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Foundational Moments

Albert the Bear, 1157

Was there in fact any foundational moment in the history of Berlin? Myths abound, and turning points are, as always, a matter of selection and interpretation.

In the twelfth century, a Saxon 'Count of Ascanien and Ballenstadt' known as Albert the Bear after the symbol on his shield, not his appearance, wrested control of the frontier territory or 'march' (Mark) of Brandenburg from the Slavic Wends.[1] Following a period of protracted fighting and temporary retreat, he regained control in 1157 and took the title of Margrave of Brandenburg, choosing the town of Brandenburg west of Berlin as his residence. Albert's military victory over a pagan people not only signalled German and Christian domination of the area, but also elevated the status of Brandenburg to that of an Electoral territory in the Holy Roman Empire, one of the few territories with a politically significant vote in the election of Holy Roman emperors. Furthermore, the conquest increased the ethnic diversity of the area; defeated Slavs and victorious Germans intermingled and intermarried, while Albert pursued a policy emulated by many of his successors of attracting immigrants, particularly from the Netherlands, to encourage agricultural production and economic growth.

Albert the Bear's fame persisted over the centuries. In the view of the nineteenth-century historian Thomas Carlyle: 'None of Albert's wars are so comfortable to reflect on as those he had with the anarchic Wends; whom he now fairly beat to powder, and

either swept away, or else damped down into Christianity and keeping of the peace.' Carlyle considered that now the Wends 'could not but consent more and more to efface themselves, – either to become German, and grow milk and cheese in the Dutch manner, or to disappear from the world'. Carlyle concluded that this was, 'for posterity', Albert the Bear's most 'memorable feat': 'After two-hundred and fifty years of barking and worrying, the Wends are now finally reduced to silence; their anarchy well buried, and wholesome Dutch cabbage planted over it.'[2]

The moment that Albert conquered the Wends was clearly significant, but it neither constituted the foundation of Berlin, nor did it immediately enhance the status of the place. Other towns were at this time far more important, particularly the fortified town of Spandau to the west, controlled by Albert, and from 1241 also Köpenick to the southeast, under one of Albert's successors – both of which would eventually be incorporated as suburbs into the expanded Greater Berlin of the twentieth century. At the time they received their first written mentions in 1237 and 1244, the settlements of Cölln and Berlin were simply convenient river crossing points for trading routes on the waterways of the Spree and Havel. Three quite contrasting twentieth-century regimes – Nazi, communist, and democratic – nevertheless found it convenient to celebrate anniversaries of the supposed 'founding' of Berlin in 1237. In 1937, Nazi Berlin marked 700 years of the city's history, dating this to the first written mention of the settlement of Cölln, a crucial part of the central area of what we now know as Berlin. The settlement on the other side of the river, Berlin, which eventually gave the city its name, was first mentioned in a document of 1244. The date of 1237 was marked again in the competing 750th anniversary activities in East and West Berlin in 1987.

Yet the origins of Berlin go back well before Cölln and Berlin were first recorded in writing; and leaving historical heroes

and celebratory reflections aside, it is not so easy to identify a precise date of origin. The related ambiguity about place of origin is also oddly apposite: the city's double foundations in Cölln and Berlin continued to be reflected in the multiplicity of districts across subsequent centuries.

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Archaeological evidence of human settlements in this swampy area of lakes and waterways, set in a wider landscape of sandy soil, go back for centuries before the Christian era. This was border territory never conquered by the Romans, populated by those they considered 'barbarians'. During the long medieval period, movements of peoples across Europe from both west and east contributed to a mixed linguistic and ethnic heritage, again a continuing feature of the city's history. Berlin lay in one of the last areas of central Europe to be Christianised, with rivalry for control from both Germans to the west and Polish Catholics to the east, while pagan Slavs or Wends held much of the region in between.

This ethnic and cultural diversity created some later sensitivity with regard to specifying foundational moments. Two eighteenth-century chroniclers, Johann Christoph Müller and Georg Gottfried Küster, who compiled a lengthy history of *Old and New Berlin* running to several thousand pages, remained mystified about Berlin's origins; yet, noting that waves of immigrants had contributed to the city's development over the centuries, they perceptively commented that many contemporaries 'would prefer to credit a German, rather than a foreign people' with founding Berlin. Even so, they added with some candour, 'it is hard to discover the truth in the darkness of the past'.[3]

A key turning point clearly came with Albert the Bear's conquest of this frontier territory, and Albert may or may not have lent Berlin its name and its emblem, the bear (Figure 1.1). Müller

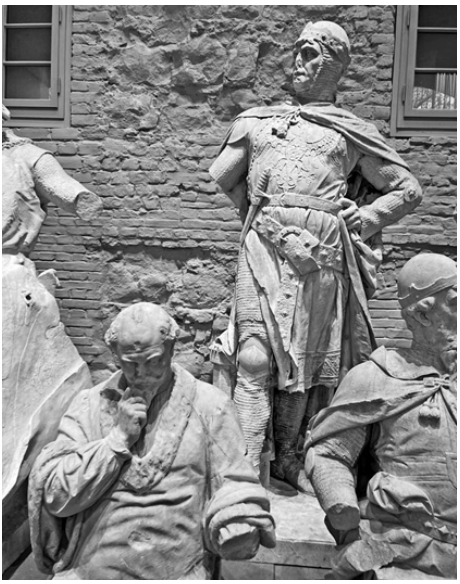

Figure 1.1 Albert the Bear, statue from the Tiergarten
Statue of the legendary twelfth-century Albert the Bear (standing), created in 1898 for Emperor Wilhelm II's 'Victory Avenue' in the Tiergarten and now on display in Spandau's Citadelle Museum.
Photograph by the author

and Küster, like many others, speculated that 'Berlin' was based on the word for bear (*Bär*). The eighteenth-century publisher and author Friedrich Nicolai, writing in 1769, also considered the origins of the city to be lost 'in the darkness of history', and mentioned the historical significance of Albert. As far as Berlin's name was concerned, however, Nicolai thought a reference to water was more likely, since 'from olden times' the word 'Bäre' referred to 'a dam or water building designed to stop or hold the flow of water for purposes of a mill or a fishery' (as in 'barrier').

There were two such places in Berlin, and in Nicolai's view the Mühlendamm was probably the origins of the settlement. Yet ethnic and linguistic diversity suggested other possibilities too; many now think the name quite likely originated in the Slavic word for swamps, marshes, or boggy ground, 'Brl': Berlin would be the settlement in the swamp. The name Cölln very likely derived, in Nicolai's view, from the influx of colonial settlers – 'Christians from the Rhineland, Holland, Flanders and the Netherlands' – giving it the name of 'colony', as in Cologne (from where many immigrated). Berlin was indeed in some sense always a somewhat colonial outpost, as Karl Scheffler too noted in the early twentieth century.[4]

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the 'germanisation' of lands east of the river Elbe continued, spearheaded not only by military force but also by the economic and cultural power of Christian churches and religious institutions. People from west and east, Slavs and Germans, intermingled and intermarried, and the ethnic mix was further enriched by settlers from further afield, such as the Flemish, attracted by prospects for economic productivity and well-being. Migrants also came from the Rhineland, and later, with the advent of the Hohenzollern dynasty in the fifteenth century, from Swabia in southwestern Germany. All these influences affected the language, with what became known as High German eventually predominating over the Low German dialects of northern Germany, but with the admixture of some words of Slavic derivation, as in place names ending in 'ow', such as Rudow, Treptow, and Pankow, or in 'itz', as in Lankwitz, Steglitz, or Wandlitz.

Whatever the origins of the population, the place or the name, during the middle ages the double settlement became more firmly established, leaving traces that persist into the twenty-first century. The locations of roads in the oldest part of the centre, and even some of their names, are still recognisable on maps of Berlin today. The foundations of the Nikolaikirche (Figure 1.2) date from

Figure 1.2 Nikolaikirche (Nicolai Church)
The foundations of the Nikolaikirche date from approximately 1230. Following major destruction of the historic Nikolai quarter during the Third Reich, the East German communist regime reconstructed it for the 750th anniversary celebrations of Berlin in 1987.
Photograph by the author

approximately 1230, and many other Berlin churches and religious orders can trace their origins to the Middle Ages. In the Marienkirche, which remarkably survived both Second World War bombing and communist demolitions in the post-war ruins, a terrifying mural depicting the 'Dance of Death', dating back to perhaps 1469–70 or to the plague in 1484, can still be seen (Figure 1.3). A white skeletal figure dances between well-dressed burghers, who may be plucked from life at any moment, while

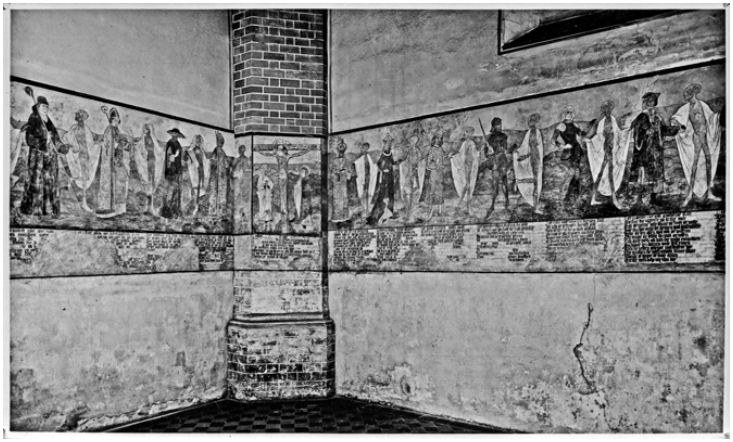

Figure 1.3 Medieval Dance of Death (c. 1484), Marienkirche (St Mary's Church)
A fresco more than 22 metres long and 2 metres high depicts the Dance of Death in the late thirteenth-century Marienkirche. The skeletal white figure of Death is depicted dancing with citizens who can be snatched away at any time, while the verses below are among the earliest surviving Berlin literary works. Photograph by M-Verlag Berlin/Hansmann reproduced courtesy of United Archives GmbH/Alamy stock photograph

verses below represent the oldest surviving written piece of Berlin literature.

Like other medieval towns, Berlin experienced varying fortunes. It was afflicted by periodic bouts of plague and pestilence, with the Black Death decimating the population in 1348; and fires destroyed flimsily built housing, particularly in 1376 and 1380. Jews had lived in the area from around the year 1000, and other residents often targeted them as scapegoats for misfortunes. Pogroms erupted in the aftermath of disease and mass death, as in 1354, precipitating the flight of many Jews eastwards to Poland. In 1510, around one hundred Jews were put to death in Berlin, and

Jews were banished from the city and March of Brandenburg.[5] More broadly, this was an era marked by ubiquitous violence, when robber barons raged across the countryside, and horrific physical punishments were meted out to citizens found guilty of sometimes entirely spurious offences.

With the growth of trade, Berlin and Cölln began to challenge the economic ascendancy of nearby towns. Increasingly cooperating, Berlin and Cölln entered a legally binding union in 1307, and established a common centre of local government and joint town hall on the 'Long Bridge' (*Lange Brücke*) that connected them. In 1369, Berlin gained the right to mint its own coins, and in 1391 it joined the Hanseatic League of mercantile free cities. In 1432, Berlin and Cölln officially merged; and by the early fifteenth century, the city enjoyed a degree of independence and self-government. Yet even if gaining in regional importance, Berlin nevertheless remained relatively small and insignificant in comparison with Europe's great medieval cities. It might, on this trajectory, have simply developed like other trading towns with their ups and downs, periods of growth and prosperity, and times of trouble, like others in the Hanseatic league (of which Hamburg remains perhaps the most significant example). But, in the context of wider power struggles over control of the territory, the autonomy of Berlin as an independent trading town was not to last.

Key changes took place in the early fifteenth century, when the fiercely ambitious, energetic, and autocratic Frederick 'the Iron Tooth' (*Eisenzahn*) of the Hohenzollern family, from southwestern Germany, took over as Elector of the March of Brandenburg – which held some importance as an electoral state in the 'Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation'. In 1442, he established his base in Berlin. It was not an easy start, and conflicts between city and ruler rumbled through the 1440s. In 1447–48, in an incident known as the 'Berlin Indignation', a citizens' revolt was put down by

the superior military force of the ruler – establishing a pattern of dynamics between forceful ruler and repressed if insubordinate ruled that would be repeated frequently in future centuries.

This too is often singled out as a foundational moment in the longer history of Berlin. Territory that the town had acquired was rapidly taken over by the Elector; rights which burghers had won over previous decades were rescinded; and city self-government soon gave way to princely control, backed by military power. By the early sixteenth century, Berlin was no longer just a trading town situated conveniently on the waterways of central Europe; it was also a significant base for both courtiers and soldiers, attracting wider interest across Europe.

From one perspective, the defeat of the citizens and their claims to self-government might be interpreted as a backward step in Berlin's history, with diminished power for the previously dominant burghers and the four most weighty medieval guilds. But viewed another way, the establishment of Berlin as a *Residenzstadt*, a courtly residence where the Hohenzollern dynasty would be based for centuries – indeed until the abdication of the Kaiser following military defeat in 1918 – set Berlin on another historical course entirely. Rather than remaining a self-governing trading centre like many other small towns across the 'Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation', Berlin was now set on the path to becoming a seat of significant political power, potentially a capital city in the making: first of the Electorate of Brandenburg, with additional territories acquired over time through both conquest and marriage; then of the Kingdom of Prussia; eventually of the German Empire, the Weimar Republic, and the Nazi Third Reich; and finally, following the Cold War era of national division, capital of the united Federal Republic of Germany. Viewed from this longer-term perspective, the setback to local autonomy in the late 1440s could be seen as switching the

tracks to a political trajectory characterised by centralisation of power based largely on military might. This moment could be interpreted as prefiguring and symbolising the tensions between autocratic rulers and subservient people that would characterise so much of Berlin's history over the following centuries.

But nothing in history is predetermined. However much later observers may want to identify foundational moments, the future is always open, always contested, and always subject to competing visions of what might be possible or desirable under changing and unpredictable wider circumstances. These moments may have opened up particular paths; but nothing predetermined the whole route.

With the advent of Hohenzollern rule came not only the loss of self-government, but also a significant reshaping of the character of the city. The royal palace, or Schloss, was established in 1443, and the centre of Berlin began to take shape in ways that remain recognisable today. The Schloss opened onto the Lustgarten, or pleasure gardens, where Berliners could stroll and watch the public enactment of symbolic power by members of the court and significant citizens. Hunting lodges and little palaces were built on the outskirts of the city and in princely estates that were readily reachable by horse and coach, such as the *Jagdschloss* 'in the Green Forest' by a lake to the west, built in 1542–43 and giving Grunewald its name, or the palatial hunting lodge in Köpenick by the Müggelsee lake to the southeast, built in 1558 on the foundations of an earlier fortress (Figure 1.4). In 1538, Berlin withdrew from the Hanseatic League, marking the end of that alternative possible path of development, and became ever more oriented to becoming a courtly residence. In 1539, Berlin adopted the Reformation, becoming predominantly Lutheran.

The character of the population changed with the growth of court administrative functions as well as professions ranging

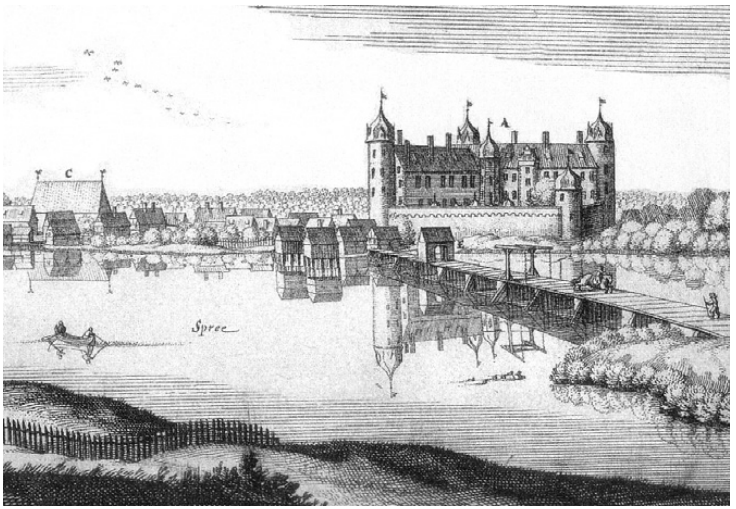

Figure 1.4 Schloss Köpenick, as portrayed in a copper engraving by Matthäus Merian, 1652
One of several hunting lodges around Berlin, like the Jagdschloss Grunewald, Schloss Köpenick illustrates how the power of the rulers was beginning to shift to symbolic displays of status and indulgence in leisure pursuits – although not at the expense of military might.
Matthäus Merian, copper engraving, 1652. public domain.

from alchemy, astrology, and architecture, through finance, law, and music. As the residential areas grew, churches and religious buildings were augmented by locations for more secular pursuits, including the first performance of a play in 1541. People were increasingly attracted to come to Berlin from far and wide, seeking a productive and interesting life, in what would become a long tradition of being a *Wahl-Berliner*, a Berliner by choice rather than birth.

Berlin was nevertheless very far from being anything like a significant European city, and remained relatively small

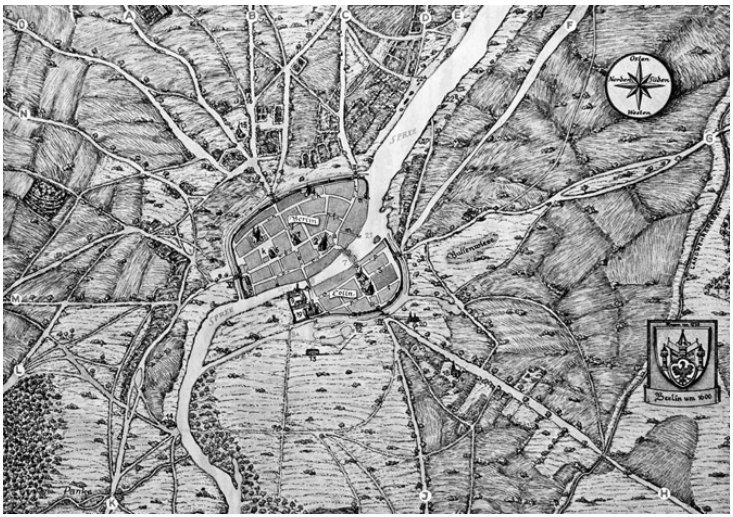

Figure 1.5 Map of Berlin, c. 1600
This map shows the two original settlements on either side of the River Spree: Cölln and Berlin. Note: the north/south points of the compass are not as conventionally displayed today.
Public domain

compared to other major cities at the time (Figure 1.5). In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, Berlin had a population of only around 10–12,000, at most only around one-fifth of the size of Vienna, and in stark contrast to Paris with 200,000 inhabitants, let alone Shakespeare's London, which had a population of around 300,000. Most residents lived not in the finer houses of the elites and courtiers but rather in crowded and unsanitary conditions, their short lives marked by hard work, poverty, and disease as well as the ever-present threat of fires rapidly destroying their homes. The future of Berlin as a capital city of major world-historical significance was far from given in its humble and somewhat obscure origins.