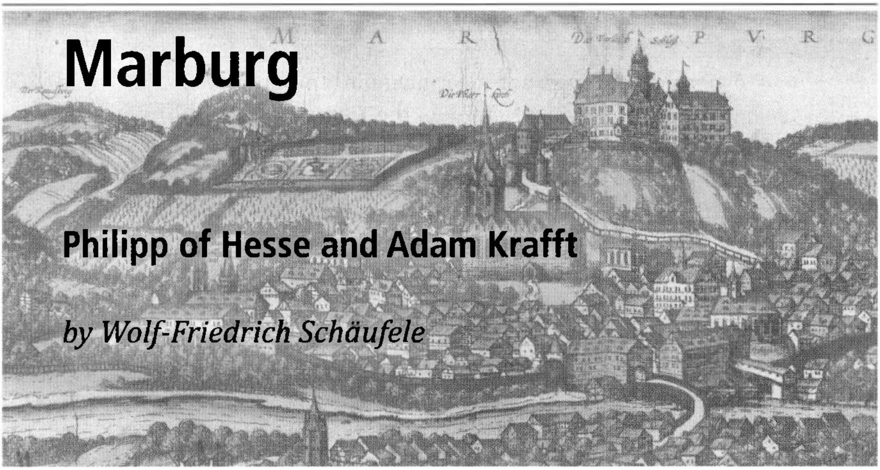
Marburg

Philipp of Hesse and Adam Krafft

by Wolf-Friedrich Schäufele

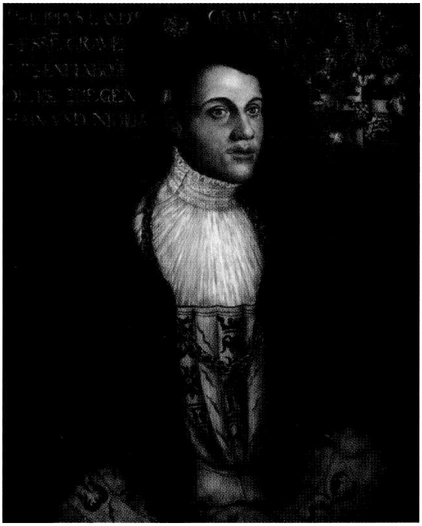


Marburg, with its picturesque upper city on the castle hillside, tidy half-timber houses, and its largely intact medieval town ensemble, is a popular tourist attraction today. With a university steeped in tradition, the characteristic to and fro of students around town, and a vibrant nightlife of clubs and cinemas, Marburg is also a typical university town. Amid this modern tableau, however, the town's grand history as an active setting for the Reformation is still quite palpable today.

The beginnings of Marburg's rise to historical significance go back to the arrival of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary. Elizabeth settled as a young widow just outside the gates of this modest castle town on the Lahn River, where she founded the famous hospital in which she herself took care of the sick and needy until her early death in 1231. After her canonization, the imposing Church of St. Elizabeth was built over her grave, one of the first churches to be built in the purely Gothic style in Germany, and during the waning Middle Ages pilgrims came from near and far to experience grace and healing at this place. Heinrich I († 1308), Elizabeth's grandson, ruled in Marburg from 1247 as the first prince of the newly established Landgraviate of Hesse, also making this town on the Lahn River the first Hessian capital. He and the later landgraves of Hesse up to the Reformation are buried in the chancel of the Church of St. Elizabeth.

Landgrave Philipp the Magnanimous (1504–67)

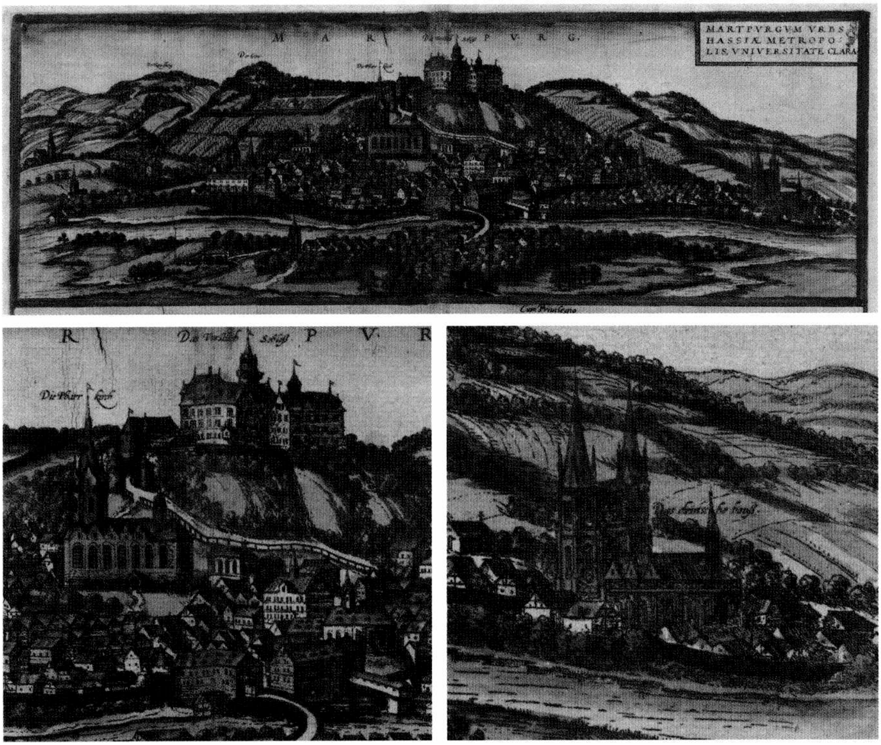
In 1504 another descendant of Saint Elizabeth was born in the Marburg castle, Landgrave Philipp the Magnanimous, who was destined to become one of the most important political minds of the Reformation. During his half-century of rule,



Landgrave Philipp of Hesse; portrait attributed to Hans Krell, ca. 1534

Hesse acquired considerable influence as a territory and in the process also became one of the premier Protestant powers in the empire. The young prince joined the Reformation in 1524, encouraged by a chance meeting with Philipp Melanchthon on a highway outside Frankfurt and his ensuing correspondence with the Reformer. Hesse having become traditionally allied with the Saxon dynasty of the Wettins through marriage and alliances, Philipp tried to establish a similar alliance with the Protestant Prince Electorate of Saxony. At the imperial diet in Speyer in 1526 the potential of this Hessian-Electoral Saxon alliance first made an unforgettable impression, the two delegations appearing in matching clothing and with the shared identifying insignia *VDMIÆ*, an abbreviation of the Latin Bible verse *Verbum Dei Manet In Æternum* (The word of God will stand forever, Isaiah 40:8). During the months following this diet, Hesse and Electoral Saxony engaged in a sweeping introduction of the Reformation, and over the next three decades were the undisputed political leaders of German Protestantism. Philipp of Hesse was a major player in every big plan and campaign during this period, his most important accomplishment being the founding of the League of Schmalkalden, a military-political alliance of Protestant imperial estates under Electoral Saxon and Hessian joint leadership that long enjoyed considerable success in parrying the threats of the Catholic emperor.

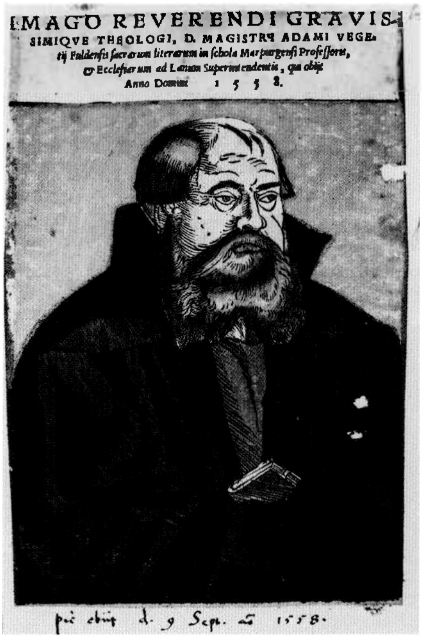
Although Landgrave Philipp usually resided in Kassel and is also buried there, Marburg remained the intellectual and religious center of Hesse under his rule. The parish church of St. Mary's in Marburg became the official model for the Reformation renewal of all Hessian parishes. In 1527 St. Mary's became the home parish of Adam Krafft (1493–1558) from Fulda, Philipp's previous court preacher. From this home base in Marburg, as senior visitor he indefatigably traveled throughout the various parts of the territory, creating with both energy and skill a new Protestant church institution while also reforming schools and charitable institutions. Among the six superintendents in Hesse from 1531, Krafft was the most respected; his contemporaries called him the Hessian "bishop". It is



Marburg; colorized view from Georg Braun and Franz Hogenberg, "Civitates orbis terrarum", vol. 1, Cologne, 1593
Bottom left: above the bridge the former Dominican monastery, which after 1529 was used as a university building; center left: the Lutheran Church of St. Mary; at the top: the castle
Bottom right: the Church of St. Elizabeth

no accident that the annual general synods of the Landgraviate of Hesse met in Marburg, then later in Marburg and Kassel.

Landgrave Philipp, who read the Bible as well as general theological works, uniquely embodied the Protestant ideal of a theologically educated and informed lay person. As such, he maintained his freedom regarding the advice of theologians. Philipp was especially careful not to develop ties with Luther alone, to whom he once quipped, "Herr Doctor, you do dispense good advice; but what if we were to choose *not* to follow that advice? " He also maintained close ties with Melanchthon, Huldrych Zwingli in Zurich, and Martin Bucer in Strasbourg. In other words, Philipp remained resolutely open-minded in confessional matters. As far as he and his territory were concerned, Philipp kept to the "middle ground between Lutherans


IMAGO REVERENDI GRAVIS-
SIMIQVE THEOLOGI, D. MAGISTRI ADAMI VEGE-
tij Faldensis sacrarum literarum in schola Marpurgensi Professoris,
& Ecclesiarum ad Lanum Superintendentis, qui obijt
Anno Domini 1558.
qui obiit d. 9 Sep. ao 1558.

Adam Krafft; colorized wood engraving, ca. 1570

and Zwinglians", commending this position in 1534 to Duke Albrecht of Prussia as well. Although Philipp's sons and grandsons were unable to maintain such confessional breadth, traces of this earlier juxtaposition of the various Reformation positions are still discernible today in the Protestant churches of Hesse.

Philipp's intellectual and theological independence also contributed to that particular episode in his life for which he still seems to be best known, namely, his second (bigamous) marriage, in 1540, to the lady-in-waiting Margarethe von der Saale. Instead of simply living in concubinage as did most of the princes of his time, this devoted reader of the Bible, reconciling his conscience with his passion, found in the biblical stories of the bigamous marriages of the Old Testament patriarchs what he viewed as a model for his own situation. Why should not he, too, be allowed formally to marry a second woman alongside his first wife, Landgravine Christine?

Characteristically, this self-confident prince was even able to secure the secret approval of Luther and Melanchthon. At the same time, Philipp did try to remain discreet. His second wife was not allowed to live at court, and her children did not enjoy the same status as those from his first marriage. Nonetheless the affair soon came to light, and the damage not only to Hesse's public reputation and esteem, but also to that of the Reformation cause, was considerable — bigamy being considered a capital crime at the time.

The oldest Protestant university (1527)

In 1527 Philipp of Hesse founded a university in Marburg, which is today the oldest of those founded in Reformation times. In 1541 Emperor Charles V granted it an official university privilege. (The *Hohe Schule* in Silesian Liegnitz, founded in 1526, never attained university status, and under the influence of the spiritualist

In the middle: the old Dominican Monastery and church (today the University Church). It was used for lectures until its demolition in 1873. What is known today as the "Old University" was built in a neo-Gothic style on its foundations. At the top: the landgraviate castle. Photograph by Ludwig Bickell, ca. 1870

Caspar von Schwenckfeld, who was persecuted as an "enthusiast", quickly sank into insignificance and had to close down in 1529.) Landgrave Philipp wanted to establish a university in his own territory for the training of future Hessian pastors and officials. At the same time, this act sent a signal in terms of Protestant educational policy. After years during which academic training had lost its prestige in many circles due to the new respect accorded the laity, and to the teachings of radical Reformers like Andreas Karlstadt, the number of university students had drastically fallen.

Between 1523 and 1533 even the Faculty of Theology of Wittenberg University had found it necessary to cease conducting academic examinations and conferring degrees. So the founding of a university in Marburg served a beacon for the Reformation commitment to education and the modern model of a successful alliance between Protestantism and erudition. It is no accident that the buildings and income of the town's former monasteries were (and still are) used for the university, notably the Dominican and Franciscan monasteries and the House of Brethren of the Common Life (*Kugelhaus*). University structures and lesson plans took their orientation from Melanchthon's university reform in Wittenberg. The first professors of theology were Adam Krafft, the Swabian Lutheran Erhard Schnepf, the ex-Franciscan Frenchman Franz Lambert of Avignon, and the Fleming August Sebastian Nouzenos. Later as well, Philipp of Hesse made a point of having faculty members of different theological persuasions.

In order to convince the best and brightest in the landgrave's territory to study in Marburg, the founding of the university was complemented by an expansion of the whole educational system. A concerted effort was made to establish Latin schools as feeder institutions, and a *paedagogium* was founded in Marburg as a preparatory school for the university. One unique feature was the Hessian scholarship institution, which after opening in 1529 enabled gifted students without means to study at the university, the cost of their education being covered by Hessian towns; it became the model for what is known today as the *Stift* in Tübingen, founded in 1536.

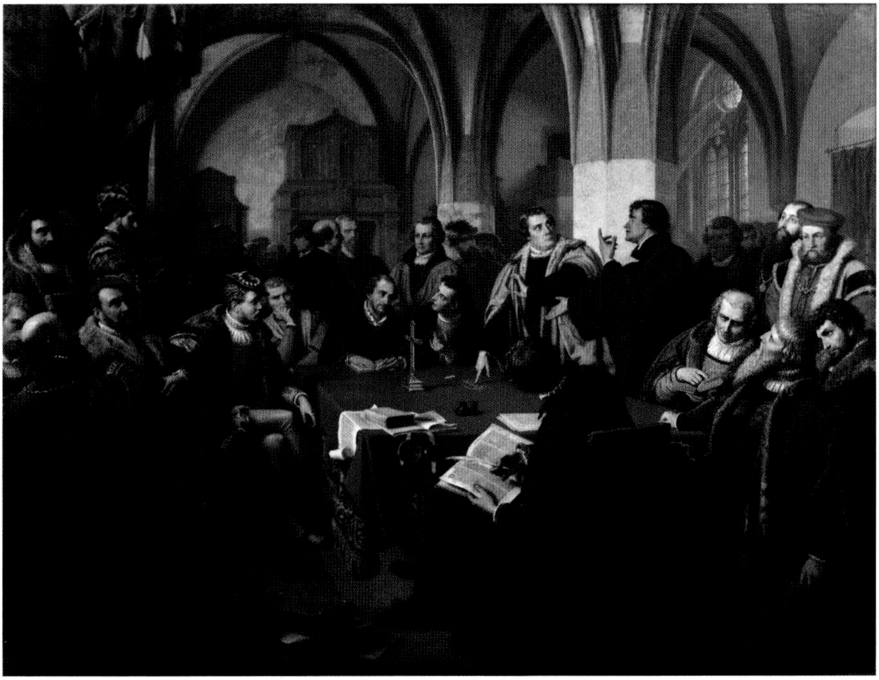
Although during its early years a number of noteworthy theologians taught at Marburg University, none were genuinely prominent theological figures. In 1605, what had become a resolutely Lutheran university switched to the Reformed confession at the initiative of Landgrave Moritz the Learned of Hesse-Cassel, which constituted a profound caesura in the university's history. All four Marburg theology professors resigned together and, beginning in 1607, set about establishing a Lutheran counter-university in neighboring Giessen. However, after the Reformed confession established itself in Marburg once and for all in 1653, Marburg University, alongside Heidelberg University and the *Hohe Schule* in Herborn, became part of the Reformed educational cosmos. This confessional tie was abolished in 1822 in the spirit of the Protestant Union (between Lutherans and Reformed).

With the annexation of Hesse-Cassel by Prussia in 1866, the grand era of Marburg theology commenced, lasting well past the mid-twentieth century. Even today, Marburg professors such as the systematic theologian and ethicist Wilhelm Herrmann (1846–1922), the systematic theologian and scholar of religions Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), and the New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) continue to enjoy worldwide esteem. The university in Marburg currently has approximately twenty-six thousand students in its sixteen faculties, and will celebrate the 500th anniversary of its founding in 2027.

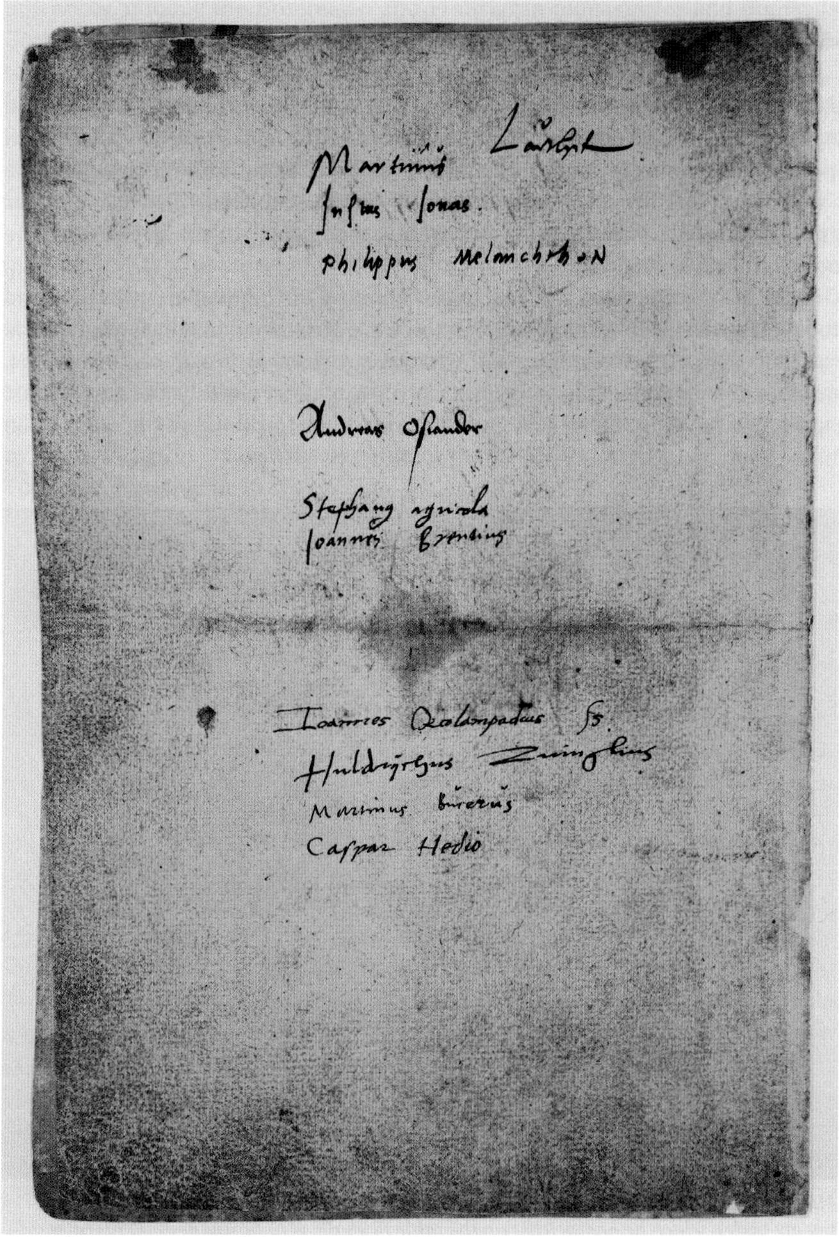
The Marburg Colloquy (1529)

In early October 1529, Marburg became the scene of European Reformation history in the making. Following the most recent Imperial Diet, military action on the part of the emperor had become increasingly probable, and Philipp of Hesse was working feverishly on the diplomatic front to secure his alliances. A major hindrance, however, was the long-drawn-out theological disunity plaguing the broader Reformation camp.

One point of contention was the understanding of the Eucharist. Luther and the followers of the Wittenberg Reformation were persuaded that every individual human being, with utter certainty and without any prior action on his or her part, encounters the crucified Christ in the Lord's Supper. Precisely because Christ himself promised it — Luther repeatedly came back to the words of institution



The Marburg Colloquy of 1529. Luther insists to Zwingli that the Greek biblical term έστί (This is *my body), which he has written on the table in chalk, is to be understood literally. Painting by August Noack, 1869*



Martinus Lůther
Justus Jonas.
philippus Melanchthon

Andreas Osiander

Stephanus agricola
Joannes Brentius

Ioannes Oecolampadius ss.
Huldrychus Zuinglius
Martinus Bucerus
Caspar Hedio

The final page of the Marburg Articles with the Reformers' signatures

"This is my body ... this is my blood" (Matt. 26:26-27) — every person who receives the Eucharist not only receives the bread and wine, but also participates in the crucified human body and blood of the Lord, receiving in faith forgiveness for sins. Luther's understanding was that God had wholly entered into the material world in Christ, not only binding himself to the elements of bread and wine in the Eucharist, but also surrendering himself to human beings and into their hands.

Huldrych Zwingli in Zurich, Johannes Oecolampadius in Basel, and their followers in south Germany were unable to relate to such a notion. God, as Spirit, stands sovereignly over against any and all material existence. And seeing that, after the ascension, Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, he cannot be corporeally present in the Eucharistic bread and wine. In the Lord's Supper, participants receive nothing more than bread and wine; it has no power to forgive sins. That said, for believers who have already received God's Spirit beforehand, this bread and wine symbolize the body and blood of Christ — Zwingli understood the words of institution in a figurative sense — and the risen Christ is present spiritually in the congregation's collective recollection of Christ's passion.

For the past three years, beginning in 1526, there had been a contentious debate on these questions, carried on in a flurry of polemical treatises and pamphlets. Philipp of Hesse hoped to put an end to these disputes by inviting Luther, Zwingli and Oecolampadius, Melanchthon and Bucer, and many other prominent Reformation theologians to his castle in Marburg. The adversaries were to sit down at the same table and come to a peaceful resolution under his personal direction. Luther and Zwingli met personally for the first and only time in Marburg. The colloquy went on for four days, initially in teams of two, then in plenary, a scene the Darmstadt court painter August Noack impressively dramatized in a historical painting in 1869.

To Philipp's considerable chagrin, the Eucharistic agreement never came about. Luther and Zwingli did, however, agree to refrain from carrying on the dispute publicly. During the following years Philipp of Hesse and Martin Bucer continued negotiations to find a satisfactory settlement on which all parties could agree. The most important fruit of these efforts was the Wittenberg Concord of 1536, in which south German Protestants came to agreement with the Wittenberg theologians. Unfortunately, Bucer's continued attempts to gain the support of the Swiss representatives were unsuccessful. The question of the Eucharist could not be resolved with sixteenth-century theological models, and it was not until four hundred fifty years later that the different approaches were reconciled in the Leuenberg Agreement of 1973.

Back in 1529, however, at the conclusion of the Marburg Colloquy, the landgrave achieved an accord that may well be viewed as a modest sensation. Although Luther had initially accused the Swiss and south German representatives of numerous heretical teachings, he now, along with Zwingli and eight other theologians from both sides, signed a document of consensus that he himself had drafted. What is known as the Marburg Articles set out in fourteen points the colloquy participants' complete theological agreement, emphasizing then in the fifteenth point, concerning the Eucharist, numerous other shared convictions before acknowledging the continuing discord concerning the question of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. Although this confessional paper did not subsequently have much influence, it remains a noteworthy testament to the striving for mutual understanding that inspired Philipp the Magnanimous over the entire course of his life. This has left discernible traces in Marburg.

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Further reading

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Visiting Marburg

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