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Citizen Eucharius Albrecht and The Reformation, 1493-1522

In 1493, Frederick III, the Holy Roman Emperor, died,¹ and his son Maximilian, who had been crowned the King of the Romans² by Frederick III to shore up his right to inherit the position of Holy Roman Emperor for the Habsburg family, became the head of the Holy Roman Empire.

The emperor, along with the seven electors – the Archbishops of Cologne, Mainz and Trier, the King of Bohemia, the Count Palatine of the Rhine, the Duke of Saxony and the Margrave of Brandenburg³ – shared with the powerful imperial cities such as Rothenburg ob der Tauber⁴ the power and politics of the Holy Roman Empire. Within the imperial cities, a small patrician class prevailed; this was the political set-up until the early 19th century when Napoleon brought an end to the Holy Roman Empire, including the power base of the patricians. In Rothenburg ob der Tauber, located in the Franconian region in modern-day southern Germany (66 kilometres due west of Nuremberg and 48 kilometres due south-east of Würzburg), the Albrecht family was one of the great patrician families that exercised control over this imperial free city.⁵

By 1493, the Habsburgs had created an empire thanks to strategic marriages that dominated the map of Europe. Within the Holy Roman Empire, the emperor wielded power and influence to different degrees in different areas. The major threat to the Holy Roman Empire during these times was that posed on its eastern borders by the Ottoman Empire, after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. On the western borders, the growing

1 Maximilian I, king and co-ruler with his father Frederick III after 1486; sole ruler from 1493; and emperor 1508–19. Whaley, Joachim. *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire Volume I: Maximilian I to the Peace of Westphalia 1493–1648*. P. 19. Appendix 2 lists the Holy Roman Emperors 1493–1806.

2 The King of the Romans title was used for the heir apparent to the Holy Roman Empire, similar to the Prince of Wales title. The Holy Roman Empire was an elective monarchy; no person had the right to the succession. Therefore, the King of the Romans was used to heavily influence the succession. The emperor was crowned on the election carried out by the seven electors.

3 The Margrave of Brandenburg's family had lands in the Franconia region. This came about in 1415 when Emperor Sigismund vested Frederick (of the Hohenzollern dynasty, formerly the Burgraviate of Nuremberg), with the hereditary title of the Elector of Brandenburg.

4 At times Rothenburg will be used instead of the full name Rothenburg ob der Tauber.

5 Rowlands, Alison. *Witchcraft Narratives in Germany – Rothenburg, 1561–1652*. P. 3.

conflict between the Habsburgs and France added a further dimension of external threat.⁶

In the same year, Maximilian began preparations for a crusade against the Ottomans. By 1495, at a meeting of the Reichstag (parliament) at Worms⁷, Maximilian I's enthusiasm for a crusade against the Ottoman Empire took second place, as issues in Italy provided opportunities for him to be formally crowned by the Pope. However, the Reichstag did not think it was in their interest to pay for external excursions. To finance his political ambitions, Maximilian had secured large loans from rich patrician families from the Upper German areas (southern Germany including Franconia and Swabia) including names such as Jakob Fugger from the Imperial Free City of Augsburg.

By 1500, there were some sixty-five imperial cities. The largest was Cologne, with 30,000 inhabitants; Nuremberg had over 20,000.⁸ Rothenburg had around 6,000 inside the city walls and another 14,000 in its surrounding areas. Rothenburg was an influential and well-off Imperial Free City.

The population in the City of Rothenburg was dominated by craftsmen and their households; however, the city council was dominated by an urban patriciate which made money from rent as opposed to trade.⁹ During these times, the patrician elite who ruled Rothenburg through the city council, attracted the likes of Tilman Riemenschneider¹⁰, who produced some impressive woodcarvings of religious stories, such as *The Last Supper*, that are revealed in St Jacob's church.¹¹

In 1493, in the Imperial Free City of Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Eucharius Albrecht (likely his second marriage), married Margaretha Strauss, the daughter of Rothenburg senator Stephan Strauss. Eucharius had two recorded children, Georg Albrecht and Kilgan (Gill) Albrecht. Records also show that in 1506, Eucharius Albrecht purchased a vineyard in Rothenburg territory.¹² This purchase is significant as it shows Eucharius Albrecht implementing the strategic objective of the urban patricians of owning the land around the city. Rothenburg councillors gradually acquired a hinterland which became the fourth largest rural territory governed by a Free Imperial City, covering 400 square

6 Whaley, Joachim. *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire Volume I: Maximilian I to the Peace of Westphalia 1493–1648*. P. 29.

7 Worms is a city in Rhineland-Palatinate, situated on the Upper Rhine. There were over a hundred imperial diets held at Worms, including that of 1521 which ended with the Edict of Worms, in which Martin Luther was declared a heretic.

8 Whaley, Joachim. *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire Volume I: Maximilian I to the Peace of Westphalia 1493–1648*. P. 41.

9 Rowlands, Alison. *Witchcraft Narratives in Germany – Rothenburg, 1561–1652*. Pp. 3–4.

10 Tilman Riemenschneider, born about 1460 and died 1531 a poor man after being beaten and tortured by the peasants during the peasant uprisings in the 1520s. He spent most of his time in Würzburg. He was one of the most prolific sculptors during the transition period between late Gothic and Renaissance.

11 Along with the town hall, the double towers of St Jacob's dominate the skyline of Rothenburg. The double tower on the church represents the church's two masters – the Teutonic Order and the city council. By the start of the 15th century, the Teutonic Order had left the city. Huth, Thomas. *Rothenburg – Scenes of a City*. Pp. 69–72.

12 Bräuer, Siegfried & Kobuch, Manfred. *Thomas Müntzer Correspondence*. Volume 2. Thomas Müntzer edition. Critical Complete Edition. P. 22.

kilometres. The council oversaw the protection of the rural hinterland with hedges, ditches, gates and towers.¹³

Scholars have identified that the Albrecht family resided in the Würzburg or Herbipoli (Latin name) diocese before they settled in Rothenburg ob der Tauber.

Eucharius Albrecht was born in Ippesheim (close to Neustadt an der Aisch, in Middle Franconia) around 1461. It is recorded that he became a citizen of Rothenburg in 1488.¹⁴ Citizenship of an Imperial Free City conferred both political rights and communal responsibilities. The civic oath thus included not only a pledge of obedience to authority, but also expressions of loyalty to the city and a promise to protect the community from harm.¹⁵

A 'Johannes Alberti Monetary de Herbipoli' was enrolled in Leipzig University in the summer of 1462.¹⁶ Johannes was ordained as a deacon in 1471 and a priest in 1474 in Merseburg.¹⁷ In the records of Merseburg, he was registered in the name of 'Johannes Monetarius' or 'Monetarij'.¹⁸ According to these records, Johannes Alberti is descended from a family of mint masters. The University of Leipzig also has a strong link with the Albrecht family, for Johannes Alberti was not the only Albrecht who attended Leipzig. The enrolment register has Georg Albrecht (Eucharius's son) at Leipzig in 1513 and 1514. It is likely that Johannes was a great uncle to Georg.¹⁹ However, Georg soon left and went to Wittenberg University.²⁰

Although not mentioned directly, Eucharius Albrecht's health was the main topic in a letter sent to his son Georg Albrecht in either 1518 or 1519.²¹ The letter was delivered to Georg by Thomas Müntzer who was a tutor for Georg at Wittenberg University. The letter is from Dorothea Albrecht who had married Eucharius's second son, Glig, and is therefore Georg's sister-in-law.

[In the hand of an unknown writer]

My friendly greetings dear Georg. From the depth of my heart I pity your poverty. However, you should not blame your problems on your father and me. Dear Georg, Mr Thomas

13 Rowlands, Alison. *Witchcraft Narratives in Germany – Rothenburg, 1561–1652*. P. 4.

14 Stadtarchiv (State Archive) Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Milchmarkt 2, 91541, Rothenburg ob der Tauber.

15 Tlusty, B. Ann. *The Martial Ethic in Early Modern Germany*. P. 12.

16 (Enrolment register Leipzig 1, 232 B 79) from Bubenheimer, Ulrich. *Thomas Müntzer, Herkunft und Bildung*. P. 171.

17 Merseburg is a town in the modern-day south German state of Saxony-Anhalt on the River Saale, approximately 14 kilometres south of Halle.

18 Buchwald, Georg (ed.): *Die Matrikel des Hochstifts Merseburg 1469 bis 1558*. 4, 28; 8, 23).

19 Bubenheimer, Ulrich. *Thomas Müntzer, Herkunft und Bildung*. P.170.

20 Leipzig University was founded in 1409 and is the second oldest in Germany. Wittenberg University was established in 1502 and is now known as the Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg.

21 *Determination of date*: The letter was written in the period after Georg Albrecht's enrolment in Wittenberg on 28 September 1517. The year in which it was written is not definite but sometime before Oculi Sunday (the third Sunday in Lent) (see line 10). Müntzer's biography allows for such a journey in 1518 (Oculi on 7 March) or 1519 (Oculi on 27 March).

Müntzer visited me himself and explained his business. Don't worry about it, no harm has been done. Dear Georg, you should know that your father is very unwell and will not get better, unless God shows some special mercy. I and your father had been wanting to tell you for a long time ... Dear Georg, you told your brother Michael that you wanted to come on the Sunday before mid-Lent. Dear Georg, if you leave it so long I'm truly worried that you will no longer find him alive, so it would be good if you could come earlier with your brother, together with Kilgan. He has found a girlfriend and is madly in love, so I've heard. Dear Georg, if you can't come, let us know that you won't be coming, and God forbid, if the worst should happen, don't blame me and your father. As there is no one with your father apart from Martin and Lorenz²², Martin would be very happy if you could come; if not, then may God give you good health. May God also give you a good night. I have to lie down.

I have written my best + + + + +

From me Dorothea Albrechtin²³

During this time at Wittenberg University, Martin Luther nailed his theses to the doors of the All Saints in Wittenberg on 31 October 1517. Georg Albrecht had enrolled at Wittenberg University one month before this historic event.

One of the key supporters of Luther, and a 'revolutionary' in his own right, was Georg Albrecht's tutor, Thomas Müntzer (who was one of the subjects and delivered the above letter). Of interest, Müntzer, like Albrecht, was also descended from a family in which the profession of mint master was represented.²⁴

In spring 1517 in Wittenberg, Müntzer met with Luther and became involved in great discussions which proceeded the postings of Luther's *Ninety-five Theses*. At this time, Wittenberg University had become the home for Bible-centred theology and humanist philological study. Luther was therefore responsible for the early Reformation²⁵

22 Martin is likely to be Dorothea's second husband or soon-to-be husband (as Glig Albrecht had died early). While Lorenz was a brother-in-law of Eucharius, he was married to Magdalane Struss. Bräuer, Siegfried & Kobuch, Manfred. *Thomas Müntzer Correspondence*. Volume 2. Thomas Müntzer edition. Critical Complete Edition. P. 23.

23 It is likely that Dorothea Albrecht was Eucharius's daughter-in-law, as Georg's younger brother, Glig, had married a Dorothea Hoffmann. Glig and Dorothea were also parents of Kilgan. It is likely Eucharius married three times, firstly to someone who was mother to Georg and Glig, then Margaretha Strauss, in 1493, and at a later time Ursula Tann. It looks as if this letter was written between the marriages of Strauss and Tann. Stadtarchiv (State Archive) Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Milchmarkt 2, 91541, Rothenburg ob der Tauber.

24 Bubenheimer, Ulrich. *Thomas Müntzer, Herkunft und Bildung*. P. 171.

25 The Reformation was the great split in the Western church in the 16th century, producing a permanent division between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. The precipitating event was Luther's action in challenging Rome by nailing a list of '95 theses' to the church portal at Wittenberg in 1517. The main effect of the Reformation was to undermine the spirit of obedience to any clerical authority, which paved the way for the development of modern science and philosophy. Thus, the humanist efforts of the Renaissance were able to grow into a permanently secular movement of intellectual enquiry, which has lasted ever since. From *Collins Dictionary of Philosophy*, Vesey G & Foulkes, P. P. 250.

movement, and he and other scholars at Wittenberg were influential in the development of the Humanist movement.^{26 27}

This event, undoubtedly one of the most significant in history, was played out in front of Georg Albrecht. Soon another significant historical moment was to take place – this time Eucharius Albrecht would have an active role.

In the meantime, however, Eucharius Albrecht survived the health scare that Dorothea Albrecht outlined in her letter to Georg Albrecht.²⁸ The Albrechts had now established a foothold in the ruling circles; however, they had not reached the top echelons. Both Georg and his younger brother, Gilg, were tanners, while Eucharius was a butcher, but the family had land and was well educated. This focus on education would enable future Albrecht family members to have a greater influence in the decision-making of the Imperial Free City.



²⁶ Whaley, Joachim. *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire Volume I: Maximilian I to the Peace of Westphalia 1493–1648*. P. 184.

²⁷ The humanism movement was an intellectual movement that brought out one central feature of the Renaissance: a reevaluation of man and human affairs, as against the god-centred speculations of the Middle Ages. The movement began in 14th-century Italy and spread with the Renaissance. The thinkers in this tradition stressed the value of liberty and tolerance, existing authorities and to initiate the scientific revolution of the 16th century. This general outlook has followers who call themselves humanists to this day. From *Collins Dictionary of Philosophy*, Vesey G & Foulkes, P. P. 137.

²⁸ Georg Albrecht married Barbara Hufnagl (who died in 1563). Their children: Georg, who married Magdalena Waldmann; Leonhard, who died at a young age; Apollonia, born 1555 and married Matthias Donn on 5 August 1573; and Ursula, born 17 May 1569, who married Georg Heid. From Stadtarchiv (State Archive) Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Milchmarkt 2, 91541, Rothenburg ob der Tauber.