
The Net of the Church: Inscriptions on the Keystones of the Choir Vault of St. Barbara in Kutná Hora

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At the ninth symposium on the Bohemian Reformation and Religious Practice (BRRP) in June 2010, I spoke about the role of inscriptions in Utraquist churches and about their relationship to images. The significance of this way of communication in the formative period of Czech Hussitism – and in the period of the Bohemian church prior to the Battle of Lipany – is analysed in my article in *Studia medievalia Bohemica*.¹ During my presentation I could also note the choir vault of St. Barbara Church in Kutná Hora. This was thanks to a lecture of Michaela Ottová at a conference, connected with the exhibition “Art of the Bohemian Reformation” in February 2010, and thanks to her kindness in making available to me high quality photographic documentation of the images after their restoration. Subsequently, toward the end of 2010, Ottová’s monographic work on St. Barbora appeared also in book form.² The present article – thanks to this systematic study of high quality – can analyse the unique decoration of the choir vault in Kutná Hora in greater detail than it was possible during the BRRP symposium. Its objective will be a questioning of one part of Ottová’s book, namely of her iconographic explanation of the choir vault, which I do not consider correct. I will try to show that the author in her formulation did not sufficiently take into consideration either the potential of visual communication or the specificity of Utraquism, for which the church of St. Barbara was of extraordinary importance toward the end of the fifteenth century.

Sometime after 1388 the brotherhood of Corpus Christi in Kutná Hora started to build a spacious church at the location of an older miners’ chapel, which remained standing in the new choir.³ Because of the long-standing

¹ Milena Bartlová, “‘Prout lucide apparet in tabulis et picturis ipsorum.’ Komunikáční úloha obrazů a textů v počátcích husitismu” [The Communicative Role of images and texts in the beginning of Utraquism], *SMB* 3(2012) 249–274.

² Michaela Ottová, *Pod ochranou Krista Spasitele a sv. Barbory. Sochařská výzdoba kostela sv. Barbory v Kutné Hoře, 1483–1499* [Under the Protection of Christ the Saviour and St. Barbara. The Sculptural Decoration of the Church of St. Barbara in Kutná Hora, 1483–1499] (České Budějovice, 2010).

³ The following survey follows Ottová, *Pod ochranou*, 29–32; concerning the older chapel, see *ibid*, 49.

disputes between the town of Kutná Hora and the Cistercian monastery of Sedlec concerning the parish of St. James, the new church is located just beyond the boundary of the parish, and thus on the territory of the neighbouring municipality of Pněvice. The high self-confidence of the urban municipality of Kutná Hora was reflected by the chosen architectural format of a Gothic cathedral with flying buttresses, the symbolism of which pointed to the dignity of the royal town as its patron.⁴ This penchant for representation was also underscored by the enlistment of a leading Prague architect – Jan, the son of Petr Parlér, is considered to be the creator of the original plan and of the initial construction. Evidently, as early as the 1420s, the church became the centre of a parish; in 1437 Emperor Sigismund confirmed, according to the *Compactata*, an Utraquist priest there, and St. Barbara remained Utraquist until the Counter Reformation. The construction, however, stagnated after 1424, nevertheless the unfinished edifice could perform its ecclesiastical function.⁵ It was only in 1482 that the town proceeded to complete the construction. Until 1489, the building was carried on by Hanuš, “a mason of St. Barbara”; between 1490 and 1493 evidently by Briccius Gauske.⁶ Subsequently, the town called in two architects once more from Prague; at first, Matěj Rejsek sometime before 1495 and, after 1512, Benedikt Rejt, who created the artistically most important part of the entire edifice, the vault of the principal nave with figured rib design.⁷ In 1493 – possibly just on the occasion of Rejsek’s assumption of the construction leadership – the truss was placed above the choir so that the walls and the system of external supports must have been completed at that time, perhaps including the decorative masonry.⁸ The closing of the choir vault is ascribed to Matěj Rejsek in 1499, both by a written document, and by a festive inscription, carved into one of the vault ribs.⁹ In addition to the inscription of dedication, the vault bears an unusual number of other images and inscriptions. [Figs. 1 and 1a] Keystones were inserted into all places where the ribs of the reticulated vault intersected, which was a rather unconventional solution for this type of vaulting. It can be assumed that this was done with the intention of locating in

⁴ Pavel B. Kůrka, *Kostelníci, úředníci, měšťané. Samospráva farnosti v utrakvismu* [Sacristans, Officials, Burghers. The Self-Administration of Parish in Utraquism] (Prague, 2010) 69 cites the king as St. Barbara’s patron; however, on page 127, he cites – in agreement with Ottová and her sources – the town as the church’s patron.

⁵ As Kůrka newly points out the weekly accounts of church funds at St. Barbara were preserved in unusual completeness for 1457–1474 and 1514–1516. Their utilisation may flesh out the outline sketched by Ottová and her sources. See Kůrka, *Kostelníci, úředníci, měšťané*, 85, 123.

⁶ Ottová, *Pod ochranou*, 34–41.

⁷ Pavel Kalina, *Benedikt Ried a počátky záalpské renesance* [Benedict Ried and the Beginnings of the Transalpine Renaissance] (Prague, 2009) 91–105, 163–174.

⁸ Ottová, *Pod ochranou*, 35; on the date of Rejsek’s arrival, *ibid.*, 39–41.

⁹ Jiří Roháček, *Nápisý města Kutné Hory* [Inscriptions of the Town of Kutná Hora] (Prague, 1996) Nr 025, p. 86–88; Ottová, *Pod ochranou*, 68.

these places reliefs with figural images and text ribbons. In the vault panels there are painted thirty-one coats of arms: of the Holy Roman Empire, the lands of the Bohemian Crown, of the local lords, and finally the insignia of the guilds of Kutná Hora.¹⁰

The relief keystones of the choir vault of St. Barbara are, as pointed out earlier, of two kinds.¹¹ The easternmost, and at the same time the largest one, bears an image of Christ in a brown tunic, who blesses a chalice with a host, and is marked by the identifying inscription: *Jesus Salvator mundi*. [Fig. 2] On the axis toward the west, there are at the intersections of the ribs four medallions with the conventional symbols of the evangelists. On the same linear axis there is also a large ribbon with the inscription *Spes*, and a smaller one with the inscription *Fides*. Other keystones are then furnished only with inscriptional ribbons with fragments of biblical citations or with titles of single words. In order to understand the meaning of the entire structure, it is more appropriate not to describe them individually, but according to categories of their meaning. The latter consist of the Decalogue, eight beatitudes (two beatitudes of those persecuted for faith are combined into one, evidently because of the limited number of possible locations on the keystones), seven virtues, and six sacraments. The missing sacrament of ordination is evidently represented by an image of Christ, found on the coping-stone located in the middle of the rosette of the ribs, which lead to the representations of the other six sacraments. It is true that a seventh place was available, but it was already furnished with the inscription *Misericordia*. While in this place it is evident that the lines of ribs serve as vectors of semantic interconnection, this is not so clear in other places of the vault.

Ottová incorporates the explanation of the significance of the images and inscriptions on the choir vault into an overall interpretation of the sculptural “decoration” of the church. By the quotation marks here I want to call attention to the extent to which a conventional word *a priori* determines our understanding of the meaning of the scrutinised images. They become for us “a decoration”, hence something that has a primarily embellishing, or – expressed by a modern term – aesthetic, significance. In art history, the methodology of iconographic explication employs in this context an approach, which has developed in practice since the 1930s from the Roman Catholic exegetical tradition, and that has never been defined with full precision. On the one hand, it employs often even an excessively ample and loose set of associations that do not need in any way to rely rigorously on reconstructed contemporary intellectual structures and concrete situations;

¹⁰ The coats of arms and insignia are identified by Roháček, *Nápisy města Kutné Hory*; a more precise characterisation of the individual ennobled families, represented by the coats of arms, is so far lacking.

¹¹ Roháček, *Nápisy města Kutné Hory*; see also Ottová, *Pod ochranou*, especially the schema in the table on p. 70 and 71–77.

it often counts on an ahistorical concept of “a generally Christian” meaning, and on a no-less-modern yearning for an exclusively unambiguous significance. On the other hand, this method strives to grasp a consistent and coherent programme of ideas in the scrutinised art work, the existence of which it *a priori* presupposes.

In my opinion, however, for the late medieval artists and their audiences – the significance of communication prevailed over an artistic role (which, of course, was in a certain measure always present) in their understanding of images. That concerns both the images and the inscriptions, and the choir vault of St. Barbara offers to us a unique possibility to explore the structure of signification relying on both elements. It is perhaps more precise to say that, in a society still with a prevailing functional illiteracy, public inscriptions – together with figural images formed a category of signs, both of which referred equally beyond the visually accessible world to a world of such realities that were invisible.¹² Hence, the primary concern was, above all, effectiveness in the framework of public communication. This interpretation is seemingly opposed by the fact that the inscriptions on the choir vault of St. Barbara are not legible at the height of thirty-three meters from the floor of the sanctuary. This, of course, likewise works against Ottová’s opinion that the significance of the inscriptions – referring to the Decalogue, virtues, and beatitudes – was to be morally educational for the congregation. These inscriptions obviously were not intended as scripts for a vocal performance; simply said, it was not expected that anybody would read them aloud. The scripted sign can perform its role of communication in another way than through a reading of the referred meaning of a written word. It seems that we must assume that the meaning of these inscriptions was just their presence as specific signs, namely, signs referring to what is designated in another – yet joint and parallel – way by the visual image.

The vault with ribs, keystones, reliefs, texts and paintings is indisputably a single, complicated, yet coherent visual structure. Its individual elements consist of figural images (four of which are conventional emblems), inscriptions, and connecting lines among them. In my opinion, it is appropriate to proceed in our explication from the image of a net, which the vault represents at first sight. Its composition – with the locating of inscriptions and images in all the places of the ribs’ intersections – differed from what a late fifteenth-century observer in Central Europe was accustomed to seeing, and it is exactly in this specific difference that we can best seek the possible concrete local significance. As Ottová noted correctly, the crucial point of the net of ribs, and thus central element of the message of the total visual ensemble, was the image of Christ the Saviour, who is depicted as the true priest and

¹² See also Bartlová, “Prout lucide appareť.” For more detail with argumentation and literature, see especially eadem, *Skutečná přítomnost. Středověký obraz mezi ikonou a virtuální realitou* [Real Presence. The Medieval Image Between Icon and Virtual Reality] (Prague, 2012).

the source of all holiness. Likewise, another image of the same iconography in the same church, namely, the painting on the vault panels next to the so-called Smíškov Chapel (*Smíškovská kaple*) is structured according to the fields of the vault as a pictorial unit. Also here we can see Christ blessing the chalice in a composition that contains the evangelists' symbols. The image of Christ, blessing a chalice, dressed in grey or brown tunic (obviously as the sign of an ostentatious modesty and humility), was indisputably a significant image in Kutná Hora.¹³ A hypothetical possibility may be suggested that the original central statue of the richly decorated eastern pillar of the exterior also represented Christ blessing a chalice, once more surrounded by the four evangelists' symbols. It would then be only logical that such a statue of Utraquist significance would have been intentionally removed in the eighteenth century and replaced by the incongruous figure of a monk.¹⁴

In my opinion, Ottová's misunderstanding of the images of the evangelists as apocalyptic motives led her to an incorrect interpretation of the meaning of the choir vault – as a general reminder of the Last Judgment and individual salvation acquired by observing the rules of a moral life.¹⁵ These four conventional emblems certainly have their origin in apocalyptic imaginative interpretation of Ezekiel's vision of a tetramorph (Ezek 1:4–14; Rev 4:6–8), but a reference to the Last Judgment with their help would be unnecessarily complicated, especially within the setting of a parish church, which laid a particular stress on comprehensibility. The reference to eschatological emphasis in the theology of the reformers of Hus's circle is equally remote for the specific time and setting. In my judgment it is better to recall Utraquist ecclesiology as the determining frame for the message of the choir vault in St. Barbara. The very central image of Christ blessing the chalice points exactly in that direction. The semantic focal point of the image of the chalice was in general a designation of the church as an eucharistic community.¹⁶ The eucharist, distributed in both kinds, was for the Utraquist Church a constitutive element, which further strengthened its identification role after the Compactata, when the chalice remained the sole clearly visible

¹³ Ottová, *Pod ochranou*, 73–74; see also Zuzana Vsetečková, "The Man of Sorrows and the Christ Blessing the Chalice," BRRP 4 (2002) 193–205.

¹⁴ Ottová, *Pod ochranou*, 62–64.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁶ Ottová at the relevant place of her analysis (p. 74, especially n. 249) disregarded my studies about the chalice as the Utraquists' basic visual sign of self-identification, which quite clearly substantiate this ecclesiological relevance; see Milena Bartlová, "Původ husitského kalicha z ikonografického hlediska" [The Origin of the Hussite Chalice from the Iconographic Point of View], *Umění* 44 (1996) 168–173; eadem, "Ikonografie kalicha, symbolu husitství" [Iconography of the Chalice, the Symbol of Hussitism] in *Jan Hus na přelomu tisíciletí* [Jan Hus at the Turn of the Millennium], HT, Supplementum 1, (2001) 453–488. As far as I know these conclusions were never disputed, much less refuted; the study by Daniela Rywíková, "The Question of the Krumlov Miscellanea: The Chalice as Utraquist Symbol?" *Umění* 57(2009), 349–363, lacked any new relevant arguments.

distinctive feature of the Bohemian church. The ensemble of the Gospels and the Decalogue as the foundation of the Church teaching, the sacraments as its active embodiment, and the beatitudes as the ideal fulfilment of the Christian life, can be graphically described (with possible rhetorical reference to Chelčický) as a metaphorical “net of the church.” It gathers the members of the ecclesiastical community, who are represented by the coats of arms in the panels of the vault, which are in fact materially carried by the net of the ribs. At the same time, the “church network” offers the faithful – exactly through the basic elements of its doctrinal message – a certainty and a safe foundation and direction for their lives. Emblems and signs located in church vaults – both in the triangular panels of vaults and on the keystones – were quite common images intended to support memorialisation.¹⁷ What makes the case of Kutná Hora peculiar is the system of inscriptions and images on the keystones, into which the emblems are incorporated. We see here clearly and graphically that the ecclesiastical rules undergird the local solidarity and together create a community, both ecclesiastical and, at the same time, urban. In the indivisible unity of a net and a canopy, which enclose the church space as a locus of encounter around the sacrament, the sacred component of the municipal community is being realised. The inclusion of the emblems of the lands of the Bohemian Crown, of the Empire, and of the Bishop of Wrocław (that of the Olomouc bishop is lacking) can be understood as an expression of the Kutná Hora burghers’ allegiance to Utraquist ecclesiological aspirations for the whole of the lands of the Czech crown.

The message of the vault of St. Barbara’s is thus lapidary and graphic, in agreement with Ottová’s assessment, but it is in no way simple or straightforward.¹⁸ On the contrary, a very interesting communicational strategy is involved, which fully utilises the expressive potential of its own plastic form – in this case the vault ribs and triangles – and treats images and inscriptions in a rather original manner. These texts in their illegibility figured as independent communicative signs referring to the authority of savants and scholars.¹⁹ There had been a traditional expectation that the authority in the ecclesiastical community had to – correctly and in an obligatory manner – interpret images, which alone had a tendency toward an intrinsic ambiguity. Religious images, however, lost their credibility as epistemological instruments at the moment when the old ecclesiastical structure began to appear to the reformers, not as the bearer of the true tradition and the guarantee of the orthodoxy of its manifestations, but rather as a falsely usurped and

¹⁷ See, for instance, Michal Fiala and Jakub Hrdlička, “Znaková galerie v chrámu sv. Víta na Pražském hradě” [The Gallery of Signs in St. Vitus Cathedral in the Prague Castle], *Sborník archivních prací* 42 (1992) 261–306.

¹⁸ Ottová, *Pod ochranou*, 77.

¹⁹ Bartlová, “Prout lucide apparet.”

erroneously exercised office which endangers the faithful by misleading them in the incorrect way. Considering – in contrast to the later early modern reformations of the sixteenth century – that the word [of God] was not for early Utraquism yet stabilised, (always and everywhere, through the identical signs of a printed text), Utraquism was unable to take that crucial step, which assured a paramount advantage to Lutheranism, namely, entrusting the competence of biblical interpretation to every individual member of the faithful. For Utraquism, the church remained the only possible authority, its mediating interpretation could not be avoided, and as a result Utraquism – as a reformation before the printing of books – remained a reformation that was medieval. Hence, it behoved to seek such visual symbols, which could effectively demonstrate the existence of a new purified ecclesiastical community in the place of the old hierarchical papal church. In my judgment, the replacement of images by inscriptions fits exactly into [the context of] this epochal change of media, and its meaning was to demonstrate the authority of the distinctiveness of the new signs of communication, and thereby also the distinctiveness of the renewed church. It is most likely that the author of the original concept of the choir vault of the church of St. Barbara was the Archdean and the Rector of St. James's School, Svatomír Zrůbek of Újezd, whose role in the life of Kutná Hora was revealed by Ottová.²⁰ This finding would also fit with the other meaning which the inscriptions signified in replacing images, namely, the intent to elevate the Utraquist savants into the roles of ecclesiastical authorities instead of – or at least next to – the hierarchs.

(Translated from the Czech by Zdeněk V. David)

²⁰ Ottová, *Pod ochranou*, 26–27, 77.

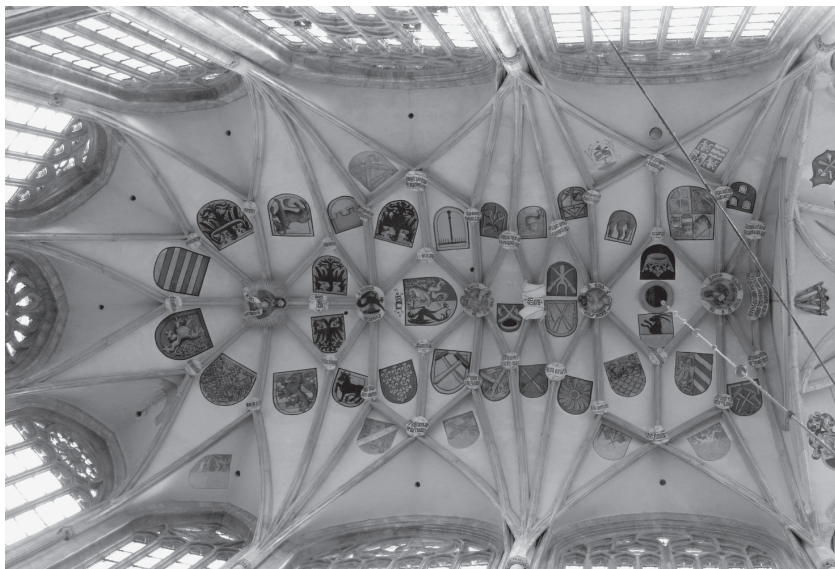


Fig. 1: The vault of the choir of the St Barbara's Church in Kutná Hora; Matěj Rejsek, before 1499.

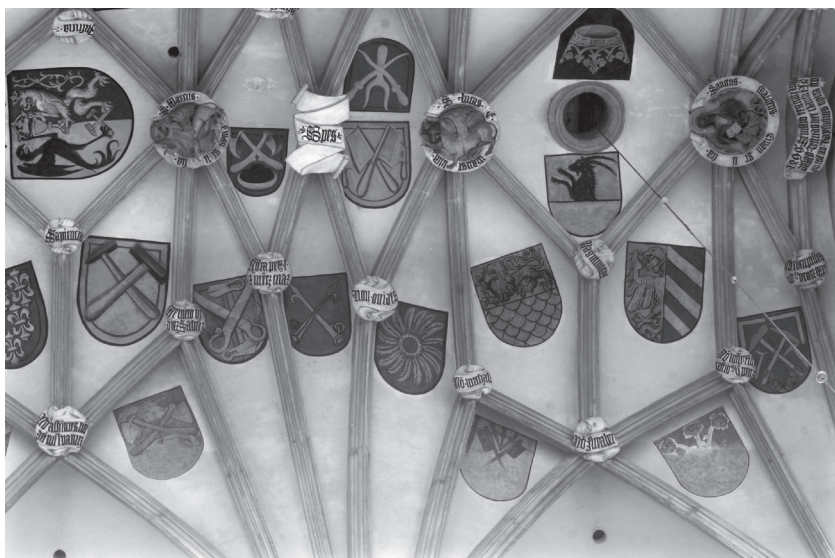


Fig. 1a: The vault of the choir of the St Barbara's Church in Kutná Hora; Matěj Rejsek, before 1499; detail of the central part.



Fig. 2: Jesus Christ blessing the chalice. Keystone in the vault of the choir of the St Barbara's Church in Kutná Hora; Matěj Rejsek, before 1499. Inscription: Jesus Salvator meus.