

The Public Display of Religious Identity by Utraquist Towns in Fifteenth-century Bohemia

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Roughly one hundred years before Luther's famous proclamation which marked the beginning of the Lutheran Reformation, two originally independent historical phenomena occurred in the kingdom of Bohemia – one of a more general nature, and the other unique to Bohemia. The first one was the rise of burgher culture and politics, as well as the economic status of towns, which saw a new quest for their representation. The second was the first successful reformation movement in European history – the Bohemian Reformation. In this paper I would like to argue that soon after they occurred, in the second half of the fifteenth century, the two historical processes reached the stage when they found advantages in each other.

In the early fifteenth century, the Bohemian reform movement won over Bohemia and most of the country became Utraquist. The Bohemian Reformation soon got rid of its Hussite radical wing, but the country remained reformist – or “heretical”, depending on the origin of one's sources – for the next two hundred years. By the mid-fifteenth century, of the original Four Articles of Prague, mainline Utraquism, strictly enforced only communion *sub utraque*. The lay chalice has become the most remarkable distinguishing feature of Utraquist Bohemia.

Utraquism, which had been the majority religion in Bohemia during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was vigorously suppressed by Roman Catholics after the Battle of the White Mountain (Bílá Hora) in 1620 which restored Habsburg rule. After that date, all monuments of the Bohemian Reformation were systematically destroyed, clouding material memories of the Utraquist past into almost complete forgetfulness. Only a few public monuments escaped the censor's eyes; they were rare and at first sight did not diverge substantially from Roman Catholic doctrine. The majority of public monuments were lost through the hostility of Roman Catholic officials following the Edict of 1624 under the regent Charles of Liechtenstein which forbade any images or inscriptions which did not comply with Roman Catholic orthodoxy.¹

1 “Whosoever has something degrading and against [Roman] Catholic religion painted on his house, whitewash it [or pay a] fine of 30 gold pieces. Similarly, whatsoever can be found on gates must be destroyed or covered. On these places, the image of Christ crucified or other old religious images shall be painted.” “Každý soused co by posměšného a proti náboženství katolickému potupného na domu svém i vnitř malováno měl, to ihned pod pokutou 30 zlatých zamazati dal. Podobně co kdes na branách vytesáno neb malováno jest, ať jest vylámáno a zamazáno. Na těch pak místech boží umučení a jiná starodávná pobožná malování aby byla.” Jan Amos Komenský, DJAK 9/I, *Historia profana, Historia o těžkých protivenstvích, Historia persecutionum* 151 (255).

Based on the example of one Bohemian Utraquist town, I would like to show how Utraquism – in its core a religious attitude – became an issue in the construction of public identity and representation of Bohemian towns. As I want to focus on communities' religious representation, I will exempt from this essay the private decoration of houses.

When researching Utraquist administration, Noemi Rejchrtová once stated that the dependence of the Utraquist church upon lay civil structures differentiated it from the organisation of the Roman Church.² Utraquism found itself in a different situation than Roman Catholicism which maintained an independent hierarchy of power built over the centuries. Utraquism's close, but complicated, relation to the lay community is important for our cause as fifteenth and sixteenth century town culture – especially the administration of the towns – brought in new forms of demonstrating social prestige and religious identity. In short, since the second half of the fifteenth century, Bohemian towns proudly and openly showed their attachment both to Utraquism as their religion, and to the Bohemian king as their supreme ruler, and they attempted to show their social-political, and religious status through the public monuments which they built.

An interesting source for the history and culture of the queen's dowry city of Hradec Králové is the 1780 edition of Carl J. von Bienenberg's *Geschichte der Stadt Königrätz*.³ There we find, besides the interesting extracts from older sources, descriptions of old monuments which were still partly preserved in Bienenberg's time. One of the ancient monuments in Hradec was a sandstone fountain with figural and heraldic decoration which he dates to 1460.⁴ Bienenberg relates that it had been built on the main square under the Burgrave of Hradec county, Nicolas Berka of Dubá and Lipá, to honour the Bohemian "heretical" king George of Poděbrady. In Bienenberg's time its ruins were still visible, but nothing survives today. Bienenberg describes the decoration of the fountain as follows:

The fountain or well ...is hexagonal [in shape] and [its decoration] communicates two main messages: the column rising from the main water basin consists of an hexagonal chalice decorated with coats of arms and figures and it

2 Blanka Zylinská, "Utrakvistická církevní správa a možnosti jejího studia," [Utraquist church administration and possibilities for its study] in: Ivan Hlaváček, and Jan Hrdina eds., *Církevní správa a její písemnosti na přelomu středověku a novověku*. AUC – *Philosophica et Historica* 2 (Prague, 1999) 41, cites the unpublished work of Noemi Rejchrtová (Noemi Rejchrtová, *Studie k českému utrakvismu, zejména doby jagellonské* [Studies in Czech Utraquism, especially in the Jagellonian period] habilitation diss. Evangelical Theological Faculty, Charles University, Prague, 1984).

3 Carl Josef von Bienenberg, *Geschichte der Stadt Königrätz*, (Prague, 1780)1:347-8.

4 For the only description in the literature see Ludvík Domečka, "Bývalá kašna kamenná z 15. století v Hradci Králové," [Former fountains from the fifteenth century in Hradec Králové] ČSPSČ 35(1927) 27-30.

stresses the Utraquist confession of the town. There are coats of arms with an eagle, the Bohemian lion and the letters G and W, as well as other coats of arms....

The letters G and W Bienenberg interpreted as the initials of the kings George of Poděbrady and his successor Władisław [Vladislav] II Jagiellonian, under whom – as he implied – the fountain would have been finished (some time after 1471). The letter G, however, can also be interpreted from the name of the town Gradcz (Hradec) where it is used in the city's coat of arms or as a separate heraldic motif in the city's decoration (a lion holding the letter G).

Bienenberg continues his description: "under the coats of arms, there are six busts in contemporary costume with water spouting from their mouths and six female heads without water." The chalice-like basin has a cover mounted with a life-size statue of St. George slaying the dragon and the princess who turns away from the scene in horror.

Bienenberg, who was himself an Enlightenment Roman Catholic scholar, reads the scene as:

Saint [George] looks towards the square, and thus towards Mautnerska Gate, through which George of Poděbrady ceremonially entered the town. [The saint] symbolises King George as defender of the Utraquists.

He mentions the ceremonial royal entry as having taken place on 1 September 1452.

Clearly, the eighteenth-century German historian understands the composition of St. George on the chalice as an allegory of the Utraquist King George and of his protection of the Utraquist faith. If Bienenberg is right, then the Catholic soldier-saint in his traditional attire and iconography was – thanks to his position on the chalice and the context of the Utraquist city – transformed in truly Renaissance spirit into a confessionally-ambivalent allegory of a knight defending the true faith. This time though, the true faith in question was the Utraquist faith, the same as that professed by the citizens of Hradec. With such iconography, the monument easily survived until the eighteenth century as there was nothing embarrassing from the point of view of Roman Catholic orthodoxy for the censors to fight against.

This poses the question, who could have conceived such a complicated iconographic programme with allegorical meaning? An hypothesis is offered by Hradec's status as the dowry town of Bohemian queens. The city officials were in close contact with Queen Johana of Rožmitál (+1475), the wife of George of Poděbrady. Johana, herself a Roman Catholic, was married to the Utraquist king whose confessionally tolerant rule she supported with all possible effort as an energetic and educated woman. With regard to her assumed

interest in the city's affairs,⁵ it is unlikely that she would not have been consulted about such an important public undertaking in her own town – or, indeed, she could even have been the one who commissioned the work. It seems plausible that the one who conceived the work might have come from her court.

But let us return to the fountain and to Bienenberg's description. On the outer perimeter of the hexagonal fountain stood three pyramids; between them were three life-size figures of supporters on plinths. The first angle of the hexagonal outer structure – in Bienenberg's time well-preserved – had a figure and the coat of arms of Nicolas Berka of Dubá, who was the Burgrave of Hradec county between 1460 and 1471. The next plinth had the city's coat of arms in the form of circular walls with three towers on one side and an as yet unidentified coat of arms with a dog on the other. As the pyramids and figures apparently alternated, this angle of the hexagon must have had a pyramid. The third plinth bore a figure and coat of arms with a boar's head. Bienenberg reads it as the coat of arms of the Valdek or Šelenberk families, but it is more likely that the owner is Lev of Rožmitál (who was the Lord Chief Justice of Bohemia from 1464 and Lord High Steward from 1467) or Jan Zajíc of Házmburk (Lord High Chancellor). In any case, the arms were apparently those of a high royal official.

On the fourth angle was a pyramid on whose plinth there were arms with a chalice flanked by an eagle and a lion and a pair of crossed hammers; Bienenberg unconvincingly interprets the second arms as those of the town of Kutná Hora. In my opinion, it may have been the arms of a guild e.g. those of a miners' guild, but the exact identification is no longer possible. The eagle and lion are, however, on the coat of arms of the Bohemian kingdom; together with a chalice – the symbol of Utraquism – in the middle they confessed the dual nature of the loyalty of the citizens of Hradec. On the other side of the same plinth, there was a coat of arms with the letter G, likely symbolising Hradec.

Originally, a figure stood on the fifth angle; on the plinth there was a coat of arms with an eagle. In the last, sixth angle there was nothing still remaining in Bienenberg's time beyond a pyramid. Between the angles of the hexagon were other, mainly reclining, figures, coats of arms, and ornaments; they may have been the arms of various guilds and brotherhoods. By Bienenberg's time they were extensively worn down or damaged through confessional intolerance after Bílá Hora.

The inventive and complicated decoration of the stone fountain clearly suggests that the town used its public space to promote its two core identities: the

5 Johana, according to Bienenberg's sources, had a considerable influence over town matters. In the years during which the fountain was presumed to have been erected (1460 – 1461) it was she who ordered her court officials to name the city's council members, Bienenberg, *Geschichte* 1:348–9.

confessional identity of its Utraquist citizens as well as its identity as a royal city close to the royal family and the king's administration. The impulse to such an heraldic and iconography programme was undoubtedly given by the town council of Hradec that itself used its intertwined confessional and political identity in order to build its own representation. In what follows, we will see that the council's efforts to achieve proper public representation went even farther – it created a complex set of public iconography, now lost, communicating the status of the town to the outside world.

For another Utraquist public monument, now lost, we must turn again to Bienenberg's text. A rather peculiar proof of efforts to promote the unity of the kingdom and the Utraquist confession in Bohemia is mentioned there for the year 1520:⁶ an image of a chalice on the *Mautnerská* Gate in Hradec surrounded with Czech verses beginning "One faith, one baptism, and love amongst us...."⁷ The inscription and the image were accompanied by two coats of arms: that of the city, and that of the shearers' guild (*Tuchschörerwappen*). Here, the person who invented the monument on behalf of the guild and the city council openly adhered to the programme of the confessional unity of the kingdom. The reader should not be misled, however, for the text is in no way a statement of tolerance towards all other Bohemian confessions as it continues with a sharp and hateful denunciation of the third confession in the Bohemian state – the Unity of Brethren (*Jednota bratrská*).

As in the case of the fountain described earlier, the text on the gate promotes the unity of the Utraquist faith in Bohemia to which Hradec's burghers adhered. The question remains, however: to what extent did it mean embracing or tolerating Roman Catholicism?⁸ The public image of the chalice on the gate shows how much Hradec's Utraquist citizens were proud of their confession and represents exactly the type of image which was banned by Regent Liechtenstein's edict. No wonder that after Bilá Hora it was most probable that

6 Bienenberg, *Geschichte* 1:442-3, quotes two sources unknown to me, probably from his own archive.

7 The following inscription (with transcription errors by Bienenberg) was written in columns flanking the chalice in the middle. The chalice was removed in 1626, but its outline was still visible on the gate in Bienenberg's time: "Gedna wira geden kržest / a laska mezy nami / Čžinmež Bohu Chwalu / Cžest raczi byti s nami / Veritas vincit / Milužte Prawdu Hradeczti / Anno / Wirau bludne bikhart /// žiw o wirze gednota / Čžini mnoho dobreho / warug se wiry bikharta / i kazdeho bludneho / Veritas liberabit / neb prawda Pržemaha / Dni 1520 / Sti prawda weczne zustawa". Latin numerals with the date of execution were interpolated into the text (here in italics). A rough translation follows: "One faith, one baptism / and love amongst us / God shall be praised / Honesty be with us / Veritas vincit / Love the Truth, Hradec people / Anno / heresy [is] the faith [of] pikharts /// that unity in faith / is to our advantage / avoid the faith of a pikhart / or any heresy / Veritas liberabit / because the Truth triumphs / Dni 1520 / [?] the Truth remains eternally."

8 The anti-Picard (Brethren) propaganda could have served as a unifying theme here, pointing at the "common enemy", and stressing the fact that the Utraquists shared with Roman Catholics the seven sacraments, if not the manner of administering communion.

this chalice was replaced by a monstrance – the ceremonial liturgical vessel for exposing the eucharistic host.

The reverence given to the Utraquist chalice in the late fifteenth century does not in any way compromise Utraquist popular veneration of images and saints, nor did it deter them from decorating their churches. The year 1497 is the date of execution of the Utraquist (aumbry/tabernacle) in the parish church of the Holy Spirit in Hradec Králové⁹ – one of the few monuments which has come down to us (Fig. 1). It bears the figures of Saints Peter and Paul and the Latin inscription “Ecce panis angelorum factus cibus viatorum..”,¹⁰ taken from the hymn *Lauda Sion* for the Feast of Corpus Christi – a hymn used by both Roman Catholics and Utraquists and, thus, in no way offensive to Roman Catholics. Although one cannot be sure who ordered this purely religious work, I include it among public works (it was, of course, accessible to the public) to show that not all art was later considered harmful. Confessional ambivalence helped this Utraquist aumbry to survive the “cleansing” of offensive art from churches that took place during the seventeenth century. On the other hand, mixing Roman Catholic iconography in an Utraquist context is common in Bohemia, and makes the study of Utraquist art and material culture rather difficult undertaking.

Finally, one more preserved monument from the Utraquist era in Hradec is a silver pyx (container for the Eucharist host) with two spoons, dated to the second half of the fifteenth century (Fig. 2). It was found in the chest in the town hall of Hradec before the mid-nineteenth century, and had been kept until 1882 in the town hall's treasury.¹¹ The body of the pyx is wrapped in green velvet embroidered with lilies in gold and pearls. (Fig.3) The low circular pyx stands on four feet in the form of pomegranates and has a lid fixed by a hinge; opposite, there is a clasp decorated with a miniature lion in heraldic figure. As mentioned above, the lion was used as the arms of Hradec (e.g. on the official seals); here it reveals a close link between the pyx and the city.

Although there seem to be no written sources confirming it, the Hradec pyx has always been linked by tradition to the Utraquist liturgy and the town administration of Hradec Králové, and it was known from the beginning as the Utraquist pyx. It is unlikely that it originates from the Church of the Holy Spirit or from one of the other churches in Hradec; a more plausible suggestion is that it had been ordered for the Communion of the city council members who were of Utraquist confession until Bílá Hora. Besides its tradition and location, its origin in the town hall of Hradec is supported by the heraldic lion, the offi-

9 Karel Guth, “Pastoforium v kostele sv. Ducha v Hradci Králové,” [The tabernacle in the Church of the Holy Spirit in Hradec Králové] *Umění* 11 (1938)521-529.

10 Bienenberg, *Geschichte* 1:406.

11 Now in the Museum of Eastern Bohemia in Hradec Králové, inv. no. 17612 a, b, c.

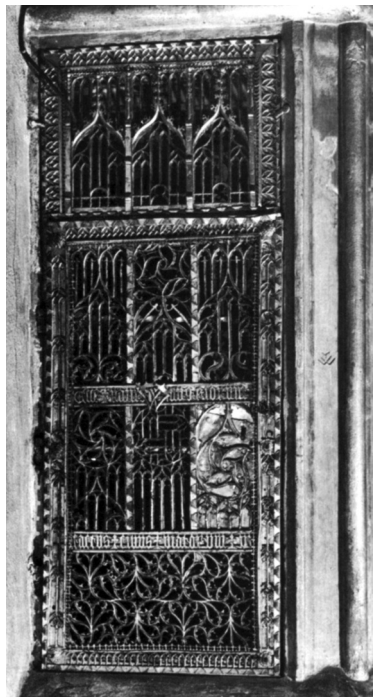
cial symbol of Hradec as a city. The pyx could have served in the council's worship in the town hall chapel or at other liturgical services held after the election of new councillors. It could have had as a companion piece a Utraquist chalice – possibly one with a spout which was a Utraquist peculiarity for communion *sub utraque*. It apparently belonged to the town's treasure, which – together with an archive – used to be shown to official and other important visitors. This practise of ritually showing the level of local patriotism is also known in the case of the town of Kutná Hora. The pyx seems to have had a rather semi-public function showing the unity of the town in its Utraquist confession and the proud tradition of the town's self-government responsible only to the king and the officials of the Bohemian kingdom.

Hradec is not the only city, where fragments of Utraquist public monuments were recorded. A few preserved fragments and sources suggest that similar forms of town representation – this time stressing the Hussite tradition – were used in the Utraquist town of Tábor in the fifteenth and at the beginning of the sixteenth centuries. The monuments comprise a painting of the famous Hussite military leader Jan Žižka on one Tábor gate painted in 1451, a public feast devoted to the same person, a stone carving of the town's coat of arms with images of Hussite religious leaders and Žižka from 1515-1516, and a baptismal font decorated with chalices (Fig. 4), dated possibly to the year 1482.¹²

Similar monuments surely existed in Prague as well: there was a large chalice on the facade of the Týn church, and two statues of King George of Poděbrady, one on the Prague bridge and one on the Týn church. Finally, the original decoration of the medieval fountain in the Utraquist town of Kutná Hora could have served a similar purpose; however the original decoration is unfortunately lost.

The city of Hradec Králové is an interesting example of a complex iconographical programme preserved in fragments that stress the town's Utraquist community – faithful to the king and proud of its self-governance. With a high degree of probability, three out of the four Utraquist monuments can be linked to the city council and its effort to represent the city in public eyes. Next to the building of churches, monuments in the public spaces of Bohemian towns were seen as a suitable environment to express the community's religious identity through works of art and architecture. Their installation was supervised by town officials to create the symbolic topography of the town.

12 Rudolf Tecl, "Církevní správa a náboženské poměry v Táboře během druhé poloviny 15. a na počátku 16. století (s edicí účtů tábořských kostelníků z let 1509-1510)", [Ecclesiastical administration and religious conditions in Tabor during the second half of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries (with an edition of the accounts of the sacristans of Tábor from 1509-10)] *Tábořský archiv* 10 (2000-2001) 232. On Tábor's other monuments see Rudolf Tecl, "Tábor v druhé polovině 15. století", [Tábor in the second half of the fifteenth century] HT 2 (1979) 87-89 n. 86.



The Hradec Králové aumbry/tabernacle
(pastoforium).
Church of the Holy Spirit, Hradec Králové.



The Hradec Králové pyx with
two communion spoons.
Museum of Eastern Bohemia,
Hradec Králové, č.inv. 17612 a,b,c.



Two communion spoons in front of the Hradec Králové pyx.
Museum of Eastern Bohemia, Hradec Králové, č.inv. 17612 a, b, c.



The tin baptismal font from Tábor. The chalice in the frieze can be seen in the detail. c.1490.
Hussite Museum, Tábor.