
The Bethlehem Chapel, 1570–1606: A Dispute Inside One Camp

Pavel Kůrka (Prague)

The Bethlehem Chapel had gained fame due to the association with Jan Hus and again a century later due to the brief sojourn of Thomas Müntzer. During the sixteenth century, however, it turned into an – on the whole – ordinary sanctuary with little to remind one of its glorious past. Nevertheless, one legacy of its glorious past was also its peculiar legal status, which led to various disputes concerning its management.

According to the testament of the Chapel's founder, Jan of Mühllheim, its management was divided between the representatives of the Bohemian university nation (after the violent phase of the Reformation this right passed on to the heads of Charles College [*karolinská kolej*]) and the mayor of the Old Town of Prague. The former had the right to appoint the preacher and one of the three administrators, the latter named the remaining two officials.¹ At the foundation of the chapel, it was also necessary to respect the rights of the adjacent Church of Sts. Philip and James.² This church was destroyed during the wars of the Bohemian Reformation and thus the Bethlehem Chapel turned *de facto* into the parish church.³ This, however, did not become reflected in its nomenclature; the priest in charge continued simply to be called the Bethlehem Preacher and is never designated as parish priest.

Zikmund Winter has already narrated, from the viewpoint of the university, the substance of the dispute over the chapel, the *schwerpunkt* of which rested in the period of 1570–1606.⁴ Ferdinand Hrejsa has described the con-

¹ Concerning the right of patronage over the chapel, see most recently Blanka Zilynská, "Pražská univerzita – patron církevních beneficí?" [Prague University: A Patron of Ecclesiastical Benefices?], *AUC HUCP*, 47 (2007) 75–88, especially 79–82. For the chapel's history in English, see Otakar Odložilík, "The Chapel of Bethlehem in Prague," in: *Studien zur alteren Geschichte Osteuropas*, ed. Günther Stokl (Graz and Cologne, 1956) 125–142.

² The church stood in the place of today's house no. 252, the clergy house in the place of house no. 258; see František Ekert, *Posvátná místa král. hl. města Prahy, dějiny a popsání* [The Sacred Edifices of the Royal Capital City of Prague: History and Description] 2vv. (Prague, 1884), reprint (Prague, 1996) II: 401.

³ Tomek, *Dějepis* 9:97–106.

⁴ Zikmund Winter, *O životě na vysokých školách pražských knihy dvoje* [Two Books about the Life in the schools of Higher Education in Prague] (Prague, 1899) 165; idem, *Děje vysokých škol pražských od secessí cizích národů po dobu bitvy bělohorské (1409–1622)* [History of the Schools of Higher Learning in Prague from the Secession of the Foreign Nations until the

flict in great detail, but in excessively stressing the confessional aspects, he obscured the legal side of the encounter.⁵ Hrejsa sees the start of the later clashes as early as the 1520s, when the disputes broke out concerning the appointment of the preacher and the confessional orientation of the Chapel.

In April 1523, a convocation of the Utraquist estates and clergy deposed the current preacher, the conservative Utraquist, Vavřinec of Třeboň, and replaced him with a radical priest Martínek. At his departure during the following year, there is a mention of giving accounts into the hands of four sacristans, representing the city council, but without any trace of the university's influence.⁶ Evidence that even in calmer times the appointment of the preacher did not observe the rules of the act of foundation can be deduced from the royal presentation of the priest Václav Subula in 1531. His nomination was entrusted to the Old Town representatives, while the University was once more entirely bypassed.⁷ The right of the University to name the preacher was once more ignored in 1551, when Ferdinand I entrusted the preaching office to the Administrator of the Utraquist Consistory, Jan Mystopol.

Still right after Mystopol's death in 1568, there was no indication of the coming of a conflict. The Old Town officials together with the University professors asked for a joint administration of the Chapel in accordance with the old customs. Evidently, they feared that either the royal officials or the Consistory *sub Una* might wish to usurp the right of appointment.⁸ Another Utraquist Administrator, Martin Mělnický resided in the parsonage in 1570, but he did not preach in the Bethlehem Chapel. Only at this point did the University professors start to clamour for their rights. While nobody prevented them from nominating the preacher, the latter was unable to reside at the Bethlehem Chapel before the departure of Václav Benešovský in 1590. Even afterwards, however, the conflict continued around the appointment of the officials. The officials themselves actively participated in the dispute, for instance, by submitting remonstrances in support of the legal rights of the city.⁹

The parishioners did not wish to give up their churchwardens who were introduced by Mystopol, and the top representatives of the Old Town government supported the parishioners' wishes. All the further requests, submitted by the University, concerned the question of officials. During the following

Battle of the White Mountain, 1409–1622] (Prague, 1897) 66–68.

⁵ Ferdinand Hrejsa, "Betlém od r. 1516," in idem, *Betlémská kaple. O jejích dějinách a zachovaných zbytcích* [Bethlehem Chapel: Its History and Extant Remnants] (Prague, 1922) 22–106.

⁶ Ibid., 23–29.

⁷ Klement Borový, *Jednání a dopisy konsistoře katolické a utrakvistické* [Acts and Letters of the Catholic and Utraquist Consistories] 2 vv. (Prague, 1868–1869) 1:59–60, no. 73.

⁸ Josef Teige, *Základy starého mstopisu pražského, 1437–1620* [Elements of old Prague topography 1437–1620] 2 vv. (Prague, 1910–1915) 2:831, no. 115. Teige refers to a wrong signature in the "Ekonomika" Fond of the Charles University, so that the document in question cannot be found.

⁹ Teige, *Základy*, 2:831–832, no. 135,

decades these demands continued unaltered. In the continuing dispute, both sides appealed to their historical rights, as was common in those days.¹⁰

While the University professors could rest their claims on the foundation documents, the townspeople found support in the subsequent practice. The crucial funds, which enabled the necessary structural repairs throughout the period were gathered on the initiative of the local inhabitants. The vaulting of the Chapel was made possible by the bequest of Alžběta Svíčnice, which was not obtained without a conflict with her relatives, who were reluctant to respect her last testament. Characteristically, the burden of negotiations was borne by the officials, charged with financial affairs.¹¹ The reconstruction, begun in 1572, was mainly due to Václav Krocín, a distinguished burgher of the Old Town, albeit the University professors covered some of the expenses.¹² Another large donation came to the Chapel in 1586 from the bequest of the townsman Adam Karyk of Řezno, namely, 6,000 score of Meissen groschen, to be used for funding the preacher's salary. When the office was vacant, the income was assigned to the hospital.

A compromise between the University and the Old Town was reached only after the death of the two main protagonists: Mayor Václav Krocín and Professor Trojan Nigell of Oskořín. On 6 January 1606 the Old Town and the University concluded an agreement concerning the Chapel's management, which returned to the principles of Mühlheim's foundation, with the proviso that both parties would audit the accounts. Soon thereafter in 1612, the Chapel was transferred to the Unity of Brethren, while the University reserved the right to use the edifice for ceremonial occasions.¹³ That, however, constitutes another chapter in the Chapel's history, different from the period of disputes between the University and the Old Town in 1570–1606.

From the formal legal point of view the University's claims appeared well founded, although the local inhabitants – respectively the city administration – had ample reasons for dissatisfaction, given the feeble interest of the University in the Chapel. In their interest, it was necessary to keep the Chapel functioning, to maintain liturgical services and to assure the physical upkeep, which was not a matter of course in the period in question.

At the same time, the Old Town and the University had many interests in common from the viewpoint of the country-wide ecclesiastical policy in a period of sharpening confessional disputes. Their dispute was an encounter within a single camp, which imposed a need for discreet conduct and

¹⁰ For instance, Archiv Univerzity Karlovy (= AUK), Ekonomika B14, Akta probosťa Karlovy koleje 1596–1608, f. 91r.

¹¹ Teige, *Základy*, 2:826–829.

¹² Hrejsa, "Betlém od r. 1516," 42–44.

¹³ Concerning this transfer, see Michal Svatoš, "Smlouva o užívání Betlémské kaple z roku 1612," [Contract for the use of the Bethlehem Chapel from the year 1612] in: Lenka Řezníková and Vladimír Urbánek, edd., *Mezi Baltem a Uhrami* [Between the Baltic and Hungary] (Prague, 2006) 209–222; the study is also available on the web [<http://www.michalsvatos.cz/?p=10>].

avoidance of appeal to outside parties, although it was not possible to exclude interventions from the Utraquist Consistory, which was then under the sovereign's influence. Also in the 1590s we find a mention that the University had appealed to the Emperor.¹⁴

The conflict cannot be explained simply by reference to confessional interests, as an encounter of diverse orientations within Utraquism. The inhabitants of the parish had an understandable interest in "their church" and a desire for an arrangement that would guarantee its normal administration. As donors, both large and small, they felt entitled to share in decisions about the Chapel's development.

One of the causes of the dispute was the legal status of the Chapel, which differed substantially from that of other churches in Prague. As a matter of fact, the founders had not lost the right of patronage during the radical phase of the Bohemian Reformation as had happened in the case of other churches. In the case of the Bethlehem Chapel, there was a perpetuation of the atypical model of a joint patronage, exercised by the Old Town of Prague and the University. The two influential institutions and leading forces of the Bohemian Reformation found themselves in the paradoxical roles of defenders of an obsolescent status quo vis à vis the Chapel. The divided management was evidently untenable in its duality considering the differing degrees of attention the two patrons paid to the Chapel. While before 1570 the Chapel fell from the University's care and the latter did not even insist on the execution of its rights, the Town – and above all, the parishioners – accepted the Chapel as theirs, not only as far as administration and utilisation were concerned, but the burghers who lived in the parish also financed the repairs that were necessary for the physical preservation of the Chapel.

¹⁴ AUK A 13a, f. 268.