

On the ancestry and kin of Katharina von Bora

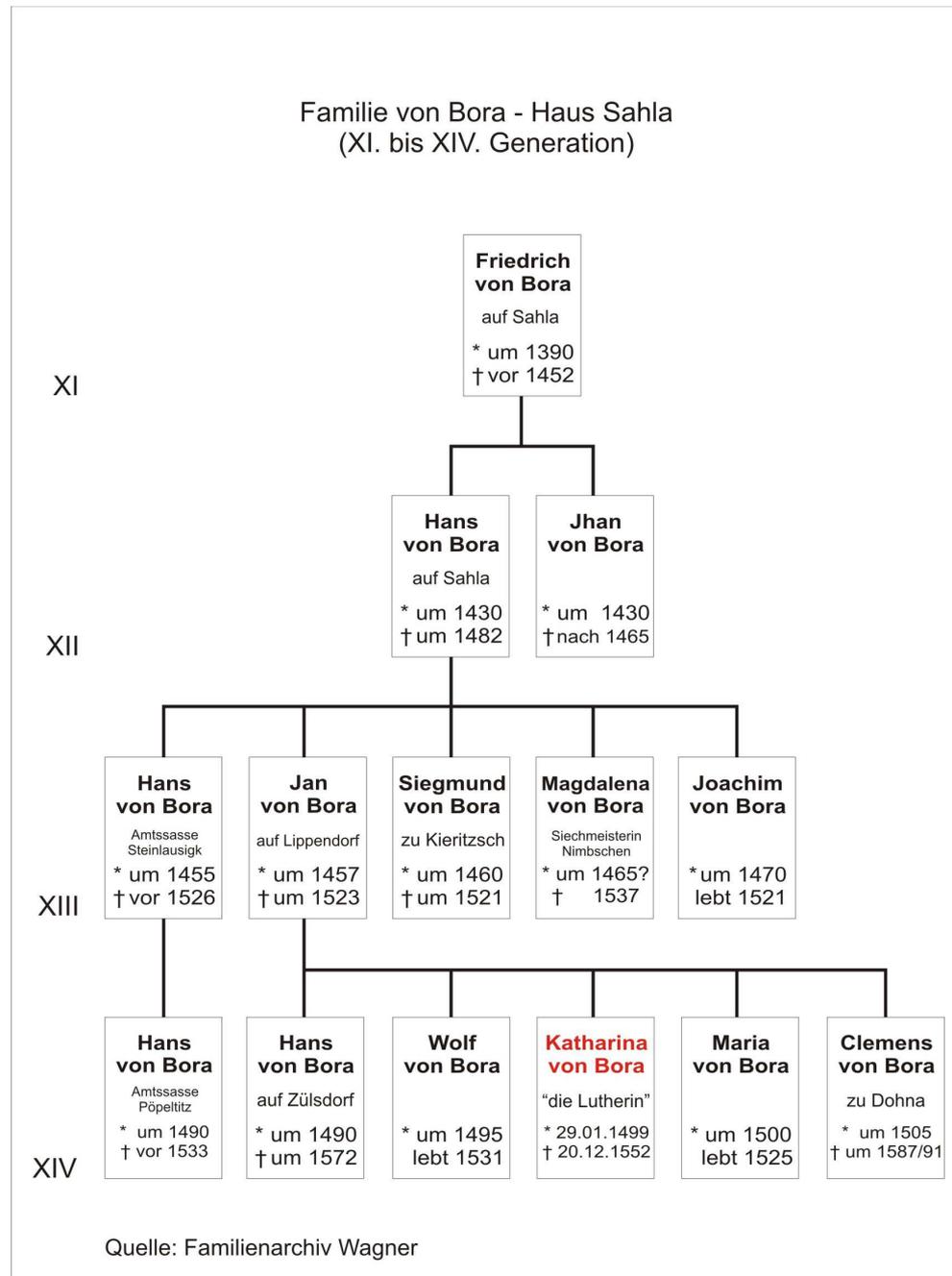
by Jürgen Wagner

For centuries, historians focussing on the Reformation as well as family researchers have been arguing about the question who the parents of Katharina von Bora – born 29 January 1499 and wife of the Protestant reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) – were. Towards the end of the 19th century, the birthplace of the “Lutherin“ was still sought in at least six different locations. Amongst these were Löben, district of Wittenberg, and Muldenstein, district of Gräfenhainichen. Since about 1905, experts agree that only Lippendorf † near Kieritzsch, south of Leipzig¹, can come into consideration. However, this town was completely excavated in 1980.

Historians and genealogists support their argument in particular with two official records stating the historic Lippendorf † both in 1482 and 1505. First, a certain Hans von Bora and later a Jhan von Bora with their wives, Katharina and Margarete respectively, are mentioned as “zu Lippendorf“. Since 1900, it was for no valid reason assumed that Hans and Jhan von Bora were identical. Hence, Margarete, documented in 1505 and whose maiden name remains unknown, was to have been Katharina von Bora's stepmother. There is even the very touching story, that little Katharina was pushed off into the nunnery in Brehna (between Halle/Saale and Bitterfeld), at the instigation of this stepmother.

Recent thoughts concerning the origins of the “Lutherin“ assume that Hans and Jhan von Bora were brothers and descendants of the von Bora family lineage “Haus Sahla“. This has so far not been investigated by previous authors. The manor Sahla † was situated

¹) Not to be confused with the present-day Lippendorf, originally Medewitzsch. No longer existing villages are marked with †.



close to Schkortleben near Weißenfels, almost exactly where the A 38 Göttingen - Leipzig crosses the Saale today. Presumably, this feudal estate was completely destroyed by a flood of the river Saale in the 16th century. The likely elder Hans von Bora (XIII. generation) married a Katharina around 1482, sold his father's farm Sahla † to the family von Biesenrott of Schkortleben in about 1494, passed his

Lippendorf property on to his younger brother Jhan (XIII) and from then on led the von Bora grounds in Steinlaußig (now Muldenstein). Jhan von Bora (XIII) took over Lippendorf †, married around 1495 and fathered five children in the following years, amongst which was Katharina (XIV), born in 1499. In 1505 he endowed his property in Lippendorf to his wife Margarete as an "old-age pension". Both probably died around 1521. Their sons Hans, Clemens and Wolf (XIV) led a law suit in 1531 regarding a small property in or near Kieritzsch, that had been in the hands of their uncle Siegmund von Bora (XIII) until 1521. They also acted on behalf of their sisters. Potentially, this property was the likewise long-lost residence Zöllsdorf † near Kieritzsch. It was verifiably managed by the "Lutherin" with much devotion but only moderate success between 1537 and 1552, and the reformer calls it "Erbdächlein" (endearing diminutive form of "Erbdach", which approximately translates to "inherited home"). Very early on, these two factors led to the assumption that Katharina von Bora could have been born in Lippendorf †. In their jurisdictional plea the von Bora brothers strongly emphasise that they spent a considerable amount of time outside of Saxony after 1521.

Given these circumstances, Katharina von Bora must have been aware during her escape from the nunnery Nimbschen in 1523, that her closest relatives, her uncle Hans von Bora (XIII) of Steinlaußig (Muldenstein) and his son of the same name (XIV), lived in the neighbouring Pöplitz, in the vicinity of Wittenberg. This also explains why she did not stay in Torgau but travelled further to Wittenberg, where she arrived completely penniless. Presumably, her uncle and cousin could not or would not take her in so that she ended up finding a place to stay at Lucas Cranach's, the Elder.

The legend of Katharina von Bora being a descendant of impoverished nobility from Meißen will probably have to be

considered ineradicable. As a matter of fact however, this tale is nothing more than a relict of the propaganda against Luther during the time of the Reformation and has been questioned by reliable authors since 1752.² In 1843 it was noted that the alleged poverty of Catharina von Bora's family cannot be authenticated by any credible source.³ The plea made by the von Bora brothers in the aforementioned law suit from 1531 supports all doubts concerning the poverty legend. It is recorded that the von Bora siblings' (XIV) father, whose name was unfortunately not mentioned, provided his brother Siegmund (XIII) with a hundred guilders.⁴ This sum is equivalent to Luther's yearly salary as a professor in Wittenberg at the time of his marriage (1525).⁵ The same amount today would be a basic gross salary of 50,000 € p.a.⁶ If Catharina's father was capable of providing private loans of this magnitude, one can surely no longer speak of impoverished circumstances. Furthermore, the still preserved estate near the market place in Dohna, which was originally owned by Clemens von Bora (XIV), is evidence against the poverty legend.

²) Walch: Wahrhaftige Geschichte der seligen Frau Catharina von Bora (Translation of title: The True Story of the Blessed Lady Catharina von Bora), Halle 1752, p. 20: "Die erste Frage ist, ob die Eltern der Catharina von Bora arm oder vermögend gewesen? Sie ist an sich gleichgültig. Wir wollen sie daher weder bejahen noch verneinen, aber den fehlerhaften Beweis des Engelhard [eines früheren Autoren] können wir nicht anerkennen." (Translation of quote: "The first question is whether the parents of Catharina von Bora were poor or wealthy. This question in itself is impervious. We therefore neither want to confirm nor negate it. But we cannot accept the incorrect evidence of Engelhard [a previous author]."

³) Beste: Die Geschichte Catharina's von Bora (Translation of title: The Story of Catharina von Bora), Halle 1843, p. 13; also the original French source of the poverty hypothesis.

⁴) Full text in "Genealogie", 2010, p. 304.

⁵) Thoma, Albrecht: Katharina von Bora, Berlin 1900, p. 90; also Friedenthal, Richard: Luther, Munich/Zurich, 1983, p. 541.

⁶) cf. e.g. Süddeutsche Zeitung 14.02.2012: Spitzenverdiener im Süden. Professoren-Gehälter im Bundesländer-Vergleich. (Translation of article heading: Top earners in the South. Salaries of professors in a federal state comparison.)

Likewise scientifically insupportable are many more legends such as the one which claims that Katharina von Bora was born in Hirschfeld near Nossen, that her biological mother was to have been a certain “Anna von Haugwitz“, who died before 1505, and that therefore the administrative tax officer Hans von Mergenthal⁷, owner of a property in Klitzchen and buried 1480 in Torgau, should be considered her stepfather. Part of this tale is the stepmother-legend. No realistic background can be verified for either of these phantasmic stories. Especially “Anna von Haugwitz“ is pure fiction. Somewhat credible only seems that Katharina von Bora was sent to the nunnery Brehna near Bitterfeld in order to receive a school education. Her brothers were probably educated the same way at the grammar school in Grimma. Why an education in Brehna was chosen for Katharina is unclear. The vicinity of Brehna to the home of her father’s brother Hans von Bora (XIII) of Steinlaußig (Muldenstein) could have played a role.

In general, one should view the circumstances of the Lutherin and her relatives in the light of the overall change in living conditions during the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern era. The late medieval agricultural crisis and the social as well as economic rise of the urban middle class⁸ had evoked a general change in the economic and social situation. Agricultural property often no longer provided the landed gentry with sufficient basic means of subsistence. Its members therefore sought employment at court as well as in the civil or military service. Such a shift from a life shaped by agriculture to other living conditions can also be found in the von Bora family: Hans von Bora (XIII), who worked for the department Weißenfels on his Sahla † estate between 1482 and 1494, can still

⁷) Torgauer Heimatkalender, 2009, p. 60.

⁸) Gebhardt: Handbuch der Deutschen Geschichte (Translation of title: Handbook of German History), 9th edition VII, p. 190.

be regarded as a landlord strongly associated with agriculture. For the alleged father of Katharina von Bora, Jhan von Bora of Lippendorf † (XIII, 1505), there is evidence of monetary activities. His children (XIV) however dissociated themselves from an agricultural lifestyle. They based their lives without exception within urban districts: Hans in Zwickau, Katharina and Maria in Wittenberg, Clemens in Dohna. According to all historic evidence, Katharina von Bora and her brother Clemens cannot be denied a successful adjustment to the economic circumstances of the early Modern Age.

Provided that the certificate of 1531 will not be supplemented by the highly unlikely findings of further documents, science will always have to rely on historic clues regarding any questions about the origin of Katharina von Bora. Documentary evidence is not to be expected. However, circumstantial evidence can also lead to more plausible concepts of the origin and family background of the Lutherin than the tales that have so far and all too long been spread.

For further details and references, please see "Genealogie" (2005), pp. 673 - 703; "AfF Archiv für Familiengeschichtsforschung" (Archive for Historical Family Research; 2005), pp. 242 - 271; "Genealogie" (2006), pp. 30 - 35, 182 - 184; "FFM Familienforschung in Mitteldeutschland" (Family Research in Central Germany; 2006), pp. 342 - 347; "Genealogie" (2010), pp. 289 - 307; also: www.von-bora.de.