The History of the City of Halle and its University

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Prehistory up to 11th century

The city of Halle lies on the edge of the North German Plain in an extensive terrain to the east of the river Saale inhabited since prehistoric times. Rich brine springs led to the intensive extraction of the salt as early as the late Bronze Age and again in the early Iron Age. After the fall of the Thuringian kingdom Slavonic tribes made their way into the area. Einhard's Chronicle reports that a Frankish army under King Karl, son of Charlemagne, laid out two fortresses: the first mention of the name Halle (806).

In the early 10th century Heinrich I had the Giebichenstein fortress enlarged and brought into his extensive system of fortifications. The Giebichenstein March with castle and settlement along with Halle itself with its salt production, to the south, were granted by Otto I to the Monastery of St. Maurice in Magdeburg in 961.

In 968 Otto founded the Archbishopric of Magdeburg, which received the rich gift in its turn. The burghers flourished in the second half of the 11th century as a result of their rights of market, coinage, customs and outlawry. The high yield of the brine wells led to the growth of what was for the Middle Ages a major industry.

12th and 13th centuries

A defensive wall ringing the town was built with the help of the burghers at the beginning of the 12th century, enlarging the area of the settlement fivefold. The large new market place now became the focal point. A council is first mentioned in a document dating from 1258, though it was not recognized by the Archbishop of Magdeburg, as overlord, until 1310. The town joined the Hanseatic League in 1280, followed by an "eternal alliance" with her sister city, Magdeburg, in 1324. With some 4000 inhabitants Halle stood before a golden future based on the wealth brought by the salt production.

14th to 16th centuries

In the 14th and 15th centuries the town struggled for political autonomy and exclusion from the territories of the Archbishopric, a process not unaccompanied by military conflict. The Rathaus, where the council assembled, was rebuilt by the master mason Nickel Hofmann, giving visible expression to their power. In 1341 the Hospital of St. Cyriac was erected near the gate named the Klaustor on an arm of the Saale. Administered by the town, it was to take in and care for all the sick as well as paupers. A series of churches and convents were built, to mention just one, the gothic church of St. Maurice near the wall in the south-west of the town, whose choir is decorated with sculpted works by Conrad von Einbeck, including a self-portrait (c.1425).
A further mark of the self-confidence of the burghers' culture is the Red Tower on the market square, a free-standing clock tower, built between 1418 and 1506 "to praise the famous city of Halle, its whole citizenry and indeed the whole surroundings", as can be read in the document relating to its formal opening. In the 15th century lengthy conflicts between the council, the salt panners and an opposition within the city gave the Archbishop of Magdeburg a chance to intervene in 1478 when he sent troops in and forced the town back into strict feudal dependence. He had a citadel, the Moritzburg, for use as the residence of the Archbishop at the north-west edge of the city. Archbishop Ernst moved into the first rooms in 1503, after 19 years construction work. His successor, Albrecht Margrave of Brandenburg (1490-1545), soon concentrated a quite unusual degree of power in his hands: he became administrator of the Monastery at Halberstadt and in 1514 also Archbishop of Mainz. Halle became Albrecht's favourite residence and, being the art loving Renaissance prince he was, set about radically changing its appearance.

He had the old Dominican church converted into the cathedral (now Domkirche) and in 1520 founded the "Neue Stift", now the Residenz. However, the events of the Reformation and the Peasants' Wars stirred the city up and for all the now Cardinal Archbishop's vehement resistance the Reformation won through. His plan for a Catholic university in Halle never came to fruition. Albrecht left the city in 1541, never to return. Halle officially adopted the Reformation.

17th century

The fact that the city was in the immediate neighbourhood of the Electorate of Saxony improved its position in a number of ways toward the end of the 17th century. Huguenot refugees and those from the Palatinate of the Rhine formed their own community in the town, contributing to its economic progress. At the same time the Electorate of Brandenburg, in whose territory Halle had now been incorporated, soon followed with a plan to found a University here. In view of the lack of well qualified officials, pastors, teachers, doctors and lawyers, it was logical to choose the former Archiepiscopal seat as home to this. All the more so as there was already an academy for young gentry run by the Frenchman Millié where the offspring of the nobility and more respectable bourgeoisie received an appropriate education. Christian Thomasius, an energetic scholar driven out of Leipzig in 1690, was entrusted by the Government of Brandenburg to hold lectures in Halle and transform Millié's Academy into a University.

The official opening of the new University of Halle in the presence of Elector Frederick III on 12th July 1694 was an exceptionally impressive event and all four faculties were able to attract excellent teachers in a remarkably short time.

Examples are Samuel Stryk (1640-1710), von Ludewig and Christian Thomasius himself in the Law Faculty, Friedrich Hoffmann (1660-1728), the son of a local doctor, and his scientific antagonist Georg Ernst Stahl (1659-1734) in Medicine, Christoph Cellarius (1638-1707), Johann Franz Buddeus (1667-1729) and August Hermann Francke, who taught Oriental Languages, while from 1707 the renowned Enlightenment philosopher and mathematician Christian Wolf (1679-1754) joined the Faculty of Philosophy and Johann Wilhelm Baier (1647-1695) as well as, later, Francke that of Theology.
It was above all Francke and Thomasius who typified in a pronounced way the intellectual trends of their times: if the one was the focus of a Pietism specific to Halle, the other was central to the early German Enlightenment.

An extraordinarily large number of students were attracted for whatever reason to the University: the chronicler Dreyhaupt's tables for 1693-1744 show 29,322 matriculations, including 12,626 law students, 12,278 in theology and 1942 in medicine.

August Hermann Francke's Foundations constituted a second pole for intellectual life in Halle. A theologian heavily attacked by orthodox Protestants on account of his Pietism, he came to Halle in early 1692 to take up his responsibilities as pastor at St. George's in Glaucha as well as teaching duties at the University. Having seen at first hand the poverty and squalor prevalent in his parish he resolved to found an orphanage along with other educational facilities and provide for their maintenance. In 1698 he received special permission from the state for this purpose and set about creating an educational complex almost as a town in itself, which was soon to achieve worldwide renown.

To finance the institutions Francke involved himself in a series of business activities: a pharmacy and a printing press, which yielded profits, and farmland, a brewery and a bakery for the institutions' own supply.

18th century to the present

The second half of the 18th century saw a serious decline in all areas of the economic and intellectual life of the city, caused in particular by the events of the Seven Years' War. Johann Christian Reil (1759-1813), clinician and official physician to the municipality, recognized in this latter capacity the shockingly bad social situation in Halle when he wrote to the City Council at the beginning of 1805: "The city has between twenty and twenty-four thousand inhabitants, whose principal employment is to be found in wool working, stocking factories and spinning establishments, whose influence on the health of the workers is all too well known."

On the other hand, the University saw its second flowering in the last quarter of the 18th century: F.A. Wolf in classical philology, Schleiermacher as theologian, the natural scientist H. Steffens, A.H. Niemeyer in education and in botany K. Sprengel. The Medical faculty too received further support again, and achieved a highly respected status. An independent University Hospital was established on 14th May 1787 under the direction of von Goldhagen (1742-1788). He was succeeded by Johann Christian Reil, who promoted teaching oriented to ordinary medical practice, and in 1808 separated the surgical from the internal medicine departments.

The classical/romantic era in the history of the University of Halle came to an end in October 1806, when it was closed down after Napoleon's troops took the city. For all its vicissitudes it survived the difficult war years that followed, but lost nevertheless its leading role in the city during the 19th century. Rapid industrialisation, favoured by the exploitation of rich lignite deposits, high-yielding agriculture (grain, beets) and
An early rail connection (1840), resulted in a complete change in the character of the town, its image and its social structure.

While around 28,000 people lived in Halle in 1841, fifty years later a population of over 100,000 had long made the city into a major conurbation. Alongside mechanical and similar forms of engineering, lignite and sugar refineries, the economy soon came to be dominated by the chemical industry. The city found itself at the centre of a whole industrial region which was to remain a determinant factor for the economic geography of the Mitteldeutschland region right into the communist period, when it played a decisive role in the economy of East Germany.

With its roughly quarter of a million inhabitants Halle is today the largest city in the regional state of Saxony-Anhalt. Much of locally established industry, above all the network of chemical concerns, collapsed in the wake of the changes accompanying the reunification of Germany. Nonetheless, the city is well on the way to a renaissance in all manner of fields on the basis of its traditions and past achievements as regional cultural centre, as well as industrial focal point, and relying on the strength of its intellectual capital.