

Some Territorial Implications of Rural Confraternities in Upper Franconia

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Students of confraternities have for the most part approached them as urban phenomena. In German studies of the Reformation, confraternities, like guilds and other urban corporations, are perceived as methods of organizing communities, either as an extension of or in opposition to the established authorities. Next to nothing, however, has been written about confraternities in their rural setting. Investigation of rural lay devotional societies presents certain problems, namely concerning sources, but offers numerous possibilities for discussing popular religion. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that the form and structure of rural confraternities had not insignificant implications for the formation of territorial states in the later Middle Ages.

During the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there is evidence for the existence of lay confraternities in a number of small towns in the diocese of Bamberg.¹ While these have attracted little scholarly attention, there have been several studies of clerical fraternities in the late Middle Ages. A common source for most treatments is an undated document, the *Statuta antiqua Capituli Holfeldensis*, presumably composed in the fifteenth century.² The standard study of these clerical associations was written by Georg Kanzler in the early 1930s, and subsequent research has done little beyond parroting his opinions.³ According to Kanzler, clerical fraternities and lay communities arose in the diocese of Bamberg during the fourteenth century. The earliest constitution is for an association of clergy and laymen from the towns of Lichtenfels, Kronach, and Staffel-

1 Erich Freiherr von Guttenberg and Alfred Wendehorst, *Das Bistum Bamberg*, Teil 2, Die Pfarrorganisation, *Germania Sacra*, Series 2, vol. 1.2 (Berlin, 1966).

2 L. Cl. Schnitt, *Die Bamberger Synoden* (Bamberg, 1851), 198-204.

3 Georg Kanzler, "Die Landkapitel im Bistum Bamberg," *Berichte des Historischen Vereins Bamberg* [hereafter, *BHVB*] 83 (1931) and 84 (1934); Klaus Guth, "Kirche und Religion," in Elizabeth Roth, ed., *Oberfranken im Spätmittelalter und zu Beginn der Neuzeit* (Bayreuth, 1979), 131ff.

stein, dated 1344. The focus of the fraternity seems to have been on the eucharistic cult, as the members partook in yearly sacramental processions in each of the three towns.⁴ The creation of the fraternity also paralleled the organization of the archidiaconate of Kronach. According to Kanzler, these voluntary associations arose alongside the juridical corporation of the rural chapters (*Landkapitel*) within the archidiaconate. They “fostered the fraternal unity of clergy and laity through the band of religious zeal.” Moreover, it is because of such organizations that Catholicism did not disappear entirely in the region during the Reformation: “without a doubt (*zweifellos*) [the rural chapters] along with the fraternities are to be thanked, that a portion of the diocese remained true to old faith.”⁵

Kanzler’s view of the form, structure, and role of fraternities is hard to uphold. Aside from a few wills, sources for fraternities and confraternities are missing for the early years of the sixteenth century, and resurface only during the Counter-Reformation era. Indeed, the major focus of Kanzler’s own research is the resurrection of the *Landkapitel* in the early seventeenth century. Schmitt published his edition of the Hollfeld statute along with the edict for the restoration of the *Landkapitel*, and represents the latter phenomena as a simple continuation of its fifteenth-century predecessor. The thrust of scholarship on this issue, then, has been guided by Counter-Reformation instincts, and attempts to seek a continuum of catholicity from the late Middle Ages through the Reformation into the post-Tridentine period.

There is, however, one area in which we might see these associations as fostering a form of unity. In the rural parts of the diocese, fraternities were generally made up of members from several communities. In addition to the example given above, there were several other fraternities that linked different communities.⁶ In his will, dated 1523, Laurentius Einwich, rector of Pottenstein, made a grant to the fraternity at Hollfeld.⁷ Given that Hollfeld was over 20 km away, Einwich’s associations drew their members from a fairly large field. Likewise, Johann Scheller, a chantry priest in Rattelsdorf, left a bequest to a confraternity

4 Kanzler 2:13; Xaver Haimerl, *Das Prozessionswesen des Bistums Bamberg im Mittelalter* (Munich, 1937), 64.

5 Kanzler 2:34.

6 Stadtsteinach–Kupferberg–Martschorgast; Kulmbach–Bayreuth; Kronach–Teuschnitz; Hollfeld–Ebermannstadt–Pottenstein–Waischenfeld. Haimerl, 64–65.

7 *Staatsarchiv Bamberg*, A 50, Lade 901, 154, 18 Jan. 1523.

in Uetting, 16 km distant across the Main.⁸ The existence of Corpus Christi brotherhoods in Pottenstein, Ebermannstadt, Creussen, and Hof, among the attested examples, and perhaps even more so the appearance of a Rosary Confraternity in Creussen, indicate that the rise of lay confraternities and clerical fraternities coincided with the spread of a new set of devotional practices into the region, practices which redirected the focus of religious life outside the narrow confines of rural society.⁹

One place where we are able to see these "voluntary associations" of clergy and laity defining territory is in Hof. Johann Lindner's *Kirchenordnung* for Hof, written in 1479, contains several passages referring to the organization and function of lay confraternities in rural areas.¹⁰ During the Corpus Christi festival, the "presbyter fraternitatis corporis Christi" was charged with directing the processions.¹¹ On the Sunday following *Margarethae*, the *fraternitas sacerdotum* would assemble late in the evening to hear a sermon.¹² Given the confusion in Kanzler's observations, it would appear that this clerical fraternity might well have included laymen as well. A later section refers to "rural lay synods" (*syndus laicorum ruralium*). These were required to meet four times per year as determined by the chief officer. Each member would pay 1 d. which would go to pay the chaplain for saying mass and the sacristan for use of the church. Each of the four meetings would be held at a different church, as was the case with the fraternity in Lichtenfels, Kronach and Staffelstein.¹³

The territorial implications of these rural confraternities are fairly clear. Hof lay in the Vogtland, a border region between the margraviate of Brandenburg-Kulmbach, the Bohemian Egerland, and Saxony. It also formed the frontier between four dioceses. While Lindner's church ordinance indicates that some of the parishes represented in the "rural synods"

8 *Staatsarchiv Bamberg*, A 50, Lade 906, 570 (1523).

9 Lionel Rothkrug, *Religious Practices and Collective Perceptions: Hidden Homologies in the Renaissance and Reformation*, Historical Reflections, 7 (Waterloo, 1980), 82ff.

10 Lindner, *Registrum sive directorium rerum agendarum parochialis ecclesiae sancti Laurentii in Hof conscriptum anno 1479 per magistrum Johannem Linthner protunc vicegerentem*, in Christian Meyer, ed., *Quellen zur alten Geschichte des Fürstenthums Bayreuth*, vol. 1 (Bayreuth, 1895), 209ff.

11 Lindner, *Kirchenordnung*, tit. 15, p. 224.

12 Lindner, *Kirchenordnung*, tit. 16, p. 226.

13 Lindner, *Kirchenordnung*, tit. 29, p. 234.

lay outside the diocese of Bamberg, they still had to pay their 1 d. to the chaplain in Hof. Hence, the confraternity defined a sacramental and fiscal community which overlay diocesan as well as territorial boundaries.

Within Hof, it is fairly easy to see the activities of a number of confraternities during the later part of the fifteenth century. Three chapels were built around St. Michael's church in Hof with funds donated by confraternities. The Corpus Christi brotherhood built the first in 1490. The brotherhood also endowed a Lady Mass on the same altar a few years later. A *Knappenbruderschaft* established a chapel, as did the brotherhood of St. James, founded by burghers who had made a pilgrimage to Compostella. But while confraternities could come up with the funds for building chapels, maintaining them was another matter. The margraves of Brandenburg quickly assumed patronage over the Lady Mass, while the vicarage was administered by the town council in the name of the brotherhood. The *Knappenbruderschaft* was unable to endow a vicarage at all, while the chapel built by the *Jakobsbruderschaft* was still listed in 1525 among the *beneficia non confirmata*.¹⁴

A more detailed description of the financial problems which plagued the small confraternities in upper Franconia in the decades prior to the Reformation may be found in a manuscript history of the Reformation, composed by Paul Reinelt of Selb in 1612. Reinelt set out to write the history of his parish, and in the process undertook a fairly detailed study of the records of endowments. In 1490, the "Brotherhood of the Angel Mass," founded after the establishment of a chantry by the lords of Sparneck, endowed a new mass, which was supported with donations from forty-two residents of Selb.¹⁵ Thereafter, this particular group disappears, perhaps supplanted by a Corpus Christi Brotherhood, first mentioned in 1519. For its part, the Corpus Christi Brotherhood is remembered chiefly on account of its financial difficulties. In 1519, the brotherhood had been forced to sell for 40 fl. some lands it had purchased for 110 fl. only six years previously.¹⁶

The sudden demise of many of the small confraternities suggests that, like the *Jakobsbruderschaft* or the Brotherhood of the Angel Mass in Selb, many of these groups emerged in conjunction with a particular event. They would then either be absorbed into other confraternities or disband altogether within a few years. Only in administrative towns like Hof (which could hardly be called urban) do the confraternities seem to

14 Guttenberg and Wendehorst, 242-43.

15 *Staatsarchiv Bamberg*, A 245i, 40, pp. 222ff.

16 *Staatsarchiv Bamberg*, A 245i, 40, p. 430.

have enjoyed a long life, and even there, this was the exception, and not the rule. In places like Pottenstein and Creussen, the town council or, in the latter case, the margraves of Brandenburg took over as the patrons of chantries originally endowed by confraternities in the fifteenth century.¹⁷ In short, while the emergence of confraternities may be seen as an aspect of communalism, the failure of small communities to maintain such organizations signals the inability of confraternities to create a communal "alternative church."¹⁸

If we use survival and fiscal viability as criteria for evaluating the significance of rural devotional societies, the following typology can be established. The lay-clerical fraternities (*Landkapitel*, rural synod) which drew from a number of communities and stood alongside formal diocesan administrative structures, appear to have been the only viable devotional societies in rural Franconia. Confraternities organized around purely local cults, like the Angel Mass brotherhoods of Selb and Ebermannstadt appear to have been the most impermanent form of lay religious organizations. Corpus Christi brotherhoods and Rosary societies, organized around devotional practices with supra-regional associations, occupy a medial position. Given that they enjoyed greater official support (as suggested by the assumption of patronage over the endowments of the Corpus Christi Brotherhood of Hof by the town council and the prince) these devotional societies were longer lived.

With respect to territorial formation, this typology takes on a two-fold significance. Lay clerical associations and Corpus Christi brotherhoods may be taken as examples of the imposition of clerical discipline onto lay society and, by extension, of the integration of rural communities into larger territorial units.¹⁹ At the same time, if participation in these associations was, as Kanzler argues, "voluntary"—something which seems very likely for the Corpus Christi brotherhoods—then it would follow that the process of integration was not carried out against the desires of communities but, at least, with their tacit approval. The case of the "rural Synod" in Hof suggests that such organizations could go so far as to imply an alternative to existing definitions of territoriality. The late medieval breakdown of territoriality into "a kaleidoscope of personal

17 Guttenberg and Wendehorst, 144, 147.

18 Cf. Peter Blickle, "Communal Reformation and Peasant Piety: The Peasant Reformation and Its Late Medieval Origins," *Central European History* 3/4 (1987): 216-28.

19 Cf. Steven E. Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities* (New Haven, 1975), 15-22.

relationships”²⁰ could be overcome in the establishment of confraternities. And thus the formation of rural confraternities may well have constituted one of the initial stages in the amalgamation of rural society into the emerging territorial state.

20 David Sabean, *Power in the Blood* (Cambridge, 1984), 21.