

Martin Luther in Thuringia

Martin Luther (1483- 1546), who initiated the Protestant Reformation, was born in Thuringia. This is the place, where decisive events took place in the life of the priest and professor of theology. His parents came from Möhra and Eisenach. After attending parish school at Eisenach, Luther studied at the University of Erfurt between 1501 and 1505. The late medieval metropolis offered Luther a variety of impulses. His entry into the closed Augustinian friary of Erfurt in 1505 is regarded as a ‘turning-point of the Reformation’. Despite his relocation to Wittenberg in 1511, Thuringia remained at the centre of attention in regards to Luther’s world-historic legacy. With the unfolding of the Reformation in 1517 and the ban (Reichsacht) decreed by Charles V, ruler of the Holy Roman Empire, Luther clandestinely retreated to the Wartburg castle in 1521/22, where he translated the New Testament from Latin into German. Luther also had influential supporters and patrons such as the Elector of Saxony, who also ruled over the Thuringian territories. Within the ‘heartland of the Reformation’, where Protestant Imperial Estates came together and founded the Schmalkaldic League, the new religious denomination established itself swiftly. From this point onwards, the organisation of churches was conducted within the Land (Landeskirche). This structure signified a cornerstone of modern statehood.

Alongside Saxony, Thuringia is one of the places that has the most famous historical sites related to Luther, to name but a few is the Wartburg Castle and Erfurt. As a consequence, an extensive culture of remembrance evolved, which culminated in the 19th and 20th century. Luther became the figurehead of the German national movement, that was commemorated with the Wartburg Festival of 1817 as well as of other numerous ceremonies, publications and monuments. Even under the rule of the DDR-regime, Luther’s five hundreds centenary was celebrated with grand tributes in 1983. Today, Luther continues to play a significant role as a historic personality that creates a sense of identity and has also a large effect on the tourism industry in the Free State of Thuringia.

Sites of Luther’s Life and Their Remembrance

Until today, there are relatives of Martin Luther in and around Möhra in the South of Eisenach, where his family origins can be traced back to the 14th century. His father Hans Luder (it was Martin who changed the name into Luther in 1517) was born and raised as eldest son of a farmer. Until Luther’s year of birth 1483, he lived together with his wife Margarethe.

Margarethe descended from the reputable middle-class family Lindemann of Eisenach. In a village, belonging to the parish 'Moorgrund'. The supposedly parental home reminds of the historic linkage to Luther. He had been preaching in the village on his way back from the Diet of Worms on May 4, 1521, just before his counterfeit abduction to the Wartburg Castle. Luther never negated his Thuringian origin: "I am a farmer's son; my great-grandfather, my grandfather and my father were all righteous farmers", as is written in one of his famous dinner speeches (Tischrede) during the 1530s. In 1483, Hans Luder moved to Eisleben in order to earn money as a pitman at the copper mines of Mansfeld. Martin Luther was born here on November 10, 1483. That he had the opportunity to become a world-historic personage, he owed to the father's professional progress. Since 1484 resident in Mansfeld, his father made it to a wealthy mining part-owner and respected citizen. Hans Luder was highly interested in his son's school education and affiliated great hopes with the same. After grammar school in Mansfeld and after visiting the cathedral school of Magdeburg, Luther attended the parish school St. George's of Eisenach, from 1497 until 1501. He was accommodated by relatives of his mother, the respectable patricians Heinrich Schalbe and Konrad Cotta. From 1498, Luther resided in the house of Cotta, today known as the 'Lutherhaus'. In this environment, lay piety was common practice and characteristic of the time. That was the striving after a life agreeable to God in the style of the mendicant orders. Luther was going to visit his "beloved town" Eisenach, where he, according to his own words, "was succumbed by the sciences for over four years", and where "nearly all my relatives" lived. He was to return only two more times beside his abidance at the Wartburg Castle: in 1529 and 1540. With all the sites of remembrance including the 'Lutherhaus' that has been turned into a modern museum, the landgraviate situated along the foot of the Wartburg Castle stands for Luther's schooldays and his family ties in Thuringia.

In Erfurt, Martin Luther gained a number of determining impressions. It was here, where he was going to acquire the credentials necessary for a luminous career, at best directly at a court. The young man was impressed by the brisk intellectual life in the pulsating town, which was with nearly 20.000 inhabitants one of the largest cities of the Holy Roman Empire. According to Luther, all other universities appeared "abecedarian places" in comparison with the University of Erfurt. When Luther matriculated himself as 'Martinus Ludher ex Mansfeldt' at the Collegium maius, the university's main building, he could breathe the scent of already one hundred years of history. The 'Hierana' (the university at the river Gera) was considered as one of the most distinguished universities of Central Europe and was one of the first to

receive the founding privilege within present-day Germany in 1379. Luther's 'hall of residence', the so-called 'Georgenburse' and all other student halls, colleges, the university's church (St. Michael's Church) and numerous printing presses were located at the 'Latin quarter'. The Collegium maius also housed the faculty of philosophy, this is where the course of studies began before one could attend one of the three higher faculties (law, medicine or theology). Luther successfully completed his study of the basic scholarly concepts (the septem artes liberales) and attained the degree of Magister Artium in 1505. All his life, he maintained a close relationship to Erfurt and professed: "The University of Erfurt is my mother, I owe her everything."

After his legendary experience during a thunderstorm, however, Luther dropped his studies of law, which were meant to be a prerequisite for his predetermined career path. On his way home coming from his parents in Mansfeld, he was caught up by a storm very close to Erfurt's fringe area of today's Stotternheim on July 2, 1505. In this very moment, in greatest distress, he wore: "Help me, holy Anna, I will be a monk!". This event had been considered as distinctive turning point – even as 'change of the Reformation's direction'. Luther turned from the vivid law student into a monk in spiritual agony over salvation. Today, the decision against the parents' and friends' will is seen to have been a longer process, initiated by a bundle of different motives. On July 17, 1505 Luther entered the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt. Until 1511, he was going to submit himself to one of the strictest 'monk hoods' and struggle with the question, how to he could come up against a merciful God. In 1507, his ordination to the priesthood took place at the St Mary's Cathedral of Erfurt. Shortly after, Luther began his study of theology, which he completed with a doctorate 1512 in Wittenberg. Around 1510/11 was the one and only time, when the monk from Erfurt had to make his way to Rome to the pontifical domicile in matters of his order. Alongside, Wittenberg and the Wartburg Castle, Erfurt can be regarded as one of the most important sites in Luther's life, whose traces can still be found in Erfurt's historic city centre. Here are the main buildings of his former university located, which house the administrative centre of the Protestant Church of Central Germany today. Also his former student halls are pointed out by a memorial and a pilgrim's hostel; the Augustinian monastery is now a renowned conference centre and meeting place. Visitors can also attend an exhibition and take a glance at Luther's cell or the historic library. Additionally to those prominent historic sites, there are also the Cathedral, the Merchants' Church (Kaufmannskirche), the St. Michael's Church (Michaeliskirche), the Franciscan Church (Barfüßerkirche) and guesthouse 'The Tall Lily' (Gasthaus Zur Hohen

Lilie). The town museum “Haus zum Stockfisch” presents a good overview of the authentic historic places and puts them into context with Luther’s life in Erfurt as a late medieval commercial and cultural hub.

From 1511 onwards, Luther’s life and impact as reformer was more closely connected with the Electoral Saxonian residence and university town Wittenberg. At first and despite theological notions, Luther had by no means the intention of confronting Rome and thus provoking the establishment of a new church. At the core of his perspective stands the realisation that a human being can only recuperate salvation through the belief in a merciful God and not through the intercession of the church or the simple exhibition of good deeds. One would only become righteous through Jesus Christ (*solus Christus*), the Holy Scripture (*sola scriptura*), the mercy of God (*sola gratia*) and through faith (*sola fide*). This understanding led to the reformation, however, the overbearing churchly practice of selling indulgences acted as a trigger. After Luther’s legendary proclamation of The 95 Theses on October 31, 1517, he issued his theology in a collection of scripts. The modern letterpress printing techniques inured to the benefit of Luther as his writings could be spread on a significantly larger and more efficient scope than ever before. After his excommunication by Pope Leo X, Luther refused to recant his theses in front of the Emperor Charles V before the Diet of Worms in 1521. Subsequently, Luther was declared an outlaw (*Reichsacht*).

Luther, however, had a cautious supporter with Prince Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony (1486-1525). He ordered in pretence the abduction of the monk and professor not far away from the Altenstein Castle near Bad Liebenstein to the Wartburg Castle on May 4, 1521. Over ten months, Luther lived at the former residence of the Landgrave of Thuringia disguised as nobleman ‘Jörg’. He utilized his time there for the translation of the New Testament from Latin into German, which was followed by the complete work – the Luther Bible – in 1534. Herewith, Luther laid the essential groundwork for the dissemination of the Protestant faith. Furthermore, the seminal bible translation also played a significant role in the assertion of a new High German literary language. The Wartburg Castle, which is considered a World Heritage Site today, owes its standing as place of national significance not to Luther alone, but also to its cultural-historic complexity. To mention are the remembrance of the splendid landgraviate’s time, symbolized by the minstrel’s contest at the Wartburg Castle (1206/07), Holy Elisabeth of Thuringia (1207-1231) and the Wartburg Festival held by the student fraternities in 1817.

In subsequent years, the reformatory impulse expanded far beyond Luther's original intentions and developed into a social movement that culminated in the Peasant War of 1524/25. Under the leadership of Thomas Müntzer (1489-1525), who was originally a fellow combatant of Luther, Thuringia became the centre of upheaval. Important sites were Mühlhausen, where the radical theologian Müntzer had established himself and Bad Frankenhausen, where the decisive campaign against the peasants took place on May 15, 1525. Luther embraced the upheaval's bloody abatement by the princely authorities. At the same time, a conciliation between Protestant and Catholic estates of the empire had failed. The Protestants, named after the protestation before the Diet of Speyer in 1529, still did not enjoy any legal security. Their new profession of faith - the Augsburg Confession (*Confessio Augustana*) - written by Luther's companion Philipp Melancthon (1497-1560), was not accepted by Emperor Charles V. Luther, who was still outlawed, could only observe the ongoing debate at the Diet of Augsburg 1530 from the town of Coburg, the southern outpost of the Electorate of Saxony.

The consolidation of the Protestant alliance as well as its defeat are closely intertwined with the town of Schmalkalden. On February 27, 1531, the Schmalkaldic League was founded here under the leadership of the Electorates of Saxony and Hesse as defence alliance by Protestant princes and towns. The alliance increasingly gained on influence and power at the congresses of Schmalkalden. At the Diet of 1537, Luther presented his Schmalcald Articles, which stand for the Protestant confession and Lutheran doctrine. Luther deceased on February 1546 in Eisleben, hence he was spared to witness the defeat and dissolution of the Schmalcaldic League in 1546/47. Elector John Frederick of Saxony (1532-1547) remained in imperial imprisonment. After his release, he continued to rule as Duke of Saxony in Weimar over the Thuringian territories, whereas Wittenberg and the prince-electoral honour fell to the Albertine line of the Wettin dynasty of present-day Saxony. Also the court painter Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1552), the most famous renaissance artist of the time, moved to Weimar, where the 'Cranachhaus' can be visited today. Luther stayed at the main Thuringian residence of the Wettins several times. A three winged altar designed by Cranach (1552/55) stands here at the 'Herderkirche' and depicts one of the most impressive imagery of the Lutheran theology. There are several more places of historical significance that are related to Luther as he travelled a lot through Thuringia and preached at several Thuringian churches. Luther's tomb slab is to find at the St. Michael's Church in Jena, which was going to be the

home of the most important university of the Wettin territory within Thuringia (1548/58). Originally, it was planned to place the tomb in Wittenberg. A wooden model is to see at the St. Andrew's Church in Erfurt. Georg Spalatin (1484-1545), a close confidant of Luther and of Elector Frederick, worked as one of the first superintendents on the de facto constitution of the reformed church. Luther's friends and other eager supporters of the Reformation had been highly active at many places in Thuringia.

The Reception of Luther

Inside of the 'Reformation's heartland', the new denomination could swiftly permeate, with exception of the Electoral Mainz' territories together with the confessionally divided Erfurt and Eichsfeld. Organized in regional churches (Landeskirchen), headed by the princes as bishops, Protestantism advanced to a keystone of modern statehood. A parallel development was the growing cult around the reformer Luther. Important sites related to him such as the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt or the Wartburg Castle nearly gained the status of pilgrimage's places. Simultaneously, the study of theology and the research focused on Luther found an important home in Thuringia. At the University of Jena, which acts as guardian of the Lutheran heritage and school for Protestant priests since several centuries now, hosts an extensive collection of works from the period of the Reformation. Since 1883 until 2009, the leading journal 'Weimarer Ausgabe' published all writings by Luther.

The national-protestant cult around Luther hit its peak in the 19th century. Initiated by the Wartburg festival of the student fraternities in 1817, yet there were other occasions such as the great jubilee 1830, 1846 and 1883 to celebrate Luther as national heroic figure. This is also reflected in numerous historical monuments. Memorials in Möhra (1861), Erfurt (1889) and Eisenach (1895) picture a steadfast Luther with a bible in his hand cast in bronze. The memorial stone close to Stotternheim (1917) reminds of the 'turning-point in the Reformation'. At the 'Luthergrund' close by Steinbach an obelisk, next to a well and a breech tree named after Luther, marks the place of Luther's counterfeit abduction to the Wartburg Castle; in Tambach-Dietharz, the 'Luther-fountain' reminds of Luther's recovery from a perilous urolith on his way back from Schmalkalden in 1537. Additionally, there are countless commemorative plaques, street names, oak trees and so forth named after Luther. There was another heightening with the nationalist accentuation of the Luther-image with World War I 1914/18 (during which the 1917 jubilee of the Reformation took place). The Third Reich (1933-1945) picked up on Luther's anti-Semitic writings, thus he was instrumentalized as

legitimatising source of the Holocaust. Especially, the so-called 'German Christians' (Deutsche Christen) that associated themselves closely with the national socialist idea, played a role in these developments.

During the time of the DDR-regime, the dominating party - the SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) led a fierce campaign against the Protestant church, especially in the 1950s. This went along in correspondence with the stigmatisation of Luther as "peasants' slaughter man" or "the prince's servant", while Thomas Müntzer rose in rank to a heroic figure. Gradually, however, the situation changed, which became noticeable on the occasion of the 450th jubilee of the Reformation in 1967 for the very first time. This dynamic culminated in a great tribute to Luther on his 500th birthday in 1983. SED Secretary-General Erich Honecker even declared Luther as one of the "greatest sons of the German people". This is to view in the context of a new church policy that was pursued since 1978 that aimed at a more harmonious relationship. During the elaborate tributes of 1983 for which substantial restoration efforts were made, the Wartburg Castle and Erfurt stood at the centre of attention. On April 21, the re-opening of the Wartburg museum was celebrated; on May 4, the churchly 'Luther's Day at the Wartburg Castle' followed, where the church service was even broadcasted by DDR-television. The reconstruction of Erfurt's Augustinian monastery by the church belongs to the most sustainable results of the Luther-year 1983. The state-celebrated remembrance of the Reformation and the Peasant War that the DDR historians addressed with the term 'early civil revolution' (Frühbürgerliche Revolution), reached its apogee with the monumental panorama canvas by Werner Tübke exhibited on the Schlachtenberg (battle mountain) in Bad Frankenhausen.

Since the peaceful revolution and the German reunification 1989/90, once again Luther is regarded as one of the most important identity-creating historic personalities of the Free State Thuringia. He signifies the onset of a deeply rooted cultural landscape and collective memory between Reformation and Classicism, which shaped the image of Thuringia as 'cultural heartland'. The Land of Luther, Bach and Goethe strongly defines itself over its cultural-historic traditions, which are also significant for the region as tourist destination. It is imperative to administer this heritage, especially during the Luther-decade until the 500th jubilee of the Reformation in 2017, on the basis of a timely and differentiated understanding of Martin Luther.

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