

The Reformation in Thuringia

At the beginning of the 16th century, the expansion of the territorial rule and the establishment of modern-state structures in the territories of Wettin, Reuß, Schwarzburg and Henneberg were in full progress: the high justice was intertwined with the 'Grundherrschaft', the rule over land and subjects, and a feudal system was established through the resident aristocracy. With the Reformation, a third component – the religious authority in form of an own regional church (Landeskirche) was constituted.

Great transformations, similar to the ones in the European central states England and France, took also place in the areas of state, economy and politics in the German territories. The Ernestine Electors of Wettin pushed ahead the consolidation of the administration and the promoting and use of intellectual-cultural and theological-ecclesiastical capabilities. The underlying foundation should become the academic education of civil servants and priests. This process was financially supported especially by the mining of precious metals in Thuringia and in an ore-rich area close-by, as well as the expanding metal working. The increased demands on the qualified workers had a boosting effect on the standard of education and for the development of bourgeois or at times sophisticated rural classes. This holds also true for the nobility – evident in the solid, classical education of the reigning monarchs, for example: of John Frederic the Magnanimous (1503-1554).

It was the beginning of a new era, in which the early capitalist economy and humanistic that is from the renaissance resulting educational and scholarly ideas were the driving force behind it. At this time, the University of Erfurt represented one of the significant seats of humanistic thought. Eobanus Hessus, Luther's teacher Jodocus Trutvetter and Mutianus Rufus, the teacher of Ullrich von Hutten were teaching at this university. Yet on no account, did the spirit of humanism seem to have reached the common man. The daily life of the ordinary people was rather dominated by deeply seated religious beliefs and mysticism. The search for new saints and miracles and the exaggerated conduct of pilgrimages revealed this fact.

The chronicler and clergyman Konrad Stolle from Erfurt described how in summer 1475 in Meissen, Hesse, Franconia and Thuringia, children and adolescents gathered and begun to march with flags without the knowledge of their parents and landlords, even their father confessor could not hold them back. They went on pilgrimage to the 'holy blood' in Wilsnack and "they did not know what the holy blood was and they also did not know what they were doing." In Wilsnack, which is closely located to Perleberg, a church had been destroyed as a

consequence of an arson attack; the altar, candles and three hosts had “merged together” and had been covered in blood, however they were found undamaged. From now on, they were worshipped in the hope of salvation.



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The Collegium Majus – center of the medieval University in Erfurt

Also in Wittenberg, the former heart of the Electorate existed one of the largest relic collections that Frederic the Wise extensively used by offering profitable indulgence ‘deals’. By 1509, 5005 objects had accumulated, of which each of them granted 100 days of indulgence, which means the guarantee of remission concerning transitory punishment as a consequence of sinful deeds. To this collection belonged, amongst many, a piece of the armor once owned by the Holy Mauritius, remnants of Moses’ burning bush or straw from the crib of the Lord Jesus.

Whoever was on pilgrimage to Wittenberg and was financially able could acquire indulgence for several years, even for centuries, for oneself or deceased relatives. For the people of the 16th century this was a decisive aspect, because the question: “How can I do justice to God?”

was a dominating concern. The basic ideas of the Lutheran Reformation originated from this circumstance.

The Beginning of the Reformation

Since October 31, 1517 the Reformation had taken its course through the opposition against the deplorable state of affairs within the church, in particular in form of protests against the common indulgence practices of the Curia. All this happened in the territorial state, to which belonged large parts of Thuringia. However, this was also directed against Frederic the Wise, the own territorial ruler, who had forbidden the indulgence trade of his neighbour Albert, Margrave of Brandenburg and Prussia (archbishop of Magdeburg and Mainz) in the Electorate of Saxony, yet Frederic himself still believed strongly in the concept of indulgence.

Luther argued: "Our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ intended with his words: "Repent! Do penance!", the believer's whole life to be lived in repentance." Consequently 'indulgence' lost its significance and the truly repentant sinner could receive absolution and the forgiveness of sins only by God. The, in the thesis contained, attacks against the economic practices of the 'indulgence trade', enhanced the extensive impact of the writings on large parts of the population.

The common man felt strengthened in his anti-Roman -, at times also against the own ruler directed demands for reform. In the following period, Luther developed, driven by the pressure of ongoing disputes with his opponents step by step his theological concept. Particularly, his three writings of 1520: "From the Freedom of a Christian", "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation" and "De Captivate Babylonica" presented the substratum of a newly formatting church.

In the Thuringian estates of the Ernestine, Luther's thoughts were met quickly with response. Luther's presence in Thuringian towns, while he was traveling to an interrogation in Augsburg in 1518 or to the 'Reichstag' in Worms (he took up residence in Erfurt, Gotha, Weimar and Jena) contributed to the popularization of the Reformation. Especially in the larger towns, the clergymen turned to Luther's new theory and increasingly preached according to its principles.



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The Luther-House in Eisenach

For the time before 1525, it is possible to prove the existence of reformatory-minded clergymen in Altenburg (1522), Neustadt an der Orla, Saalfeld (since at least 1524), Coburg, Eisfeld (1524), Eisenach (1522/23), Gotha (1524), Weimar, Jena (since at least 1523), Eisenberg (after 1523) and at last in Orlamünde and in Allstedt. There were predominantly preachers that did not belong to the church or former monks, who understood it as their task to proclaim “the true words of the Lord”.

A distinctive episode of the Reformation in Thuringia was Luther’s residence at the castle of the Wartburg from 1521 until 1522. Luther, disguised as the junker ‘Jörg’ concluded the translation of the Bible at this place - one of the greatest cultural achievements in German history. To the potential audience of Luther’s translation belonged not only the citizens but also the uneducated population groups. Apart from the difficulties that resulted from the widespread illiteracy, Luther also had to eliminate other lingual discrepancies. As he noted:

“...one cannot follow the Latin letters to know how to speak German, like these donkeys do but one has to ask the mother at home, the children on the

streets, the common man at the market and watch their traps, how they talk and interpret accordingly, so they can understand and know that one speaks German to them.”

(„...man mus nicht die buchstaben inn der latainische sprache fragen, wie man sol Deutsch redder, wie diese Esel thun, sondern man mus die mutter jhm hause, die kinder auff der gassen, den gemeinen man auff dem marckt drumb fragen, und den selbigen auff das maul sehen, wie sie reden, und darnach dolmtzschen, so verstehen sie es den und mercken, das man Deutsch mit jn redet.“)*

However, already in March 1522, he had to leave the Wartburg, because of the radical-reformatory changes initiated by Andreas Karlstadt and Gabriel Zwilling, in order to assert his own reformatory ideas and expectations in Wittenberg.

The Dispute of the Reformers

The events in Wittenberg represented the prelude to the development of a deep fragmentation of positions within the Reformation. Also in the Thuringian region, a wide spectrum of reformatory interpretations and reforming attempts had been conducted. It came to the formation of different centres. In Eisenach, Jakob Strauß had been working as a priest at the St George's Church (Georgenkirche) since January 1523. He pursued his own reformatory approach and made himself known particularly with his writings against profiteering. The court of the Electorate of Saxony took notice of him at a debate in December 1522.

In the following years, Strauß published a series of papers, in which he strongly criticized the order of the Catholic Church. Even before Luther, he refused to accept the traditional Catholic understanding of the confession. Strauß adopted full passages of Luther's writings – reinterpreted them and implemented the results straight away into the daily church-life in Eisenach.

In his writing “Christlich Unterricht des Irrtumbs” (Christian teachings of mistaken thoughts) 1523, he refuted the old, clerical understanding of the veneration of the saints. Shortly after, a sermon about the marriage of clergymen followed, in which Strauß criticized the illegitimate relationships between priests and their housekeepers and was voicing his support for the priestly marriage. The articulated will to implement reformatory theology into practice was

evident in Strauß's 51 articles arguing against extortion. The preacher was considerably less lenient compared to Luther in denouncing the foul financial practices of the clerical institutions.

In Weimar, the court's priest became soon the centre of attention. He argued that only the laws of the Old Testament (Moses) should constitute the universal legal basis of human dispensation of justice. His patron, the Elector John the Steadfast was undecided, which reformatory position he deemed as the 'correct' one. His son John Frederic I, on the other hand, distanced himself to Stein's position relatively early. Annoyed by the attitude of the court's preachers and Strauß, the preacher from Eisenach, John Frederic I enquired by Luther, which position was appropriate in regards to the Law of Moses and usurious trade. Luther replied, a Christian would be a sinner, if he was to respect imperial rights. However, if such priests would turn into emperors they could potentially decide differently. Relieved by Luther's answer, John Frederic I wrote to Luther that he was driven by distress, because his father, the Elector John was strongly influenced by Stein, who did not acknowledge any worldly court for the dispensation of justice.

Since 1523, Thomas Müntzer had written important reformatory papers in Allstedt, which signify a scholarly contribution of an independent, important reformer. This became apparent in his writings the "Deutsche Kirchenamt" (The German Church Office) the "Deutsch-evangelische Messe" (German Protestant Mass), with which he initiated and conducted a reform of the church service. With the "Ordnung und Berechnung des deutschen Amts zu Allstedt" (Order and Instruction of the German Office in Allstedt) followed the explanation and justification of the new church service proceedings.

Like Luther, Strauß, Stein and Karlstadt, Müntzer targeted for the time being the urbanized population. He turned to the Ernestine dukes with sincere offers. Ultimately, Müntzer's theology found in its active interpretation of apocalyptic imposition and the transfer of the 'power of the sword' to the weakest of society its deepest consequence. The weakest of society, they were the ones that suffered comparably to Christ's way of the cross.

Another hub of reformatory change had developed in Orlamünde. Since May 1523, Karlstadt had been working here. Similar to Müntzer, Karlstadt heavily influenced the thinking in many congregations in this part of Thuringia, over a long period of time. Both provided the intellectual backbone to the revolting peasants and the after 1525 established Anabaptist movement. In contrast to Thomas Müntzer, Karlstadt did not have a direct link to the Peasants' War. The reason for Karlstadt's resettling to Orlamünde lay in the heavy

disappointment that he suffered after Luther's return from the Wartburg and the attacks by the same against him. He turned away from formerly like-minded companions. In March 1523, his change of attitude became publicly noticeable. Karlstadt refused to continue holding his doctorate title, he took off his scholarly gown and dressed like a peasant and called himself from then on: "Bruder Endres" (Brother Endres). At first, he was employed as a farmer in Wörlitz, because he did not want to eat any longer the poor people's bread.

All of this was incomprehensible to Luther. Karlstadt's move to Orlamünde did not happen without the knowledge of the authority yet, as Luther claimed later, without the permission of the university and without recommendation of Wittenberg's theologians. As a reaction of the request of Orlamünde's council and Karlstadt's pleadings, Duke John and his brother, the Elector Frederic of Saxony allowed the move and take-over of Orlamünde's parish.

Karlstadt found fulfilment in this work and won the trust of the congregation not only in Orlamünde but also in Bucha, Zeutsch, Heilingen and Freienorla. The reason for that was to a great extent that Karlstadt could implement his reformatory ideas without objections from Luther or the theologians in Wittenberg. In Orlamünde, imagery and the organ were banned from the church building, at the Holy Communion the participants took both, bread and wine, and the service was held in German language. Particularly significant was the refusal to conduct anymore infant baptisms.

On Sundays, Karlstadt preached the John's gospel and during the week he interpreted the Acts of the Apostles. He asked the audience to make known the word of God, including all lay persons, because he deemed it possible to learn from them just as well as from any priest. This was the consequence Karlstadt drew from the doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers.

The developments in Orlamünde and the publication of several writings in Jena caused Luther to challenge Karlstadt to a direct dispute. Luther travelled to Thuringia. On August 22, he preached in the St. Michael's Church (Michaeliskirche) in Jena, very early at seven o'clock in the morning. The emphasis of his sermon was on the examination of, as he called it, all the sentimentalists and dreamers. He equated Karlstadt and his followers, to whom also belonged Martin Reinhardt, the priest of the St. Michael's Church and the jurist Gerhard Westerburg, with Thomas Müntzer. Luther argued further that the destroying of churches, imagery, wood and stone and the eradicating of the baptism, the sacrament of the altar, was a diabolical act. Karlstadt, who was listening, was outraged by the sermon. This led to the

well-known, open confrontation at the Black Bear Inn. Karlstadt pointed out that he had nothing in common with the radicals in Allstedt (Müntzer and his followers).

Luther wanted to withdraw himself from the impetuous argument aside of his sermon and challenged Karlstadt to engage in a public debate with him in Wittenberg. However, Karlstadt refused to take part as he remembered well the events of 1521/22. Karlstadt knew of Luther's impact on the people. He expected that this would prohibit him preaching, writing and publishing. Despite this, his heart did not seem to be filled with wrath.

By being able to question Luther outside the town Wittenberg, Karlstadt found the opportunity to defend his reformatory approach. Whereupon, Luther reacted by claiming that he did not name Karlstadt and it was Karlstadt's own responsibility if he had felt criticized. The occurrences here appear symptomatic of the situation of the early Thuringian reformatory period. The theologian or clergymen, who believed that they owned 'the gospel and the truth' alone, had to win over and convince their fellow men.

Karlstadt, Strauß and in some aspects also Stein and in particular Thomas Müntzer felt as much destined in their domains as Luther did. After these first arguments, Luther had an appearance in Orlamünde. Shortly before, he received a letter from the people of Orlamünde, in which they reproached Luther for treating everybody with contempt, who disposed according to God's will silent idols and pagan images. The letter also suggested that Luther should not besmirch the ones, who are on the side of the Lord. Luther should come to Orlamünde and refute their positions and instruct them, in case they were truly mistaken, instead of threatening to expel them from the territory.

Luther on his part reproached the people of Orlamünde for the letter and claimed that Karlstadt alone was the author – as the people of Orlamünde were only being ordinary people. Karlstadt had, according to Luther, abused the town's seal for his own purposes. The council repudiated this insinuation vigorously. A dramatic situation developed that was to shed some unfavourable light on those parishes and towns that attempted to take the Reformation into their own hands. Luther blamed the congregation for accepting Karlstadt as priest without having the necessary authority at its disposal. The response acts as evidence of the profound knowledge of Orlamünde's people. The year before, they argued, Luther himself had granted the right to the congregations to appoint their own priests. However, this point was completely ignored by Luther.

Luther rather requested that the congregation should exclude Karlstadt from the dispute. In the end, Karlstadt accepted this. Soon afterwards, it followed another quarrel between Luther and a cobbler, who attempted to refute Luther's position in the question about the use of imagery. Luther set out his point of view on the events in Orlamünde in his writings "Wider die himmlischen Propheten, von den Bildern und Sakrament" ('Against the Heavenly Prophets, of Images and Sacrament') in 1524/25. As a consequence of this confrontation, Karlstadt was forced to leave the Electorate. A profound incision took place through the peasants' revolt in Thuringia that was intellectually influenced by Müntzer, however on no account carried alone by his theology or even under his military leadership.



Foto LZT

From 1505 to 1511 Martin Luther was a member of the Augustinerkloster in Erfurt

The defeat was followed by heavy punishments for all insurgents in the towns and in the countryside. The many reports by clergymen and officials reveal the catastrophic conditions in the country and confirm the confessions of the prisoners that were often results of torture. The new Elector John convinced himself on an expedition through Thuringia. His efforts in terms of the reformatory changes' continuation was not called into question by the Peasants' War. The deceased Elector, Frederic the Wise had avoided to affiliate himself to the

Lutheran theory in practice until his death, nonetheless he supported it all along. John the Steadfast and especially his son, John Frederic I declared their personal support for the Reformation.

Until 1525, all reformatory changes had been of local character, most of the time forced by the actions of the ordinary man, however after 1525, the state-organized re-organisation or rather the creation of a new church system begun taking shape. This was the time of birth of the Lutheran regional church (Landeskirche), the beginning of the practical implementation of the Reformation.

What however, dominated the daily life of the peasants at this time? The revolt was defeated in May; over 6000 people were killed alone in the area of Frankenhausen. Whoever did not suffer imminently in the war, was caught by the sweeping punishments executed by the ruler. Yet only governable subjects, peace amongst the population, towns and parishes spared from war allowed the thriving of the state. As far as the fields were not devastated, they had to be harvested. But did it still make sense to plague oneself with the daily, hard work? Had God not roundly condemned the rank of the peasants? Or was the right time only approaching, the final judgement had not yet come? The inner-moral conflict of many people intensified in the face of reality. The subordination seemed a logical consequence. Nevertheless the people's reformatory ideas and thoughts continued to exist.

Since 1527, the Anabaptism movement intensified the conflicts in Thuringia. Here were large promotional hubs located, for example in Etzleben, Heldrungen and in the areas of Erfurt and Mansfeld. Influenced by Karlstadt's and Müntzer's ideas, the coming to terms with the gruesome Peasants' War and confronted with the Lutheran Reformation, new tendencies developed that were distinct to the original doctrines of the Peasants' War.

The Anabaptists dismissed the christening of infants and practiced instead the so-called believers' baptism, which was carried out on mature adults only. They convened at remote places and dedicated themselves to the study of the Bible without any clerical instruction.

Melchior Rinck, Hans Hut and Hans Römer were influential apostles of the Anabaptism movement in Thuringia. They anticipated according to John's revelation the last judgement day, proclaimed and prepared by the belligerent activities of the Turks or natural disasters. From the perspective of the rulers, it was high time to reintroduce law and order to the situation of their territory. After the Peasants' War, the Elector had begun, as advised by his theologians and his councillors to control parishes and congregations.

Therefore, he used an old means of the church that is the right and duty to pay a visit to the congregations on a regular basis. After first attempts in 1525 and 1526, an inspection of the whole territory of the Electorate was conducted. The investigators ("Visitatoren"), mainly clergymen and jurists, had to pay special attention to the official performing and way of life of the priests; to register the property and income of the same; monasteries and convents and if necessary to determine changes. Therefore, patrons, representatives of the congregations and municipalities as well as clergymen were convened. Already the first visitations showed that extensive re-structuring was inevitable, if the church situation was not to derail.

The Assertion of the Reformation

The circumstances were characterized by inadequate education, miserable living conditions, extramarital relationships with housekeepers or the existence of Anabaptists and other renegades. In 1529, in the district of the river Saale (Saalkreis) with the centres Jena, Neustadt/Orla, Pössneck and Saalfeld, 190 parishes and 239 clergymen were statistically recorded. Out of the assessed clergymen around 60% were considered to be suitable, of which half of them still showed deficiencies. Over 50% were found incapable or were characterized as 'papists'. In order to offer a recommendation to the obliging clergymen and to present a wording of church law to the adversaries, theologians and councillors developed the "Unterricht der Visitatoren" (lessons of the 'visitors') in 1527/28. This writing contained all of what a good Lutheran-minded priest and teacher was ought to know and supposed to teach his congregation. Who, however achieved once again unsatisfactory results at one of the following visitations had to expect the dismissal.

The question of the monasteries was a special problem. From the Protestant perspective monasteries were old relics of the Pope's Church and not justified in the Bible. They did not only represent spiritual institutions but also political and economic centres. Using the unstable situation after the Peasants' War, the Elector John the Steadfast refused the former inhabitants, who had fled from the Thuringian monasteries to return and ordered them to settle in selected monasteries, which were kept under close surveillance.

Often, the persons affected received compensation and were assured of life-long care. Naturally, there was resistance but the situation had changed dramatically until the 40es of the 16th century so that the Elector sold the, to him now unprofitable appearing, property of the monasteries. In the towns, the monasteries' property was used for school purposes, plots

were sold to citizens or the treasuries of the municipalities were equipped to pay the salaries of the priests, to support the poor and the schools with the necessary means.

Of course, the rulers of the territory had drawn profits from this property. The municipalities also used the monasteries' funds for the solving of social and parochial issues. Viewed altogether, the since 1525 pursued reformatory path in Thuringia had consolidated the position of the ruling ranks. Also the landgraviates (Schwarzburg/Reuß) in close proximity, which wanted to evade the adsorption by the Ernestines, had opened up to the Lutheran theory by the mid-30es. Henneberg followed suit around the middle of the century. In the Albertine estate, after the death of Duke George the Bearded (1539), a swift turn to the Reformation took place and even the, to the Electorate of Mainz belonging, Eichsfeld experienced a temporary, reformatory change in the mid-1520es.

The divestiture of the electoral rank and the reduction of the land after the defeat against the Kaiser at the Schmalkaldic War (1547) meant for the Ernestines an important turning point. Therewith, they lost one whole Electorate-district and were hence restricted to the Thuringian estates. The Reformation could not be revoked, with the exception of the Eichsfeld. Also in the Thuringian territory, the modern form of state asserted itself increasingly, despite the scattered distribution of the estates and fragmented territory. The separation from Rome, the creation of an own regional church (Landeskirche), the great transformations within the structures of the sciences, of academia and the education system, and moreover the formation of a German national language are and remain major outcomes of the Reformation - just as the Reformation remains inseparably inter-linked with Thuringia.

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