Helmke provides his readers with a fascinating and multifaceted biographical study of Landgrave Philipp of Hesse, an important participant in and contributor to the sixteenth-century Reformation. He does so by placing the landgrave into his familial, political, and religious contexts. While Philipp is the chief focus, his time, place, and influential contemporaries are also explored. Helmke’s portrait of Philipp is a paradoxical one since he presents the landgrave as a person who is both “heroic and scandalous.” Thus Philipp’s admirable as well as his less-defensible character traits and actions are examined incisively. The book can be a resource both for scholars and for casual students of the Reformation.

Kurt K. Hendel
Bernard, Fischer, Westberg Distinguished Ministry Professor Emeritus of Reformation History, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Has there been a more studied and discussed century in church history than the sixteenth with its Protestant Reformation and Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation? Probably not—and yet John Helmke has found a hole in the record concerning one of that century’s major players, Philipp of Hesse. That said, we might expect a dusty tome replete with obscure details and foreign language footnotes. Helmke, though, has provided an accessible story that will engage all sorts of readers and reward them for the time spent.

Leonard Payton
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In accounts of the Reformation in the Western Church, Martin Luther casts a long shadow. Most of those who step into the light are his friends and foes whose concerns were correct teaching of the Christian faith. But political leaders on both sides did much to shape and to extend the reach of the Reformation. Along with Luther’s noble protector, Frederick the Wise, Philipp of Hesse looms large. In sixty-three years crowded with passionate living, Philipp had a significant impact on the Reformation’s development. It’s a story worth telling, and here it is well told.

The Rev. Fred Reklau (retired)
Author of Partners in Care: Medicine and Ministry Together (Wipf & Stock, 2010)
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prologue</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Recognition 1518–24</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Heritage 100 BC–1518</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Changes 1524–26</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Philipp's Commencement 1526</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Lambert of Avignon 1526–30</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: The Reform of Hesse 1526–27</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: Sorrow and Scandal 1528</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8: Recovery 1529 and 1530</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9: Heroic Act One</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 10: Heroic Act Two</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 11: Heroic Act Three</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 12: Heroic Act Four</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 13: Scandal 1539–40</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 14: Servitude 1540–46</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 15: War 1546–47</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 16: Humiliation 1547–52</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 17: Retirement 1552–67</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue: 1830–The Present</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1: Personality Profile of Philipp of Hesse</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 2: Treatment of Studies of Philipp of Hesse</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endnotes</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Martin Luther’s call for reform addressed and appealed to quite a variety of people in sixteenth-century Europe who found their own longings for a better life than that prescribed by the Church’s practices and preaching. People of all social levels, of differing degrees of formal education, of contrasting religious preferences and practices responded in a variety of ways to Luther’s discarding the ritualistic, hierarchical approach to God that formed the heart of the piety of the late Middle Ages. His turning to an understanding of the Christian faith that taught that God comes to us, in human flesh and in His re-creative Word in oral, written, and sacramental forms, found favor among the people of central, northern, and eastern Europe for many different reasons.

Among the more colorful and vibrant of the personalities that rallied to Luther’s cause was a young prince, already as a child blessed and burdened with the trappings and, to a certain extent, the exercise of power in German society, Philipp of Hesse. Philipp was raised in the consciousness that God was laying on him tremendous responsibilities for rebuilding the lands of his family, the principality of Hesse, in the middle of the German empire—for his father and uncle before him had let their lands decline in many ways. Philipp brought a determination and decisiveness to the tasks his bloodline imposed upon him that reflected the seriousness of his calling from God to govern his subjects for their benefit. That benefit embraced both their physical needs and their spiritual welfare.

As with many gifted individuals, Philipp could not exercise these responsibilities, given the shape of his personality, without offending some. Not only those who despised and dreaded Luther’s reform found Philipp detestable and despicable. Other supporters of the Wittenberg reformer and his colleagues suspected Philipp of not sharing their view of the Lord’s Supper and regarded his taking a second wife as reprehensible. They differed with him in policy and principle. Others have admired him over the centuries for his bold confession of his faith at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 and in other situations in which the
Wittenberg Reformation faced the crises of its early years. At Augsburg, as he had earlier and would later, he placed his lands, liberty, and life at stake in the face of threats from a number of colleagues in the imperial college of princes, who deemed his promotion of Luther’s reform a threat to both order in society and a proper understanding of the Christian faith. His interest in reading the Bible, a habit he had learned as a child, and his fervent desire to serve God and confess the message of salvation through Jesus Christ commended him to many in spite of his moral failings.

Equally comfortable in his suit of armor, on his horse, and in discussions of practical administration of the Church and even theological questions, Philipp of Hesse illustrates the broad appeal of the message that Luther and his Wittenberg colleagues—Philipp Melanchthon, Justus Jonas, and Johannes Bugenhagen—were proclaiming for some at every level of society, from princes to patricians and peasants. Philipp also embodies the struggles that Christians still encounter while embedded in their own callings in their homes and at work, in society, and in their congregations, even when their responsibilities do not match in societal impact those imposed by birth on Philipp. He exemplifies Luther’s insight, gained from St. Paul (Romans 7), that Christ’s chosen people are constantly experiencing—indeed, are unceasingly involved in—the struggle between the law of sin and the Law of God. His was indeed not only a life of outer conflicts of all kinds but also a life of inner conflict that he did not deal with lightly. Yet for most who have brushed up against his name in our day, he remains a cardboard figure, an image thinly sketched by those whose focus on the Reformation lies elsewhere and permits him only a bit part on the stage. John Helmke is determined to change that.

I have known John Helmke for over four decades. Throughout that time, Philipp of Hesse has had a hold on his imagination; the Hessian prince early on became a hobby and passion for him. Like a good detective, he wanted to know the facts of the landgrave’s life and times, and he has striven to incorporate those facts into the larger panorama of Philipp’s turbulent and tumultuous time in order to make him come alive for twenty-first-century readers. Separated from Philipp as we are by five centuries, by language, and by strikingly contrasting cultures, we find it hard to grasp what was really going on in his world and his own mind as we stumble across confusing social structures, inscrutable decisions, or inexplicable reactions. We easily presume that our ancestors thought in the manner we do until we delve a bit deeper into their times. Helmke builds bridges into the world of Martin Luther and Philipp of
Hesse, bridges that help us make sense of our heritage and put it to proper use. He aids us in avoiding a habit that plagues all reflection on the past: we tend so easily to disregard the unique features of another age and discard what does not fit into the patterns we presume must have governed their decision-making because they govern ours.

Helmke practices the trade of biographer in such a way that he tries to lead us away from letting our present presuppositions govern our reading of the past. When we do that, we are wasting our time, for history is of use when it guides us into new perspectives on our own inheritance from the past and our own experience of the present. Helmke helps us see the unfolding events in the life of Landgrave Philipp from his perspective and that of his contemporaries. He helps us learn why Philipp viewed life and faith as he did. Therefore, readers will find in these pages the special treat of getting to know someone quite different from themselves, but another human being and brother in the faith whose example, as Philipp Melanchthon pointed out in Article XXI of the Augsburg Confession, should be remembered in order to strengthen our faith (as a warning for the conscience and a model of trust in times of trouble), a reminder of God’s faithfulness and goodness despite our sin, and in order to give us an example of how and how not to exercise our own callings from our Lord.

Robert Kolb
Wolfenbüttel, The Eve of Festival of St. Barnabas 2018
Some learn of Philipp of Hesse’s bold political leadership of the Reformation in Germany and honor him as heroic. Others learn of his bigamy and despise him as scandalous. Yes, Philipp of Hesse was a bigamist. He married a second wife during the lifetime of the first. Then he fathered children by both wives.

English-language writers have treated Philipp superficially. Others, like the sculptor Ernst Rietschel, portrayed Philipp as Luther’s second protector on his famous monument to the reformer in Worms, Germany. I see Philipp as a complex political leader who was both saint and sinner. I see Philipp as the Unlikely Hero of the Reformation.

My aim is to make my story of Philipp’s life useful for students and teachers alike, entertaining for anyone who enjoys reading stories when the children are tucked off to bed, when commuting to and from work, or when waiting in the hospital for a family member or friend to return from surgery.

Philipp of Hesse has held my imagination captive since I was a teenager. It is for you, my reader, to determine whether Philipp’s heroism outshines his scandals.

Philipp was born on November 13, 1504, eleven years after Columbus returned from the New World, when Martin Luther was a twenty-one-year-old university student. He would rule Hesse for forty-nine years and die in 1567 when most of the first-generation reformers had passed from the scene.

Of the significance of Philipp of Hesse’s life and rule, the historian Hans J. Hillerbrand has written, “Without Philipp, Luther’s cause may well have tumbled like a house of cards, while without Luther’s cause, Philipp may well have remained an innocuous territorial ruler in sixteenth-century Germany.”

Martin Luther described a Christian as being, at one and the same time, both saint and sinner. Philipp dramatically personified that description. He was heroic in his promotion of the Reformation, but he could also be scandalous when ignoring the cautious advice of his friends.
At least twice Philipp scandalized his friends as well as his foes, but on at least one occasion he acted on his own and succeeded brilliantly. At that time, it took him only forty-eight hours to restore Württemberg (not to be confused with Wittenberg, Luther’s town) to its hereditary prince. Even then, Philipp’s foes labeled this heroic act as scandalous.

At least three of Philipp’s acts reveal his personal sensitivity, faithfulness, and compassion. First, his marriage to Christine was arranged when he was four months old and Christine was not yet born. Unfortunately, their marriage appears never to have blossomed into love. Still, Philipp refused to divorce Christine, for he knew the suffering that would cause her and their children. Second, Philipp honored Martin Luther. His actions revealed him as the boldest political leader of the Reformation when, on the other hand, conforming to the dictates of the Church and the empire promised him greater power and wealth. Third, Philipp loved all his subjects, not just the obedient. Powerful friends pressured him to execute subjects that left his church. Philipp always said no.

Philipp of Hesse ruled one of the most powerful lands of the Holy Roman Empire, which was more a crazy quilt of German principalities than an empire. The line of authority in the empire was first the emperor, Charles V, and his deputy brother, Archduke Ferdinand, then the electors, and finally the dukes. Landgraves like Philipp were the rulers of territories inside the empire. Margraves were rulers of territories on the border (Mark in German) of the empire. Both were roughly the equivalent of English dukes and earls. The emperors were elected by seven of the most powerful rulers, called electors.

In addition to the German states, the Holy Roman Empire included the Netherlands, Austria, Hungary, Bohemia, and several lesser-known eastern lands. Emperor Charles V was also the king of Spain. This meant his responsibilities included the recently discovered Americas. As a result, he had the care of one of this world’s largest empires, roughly half the size of the then-known world.

Charles had valuable holdings in Italy and took particular interest in the Netherlands, the land of his birth. He assigned the Netherlands to his aunt Margaret, who served as regent until her death in 1530. To succeed her, Charles appointed his sister, Queen Mary, who was the widow of Louis II, the king of Hungary and Bohemia.

Charles’s Turkish problem is well known. Less well known is how his Italian possessions often caused him fierce, open conflict with the papacy and the king of France.
Upon his election as the emperor in 1519, Charles gave his brother, Ferdinand, deputy authority over Germany and its neighbors to the east. This made Ferdinand responsible for defending the empire, including Germany, against two perceived threats: the Ottoman aggression and the Protestant Reformation.

The archduke reported to Charles. Charles normally respected his brother’s wishes. The two regents of the Netherlands, his aunt Margaret first and sister Mary later, served as referees when the brothers had disagreements that could not be settled without their help.

Germany in 1519 appeared to be little more than a smoldering hotbed in the empire. This was only two years after Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses, fanning the flames of the German Reformation. Though the reformer had been savagely attacked, the Reformation had not spread far as a movement. One year later, in 1520, the pope condemned Luther as a heretic. In April of the following year, the emperor condemned him as an outlaw. By the summer of 1521, Germany, that smoldering hotbed, had exploded into a raging fire.

Hesse’s geography has changed little since Philipp’s death in 1567. Its land area today includes Hesse-Darmstadt, Hesse-Kassel, and parts of Nassau, Fulda, and other smaller territories and is about the size of Massachusetts, 8,100 square miles (3,127 sq km). The distance from its northern to southern borders is approximately 120 miles (193 km); from east to west, approximately 61 miles (98 km).

A great challenge when writing is to select what needs to be written and what must be left unwritten. Regarding Martin Luther’s life, I will treat only those events that involved Philipp and/or shed light on Philipp’s political leadership of the Reformation. I will include more-detailed sketches of three female ancestors important to Hesse; Philipp’s father-in-law, Duke George of Saxony; and his theologian, Lambert von Avignon. These persons are less famous than Luther, but they played important roles in Philipp’s life.

In 1962, Alton O. Hancock prepared his unpublished doctoral dissertation, *The Reformation in Hesse to 1538: A Study of the Encounter of Differing Reformation Points of View*. In it he treated only Philipp’s first thirty-five years of life, leaving his bigamy and final twenty-nine challenging years untreated.

In 1967, when the 400th anniversary of Philipp’s death was being commemorated, Hans J. Hillerbrand published his thirty-seven-page English biography of the landgrave, which was quoted above. In addition to its brevity, it is disappointing to me that many quotes from Philipp are not translated. They are published in the challenging sixteenth-century German of Hesse. Simply transcribing them into modern German would have been helpful.
In 1988, Professor William J. Wright published *Capitalism, the State, and the Lutheran Reformation*. This is not a biography of Philipp but an important treasury of Hessian information including valuable insights on Philipp.

In 2001, Richard Andrew Cahill published an impressive scholarly work, *Philipp of Hesse and the Reformation*. Unfortunately, he treats only Philipp's first twenty-four years and ignores his most heroic and scandalous last thirty-nine years.

In 2015, Professor David M. Whitford published *A Reformation Life: The European Reformation through the Eyes of Philipp of Hesse*. This is an impressive cradle-to-grave treatment of Philipp including a chapter on his bigamy, which is rarely treated in English. It may be helpful as an introduction to Philipp's life, but it presents him merely as a witness to the Reformation.

Many terms that were common in the sixteenth century have become archaic today. I find three stand out as most important: *diet*, *recess*, and *estate*. They are confusing terms because they are still used today but with meanings quite different from their meanings at the time of the Reformation.

The word *diet*, as in “the Diet of Worms,” is from the medieval word *dieta*, meaning “a meeting and its routine.” Today, our closest equivalent might be the word *congress*, though membership of the diet was not elected. It was by appointment or inherited. There were two levels of diets, the territorial diets and the imperial diets.

The word *recess*, as in “the recess of the diet,” is also from a medieval Latin word, *recedere*, meaning “to go back.” By Philipp's time, it had taken on the meaning of withdrawal or departure and was applied to the document drawn up soon after a diet to report the work done there, similar to our written minutes of a meeting.

The word *estate* presents more problems. For simplicity, it is best to tell how the word was used in Philipp's time. When a prince needed to organize a diet in his land, he summoned his “territorial estates.” These included the nobles, the towns, and the church, represented by its clergy. When a diet of the empire was needed, the “imperial estates” were summoned by the emperor. Here the estates included the princes, the imperial cities, the bishops, and the archbishops. (Seldom if ever did the title *prince* mean the son of a king in the empire. I have found the title *prince* to be used there in a manner similar to the title *ruler.*)

A fourth word, *Protestant*, also needs some clarification. Today, a Protestant is a Christian who is not Roman Catholic. During Philipp's lifetime, *Protestant* was the third name used to address those following Luther's teachings.
It was coined in 1529. I use the words Lutheran and Protestant interchangeably for variety, but I use the term Evangelical sparingly, for that term addresses a movement today that has grown out of the Reformed, not Lutheran, tradition.

Except when quoting other authors who use the English spelling Philip, I will often use the German spelling, Philipp, and the English equivalent of German proper names, like John for Johann.

Philipp’s most heroic decade was the 1530s. I will dedicate four chapters to that decade. Most important are chapter 11, his treatment of the revolutionary Anabaptists of Münster, and chapter 12, his treatment of his own peaceful but dissenting Hessian Anabaptists. Without Philipp’s promotion of Protestant expansion, described in chapter 9, and his attention to the economic, educational, and health care needs of the poor, described in chapter 10, the landgrave’s heroic treatment of his Anabaptist subjects described in chapter 12 might have met severe opposition from the estates, who had rebelled against his mother twenty years earlier when he was a boy.

In his last will and testament of 1562, Philipp divided his land among his four living sons by Christine, instructing them to remain faithful to the Augsburg Confession and treat benevolently those who might leave the Lutheran Church. As a result, Hesse remained a safe harbor for Anabaptists and others of dissenting faith.

The Amana Colonies of Iowa are such a dissenting group that benefited from Hessian hospitality. In 1714, a German religious group began meeting and called themselves “The Community of True Inspiration.” They were persecuted for their faith and found refuge in Hesse. In 1842, after 130 years of peaceful coexistence with the Hessians, the threat of a renewed persecution and economic depression convinced them to emigrate to America, where they settled in Iowa.

A promising area to study might be how Philipp’s refusal to execute Anabaptists may have planted a seed for the formulation of the Establishment Clause in the American constitution; it reads, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Now let us enter the exciting sixteenth century to meet this unlikely hero of the Reformation, Philipp of Hesse. He was an unlikely hero due only to his scandalous private life gone public and the embarrassment he caused for the Reformation. Should you find you dislike Philipp after you have finished reading about his life, you will not be alone. My purpose is not to glamorize Philipp. It is to tell his story with sympathy, showing how incomplete the histories of the Reformation are when they treat Philipp with little or no care.
“Declare my son the Landgrave of Hesse.” A widowed mother of two precocious children, Elizabeth, age 15, and Philipp, age 13, approached Emperor Maximilian I with this outrageous request. Hessian rulers were addressed as landgraves, and even in 1518, thirteen was too young to rule.

Her request was more outrageous for the fact that Hesse had been in political turmoil for most of the previous nine years. In 1509, the widow’s husband, Philipp’s father, Landgrave Wilhelm II, died, leaving his land in the hands of regents who now lacked a unifying ruler.

Still, Maximilian did not hesitate to grant this widow’s wish, for she was Anna of Mecklenburg, who had opposed the rebellious estates and become the most powerful person in Hesse. On March 16, 1518, Maximilian declared Philipp to be the landgrave of Hesse. That was five months after Martin Luther published his Ninety-five Theses, igniting the Reformation. In the turbulent times that followed, Philipp ruled Hesse well for forty-nine years and outlived most, if not all, first-generation Reformation leaders.

Within five years, Philipp would be recognized for three decisive acts: a “kidnapping,” diplomatic success at the 1521 Diet of Worms, and putting an end to the Knights’ War by defeating Franz von Sickingen, the most feared knight in the German nation and the Holy Roman Empire.

A CONFUSION OF NAMES

We need time out to learn some names, for the names of Philipp’s family members can be very confusing. There were three Wilhelms. His father, Wilhelm II, was called “the Middler” because he was for a time the second to rule only northern Hesse from the city called Kassel. His uncle, Wilhelm I, was called “Mad Wilhelm” due to a mental disorder caused by syphilis. Wilhelm III
was a cousin of Philipp’s father who ruled southern Hesse from Darmstadt until he died in a hunting accident in 1500.

Mad Wilhelm had ruled southern Hesse prior to 1493, when he was compelled to resign his position to Wilhelm III, having been judged incompetent to rule. Upon Wilhelm III’s death, in a hunting accident, Philipp’s father united Hesse. Mad Wilhelm, however, outlived Philipp’s father long enough to raise serious problems for Philipp’s mother.

Adding to the confusion of the men in young Philipp’s life were confusing names of some of the women. There were two Annas and two Elizabeths. Philipp’s mother was Anna of Mecklenburg. His aunt, the wife of Mad Wilhelm I, was Anna of Braunschweig. Elizabeth, Philipp’s older sister, was born in 1502. His cousin Elizabeth, whose dates are unknown, was the second daughter of Mad Wilhelm and Anna of Braunschweig. Her part in young Philipp’s story will be told later in this chapter.

PUTTING YOUNG PHILIPP TO THE TEST

Professor William John Wright describes five factors that prompted a new economic policy for the empire at the time of Philipp’s rise to power. They were the rise of the territorial state, the Lutheran Reformation, the growing influence of capitalism, the crisis of feudalism, and population trends.²

In those changing times, many watched to see if young Philipp might fail. Watchers included Philipp’s next-door neighbor Frederick III, the most powerful elector in Germany, who ruled Ernestine Saxony from 1486 until his death in 1525 and would become Martin Luther’s protector. Frederick had been troublesome to Philipp’s mother, Anna of Mecklenburg, for he was slated to inherit the rule of Hesse should Philipp die young.

Another next-door neighbor watching Philipp was Frederick’s estranged cousin, Duke George of Albertine Saxony. He ruled from 1500 to 1539 and connived to unite Hesse and Albertine Saxony by signing a contract with Wilhelm II, legally committing to marriage four-month-old Philipp and George’s yet-to-be-born daughter, Christine. By signing that contract, George and Wilhelm envisioned how the power and wealth of Hesse, when added to that of George’s Albertine Saxony, might topple Frederick from power and seriously challenge the emperor.

Other close neighbors watching young Philipp were Frederick’s brother John, who would one day rule Ernestine Saxony, and George’s brother Henry,
who also would one day rule Albertine Saxony. The story of the two Saxonies and their leaders will be told in chapter 3.

Other powerful princes of the empire were also watching, including Emperor Maximilian himself, who ruled from 1486 to 1519. Would Philipp prove too young to rule? Would he be tied to his mother’s apron strings and ignore some of the pressing needs of the empire? Would he die young and would Hesse then unite with one of the two Saxonies against the empire?

As it turned out, Philipp’s mother arranged a hearing of grievances posed by the estates for Philipp. At thirteen years of age, Philipp was well prepared by his mother and her supporters. He handled himself well. Throughout his rule, the landgrave never found it difficult to make hard decisions. He would rule Hesse decisively until what was then the ripe old age of sixty-three. By the end of his first six years as landgrave, though he would only be nineteen, Philipp would have revealed that he was one young prince of Germany to be recognized as a decisive ruler.

A KIDNAPPING

It might seem a stretch to call Philipp’s premeditated and alarming act during the first months of his rule a kidnapping. We might call it today a matter of “protective custody,” but history remembers it as a kidnapping.

As early as 1500, Anna of Braunschweig had objected to the unification of Hesse under Philipp’s father. She was convinced that, with her help, Mad Wilhelm could resume the rule of the southern half of divided Hesse. Following the death of Philipp’s father in 1509, this Anna’s constant objections caused serious conflicts with Philipp’s mother. Anna of Mecklenburg was fifteen years younger than her sister-in-law, but she refused to bow meekly to Anna of Braunschweig’s wishes.

Earlier her conniving sister-in-law had arranged the marriage of her elder daughter (whose name and dates are unknown) to a lesser count without bothering to ask for the approval of the territorial estates (the nobility, the clergy, and the towns). By 1514, Anna of Mecklenburg presided over these estates as the confirmed regent of Hesse. The marriage of Elizabeth’s older sister was an accomplished fact, but now the estates refused to allow Anna of Braunschweig to give her younger daughter to any suitor they might deem unworthy. This was no idle threat, for the estates gathered regularly in territorial diets, financed the cost of raising young Elizabeth in luxury, and were already providing her with a dowry.
Mad Wilhelm died in 1515. By this time, Anna of Mecklenburg had completely solidified her control over the estates, and she petitioned the emperor to grant her custody of her niece, Elizabeth. Philipp’s mother threatened that if she lost her petition, Anna of Braunschweig would lose her widow’s holdings (in German, her Wittum) if she allowed her daughter to travel outside of Hesse or gave her in marriage without the consent of the estates.

In autumn of 1516, Anna of Braunschweig left her daughter at Melsungen, in northern Hesse near Kassel, and disappeared to lodge a complaint at the Imperial Court. Philipp’s mother took Elizabeth into the Hessian Court, ostensibly for her security. There, twelve-year-old Philipp met his cousin Elizabeth.

Anna of Braunschweig won her suit. Upon her return she took her daughter back to Melsungen, where they lived until the spring of 1517. Mysteriously, in that year she left Elizabeth, now thirteen, in the charge of the servants and disappeared once again. This time she was gone for an entire year. In March 1518, the same month that Philipp was declared of age to rule, the emperor suggested to Anna of Mecklenburg and the Hessian estates that Elizabeth should come to live in his court in Innsbruck. There she would be raised in luxury at the expense of the Hessian estates. To no one’s surprise, Anna of Braunschweig welcomed the emperor’s invitation. Anna of Mecklenburg and her estates rejected it.

On April 15, 1518, Philipp, having ruled as the landgrave of Hesse for only one month, took a bold, somewhat reckless step. He “kidnapped” Elizabeth. It happened at a baptism. Who was baptized is unknown. Elizabeth and Philipp’s uncle, Duke Albrecht of Mecklenburg, were invited to serve as sponsors. Following the baptism, Philipp invited Elizabeth to return with him to Marburg. He promised to treat her to all the luxury and privileges a princess of her status deserved. He added that should she refuse, she could expect no more favors from him. Apparently Elizabeth did not object. Philipp ordered her custodians not to interfere and took her to his castle in Marburg.

Anna of Braunschweig appealed to the emperor, who ordered Philipp to appear at the 1518 Diet in Augsburg. This was the diet at which Martin Luther was ordered to meet with Cardinal Cajetan. Luther obeyed, but Philipp refused to appear.

Anna of Braunschweig was financially ruined by the cost of her suit, and the emperor formed a special commission to settle once and for all the conflict of the two Annas. Fortunately for Philipp and his mother, the chairman of the commission, named by the emperor, was their friendly benefactor, Duke George of Albertine Saxony.
The commission announced its decision in October. Philipp was to have custody of his cousin for one and a half years. Her mother was to be allowed visitation rights. Philipp was required to provide his cousin with food, clothing, and jewels befitting a princess of her status and to seek a suitable husband for her. If she were not married by the end of the eighteen-month period, her mother could resume custody under two conditions: that she would not take her daughter out of Hesse and that she would not permit her to marry without the approval of Philipp and the estates. Three months later, in January 1519, Emperor Maximilian I died.

A HUGE RANSOM IS EXTORTED FROM YOUNG PHILIPP

In the early sixteenth century, knighthood was losing its blossom. It enjoyed a brief resurgence under Emperor Maximilian I, who fancied himself as the last knight and relied heavily for support upon the empire’s knights, the most powerful being Franz von Sickingen. He had awarded Sickingen great wealth and twelve castles on the Rhine due to his support. By 1518, most of the knights of Germany were little more than ferocious bands of robber knights (Raubritter). Sickingen was the most widely feared knight of his day.

In that time there were two classes of knights in the empire: territorial knights, who were nobles down on their luck and in service to other nobles, and imperial knights, who were nobles in service to the emperor. As imperial knights, Sickingen and his friend Ulrich von Hutten had personal scores to settle with the still-unchallenged landgrave of Hesse.

The sixteenth century was also a time of state building, replacing feudal society with a society of imperial peace, built on Roman law as it had been codified by the emperor Justinian in the sixth century. Maximilian enlisted the support of the rulers of Germany to enforce this imperial peace. Prosperous nobles had stated their grievances as recently as 1515, believing this movement would be a threat to their powers, which indeed it was. The clergy and the towns supported the nobles, feeling they had been getting along quite well under feudal society.

Three events came together within a fifteen-month period to signal the death of feudal society. First, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses, kick-starting the Reformation. Second, on March 16, 1518, the emperor declared Philipp of age to rule. By doing this, he recognized the limits Philipp’s mother had placed on the Hessian nobility and how she had
successfully pursued her husband’s commitment to rebuilding united Hesse under Roman law. Third, on January 12, 1519, “the last knight,” Emperor Maximilian died.

Hesse had gained its independence from Thuringia in the thirteenth century. Since then, the Free Imperial City of Mainz and its archbishop had been a thorn in the flesh of the landgraves of Hesse. “Free imperial cities” were cities denoted as self ruling, represented in the imperial diets, and subordinate only to the emperor. In 1521, of the approximately four thousand cities and towns in the empire, eighty-five were designated as free imperial cities. Philipp’s two closest free imperial cities were Cologne, not far from his northern border, and Mainz, on his southern border.

Bishop Albrecht of Mainz had been recently elevated to archbishop. The funds needed to cover the cost of his elevation, together with funds to be used for building the new St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, were borrowed from Augsburg banks. The plan was to repay this huge loan by the sale of Pope Leo X’s promises of release from the pains of purgatory, called indulgences. That sale motivated Martin Luther to post his Ninety-five Theses on October 31, 1517.

Both Philipp and the archbishop of Mainz claimed control of an area along the Rhine River. It was inevitable that the prince of the land and the prince of the Church would not see eye to eye.

Philipp inherited an unwritten feud between the archbishop and Wilhelm II that had not been settled since 1505, when Philipp was less than a year old. The land along the Rhine was famous for its fine Rhenish wine. At the Imperial Diet of Cologne in 1505, Emperor Maximilian granted Philipp’s father the right to impose a road tax on Rhenish wine. This imposition, added to the customs fees already on wine, the tolls on Rhine River traffic, and the fact that Wilhelm II had taken some of the territory for himself earlier that year, caused a virtual feud by the archbishop against Wilhelm II that Philipp would inherit thirteen years later. Young and untested, Philipp presented an easy target for Franz von Sickingen, who supported Archbishop Albrecht.

It was September 7, 1518, and harvesttime was fast approaching, so Sickingen felt certain he could quickly make the entire area respect his power by laying siege to Metz, an important city located northwest of Hesse. He threatened the livelihood of Metz by announcing that unless they surrendered immediately, he would destroy their livelihood, chopping down their vineyards. Metz quickly surrendered. Sickingen allowed little time for the news of his victory to spread throughout Hesse. He wrote Philipp an official “letter of feud.”
Sickingen’s letter stated that he would allow forty days’ notice to the city of Darmstadt, in southern Hesse, to prepare for battle or surrender. Once he had seen to it that his letter of feud was delivered to Philipp, Sickingen felt certain he could not be charged with murder. For centuries, such procedures had been accepted as legitimate throughout Europe, even by the Church. Though Sickingen had not been harmed by Darmstadt and had been employed by the emperor to enforce the imperial peace, Sickingen was still masterful at twisting outdated feudal customs to his own advantage.

At that time, Philipp had ruled Hesse for only six months. He recognized the difficult position he was in, and he provided a representative with power of attorney to settle Sickingen’s feud. However, Philipp and his representative had different ideas about how his power of attorney was to be used. A treaty was drawn up with eighteen points, all of them favoring Sickingen.

Philipp was outraged when he learned of this lopsided treaty, for it stated that he agreed to pay the huge ransom of 35,000 gulden Sickingen demanded. The gulden was Hesse’s most valuable coin. It was the only Hessian gold coin, used primarily in foreign trade. One gulden alone was a priceless treasure compared with the silver and copper coins used by the common people in the shops of Hesse. This treasure was all that Sickingen really wanted. He called off his troops and Darmstadt was saved. However, for the next five years, Philipp would harbor his own unwritten letter of feud against Sickingen.

THE WISDOM OF SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD PHILIPP AT THE DIET OF WORMS

Emperor Maximilian died in January 1519. During the hotly contested election between Maximilian’s grandson, Charles V, and Francis I, the king of France, Sickingen gathered an army to protect Charles. Two years later, at the Diet of Worms in 1521, he would perform a similar service to make certain the emperor honored his pledge of safe passage to Martin Luther. During the sessions of that diet, Sickingen gathered his troops at the gates of Worms. They were prepared to rescue Luther if necessary. Fortunately, the emperor honored his safe passage, and Sickingen’s troops were not needed. Later, twenty horsemen, allegedly provided by Sickingen, would accompany Luther’s departure from the city.

All the princes of Germany had been summoned to the diet, so it is difficult to imagine that Philipp was not present to hear Luther’s famous refusal to recant. Still, while the late nineteenth-century mural in the aula (auditorium)
of the Melanchthon Gymnasium (high school) in Wittenberg depicting Philipp greeting Luther soon after his refusal to recant is impressive, it is probably a product of artistic license.

At that time, Philipp was very upset with his mother for marrying below her station two years earlier. In fact, he had been so upset that at one point he threatened to raise an army to attack his stepfather. One week after Luther’s appearance, Elizabeth, Philipp’s eighteen-year-old sister, negotiated a mother-and-son reconciliation.

When Philipp was declared of age to rule in 1518, Hesse had been hard-pressed for allies to defend it against an attack by Sickingen and others. In the following year, Philipp saw to it that Hesse was accepted into membership by the Swabian League, which had been created in the late fifteenth century for the mutual defense of the lands of southern Germany. Prior to this, borderland Hesse had not qualified as a land of southern Germany.

Philipp devoted much time and attention to strengthening Hessian ties with old and new allies at the diet. He even renewed the controversial inheritance alliance with Elector Frederick, formerly his mother’s foe. By now, Frederick was Martin Luther’s protector, who had negotiated the reformer’s safe passage to and from Worms.

To Philipp’s credit, he listened to his advisers though he was still only sixteen. In addition to the pomp and circumstance arranged for his impressive arrival in Worms, it was said that the young landgrave’s best adornment was his many “beards,” meaning his councilors, with whom he surrounded himself. By the summer following the diet, Philipp and his councilors had improved their relations with most of Hesse’s neighbors.

One exception to Philipp’s impressive run of successes at Worms was a challenge by two brothers, the dukes Henry and William of Nassau. They sued Philipp for control of Katzenelnbogen, a valuable section of land on the Rhine that had been a part of Hesse since the 1470s. Making matters more difficult for Philipp, Henry of Nassau had been Charles V’s tutor, and after 1522 would live in the Spanish court as the emperor’s lord chamberlain.

The brothers’ demands were high. They would settle for nothing less than complete control of Katzenelnbogen. At one point, the emperor entered the negotiations and convinced Philipp to offer the brothers 110,000 gulden if they would drop their claim. The brothers refused.

How personally involved was sixteen-year-old Philipp with all these negotiations? A document in Philipp’s own hand sheds light on that question. The
document is a checklist of twenty-six items that Philipp intended to accomplish at the diet. The first thirteen dealt with foreign relations. As each item was completed successfully, he marked it with an X. One item indicates that Philipp himself acted as the negotiator between Brandenburg and Bavaria. Among the treaties that Philipp and his councilors drew up at Worms, one that was important for the solution of the Sickingen problem, as we shall see later, was a treaty for mutual defense with Louis, the elector of the Palatinate.

Philipp visited Martin Luther in his apartment in Worms on the day after the reformer’s arrival. All that was recorded of their conversation is a brief remark by Philipp as they parted. It would be remembered differently by the Catholics and the Lutherans. Luther’s followers remembered Philipp’s statement as evidence he was not yet Lutheran: “If you are right, Dr. Luther, God help you.” Catholics, like the papal nuncio Jerome Aleander, remembered Philipp’s words as evidence that Philipp was already a Lutheran: “You are right Dr. Luther, God bless you.” Philipp also gave Luther safe passage through Hesse for his return to Wittenberg.

PHILIPP SLAYS FRANZ VON SICKINGEN

Philipp was not yet Lutheran, contrary to what Aleander had reported. His defeat of Franz von Sickingen, a follower of Luther, would contradict the nuncio’s report. Was Sickingen really Lutheran? There can be little doubt he was. However, his decision to turn Lutheran may have been little more than a matter of political opportunity for him. Still, there is evidence that even Luther was convinced Sickingen’s profession to be a Lutheran was sincere.

Sickingen’s friend Ulrich von Hutten revealed that Sickingen had one serious shortcoming: he was illiterate. Hutten corresponded with Luther on Sickingen’s behalf. Hutten claimed that Luther’s tracts were read at Sickingen’s table and the knight listened to them attentively. Also, Luther dedicated his tract *On Confession* to Sickingen. In March 1522, he sent greetings to Franz and Ulrich, addressing them as “our friends in the faith.”

While waiting at the gates of Worms in 1521, Sickingen had devised a plan to bring about an immediate reform of Germany and restore feudal law. Sickingen would seize the city of Trier and capture its archbishop/elector, Richard von Greifenklau. Since Greifenklau had supported the candidacy of the king of France in the imperial election of 1519, Sickingen expected that the emperor
Philipp of Hesse

would reward him appropriately for capturing Greifenklau. Hutten accepted Sickingen’s plan and urged him to act on it quickly.

In the meantime, the emperor was returning to Spain by way of the Netherlands. From there he would sail on to Spain, a much safer route than traveling through France, which was ruled by his enemy Francis I, or sailing the Ottoman-infested Mediterranean Sea, where Barbarossa was inciting terror. On his way, the emperor stopped in Speyer and summoned Sickingen to appear before him. There Charles commissioned the great knight to serve as a general in his war with Francis. Though Francis would later be held briefly as the emperor’s captive, he would remain a constant source of trouble for Charles V and would rule France until his death in 1547.

Sickingen obeyed the emperor’s orders. He took his troops to France and delayed his plans for a military reform of Germany. It would, however, be a mistake to conclude that Sickingen abandoned his commitment to his military reform of Germany. Sickingen may have believed that being an imperial general might make it possible for him to gather a larger, better-trained army.

Sickingen’s remarkable record of military success faltered in France, for Charles’s campaign proved to be a failure. The celebrated French knight Bayard forced Sickingen to retreat. The emperor had failed to provide him with adequate support. Sickingen returned to Germany eager to resume his campaign against Trier.

Richard von Greifenklau was known as a fighting bishop, serving both as an archbishop and as the elector of Trier. Sickingen would underestimate Greifenklau. On August 29, 1522, Sickingen’s army attacked Trier. Hutten, down with syphilis, was unable to lend his friend any direct assistance. Still, he had powerful connections in Mainz, for he had served in the court of Archbishop Albrecht, and a relative, Frowin von Hutten, was the court prefect in Mainz. Hutten used his influence, causing Mainz to delay coming to the rescue of Trier. He also saw to it that Philipp and his troops were denied passage at the Rhine for a time. Frowin von Hutten had ordered an unauthorized blocking of the bridges.

For three weeks, Sickingen’s armies laid siege to Trier. He was defeated for two reasons. First, Philipp set an ambush and confiscated vital supplies of gunpowder meant to supply the knights. Second, Sickingen apparently forgot that the archbishop was a “fighting bishop” and underestimated the loyalty of his subjects.
In what appeared to be Trier's darkest hour, troops burst out of the city, led by the archbishop himself. They engaged Sickingen and his armies outside the city wall, and Greifenklau prevailed.

Sickingen survived that battle, but at Oberwesel on September 29, 1522, Philipp convened a meeting with the electors of the Palatinate and Trier. That meeting would seal Sickingen's fate. He had escaped to his Ebernburg Castle, where Philipp was eager to attack him. The others convinced Philipp that doing so would court disaster; winter was coming, and the Ebernburg was considered impregnable.

In February the following year, the three princes met again in Frankfurt. Sickingen still controlled all of his twelve castles. The princes agreed to attack only the one where Sickingen was most likely to be found. On April 22, they met again in Kreuznach, where they learned that Sickingen was at Landstuhl, one of his more heavily defended fortresses. Philipp offered 500 gulden to anyone who would capture the feared knight.

The princes laid siege on April 29, 1523. Philipp took advantage of the late fifteenth-century development of portable cannons on wheels. Over six hundred cannonballs were fired on the first day. Philipp joined his troops, clothed in their military garb. At one point he fired a cannon himself. A misfire might have ended Philipp's promising career. On the third day of the siege, Sickingen foolishly stepped out to inspect the damage done to his fortress. During the short time he was vulnerable, a cannonball shattered a wooden beam next to him, and it impaled him.

The seriously wounded Sickingen was taken into the fortress, there to linger until he died. On May 6, he surrendered to the three princes, ending the Knights' War. The next day, Philipp and his allies went into the fortress, where they found Sickingen in a dark chamber. Philipp entered first and asked the knight why he had attacked him in 1518. Sickingen promised that if he lived, he would make it up to Philipp. After Philipp and his party left the room but while they were still in the hallway, word came to Philipp that Sickingen had died.

For Philipp, the insult of being compelled to pay that huge ransom five years earlier had been avenged. The news spread far and wide. Now the child prince of 1518 was recognized as a decisive leader for all to follow with confidence.

How can one account for Philipp's rapid rise to recognition at such an early age? One's heritage is a powerful but often ignored factor. Stories of our ancestors and their deeds told to us in our youth fill our adult memory and influence our adult behavior.