

Thuringia and Saxony in the early 16th Century

A Simplified Overview

The Land

Thomas Müntzer's principal stamping-ground can loosely be defined as Thuringia, in Central Germany. This area in the 16th century covers much the same area as it now does in the 21st. Like much of Germany 500 years ago, however, it was an ill-fitting jigsaw of small and large territories, divided up between princes and minor nobility, and also between the ecclesiastical and the secular powers.

Broadly speaking, the territory fell under two principal rulers – that of the Elector of Saxony and that of the Duke of Saxony. Sprinkled in among their lands were territories governed by the Archbishops of Magdeburg and Mainz, the Bishop of Halberstadt and an assortment of Counts. In here too were the Imperial Free Cities of Mühlhausen and Erfurt, who – in theory at least – answered to none but the Holy Roman Emperor (Charles V); in practice, these cities were obliged to seek mutual alliances with regional princes - in 1482, Mühlhausen had signed up for protection with both branches of the Saxon ruling family and with the Landgraviate of Hesse.

Two maps are indicated below which together give an overview of how Saxony and Thuringia were divided up at that time. What is noticeable from these maps is the potential for greatly conflicting interests between the landowners and rulers – exacerbated by the fact that the Electorate of Saxony followed Luther, while the Duchy of Saxony remained steady with the established Catholic Church. In particular, note that the town of Allstedt sat as an 'exclave' of the Electorate, bang in the middle of a large swathe of the Duchy's lands; and that Mühlhausen was bordered by two Catholic territories.

A final point to note is the sheer extent of **Church-held land** – one reason, if no other, for some of the princes of Germany to support the Reformation campaign against Catholic Church wealth and possessions. The main holdings – visible (barely) on the first map below – are

1. just to the north and west of Mühlhausen (just below the map's legend), the Eichsfeld – belonging to the Archbishopric of Mainz; further Mainz land surrounds the Free City of Erfurt.
2. around Magdeburg (top left of map), belonging to the Archbishopric of Magdeburg; further Magdeburg land surrounds Querfurt and Halle.
3. around Halberstadt (just below Magdeburg), belonging to the Bishopric of Halberstadt

MAPS

Please click on one or other of the links to view the maps. (Both are sourced from *Wikicommons*)

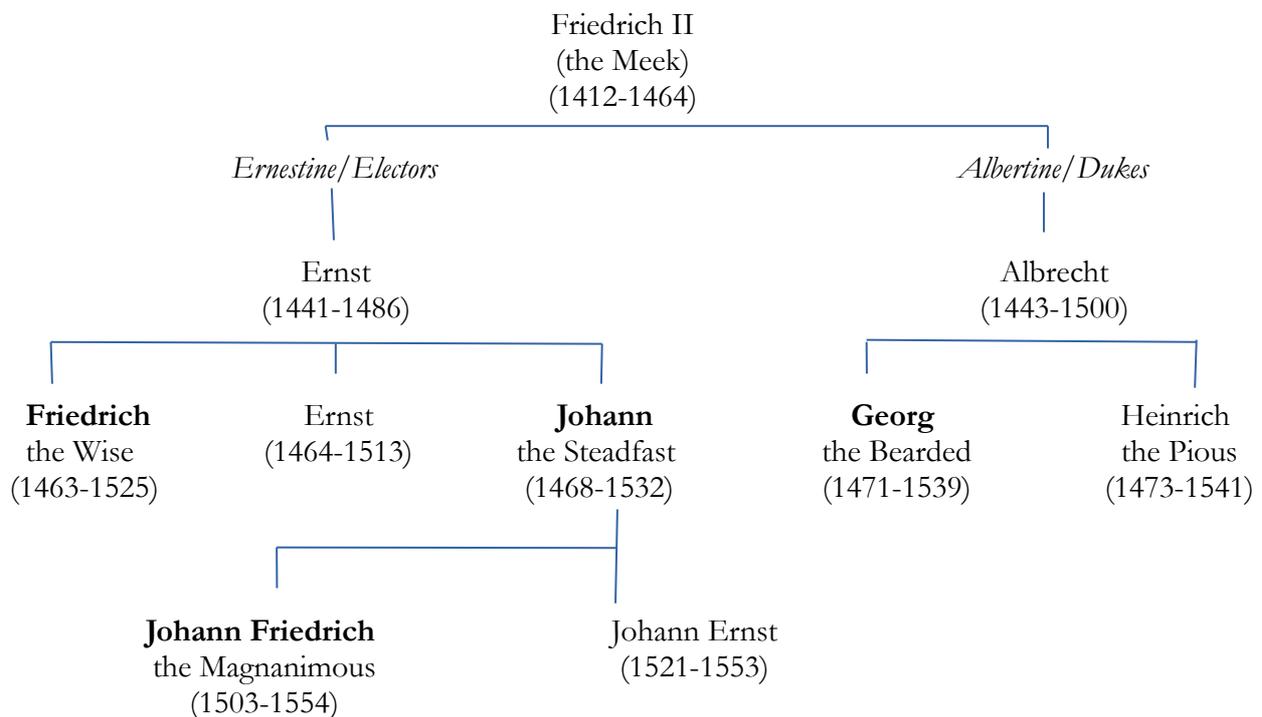
- [Map \(complex\) of Saxony and Thuringia after 1485](#)
- [Map \(simple\) of Saxony after the Treaty of Division of 1485.](#)

The Landowners

The principal feudal landowning family was the Saxon House of **Wettin**. This was divided into two branches – the ‘Albertine’ and the ‘Ernestine’. The division took place in 1485, and recorded in the Treaty of Leipzig. The sons of Friedrich II (‘the Meek’), who had died in 1464, were Ernst and Albrecht: the former took the Electorate and founded, unsurprisingly, the Ernestine branch; the latter took the Duchy and founded the Albertine branch.

It was the privilege of the Elector of Saxony to be part of the Imperial Electoral College who had the right to choose the Holy Roman Emperor; as such, the Elector had legal superiority. However, in the early 16th century, the regional princes were already moving into positions where, de facto, they challenged the authority of the Emperor.

The Wettin Family in the early 16th Century



Ernst, the founder of the **Ernestine** branch, died in 1486, and was succeeded by his son Friedrich (‘the Wise’), who remained Elector until his death in May 1525. Friedrich became, and remained, Luther’s main protector and patron, and adopted the church reforms. On Friedrich’s death, he was succeeded by his brother Johann (‘the Steadfast’), who was also the Duke of Thuringia; he remained Elector until his death in 1532, at which point he was succeeded by his sons Johann Friedrich and Johann Ernst, who were joint Electors until 1542.

It was Johann the Steadfast and his son Johann Friedrich who listened to Müntzer’s ‘Sermon Before the Princes’ in July 1524.

We should note that the original Ernst had a third son, also named Ernst, who functioned as the Bishop of Halberstadt and Archbishop of Magdeburg until his death in 1513. Both of these positions came with large chunks of Saxon land.

On the **Albertine** side, Albrecht was succeeded on his death in 1500 by Georg (‘the Bearded’), who ruled until 1539, being succeeded then – albeit briefly – by his brother Heinrich (‘the Pious’). Georg remained steadfastly Catholic – and, unlike the rest of his extended family, appeared to have no good character traits, so was nicknamed after his facial hair. Georg’s daughter Christine married Philipp of Hesse in 1523: Philipp became an avid supporter of the Lutheran Reformation from 1524 onwards –

which would scarcely have pleased his new father-in-law...

In 1547, the entire Wettin area of governance was re-negotiated and the Electorate was exchanged once more between the two branches – but these later matters need not concern us here.

The Counts of **Mansfeld** constituted another significant noble family in Thuringia. The family had split into three main branches at the end of the 15th century, and at the time of the Reformation, there were no fewer than five Counts, whose religious loyalties differed greatly. Count Ernst was a staunch Catholic man, who incurred Müntzer's wrath by banning his subjects from visiting Allstedt to attend the reformed church services.. Ernst's brother Albrecht was a strong supporter of Luther. The Mansfeld county spanned a significant area to the north of Thuringia; Count Ernst's residence was at Heldrungen – about 10km south-west of Allstedt.

Popping up in the Müntzer story are a ragtag of Imperial knights and small landowners. This layer of the nobility was already a spent force after the defeat of Sickingen's rebellion in 1522/23. Among these nobles can be counted the Counts of **Stolberg-Wernigerode** and of **Schwarzburg**: several members of these families ended up, willy-nilly, in the rebel camp on the eve of Frankenhausen.