
The Heretic's Cap of Hus

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Soon after his death at the stake, Jan Hus was honored in the Utraquist Church as a martyr, and his celebration gradually assumed the character of a saint's veneration. Jerome of Prague enjoyed this high respect along with Hus. The feast day of the two martyrs, celebrated on 6 July, was marked by special liturgical texts.¹

The martyr's death of Hus was also remembered by means of its depiction. Although it is well known and established that the great majority of such imagery was annihilated by the Counter Reformation, yet the parameters of the cult of Hus may be deduced from the surviving samples. We find portraits of Hus fairly often in illuminated manuscripts and on woodcuts and, exceptionally, also on altar panels.

Hus and Jerome are often portrayed wearing tall caps, on which black or red devils usually appear. The number of satanic creatures varies between one and three, and occasionally there are none. With or without the evil spirits, the cap can also bear the inscription "An heresiarch." The specific form of the headgear may also vary. The cap can be cylindrical or conical, and may be somewhat narrowed or expanded at the upper edge. As a rule, however, the heretic's cap is so striking and dominant in Hus's portraits that it calls for a closer exploration of its origin and significance.

Literary Sources

Two eyewitnesses, who attended the Council of Constance, left authentic reports about Hus's and Jerome's executions. One account, *Zpráva o Mistru Janu Husovi v Kostnici* [A Report About Master Jan Hus in Constance], is by Petr of Mladoňovice, Hus's disciple and friend, who launches into a hagiographic rhetoric to describe the martyrdom. Petr describes Hus's courage, humility, and deep faith during his defrocking, which involved a ritualised withdrawal of the chalice and the liturgical vestments, and the spoiling of the tonsure. The procedure ended with an imposition of the "mocking paper crown." Mladoňovice described the cap thus: "And the crown was of paper and round, almost an ell² in height, decorated with three awful devils, and hemmed by an inscription of the charge of guilt: 'This is an heresiarch'."³ Petr wrote in a similar manner about the cap of Jerome: "Then, after his conviction, they brought before Master Jerome a large tall crown with red devils painted all around, so that he might go, wearing it, to his death."⁴

¹ David R. Holeton, "O felix Bohemia – O felix Constantia": the Liturgical Commemoration of Saint Jan Hus," HENC 385,389-393.

² Czech: *loket*. The Czech ell measured 1.143 meters. *Ed.*

³ "Petri de Mladoniowicz relatio de Magistro Johanne Hus," ed. Václav Novotný, FRB 8 (1932) 140.

⁴ "Petra z Mladoňovic Pašije M. Jeronyma s překladem," ed. Václav Novotný, *ibid.* 365.

The other account of the two martyrs' execution was produced by Ulrich von Richental, the scribe of Constance. It was included in his *Chronicle of the Council of Constance*, which contained illustrations and was written in 1423-1433. This source also mentioned the heretic's cap after describing Hus's defrocking, just before he was led to the place of execution: "And he wore a white mitre, made of paper, with two devils painted on it, and between them an inscription 'Heresiarch,' that is arch-heretic. ... And when he was burnt, the mitre was still intact. The executioner then pushed it into the fire, and so it also burnt..."⁵ The description of Jerome's martyrdom does not mention an heretic's cap, but it states briefly that Jerome's execution followed the same pattern as Hus's.

The Origins of the Heretic's Cap

Defrocking

Both texts concerning Hus placed the imposition of the heretic's cap after his defrocking. The defrocking of a priest, who was convicted of heresy – that is an invalidation of his priestly ordination – was an act anchored in the canon law⁶ and observed the form of a standard ritual. This scenario included the disowning of the heretic by the ecclesiastical community, and after a largely meaningless petition for a mild punishment, the convict was transferred to the secular authority for execution.

On the one hand, the accounts of Hus's trial and conviction essentially agreed with the procedures of canon law. Although the petition for a mild punishment was not mentioned, its submission may be assumed. On the other hand, canon law did not know either the concept of the "heretic's cap" or the procedure of its imposition. Since the procedure lacked a legal basis, its *raison d'être* must be sought elsewhere.

The Punishment of Heretics

The origin of the heretic's cap was probably connected with the punishment by fire, which the Middle Ages had reserved for the heretics. Although the Code of Theodosius already in the fourth century provided the formal basis for their persecution, capital punishment for heresy remained rare during the first millennium. The earliest instances of heretics sent to the stake (by decisions of the temporal power) dated to the beginning of the eleventh century, when the practice was not yet incorporated into legal codes, and it still remained unusual during most of the twelfth century.⁷ Execution by fire for heresy was, for the first time, made official by Imperial Laws in the thirteenth century, and these laws became the formal basis for the persecution of heretics into the Late Medieval period. The papal decrees concerning heresy adopted execution by fire from the laws of the Empire in 1231.⁸

⁵ Ulrich Richental, *Chronik des Konstanzer Konzils: Text der Konstanzer Handschrift*, ed. Otto Feger (Constance, 1965), c. 156, "Seine Verurteilung und Hinrichtung": "Und hat ain wisse ynfel uff sinem hopt mit bappir gemacht, und stunden zwen tüfel daran gemalt und zwischen den tüfeln geschriben 'Heresiarcha', das ist ein ertzketzer. ...Und do er verbrunen was, dennocht was die ynfel gantz in dem für. Do zerstiess sy der hencker, do verbran sy erst...."

⁶ Jiří Kejř, *Husův proces* (Prague, 2000) 199 nn. 284-286.

⁷ J. B. Russel, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca NY, 1972) 150.

⁸ F. Rapp, *Církev a náboženský život Západu na sklonku středověku* (Brno, 1996) 322.

Burning at the stake occurred in public and thus also served as a deterrent. The heretic was viewed as an inherent menace and this was underlined by the fact that the bones of such dissidents would be exhumed and incinerated to forestall their resurrection.⁹ In my opinion, the object of our discussion, the heretic's cap, fits into this context by visibly denoting the culprit as a certified "agent of perdition". The heretic's cap was first mentioned in connection with trials by the Inquisition in the thirteenth century. As a part of the *autodafé*, after a sermon in front of the church and before his journey to the stake, the convicted dissident put on the shirt of a penitent and sometimes also a paper cap decorated with satanic symbols. Physical abuse was his lot on the way to the execution site.¹⁰

Although a regular court of the Roman Curia judged Hus, not a court of the Inquisition, still his journey to the stake with a cap on his head evidently reflected a routine procedure, and corresponded to the customary treatment into the fifteenth century, and even later in the Spanish Inquisition.

The Meaning of the Heretic's Cap

A clue to an explanation of the heretic's cap is the inconsistent terminology used in the earlier-cited medieval texts, which employed diverse term for the object, which in this study is designated by the generalized term of a "heretic's cap". Petr of Mladoňovice, a devotee of Utraquism, spoke in reference to Hus and Jerome about a "paper crown", while Ulrich von Richental in the same context called the headgear *ynefel*, that is a "mitre."

A Crown

Mladoňovice's terminology revealed less about the origin of the cap than about the author's intent, which was to explain the cap by twice referring to Christ's crown of thorns. Aside from other comparisons, by using the very word *corona* Petr directly and openly proclaimed the parallel between the death of Hus and the martyrdom of Christ, hence Hus's "imitation of Christ". The author thus used Hus's passion as a cornerstone for the liturgy of Jan Hus's feast day.

In his text, Mladoňovice had Hus compare his own "mocking crown" [*corona contumeliosa*] with Christ's "much harder and heavier crown of thorns" [*spinea corona*]. In Christ's passion, the crown of thorns mixed the elements of mocking, humiliation, and designation (as a king), and at the same time was an instrument of physical torment.¹¹

The element of mocking, which the Gospel clearly emphasized, was not accented by Hus's passion in connection with the heretic's cap. Derision was merely expressed by the epithet 'mocking' [*contumeliosa*]. The aspect of mocking was either viewed as self-evident, needing no further mention, or it was surpassed by another more relevant consideration. In any case the omission is a puzzle. The ridiculing of Hus prior to his execution would have offered another parallel with the passion of Christ.

⁹ W. G. Nigg, *The Heretics* (New York, 1962) 220.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 221.

¹¹ Mt 27:29-30: "...plaiting a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head... and bending the knee before him they mocked him saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' And they...took the reed and kept striking him on the head."

A Mitre

Aiming in a dispassionate way at the exterior of the event, Ulrich von Richental used for the cap an ecclesiastical term and sought its origin in the customary church insignia, albeit used in a perverted form. *Ynfel*, that is *infula* or mitre, denotes the liturgical head cover of a bishop, viewed here as a kind of positive prototype of the heretic's cap.

The first references to the use of an heretic's cap stemmed from the thirteenth century, but it is possible that this head cover was already used in earlier times. It would be, therefore, fitting to note the form of the mitre in the Middle Ages. Its origins and early development are not entirely clear, and a variety of hypotheses exists, which cannot be analyzed here. The most common opinion traces the origin of the mitre, as well as that of the tiara, to a high, soft, and white cap, called *camelaucum*, the existence of which is documented already in the eighth century. The popes were the first to use this headgear in the West, and since the tenth and the eleventh centuries other bishops were wearing similar headgear. By the mid-twelfth century the mitre had counted among the standard episcopal insignia.

The mitre's shape was originally conical. In the early twelfth century it became lower and slightly rounded off at the top. Later a depression from left to right became common, creating two "horns", that is pointed elevation in the front and in the back. By the mid-twelfth century the mitre had assumed its present-day form, except for being somewhat lower. It reached its final shape more or less in the sixteenth century. Initially, the mitre's exterior was rather plain, and it was only in the twelfth, and particularly in the following, century that ornamental embroidery and incrustation with jewels made their appearance. The tiara retained its cylindrical shape, but gradually metal replaced the soft cloth.¹²

Like the tiara, the heretic's cap might have by its shape, as described, closely resembled the *camelaucum*, that is the simplest form of the mitre. Richental's term *ynfel* could be, therefore, in his time appropriately applied to the heretics' cap.

A Multiplicity of Meanings

The issue of the origin of the heretic's cap leads to the question of its significance. It would seem reasonable to interpret it as an instrument of mockery and humiliation, and these aspects can be neither neglected nor minimized. After all, the very death by fire was in its day degrading, designed for excommunicated dissidents, just as in the time of Christ the death by crucifixion was limited to the most reprehensible criminals.

In my opinion, however – as indicated earlier – one may properly seek in some cases a more sophisticated meaning for the heretic's cap. Aside from, and together with, a tendency to mock, there could also be the intent to mark or to brand the heretic with a visible sign of his office of an heresiarch, a leader of heretics, as was the case with Hus.

¹² L. Pokorný, *Liturgika*. Vol. 2: *Dějiny liturgie v přehledu* (Litoměřice, 1976) 279-280. See also R. Lesage, *Vestments and Church Furniture* (London, 1961) 134-135.

This is also the opinion of Václav Oliva, who noted a certain shift of meaning in the understanding of the heretic's cap during the Middle Ages, namely from an initial demarcation of the heretic (in our case by means of the cap – an anti-mitre) to a tendency to humiliate and mock him. The two aspects could not be strictly separated from each other, but their interdependence did not exclude a possible shift in emphasis. Oliva maintains that harsh punishments were applied “only to the headmen of heresy or the heresiarchs, that is teachers and propagators of heresy, and further those who would accept ordination from the dissenters, or who conducted deviant liturgies or public gatherings of dissenters.”¹³ Because Hus met the condition for the status of an heresiarch, “a ‘mocking mitre’ or cap with the inscription ‘Hic est heresiarcha’ was placed on his head prior to his dispatch to the stake... The imposition of such a head covering in a way belonged to the ritual of the execution, and it announced to all present the reason for what was to follow. Consequently, this type of coronation was not, in fact, intended to be a mockery, or instrument of ridicule, yet – inasmuch as the fifteenth century had forgotten its real significance – the act was misinterpreted as a mockery and thus aroused ridicule.”¹⁴

An Antithesis

The view of the heretic's cap as a caricatured mitre is justified by the medieval penchant for the antithetical mode of thought, whereby two persons, concepts, or qualities were juxtaposed and placed into a mutual contradiction.¹⁵ The polarized world-view may be illustrated also by the following intrinsically related examples of “antitheses” or “anti-parallels”.

Perhaps the most trenchant instance of an antithesis in medieval thought was the duo Christ and Antichrist, which was expressed also in antithetical imagery. As an antagonist, Antichrist was characterized by qualities opposite to Christ's, mainly by hypocrisy and heresy. The same vices were normally ascribed also to those who had deviated from orthodox Christianity.

In Petr of Mladoňovice's account we encounter a number of anti-parallels. The rituals of ordination and defrocking may be juxtaposed. During the ordination the priest received his authority in a standardized ritual, in which significance was attached to the transmission of vestments and liturgical implements in a combination with certain verbal formulas. On the contrary, during the defrocking in a counter-ritual the priestly insignia were withdrawn from the convict, while certain set phrases were uttered, highlighting the effect of the polarization.

The antithetical view of the world is also contextualized by Mladoňovice's interesting reference to the cardinal points of the earth. Describing the situation after Hus's attachment to the stake, Petr wrote: “And when his face was turned to the east, some of the spectators said: ‘Turn his face toward the sunset, not toward the east, because he is an heretic.’ And so it happened.”¹⁶ This episode may be understood as an “occidenting” of the heretic to the west, in contrast to the “oriented” stance of a priest, serving mass facing east, in a church oriented toward the sunrise.

¹³ Václav Oliva, “O trestání kacířů,” *Obrana víry* 18, 2-4 (1923) 37-38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 36-37 n. 13.

¹⁵ K. Chytil, *Antikrist v naukách a umění středověku a husitské obrazné antiteze* (Prague, 1918) 1.

¹⁶ “Petri de Mladonowicz relatio de Magistro Johanne Hus,” 144.

Quasi-analogies also occur during the imposition of a mitre and that of an heretic's cap. For the Roman Pontifical the mitre symbolized a helmet of protection and of salvation, with the aid of which the bearer could face the enemies of truth. When placing the mitre on the candidates head, the consecrator was to utter the following words: "Oh, Lord, we place this helmet of protection and salvation on the head of this bishop, your soldier, so that his visage, decorated by the mitre, and his head, armed by a mitre with the horns of the two Testaments, might terrify the enemies of truth..."¹⁷ The "anti-mitre," the mocking heretic's cap, signified the transfer of a God's enemy to the inferno, as confirmed by Mladoňovice's words discussing the imposition of the cap on Hus: "And before placing the mocking paper crown on his head, they told him, among others: 'We commend your soul to Satan'."¹⁸ And when Hus's cap fell from his head in front of the pyre, the executioner's henchmen said: "Restore it to his head so that he might be burned together with the devils, his masters, whom he had served on earth."¹⁹

It is hardly surprising in the context of our analysis that also the mitre and the heretic's cap would show similarities and figure as anti-parallels. The mitre is a conspicuous head-cover of a bishop, connoting the high office of its wearer, an important ecclesiastical dignitary, and is usually decorated with celestial symbols. On the basis of textual and pictorial sources, the heretic's cap may be described as a conspicuous high white cap, which is cylindrical or conical in shape and which is decorated with infernal beings and with the inscription of "Heresiarch". Thereby it clearly denotes the anti-office of a "heresiarch", a leader of heretics. The heretic's cap as an imitation of the mitre had the advantage of low cost and simplicity, being made of paper, inasmuch as it was destined for only the few moments before the convict's execution, and to be consigned with him to the flames.

Theological Imagery at the Sixteenth Century's Turn

Jan Hus's portrayal in an heretic's cap on the martyr's pyre was a standard iconographic topos, encountered in both Roman and Utraquist sources.²⁰

In the Roman milieu the imagery documented historical events at the Council of Constance, in which Hus was presented as an historical figure, an heretic sentenced by the church, with his death as the main theme. This was illustrated, for instance, by the series of five images in Richental's chronicle, depicting Hus's conviction and death. The normal iconography of the heretic's cap was altered by the scene at the stake,²¹ in which two devils were pictured next to the inscription "Heresiarch". Moreover, two air-borne devils were performing the heretic's actual coronation.

¹⁷ Cited by Lesage, *Vestments and Church Furniture* 135.

¹⁸ "Petri de Mladoniowicz relatio de Magistro Johanne Hus," 139-140.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 143.

²⁰ Bohemian sources, in accordance with Mladoňovice's description, favored the cap with a Satanic troika. Depictions, based on the data in Richental's chronicle, were limited to two devils.

²¹ See the Prague manuscript of Richental's chronicle (164), Ms. Prague NK XVI A 17, cited according to V. V. Štech, "Jan Hus ve výtvarném umění," in *Mistr Jan Hus v životě a památkách českého lidu* (Prague, 1915).

In the Utraquist Church, the scene at the stake represented the death of a martyr and subsequently that of a saint, a status to which Hus was elevated by the Bohemian Reformation. The formation of Hus's image as a saint proceeded in a conventional way, starting with the depiction of his martyrdom at the stake "as the most significant event of his life and as the start of a new era."²² As a rule, the heretic's cap appeared on his head, and incidentally this was the first depiction of such a headgear in art form. The cap gradually became the attribute or hallmark of the new saint. Subsequently, there appeared images simply of his person as a saint, and even later – under the influence of the German Reformation – portraits of him as a "Reformer".

Among the scenes of his martyrdom, a special place belongs to the symbolically rich illumination in the Litoměřice Gradual (prior to 1517), which consists of two scenes. In the lower part of the imagery, an "earthly" Hus is undergoing his martyrdom at the stake, wearing a penitent's garment, and the heretic's cap, the attribute of his sainthood and the symbol of his degradation, lies at his feet. In the heavenly scene above the martyr's pyre, Hus is ascending to God the Father; he is dressed in a chasuble, his tonsure is renewed, and the angels are bestowing on him the crown of martyrdom. Theological themes are addressed by artistic means: the return of priesthood, hence a cassation of the ecclesiastical defrocking, and thereby a response to Hus's appeal to Christ, to God's sovereignty symbolized by the tiara on the head of god the Father.

In addition to the scenes of martyrdom, Hus appears with the heretic's cap also on an altar panel from Vlněves (post-1520). He is depicted next to St. Vojtěch [Adalbert], whom he assists at mass. Vojtěch as a bishop wears a chasuble and a mitre, while Hus is dressed in the red garment of a martyr, and wears the heretic's cap as the attribute of his sainthood.

It is significant to confront the development of Hus's veneration with his enemies' attitude after his immolation at Constance. Having described in a graphic way the crushing and burning of the martyr's skull and heart, Mladoňovice continued: "And now the executioner held his garment and Clem's son, learning that it was the Master's cloak, ordered it together with everything of his that had remained, including his belt, to be cast into the fire, saying: 'The Bohemians would venerate any of these as a relic'."²³ Hence anything pertaining to Hus could become an object of high regard. This would then apply also to the mocking cap with its decoration, inasmuch as the already mentioned garment, although designed for ignominy, had to be annihilated for fear of veneration. No wonder then that this cap turned into a hallmark of sanctity in the depiction of Hus.

Despite Rome's condemnation of Hus as an heretic, and despite Utraquism's qualified skepticism about the veneration of saints, Hus became honoured in Utraquist Bohemia as a saint. As such, the Bohemian Reformer acquired in the visual arts as his attribute or hallmark (next to the martyr's pyre) the heretic's cap. Because the procedure is not known in canon law, the point or implication of placing the cap on the heretic before the execution remains conjectural. From the available

²² *Ibid.* 96 n. 10.

²³ "Petri de Mladoniowicz relatio de Magistro Johanne Hus," 147.

evidence it is clear that the heretic's cap was in the eyes of the Roman Church a singularly negative entity. Along these lines, the Council of Constance utilized the cap to designate Hus as an heretic, indeed as an "heresiarch," and as a symbol of his extradition to the infernal jurisdiction. Paradoxically, the very same cap began to play the role of the insignia of a saint venerated by the Utraquists, who had never ceased to consider themselves a part of the Catholic Church.

Translated from the Czech by Zdeněk David