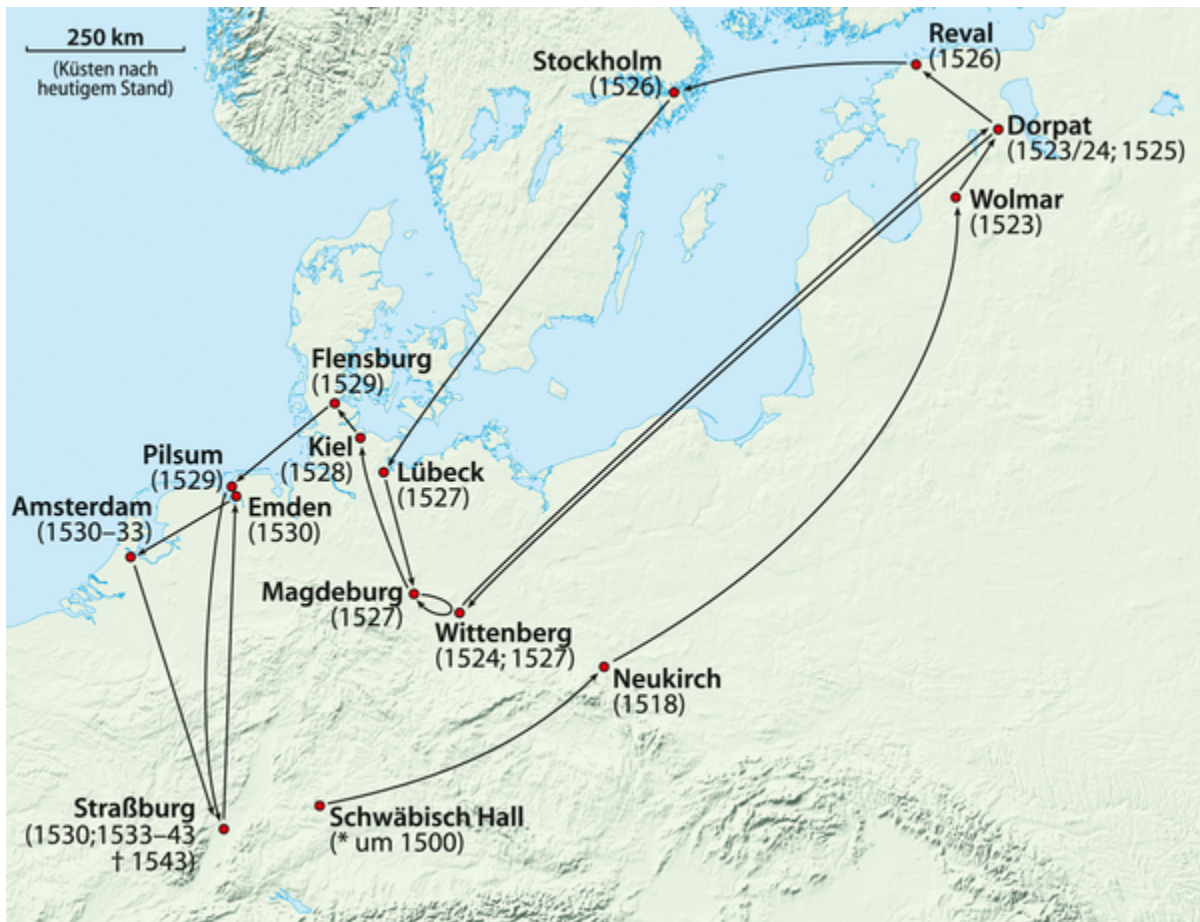


Melchior Hoffman: A Radical Reformer

Introduction:

In the tumultuous landscape of the Protestant Reformation, where religious ideas clashed and transformative ideologies emerged, Melchior Hoffman stood out as a radical reformer. Hoffman, a charismatic and influential figure, played a significant role in shaping the Reformation movement, particularly in Germany and the Netherlands. His unorthodox beliefs and impassioned preaching captivated audiences, igniting social and religious transformations that challenged the established order of the time.

Early Life and Conversion: Melchior Hoffman was born in 1495 in Swabia, Germany. He was without scholarly training, and first appeared as a furrier in Livonia. Attracted by Luther's teachings, he came forward as a lay preacher, combining business travels with a religious mission. By 1523 he was “on people’s radar” and was required to receive Martin Luther’s endorsement to continue as a lay preacher. He received the endorsement, but as his preaching became more radical causing political and religious strife, he was forced to leave many cities. He moved to Sweden to continue his self-appointed ministry, but was also forced to leave the country.



He made his way to Denmark, where he found favor with King Frederick I, and was appointed by royal ordinance to preach the Gospel at Kiel. He was probably the first printer in the city. He was extravagant in his denunciations, and developed a Zwinglian view of the Eucharist.

This again brought him “on the radar.” Luther himself was alarmed at this. At a colloquy of preachers in Flensburg on (April 8, 1529), Hoffman, John Campanus and others were challenged about their views on

the Eucharist which was akin to the theology of Zwingli. Hoffman spoke against the "magic" of the Lutheran interpretation, holding that the function of the Eucharist, like that of preaching, is nothing more than an appeal for spiritual union with Christ. Refusing to retract, he was banished.

Making his way to Strasbourg, he was well received, until his Anabaptist tendencies became apparent. He joined with the Anabaptists of the city, and was rebaptized in April 1530. At which point he moved to Emden (1530) where he developed his first large following of disciples. It was during this stage that in his studies of the *Book of Revelation* he determined that Jesus would return to earth at Strasbourg in 1533. He claimed to have received a vision of "resurrections" of apostolic Christianity, first under John Hus, and now under himself with 1533 being the inaugural year. Strasbourg was to be the New Jerusalem. When however he prophesied that the return of Christ would be preceded by a purging of the ungodly, Hoffman was seen as a revolutionary.

Hoffman's prophecy failed to come true. Two of his followers, Jan van Matthijs and Jan van Leiden, proclaimed that Hoffman was wrong on the questions of the exact time and place, where Christ would return and reign, and named Münster as the correct location. Hoffman's failed prophecy of the return of Christ contributed significantly to the Münster Rebellion (1533–1534).

Münster Rebellion. The city of Münster was a largely Lutheran town but located in a largely Catholic region, the Prince-Bishopric of Münster with alliances to the Holy Roman Empire. The city soon became a hotbed to Anabaptist theology with a large enough following to take political control of the city in the elections. They then sought to establish a theocratic society based on Hoffman's teachings. They embarked on a radical social experiment that aimed to create a community governed by strict religious principles. A key point was redistribution of wealth which brought the poor streaming to the city to "join" the movement.

The resulting chaos and anarchy led to Prince-Bishopric of Münster seeking to restore order. A siege began soon after Easter 1534. Inside the besieged city, one of the emerging leaders was John of Leiden, a tailor's apprentice. His authority grew. He turned the city into a millenarian Anabaptist theocracy until eventually he proclaimed himself the successor of David and adopted royal regalia, honors, and absolute power in the new Jerusalem (Sept 1534). Inside the city, women outnumbered men by a factor of 3, so Leiden made polygamy compulsory, with himself taking sixteen wives. Meanwhile, most of the residents of Münster were starving as a result of the year-long siege.

The insurrection was suppressed in June 1535, the city and John captured. John was tortured to death in the city's central marketplace on 22 January 1536.

Hoffman was not present during the rebellion, but was blamed for the terror inspired by the rebellion. Hoffman was imprisoned for the rest of his life, until his death in 1543.

Radical Beliefs and Prophetic Vision: Hoffman's religious views gradually took on a more radical character. He rejected infant baptism and advocated for the re-baptism of adults who had made a conscious decision to embrace the Protestant faith. He believed that true believers formed a spiritual community separate from the existing church institutions, and that they should live in harmony and mutual support.

A defining aspect of Hoffman's theology was his belief in the imminent return of Christ and the establishment of the New Jerusalem in Strasbourg. He considered himself a prophet, claiming to have received divine revelations and visions. These prophecies fueled his conviction that he was an instrument of God's divine plan for the Reformation.

Legacy and Impact: Although Hoffman's direct influence waned after the Münster debacle, his ideas continued to resonate among various radical and Anabaptist groups in the centuries that followed. His emphasis on the spiritual community, religious freedom, and the imminent return of Christ inspired subsequent movements and individuals who sought to challenge religious and societal norms.