

Armin Kohnle and Uwe Schirmer (eds.), in cooperation with Heiner Lück, Margit Scholz, Thomas A. Seidel and André Thieme, *Kurfürst Friedrich der Weise von Sachsen. Politik, Kultur und Reformation*, Sächsische Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Franz Steiner Verlag Stuttgart, Leipzig and Stuttgart, 2015, pp. 455, index of places and names, ill. and tables; series: Quellen und Forschungen zur sächsischen Geschichte, 40

Frederick III, Elector of Saxony (1463–1525), was certainly one of the most interesting figures of the early Reformation era. He was a symbol of authority in the period of transition between the Middle Ages and Early modern period, serving as imperial general of the Holy Roman Empire, making the obligatory expedition to the Holy Land (1493), building a huge collection of relics, founding the University of Wittenberg, and almost taking the imperial crown. However, the Elector of Saxony has most notably gone down in history for serving as Martin Luther's protector, a figure whom, legend has it, he never actually met in person. He instead maintained contact with the reformer through his secretary Georg Spalatin. Frederick's other achievements have been overshadowed by the charismatic figure of Luther, which might explain why the most recent in-depth academic monograph on his rule was Ingetraut Ludolph's 1984 book.¹

¹ See the most recent edition: Ingetraut Ludolph, *Friedrich der Weise. Kurfürst von Sachsen 1463–1525* (Leipzig, 2006).

This volume, edited by Armin Kohnle and Uwe Schirmer, seeks to depict Frederick beyond the context of Martin Luther. This is not entirely surprising given that the articles were presented and discussed at a 2013 conference in Torgau, organized to mark the 550th anniversary of the ruler's birth. This certainly gives the volume added coherence, although readers might still feel disorientated by the fact that sixteen of the twenty two articles published here had already appeared in another post-conference volume published in 2014 but edited by different scholars.² The edited volume discussed here is not simply an expanded version of the earlier publication, since Andreas Tacke's article, for example, on the subject of images of Frederick ('Marketing Frederick. Friedrich der Weise in der bildenden Kunst seiner Zeit') was already published in a slightly extended version in 2014 that included the illustrations he analyses, which are missing from this 2015 volume. Giving the benefit of the doubt, it should be noted from the outset that this book deserves a highly favourable review, since it embodies all the best qualities of an edited volume: it synthesizes the results of in-depth analytical source-based studies from experts in various disciplines applying diverse methods.

The volume is constructed transparently and logically. The studies are arranged around three central thematic blocks: firstly, Frederick and his politics; secondly, culture and humanism; and, thirdly, piety and the Reformation. It is worth noting that the third section is the shortest, comprising only four articles, thus indicating the intention to shift focus towards Frederick and away from Luther.

In the first part of the book, the contributors address the question of the origins of Frederick's political significance. Armin Kohnle ('Kaiser, Reichstag, Reichsreform. Friedrich der Weise und das Reich') presents Frederick's relations with the Holy Roman Empire in the context of his visits to the Imperial diet, his relationship with Emperors Maximilian I and Charles V, as well as his position on reforming the Empire. Kohnle presents Frederick as a ruler who was not only omnipresent in the Empire, personally attending over half of the diets between 1486 and 1524, while sending a representative to the rest (see table on pp. 21–2). The Elector of Saxony also used the arena of diets to build a network of connections and relationships and, thanks to his flawless memory, he could recall events, statements and people years later. Although he has often been depicted as an opponent of the Habsburgs as Elector, Frederick was considered an impartial mediator and loyal political partner ("ehrlicher Makler", p. 17) from the moment he took up his first posts in the court of Emperor Maximilian.

² Dirk Syndram, Yvonne Fritz and Doreen Zerbe (eds.), *Kurfürst Friedrich der Weise von Sachsen (1463–1525). Beiträge zur wissenschaftlichen Tagung vom 4. bis 6. Juli 2014 auf Schloss Hartenfels in Torgau* (Dresden, 2014).

His thirty years of political activity culminated in the imperial elections of 1518/19, in which Emperor Maximilian wanted to force through the election of his grandson, the young Charles Habsburg, King of the Netherlands, as his successor. The accepted view in historiography is that Frederick could have taken the imperial crown at this point but did not do so, perhaps because of the heretic under his protection. Since the turn of the twentieth century, Polish researchers have also stressed the role of the Jagiellonian court and Sigismund I, as the protector of the juvenile Bohemian king, as a factor in the election of Charles V. Frederick's actions are presented in exceptional detail by Heiner Lück ('Friedrich der Weise und die Königswahl von 1519'), who reconstructs events to present a wonderfully engaging image of political rivalries among the great powers and their agents, while also including lawyers' opinions and expert reports. In the course of this rivalry, Frederick appears as someone deeply bound to the Holy Roman Empire's constitution, as defined by the Golden Bull, guaranteeing electors a free vote on the emperor. Political correspondence cannot, though, answer why the Elector, despite strong support, failed to take the crown.

This impression is confirmed by further articles analysing the Elector's politics within the complicated structure of the Saxon territories that were divided into two parts in 1485: the electoral Ernestine lands and the Albertine principality. A separate domain was carved out within the Electorate of Saxony in 1513, then ruled by Frederick, as a result of *Mutschierung*, with this territory put under the control of his brother Johann the Steadfast. Following Luther's actions, further Reformation-influenced differences were imposed on this complex political structure: Frederick remained loyal to the Church but defended Luther; Johann was a supporter of the new teachings; and Georg firmly opposed Luther, offering his support to anti-Lutheran polemicists. Christian Winter analyses the relationship between the Elector and his brother Johann ('Kurfürst Friedrich der Weise und sein Bruder Herzog Johann'), while Enno Bünz looks into the relationship with the ruler of Albertine Saxony, Georg ('Nähe und Distanz: Friedrich der Weise und Herzog Georg von Sachsen, 1486–1525'). Michael Scholz's essay considers relations with the bishops of Magdeburg, one of whom was another of Frederick's brothers, Ernst ('Familiäre Bindung und dynastische Konkurrenz. Friedrich der Weise und die Erzbischöfe von Magdeburg'). According to Winter, carving out a separate domain within Ernestine Saxony was an administrative rather than political decision, with both rulers engaged in consensual and harmonious politics. The transformed political landscape in the Empire following the German Peasants' Wars coincided with Frederick's death and Johann taking power, which led to Saxony becoming an open supporter of the Reformation throughout the Empire. Interestingly, relations with Georg, who opposed Luther, remained cordial within the Saxon dynasty (p. 134). Frederick ensured that relations with the archbishops of Magdeburg, including his

brother Ernst, were as good as those with Albrecht of Brandenburg. Despite the tension between Halle and Wittenberg at this time – resulting from dynastic competition and, following Luther's actions, confessional differences – relations were nevertheless maintained (pp. 149–52). The image of a peaceful and balanced policy is confirmed by Frederick's involvement in the cause of the Teutonic Order in Prussia (Stephan Flemming, 'Friedrich der Weise und der deutsche Orden in Preußen, 1486–1525') and by his relations with the imperial cities, as shown in Sina Westphal's case study on the strong bonds tying electoral Saxony to Nuremberg ('Außenpolitische Korrespondenz. Friederich der Weise und die Reichstadt Nürnberg').

Frederick's reign in Saxony is sometimes depicted as a transitional period between the medieval mode of power, exerted by a court and a ruler who travels throughout his domain, and a modern model, in which a ruler creates an administrative centre for governing a country. The Ernestine line of the House of Wettin imagined Wittenberg in this role, with the city taking over many functions once held by Leipzig, which found itself in the Albertine part of the state. However, as research by Thomas Lang, Uwe Schirmer and Jürgen Herzog ('Zwischen Reisen und Residieren'; 'Der kursächsische-ernestinische Fürstenhof unter Friedrich dem Weisen, 1485–1525'; 'Fürstlicher Hof und Stadt Torgau während der Regierungszeit Friedrich des Weisen') convincingly argues, the Wettin court, which counted 80 people and 80 horses in 1456, remained mobile, travelling between its main residences in Meissen, Leipzig, Altenburg, Weimar and Dresden, with smaller seats in Torgau, Lochau and Schellenberg. Frederick's court was composed of between 130 (1503) and 230 (1508) people, managing to cover up to 3400 kilometres a year (p. 234). These observations are confirmed by the dates on documents issued and also by property inventories, receipts of court kitchens, and other sources ('Küchenbuch, Reisebuch, Lagerbuch'). Frederick the Elector rarely visited Wittenberg, where the booming university played host to Luther, and when he did visit, he spent little time there (p. 228).

The history of the founding and development of the university is presented comprehensively and convincingly in Manfred Rudersdorf's contribution, 'Kurfürst Friedrich der Weise und die Anfänge der Leucorea in Wittenberg'. 416 students enrolled during the first year of its activities, while 800 were enrolling annually by the mid-sixteenth century (p. 256). Wittenberg quickly became a symbol of the revival in both the education system and theology, initially within the frameworks of humanism and *devotio moderna*, which were represented by Christoph Scheurl and Johannes von Staupitz, and then later in connection to the Reformation and humanism, as embodied by Luther and Philipp Melanchthon. Despite Melanchthon never having met the Elector of Saxony in person, the speeches that he prepared on the occasion of Frederick's funeral (1525) and on the anniversary of his death (1551) were highly influential in shaping the image of the ruler. As Hans-Peter Hasse

suggests, it is thanks to Melanchthon that Frederick acquired the sobriquet “the Wise” (‘Melanchthon und Kurfürst Friederich der Weise. Konstruktion der Fürstenmemoria’).

It is symbolic of the volume that the section on the Reformation is the shortest and comes at the end. The policies of Frederick and his successors, Johann the Steadfast and Johann Frederick I, are presented in an article by one of the leading experts on the subject, Eike Wolgast (‘Die deutschen Fürsten vor der Herausforderung durch die frühe Reformation’), who places these figures in the context of imperial princes’ attitudes towards the Reformation. Of greatest interest to researchers dealing with the Reformation will be the closing article by Bernd Stephan on the subject of Frederick’s ambivalent relations to Luther (‘Friedrich der Weise und Luther: Distanz und Nähe’). Referring to the characterization of Frederick presented in Melanchthon’s speeches, the biography by Spalatin and Johannes Eck’s correspondence, Stephan depicts the Elector’s attachment to a traditional mode of religiosity which gradually moves towards finding common ground with Luther through the shared traditions of humanism, Biblicism and profound piety.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate the very positive assessment of the volume presented at the outset. This collection offers an exceptionally valuable summary of many monographic studies that draw on a still largely unknown source base. While the publication happens to coincide with the anniversary of the Reformation, a fact that will contribute to a lively reception of the volume, the editors have skilfully, perhaps overly so, managed to avoid the trap whereby ‘anniversary publications’ focus almost entirely on Luther. The articles presented in this volume might occasionally drown readers in details and reconstructions of events, although this is surely a price that readers are willing to pay in order to have access to new findings based on in-depth and reliable source analysis. While not presenting Frederick the Wise in an entirely new light, this publication ensures that the image of him becomes more refined and nuanced, and acquires greater depth. A certain disadvantage of focusing on the ruler’s person, however, is the tendency for some authors to adopt an overly psychologizing approach that exceeds the knowledge that can be derived from sources (e.g. pp. 434–5). Given the dangers posed by such approaches, the editors’ strategy is to ensure that he is depicted constantly in interaction with other rulers and members of his court and family. This guarantees that the volume offers a significant contribution to research on the political and social background to events in the Reformation, sixteenth-century court culture, and the modern history of the Empire.