CHAPTER ONE

Beyond the Myths

There is no beginning to the story of Martin Luther. This is because in telling the genuinely extraordinary story of a genuinely extraordinary human being, one immediately stumbles over two perfect conundrums, both of which make a clean beginning impossible. One is calendric, and the other is so odd that it can hardly help seeming more than coincidental.

The first and calendric conundrum is that—although we now know far more about Martin Luther than about anyone from his era and possess endless corroborative documentation about him—we cannot establish one of the simplest and most foundational facts of all: the year in which he was born. We are sure of the date of his birth, November 10, and we are even sure of the hour, which was just past midnight, according to his mother. But the year, alas, eludes us. Much for this reason, Luther would heap scorn upon astrological prognostications of any kind during his life—especially those of his future co-conspirator Melanchthon, a dedicated devotee of this art. Luther always maintained that he was probably born in 1484, but neither Luther nor even his own mother could be sure, and current reckoning puts it more likely at either 1482 or 1483, with the preponderance of evidence favoring the latter, so that in the course of this book we shall use that year.

The second conundrum is of another order entirely. We know that on November 11—the day following his birth—the infant was bundled and trundled a mere hundred yards away from his home to the awe-inspiring majesty of the Church of SS. Peter and Paul, there to be baptized and forever snatched from the gaping maw of everlasting fire and death. Because November 11 was St. Martin’s Day—the feast day of Saint Martin of Tours—the child was given the saint’s name, a common enough practice at that time. But unbeknownst to Luther’s parents, there was a detail of this saint’s life that would one day form an eerie and seemingly prophetic parallel with the career of the newborn that day named for him.
Saint Martin lived in the fourth century. He was born in what is today Hungary; grew up in what is today Pavia, Italy; and spent most of his adult life in what is today France, all three of which at that time were within the borders of the Roman Empire. He became a Christian at an early age, despite his father’s disapproval, and was enlisted in the Roman army. One day while in the Gallic provinces—it was in the town of Borbetomagus, in what is today central Germany—the future saint was ordered to participate in a battle. But in the belief that shedding blood was not consonant with his deep Christian convictions, Martin bravely declared, "I am a soldier of Christ. I cannot fight." For this shocking refusal to submit to this duty assigned him, he was imprisoned and charged with cowardice, but he turned this charge on its head by then volunteering to go to the front lines unarmed, because he did not fear for his life, only that he might take the life of another. In the end, the battle did not take place, and he was released from duty, shortly thereafter becoming a monk. The Roman city called Borbetomagus where this Martin took the death-defying stand for his faith that set him on his path of sainthood would in the future become known as the German city of Worms. Thus, eleven centuries from when this first Martin took his Christian stand against the Roman Empire, the second Martin would take his Christian stand against the Holy Roman Empire—in precisely the same place. So on the second day of his life, Martin Luther was linked with both the distant historic past and his own historic future.

The world into which Luther was born was the world that had existed unchanged for many centuries. It was a world separated by an infinite ocean from the vast continents we know now as the Americas. Christopher Columbus was during this time sailing and trading along the West African coast, with no idea that within a decade he would daringly set out across the Atlantic in three caravels. The printing press was in its earliest infancy, having been invented some forty years earlier by Johannes Gutenberg, and although the great schism of 1054 had separated Eastern Christianity from Western, the idea that the vast seamless universe of the Holy Catholic Church led by the pope might be challenged and then riven forever was perfectly nonexistent.

Martin Luther was born in the final year of the reign of Pope Sixtus IV, one of a series of six popes at once so comically bungling and tragically scandalous that it was almost as though this sextet had deliberately placed their collective corruptions in a papier-mâché monster, hung it from a tree, and begged an Augustinian monk to take a dozen or so good
Beyond the Myths

whacks at it.* But for the name his parents had given him, there is nothing in the childhood or the upbringing—or even the early adulthood—of Martin Luther to suggest him as a candidate for the extraordinary life that followed.

Before we pluck Martin’s woven basket from the cattails and proceed further, we should add that Luther’s name was originally not Luther at all but Luder or Ludher. Luther changed it at some point later in life, although precisely when and why is unclear. His father and mother eventually incorporated the change to their own names, probably because of their son’s increasing fame, and perhaps also because the word Luder had a number of unattractive associations they preferred to leave behind and thereby relegate to the squint-eyed netherworld of historical footnotes.†

One of the greatest challenges in telling the story of Martin Luther is in distancing him from the endless fables, myths, and tall tales told about him in the last five centuries. The first of these is that he was born into a family of peasants—that his father was but a humble miner and that his mother was of even humbler background and was probably a bathhouse attendant of low morals. It is only because of very recent archaeological discoveries that we can put the persistent untruth about Luther’s humble background to sleep.

The fact is that Martin’s father—his name was Johannes, so he was called Hans—was indeed a man of great intelligence and fire. Although it is often said he was a miner, he was certainly no day laborer, but was in fact an ambitious and ultimately successful entrepreneur in the mining business. He owned several smelting works and moved to Eisleben with his young wife, there to discover and exploit the rich veins of copper that spidered beneath the forested lands of that region. His young wife, Margarethe, was from the local Lindemann family, who were established, prominent, and quite well-to-do burghers in the Eisenach area. In fact, one of them became mayor of the town in 1497. Two of Martin’s first cousins—the sons of his mother’s eldest brother—made names for themselves: one became a doctor of law and an electoral councillor in

---

* The story of these six tragically unpapal pontiffs, which also included Pope Innocent VIII (1484–1492), Pope Alexander VI (1492–1503), Pope Pius III (1503), Pope Julius II (1503–1513), and Pope Leo X (1513–1521), is well told in Barbara Tuchman’s The March of Folly.

† Luder typically referred to a slovenly woman of deficient morals and is translated as “hussy”—or today would simply be translated as “bitch” (of the non-canine variety). Equally unhappily, the etymologically related root word lude signifies “pimp” and traces back to the word for a lure of some kind; in this application, it denotes a lure to sexual sin.
Saxony, and the other studied in Leipzig, Frankfurt, and Bologna, becoming a medical doctor who served as the personal physician to Elector Frederick the Wise and sometimes treated Luther. In the last years of his life, he taught medicine at the University of Wittenberg, while Luther lived there. The humble beginnings often attributed to Luther’s parents, and especially to his mother, are part of the sometimes misleading hagiographic narrative that sprang into being after his death.

We may also assume that the well-to-do Lindemann family lent Hans Luther the substantial amount of money needed for him to get his start in the risky copper-smelting business. Luther’s father knew that to make good on the serious investment his in-laws had made in him and his business would be difficult, and that it was. He worked very hard and clearly expected his son Martin to be a part of the larger plan. Because Martin was exceedingly bright, Hans planned an excellent education and a subsequent legal career for him.

We may also assume that the Ludhers were no more or less religious than most people of their time and social station, which is to say they took God and the church very seriously. They almost certainly had a shrine in their home to Saint Anne, which not the Bible but Christian tradition declared was the name of Mary’s mother, who became the patron saint of miners. The reason for this is that her womb was said to have borne two inestimable jewels. From her own womb had come Mary, and then from Mary’s womb had come Jesus. Anyone whose womb had produced these eternal treasures could hardly be improved upon as a patron saint for those making their livings searching for treasures themselves.²

Recent Archaeological Discoveries

A resounding boon to Luther studies arrived in very recent years via archaeological discoveries in the city of Mansfeld, where Luther lived from the age of six months until he went off to school in Magdeburg. Most remarkable, in an excavation begun in 2003, the small and humble house in Mansfeld where for centuries Luther was said to have been raised was demonstrated to be merely one-third of the actual house in which his family lived. Thus, as we have already stated, Luther’s reference to himself in later years as the son of “peasants” and “poor miners” is proven to
have been a typically Lutheran admixture of humility and hyperbole. Contrary to the five centuries of myths born of this self-characterization, he was raised in a well-appointed home. The measure of how well can be taken from another (2008) archaeological discovery on the site of that home. It was then that a “previously unknown brick-lined cellar room” from the time of Luther’s childhood was discovered, and it was bursting with such a dazzling variety of household waste as to constitute a veritable King Tut’s tomb of the late fifteenth-century quotidian. The forensic details that emerge illuminate the day-to-day life of the Luthers during this time. That Martin and his family handled these long-buried objects in the course of their lives five centuries ago is simply remarkable to consider, as is the scale and breadth of the find. The findings confirm the idea that this was not the home of poor or humble people but, on the contrary, the home of a very respectable and established leading family of the city.

Not less than seven thousand animal bones were analyzed, and from these it was determined that 60 percent of the Luther family diet was pork. The porcine fragments came principally from “young, fully grown” animals, whose meat was more expensive than that of older, less flavorful hogs. Thirty percent of the bones were from sheep and goats, and the remaining 10 percent from cattle. More than two thousand bones from domestic fowl were identified, most of them goose, also higher on the price scale than other options. Young chickens were also eaten regularly, “along with the occasional duck or pigeon.” Some of the goose bones discovered had been turned into pipes with drilled stops, indicating they had been used as birdcalls, to lure smaller songbirds, which were commonly part of the menu in German homes for many centuries. Finally, the local fishes carefully plucked and identified included freshwater species such as “carp, bream, roach, asp, pike, pike-perch, perch, and eel.” There was also a significant presence of imported saltwater fishes, including “herring, cod, and plaice,” which would have arrived at the Luther house either dried or salted.3

But more revealing yet in this 2008 trove were the objects of kitchen life. A number of Grapen were found. These were the earthenware tripod pots put directly into the fire. Some fragments of much rarer metal Grapen pots were discovered too. These were so valuable they are often mentioned in wills from that era. The shards of whimsical Igelgefässe (hedgehog vessels) were also found, as well as the remnants of “stemmed
glasses, knobbled glasses, and ribbed beakers.” The knife handles and all else bespeak a household of upper-middle-class prosperity.

The archaeologists discovered many of the toys with which Martin and his three brothers likely played. Seven marbles of irregular sizes were recovered, indicating that they were probably made at home and fired in Frau Luther’s hearth. The “phalanx bone” of a cow with a drilled hole was also found, and it is believed this hole would have been filled with molten lead and this and similarly weighted bones used as children’s bowling pins. The background of Brueghel the Elder’s famous painting *Children’s Games* depicts just such an activity. There was also a *Pfeifvogel* (bird whistle) that “could be filled with water to produce a warbling song.” There is even a curious little object that was identified as a miniature replica of the “nut”—part of the trigger mechanism—of a crossbow. It seems this was from a toy crossbow that belonged to Martin and his brothers, and so now, to the many images we have of Luther in our collective cultural memory, we must add this new one of him as a boy mischievously chasing and shooting his brothers with this toy crossbow. To be sure, the son of “poor peasants” would hardly have had access to something so fanciful and expensive.4

A potentially tantalizing mystery of this great trash heap, however, reveals itself in the variety of valuable objects that are scattered throughout those less valuable. We have no difficulty fathoming why someone would throw away a fishbone, but why brass aglets and buttons, an embroidered purse affixed to a belt, or even some silver coins? One current theory holds that about 1505, immediately after Luther had become a monk against his father’s wishes, the plague struck Mansfeld, as it did many times during these centuries. It is believed that two of Martin’s brothers perished.5 According to the medical advice of that time, all of the clothes and bedclothes of someone who had died from the plague would have to be burned. As the rooms of those who had died were cleared out, some more valuable objects could have been mixed in with the others, thus accounting for this otherwise strange and highly revealing find.

**Luther’s Relationship with His Father**

Another fable that has clung like a burr to Luther’s story is the canard of Luther’s father being so impossibly strict and perpetually glowering that
it resulted in the boy’s eventual rebellion against not just his earthly father but his heavenly father too. Whereas no one should doubt that Hans Luther would have clouted his son about the head when the situation demanded it—and what boy would not create situations along these lines from time to time?—such corporal discipline was de rigueur at that time, and not only then but throughout nearly all of the history and cultures of the world. So to attach some significance to it is to embrace an anachronism. If corporal punishment of this kind had anything like the effect so strongly suggested, the world would have been filled with nothing but Luthers throughout the centuries. Luther’s upbring- ing, from all we know, was about as typical as can be, and the only thing that would be worth remarking on, given the ubiquitous practice of physical parental discipline, would be if we had information that Luther’s father had indeed spared the rod. Martin’s father once disciplined his son so severely that the young Martin withdrew from his father for some time, whether out of fear or anger. But again, this is hardly beyond what we might expect, nor was Herr Luther the only one to be at times severe. In later years, Luther would recall how his dear mother once beat him—“until the blood flowed”—for the terrible crime of having filched a single nut.

But the persistent fiction concerning Luther’s father’s harshness comes to us almost entirely from Young Man Luther, a widely read biography by the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, who maintained that it was Luther’s conflation of a grim, judging God with his own father that produced the predictable and involuntary Oedipal spasm that tore Western Christendom in two. Though Erikson’s thesis would befog Luther scholarship for decades, there is no reason to accord this fatuous Viennese theory any validity except as a historical curiosity to be cataloged with Dr. Spock’s books. That his 1958 book was published with encomia from Margaret Mead and Reinhold Niebuhr completes the embarrassingly mid-century cliché. It’s a fact that because there is far more information available about Luther’s emotional and intellectual life than about any of his contemporaries—whether Vasco da Gama or Henry VIII—anyone angling to impose a silly interpretation on him will find a prominent vein from which to mine nuggets and with them to erect another monument to dated pseudo-intellectual fiddle-faddle.

What is perhaps oddest about Erikson’s theory is that it must not only arrange many facts rather precariously to fit its preconceived mold