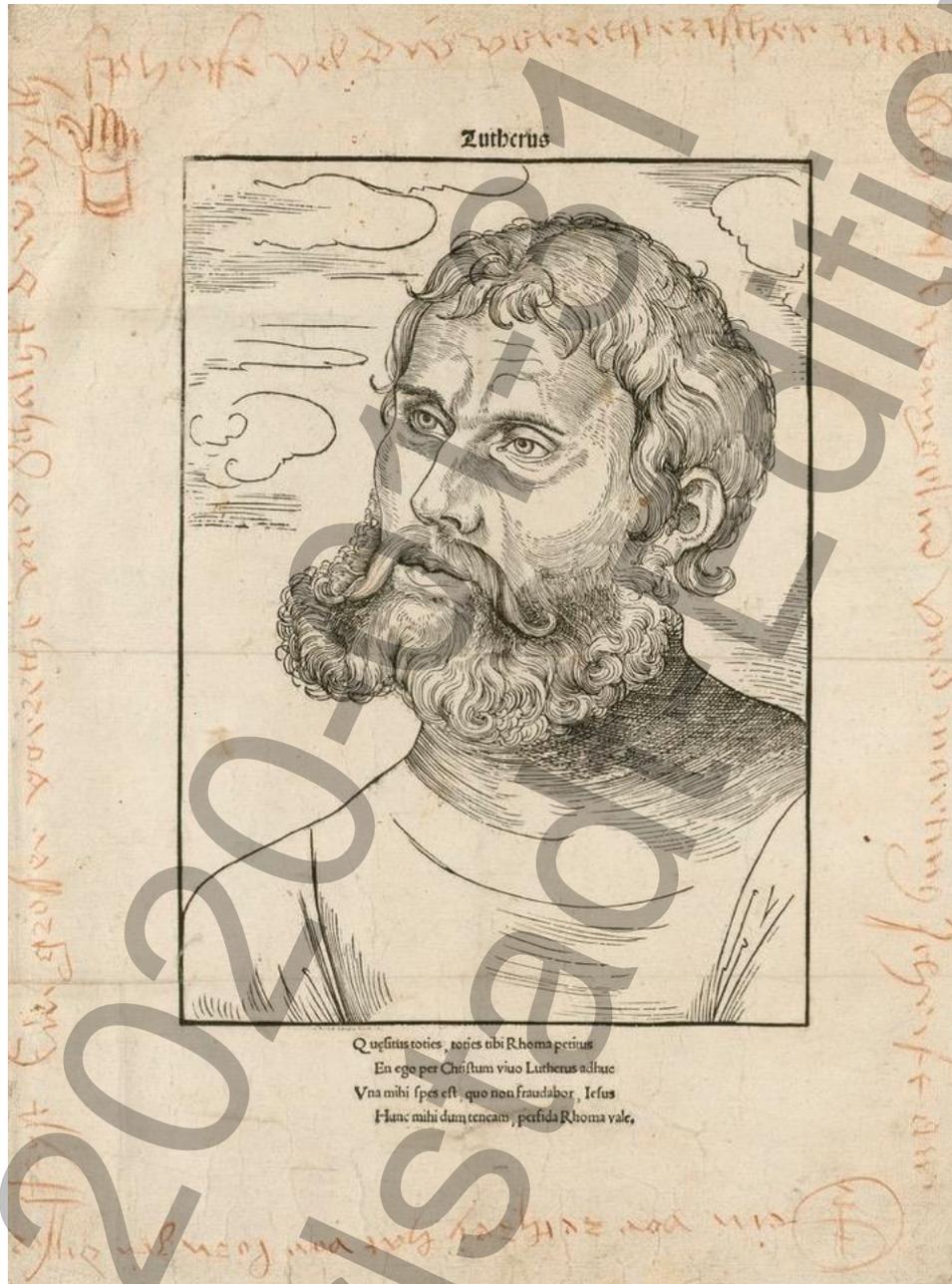


## Farewell from „Junker Jörg“

On the demythologizing of an influential Luther portrait

by Professor Dr. Thomas Kaufmann

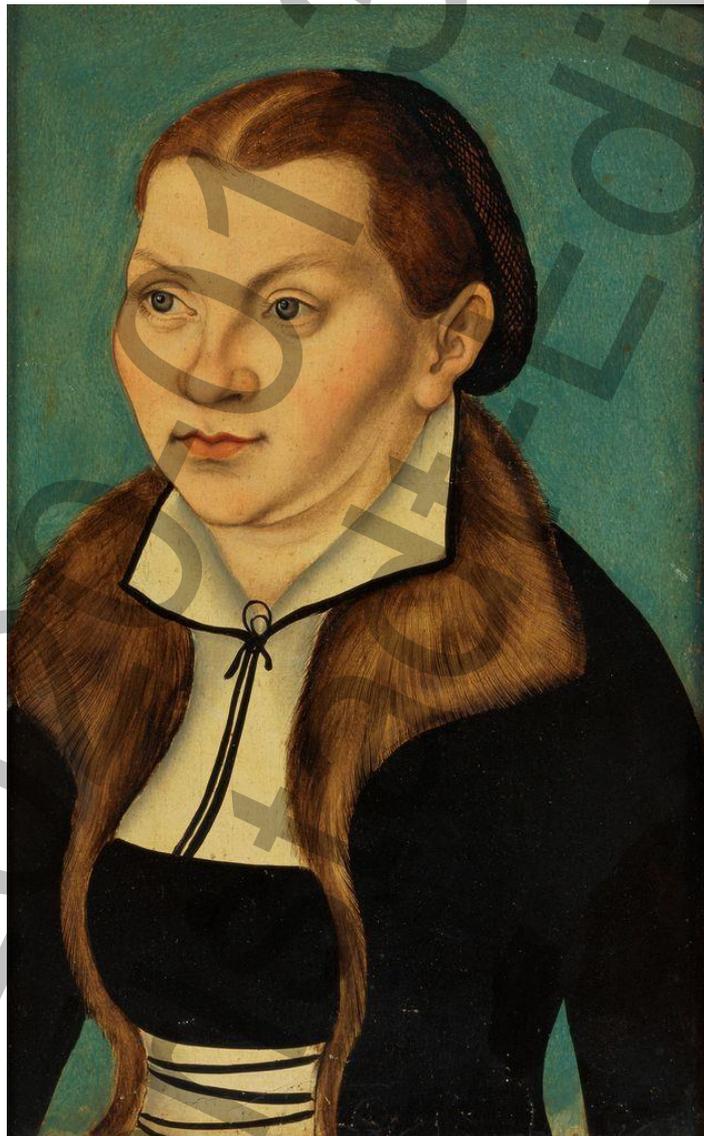


*Lutherus . . . (Dresden State Art Collections)*

In the case of creative people, „re inventing them“ every now and then, usually in a visible and audible way, is normal and necessary. Even for Albrecht Dürer, who is still regarded by many as the first artist (not just a craftsman), a constantly revised view of himself ran through his life. And that figure of older German history, about whom we know more than anyone else, constantly reinvented himself and was reinvented again and again: Martin Luther. In a brilliant booklet entitled „Cranachs Luther,“ the great Hamburg art historian Martin Warnke reconstructed the artist's „designs“ of the Reformer's „image“ three and a half decades ago. This revealed a sort of division of labour between Lukas and Luther, which

can already be clearly seen in the first captions from the years 1520/1: the artist's pen creates the transient image; Luther himself creates an immortal image of his inner being through his writings.

Luther's contemporary paintings reflected what people saw in him or what Cranach and others wanted to make visible in him. First, in 1520/21, the stormy and polemical figure, the talkative, devout monk and Bible interpreter, the learned doctor. A little later, in 1521/22, after the time at the Wartburg Castle: the bearded knight, „Junker Jörg“, who brings order and puts an end to chaos. Then, from 1525, the husband in a double portrait with his wife Katharina von Bora. Finally, in the 1530s and 1540s, together with other professors from Wittenberg or alone: the big-bodied, unshakeable, monumental church teacher, the icon of orthodoxy, the father of the Lutheran church.



Katarina von Bora, Foto: dpa

Thus understood, Cranach's Luther portraits were visual reflexes and commentaries on specific historical contexts from which they emerged. But in contrast to the famous Cranach engravings of the monk and of Doctor Luther, which were quickly taken up and modified by artists such as Erhard Schön, Hans Baldung Grien, Hieronymus and Daniel Hopfer, there are no traces of the reception of „Junker Jörg“ in contemporary prints.

„Junker Jörg“, the Luther who returned from the Wartburg and was portrayed by his friend Cranach with full hair and beard, has always been one of the leading icons of Protestantism. The mendicant monk, who escaped from the world-historical spotlight of the Imperial Diet in Worms and was smuggled into the lofty castle overlooking the Thuringian Forest, has discarded his robe and tonsure; disguised as a nobleman, as a knight, as „George“ or „Jörg“, he breaks inwardly and outwardly with the clergy and the vows of the order. Bare-headed, the cloudy heavens above him, he stands directly before God. Soon the strong, bearded leader will bring the revolutionary activities of the „iconoclast“ Andreas Bodenstein, called Karlstadt, into „orderly paths“. The image of Luther as „Junker Jörg“ is an integral part of a narrative in which Luther becomes the trusty Reformer, who saves the Reformation from „leftists“, „radicals“ such as Müntzer and Karlstadt, and who, with the help of secular authorities, permanently instills the conviction that rural land is under the hand of the Junker.

Up to now ecclesiastical, artistic and general historical research assumed that the portraits of the „Junker Jörg“ were made in December 1521 or March 1522 by Lucas Cranach the Elder in Wittenberg. In addition to a woodcut, two widely known, but undated oil paintings are known, displayed in Weimar and Leipzig. In December 1521 Luther had travelled clandestinely from the Wartburg Castle to Wittenberg to meet some confidants and to inform himself about the troubled state of affairs there. At the beginning of March 1522 he returned from exile for good. There are some indications that it was above all the intention to get the New Testament, translated into German at Wartburg Castle, into print as quickly as possible that drove him home.

Two historical sources confirm that Luther appeared in his knightly disguise to the artist Cranach, who did not recognize him. It has been assumed previously that the portrait of „Junker Jörg“ is the iconic manifestation of Cranach's amazement. The legend was so strong that in his genre painting „Cranach paints Luther in the Wartburg“ (around 1890) the painter Heinrich Stelzner transported the portraitist to Luther's hiding place. But it is anything but certain that Cranach did painted Luther then.

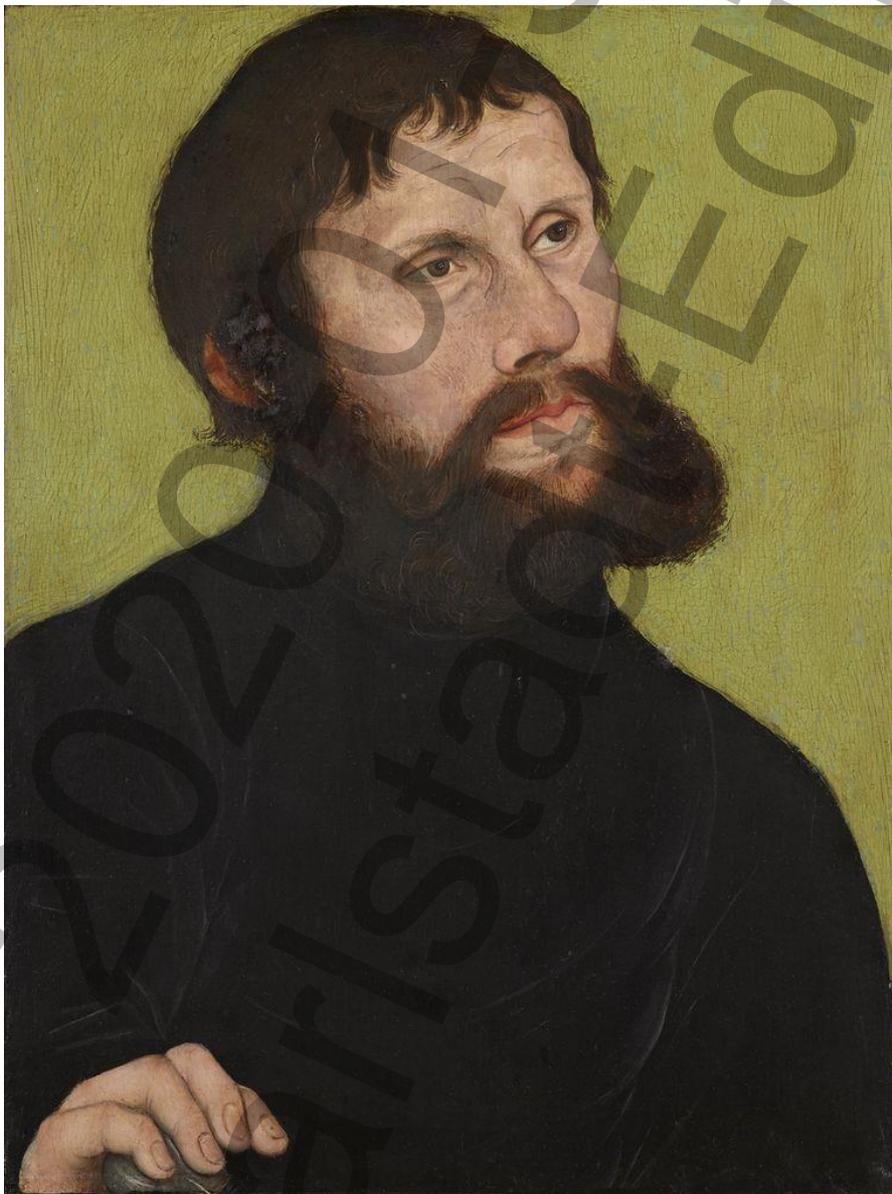
Any critical revision of the traditions of the „Junker Jörg“, which puts in question, „lays siege to“, the traditional images of Luther, has to start from the different versions of the broadsheet prints, which all used the same woodcut. Four different versions survive. They differ in their progressive enhancements of the text. The first version, which is preserved in only one copy, shows a bearded man's head with a view of the sky. Above the picture there is a headline („Lutherus“) set in *Schwabach* types. Below the woodcut is a four-line Latin poem, a so-called tetrastichon, set in *Antiqua*. It can be translated as follows: „So often pursued, so often threatened by you, Rome, I, Luther, still live through Christ. I have a hope that will not betray me: Jesus. As long as I hold fast to him, begone, faithless Rome.“

The manuscript sources for this poem date from 1537. The type used for the broadsheet is not attested before 1523, the year in which the Cranach-Döring workshop began its work.

At the next stage of processing, a heading was added to the single-page print, identifying the bearded man as Luther „as he returned to Wittenberg from his Patmos in 1522“. The inspired prophet, Luther, had himself described his hiding place in several letters as „Patmos“, a Greek island in the South Aegean on which John is said to have received his revelations of the Apocalypse. Below the picture the four-line poem was printed in this version as well.

The third editing stage of the single-page print added three small sets of four-line Latin texts below the woodcut, which placed the sitter in a larger historical context. Each of

these texts has a heading and a chronogram (also called *eteostichon*), i.e. a Latin verse in which the letters with Latin numerical values (M, D, C, X, V, I) gives the year to which the verse refers. They read: 1.) „Year of the confession in Worms 1521. He stood at the feet of the Emperor, where Worms lies on the banks of the Rhine.“ 2.) „Year of Pathmos 1521. Fleeing from the Rhine, he is kidnapped; avoiding the Pope's outstretched nets, he goes to work under the roofs of Pathmos.“ 3.) „Year of the return from Pathmos 1522. To deal with Karlstadt's frenzy he hurries back to Saxony and frees the sheep from the assailant's predatory jaws.“ The fourth version corresponded to the third and merely added an imprint. It dates the print to 1579 and mentions Johannes Schwertel in Wittenberg as the printer. Born in Coburg, he had been working there since 1563; he had taken over materials from the Cranach workshop and apparently hoped to earn money with the motif „Luther as Junker Jörg“ at the end of the 1570s.



Martin Luther, Foto: dpa

Two of the chronograms printed since the third version can be traced in a collective print of the year 1548. They were attached to a separate edition of Philipp Melancthon's Luther biography, which was first published in 1546, the year of the death of the Reformer who had

long since become „monumentalised“. Melancthon's influential „History of the Life and Deeds of Martin Luther“ had originally served to preface the second volume of the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's Complete Works.

From all this it follows that those copies of the broadsheet which celebrate Luther's appearance in Worms as a heroic act of confession and evaluate the return from Wartburg Castle as a powerful victory over the rebel Karlstadt, in fact belong to the period after Luther's death. They are part of the eruption of Memoria about Luther, his followers visualizing him in a wealth of textual and pictorial genres and canonizing him as an unquestioned authority. The one-leaf prints with the woodcut of „Junker Jörg“ have, therefore, to be discarded as a document from the year 1522. This applies also to the „Junker Jörg“ paintings. The use of a template for the head by the Cranach workshop to rationalize its production of the images clearly points to the time after Luther's death. Therefore it is also highly unlikely that the second stage of processing of the broadsheet, which dated the bearded Luther in 1522, took place before the year of his death. The iconic bearded man of action, who returned from the Wartburg and created order, did not exist during Luther's lifetime.

The fact that the four Latin verse lines cited above, in which „Lutherus“ complains about the frequent persecution by Rome and hurls a triumphal „I live“ (*vivo*) at the afflictions by the „Papists“, do not fit into the year 1522, might well have attracted the attention of research before now. For in 1521 he had just been condemned. At this time there could be no talk of recurring attacks of „Rome“ on his life. In 1537 it was a different story, because in the meantime Luther had been engaged in countless controversies, and had - as he was convinced - narrowly escaped various assassinations and sinister pursuits by the „Romans“ and the Jews who collaborated with them. Johannes Aurifaber, his pupil, his scribe, editor of his sermons, letters and table speeches and intimate connoisseur of his biography, made use of the verses in 1537. The fact that Luther wrote poetry in Latin during his travels is testified elsewhere.

Luther fell seriously ill during a meeting of the Schmalkaldic League, the political-military alliance of Protestants, held in February 1537 in the small Hessian town of the same name on the south-western slope of the Thuringian Forest. The subject of the deliberations was the Papal Council, which had been summoned to Mantua. Within two weeks Luther's health deteriorated dramatically - a urinary stone disease. He thought he was close to death and insisted on being transported home immediately; he wanted to die on Saxon territory. Testamentary provisions were made. The farewell of his friends and the Elector took place in the knowledge that it would be his last journey. From Wittenberg his wife Katharina hurried towards him, hoping to meet him alive. On his departure in Schmalkalden, Luther blessed those around him with the sign of the cross and the wish: „The Lord fill you with his blessing and hatred for the Pope.“ A legate sent from Rome observed the scene and concluded that Luther was already dead.

Probably due to the bumpy ride, the stone came loose in the following night in Tambach; the weakened reformer was now able to pass water again for the first time in weeks. He was saved - of course by an intervention of his heavenly Lord. His companion, Friedrich Myconius, Superintendent of Gotha, immediately travelled back to Schmalkalden, 15 kilometres away. In front of the house of the papal legate Myconius exclaimed: „Lutherus vivit, Lutherus vivit.“ It makes good sense to imagine, as Aurifaber did, the triumphal quatrain being written by Luther in this historical context.

Whether Luther shaved during the time of his Schmalkalden illness is unknown. The fact that he not only grew a beard in the Wartburg Castle, but also during a stay of several

months from April to October 1530 at Veste Coburg, i.e. during the time of the Augsburg Imperial Diet, is attested. Just as Cranach did not recognize him in 1521/22, so it was for the Elector Johann Friedrich in 1530. Interestingly, two of the seven Cranach oil portraits of a bearded Luther which have been preserved date from 1537: One comes from the town church of Penig and is on permanent loan to the Wartburg Museum. The other is now on display at the Muskegon Museum of Art in Michigan. The remarkable thing about both pictures, however, is that they present the Wittenberg professor of theology together with his wife Katharina.

Luther's Table Talk from the year 1537 has the following entry: „Cranach the Elder painted Doctor Martin Luther's wife. As soon as the panel was on the wall, and the Doctor looked at the painting, he declared: I want to have a man painted also, and these two pictures sent to the Council in Mantua, and have the Holy Fathers assembled there ask whether they would rather have the marital status, or the celibate life of the clergy.“ This indicates that after seeing a new Cranach portrait of his wife on the wall, Luther asked Cranach to paint him as a man and to have the dual portraits sent to the hated Council of Mantua. With this final break with celibacy, which he had once praised, the Saxon *enfant terrible* wanted to alarm the Council Fathers with this image of a bearded, sword-bearing secular husband radiating virility and vitality.

Here, then, is a possible reconstruction of how the „Junker Jörg“ portrait emerged: the woodcut of the first version of the single-leaf print, and the bearded Luther of the painted couple, were probably made in close temporal proximity to the return of the reformer, who had happily escaped death, from his journey to Schmalkalden, i.e. in mid-March 1534. Ist primary motivation was an anti-papistical one. Luther was demonstrating that Christ had kept him alive, contrary to the hopes of his enemies. With the dual painting, possibly inspired by Luther himself, with its beard and vital masculinity he presented himself in a way that maximized the anti-Catholic provocation.

After this probably singular, not very influential use of the woodcut, it remained in Cranach's workshop. Only after Luther's death did it develop a new, now decidedly more influential life. The subsequent guardians of his inheritance, the Rörers, Mathesius and Aurifaber, stylized the time at Wartburg Castle as Luther's „Patmos“, the exiled Reformer as „Georg“ or „Jörg“, exaggerating the appearance in Worms, which he himself adjudged as very sober, as a heroic confessional scenario. They also revalued the struggles with Karlstadt about the direction the Reformation should take as a suppression of anarchy, and removed from the record much of the evidence of Karlstadt's close relationship to Luther early on. It was only after 1546 that the woodcut with the bearded man was associated with the decisive years of the early Reformation (1521/22). The oil paintings of „Junker Jörg“ were probably also created in the context of the postmortem Luther Memoria, when people liked to associate „their“ Luther with certain phases of his life.

It is theologically, socially, and politically imperative to keep reenvisioning Luther. This can only succeed if we lay siege to, or set aside outdated images. The task of critical historians and church historians is to relativize or even erase erroneous images of Luther by putting them in their historical context. This task could not be more relevant.

Today many traditional images of an undead „Luther Zombie“ are being conjured up again and are beginning to develop a spooky life. On election posters of right-wing parties the „German Luther“ appears again, as an enemy of foreigners, an anti-Islamist, an authoritarian man in bronze, the enemy of the Jews, a patriarch in the home. In historical literature directed at young people by new right-wing agitators, Luther is brought to life as a heroic figure in a chain of „great men“. Both the texts and the illustrations of these books

remind us of the fatal epoch of Luther's unrestrained politicization in the Wilhelminian Empire, which eventually enabled his instrumentalization in the Nazi state.

The first and most important step for Luther's creative reinvention is to take him off his pedestal and remove that authoritative and supposedly meaningful patina. It is just not on to highlight Luther only as the tempted one, the doubter, the challenger, the musician, the linguist, the comforter but be silent about the thunderer, the foul-mouthed polemicist, the strongman type, „horribly robust“, with his „choleric, coarse, swearing, spitting and raging“ (Thomas Mann). Luther is diverse and scintillating, never straightforward, always springing a surprise..

Some contemporary artists have begun to work on new images of Luther. The exhibition „Luther and the Avant-garde“ shown in 2017 in Wittenberg revealed highly original approaches to the outworn, bloated depictions. The dispute about Lüpertz's design for a stained glass window in the Marktkirche in Hanover can help us to further the „demonumentalization“ of the Reformer, once and for all. For whatever one thinks of this restless, disturbing poltergeist from central Germany - one must see that he doesn't get into the wrong hands!

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Peter Matheson (Dunedin – New Zealand <http://peter-matheson.com/index.html>) translated the original german version (published in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Nr. 250, 28.10.2019, S. 6.)