part) pleased by your books when they first appeared. We were also not unhappy to hear that the disputation took place in Leipzig, since we have hoped this would help to abolish abuses among Christians.²¹

By mid-November 1517, only days after their publication, Duke George had decided to have the *Ninety-Five Theses* distributed throughout his lands. In agreement with the bishop of Merseburg, broadsheets were posted

¹⁷ Hieronymus Emser (ed.), *Enchiridion Erasmi Roterodami Germani de milite Christiano in quo taxatis vulgi superstitionibus, ad priscae religionis puritatem: veteris aeloquentiae lituonos prouocat* (Leipzig: Valentin Schumann, 1515 and 1516 [VD 16 E 2744, 2746]). For the date of the first edition, see the imprint 'Lypsi, in aedibus Valentini Schumanns Calcographi diligentissimi. Sexto Calendas Septembris, anno M.D.XV.' (ibid., fol. LVIII.v). On this edition in the printing history of the text, see *Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachbereich erschienenen Drucke des XVI. Jahrhunderts* (VD 16), Part 1, 22 vols. (Stuttgart, 1983–95), vol. 6, 225–30; Robert Stupperich, 'Das *Enchiridion militis Christiani* des Erasmus von Rotterdam nach seiner Entstehung, seinem Sinn und Charakter', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 69 (1978), 5–23, at 9; Werner Welzig (ed.), *Desiderius Erasmus, Ausgewählte Schriften, vol. 1: Epistola ad Paulum Volzium/Enchiridion militis christiani* (Darmstadt, 1968), 11.

¹⁸ C. Scott Dixon, 'Reformations', in C. Scott Dixon and Beat Kümin (eds.), *Interpreting Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 2020), 121–49, at 127.

¹⁹ See the title quoted above in note 17. ²⁰ Volkmar, *Catholic Reform*, 360f., 423f.

²¹ Duke George to Martin Luther, Dresden, 28 December 1525, Felician Gess (ed.), *Akten und Briefe zur Kirchenpolitik Herzog Georgs von Sachsen*, vol. 1: 1517–1524, vol. 2: 1525–1527 (Leipzig and Berlin, 1905–17), vol. 2, 472–78.

‘at many locations’.²² In fact, Luther’s outcry came along at just the right moment. By targeting Johann Tetzel’s indulgence campaign for St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, it served a political goal of both Wettin lines. Although Tetzel was a member of the Dominican friary at Leipzig, he worked for Albrecht of Brandenburg, the new archbishop of Magdeburg. The election of this scion of the rival Hohenzollern dynasty had marked a major defeat for the Wettins. For decades, Ernest, the brother of Elector Frederick, had held the see, before his well-planned succession by a brother of Duke George had been thwarted by a premature death. The Wettin princes had every reason to resent the new archbishop, and consequently, they prohibited his indulgence campaign in their territories, at the very least preventing Saxon money from flowing into his coffers. However, it was not easy to enforce this prohibition with a populace so eager for pardons.²³ Therefore, Duke George welcomed Luther’s theses so that ‘the poor people who run in search of mercies are warned of Tetzel’s deceit’.²⁴ By embracing the *Ninety-Five Theses*, Duke George welcomed Luther as a partner in the common endeavour of reforming the Catholic Church. The Wittenberg professor seemed to be just another voice in the choir of those singing the well-known tune of the *Gravamina of the German Nation*. This warning against religious abuses and excesses in Rome matched Duke George’s sentiments exactly, and he gave it every political support.²⁵

As indulgences became the viral topic of public discussion in 1518, Duke George recognised the true potential of the *Theses*. He became the driving political force behind the Leipzig disputation of 1519.²⁶ In his attempts to convince the Leipzig professors, George stressed the importance of the issue, as well as the prestige to be won for his university. In a direct reference to Tetzel’s popular phrase, the duke pointed out: ‘We maintain, it should be allowed to be debated as to whether a soul is led up to Heaven when a penny jingles in the cup’.²⁷

Therefore, I am confident that Erasmus would have found Leipzig a place where initiatives for Church reform and modern forms of piety that were dear to him had already taken roots. But what would he have learned about

²² Caesar Pflug to Duke George, 27 November 1517, *ibid.*, vol. 1, 28f. Note that this letter reflects the duke’s own position, since Cäsar Pflug, bailiff of Leipzig and a senior advisor to the duke, reports about his negotiations with the local bishop.

²³ Volkmar, *Catholic Reform*, 453–59.

²⁴ Pflug to Duke George, 27 November 1517 (see above, note 22).

²⁵ Volkmar, *Catholic Reform*, 182–89.

²⁶ Volkmar, *Catholic Reform*, 458f. For new research on the disputation, see now Markus Hein and Armin Kohnle (eds.), *Die Leipziger Disputation von 1519. Ein theologisches Streitgespräch und seine Bedeutung für die frühe Reformation* (Leipzig, 2019).

²⁷ Duke George to Bishop Adolf of Merseburg, Dresden, 17 January 1519, Gess, *Akten und Briefe*, vol. 1, 60–62.

the other part of Saxony, about the electorate and its capital, Wittenberg? Certainly, the first pamphlets by Luther, many of them printed at Leipzig, would have caught his interest. However, among the newest prints on the shelves from Wittenberg there would have also been other voices, like a broadsheet of March 1520. Under the title *Verkündung des grossen apas der weysung des hochwirdigen heilighumbs in Aller Heiligen stiftkirchen zu Wittenberg*²⁸ it supplemented the *Wittenberger Heiltumsbuch*²⁹ published in two editions of 1509–10 and introduced new papal privileges granted for Wittenberg in 1518. Both prints promoted the capital of Ernestine Saxony as a place in which to venerate the saints. They invited the faithful to undertake a pilgrimage to Wittenberg, arriving in Eastertide on Monday after *Misericordias Domini*, when an enormous treasure of relics would be on display outside the Castle church. A spectacular indulgence was promised, no less than 1,902,202 years, 270 days and 1,915,983 quadrages of pardon. Most likely, Erasmus would have heard about the Wittenberg relics even without reading the prints. By mandate of the archbishop of Magdeburg, to which province Leipzig belonged, each Sunday in each church was to be announced the next *ostensio* at Wittenberg.³⁰

Princes and Piety

Judging by the state of public debate, Albertine Saxony took a modern approach to the topic of Church reform, whereas in Ernestine Wittenberg Martin Luther worked in proximity to a traditional and overwhelming late medieval piety. To complete that picture, a closer look at the princes who governed the two Saxonies is now in order. What marked the pre-Reformation lives and politics of Frederick the Wise, John the Constant and George the Bearded before the Luther affair changed everything?

Elector Frederick the Wise was born at Torgau in 1463 and died in 1525 only a few miles away at his hunting lodge of Lochau. However, he was not

²⁸ Wittenberg: Symphorian Reinhardt, 18 March 1520. See Hartmut Kühne, 'Einblattdruck über den Ablass der Wittenberger Heiltumsweisung', in Hartmut Kühne, Enno Bünz and Thomas T. Müller (eds.), *Alltag und Frömmigkeit am Vorabend der Reformation in Mitteldeutschland. Katalog zur Ausstellung "Umsonst ist der Tod"* (Petersberg, 2013), 210f. (with facsimile); an older edition in Paul Kalkoff, *Ablaß und Reliquienverehrung an der Schloßkirche zu Wittenberg unter Friedrich dem Weisen* (Gotha, 1907), 107f.

²⁹ *Dye zäigung des hochlobwirdigen hailighums der stift kirchen aller hailigen zu Wittenburg* (Wittenberg: [Symphorian Reinhart], 1509). See Livia Cardenas, *Friedrich der Weise und das Wittenberger Heiltumsbuch. Mediale Repräsentation zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit* (Berlin, 2002).

³⁰ Hartmut Kühne, *Ostensio reliquiarum. Untersuchungen über Entstehung, Ausbreitung, Gestalt und Funktion der Heiltumsweisungen im römisch-deutschen Regnum* (Berlin, 2000), 400–23.

a hermit and had seen quite a lot of Europe in his day. Always accompanied by a golden reliquary of St. Christopher, the patron of travel,³¹ the elector's travels took him across the Holy Roman Empire and beyond. Some even recognised him, rich and powerful as he was, as a suitable candidate for emperorship. In 1497–98, he spent a year at the court of Emperor Maximilian in Innsbruck, presiding over the Imperial court council (*Reichshofrat*). Earlier, in 1493, he had led a group of pilgrims via Venice into the Holy Land. Frederick never married, but the descendants of his younger brother John would eventually include a certain Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha. History, of course, remembers Frederick as the lord who was wise enough to let Luther be, protecting him from harm, and, by extension, allowing the Reformation to take root.³²

Called a 'wise' man already by contemporaries,³³ Frederick was known for his interest in humanism as well as for a scrupulous style of government.³⁴ Spiritually, however, he felt at home with the faith of his ancestors and fully embraced the late medieval economy of grace. Most dear to him was the Collegiate Church of All Saints at Wittenberg Castle. By increasing the income of its canonries and adding new positions, he provided splendidly for worship in the church. Eighty priests would celebrate more than 9,000 Masses per year.³⁵ Coincidentally, the benefices also secured the salaries of the professors appointed to teach at the new university at Wittenberg which was founded by Frederick in 1502.³⁶

Furthermore, the elector was the driving force behind the treasure of relics at Wittenberg's All Saints Castle Church. The prince wanted to provide residents and guests with a sacred infrastructure that met European standards. This was certainly a wise move in order to develop a capital, which Luther

³¹ See Thomas Lang, "'1 gulden 3 groschen aufs Heyltum geopfert'". Fürstliche Rechnungen als Quellen zur Frömmigkeitsgeschichte', in Enno Bünz and Hartmut Kühne (eds.), *Alltag und Frömmigkeit am Vorabend der Reformation in Mitteleutschland. Wissenschaftlicher Begleitband zur Ausstellung "Umsonst ist der Tod"* (Leipzig, 2015), 81–148, at 105.

³² On his biography, Kohnle and Schirmer, *Kurfürst Friedrich* (n. 4); Ingetraut Ludolph, *Friedrich der Weise, Kurfürst von Sachsen (1463–1525)* (Göttingen, 1984); Bernd Stephan, *Beiträge zu einer Biographie Kurfürst Friedrichs III. von Sachsen, des Weisen (1463–1525)*, MS (dissertation, University of Leipzig, 1979); on Frederick's appointment at the Habsburg court, Heinz Nollatscher, *Räte und Herrscher. Eliten an den Habsburger Höfen der österreichischen Länder 1480–1530* (Mainz, 1999).

³³ Bünz, 'Nähe und Distanz', 123.

³⁴ Bernd Stephan, 'Friedrich der Weise und Luther. Distanz und Nähe', in: Kohnle and Schirmer, *Kurfürst Friedrich*, 424–35, at 433.

³⁵ Ludolph, *Friedrich der Weise*, 337–66; Kühne, *Ostensio reliquiarum*, 406f.

³⁶ Manfred Rudersdorf, 'Kurfürst Friedrich der Weise und die Anfänge der Leucorea in Wittenberg', in: Kohnle and Schirmer, *Kurfürst Friedrich*, 251–69; Thomas Lang and Anke Neugebauer, 'Die Leucorea, Wittenberg und das Reich: eine Universitätsgründung und ihr kulturelles, personelles und politisches Umfeld', in Heiner Lück et al. (eds.), *Das ernestinische Wittenberg: Die Leucorea und ihre Räume* (Petersberg, 2017), 11–52.

famously remarked was located ‘*in termino civilitatis*’.³⁷ As a pious Christian, Frederick wished to be buried in the presence of all the saints, having maintained a personal relationship to them all of his life. On his way to Cologne in August 1520, he did not travel before, as he put it, ‘taking leave of all the dear saints’ at Wittenberg.³⁸

On Frederick’s orders, his agents went on a quest for sacred relics all over Europe. Between 1513 and 1520, the treasure grew by more than 1,000 pieces a year, eventually numbering to more than 20,000, thereby forming one of the largest collections of its kind in history.³⁹ It was almost like a race, in fact a race within the family, since Frederick’s activities mimicked the actions of his brother, Archbishop Ernest of Magdeburg, in amassing relics of the saints in his residence at Halle.⁴⁰ However, Frederick was also interested in creating something new. The *homo novus* and his rural capital might not have been able to compete with the age and dignity of the great pilgrimage shrines of Europe. But he was successful in procuring allies who were resourceful in the art of indulgences. On 1 February 1503, Raimund Peraudi, the French cardinal, papal legate and noted indulgence preacher, consecrated the renovated Castle Church of Wittenberg and published a charter that lay the foundation of the public *ostensio* of the Wittenberg relics. What was new was that Peraudi’s charter allowed the computation of pardon by particle.⁴¹ As a consequence, the indulgence available for the participants of the *ostensio* grew with each piece. While the prince urged his Roman procurators to upgrade the papal privilege in quality, for instance by including intercessions for the deceased, his secretary frequently documented the increase in quantity. In 1520, the pardon thus accumulated amounted to almost two million years.⁴² This diligent clerk was the same George Spalatin that Reformation history remembers for his role as intermediary to Luther, who, with the sole exception of the Diet of Worms, never met Frederick the Wise in person.⁴³

³⁷ Heinz Schilling, ‘Urbanisierung und Reformation “in termino civilitatis”. Überlegungen zu einer welthistorischen Symbiose’, in Heiner Lück et al. (eds.), *Das ernestinische Wittenberg: Universität und Stadt (1486–1547)* (Petersberg, 2011), 20–26.

³⁸ Lang, ‘Fürstliche Rechnungen’, 84, note 15.

³⁹ Ludolph, *Friedrich der Weise*, 357f.; Enno Bünz, ‘Zur Geschichte des Wittenberger Heiltums. Johannes Nuhn als Reliquienjäger in Helmarshausen und Hersfeld’, *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Thüringische Geschichte* 52 (1998), 135–58.

⁴⁰ Michael Scholz, *Residenz, Hof und Verwaltung der Erzbischöfe von Magdeburg in Halle in der ersten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Sigmaringen, 1998), 213–32; Andreas Tacke (ed.), ‘Ich armer sundiger mensch’. *Heiligen- und Reliquienkult am Übergang zum konfessionellen Zeitalter* (Göttingen, 2006).

⁴¹ Kalkoff, *Ablaß und Reliquienverehrung*, 8f.; Kühne, *Ostensio reliquiarum*, 407f.; Lang, ‘Fürstliche Rechnungen’, 132f., 139–41.

⁴² Kalkoff, *Ablaß und Reliquienverehrung*, 12–45; Kühne, *Ostensio reliquiarum*, 419f.

⁴³ Björn Schmalz, ‘Georg Spalatin am kursächsischen Hof’, in: Kohnle and Schirmer, *Kurfürst Friedrich*, 48–61.

To advertise the Saxon treasure of relics, Spalatin and others worked on an outstanding piece of print, the famous *Wittenberger Heiltumsbuch*. There is a portrait by Lucas Cranach on the cover, depicting Frederick the Wise, but also showing a second prince. Apparently, John the Constant, Frederick's younger brother and co-regent, fully shared his beliefs.⁴⁴ While John had to stay behind when his brother went on the dangerous voyage to the Holy Land, at home they had undertaken many a pilgrimage together. In July of 1489, for example, they travelled for two weeks through their dominions, visiting one shrine after the other: *Vierzehnheiligen* in the Saale valley, *Heiligenlechnam* near Altenburg, *St. Wolfgang* near Meißen, *St. Sebastian* near Großenhain and, finally, the Shrine of Our Virgin at Eicha. At each station they gave alms, had a priest celebrate Mass, bought pilgrimage signs and collected printed miracle books where available.⁴⁵

Duke George of Saxony, by contrast, never went on a pilgrimage. Born in 1471, he was the son of Duke Albert, founder of his line, and the Czech Princess Zedena.⁴⁶ Her father, George of Podebrady, was the last Hussite king of Bohemia, and died, excommunicated by the pope, while she was pregnant. When Zedena gave birth to a son, she named him George after his grandfather but did her best to instil into him a strong sense of obedience to the Roman Church. In 1484, when he was thirteen years old, Prince George was given a canonry in Mainz, a promotion which showed that he was destined to become a future leader of the Church.⁴⁷ That unusual choice of an ecclesiastical career for a first-born son has been attributed to the influence of his pious mother. Historians have claimed that Zedena wanted to redeem her Hussite father by giving back to Rome a pious George.⁴⁸ As convincing as that might sound, we do not have any proof of it. Perhaps, it might be of equal importance to note that George was trained for priesthood at a time when there was no need for an heir in the Albertine line.⁴⁹ Consequently, the

⁴⁴ *Dye zaigung des hochlobwürdigen hailigthums.*

⁴⁵ Siegfried Bräuer, 'Wallfahrtsforschung als Defizit der reformationsgeschichtlichen Arbeit. Exemplarische Beobachtungen zu Darstellungen der Reformation und zu Quellengruppen', in Hartmut Kühne, Wolfgang Radtke and Gerlinde Strohmaier-Wiederanders (eds.), *Spätmittelalterliche Wallfahrt im mitteldeutschen Raum* (Berlin, 2002), 15–49, at 24f.

⁴⁶ On his biography, Enno Bünz and Christoph Volkmar, 'Die albertinischen Herzöge bis zur Übernahme der Kurwürde (1485–1541)', Kroll, *Herrscher Sachsens*, 76–89 (with extensive bibliography); Helmar Junghans, 'Georg von Sachsen', *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 12, 385–89; Elisabeth Werl, 'Georg der Bärtige', *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, vol. 6, 224–27; Irmgard Höss, 'George Duke of Saxony', in Peter G. Bietenholz et al. (eds.), *Contemporaries of Erasmus. A Biographical Register of the Renaissance and Reformation*, 3 vols. (Toronto, 1987), vol. 3, 205–8.

⁴⁷ Volkmar, *Catholic Reform*, 81–86.

⁴⁸ Oswald A. Hecker, *Religion und Politik in den letzten Lebensjahren Herzog Georgs des Bärtigen von Sachsen* (Leipzig, 1912), 5; Elisabeth Werl, 'Herzogin Sidonia und ihr ältester Sohn Herzog Georg', *Herbergen der Christenheit* 2 (1959), 8–19, at 9.

⁴⁹ Christoph Volkmar, 'Georg der Fromme? Persönliche Frömmigkeit und landesherrliches Selbstverständnis Herzog Georgs von Sachsen', in Armin Kohnle and Christian Winter (eds.),

Leipzig Partition of 1485 was a turning point in the life of young George. Only then did his father, Duke Albert, receive half of the Wettin territories. As a Habsburg general who served as governor-general of the Netherlands, Albert did not intend to return to the East.⁵⁰ In 1488, he left ‘Albertine’ Saxony to George, who, at the young age of seventeen, took over the government of one of the most powerful principalities of the empire and ruled in Dresden for more than fifty years.⁵¹

If we add the fact, hitherto overlooked, that Duke George remained a member of the clergy until 1494, we are looking at the remarkable situation of a reigning prince with the outlook of a clergyman, a ruler who studied the Bible and composed spiritual writings alongside the business of state. George not only wrote Latin fluently, but was also familiar with scripture, the Church fathers, and the commonplaces of theology to a degree that set him apart from his peers. At the same time, it would probably be wrong to speak of a formal theological training; rather, George represents a pinnacle of lay education.⁵²

In terms of religiosity, George broke with the family tradition of setting out on great pilgrimages to Rome, Jerusalem and Santiago, as his father, uncle, brother and cousin had done. Nor did he display any personal interest in relics.⁵³ Early on, George’s mother worried over his disdain for indulgences. She once sent him a pamphlet about an indulgence that could be obtained in Meissen during Holy Week (a fixed date in the itinerary of the Albertine court), adding, almost imploringly, ‘Do not despise it. Receive it, for it will not do you any harm.’⁵⁴

Of course, it would be wrong to infer that George was irreligious. His piety simply had a different orientation and was nourished by new ideas. In central Germany, the Order of the Hermit Friars of St. Augustine propagated modern ways of piety. In that respect we can mention Johannes von Paltz and also Johann von Staupitz, the vicar general of the German Augustinian

Zwischen Reform und Abgrenzung. Die Römische Kirche und die Reformation (Stuttgart, 2014), 205–18, at 209; See also Armin Kohnle, ‘Wandel fürstlicher Frömmigkeitspraxis in der Reformationszeit. Der Fall Herzog Georg von Sachsen’, in Bünz and Kühne, *Alltag* (n. 33), 65–80, at 68.

⁵⁰ André Thieme (ed.), *Herzog Albrecht der Beherzte (1443–1500). Ein sächsischer Fürst im Reich und in Europa* (Cologne et al., 2002).

⁵¹ On his style of government, Volkmar, *Catholic Reform*, 93–117; and ‘Im Weinberg des Fürstenstaats. Räte und Landstände als Akteure landesherrlicher Kirchenpolitik am Beispiel der Albertiner’, in Armin Kohnle and Manfred Rudersdorf (eds.), *Die Reformation. Fürsten, Höfe, Räume* (Stuttgart, 2017), 129–43.

⁵² Volkmar, *Catholic Reform*, 86–93. ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 88f.

⁵⁴ Duchess Zedena to Duke George [Meißen, no later than March/April 1500], Sven Rabeler, Alexandra Kursawe and Claudia Ulrich (eds.), *Briefe der Herzogin Sidonia von Sachsen an ihren Sohn Herzog Georg* (Kiel, 2009), 103f.

friars and Luther's teacher and confessor.⁵⁵ Both were close collaborators of Andreas Proles,⁵⁶ an energetic reformer who demonstrably influenced Duke George's religious development. Their ideas informed Duke George's religious education. A devotion oriented to the ideal of *intra se trahere Christum*, and the conviction that laypersons should study the Bible, went hand in hand with criticism of externalised 'good works' and a burning zeal for Church reform.⁵⁷

Few felt the effects of George's point of view as directly as Albrecht von Schreibersdorf, the bailiff of Annaberg. When returning from a long pilgrimage made to a foreign land in 1517 in fulfilment of a vow, Schreibersdorf was greeted by his prince with a reprimand. Having advised against the pilgrimage, George saw himself vindicated by the dangers of the voyage. He let the bailiff know that while he was happy about his safe return, he hoped that 'you will reconsider our warning and what you have encountered, and in the future give much better thought about placing yourself in similar perils'.⁵⁸ Here, once again, the contrast to Frederick the Wise could not be sharper. In the same year that Duke George admonished Schreibersdorf, his cousin at Wittenberg not only allowed the pilgrimage of his bailiff of Wachsenburg but actually supported it with a gift of ten florins.⁵⁹

The difference in piety between the Ernestines and their Albertine cousin finds its counterpart in a contrasting stance to Church reform. Frederick the Wise supported the Church, but only rarely does he seem to have taken a position in questions of reform. He supported the Observant movement in the mendicant orders, and on occasion was known to criticise decisions of ecclesiastical courts.⁶⁰ But like his brother, John the Constant, he was not much concerned with Church governance, mostly restricting himself to acting on petitions from his subjects.⁶¹

Therefore, if a Wettin prince was a champion of Church reform before 1517, it was Duke George. Among many things, Duke George's involvement in the Fifth Lateran Council is as significant as is his draft for the

⁵⁵ Berndt Hamm, *Frömmigkeitstheologie am Anfang des 16. Jahrhunderts. Studien zu Johannes von Paltz und seinem Umkreis* (Tübingen, 1982) and 'Johann von Staupitz (ca. 1468–1524). Spätmittelalterlicher Reformator und "Vater" der Reformation', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 92 (2001), 6–42; Franz Posset, *The Front-Runner of the Catholic Reformation: The life and works of Johann von Staupitz* (Aldershot, 2003).

⁵⁶ Ralph Weinbrenner, *Klosterreform im 15. Jahrhundert zwischen Ideal und Praxis. Der Augustinereremit Andreas Proles (1429–1503) und die privilegierte Observanz* (Tübingen, 1996).

⁵⁷ Volkmar, *Catholic Reform*, 86–93.

⁵⁸ Duke George to the bailiff of Saint Annaberg, Dresden, 16 August 1517, Gess, *Akten und Briefe*, vol. 1, 20.

⁵⁹ Bräuer, 'Wallfahrtsforschung' (n. 47), 26f.

⁶⁰ Paul Kirn, *Friedrich der Weise und die Kirche. Seine Kirchenpolitik vor und nach Luthers Hervortreten im Jahre 1517* (Leipzig, 1926); Ludolph, *Friedrich der Weise*, 373–83.

⁶¹ Oertzen-Becker, *Kurfürst Johann*, 42 and 45.

Gravamina of the German Nation at the Diet of Worms in 1521: this commitment distinguished him from his counterparts in other territories and gave proof of his deeply personal interest in an ecclesiastical reform that would take effect *in capite*.⁶² It was not only on that point that George's concerns were clearly distinct from those of his Ernestine cousin; Frederick the Wise took no major part either in the council or in drawing up the *Gravamina of the German Nation*.⁶³

The Dynamics of Conversion

What does this leave us with at the dawn of the Reformation? In one part of Saxony, there reigned two brothers deeply immersed in the late medieval piety of good works and its economy of salvation. In the other part, a trained clergyman was in power who saw his duty as supporting a thorough reform of the Church, its personnel and popular piety. Yet, when Luther appeared on the scene in Ernestine Saxony, the most peculiar change took place.

In Albertine Saxony, the initial reactions to Luther were generally very positive. As shown above, the ducal government was the first political body to officially adopt the *Ninety-Five Theses*. However, as the full extent of Luther's agenda became clear the attitude towards him changed just as rapidly. By the end of 1519, Duke George had identified Luther as a heretical Hussite. Consequently, he was the first German prince to ban his books and prosecute his followers, thereby becoming a front-runner of the Counter-Reformation.⁶⁴ With the Ernestines, on the other hand, Luther's new teaching ignited a spark. Embracing traditional piety up to this point, they were at first concerned, and then convinced. Soon they began to follow their new prophet on a truly ambitious path, which would eventually separate them from the Roman Church.⁶⁵

In the Saxon rulers' reactions to Luther, we see the Reformation at work as a true game changer. Princes like Frederick the Wise and his brother John the Constant who had been deeply immersed in the late medieval piety of good works came to understand Luther's theology as a new road to salvation. Those, on the other hand, who had already been embracing humanist piety and promoting ideas of reform, like their cousin Duke George, quickly shied away from Luther's demanding reinterpretation of Christianity. This is highly significant

⁶² Heinz Scheible, 'Fürsten auf dem Reichstag', in Fritz Reuter (ed.), *Der Reichstag zu Worms 1521. Reichspolitik und Luthersache* (Cologne and Vienna, 21981), 369–98, at 393–97; Volkmar, *Catholic Reform*, 167–71, 182–89.

⁶³ Ludolph, *Friedrich der Weise*, 373–75. ⁶⁴ Volkmar, *Catholic Reform*, 453–596.

⁶⁵ Bünz, 'Getrennte Wege', 286–91; Helmar Junghans, 'Die Ausbreitung der Reformation von 1517 bis 1539', in Helmar Junghans (ed.), *Das Jahrhundert der Reformation in Sachsen* (Berlin, 1989), 33–66; Stefan Michel, 'Torgauer und Weimarer Reformation. Die Reformansätze der Brüder Friedrich und Johann von Sachsen', in Kohnle and Rudersdorf, *Reformation*, 8–20.

if we are trying to understand what was new about the Reformation and why it was more than just a ‘late medieval event’ (Thomas A. Brady).⁶⁶ Disruption, not continuity, has always been a sign of religious conversions. This is what happened to the Ernestine princes, as to many of their subjects. A fundamental change in belief leads people to burn all bridges. What began as an academic debate spiralled quickly into a religious revolution of medieval society.

While writing history as the acts of grand men seems to be, generally speaking, an outdated approach, in the case of Reformation Saxony, looking at the princes can explain certain developments which other factors cannot. At least for a moment there, the personal opinions of the three Wettin leaders towards one man, Luther, carried a lot of weight. This was an age of personal rule. State affairs were run at the prince’s court under his personal control. It helped that Saxony was one of the most advanced German territories in terms of early modern state-building. A loyal gentry and a well-developed network of bailiffs amplified the power of the prince. Cities were rather small and dependent on the state as well. In sum, the power of the Wettin princes to make decisions and to see them carried out was quite remarkable compared to the rather imperfect standards prevailing in those days.⁶⁷

Outlining the princely politics of Reformation and Counter-Reformation in the two Saxonies could easily fill another paper. Many more insights will be gained by looking in detail at the cities, at the countryside, at monasteries and parishes. But for now, it will suffice to sketch how the Wettin princes acted. Elector Frederick, while not fully embracing the new teaching, let the Reformation be. He did nothing when monks and nuns left their convents; he did nothing when Church services in Wittenberg were reformed. This gave the Reformation space, and its ideas time to flourish, among the teachers and students of Wittenberg’s university, among the burghers of his towns, and not at least among the gentry.⁶⁸ Only when Luther tried to close down Frederick’s beloved All Saints Church in Wittenberg did he go too far. The aging elector

⁶⁶ Thomas A. Brady, ‘Zur Einführung. The German Reformation between Late Middle Ages and Early Modernity’, in Thomas A. Brady (ed.), *Die deutsche Reformation zwischen Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Munich, 2001), VII–XX, at IX.

⁶⁷ Volkmar, ‘Im Weinberg des Fürstenstaats’; Schirmer, *Kursächsische Staatsfinanzen*.

⁶⁸ On early supporters of Luther among Wittenberg’s students Thomas Kaufmann, *Der Anfang der Reformation. Studien zur Kontextualität der Theologie, Publizistik und Inszenierung Luthers und der reformatorischen Bewegung* (Tübingen, 2012), 185–265; on town burghers Natalie Krentz, *Ritualwandel und Deutungshoheit. Die frühe Reformation in der Residenzstadt Wittenberg (1500–1533)* (Tübingen, 2014); Joachim Emig, Volker Leppin and Uwe Schirmer (eds.), *Vor- und Frühreformation in thüringischen Städten (1470–1525/30)* (Cologne, 2013); on the Ernestine gentry Uwe Schirmer, ‘Der obersächsisch-thüringische Niederadel in der Frühzeit der Reformation (1520–1525)’, in Kurt Andermann and Wolfgang Breul (eds.), *Ritterschaft und Reformation* (Stuttgart, 2019), 201–39; and Uwe Schirmer, ‘Landstände und frühe evangelische Bewegung. Die kursächsisch-ernestinische Ständeversammlung zu Altenburg im Mai 1523’, in Kohnle and Rudersdorf, *Reformation* (n. 53), 356–78.

put a stop to it, ensuring that until his death in 1525, the traditional worship of the canons remained in place,⁶⁹ as did the Wittenberg treasury of relics with its beautiful reliquaries. The last *ostensio* was staged in 1523, albeit without the prospect of an indulgence.⁷⁰

In most cases, however, Frederick chose not to act. The political interventions in territorial Church governance, always a cornerstone of Wettin power, were effectively suspended. This was perhaps the most important contribution that the 'wise' elector made to the Reformation, since it provided the Evangelical movement with a chance to breathe.⁷¹ How much of it was the result of wisdom, and how much was simple passivity due to old age and ill health, is hard to decide. Perchance we will learn more from a new project at the *Sächsische Akademie der Wissenschaften*, which is currently preparing editions, under the supervision of Armin Kohnle, Manfred Rudersdorf and Stefan Michel, of the correspondence of Frederick and John.⁷²

While the old elector did not foster the Reformation in Electoral Saxony, he shielded it from harm. This became clear not only in the protection he gave to Luther personally, but also at the episcopal visitations of 1522–24. Since visitations are often seen as a hallmark of the German Reformation,⁷³ it is worth noting that the first visitations in sixteenth-century Saxony were actually Catholic actions directed against the new Evangelical movement.⁷⁴ Obtained by Duke George, the Imperial Regency Council's mandate of January 1522 had called on bishops to take disciplinary action.⁷⁵ Soon afterwards, Bishop John VII of Meissen announced a visitation of Torgau, Herzberg, Lochau, Schmiedeberg, Leisnig and Colditz. Those towns were located only on the fringes of his bishopric, but they had in common that they were Ernestine territory. In the much smaller bishopric of Merseburg, the visitations of 1524 followed a similar pattern.⁷⁶

Elector Frederick, being in no doubt who was behind the action, found it necessary to accommodate the bishops. However, he sent officials to

⁶⁹ Krentz, *Ritualwandel und Deutungshoheit*, 261–97, 378–83.

⁷⁰ Kühne, *Ostensio reliquiarum*, 421f.

⁷¹ Kirn, *Friedrich der Weise*, 150–64; Wilhelm Borth, *Die Luthersache (Causa Lutheri) 1517–1524. Die Anfänge der Reformation als Frage von Politik und Recht* (Lübeck and Hamburg, 1970), 88–99.

⁷² The first volume, covering the prelude until 1517, appeared in 2017: Armin Kohnle and Manfred Rudersdorf (eds.), *Briefe und Akten zur Kirchenpolitik Friedrichs des Weisen und Johanns des Beständigen 1513 bis 1532, Vol. 1: 1513–1517*, by Stefan Michel, Beate Kusche and Ulrike Ludwig (Leipzig, 2017). See also the project website: bakfj.saw-leipzig.de.

⁷³ Dagmar Blaha and Christopher Spehr (eds.), *Reformation vor Ort. Zum Quellenwert von Visitationsprotokollen* (Leipzig, 2016).

⁷⁴ Volkmar, *Catholic Reform*, 522–25.

⁷⁵ Armin Kohnle, *Reichstag und Reformation. Kaiserliche und ständische Religionspolitik von den Anfängen der Causa Lutheri bis zum Nürnberger Religionsfrieden* (Gütersloh, 2001), 108–12.

⁷⁶ See Karl Pallas, 'Briefe und Akten zur Visitationsreise des Bischofs Johannes VII. von Meißen im Kurfürstentum Sachsen 1522', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 5 (1907/08), 217–312; 'Die Visitationsreise des Bischofs Johann VII. von Meißen im Kurfürstentum Sachsen 1522',

accompany them, not so much to lend support as to control them instead. Ultimately, the visitations resulted in a defeat for the Catholic side. While the bishops banned several Evangelical priests from celebrating the Mass, and demanded that they leave the bishopric, in the end those were simply empty threats. As the representatives of the prince were under specific orders to prevent any arrests, the Evangelical preachers were able to ignore their bishop's wrath in safety.⁷⁷ Adolf of Merseburg, realising this, even offered to transfer his episcopal authority to the Ernestines. However, Elector Frederick vehemently rejected such an increase in his responsibility for Church governance, bolstering his argument (ironically) with canon law.⁷⁸

For the outside world, however, Frederick did uphold the impression that the Reformation progressed without his knowledge or approval. This is what he told the emperor, and convincingly, because there was some truth to it. Frederick did not take responsibility for the writings of Luther, he did not authorise the reform measures of Wittenberg city council, nor did he sign the *Leisniger Kastenordnung*.⁷⁹

Behind the scenes, however, Lutheran ideas were taking hold even at court. Albert von Lindenau, cup-bearer to the prince, employed a former Augustinian Hermit to preach the Reformation to his peasants at Machern near Leipzig as early as 1522.⁸⁰ When the bishop of Merseburg complained about this on behalf of the Catholic village priest, Lindenau defended his decision in a letter that he put on paper at Lochau, the elector's hunting lodge. Lutheran ideas quickly took hold in the Lindenau family. In 1524 Albert's son, Henry, married Gertrud von Schellenberg, a former nun who had run from the Cistercian nunnery of Nimbschen in the famous mass break-out of Pentecost 1523 along with Luther's future wife, Katharina von Bora. The provocative wedding, which seems to have taken place at Machern, was held by none other than George Spalatin.⁸¹

Zeitschrift des Vereins für Kirchengeschichte der Provinz Sachsen 6 (1909), 25–80; and 'Die Versuche des Bischofs Adolf von Merseburg, den kirchlichen Neuerungen innerhalb seiner Diözese entgegenzutreten, und das Verhalten des Kurfürsten Friedrichs des Weisen und seines Bruders Herzog Johann dazu. 1522–1525', *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Kirchengeschichte der Provinz Sachsen* 23 (1927), 1–54.

⁷⁷ Pallas, 'Briefe und Akten zur Visitationsreise', 40f.

⁷⁸ Pallas, 'Versuche des Bischofs Adolf', 13f.

⁷⁹ Krentz, *Ritualwandel*, 210–14; Michael Beyer, 'Die Neuordnung des Kirchenguts', in Junghans, *Jahrhundert der Reformation*, 91–112, at 97–99.

⁸⁰ Most historians believe that the monk who started the Reformation at Machern was the same Konrad Kluge who served as the first Lutheran parish pastor there from 1524. Hartmut Kühne, however, has convincingly disputed this theory. See Hartmut Kühne, 'Lehrer – Priester – Prediger. Michael Coelius' Weg in die Reformation (1492–1530)', in Siegfried Bräuer and Armin Kohnle (ed.), *Von Grafen und Predigern. Zur Reformationsgeschichte des Mansfelder Landes* (Leipzig, 2014), 155–95, at 165–67.

⁸¹ Schirmer, 'Der obersächsisch-thüringische Niederadel', 232–34; Armin Kohnle, 'Die Herren von Lindenau und die frühe Reformation', in Martina Schattkowsky (ed.), *Adlige Lebenswelten in Sachsen. Kommentierte Bild- und Schriftquellen* (Cologne, 2013), 320–26. One should not,

Frederick's private secretary and court chaplain, Spalatin was directly involved in many taboo-breaking acts of the early Reformation. Some of them took place literally under the nose of the aging elector. Franz Günther, parish priest at Lochau, was one of the first Lutheran pastors to marry. In April 1523, when his wife gave birth, Günther even dared to ask Frederick the Wise to become the child's godfather. While the prince declined, he allowed a close servant, Hieronymus Rudlauf, to stand by the baptismal font, from which the child was elevated by George Spalatin on 17 April.⁸²

While Frederick meticulously took care to maintain a minimal distance from the Reformation, his younger brother John the Constant was soon to close the gap. For decades a co-ruler in the shadow of his elder brother, he became a partisan of Luther in 1522. He was the addressee of the famous *Sermon to the princes* at Allstedt (1524), and he was open-minded enough to listen to the radical ideas of Thomas Müntzer. As long as his brother was alive and the emperor was watching, John kept his guard up, letting others act.⁸³ When the noble estates of Ernestine Saxony proposed a political programme for the Reformation at the Diet of Altenburg in May 1523, it was understood that Duke John was secretly backing their demands.⁸⁴ Luther himself had high hopes for the reign of the future Elector: 'If we had Duke John, everything would be alright.'⁸⁵

In 1525 John succeeded his older brother, governing as the elector for seven years until he died at the age of sixty-four in 1532. Frederick had protected Luther, but only John made the Reformation an act of state. The arsenal of Church governance, that his predecessor had effectively suspended, was reactivated to install a new Church order. By the means of general visitations, tested since 1526 and perfected in the *Instruction of the visitors of Saxony* (1528), John transformed Ernestine Saxony into the model state of a princely Reformation.⁸⁶ How he became one of the leaders of the Protestant party after the Imperial Diet of Speyer (1526), and formed its political body with the League of Schmalkalden (1531), is a chapter of the Reformation master narrative that does not need to be retold.

however, jump to the conclusion that the Saxon gentry was unanimously won over by Luther. Many families found themselves in both camps. A close relative of Albert's, Sigismund von Lindenau, was elected bishop of Merseburg in 1535 and always stayed loyal to the pope. Christoph Volkmar, *Die Reformation der Junker. Landadel und lutherische Konfessionsbildung im Mittelberaum* (Gütersloh, 2019), 18, 28f.

⁸² Schirmer, 'Der obersächsisch-thüringische Niederadel', 234.

⁸³ Michel, 'Torgauer und Weimarer Reformation', 14f.; Schirmer, 'Kurfürsten', 66f. The *Sermon to the Princes* is now edited by Armin Kohnle and Eike Wolgast (eds.), *Thomas-Müntzer-Ausgabe. Kritische Gesamtausgabe, vol. 1: Schriften, Manuskripte und Notizen* (Leipzig, 2017), 300–21.

⁸⁴ Schirmer, 'Der obersächsisch-thüringische Niederadel', 212–23.

⁸⁵ 'Ei, wenn wir Herzog Hansen hätten, wär's fein.', quoted at Schirmer, 'Die ernestinischen Kurfürsten', 66.

⁸⁶ Junghans, 'Ausbreitung der Reformation', 49–55.

Duke George, on the other hand, quickly lost his initial sympathy for a new voice of reform once he associated Luther with the Bohemian heresy. His suspicion was raised at the Leipzig disputation, as Luther's declaration that there was some truth in the teachings of Jan Hus had led to an open confrontation. Very soon, the first anti-Lutheran pamphlet was published at Leipzig, authored by the Duke's chaplain, Hieronymus Emser. *De disputatione Lipsicensi* was in fact an anti-Hussite text, addressed to the Catholics of Bohemia. In attacking Luther and the Hussites simultaneously, it transformed the traditional anti-Hussite stance of Albertine Saxony into an agenda that simultaneously addressed Luther. It was the birth of Catholic propaganda against Protestantism.⁸⁷

George's hostile opinion about the Wittenberger hardened into certainty with Luther's sermon on the layman's chalice (*Ein Sermon von dem hochwürdigen sakrament des heiligen wahren Leichnams Christi und von den Brüderschaften*).⁸⁸ From that early moment, at Christmas 1519, Luther was a convicted Hussite in the duke's eyes. George's belief that Luther was propagating Bohemian heresy informed his Church policies during the Reformation. While everyone else in the empire seemed to listen to Luther's indictments of Rome, and the flock of Lutheran supporters grew, Duke George took up the fight against a familiar threat. Fearing the spread of heresy throughout his territory, the prince tried to convince his cousin, Elector Frederick, that the 'doctor from Wittenberg' was really acting like a 'bishop of heresy from Prague'.⁸⁹ In George's eyes it was not just a similarity in ideas but a very real alliance. Through his own Bohemian contacts, George was informed of a visit of Czech Utraquists to Wittenberg.⁹⁰

The wait-and-see attitude of his cousin Frederick infuriated George no end. His letters to the Ernestines during the winter of 1521–22 carried a single reproach. Frederick was endangering his own soul through neglect of his princely duty to God: 'Beware our Lord God's judgment and vengeance against those who should act properly but fail to do so.'⁹¹ George was convinced that Frederick had the power to thwart the Reformation. In February

⁸⁷ Christoph Volkmar, 'Turning Luther's Weapons against Him. The Birth of Catholic Propaganda in Saxony in the 1520s', in Graeme Kemp and Malcolm Walsby (eds.), *The Book Triumphant: Print in Transition in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Leiden, 2011), 115–31. A classic study on this topic, with a broader scale, is Mark U. Edwards Jr., *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley, 1994).

⁸⁸ Martin Luther, *Ein Sermon von dem hochwürdigen Sakrament des heiligen wahren Leichnams Christi und von den Brüderschaften* (1519), *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (WA) (Weimar, 1883–), vol. 2, 738–58.

⁸⁹ Duke George to Elector Frederick, Dresden, 27 December 1519, Gess, *Akten und Briefe*, vol. 1, 110f.

⁹⁰ Volkmar, *Catholic Reform* (n. 4), 466–72; from Luther's point of view, Kaufmann, *Anfang der Reformation*, 30–67.

⁹¹ Duke George to Elector Frederick [Schellenberg, after 13 November 1521], Gess, *Akten und Briefe*, vol. 1, 206–8.

1522, he accused him that ‘you have allowed people to do such things. However, if you would show your displeasure, you could surely dissuade them with little effort’.⁹² For good measure, he reminded Frederick of the family tradition to fight the Hussites.

How the duke intended to act in his own lands, he stated in a letter of warning to his vassals, the nobles von Minckwitz zu Sonnewalde: ‘As a prince who has been vested with worldly authority by God himself, I wish to follow the Gospel of Christ; to head off these abuses and heresies, and not let them get out of control; as it is my right and duty.’⁹³ Unquestionably, George got to the heart of the matter on a political level. Just as he had successfully opposed the Hussites in the past, he intended to do the same with Luther’s followers. His principal approach in dealing with the Reformation was to suppress it by means of his territorial Church governance – a proven collaboration of the ducal court, local officials and clerical authorities. As early as 1519, sooner than any other territory in Germany, the authorities in Albertine Saxony took stern measures against Luther’s followers. This included censorship for Leipzig’s printers, surveillance of the book trade, and oppressive measures against Evangelical preachers, monks and subjects that would culminate in suspensions and expulsions. Despite the proximity to Wittenberg, Duke George was able to break the momentum of the early Reformation in his own principality and to force Luther’s followers into exile or underground.⁹⁴ Far less successful, however, were George’s continuous attempts to bring about a reform of the Church by the means of visitations, preaching campaigns and disciplinary measures against clerical abuses. In his own writings, such as the preface to the *Emsertestament*, the most influential Catholic edition of the Bible in the German vernacular during the Reformation era, George documented his strong and sometimes unorthodox wish for a renewal of the Christian faith.⁹⁵

However, as the Reformation gained momentum, George faced a fatal dilemma. Unable to compete with Luther’s new theology and the religious awakening that it inspired, he was forced to take a conservative stance against what he saw as heresy, confronted with a Roman curia that was increasingly unresponsive to calls from Germany; he stood alone. Short indeed grew the list of allies who found Lutheran teachings too radical and had not yet completely lost their trust in the papacy. With his enthusiasm for Catholic reform, George tried to give them hope that the Roman Church was still capable of renewal. It was an approach that could offer no cure, but nursing, to stabilise the patient until the doctor arrived. However, his hope in the

⁹² Duke George to Elector Frederick, Nuremberg, 2 February 1522, *ibid.*, 260–62.

⁹³ Duke George to the brothers von Minckwitz zu Sonnewalde, Dresden, 5 December 1524, *ibid.*, 771f.

⁹⁴ Volkmar, *Catholic Reform*, 453–596. ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 597–607.

pope and a general council was not to be fulfilled in his lifetime, nor in his territory, which was won over to the Reformation after his death in 1539.⁹⁶

Conclusion

Saxon comparisons remind us to look at the German Reformation from both sides. Even in his homelands, Martin Luther was successfully challenged by Catholic opponents right from the beginning. Even more intriguing, receptiveness for Church reform and sympathy for the Reformation did not necessarily correlate. In Saxony, the Reformation proved to be a game changer. Those deeply immersed in late medieval piety and its economy of grace, found themselves the born disciples of Luther's new road to salvation, becoming the most zealous converts. While Frederick the Wise acted as Luther's protector, John the Constant, soon became the devoted leader of the Evangelical princes in the empire.

At the same time, those who had once led the efforts to reform the Church, found themselves relegated to a conservative back-seat. Duke George, despite having devoted much of his life as a moderniser, ended up in the history books portrayed as a roadblock. Clearly, the Reformation changed business.

Furthermore, the Saxon example shows that the relationship between princes and the Reformation was never a one-way street. Just as important German princes could become champions of the Reformation, others were able to use their power against it just as effectively. Keeping this in mind, historical narratives should resist the temptation to construct simple causalities from structural parallels, and rather try to tell the whole story.

If further proof was needed to support that thesis, it could be found in the fate of the Wettin alliances with the House of Brabant. The young Philip of Hesse would never have become an independent ruler without the support of George of Saxony. For years, the duke had defended the rights of the underage prince and his mother against powerful opposition from the noble estates. Typically, a double marriage sealed the alliance. Philip married George's daughter Christine, while Philip's sister Elisabeth became the wife of John, Duke George's eldest son. The Ernestines, on the other hand, had only backed the opposition. By the summer of 1524, however, Landgrave Philip the Magnanimous decided to embrace the Reformation. This move immediately triggered a full reversal of affiliations. The trusted relationship with Duke George, his father-in-law, fell apart within months. Instead, a new alliance was forged between Philip and Elector John the Constant, with the two of them soon to become joint leaders of the Schmalkaldic League.⁹⁷ Once again, the Reformation in Germany had realigned the stars.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 608–15. ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 503f.

Further Reading

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