

Elisabeth of Brandenburg: “Reformation Princess”

Elisabeth of Brandenburg (24 August 1510 – 25 May 1558) was a Duchess consort of Brunswick-Göttingen-Calenberg by marriage to Eric I, Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg, and Regent of the Duchy of Brunswick-Göttingen-Calenberg during the minority of her son, Eric II, Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg, from 1540 until 1545. She is considered a “Reformation Princess” who, together with the Hessian reformer Anton Corvinus, helped the Reformation prevail in today’s South Lower Saxony.

Elisabeth was born, probably in Cölln, the third child and second daughter of the Elector Joachim I of Brandenburg and his wife Elisabeth, daughter of King John I of Denmark. She was educated in a strictly religious and humanist fashion. At the age of not quite 15, she married on 7 July 1525 in Stettin with the forty years old widower Duke Eric I “the Elder” of Brunswick-Göttingen-Calenberg.

She first came into contact with the Reformation in 1527 at her parental court in Brandenburg when her mother celebrated communion under both kinds and thus openly accepted the teachings of Martin Luther. When Elisabeth visited her mother at Lichtenburg Castle in 1534, she met Martin Luther personally for the first time. She began to regularly correspond with him in 1538. She sent him cheese and wine and he sent her mulberries and fig tree seedlings and his German Bible translation with a personal dedication. On 7 April, Elisabeth publicly accepted communion under both kinds and thereby expressed her conversion to the Lutheran faith. On October 6, she informed Landgrave Philip I of Hesse of her conversion and with his assistance, invited the reformer Anton Corvinus to move from nearby Witzenhausen to Münden. Eric I tolerated the conversion. Although Lutheranism was inconsistent with his Catholic upbringing and his loyalty to the Emperor, he admired the reformer’s courage.

Elisabeth had a strong ally in Elector John Frederick I of Saxony. When Eric I died on 30 July 1540, he helped her become co-regent of Brunswick-Calenberg-Göttingen, together with Philip I of Hesse, despite fierce resistance from Duke Henry II of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. She and Philip were regents for five years; she used this opportunity to implement the Reformation in the principality and to reorganize the princely household.

Anton Corvinus was appointed superintendent of the principality, with an office in Pattensen. The lawyer Justus von Waldhausen, who had studied at Wittenberg, was appointed to princely Councillor and later to chancellor, on the recommendation of Martin Luther. The physician Burckard Mithoff, the court judge Justin Gobler and the Magistrate Heinrich Campe completed the team with which the princess wanted to implement her reforms. In 1542, a Church Order for all of Calenberg-Göttingen was issued. This was followed up by a thorough visitation from 17 November 1542 to 30 April 1543, which Elisabeth personally participated in. A monastic order issued 4 November 1542 regulated the conversion of the monasteries to Protestantism. A Court Procedures Order was enacted in 1544, to regulate legal relations in the country. The princess also wrote many spiritual songs and an “open letter” to her subjects to strengthen their faith.