CHAPTER NINE

OMENS AND PRODIGIES THAT FORETOLD UPROARS
IN WESTPHALIA AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE
CITY OF MÜNSTER

We learn through the reading of history that virtually no commonwealth was ever afflicted with some notable disaster because of crimes without God having first, in His gracious omnipotence, terrified it with horrible omens and prodigies in order that He might thereby make manifest the offense that He feels and give advance warning of the destruction to come, in case the astonishment caused by these portents might cause people to lay down their impiety and really come to their senses. It would not be difficult for me to demonstrate this with countless examples from very many cities if it were not the case that with such verbosity I would cause nauseated disgust in my readers, who are in a hurry to reach the actual subject matter. Indeed, I do not think that anyone with even a moderate familiarity with literature would have any doubts about this proposition, since the writings of both the Greeks and Romans on the one hand and the Jews on the other are filled with such omens and prodigies, incontrovertibly sent by God, which foretold devastation and inevitable destruction to the latter and miserable death and a change in their affairs (as the outcome demonstrated) to the former. Let us, therefore, omit prodigies that once foretold the overturning of other cities and look at our local prodigies, which in fact are so many and so manifest that it would hardly be thought that I should neglect them as I am about to describe the transformation of the polity of Westphalia and of Münster in particular.

We find that since the days of Charlemagne, that most Christian prince and the apostle of all Saxony, who waged very wholesome wars on Westphalia and first successfully beat down that very recalcitrant and fierce race by arms and then softened them by teaching them the saving Word of Jesus Christ, there were no notable religious uproars in

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1 The conceit comes from the preface of Livy’s Roman history, in which he imagines that the reader wishes to ignore the salubrious lessons to be learned from Rome’s early history in order to hurry to the racier material concerning the fall of the Republic.
this province. But in the year 1517 there were many omens: on January 12 at about 3 o’clock in the afternoon three suns pierced with bloody swords were seen in the sky in certain places in Germany, and on January 13, a sun of fearsome appearance could be seen surrounded by certain half-circles of various colors; next, on January 10 and March 17 three moons appeared. These omens indisputably foretold that the clarity of the one sun and faith was to be buffeted with hazy opinions and torn to pieces and that the leaders of states, which the study of history has shown to be what suns signify, would disagree among themselves, and after that year there arose many sects in certain provinces of Germany that gradually tainted almost all of Westphalia as if by contagion, not only stirring up many commonwealths but imposing horrible innovations on them.

The very outcome indicated what was foretold by that terrifying omen seen in the sky by many people four hours before sunrise on October 11, 1527, being particularly visible to the north. | What they saw was the shape of a bent arm extending from the clouds, and in its hand could be seen a double-edged sword with a rather obscure star on either side and another star that was larger and brighter than the rest on the blade. On the sides could be seen bloody daggers with human heads intermixed, which struck the viewers with such terror that it almost made them faint. What was the presage of that fatal outbreak of the sweating disease called “English,” which broke out all over Germany with sudden and vast mortality in the year 1529, and within twenty-four hours of infecting people either caused them to choke to death or restored them to their former health at no cost to life? This outbreak terrified people so much that as they walked around, the living who still enjoyed their health proclaimed that they were dying. As this disease was going about in its depredations, randomly seizing very many victims and laying them low, the priests who administered the sacraments to the bed-ridden, being so few in number, were necessarily held in such honor and veneration that you would have thought them gods on earth.

Certainly, the only thing which this universal malady of Germany and

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2 The “sweating sickness” (morbus anglicus) signifies a disease that was first attested in England in 1485, and apart from the outbreak mentioned here never spread to the continent (hence the adjective “English”). The onset of this highly infectious disease was swift, and frequently its high fever and profuse sweating (hence the name) soon resulted in death. After several recurrences in the first half of the sixteenth century (Henry VIII was terrified of it), this dreaded disease swiftly disappeared in the second half, and its exact identification is unclear.