

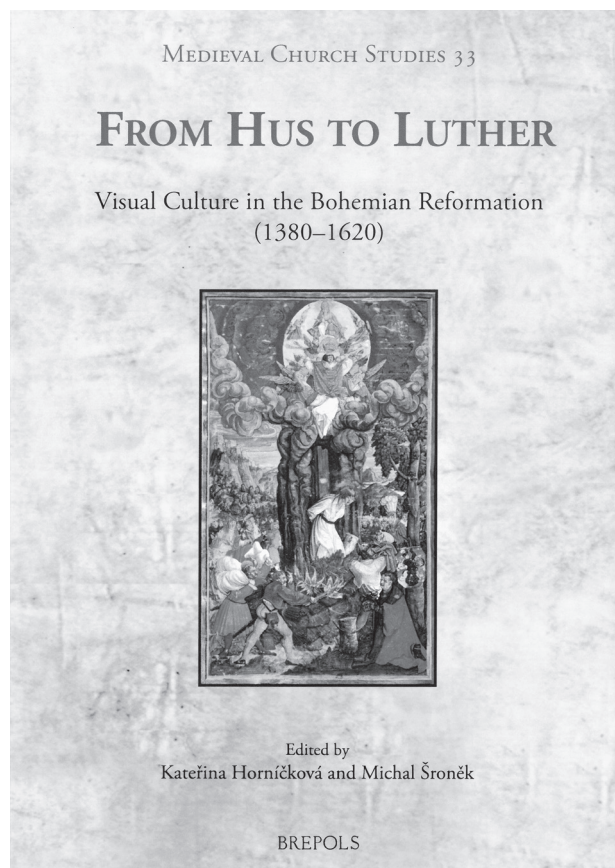
From Hus to Luther. Visual Culture in the Bohemian Reformation (1380–1620)
(Medieval Church Studies 33).

Edited by Kateřina HORNÍČKOVÁ and Michal ŠRONĚK. Turnhout: Brepols, 2016.
XXI + 323 pages, 50 b/w + 8 colour illustrations

Reviewing a book with Luther in its title in 2017, in the Year of the Reformation is hardly surprising. However, the reader will be faced with a number of positive surprises reading the book. In fact, the volume itself was published in 2016, somewhat earlier than the memorial year started. Moreover, the editors and the authors have been working on the subject for a long period, as many of their publications attest. The book itself is based on a Czech publication of 2010 entitled *Umění české reformace* [Art of the Bohemian Reformation]. This was published on the occasion of an exhibition in 2009/2010 in Prague. The Czech book had 560 pages, it contained the description of a number of important objects, and was richly illustrated in full colour images. The present edition contains the English versions of all the essays and a selection of 50 black-and-white photographs of which eight are repeated in full colour. Moreover, the essays had been updated and contain more footnotes in their present form. Therefore, the English edition is very much welcome, since, as the editors state in the foreword, “this volume offers the first overview of the hitherto neglected art and culture produced across a period of approximately two hundred years” (p. 2).

The main title, *From Hus to Luther* does not cover the entire period included in the volume. It is defined as the period between 1380 and 1620. Thus, the earliest events mentioned here are the Pre-Hussite movements at Prague University and the volume ends with the battle of the White Mountain and its consequences. However, jumping to the last essay (‘The End of the Bohemian Reformation’ by Tomáš Malý) we learn that Bohemian Reformation did not end in 1620 but in one or another way, inside and outside of Bohemia, it continued until the end of the seventeenth century. This timeframe thus starts with the Late Middle Ages and ends in the Early Modern Period, neglecting traditional borderlines between the two. Reading the book it becomes clear that the reformation process was continuous during these centuries and any demarcation line would be artificial.

The subtitle (*Visual Culture of the Bohemian Reformation*) uses a term that might be surprising for some of the readers. Was there a Bohemian Reformation? This is not my impolite question but the title of the introductory essay of the great Czech historian, František Šmahel,



to whom (together with another outstanding scholar of Central European history, János M. Bak) the volume is dedicated. The answer to this question is positive; however, the real question is not about its existence but about its meaning. It seems that Bohemian Reformation can mean the Hussitism and related specifically Czech denominations, as a kind of Proto-Reformation or, as Milena Bartlová formulated, “the first step towards European Reformation” (p. 52). On the other hand, it can be equally understood (as the editors state on p. 2) as “a general term that we use in a geographical sense to denote the various reform- and Reformation-oriented non-Catholic Christian denominations,” thus including Lutherans and Calvinists active in Bohemia during the period. For those who need more information on the history of the given denominations, the paper of Martin Nodl (‘The Hussites and the Bohemian Reformation’) will serve as a detailed guide.

The other surprising element of the subtitle is the term “Visual Culture.” Talking about the Reformation,

visual culture is certainly not among the first ideas to come forward. In Bohemian context, the iconoclastic cleansing of the St Vitus Cathedral of Prague in 1619 is one of the most memorable events. Should we talk about visual culture in such conditions? As Milena Bartlová states, “the historical memory that saw the Hussites, as a whole, as destroying artistic monuments rather than being influenced by knowledge of true state of affairs was one largely cultivated by Hussite enemies... In this respect the Hussites lost the battle – and they continue to hold this losing position even today” (p. 59). The author contributed two clearly formulated, fundamental essays, a more theoretic one on ‘The Image as a Religious Issue’ and another one on the ‘Hussite Iconoclasm’.

Her results harmonize well with the essays of Kateřina Horníčková. In the first one, written on the ‘Images and Visual Culture in Bohemian Utraquism’, she clearly states that “opinions on the role of paintings in the religious context of Utraquism were hardly unified, but rather offered a wide range of attitudes and expressions, from an outright rejection of images to a reverence that was almost close to that of the Catholics in attitude” (p. 78). Moreover, the “warnings issued by theologians related to the worshipper’s individual approach to images and thus prohibited the forms that this worship could take, and not the actual presence of religious imagery in churches” (p. 79). Horníčková enumerates the typical iconographic types (the chalice, the anti-Catholic images, the representations of Saint Jan Hus) that have been preserved. In her second paper, she focuses on the Bohemian towns. Her thoughts on the late-sixteenth-century syncretization of Utraquism and Lutheranism are also important.

Further essays offer a wide panorama of the other Protestant denominations. The activity of the Lutherans, described by Petr Hlaváček, are especially in the German-speaking regions well-known. Here the Hungarian reader will notice the role of Count Štěpán Šlik, who participated and died in the battle of Mohács against the Ottomans in 1526. However, it is not easy to judge in which degree Lutheranism was attractive for the Czech speaking communities. The more radical branches, the Unity of the Brethren and the Calvinists are analyzed by Michal Šroněk. Especially the latter denomination needs specific attention since their Bohemian presence before 1619 is usually neglected. Regarding the Brethren, it appears that in religious practice “the Unity’s approach to images was not so essentially iconophobic” (p. 193), which is a statement resembling the Utraquists’ position.

Another group of papers offers a section of the problem from the point of view of different genres. As the context of sacred images is necessarily liturgical, the overview of David R. Holeton on the ‘Liturgical Life during the Bohemian Reformation’ is highly useful. Here we learn that the Utraquist liturgy in many respects preserved more elements of the medieval Christian tradition than the Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation. It seems that such conservatism is known in other branches of the Reformation such as the Anglican High Church or the Lutherans of Transylvania.

A similar conservatism is evident in church architecture. Although Pavel Vlček states in his paper on ‘Bohemian Protestant Church Architecture’ that “no distinctive Protestant church architecture [...] was developed in Bohemia” (p. 143), a number of surprising facts can be underlined in his writing. One of them is the preference of the Gothic style, which was still in use as a characteristic element of sacred architecture in the Bohemian Reformation. This is not unique since, e.g., the Scandinavian Protestant churches preserved elements of Gothic in the seventeenth century, too. Moreover, George I Rákóczi, Prince of Transylvania restored the Calvinist church of Kolozsvár (today Cluj-Napoca, Romania) in 1642–43 with a Gothic vaulting. This single-nave Transylvanian church was built (together with some other Late Gothic churches of Hungary) with retracted pilasters (*Wandpfeilerkirche*), a feature that comes forward also in Bohemian Protestant churches. Another surprising element is the meaning of the position of the towers. Vlček argues that the western pair of towers was so characteristic to Utraquist churches in Bohemia that Catholics, taking over these buildings, changed the orientation in order to have the towers next to the chancel. It is interesting to read such an interpretation because in Hungary the western towers were continuously important elements of Catholic churches.

These churches were originally full of epitaphs in the early modern period – that is why Ondřej Jakubec calls it “the era of the epitaph” (p. 247). In his detailed essay we might find sophisticated paragraphs on the policy of memorialization and convincing arguments that a semiotic analysis of the epitaph can be more fruitful than the traditional art historical one. However, since their iconography is rather general it is not always easy to determine the confession of the deceased without knowing the original historic context.

The culture of the Reformation is very much based on the written word, therefore it is not surprising that

two essays deal with books. The paper of Jiří Just is a useful, general introduction into the rich world of the printed books of the Bohemian Reformation. The essay of Martina Šárovcová discusses the illuminated musical manuscripts of the Bohemian Reformation. While the material is very rich and its quality is outstanding, a special problem emerges in defining their denomination. Utraquists tended to be traditional and consequently “it is not possible to identify all choral manuscripts from the second half of the fifteenth century as belonging to a particular denomination simply on the basis of their content” (p. 283).

With the help of this rich essay collection, the readers will learn how complex the period of Bohemian Reformation was from the point of view of the

different denominations and their visual culture. It is hardly possible to offer simple models characterizing each denomination, since the borders were fluctuating, ideas and practices were not always consequent and the communities did not live in a vacuum. In fact, many of the artistic products of the Bohemian Reformation are not in contradiction to Catholicism. However, this is possibly the result of the selection of time; since objects contradicting Catholicism had little chance to survive after 1620. Therefore our knowledge is necessarily fragmented; nevertheless, the present volume adds significantly to the topic and readers will find numerous pieces of useful information while reading this nicely conceptualized book.

Béla Zsolt Szakács