



Maple Wood Heirlooms and the Re-formation of a Dynastic Identity: Elector John of Saxony's Sermon Notes as Grapho-Relics

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Article abstract

The widespread practice of taking notes on sermons as a form of learning and piety among literate Protestants in the sixteenth century has been largely untreated by scholars. This article offers a brief survey of this phenomenon before focusing on two eight-piece sets of palm-sized maple tablets that Elector John of Saxony used for taking such notes. While research into these rare objects has tended to concentrate almost exclusively on their textual content, this contribution seeks new insights into these tablets by applying methods common to material culture studies. This approach proves to be useful not only for exploring the tablets' practical features but also for understanding their significance as the earliest surviving tangible expressions of Lutheran piety originating from a Saxon prince. Elector John's successors regarded these simple objects as "grapho-relics," elevating them to family heirlooms that symbolized the redefinition of the dynastic identity of the Ernestine Saxon house as the guardian of Luther and his legacy.

Maple Wood Heirlooms and the Re-formation of a Dynastic Identity: Elector John of Saxony's Sermon Notes as Grapho-Relics

DANIEL GEHRT

Research Library of Gotha

The widespread practice of taking notes on sermons as a form of learning and piety among literate Protestants in the sixteenth century has been largely untreated by scholars. This article offers a brief survey of this phenomenon before focusing on two eight-piece sets of palm-sized maple tablets that Elector John of Saxony used for taking such notes. While research into these rare objects has tended to concentrate almost exclusively on their textual content, this contribution seeks new insights into these tablets by applying methods common to material culture studies. This approach proves to be useful not only for exploring the tablets' practical features but also for understanding their significance as the earliest surviving tangible expressions of Lutheran piety originating from a Saxon prince. Elector John's successors regarded these simple objects as "grapho-relics," elevating them to family heirlooms that symbolized the redefinition of the dynastic identity of the Ernestine Saxon house as the guardian of Luther and his legacy.

Dans le milieu de la recherche, la pratique répandue de la prise de notes sur les sermons comme forme d'apprentissage et de piété parmi les protestants lettrés au XVI^e siècle a été largement ignorée. Cet article propose une brève présentation de ce phénomène, avant de se concentrer sur deux ensembles de tablettes en bois d'érable composés de huit pièces, dont la taille ne dépasse guère celle d'une paume de main, dont l'électeur Jean de Saxe se servait pour prendre de telles notes. Alors que la recherche qui porte sur ces objets rares tend à s'intéresser presque exclusivement à leur contenu textuel, cette contribution cherche à jeter un nouvel éclairage sur ces tablettes en appliquant des méthodes couramment employées dans le domaine des études sur la culture matérielle. Cette approche s'avère utile non seulement pour explorer les caractéristiques pratiques des tablettes, mais encore pour comprendre leur importance historique en tant que premières expressions tangibles de piété luthérienne chez un prince saxon. Les successeurs de l'électeur Jean de Saxe ont considéré ces objets de la vie courante comme des « grapho-reliques », en les élevant au rang de patrimoine familial symbolisant la redéfinition de l'identité dynastique de la branche ernestine de la maison de Saxe comme protectrice de Luther et de son héritage.

1. Reading beyond the writing¹

The objects lying at the heart of this investigation—two eight-piece sets of palm-sized maple wood tablets with handwritten notes in the

1. I am deeply grateful to Dietrich Hakelberg, Nicole James, Philipp Knüpffer, Thea Lindquist, Paul Neuendorf, and the two anonymous peer reviewers for helping me to enhance this paper.

vernacular—are rare artifacts of sixteenth-century German piety (fig. 1). Both sets contain notes that Elector John of Saxony (1468–1532) took during sermons, presumably held by Johannes Voit (ca. 1490–1559):

1) Fortress of Coburg, Autograph Collections, A.I,212,(1),3: Notes from two consecutive sermons on I Timothy 4:1–10

8 maple wood tablets • 11.5 x 8.0 x ca. 0.15 cm • central Germany • after 1522

Modern folio numbering: 1–8. Excerpts from sermons. Thirteen to fourteen lines per side without margins. Sentences and phrases are separated by asterisks. German cursive writing with silverpoint or leaden stylus by Elector John of Saxony. The beech wood covers are varnished dark brown and equipped with a brass clasp. Written on the spine by later hand: “Manus Ioannis Electoris ducis Saxoniae.” A blue envelope is enclosed with the words: “Das Buch ist Sr Hoheit dem Herzog von I.K.H. der Frau Kronprinzessin übergeben worden. Berlin, Febr. 1881.”

Provenance: The *terminus post quem* for dating the tablets derives from the abbreviation of the motto “Verbum Domini manet in aeternum” (The word of the Lord endures forever) at the beginning of the first sermon. The electors of Saxony and the other members of the Ernestine house had used this motto since 1522.² The notes are unmistakably in the handwriting of Elector John of Saxony. They were given to Duke Ernest II of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha (1818–93) in February of 1881 as a gift from his niece, Crown Princess Victoria of Prussia (1840–1901), and became part of the autograph collection that had been founded by him and his brother Prince Albert (1819–61) around 1836 at the Fortress of Coburg.

2. See Carl C. Christensen, *Princes and Propaganda: Electoral Saxon Art of the Reformation* (Kirkville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publication, 1992), 28–29; Rudolf Ehwald, “Noch eine Predignachschrift Johann des Beständigen,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 21 (1901): 524–27, 525–26.

Secondary Literature: Berbig, *Luther-Urkunden*, 145–48 (with full transcription);³ Böcking, *Autograph Collection*, 21–25;⁴ Kaltwasser, *Luther-Drucke*, 194–95.⁵

1r–8v Notes taken by [Elector John of Saxony] on two sermons held by [Johannes Voit (?)] on I Timothy 4:1–10, two consecutive days [after 1522]. Incipit of the first sermon (1r): “• V • D • M • I • E • Das vierd capitel an timotheo yn der ersten epistel * [...]” Incipit of the second sermon (5r): “wyr haben gestern gehort wie uns S paul gestern gewarnet vor dem falschenn predigern * [...]”

2) Research Library of Gotha, Chart. B 1561: Notes from sermons on Easter Sunday (Mark 16) and Monday (Luke 24).

8 maple wood tablets • 11.5 x 7.5 x ca. 0.15 cm • central Germany • after 1522

Modern folio numbering: 1–8. 2r–8v contain excerpts from sermons. Eighteen to nineteen lines per side without margins. Sentences and phrases are separated by asterisks. German cursive writing with silverpoint or leaden stylus by Elector John of Saxony. The beech wood covers are varnished dark brown and equipped with two brass clasps and a closure pin. The spine was re-enforced with a strip of dark brown leather in 1978. The paper pasted on the inside of the front cover contains the shelf number “B 1561” and references to articles in the *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* (1901) and *Archiv für Stenographie* (1903) that the director of the ducal library of Gotha Rudolf Ehwald (1847–1927) made in black ink. The paper pasted on the inside of the back cover is blank. A separate booklet contains two pages of Ehwald’s attempts to decipher John’s notes (I–II) and the typewritten restoration report signed by [Elke] Wilke from April 1978.

Provenance: For the origins of this set of tablets see the provenance description above. It was most likely inherited by Elector John’s son John Frederick

3. Georg Berbig, “Luther-Urkunden aus Coburg und Gotha,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 21 (1901): 139–48.

4. Silvia Böcking, “I would but conjure up the spirits of those far away ...:” *From the Autograph Collection in the Veste Coburg Art Collections*, trans. Cordula Politis (Coburg, 2006).

5. Franz Georg Kaltwasser, *Die Zeitgenössischen Luther-Drucke der Landesbibliothek Coburg. Mit einem Anhang: Luther-Handschriften in Coburg* (Coburg: Müller, 1961).

(1503–54) and thereafter by his grandson John William (1530–73) and his great grandson Frederick William (1562–1602), the founder of the duchy of Saxe-Altenburg. After this lineage died out in 1672, most of the library collections in Altenburg were incorporated into the ducal library in Gotha under Ernest the Pious (1601–75). The tablets were mentioned as part of the Gotha collections in the manuscript catalogue published by the library director Ernst Salomon Cyprian (1673–1745) in 1714. After World War II they were transported with the rest of the library collections to the Soviet Union and were returned in 1956.

Secondary Literature: Cyprian, *Catalogus*, b4r;⁶ Mitzschke, “Predigt-Nachschriften”;⁷ Ehwald, *Predigtnachschrift* (with transcriptions of the first lines of each sermon); Gehrt, *Reformationshandschriften*, 1,122;⁸ Michel, “Johann von Sachsen.”⁹

Digital images: archive.thulb.uni-jena.de/ufb/receive/ufb_cbu_00016354?lang=en, accessed 30 June 2020.

1r Used side of the tablet that was sanded down after Elector John of Saxony had written notes on it. His handwriting is now barely visible.

1v Unused side of the tablet with a note from an unknown person in a hand typical of the eighteenth century: “TESTIMONIVM Amoris Christi: Jllustrissimi quondam Electoris Saxoniae etc. JOHANNIS.”

2r–8v Notes taken by [Elector John of Saxony] on two sermons held by [Johannes Voit (?)] on Mark 16 and Luke 24, Easter Sunday and Monday [after 1522]. Incipit of the first sermon (2r): “ • V • D • M • I • E • Daß euangelion am

6. Ernst Salomon Cyprian, *Catalogus codicum manuscriptorum Bibliothecae Gothanae* (Leipzig: Johann Friedrich Gleditsch, 1714).

7. Paul Mitzschke, “Predigt-Nachschriften während des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts,” *Archiv für Stenographie* 55 (1903): 216–17.

8. Daniel Gehrt, ed., *Die Handschriften der Forschungsbibliothek Gotha ...*, vol. 2: *Katalog der Reformationshandschriften* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2015).

9. Stefan Michel, “Ein Förderer der Reformation: Kurfürst Johann von Sachsen,” in *Aus erster Hand. 95 Porträts zur Reformationgeschichte. Aus den Sammlungen der Forschungsbibliothek Gotha*, ed. Daniel Gehrt and Sascha Salatowsky (Gotha, 2014), 96–97, number 48.

ostertag marcj am X 6. capitel • deshalben yst christ[us] warhafftig erstanden vnd d[er] todt erwurget * [...]” Incipit of the second sermon (5r): “euangelion • luce am XXIII am ostermantag * diß euangelion lernet vnß daß christus warhafftig seye aufferstande * [...]”

The tablets were originally everyday items of practical use, but over the past centuries they have accumulated a special symbolic value. Today they are preserved in two notable cultural institutions. The Research Library of Gotha, the fourth largest historic library in the Federal Republic of Germany with extraordinary collections on the Reformation,¹⁰ possesses one set. The other is part of the autograph collections of the Franconian Fortress of Coburg. Scholars who have discussed these tablets have focused almost exclusively on the texts written upon them. Their primary aim was to address basic questions of authorship, genre, content, date of origin, and provenance. All have concluded that the tablets contain notes on sermons taken by Elector John of Saxony, based on the evidence of his distinct handwriting. Those preserved in Coburg were from sermons on I Timothy 4:1–10 held on two consecutive days. Those in Gotha were from Easter Sunday and Monday sermons based on Mark 16 and Luke 24. The strong emphasis on faith as the sole means of receiving full redemption from sins—*sola fide*—distinguishes them as Protestant sermons. Consequently, the tablets on I Timothy 4 that deal with Christian freedom repeatedly warn against placing, for instance, false hope in the spiritual merits of celibacy in religious orders or in abstinence during the fasting seasons. Of particular interest in the earliest published articles on the sermons was whether or not they had been held by Martin Luther (1483–1546). In 1901, when the publication of the Weimar edition of Luther’s works was in progress, the church historian Georg Berbig (1866–1913) claimed that they stemmed from the Wittenberg reformer, without, however, citing evidence.¹¹

10. These do not only encompass old prints but also 260 manuscript volumes with nearly sixteen thousand individual letters and documents from across the German empire and parts of Europe, and more than seven thousand pieces of Luther’s so-called “Table Talk.” These manuscripts have been recently catalogued in Gehrt, *Reformationshandschriften*. See also the online entries in the Kalliope Verbundkatalog (Kalliope union catalogue), accessed 30 June 2020, kalliope.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/de/index.html.

11. Berbig, *Luther-Urkunden*.

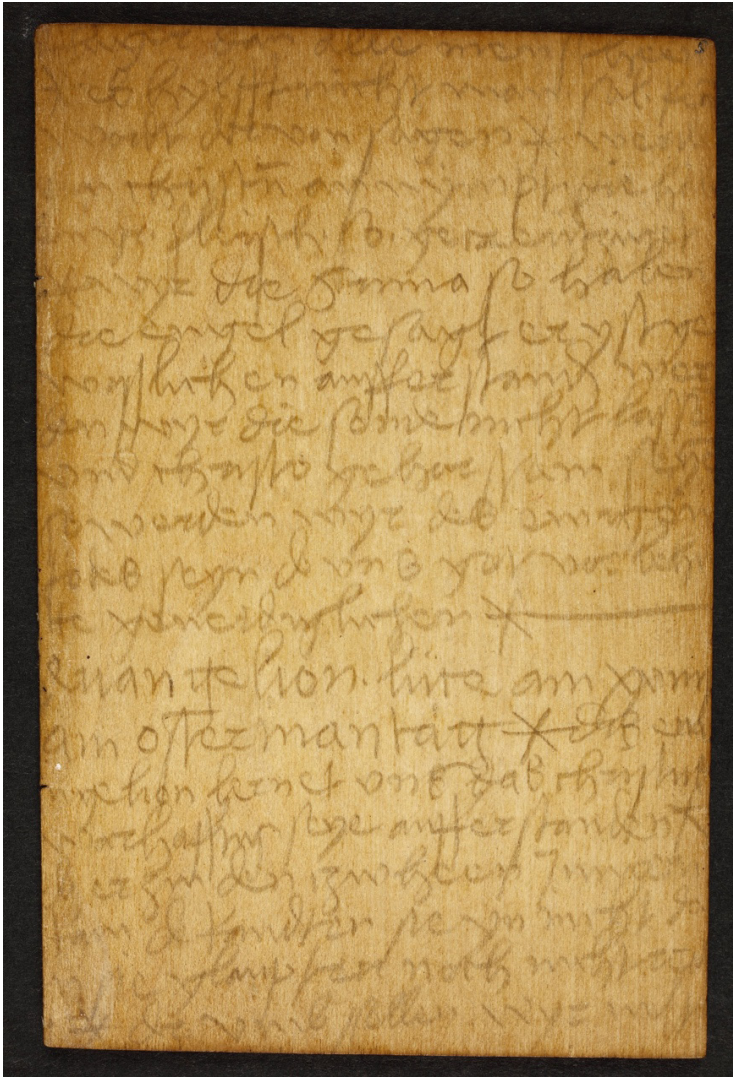


Figure 1. Sermon notes taken by Elector John on Easter Sunday and Monday (Research Library of Gotha, Chart. B 1561, fol. 5r).

One may gain a deeper understanding of these tablets by going beyond the written text to investigate questions of interest to scholars in new cultural studies. In particular, studies in material culture offer new insights into the

significance of these objects.¹² This burgeoning field of research found one of its greatest impetuses in Neil MacGregor's award-winning book *A History of the World in 100 Objects* in 2010.¹³ It has gained a small foothold in research on the German Reformation.¹⁴ The potential is, however, much greater, as a brief overview of recent efforts to intertwine these strands of research attests.

The so-called "material turn" stands, in principle, for the increased sensibility to and appreciation of the interpretative potential of material evidence, and for an interdisciplinary approach to historical questions. For instance, objects are investigated in regard to their practical, symbolic, and memorial functions, significance in society, and aesthetic qualities. These can vary in part over time in changing social contexts. The material turn has been influenced especially by archaeology and social anthropology, but art history, ethnology, and praxeology have also made significant contributions.¹⁵ Characteristic of current studies in material culture is the integration of methodological approaches of the actor-network¹⁶ and affordance theories¹⁷ that also take into account the interaction of non-human agents such as animals and artifacts in shifting relational structures.

12. For an overview of various approaches see, for example, Catherine Richardson, Tara Hamling, and David Gaimster, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Material Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017); Chris Tilley, Webb Keane, Susanne Küchler, Mike Rowlands, and Patricia Spyer, eds., *Handbook of Material Culture* (London: SAGE, 2006).

13. Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (London: Allen Lane, 2010).

14. Indicatively, none of the 110 contributions of the Wittenberg conference in 2017 on the cultural impact of the Reformation specifically took an approach in material culture studies. See Klaus Fitschen, Marianne Schröter, Christopher Spehr, and Ernst-Joachim Waschke, eds., *Cultural Impact of the Reformation*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2018). In contrast, one panel of the conference organized by Susan C. Karant-Nunn (Arizona), Ute Lotz-Heumann (Arizona), and the Duke August Library of Wolfenbüttel in 2016, entitled "The Cultural History of the Reformation: Current Research and Future Perspectives," was dedicated to material culture studies. It comprised contributions on iconoclasm, sensual experiences through various materials, and Protestant and Catholic healing springs. For the conference report by Amy Newhouse, see *H / Soz / Kult*, accessed 30 June 2020, hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-6862.

15. See, for example, Richardson, Hamling, and Gaimster, eds., 3–28.

16. See Anders Blok, Ignacio Farias, and Celia Roberts, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Actor-Network Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

17. See Richard Fox, Diamantis Panagiotopoulos, and Christina Tsouparopoulou, "Affordanz," in *Materiale Textkulturen: Konzepte – Materialien – Praktiken*, ed. Thomas Meier, Michael R. Ott, and Rebecca Sauer (Berlin and Munich: De Gruyter, 2015), 63–70, [dx.doi.org/10.1515/9783110371291.63](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110371291.63).

It has taken some years for the decisive impulses generated by English-language scholarship in this field to find resonance in Germany.¹⁸ In German Reformation studies, this can be attributed to the commonplace associations of Protestantism with iconoclasm and the principle of *sola scriptura*—by the Word alone.¹⁹ Thus, when dealing with the impact of these reform movements on the material world, scholars have often focused one-sidedly on the destruction and removal of church objects. Consequently, studies on the materially more pronounced Catholic or pre-Reformation cultures are more prevalent. For instance, some researchers have examined the role of material culture on household piety in Renaissance Italy²⁰ or the “cultural biographies” of the renowned relic collections of Elector Frederick III of Saxony (1463–1525) in Wittenberg and of Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg (1490–1545) in Halle.²¹ However, several authors have pointed out that Lutherans actually held a relatively ambiguous stance in regard to images.²² Although Calvinist or Reformed contemporaries rigorously demanded austerity in public sacral spaces, they displayed a more liberal attitude towards images within the private domestic realm. Exemplary for recent work also investigating the impact of the Reformation on material, spatial, and visual culture is Martin Wangsgaard

18. See Kim Siebenhüner, “Things That Matter: Zur Geschichte der materiellen Kultur in der Frühneuzeitforschung,” *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 42 (2015): 373–409, 373, 386–87, [dx.doi.org/10.3790/zhf.42.3.373](https://doi.org/10.3790/zhf.42.3.373).

19. See, for example, Bridget Heal, “Visual and Material Culture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Protestant Reformations*, ed. Ulinka Rublack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 601–20; Joseph Leo Koener, *The Reformation of the Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 27–37.

20. Maya Corry, Deborah Howard, and Mary Laven, eds., *Madonnas & Miracles: The Holy Home in Renaissance Italy* (London: Philip Wilson, 2017); Abigail Brundin, Deborah Howard, and Mary Laven, eds., *The Sacred Home in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), [dx.doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198816553.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198816553.001.0001).

21. Stefan Laube, *Von der Reliquie zum Ding: Heiliger Ort – Wunderkammer – Museum* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2011), 199–264, [dx.doi.org/10.1524/9783050057439](https://doi.org/10.1524/9783050057439).

22. See, for example, Heal, “Visual and Material Culture”; Andrew Morrall, “Domestic Decoration and the Bible in the Early Modern Home,” in *The Oxford Handbook to the Bible in England, c. 1520–1700*, ed. Kevin Killeen, Helen Smith, and Rachel Judith Willie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 577–97; Alexandra Walsham, “Recycling the Sacred: Material Culture and Cultural Memory after the English Reformation,” *Church History* 86.4 (2017): 1121–54, [dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0009640717002074](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640717002074).

Jürgensen's monograph from 2018.²³ It examines the transformation of the interiors, furnishings, and images of the Danish rural parish churches in their entirety from the late Middle Ages to the end of the sixteenth century. This study is interdisciplinary, combining perspectives and methodological approaches of archeology, art history, and theology, and addresses such questions as the interplay between architecture and liturgy. Today, it is common for companions on Reformation history to provide a chapter on material culture²⁴ and conversely for anthologies and companions on material culture to offer contributions on Catholic, Protestant, and other religious cultures.²⁵

Among the early German contributors to material culture studies are Carola Jäggi and Jörn Staecker, who organized a conference entitled "Archaeology of the Reformation" in 2004.²⁶ The conference brought together archeologists, art historians, and church historians to examine the impact of the profound confessional changes of the sixteenth century on material culture. The collaboration was inspired by a conference of the same name held a few

23. Martin Wangsgaard Jürgensen, *Ritual and Art across the Danish Reformation: Changing Interiors of Village Churches, 1450–1600* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), dx.doi.org/10.1484/M.RITUS-EB.5.106179.

24. See, for example, Silvia Evangelisti, "Material Culture," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Counter-Reformation*, ed. Alexandra Bamji, Geert H. Janssen, and Mary Laven (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 395–416; Heal, "Visual and Material Culture."

25. See, for example, contributions by Susanna Ivanič (322–37) and Irene Galandra-Cooper and Mary Laven (338–53) in *The Routledge Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Richardson, Hamling, and Gaimster; Stefanie Samida, Manfred K. H. Eggert, and Hans Pete Hahn, eds., *Handbuch Materielle Kultur: Bedeutungen, Konzepte, Disziplinen* (Stuttgart and Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2014), 241–44, dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-476-05346-6.

26. Carola Jäggi and Jörn Staecker, eds., *Archäologie der Reformation: Studien zu den Auswirkungen des Konfessionswechsels auf die materielle Kultur* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007), dx.doi.org/10.1515/9783110920444. The volumes of collected essays published in the past decade in connection with the projects Luther Archeology and Ernestine Wittenberg focus primarily on the physical environments in which Luther lived and worked, and merely secondarily on the influence of the Reformation on material culture. These include Harald Meller, ed., *Fundsache Luther: Archäologen auf den Spuren des Reformators* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2008); Harald Meller, ed., *Luthers Lebenswelten* (Halle 2008); Harald Meller, ed., *Mitteldeutschland im Zeitalter der Reformation: Interdisziplinäre Tagung vom 22. bis 24. Juni 2012 in Halle (Saale)* (Halle an der Saale: Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie Sachsen-Anhalt, 2014); and the four volumes published between 2011 and 2017 under the series entitled Wittenberg-Forschungen.

years earlier in Great Britain.²⁷ Both forums sparked studies into the Protestant iconography found on glazed earthenware stove tile reliefs from the second half of the sixteenth century.²⁸ Countless shards of this durable material have been unearthed at archaeological sites. The saints that were once commonly depicted on these tiles in the Middle Ages were replaced by portraits of theologians, Reformation-era princes, allegorical figures, and elements of the motif “Law and Grace.” Lucas Cranach (1472–1553) had created this dichotomous composition in the later 1520s to visualize two fundamental strands of Luther’s theology. In 2010, Miriam Verena Fleck published a pioneering study examining the development of this composition in graphic prints and paintings and its transmission, in modified form, in a wide array of media, including wood and ivory carvings, sculptures, castings, ceramic tableware, glazed stove tile reliefs, enamel and glass painting, silver engravings, textiles, and tooled leather bookbindings.²⁹ In exploring the emergence, interpretation, and spread of this motif throughout Europe in these various material forms, she used an approach common to visual culture studies.³⁰ Materiality was of secondary importance in her investigation and she did not analyze the role that specific objects played in social practices. Especially innovative in both of these areas is Nadezda Shevchenko’s work on the historical anthropology

27. David Gaimster and Roberta Gilchrist, eds., *The Archaeology of Reformation, 1480–1580* (Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2003). See also the proceedings of a similar conference on general transitions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: David Gaimster and Paul Stamper, eds., *The Age of Transition: The Archaeology of English Culture 1400–1600* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1997).

28. David Gaimster, “Pots, Prints and Protestantism: Changing Mentalities in the Urban Domestic Sphere, c. 1480–1580,” in *The Archaeology of Reformation*, ed. Gaimster and Gilchrist, 122–44, dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781315087276-9; essays by Claudia Hoffmann, Julia Hallenkamp-Lumpe, Eva Roth Heege, Kirsi Majantie, and Edgar Ring in *Archäologie der Reformation*, ed. Jäggi and Staecker; essays by Hans-Georg Stephan, Harald Rosmanitz, and Johanna Reetz in *Mitteldeutschland im Zeitalter der Reformation*, ed. Meller.

29. Miriam Verena Fleck, *Ein tröstlich Gemelde: Die Glaubensallegorie “Gesetz und Gnade” in Europa zwischen Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Korb: Didymos-Verlag, 2010). She also systematically catalogued her findings.

30. Morrall took a similar approach in his recent article entitled “Domestic Decoration and the Bible in the Early Modern Home,” in which he chartered the transmission of biblical scenes into English households via painted glass, woodwork, textiles, plasterwork, and ceramics. See note 22.

of the book, published in 2007.³¹ Shevchenko examined the change in cultural norms, behavioural patterns, and practices regarding books based on archival and material sources associated with the libraries of the Prussian ducal family during the Reformation. In doing so, she went far beyond the textual analysis of these objects and investigated them within social contexts and relationships, while also taking their materiality into account. In general, books and book collections provide a promising point of departure to gain new insights into the Reformation and its reception on the basis of material evidence.

The present case study of Elector John's notetaking on wooden tablets attempts to show the potential of applying approaches in material culture studies to objects related to the German Reformation that contain writing. However, it first surveys the general practice of notetaking in churches as a form of piety and learning promoted in Protestantism, a practice that has been overlooked by historians.³² Reflections on the materiality and affordance of the tablets follow. Affordance refers to the physical properties of an object that determine its possible uses. Viewing the tablets as "grapho-relics" offers promising insights into the significance contemporaries and those who possessed the objects attributed to them. Ulinka Rublack coined this term in 2010 to describe the cult-like interaction with autograph writings of the Wittenberg reformers that were avidly collected since the mid-1530s.³³ Especially venerated in this constellation was the highly charismatic Luther, upheld by his followers as a specially chosen instrument in the divine plan for human salvation and as the authoritative interpreter of scripture.³⁴ Collecting such autographs with their

31. Nadezda Shevchenko, *Eine historische Anthropologie des Buches: Bücher in der preußischen Herzogsfamilie zur Zeit der Reformation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

32. This practice has been dealt with almost exclusively in connection with the preservation of Luther's and Calvin's sermons. See below.

33. Ulinka Rublack, "Grapho-Relics: Lutheranism and the Materialization of the Word," in *Relics and Remains*, ed. Alexandra Walsham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 144–66, 154–59, dx.doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtq016. Werner Wilhelm Schnabel referred to such autographs years earlier as "Protestant relics." Werner Wilhelm Schnabel, *Das Stammbuch. Konstitution und Geschichte einer textsortenbezogenen Sammelform bis ins erste Drittel des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2003), 247–249, 267.

34. On the veneration of places and objects that Luther physically came into contact with, see Stefan Laube, *Von der Reliquie zum Ding*, 429–53; Stefan Laube, "Süchtig nach Splittern und Scherben: Energetische Bruchstücke bei Martin Luther," in *Luthermania: Ansichten einer Kultfigur*, ed. Hole Rößler (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), 69–90.

marks of individuality was thus reminiscent of the widespread practice of collecting earthly remains of saints in Roman Catholicism. However, no claims were made of these writings performing or inducing miracles. Their efficacy was largely limited to the feeling of personal closeness to the reformers and of blessedness that they evoked in the possession of Luther's adherents.

In the course of their "biographies,"³⁵ all extant tablets with Elector John's sermon notes found their way into collections of members of the Ernestine dynasty. This is no mere coincidence. As John's descendants, they had a special interest in possessing and preserving these particular artifacts. In their possession, these simple everyday objects became family heirlooms. This can be readily ascertained through a comparative look at a devotional book in John's handwriting from around 1530. As an expression of veneration, one of his grandsons had a bookbinder significantly enhance the outer appearance of the book. These were among the earliest autograph testimonies of the Lutheran faith of a Saxon prince. No such writings exist from John's brother and predecessor, Frederick III, called the Wise. Although Frederick protected Luther when the Roman papacy confronted the theologian with heresy, he did not take a public stance on Luther's theology, presumably for political reasons. John, on the other hand, openly promoted Luther's teachings and reform agenda after assuming power in 1525. Since then, the Ernestine dynasty has identified itself strongly as protector and promotor of the Wittenberg Reformation.

2. The Protestant practice of taking sermon notes

As is commonly known, *sola scriptura* was one of the fundamental principles of the Protestant Reformation. It stood for a new emphasis on the authority of the Bible in Christianity. Not the Mass but the sermon became the dominating focal point of worship. This was materially expressed in Protestant church architecture by positioning pulpits at a central visual point of the assembled

35. On the general concept that objects have a *curriculum vitae* in which they assume new functions and meanings in various contexts, see Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), and a recent anthology of essays taking this approach to books: Ulrike Gleixner, Constanze Baum, Jörn Münkner, and Hole Rößler, eds., *Biographien des Buches* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2017).

congregation.³⁶ Emphasis placed not only on propagating the evangelical message but also on it being received, understood, and internalized. This led to the increased practice of taking notes on sermons, whether it was merely jotting down the main thoughts, words, and phrases or attempting to record sermons in their entirety.

Statements from two of the most renowned preachers of the high Middle Ages, Berthold von Regensburg (ca. 1210–72) and Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–1328), indicate that some of their listeners also took notes during sermons.³⁷ A handful of these manuscripts as well as those from sermons held by Johannes Tauler (ca. 1300–61) and the late medieval preacher Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg (1445–1510) have survived.³⁸ Those preserved were primarily from sermons presented at convents and were recorded by nuns. In their introductory remarks, these transcribers described the meticulous task of recording the preacher's spoken words onto paper as uncommon, questionable, and theologically dangerous. They made no explicit mention of the use of the notes for spiritual edification. Nor is there any evidence that the notes were circulated. For the German literary scholar Paul-Gerhard Völker who re-examined these manuscripts in the 1960s, such remarks suggest that the primary goal of collecting the sermons was to honour confessors and theologians who had preached at the transcriber's convent.³⁹ Just the same, the words constitute the topoi of humility and submissiveness conventionally expected of women engaging even passively in the traditionally male domain of theology. Prohibited by canonical law to preach themselves, nuns were especially keen to preserve sermons particularly addressed to them and their spiritual needs, presumably also for later reading. This practice was still common at the dawn of the Reformation. The majority of the sermons that exist today by Luther's

36. The chapel at the Hartenfels Palace of the electors of Saxony in Torgau is the first example of this. See Hans-Christoph Sens, *Evangelische Schlosskirche Torgau* (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2007), 12–18; Oskar Thulin, *Schloß und Schloßkirche in Torgau* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1967).

37. See Paul-Gerhard Völker, "Die Überlieferungsformen mittelalterlicher deutscher Predigten," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 92 (1963): 212–27, 220–22.

38. Nine collections are listed in Völker, 217–18. See also Kurt Ruh, "Deutsche Predigtbücher des Mittelalters," *Vestigia Biblia* 3 (1981): 11–30; Rita Voltmer, *Wie der Wächter auf dem Turm: Ein Prediger und seine Stadt: Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg und Straßburg* (Trier: Porta-Alba-Verlag, 2005), 87–90.

39. Völker, 219.

mentor Johann von Staupitz (1465–1524), the vicar general of the German Augustinians, were recorded by nuns in Salzburg.⁴⁰

The earliest surviving manuscripts testifying to the practice of taking sermon notes in Wittenberg date back to the years 1519 to 1521. A collection of Luther's sermons on Genesis and the Gospel of Matthew has been preserved.⁴¹ Luther held these sermons in the parish church of St. Mary's immediately after those that were based on the Bible passages prescribed by the lectionary for each Sunday and church festival. Luther generally had a well-structured and concisely formulated draft version of his sermon to hand when he entered the pulpit.⁴² The theology students Johann Poliander (1487–1541) and Johannes Agricola (1494–1566), as well as Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560) who would become Germany's most prominent academic teacher, recorded what they heard either in detail or in summary. On some occasions they even translated the German into Latin. Melanchthon planned on publishing the Easter, Ascension Day, and Pentecost sermons in a Latin translation.⁴³ Consequently, these notes constitute a rather comprehensive documentation of Luther's words. During other sermons from August 1520 to April 1521, Melanchthon merely recorded excerpts, presumably for his own theological edification. The collection reveals that Poliander, Agricola, and Melanchthon were often transcribing the sermons simultaneously. These are early examples of the increasing academic practice of taking notes on sermons. Melanchthon most likely recommended this practice and acted as a role model. Several other members of the University of Wittenberg followed suit during the first decades of the Reformation.⁴⁴

40. See the introduction to *Johann von Staupitz, Salzburger Predigten 1512: Eine textkritische Edition*, ed. Wolfram Schneider-Lastin (Tübingen 1990). I sincerely thank the anonymous peer reviewer of this paper and Jonathan Reinert (Tübingen) for the reference to the notes taken on Staupitz's sermons.

41. Municipal Library of Kaliningrad, S. 22 Quart. The collection is described in Sabine Hiebsch, *Figura Ecclesiae: Lea und Rachel in Martin Luthers Genesispredigten* (Münster: Lit, 2000), 21–28; Martin Luther, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 9 (Weimar: Böhlau, 1893), 314–25.

42. On Luther's preaching practice, see Jin Ho Kwon, *Christus pro nobis: Eine Untersuchung zu Luthers Passions- und Osterpredigten bis zum Jahr 1530* (Berlin: Lit, 2008), 17–19.

43. See Hiebsch, 27–28. This project was never completed.

44. Those known include Johannes Aurifaber (1517–68), Hieronymus Besold (ca. 1500–62), Caspar Cruciger (1504–48), Veit Dietrich (1506–49), Anton Lauterbach (1502–69), Andreas Poach (1516–85), Stephan Roth (1492–1546), Michael Rotting (1494–1588), and Johann Stoltz (ca. 1513–56). See Hiebsch, 19; Kwon, 17.

Luther's sermons were systematically collected by one of his most faithful listeners, Georg Rörer (1492–1557).⁴⁵ Rörer began this practice on his own initiative in 1522 and developed his own form of shorthand in order to record the sermons verbatim. Beginning in 1537—the year in which work on the first complete edition of Luther's writings was initiated—Elector John Frederick of Saxony (1503–54) commissioned Rörer to continue this work.⁴⁶ Luther's words were to be preserved as the authoritative interpreter of scripture; Rörer's work was part of the process of canonizing Luther's writings, sermons, and lectures. To a similar end, French refugees began recording John Calvin's (1509–64) sermons in Geneva. In 1549, the congregation officially commissioned Denis Reguenier († 1560) with this work which he pursued until his death in 1560.⁴⁷ Thus, 1,542 sermons have survived. In addition to Sundays and church festivals, Calvin, who never wrote out his sermons, preached four times during the week in which he interpreted books of the Bible chapter by chapter in French. Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) systematically imparted exegetical knowledge and methods from the pulpit in Zürich in German. His only sermons preserved today are those recorded by two of his followers, Leo Jud (1482–1542) and Heinrich Buchmann (mentioned 1508–59), on the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah.⁴⁸

By the second half of the sixteenth century, taking notes on sermons had become an integral part of theological learning at Protestant schools and universities. The evidence is scarce, but compelling. The exercise books that have survived from the schooling of Johann Gerhard (1582–1637), a preeminent

45. See Hellmut Zschoch, "Luthers Rede hören und bewahren: Georg Rörers Nachschriften der Predigten des Reformators," in *Georg Rörer (1492–1557): Der Chronist der Wittenberger Reformation*, ed. Stefan Michel and Christian Speer (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012), 125–36. As deacons of the city church in Wittenberg, Rörer and Stephan Roth also transcribed numerous sermons from Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558). See Anneliese Bieber-Wallmann, "Die Predigten Johannes Bugenhagens der Jahre 1524 bis 1527 in der Sammlung Georg Rörers," in *Der Chronist*, ed. Michel and Speer, 137–69.

46. Most recently on the canonization of Luther's legacy: Stefan Michel, *Die Kanonisierung der Werke Martin Luthers im 16. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

47. See *Calvin. Studienausgabe*, vol. 7: *Predigten über das Deuteronomium und den 1. Timotheusbrief (1555–1556): Eine Auswahl*, ed. Eberhard Busch (Neukirchener Verlag, 2009), 15–16; Erwin Mülhaupt, *Die Predigt Calvins, ihre Geschichte, ihre Form und ihre religiösen Grundgedanken* (Berlin and Leipzig: De Gruyter, 1931), 1–3.

48. Central Library of Zürich, Ms. Car I 185 (Isaiah) and Ms. Car I 185a (Jeremiah). Edition: Huldrych Zwingli, *Aus Zwinglis Predigten zu Jesaja und Jeremia. Unbekannte Nachschriften ...*, ed. Oskar Farner (Zürich: Verlag Berichthaus, 1957).

Lutheran theologian in the first third of the seventeenth century, contain short notes on numerous sermons by various preachers in Quedlinburg around the year 1597.⁴⁹ Sources reveal that students recorded series of sermons offered in Protestant university towns that were aimed at systematically conveying articles of Christian faith or the exegesis of particular books of the Bible. As with academic lectures, such sermons were often transcribed in full length under dictation.⁵⁰ As a pastor and theology professor, Paul Eber (1511–69) regularly held sermons in the parish church of Wittenberg on Luther's Small Catechism.⁵¹ The series from the years 1562 and 1565, both in the vernacular, have survived in the form of student notes.⁵² In a catalogue of lectures printed in 1564, it was noted that the Jena theology professor Johann Stössel (1524–76) gave sermons on the books of Acts and Isaiah in the town church.⁵³ Exegetical sermon series that the Jena theology professor David Voit (1529–89) held on the Psalms and the Passion history in 1577 also exist in the form of student notes in mixed Latin and German.⁵⁴

At the same time, taking notes on sermons was regarded as a form of piety practised for the spiritual edification of the individual listener. This aspect was

49. Research Library of Gotha, Chart. B 915, fol. 253r–76v, 281r–82r, 293r–311r.

50. See, for example, Jürgen Leonhardt, "Classics as Textbooks: A Study of the Humanist Lectures on Cicero at the University of Leipzig, ca. 1515," in *Scholarly Knowledge: Textbooks in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Emidio Campi, Simone de Angelis, Anja-Silvia Goeing, and Anthony Grafton (Geneva: Droz, 2008), 89–112, 91; Völker, 215–16.

51. See Bernhard Bode, "Preaching Luther's Small Catechism: Paul Eber's *Catechismuspredigten* (1562)," in *Paul Eber (1511–1569): Humanist und Theologe der zweiten Generation der Wittenberger Reformation*, ed. Daniel Gehrt and Volker Leppin (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2014), 401–23.

52. The former was published in Paul Eber, *Catechismuspredigten* ... (Nuremberg: Katharina Gerlach, 1577). The latter is extant in manuscript form in the Research Library of Gotha, Chart. B 279, fol. 255r–356v.

53. See Paul Eber, *Propositiones Ad Disputandum In Academia Ienensi* ... (Jena: Donat Richtzenhan, 1564), fol. R3v.

54. Research Library of Gotha, Chart. B 497, fol. 35r–54v, 130r–44r, 167r–217r, 231v–61v, 264r–312v (Psalm 8–10 in twenty sermons); 55r–130v (Passion history). See Daniel Gehrt, "Die Harmonie der Theologie mit den studia humanitatis: Zur Rezeption der Wittenberger Bildungskonzeptionen in Jena am Beispiel der Pfarrerausbildung," in *Die Leucorea zur Zeit des späten Melanchthon: Institutionen und Formen gelehrter Bildung um 1550*, ed. Matthias Asche, Heiner Lück, Manfred Rudersdorf, and Markus Wriedt (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015), 263–312, 298n122. The volume also contains notes from a funeral sermon (fol. 144v–53v) and from sermons on John 14 (fol. 153v–67r), Luke 11 (fol. 217v–31r), and I Corinthians 3 (fol. 261v–64r).

expressed by the brilliant Greek scholar Martin Crusius (1526–1607), who when listening to German sermons in the university town of Tübingen simultaneously translated them into ancient Greek. Later he answered the question posed to himself, “Why have I done all this?”, with the following response:

1. Because they [i.e., the sermons] contain many pious matters, treated with the greatest wisdom. This is my dearest treasure. If I had not written them down, I would soon have forgotten them. 2. Because by doing so, I listened more attentively while I wrote in church: since otherwise the Devil would have made my thoughts wander. 3. Because the young students also write down the sermons, and I wanted to confirm them in this excellent practice. 4. Because I who expound on Greek writings at this university wanted to practice writing freely in Greek [...].⁵⁵

Paul Neuendorf has recently revealed that Crusius continued this practice later as part of an ambitious solo enterprise to provide the patriarch of Constantinople and Greek scholars with translations of sermons, hymns, doctrinal compendiums, and a liturgy in Ancient Greek so that Lutheranism could be introduced into the Greek Orthodox Church.⁵⁶ Today 6,588 of these sermons in Ancient Greek from the years 1562 to 1604 survive.⁵⁷

As a final example, notetaking in church was also treated as an outstanding expression of Lutheran piety in the funeral sermon for Michael Röbel († 1579)

55. University Library of Tübingen, Mb 19–6, fol. Iiv: “Cur aut[em] eas scripsi? 1. quia res multas pias, et sapientissimè tractatas continent. Hic est meus charissimus Thesaurus. Nisi scripsissem: mox oblitus essem. 2. quia sic, dum in Templo scripsi, attentius auscultavi: cum alioqui Diabolus cogit[at]iones meas aliò euagari impulsisset. 3. quia iuventute[m] studiosam, conciones scribente[m], in bono hoc proposito confirmare volui. 4. quia me, cum Græca scripta in hac Academia explicem, in Græca extemporaliscriptione exercere volui [...].” The English translation of the first three reasons is in Anthony Grafton, “Martin Crusius Reads His Homer,” *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 64.1 (2002): 63–86, 65. The translation for the fourth reason is mine.

56. These are early findings of Neuendorf’s soon to be published doctoral thesis entitled “‘Daraus künden auch die Graeci lårnen’: Die Bemühungen des Martin Crusius (1526–1607) um ein griechisches Luthertum” (Friedrich Schiller University of Jena and Ruprecht Karls University of Heidelberg, Germany).

57. University Library of Tübingen, Mb 19,2–20; Mc 101. Catalogued in Thomas Wilhelmi, *Handschriften der Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen*, vol. 2: *Die griechischen Handschriften. Sonderband Martin Crusius: Handschriften, Verzeichnis und Bibliographie* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), 27–172.

in 1579. Röbel had been a long-standing member of the court chancery in Weimar. He was extolled for his eagerness not only to listen attentively to God's Word, but also to record it.⁵⁸ His six-volume collection of excerpts encompassed 170 sermons, held above all by Bartholomäus Rosinus (ca. 1520–86) in the parish church of Weimar from the years 1567 to 1573. Röbel bequeathed this collection to his family as well as a copy to Duchess Dorothea Susanna of Saxe-Weimar (1544–92), thereby establishing a memorial to his faith.⁵⁹

In sum, as a means of acquiring and maintaining biblical knowledge and interpretations as well as the central teachings of the Christian faith, the Reformation promoted notetaking on sermons. It served an educational purpose and promoted the spiritual edification of the active listener. However, it was not a pious exercise meant for the masses, but was limited to the literate population.

3. Elector John's practice of taking notes on wooden tablets

Approaching this practice from a material perspective, the question arises: How did Martin Crusius, the Tübingen students, and the others mentioned above physically record notes on paper in the church? They needed a firm surface on which to write. In general, wooden pews were first introduced into churches

58. Bartholomäus Gernhard, *Drey Restitvion Predigten* ... (s.l., 1580), fol. Aaa4r: "Ach Welch eine hertzliche Liebe / vnd löblicher fleiß gegen Gottes Wort / ist in / vnd bey jhme [i.e., Michael Röbel] gewesen / das jhm nicht genüget hat / dasselbe mit fleiß zu hören / Sondern er hat auch gewöhnlich die Predigten / so viel jhme möglich gewesen / mit eigener Hand excipirt / vnd nachgeschrieben / Also / das er auch sechs zimliche / grosse Bücher voll Predigten / so er aus dem munde / des Ehrwürdigen / Gottesgelarten Mannes / D. Magistri Rosini / [...] mit fleiß nachgeschrieben [...] hat" (Oh, what a sincere love and praise-worthy diligence he [Michael Röbel] revealed toward God's Word. It was not enough for him to just listen to it, but he also had the habit of excerpting and writing down sermons as often as he could in his own hand, so that in the end he had six relatively large books filled with sermons that he had diligently written down from the mouth of the honorable theologian, master Rosinus; my translation).

59. The copy is preserved in the literary estate of Duchess Dorothea Susanna in Research Library of Gotha, Chart. B 878–885. See Gehrt, *Reformationshandschriften*, 1088–89. Rosinus had been a close advisor of the duchess. In the wake of inner-Lutheran conflicts, he was forced to leave Weimar in 1573; he then became the leading theologian in the imperial city of Regensburg. Dorothea Susanna tried for years to facilitate his return, but her efforts were in vain. See Daniel Gehrt, *Ernestinische Konfessionspolitik: Bekenntnisbildung, Herrschaftskonsolidierung und dynastische Identitätsstiftung vom Augsburger Interim 1548 bis zur Konkordienformel 1577* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2011), 436–525.

around the end of the sixteenth century.⁶⁰ Some who attended services brought wooden folding chairs along with them. If one could sit, it was possible to take notes in a bound volume of blank leaves of paper resting on one's lap. An object with a hard surface could also be placed on one's lap in order to write on individual leaves.⁶¹ This was indeed the manner in which Crusius recorded sermons in the church, as he frequently mentioned.⁶²



Figure 2. Palm-sized maple wood tablet for taking notes (Research Library of Gotha, Chart. B 1561, fol. 2r).

60. So far, this topic has not been treated comprehensively. Merely scattered references to this phenomenon can be found in various studies on individual churches. See, for example, Wolfgang Brückner, *Lutherische Bekenntnisgemälde des 16. bis 18. Jahrhunderts: Die illustrierte Confessio Augustana* (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2007), 179–80; Jürgensen, 527: “Pews and pulpits are traditionally identified as the new components added to the church interior after the Reformation, and rightly so, in so far as these features had probably never been present in any coherent way previously. But the pews and the pulpit were subject to the slow process of change as the rest of the furnishings and only gradually found their way into the church.”

61. Crusius wrote on separate leaves of paper that were later bound together in book form. See Wilhelmi, 11.

62. See University Library of Tübingen, Mb 17, 19–7, 19–8, 19–11, 19–12, 19–14, 19–15, 19–16, 19–17, 19–18, 19–20 passim. I thank Paul Neuendorf for this information.

Elector John of Saxony solved the problem of taking notes in situations in which a desk was not available by using palm-sized maple wood tablets to write directly upon (fig. 2). In Luther's so-called Table Talk, John was remembered for this practice: "This elector [...] used to carry writing tablets with him when he attended a sermon and to write down notes with his own hand on the sermon from the mouth of the preacher."⁶³ In general, the prince wrote on both sides of a tablet and left no margins in order to take full advantage of the space available. He separated sentences and phrases by asterisks. The names of the preachers and the years in which the sermons were held are unknown. They may have been from Johannes Voit, a Franciscan friar, whose sermons John eagerly attended in Weimar.⁶⁴ Voit became an adherent of Luther's teaching and as a result was banned from preaching by the guardian of his monastery. John offered Voit political backing, but the latter finally had to flee the monastery in 1523. Afterwards, he was called as an evangelical pastor to Ronneburg, a city in electoral Saxony.⁶⁵ At the beginning of the seventeenth century, it was reported that wooden tablets with sermon notes in John's handwriting were once among the collections in the private library of his son David.⁶⁶ Both sets of notes in Coburg and Gotha begin with the abbreviation of the motto that

63. Martin Luther, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe; Tischreden*, vol. 6 (Weimar: Böhlau, 1921), 293, no. 6,959: "Dieser Kurfürst [...] hat [...] pflegen in der Predigt Schreiftafeln bey sich zu haben, und die Predigt mit eigener Hand aus des Predigers Munde nachzuschreiben."

64. See Ludwig Rabus, *Historien. Der heiligen, auserwählten Gottes Zeugen, Bekennern und Märtyrern ...*, vol. 6 (Strasbourg: Samuel Emmel, 1557), fol. A4r–A5v.

65. A source from the early seventeenth century claims that Voit served as one of John's court preachers for a number of years before being called as pastor to Ronneburg around 1528. See Otto Clemen, "Johann Voit, Franziskaner zu Weimar, erster evangelischer Pfarrer zu Ronneburg," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 30 (1909): 434–43, 443–44. On the lack of evidence regarding this claim, see Doreen von Oertzen Becker, *Kurfürst Johann der Beständige und die Reformation (1513–1532): Kirchenpolitik zwischen Friedrich dem Weisen und Johann Friedrich dem Großmütigen* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2017), 207–08n399, dx.doi.org/10.7788/9783412510411.

66. See Melchior Adam, *Vitae Germanorum Theologorum, Qvi superiori Seculo Ecclesiam Christi Voce Scriptisque Propagarunt Et Propugnarunt, Congestæ & Ad annum usque M DC XVIII. Deductæ ...* (Frankfurt/Main: Jonas Rosa, 1620), 634: "Relicto ergo monasterio, fuit annos aliquot à concionibus Joanni electori Saxoniae, tanta cum laude & admiratione: ut ipsemet Princeps suâ manu in palimpsestis exceperit conciones: quarum exempla in librariâ illius Voiti reperta dicuntur" (Thus, after leaving the monastery, he served Elector John of Saxony for some years as preacher with such praise and admiration that the prince himself excerpted sermons in his own hand on palimpsests. Copies of these are said to have been found in Voit's library; my translation).

the electors of Saxony and the other members of the Ernestine family had used since 1522: “*Verbum Domini manet in aeternum.*”⁶⁷ This is the *terminus post quem* for dating the tablets.

The physical properties of the portable tablets were in many respects ideal for taking notes at locations in which no desk or similar type of writing furniture was available. Maple wood, known to be resistant to splitting, naturally durable, and hard to the touch, was the material chosen. This light-coloured wood offered suitable background contrast to the grey letters. A silverpoint or leaden stylus was probably used as writing implement.⁶⁸ Ink would have been impractical since it does not absorb well into wooden surfaces, and its use would require an inkwell. The tablets were cut to a size that enabled them to be held easily in one’s hand (Coburg: 11.5 x 8 cm / Gotha: 11.5 x 7.5 cm). However, the tablets were ill-suited for storing vast amounts of information. They offered relatively small writing surfaces and were approximately one to two millimeters thick—roughly ten times the thickness of an average sheet of paper. Thus, it is reasonable to presume that such tablets were intended for notes that were later to be transferred onto paper. Afterwards, the writing could be erased by sanding the surface and the tablets reused. One side of one tablet is in fact a palimpsest.⁶⁹ It appears to be blank at first glance, but upon close examination and in the right lighting, remnants of John’s writing can be discerned. This side of the tablet is slightly smoother to the touch than the other side, which lacks similar traces. This indicates that it has been sanded down. Using wooden tablets in this way was perhaps once a widespread practice. If so, it appears as if all such tablets have perished over time except for those preserved today in Coburg and Gotha.

4. Everyday artifacts as family heirlooms

The material of the tablets themselves—ordinary wood—is of negligible value. The content recorded may have allowed Elector John to retain the main thoughts of the sermons, but they were of little significance to anyone who

67. See Christensen, 28–29; Ehwald, 525–26.

68. On the use of silverpoints for drawing and writing on wood tablets see Ulrike Jenni, ed., *Das Skizzenbuch des Jaques Daliwe* (Leipzig: Edition, 1987), 22–26.

69. Contemporaries also referred to these tablets as palimpsests. See Adam, 634.

had not personally attended. Nevertheless, these wooden tablets were treated as precious objects. Instead of being discarded at some point over the past five centuries, they were preserved in princely libraries. The Research Library of Gotha, founded on the ducal library collections Saxe-Gotha, holds additional autograph manuscripts by Elector John: a four-volume set of medical prescriptions and household remedies⁷⁰ and a pocket-sized (9.5 x 11.5 cm) devotional parchment volume originating around 1530.⁷¹ The latter contains excerpts from Luther's prayers, his Small Catechism, a meditation on Christ's Passion, and a sermon in preparation for death. This manuscript came into the possession of John's grandson John Frederick III (1538–65) in 1563. On the flyleaves he wrote his own motto and those of his parents and two older brothers, as well as the following note: "This book was written by Elector John [...] in his own handwriting. Therefore it shall remain dear to me and never leave me. May God help me to become pious and blessed from it. Amen. Received from the *Schösser* in Arnshaugk on 19 August 1563."⁷²

John Frederick expressed in his own words that he treasured this book because it was handwritten by his grandfather, and he believed that by using it God would help him to become more pious and blessed. For John Frederick, this book was apparently imbued with the allure and efficacy of a relic and it is likely that he viewed the wooden tablets with the sermon notes similarly. Due to the distinctive handwriting, both manuscripts reflect John's individuality as a human being and attest to the authenticity of the objects. They mediate his spiritual presence and underscore that the written words were congruent with his own convictions. The wooden and parchment manuscripts are also unique as the earliest surviving tangible expressions of Lutheran piety originating directly from a Saxon prince. For this reason, they were collected by the members of the Ernestine family, the preacher Johannes Voit, and other

70. Research Library of Gotha, Memb. I 111–113; Chart. A 152. See Daniel Gehrt, "Die Rezeptsammlungen eines Kurfürsten," in *Eine göttliche Kunst: Medizin und Krankheit in der Frühen Neuzeit. ...*, ed. Sascha Salatowsky and Michael Stolberg (Gotha, 2019), 129–30, number 21.

71. Research Library of Gotha, Memb. II 150. See Gehrt, *Reformationshandschriften*, 5.

72. Research Library of Gotha, Memb. II 150, fol. 136r: "Dis Buch Hatt ChurFurst Johannes Hochloblicher Vnd Cristlicher Gedechnis Mit Eigener Handt geschriben, Welchs mir des halb[en] Lieb sol sein Vnnd Nimer Von Mir Komen, Gott helff das Jch daraus From vnd Selig Werde. AMEN. Von dem Schosser zu Arnshag bekommen 1563 den 19 Augustj. Jo: Frid: der dritt."

unknown persons similar to the autograph writings of Luther, Melanchthon, and other Wittenberg reformers since the mid-1530s.⁷³

Elector John's "grapho-relics" possessed great symbolic significance for the Ernestine dynasty, which increasingly identified and widely propagated itself as the guardian of Luther and his legacy.⁷⁴ The dynasty thereby assigned itself a special apocalyptic role in the history of salvation. This image was transported with slight modifications well into the eighteenth century, especially through the efforts of the house of Saxe-Gotha.⁷⁵ Thus, the maple wood tablets served symbolically alongside John's surviving devotional book as constitutive documents or cornerstones for the redefinition of the Ernestine dynastic identity in the wake of the Reformation.

After John Frederick III's death in 1565, his older brother John William (1530–73) inherited the devotional manuscript and had it rebound and the edges gauffered with Renaissance motifs, the coat-of-arms of the electors and dukes of Saxony, and his initials "I W D S" (*Ioannes Wilhelmus Dux Saxoniae*)

73. See Hans-Peter Hasse, "Wittenberger Theologie im 'Stammbuch': Eintragungen der Wittenberger Professoren im Album des Wolfgang Ruprecht aus Eger," in *Humanismus und Wittenberger Reformation*, ed. Michael Beyer and Günther Wartenberg (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1996), 88–120; Wolfgang Klose, "Corpus Alborum Amicorum: Ein Bericht über die Sammlung und Beschreibung von Stammbüchern der frühen Neuzeit," *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 10 (1985): 154–69, 162–63; Schnabel, 244–75.

74. For a substantial discussion, see Gehrt, *Ernestinische Konfessionspolitik*.

75. See Daniel Gehrt, "Arguing for the Moral Necessity of Reformation History: Ernst Salomon Cyprian's Historiographic Use of Natural Law in Defense of the Lutheran Church," in *Reforming Church History*, ed. Daniel Gehrt and Sascha Salatowsky (Stuttgart: Steiner, expected in 2022); Daniel Gehrt, "Ernst Salomon Cyprian und die Erinnerungspolitik Herzog Friedrichs II. von Sachsen-Gotha-Altenburg im Rahmen des Reformationsjubiläums 1717," in *Reformatio & Memoria: Protestantische Erinnerungsräume und Erinnerungsstrategien in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Kathrin Paasch, Christopher Spehr, and Siegrid Westphal (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 117–54, dx.doi.org/10.13109/9783666517020.117; Andreas Klinger, "Kurfürst Johann Friedrich von Sachsen in der Erinnerungskultur der Ernestiner im 17. Jahrhundert," in *Johann Friedrich I. – der lutherische Kurfürst*, ed. Volker Leppin, Georg Schmidt, and Sabine Wefers (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 361–80; Siegrid Westphal, "Nach dem Verlust der Kurwürde: Die Ausbildung konfessioneller Identität anstelle politischer Macht bei den Ernestinern," in *Zwischen Schande und Ehre: Erinnerungsbrüche und die Kontinuität des Hauses: Legitimationsmuster und Traditionsverständnis des frühneuzeitlichen Adels in Umbruch und Krise*, ed. Martin Wrede and Horst Carl (Mainz: Von Zabern, 2007), 173–92.

(figs. 3–4).⁷⁶ In this process, the text block was retrimmed, resulting in a loss of text written by John and John Frederick III close to the edges of the parchment. Apparently, it was more important for the prince to enhance the outer appearance of the manuscript in order to distinguish it as a special object in his library than to preserve the venerated content from minor damage. Around 1570, a new cover using precious materials and employing an elaborate design was made, but its actual appearance remains unknown. The manuscript received a new leather binding in 1960. There is no record of the previous binding.⁷⁷ It is uncertain whether it still had one at the time of restoration. Perhaps John William had a binding made of such highly precious materials for this treasured book that it was at one time stolen or simply removed. A case in point is the cover of a special prayer book that the duke's widowed wife Dorothea Susanna presented to her elder son in 1575.⁷⁸ The velvet material was embroidered with gold, silver, and silk thread. Small parts that were originally affixed to both sides are now missing. These were possibly small silver or gold plates with initials of the young prince's name and abbreviations of his title and motto.

76. The gauffering style is typical for the Weischner workshop in Jena that bound many books on John William's behalf. On this bookbinder see Matthias Hageböck, "Leben und Werk der Jenaer Buchbinder Johannes (1515–1589) und Lukas Weischner (1550–1609) vor dem Hintergrund der Geschichte des ernestinischen Fürstenhauses in der zweiten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts," in *Habent sua signa libelli: Beiträge zum Bucheinband in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Barbara Schneider-Kempf (Berlin: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin–Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2015), 205–21.

77. See the documentation of the restoration on the inside of the back cover dated 23 March 1960.

78. On this volume, see Daniel Gehrt, "Die religiöse Erziehung Herzog Friedrich Wilhelms von Sachsen-Weimar im Spiegel seiner Bibliothek," *Zeitschrift für Thüringische Geschichte* 67 (2013): 75–115, 109–111; Kathrin Paasch, "... so über die massen sauber in rothen Leder eingebunden": Bucheinbände aus der Forschungsbibliothek Gotha: Katalog zur Ausstellung der Universitäts- und Forschungsbibliothek Erfurt/Gotha im Spiegelsaal der Forschungsbibliothek Gotha auf Schloss Friedenstein, 27. August bis 16. September 2010, 62–63, number 24.



Figure 3. Gauffered fore-edge with coat-of-arms of the Duke of Saxony and the initials of Duke John William of Saxony (Research Library of Gotha, Memb. II 150).



Figure 4. Gauffered top edge with coat-of-arms of the electors of Saxony (Research Library of Gotha, Memb. II 150).

Elector John's wooden tablets were not enhanced outwardly, but this could simply be due to their material form. Whereas binding techniques for parchment and paper volumes had been continually developed and refined over centuries, no tradition of opulently decorating such thin wood tablets existed. The bindings for the tablets in Gotha and Coburg are so similar that they were most likely made at the same workshop during the sixteenth century.⁷⁹ Two

79. See the photo of the Coburg tablets in Böcking, 20; and the digital images of the Gotha tablets at *Zwei Predigtachschriften Kurfürst Johanns von Sachsen*, accessed 30 June 2020, archive.thulb.uni-jena.de/ufb/receive/ufb_cbu_00016354?lang=en.

dark brown varnished beech wood tablets formed the cover. The brass clasps used to close the covers are identical. The Coburg volume has one in the middle, whereas the Gotha series has two.

In addition to the devotional manuscript, John William most likely had the medical volumes and the maple wood tablets in his possession as well. After his death in 1573, his elder son Frederick William (1562–1602), the founder of the duchy of Saxe-Altenburg, inherited all of them and they became family heirlooms. After his lineage died out in 1672, the majority of the library collections in Altenburg were incorporated into the ducal library in Gotha under Ernest the Pious (1601–75), Elector John's great-grandson. They have since remained in Gotha, apart from a ten-year sojourn in the Soviet Union after World War II.

The provenance of the wooden tablets in Coburg also reveals the Ernestine dynasty's keen interest in these objects as the earliest tangible testimonies of the Lutheran faith originating directly from one of its forefathers. They were given to Duke Ernest II of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha (1818–93) in February of 1881 as a gift from his niece Crown Princess Victoria of Prussia (1840–1901), presumably while attending the wedding of his grandnephew William (1859–1941) in Berlin. How Victoria, the eldest daughter of Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha (1819–61) and Queen Victoria of Great Britain and Ireland (1819–1901), gained possession of these tablets is unknown. The act of offering them to a close relative to be preserved in the ancestral homeland of her dynasty underscores, however, the importance that was placed on these objects that were regarded as family heirlooms.

5. The question of survival

In the early Middle Ages, hundreds of wooden churches were erected north of the Alps.⁸⁰ Over the centuries, many of these buildings were destroyed in fires. This was a common fate of such highly flammable structures. Other early medieval wooden churches were intentionally demolished and replaced by larger, more durable stone buildings. Consequently, the remains of this early form of Christian architecture are today extremely rare. That such timber

80. See Konrad Onasch, "Holzkirche," *Lexikon des Mittelalters* 5 (1991): 105–06.

structures were once common, especially in the densely forested areas of northern Europe, has thus been largely forgotten.

The same holds true for material evidence of wooden sketchbooks commonly used by painters in the late medieval period⁸¹ and of such portable wooden tablets as those that Elector John used for taking notes on sermons. They offered rigid writing material that could easily be held in a slightly cupped hand, thus offering a practical solution to the problem of writing in rooms like churches that lacked desk-like furniture. They were, however, ill-suited for storing information due to their thickness. Instead, they were intended for repeated use. When these palimpsests became extremely worn from sanding or simply broke, they were probably discarded or used for kindling. Thus, this practice, which was possibly once common, has essentially fallen into oblivion. The few remaining artifacts that exist today owe their survival to their importance as testimonies to the faith of the first Saxon prince who publicly adhered to Luther's teachings. They were thus treated as grapho-relics and became of symbolic value for the confessional identity of the Ernestine dynasty.

Today, sixteenth-century manuscripts preserving notes taken by various people on sermons are rare. Those that have survived are scattered in a myriad of archives and historic libraries. This is one of the reasons why a practice that was once promoted among literate Protestants as an act of piety and learning has been largely overlooked. An in-depth study on this topic is still a desideratum.

81. See Jenni, 22–24.