REFORMERS AND THE ‘CRAZY RABBLE’ IN FIFTEENTH– AND SIXTEENTH–CENTURY GERMANY: 
RETHINKING THE CONTEMPORARY HISTORIANS OF THE NIKLASHAUSEN PILGRIMAGE

BELINDA RULE

I

In the fifteenth century, Niklashausen was a small and otherwise unremarkable south German village, situated on a bend of the Tauber river just south of its joining with the Main, in a small arc of territory where the jurisdictions of the Archbishopric of Mainz and the County of Wertheim overlapped.1 In the year of 1476, from about May onwards, a large number of people arrived there. By various contemporary accounts, ten, twenty, thirty, forty, even seventy thousand people had encamped themselves in the Tauber valley by July.2 These were pilgrims, described as ‘common folk’ or ‘peasants’, come to seek grace and healing from the Virgin. The chapel of the Virgin at Niklashausen had been a pilgrimage site since 1354, but nothing like this had happened before. A prophet had arisen, a shepherd boy and tavern musician, later identified as Hans Böhm, the ‘Holy Youth’, the ‘Drummer’, or the ‘Piper’. He had had a vision of the Virgin, who had instructed him that she wanted her people to undertake pilgrimage to Niklashausen.

The authorities, concerned by the masses of common folk flooding into the area, sent spies to discover whether anything ‘other than Christian’ was going on.3 The spies reported that great bonfires of the vanities were alight, and that spurious miracles abounded. Far worse, the Drummer was reportedly preaching that the woods and waters should be free for the use of all, and that the clergy and lords should work for their keep alongside the commoners.4 The Bishop of Würzburg, whose subject Böhm was, sent riders in the night to arrest the Drummer and spirit him away from the throng.

When the pilgrims found their prophet missing, twelve or sixteen thousand of them rose up and marched on Würzburg, carrying their massive pilgrimage candles, and reputedly singing hymns, expecting that the Virgin Mary would throw the walls down to liberate their Holy Youth. The account of the Ratschronik der Stadt Würzburg, written the same year, told of a city woken at three o’clock in the morning to defend itself from the mob.5 However, the pilgrims were unarmed, disorganised and somewhat confused, and were eventually driven off by cannon

1 The ‘crazy rabble’: ‘der toll pofel’. Sebastian Franck, Chronica, Zeitbuch und Geschichtsbibel (Straßburg: 1531), in Klaus Arnold, Niklashauen 1476. Quellen und Untersuchungen zur sozialreligiösen Bewegung des Hans Böhm und zur Agrarstruktur eines spätmittelalterlichen Dorfes (Baden-Baden: Valentin Koerner, 1980), 277. The standard account, including the sources in excerpt, is Arnold, Niklashauen. See also the update, including a newly discovered source: Klaus Arnold, ‘Neues zu Niklashauen 1476’, in Rainer Postel and Franklin Kopitzsch eds., Reformation und Revolution: Beiträge zum politischen Wandel und den sozialen Kräften am Beginn der Neuzeit (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1989), 69-89. ‘Arnold’ or ‘Arnold, Niklashauen’ will refer to the 1980 book unless otherwise specified. More recently, and in English, is Richard Wunderli, Peasant Fires: The Drummer of Niklashauen (Indianapolis and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). A large part of the material for this article comes revised from my: ‘Religion and “the rabble” in late medieval Germany: A history of interpretation of the Niklashauen pilgrimage, 1476’ (BA Hons thesis, University of Melbourne, 2000). I would like to thank the Stadtbibliothek Nürnberg and University of Melbourne Rare Books Collection for permission to reproduce images. All translations are my own unless otherwise specified.


4 ‘Die Aufzeichnungen der nach Niklashauen entsandten notarien und testes’, in Arnold, Niklashauen, 195-6, is a kind of charge sheet which the Archbishop of Mainz distributed to other authorities.

fire and the Bishop’s knights. Five days later, on 19 July 1476, the Drummer was burnt as a heretic.

To a certain extent this was not an unusual event. Christians of the European late Middle Ages were known for their propensity to descend suddenly, *en masse* upon particular sites where a rent in the veil between the divine and the everyday had been reported. Wilsnack, near Wittenberg, was a notorious example. From 1384, pilgrims had flocked to see three hosts that had miraculously survived a fire in the parish church, and now bled with the Saviour’s blood. Through the fifteenth century, authorities convened and reconvened, and polemical literature circulated, in response to complaints of heresy and hysteria among the pilgrims. Contradictory decrees were given as competing agendas were brought to bear. On the one hand, there was the revenue the pilgrims brought into the local economy, and support for whatever would encourage piety in the mass of ‘simple Christians’. On the other, there were concerns that the enthusiastic devotions at Wilsnack were slipping into heresy, and that public order was under threat from the flood of visitors who were without local social obligations. It was these last concerns regarding heresy and public order that would win the day.

Interpretations by contemporary writers of the Niklashausen pilgrimage were part of the religious discourse that made all pilgrimages increasingly controversial in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and historians writing on Niklashausen have not always paid attention to this. Late medieval religious politics was marked by a gulf between theology and religious practice. In particular, clerical authorities were increasingly sensitive to the possibly excessive importance of the saints in popular piety. Too much emphasis on a saint as the mediator between the believer and God, as well as being theologically suspect, carried a danger of bypassing the mediation, guidance and control of the clergy. If this occurred, there was a fear of both heresy and loss of social discipline. Pilgrimage to saints’ shrines, especially, seemed to present dangerous social possibilities, because the ritual practice of pilgrimage involved a temporary escape by pilgrims from normal social obligations, and the levelling of social boundaries among participants. The outbreak of the Luther controversy in Germany in 1517 allowed the entry into mainstream debates of previously marginalised radical critiques of pilgrimage and saint veneration as actually idolatrous.

In general, the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century texts which describe the Niklashausen pilgrimage have been mined for data about the event itself. The hostile perspective of these texts’ writers has been treated as an obstacle for historians to overcome. But there has been little systematic attempt to treat each writer’s hostile construction of the event as itself a piece of historical evidence. The extraction of factual data about 1476 from these documents has been a difficult process indeed, for the accounts of different chroniclers are bewilderingly inconsistent. As accounts were written further from the time and place of the events of 1476, allegations of immorality, violence and blatant heresy against the pilgrims multiplied. These allegations need to

---

6 While ‘common folk’ were typically the object of the complaints, all social classes were usually proportionately represented among pilgrims. See for instance: Steven Douglas Sargent, ‘Religion and Society in Late Medieval Bavaria: the Cult of Saint Leonard, 1258-1500’ (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1982), 372-406.


10 Zika, ‘Hosts, Processions and Pilgrimages’, 61-63.

be uncoupled from their superficial referent of 1476, and seen as contributions to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century learned discourse about common folk and religion.

Some historians’ practice of reading later Niklashausen chronicle accounts for factual data — the ‘truth’ — has had its dangers for the truth’s welfare. The events of Niklashausen, described in the incendiary language of the chroniclers, were dramatic indeed, and historians have not been immune to this drama’s call. For many historians, Hans Böhm was that strange, teleologically conceived creature, the ‘reformer before the Reformation’. For virtually all commentators, the Niklashausen pilgrimage was a forerunner of the German Peasants’ War of 1525, and Hans Böhm a charismatic revolutionary in the style of Joss Fritz, the leader of the Bundschuh peasant revolts of 1502–17. Indeed, for the distinctive interpretative school of East German Marxist history, the Niklashausen pilgrimage was one of the opening battles of that grand revolutionary effort of the German people, the early bourgeois revolution.

The trouble is that elite contemporary chroniclers had a vested interest in dismissing the visionary religious terms of the Niklashausen movement. They dismissed these terms as clearly heretical, and as little more than an excuse openly to incite rebellion. Historians have, in a sense, colluded with these hostile contemporary interpreters. The point that the religious motifs of the Niklashausen pilgrimage were contemporary commonplaces has not been sufficiently made. Niklashausen’s end was exceptional and disastrous, but that Niklashausen was either heretical or insurrectionary prior to its final stage, is a matter far less clear-cut than has sometimes been assumed.

The standard account of the Niklashausen pilgrimage is Klaus Arnold’s Niklashausen 1476 (1980), which supersedes an extensive tradition of German scholarly interest in the event. This work is encyclopaedic in its attention to the sources, and in its wake, there is not a great deal to be gained by yet another revision of the events of 1476. Rather, I wish to explore the history of contemporary interpretation of Niklashausen. This will be a history not of Niklashausen as an event but of Niklashausen as history. It will seek to illuminate why Niklashausen as a piece of the past continued to be meaningful in flexible and changing ways over the next approximately seventy-five years, ending in the mid-sixteenth century. Niklashausen retained its resonance for writers over this period, but the content of the meaning changed in ways that have not been systematically investigated.

The contemporary sources for the Niklashausen pilgrimage may be divided into two groups. The first group consists of the surviving documentation of the actions of the authorities
on the scene at Niklashausen in 1476, and various ‘news’ reports written on or near the scene. These are the documents that are most likely to contain the testimony of immediate witnesses; they are the documents that historians concerned with the actual events of 1476 rightly focus upon. The second group of documents is the subsequent chronicle tradition of accounts of Niklashausen. These are documents that were written at a geographical or temporal remove, and lack the quality of immediate witness. This second group is the focus of the investigation at hand. It is in these documents that the evolution of public memory of Niklashausen may be traced.

Part of what the present investigation has made clear is that the non–immediate chronicle tradition is able to be divided according to the time of writing. It is the Reformation that marks the meaningful dividing point. One aspect of Niklashausen’s contemporary historiography has not been sufficiently noted — the way that Reformation sources explicitly look to Niklashausen as a precursor of the German Peasants’ War of 1525. It has long been noted that the Peasants’ War (being partly Evangelically inspired) caused a profound reconsideration of rhetoric about ‘freedom’ among moderate Evangelicals. In the use of Niklashausen as a historical example, we see this reconsideration in action.

II

The story of the Niklashausen pilgrimage continued to be committed to writing, to be retold, reframed and elaborated. This tells us that its motifs resonated provocatively with learned contemporaries at least. Yet, to understand why these writers wrote as they did, we need to understand that the precise source of the provocation was relatively limited in scope — crudely, it had to do with the perceived class identity of Niklashausen pilgrims. Many of the other motifs of the pilgrimage were contemporary commonplaces. This is a point worth fleshing out, before we move on to the analysis of the contemporary texts themselves.

European participation in pilgrimage reached a peak in the fifteenth century. Saint veneration, the pilgrimages it inspired, and other pre–Reformation Catholic ritual behaviour were a kind of pre–industrial service economy, in which devotional acts were exchanged for supernatural favours. These favours included more abstract quantities such as grace and salvation, but also healing for physical illness, protection from evil for people, livestock and crops, and even weather control.

It is also important to note that Hans Böhm’s occupation as a shepherd had no necessarily subversive value. New ‘hot spots’ of numinous power were usually discovered by the rising of a prophet, who would announce a saint’s desire to be venerated in that spot, or by the promulgation of new miracles. The shepherd as discoverer of a site was a tremendously common figure in the finding legends of shrines — this was a topos lifted from the Apulian legend of the finding of the shrine of Michael on Monte Gargano (or its French derivative, Mont Saint Michel).

---


The bonfire of the vanities, which Böhm was said to have preached, was a cultural practice that enjoyed its greatest success in its native milieu, the Renaissance Italian city-state. Indeed arguably, it was a practice that was only fully meaningful amid these city-states’ cultures of conspicuous consumption. Nonetheless the practice had been introduced to Germany earlier in the fifteenth century by the famous John of Capistrano, where it may be speculated its appeal lay in its associated penitential, frequently apocalyptic preaching. Capistrano had presided over one of these bonfires in Würzburg’s neighbouring episcopal seat, Bamberg. One sixteenth–century writer would speculate that Hans Böhm had been inspired by Capistrano.

Our main source for the Drummer’s preaching is the list of statements drawn up by the authorities’ spies. The report is a difficult document to interpret, because the spies were, of course, looking only for possibly offensive statements, and did not record context. Several statements are claims about Hans’ access to sacred power, and the reasons the Virgin had called the pilgrims to Niklashausen. He said the Virgin was particularly angry with the clergy, and that they should stop taking multiple benefices. He said the priests said that he was a heretic, when actually they knew that they were. He said that both the pope and the king were going to hell, and the king was an evil man (eyn bößwicht). Further, the forests and the waters should be held in common, and the day was coming when lords must work for a day–wage. He also denied purgatory, and complained of priests performing divorces, for only God could dissolve a marriage.

It is a motley collection of statements indeed, and it draws its themes from motley sources, ranging from fifteenth–century German Reichsreform (reform of the Empire) discourse, to anticlericalism, millenarian prophecy, and peasant egalitarian aspirations. The denial of purgatory is particularly strange, given that an indulgence was formally associated with the pilgrimage to Niklashausen. However, it cannot be determined whether these statements were decisive conclusions and prescriptions for action, or mere rhetorical flourishes within a wider-ranging speech. But they do need to be seen in the context of penitential preaching. Penitential preaching in this period could often become intensely anticlerical. It tended to bewail the sins of commoners, clergy and princes alike, sometimes predicting a coming time of punishment before the end of the world. I do not mean to suggest that none of Böhm’s statements were subversive, or that he could not have been working within the penitential genre to preach, nonetheless, revolution. I do mean to suggest that Böhm’s speech did belong to an existing genre, and that heresy does not always have a clear existence prior to the instance of accusation.

Let us note, finally, how dense the countryside around Niklashausen was with holy spots, and the considerable volume of pilgrims this area was used to. Southern Germany was the heartland of saint veneration centred on pilgrimage shrines: Lionel Rothkrug discovered that the triad of the regions of Swabia–Baden, Bavaria, and Franconia accounted for almost seven hundred of the thousand–odd pilgrimage shrines founded in Germany before 1530. Franconia was the least well–endowed of this triad, but nonetheless, of the sixteen regions of Germany Rothkrug investigated, it had a disproportionate fourteen percent of all shrines.
Niklashausen’s immediate region, there were shrines in cities and across the countryside which continuously attracted pilgrims. In addition to a strong complement of older martyr relic shrines (thirteen within a fifty kilometre radius of Niklashausen before 1530), there were the newer shrines to Christ in the form of a miraculous bleeding host, or, most popularly of all, to Mary as an image (as at Niklashausen). Nearby Marian shrines predating 1476 included Maria in the Sand at Dettelbach, Maria from the Nettles at Heilbronn, and St. Maria ad gradus at Miltenberg, just to name a few. In the city of Würzburg, under the bishop of Würzburg who arrested the Drummer, there were several pilgrimage shrines at which pilgrims were encouraged to buy indulgences.

This was the background of fifteenth–century religious practice against which the Niklashausen pilgrimage occurred. This needs to be kept in mind, as we move on to reading contemporaries scoffing at the absurdity of Hans Böhm’s claims.

III

Accounts of the Niklashausen pilgrimage began to be included in chronicles and histories all over south Germany, almost immediately. These writers wrote about Niklashausen because it appeared to them to be newsworthy. A pilgrimage that had got out of hand spoke to issues in contemporary religious politics. The events of Niklashausen provided an opportunity for certain concerns to be voiced: specifically, it seems, concerns that popular religion was uncontrollable and disorderly. For the pre–Reformation accounts, I wish to pick out three moments where the creation of history can be caught in the act, as it were.

The story of Niklashausen undergoes a notable change in the 1490s. It begins to be said in chronicle accounts that the entire pilgrimage was actually the work of various second parties. Hans Böhm goes from being the irreverent and irresponsible ringleader of the chaos, to being a fool, himself a dupe of others.

The shift in the story occurs in 1493, in Nuremberg, with the short account and woodcut of Niklashausen in Hartmann Schedel’s Book of the World (dual Latin and German printed editions). The account was sparse: it stressed the Drummer’s preaching against authorities secular and spiritual, said he was a ‘herder of beasts’ (ein hirt des vihs), mentioned the Virgin Mary, that there was a large pilgrimage, and that he was burnt. Schedel then congratulated the Nuremberg authorities on their actions against the pilgrimage, for which they received a papal letter.


29 This is counted by measuring three centimetres on the pull-out map to Rothkrug, ‘Religious Practices’, signifying thirty miles, and applying a metric conversion factor to obtain the rough equivalent, fifty kilometres.


32 Anthropological speculations on the topos of the finding legends for Marian images in natural locations in late medieval Spain, see Christian, Apparitions, 15-21.


34 Rothkrug, Stadt und Kirche, 131-5.

35 My account of the reasons for the authorities’ hostile reaction: ‘Religion and “the rabble”’, 6-16.

It is the woodcut accompanying Schedel’s text that marks the shift in the story (fig. 1). The pilgrims are sitting in a group under the window of a house in a village. The Drummer is in the window, but there is another man in the window behind him, apparently prompting him. The text of the account mentions no such prompter. This woodcut was the first full-blown claim that Hans was a puppet, prompted from behind. The woodcut illustrations to Schedel’s chronicle were contracted to a workshop of artists, and the fact that the illustration diverges from the text in this way, might suggest the illustrator knew of a separate, perhaps oral, tradition of the story. The chronicle was constructed at an early stage of print technology: its layout was designed by writing out the entire text, and roughly sketching in the basic composition of the woodcuts, to create an ‘exemplar’ book. These exemplar books still exist, and the sketch for Niklashausen (fig. 2), aside from manifesting some compositional rearrangement, only appears to show one figure in the window. The sketch is not exactly clear, but if it is only one figure, then there was a disjuncture between what the writer planned to be in the image, and what the artist produced. This is not conclusive, but provocatively, it does suggest that the story of Niklashausen gathered accretions from sources even beyond those of our extant chronicle tradition. Whatever the source of the suggestion that Hans was the mouthpiece of an unknown party in this woodcut, it was seized on with glee by later, hostile writers. It should be noted that the vast majority of post-1500 sources are dependent on Schedel’s account to some extent or another.

Figure 1: Hartman Schedel, Liber Chronicarum. Nuremberg: Anton Koberger, 12 July 1493, f. 255r. University of Melbourne Rare Books.

37 Adrian Wilson, The Making of the Nuremberg Chronicle (Amsterdam: Nico Israel, 1976), 1-10.
38 Comparing the final version of the Niklashausen woodcut with one of the Nuremberg Chronicle’s woodcuts of the end times (f. 259v) sheds an interesting light on this compositional rearrangement. In the rearranged, final version of the Niklashausen woodcut, the position of Hans and his instigator echoes the position of the false prophet and his demonic instigator in the end times woodcut. Hans perhaps becomes one of the false prophets of the Marcan eschatological discourse (Mark 13:22).
39 In fact, the Book of the World had a wide circulation even relative to other printed books. Its extensive use of woodcuts, and dual Latin and German editions, made it accessible to different kinds of readers, and it had a large (for the time) print run of one thousand Latin and 1,500 German copies. Commissioned by important members of Nuremberg society, it was marketed all over Europe, and sold well. Charles Zika, Nuremberg: The City and its Culture in the Early Sixteenth Century, in Albrecht Dürer in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria, ed. Irena Zdanowicz (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1994), 28.
It may be that the notion of a hidden conspirator undercut the moral authority Hans Böhm gained by identifying with the topos of the shepherd prophet. The shepherd prophet topos relied on an idea of ‘simple’ people as close to nature, purified by suffering through labour, and so potentially more receptive to divine communication. However, perhaps if the simple shepherd was controlled not by God, but by dishonest, mere humans, then his fragile authority would be broken, and his simplicity would become contemptible stupidity. Two further sources before the Reformation take a line close to this.

For Konrad Stolle, vicar of Erfurt, in his Thüringisch–Erfurtische Chronik of circa 1499–1502, Hans Böhm was ‘a half imbecile, as had been remarked from his youth’. He was instigated in his actions by three noblemen, including the parish priest, ‘Conradus Thunfelt’, who were ‘evil Christians and heretics’, so that they could make money from pilgrims’ offerings. The trouble with this claim is that Konrad von Thunfeld was actually the name of one of the knights who confessed to leading the pilgrims in the march on Würzburg, not the name of the parish priest. Stolle is a very provocative source, because if one had not read his putative sources, one would think he was very well informed. He gives a very detailed account, and indeed it does appear that he had access to some of the original 1476 documents and correspondence. Many of his extensive details, however, are at odds with these sources. Still more are quite without precedent anywhere in the extant documentation. He writes, for instance, that when the Drummer was arrested in the middle of the night, he was preaching naked in a tavern. As Richard Wunderli remarks, ‘Surely no earlier writer would have missed this juicy detail’. Stolle gives a dramatic account of the pilgrimage: the number of people who came to Niklashausen was seventy thousand, an unprecedented estimate.

---


41 ‘eyn halber thore, als man on von jogunt uff gemerket hatte’. Stolle, Thüringisch-Erfurtische Chronik, in Arnold, Niklashausen, 262-5

42 ‘bosse cristen unnd ketezere’, ibid.

43 Some of Stolle’s remarks suggest he had possibly read the nicklas haunser fart poem of 1476, and the original correspondence of the Bishop of Würzburg with the Archbishop of Mainz.

44 Wunderli, Peasant Fires, 145, and 124 for similar remarks about Stolle. For Cohn, Pursuit of the Millenium, 233, despite the complete lack of corroboration, modern historians may have been ‘too hasty’ in dismissing Stolle’s allegation of naked preaching, for it may be evidence of Bohemian Adamite influences.
We can engage with Stolle’s version of the Niklashausen pilgrimage far better when we realise it is grounded in his objection to a matter closer to home: the notorious Wilsnack shrine. A group of Erfurt theologians had been leading critics of Wilsnack. Stolle, their colleague, wrote an account of the 1475 pilgrimage to Wilsnack, stressing ‘the psychological frenzy, the spurning of traditional authority and the total breakdown of social relationships’ by the Wilsnack pilgrims. The force of Stolle’s expectation that Niklashausen was the same kind of event is probably the explanation of his intensive narrative embroidery. We have seventy thousand people abandoning their work, taking the Drummer as their prophet when he was only ‘a wicked layman and half witless’, and the entire event was actually a conspiracy by some avaricious noblemen. This is certainly a story which is grounded in Stolle’s negative experiences of the Wilsnack pilgrimage; it is a story of the foolishness of the common folk, and of mass pilgrimage as a potentially catastrophic delusion born of avarice and social irresponsibility.

Johannes Trithemius, then abbot of a Würzburg monastery, wrote a long and vitriolic account of the Niklashausen pilgrimage in his *Annales Hirsaugienses* of 1514. This became one of the prototypical accounts for subsequent sixteenth−century writings: its contemptuous dismissal of the validity of the religious terms of the pilgrimage passed into accepted historical fact. As in Stolle, Hans Böhm is described as being prompted by a second party, only this time it is a concealed mendicant friar. The friar was necessary because Hans ‘was neither able to speak well nor able to propose anything that could be comprehended’. This was because Hans was ‘a peasant, an extremely ignorant half−wit, and herdsman of pigs’. Hans had never been called a herdsman of pigs before.

The Niklashausen pilgrimage, to Trithemius, was characterised by the stupidity of the people, pilgrims and prophet alike: ‘The masses of stupid people followed the fool everywhere’. The people’s religious motivation was sincere, but this goes no way towards ameliorating Trithemius’s contempt: ‘They strove hard to do their foolish devotions — which clearly were neither to the honor of God nor of any use whatsoever to the Church’.

Trithemius' account is strident, but his argument relies on subtle distinctions. Among his other writings, there are two comparisons that bear fruit. The first is an account Trithemius wrote in the same chronicle, his *Annales Hirsaugienses*, of the Bundschuh revolt at Untergrombach in 1502. He sets out the peasants’ confessions in a numbered list of ‘articles’, in a very similar format to the way he lays out the articles of Hans Böhm’s preaching. Some of these articles were indeed quite similar — the call for the freedom of woods and waters, for instance. After recounting the Untergrombach peasants’ secret, anticlerical passwords, he exclaims: ‘O peasant depravity, always hard for the cleric to endure’. The parallel between these two accounts is not overwhelming, but it certainly suggests that Trithemius saw the Niklashausen pilgrims as similar to Untergrombach peasants. The other point on which Trithemius needs to be compared to himself is on Marian pilgrimage and devotion. Trithemius was a great enthusiast of Marian devotion, and a compiler of Franconian Marian miracles. Further, he had written a treatise against John Hus in the matter of the Wilsnack pilgrimage, in which he defended pilgrimage and professed strong belief in the possibility of miracles in the contemporary world. This tends to make Trithemius’ absolute disgust with Niklashausen hard to understand, until we note also his belief in learning as the path to holiness. It is Hans Böhm’s state as an ‘extremely ignorant

---

45 Zika’s description of Stolle’s account, ‘Hosts, Processions and Pilgrimages’, 58.
48 Ibid., 69.
49 Ibid., 70.
50 Ibid., 71.
52 Ibid., 117.
halfwit' that gives Trithemius his opportunity to argue that Niklashausen was false religion. It may be that Trithemius’s project in his account of Niklashausen was to wedge open a distinction, where matters might otherwise be unclear, between Marian pilgrimage that was absurd, and Marian pilgrimage that was glorious and pious. It may be that this was why so much rhetorical force was needed.

The dominant theme of the pre-Reformation chronicle tradition is the disasters that occur when common folk attempt to direct their own religious lives. Work and social obligations are abandoned, and people become hysterical and foolish, finally falling into heresy and idolatry. These themes are not merely derived from or inspired by Niklashausen, they exist prior to the interpretation of Niklashausen, and inform it.

IV

From almost the moment the Luther controversy hit the headlines in Germany, the outright rejection of pilgrimage was suddenly, openly on the public agenda. The rejection of saints as divine mediators in general would soon follow. Naturally, this gave a whole new level to hostile interpretations of Niklashausen.

That accounts written by supporters of the Reformation would seize upon Niklashausen as an example of the absurdity of pilgrimage should not surprise us. However, the post-Reformation accounts are just as interested, or even more so, in comparing Niklashausen to the Peasants’ War of 1525.

The German Peasants’ War swept across south Germany from June of 1524. Inspired by Evangelical rhetoric, many peasant groups used the slogan of ‘Godly Law’ to demand resolution of grievances, and as the movement radicalised, overhaul of the whole feudal order. When the chain of rebellions was finally suppressed, something had changed in the political discourse of the Evangelical movement. In the years before 1525, Reformation propagandists had distributed pamphlets depicting the figure of the wise but simple, Evangelical Peasant, embodying the notion that the common man stood closer to God than the churchman, and could therefore be called upon to see through the obscurantism of Catholic theology to the Lutheran truth. But Luther himself was horrified at the peasant rebels’ appeal to the gospel in 1525, as were many other Reformers. The chastening impact this had on Reformation rhetoric, and particularly on Luther’s thought, has long been remarked.

These issues were high on the agenda of post-Reformation writers on Niklashausen. The old, pre-Reformation concerns about popular religious enthusiasm leading to misunderstanding and heresy were not discarded: in fact, the experience of the Peasants’ War...
gave these concerns a new and urgent edge. Evangelical writers who had lived through the Peasants’ War did not simply expect enthusiastic peasants to fall into false forms of worship, they expected that religiously enthusiastic peasants to rise up in revolt and attempt to destroy social order. Many Reformers with humanist educations were engaged in writing a new, Reformation narrative of history. When they wrote Niklashausen into this historical narrative, they often moulded it into a preview of what had happened in their own communities in 1525. This can be seen in many texts: again, I will take a handful of examples.

An interesting example is a remembrance of Niklashausen that occurs during the Franconian phase of the Peasants’ War. This is an entry in Anton Kreuzer’s Nuremberg Chronicle, probably written in 1525. Kreuzer himself is a now obscure figure whose confessional allegiance is unknown, and this makes the idiosyncrasies of his account all the more interesting, for they cannot be dismissed as mere confessionalism. Kreuzer refers to Hans Böhm while discussing the Peasant of Wöhrd, a disruptive anti–clerical street preacher who arose in Nuremberg in 1524. Nuremberg had officially adopted the Reformation in March of 1525. This powerful city escaped invasion during the Peasants’ War, but it found itself in some peril in 1524–25. The council began to take repressive measures against radical Evangelical ideas in the populace, which they felt were a threat to public order.

Kreuzer’s account, which is actually an aside during his discussion of the Peasant of Wöhrd, is a paraphrase of the account of the events of Niklashausen from his fellow Nuremberger, Hartmann Schedel’s Book of the World of 1493. Kreuzer made several significant changes to Schedel’s account. First, whereas Schedel wrote that the Drummer preached ‘against the priests and clergy’, Kreuzer wrote it was ‘against the pope and the clergy’. Second, Kreuzer inserted this remark: ‘in my opinion, he heard and learnt this from one of the Hussites’. Third, where Schedel said there was ‘a great influx’ to the Drummer, Kreuzer said it was an influx ‘of the rabble’. These changes have certain hallmarks of Catholic anti–Lutheran propaganda in the wake of the Peasants’ War. Hans Böhm is identified as an Evangelical because he preached against the pope, he is accused of being a Hussite —  a frequent slur thrown at Luther by Catholics —  and his followers are identified derisively as ‘the rabble’.

On the other hand, what the ‘reproach’ of Hussitism might mean in 1525 was rather ambiguous. That Luther was a Hussite was certainly a slur from Catholic opponents, but Luther had reclaimed this slur by 1520, beginning to talk about Hus as a respected reforming predecessor. And while Kreuzer says Hans Böhm preached against the pope, Kreuzer himself manifests a certain lack of enthusiasm about the pope. The last sentence and climax of Schedel’s 1493 story had been the fact that the Nuremberg Council had received great praise from the pope for its speedy action against the pilgrimage, and had received a letter ‘sub annulo

60 Anton Kreuzer, Nürnberger Chronik, in Arnold, Niklashausen, 276. This ‘Nuremberg Chronicle’ is not to be confused with Hartmann Schedel’s Chronicle of the World, often also known as The Nuremberg Chronicle, although Schedel is one of Kreuzer’s sources. On Kreuzer, current footnotes now point only to a single eighteen-century printed excerpt, comprising his passage on the Peasant of Wöhrd, of which this mention of Niklashausen is part —  Georg Ernst Waldau, ‘Etwas von dem Bauern zu Wöhrd’, Vermischte Beyträge zur Geschichte der Stadt Nürnberg, 3 (1788): 413-420.


63 ‘ich halt davor, er habe es von der Hussen jünger einem empfangen und gelernt’, Kreuzer, ibid. I would like to thank Peter Matheson for his help with this translation.


66 Hendrix, ‘“We Are All Hussites?”’, VII 134-38.
piscatoris’. But Kreuzer’s account omits the elaboratory clause about the letter, and shifts the sentence up several lines, so that his native city’s intervention in the affair, and its praise by the pope, are relegated to a shortened aside. Kreuzer’s account makes the most sense if we accept that it has no one single thrust, confessional or otherwise. The content has been edited, not for a didactic confessional purpose, but to create interest and immediate contemporary relevance. Kreuzer tweaks the wording of selected details, and adds a comment of his own, to make Niklashausen suggestive of a grab-bag of the issues important in religious politics in 1525.

Another paraphrase of Schedel’s Book of the World, the account of Sebastian Franck in his Chronicle, Book of the Times and History Bible of 1531, takes a very different tack. Franck was a radical and former Evangelical, whose thought had drifted towards a strong emphasis on the primacy of inward revelation. To Franck, papists and Evangelicals alike were servants of Antichrist, for the only true church was in the human heart. He moved in 1530 to Strasbourg, at the time a relative haven of radicals, and in 1531 published his massive Chronicle, a far-ranging history of the world intended to demonstrate the futility of human works not proceeding from true, inner faith.

Franck’s paraphrase of Schedel makes several pointed changes to Schedel’s text. Throughout, Franck refers to the Drummer, presumably sarcastically, as ‘their holy one’. Rather savagely, where Schedel says the Drummer was burnt, Franck says he was burnt ‘to powder’. Acidly, Franck adds the comment that ‘the pilgrimage vanished along with its holy one. The basis of all pilgrimage is much the same’. Franck reserves his most damning language for the peasant participants of the pilgrimage: in an extraordinary insertion, he writes ‘Like the people of Gomorrah, the crazy rabble soon after, they swarmed from all regions to this Drummer’. Franck sees the pilgrims as a crazy (toll), swarming mass of moral anarchy.

Some sense in Franck’s extraordinary language may be gleaned from his account of the Peasants’ War in the Chronica. In his chronicle account, Franck wrote:

\[\text{That is how it was with this rebellious, raving, and disorderly rabble. They brought on nothing by disruption, injustice, murder, robbery, tyranny, rape, and all other wickedness. And the worst of it was that all these outrages were committed in the name of God and His Gospel.}\]

Franck goes on to say that the peasants were defeated because God unmanned them in the face of the enemy, reducing them to throwing their hats. It is this raving, robbing, murdering and raping rabble, the enemy of God, that Franck seems to have inserted into the story of Niklashausen. Aside from achieving a quick shot at pilgrimage in general, Franck’s main contention in his account of Niklashausen is that rebellion can only proceed from an evil heart, and so will always lead to horrible punishment at God’s command, a contention which proceeds from his understanding of the Peasants’ War.

\[\text{67 sub annulo piscatoris — under the sign of the fish, meaning the letter had had the papal seal emblazoned upon it, to Nuremberg’s honour.}\]


\[\text{70 Life in Strasbourg and development of Franck’s ‘mature’ thought in ibid. (Hayden-Roy), 43-101.}\]

\[\text{71 ‘yrem heiligen’, ‘verbranten yn zu pulver’, Franck in Arnold, Niklashausen, 277.}\]

\[\text{72 ‘also verschwand die wallung mitt yhrem heiligen. Also haben alle wallfarten ein grund.’, ibid. ‘Ein grund’, here, is difficult to interpret.}\]

\[\text{73 ‘Also was der populus Gomorre, der toll poefel bald auff, der schwermet außer gegen dahin zu disen paucker’, ibid.}\]

\[\text{74 Franck, Chronica, in Strauss, Manifestations, 167.}\]
An account which one would expect to relieve the post–1525 fear of revolt is that of Johannes Herolt’s *Chronica* of 1540–41. Herolt was the pastor of Reinsberg, near Schwäbisch Hall, the town chronicler of Hall, and a friend of Johannes Brenz, the leading Reformer. Hall had adopted the Reformation in 1524 under Johannes Brenz’s guidance. During the Peasants’ War in 1525, Johannes Herolt was kidnapped by a party of his parishioners and forced to accompany them to join a peasant band as a preacher. As a prisoner of the peasants, Herolt witnessed the slaughter of nobles at Weinsberg. Later he would call the peasants ‘the crop and weeds of satan’.

While Herolt’s own account has little to add that is of interest, what happened to him in 1525 might explain the attitude of one of his colleagues from Schwäbisch Hall. Georg Widman’s account of Niklashausen emerges in the same decade as Herolt’s, in his *Chronica* of 1544–50. The family Widman was outspokenly Lutheran, and well known in Schwäbisch Hall. Widman’s is a lengthy account which uses extravagant and unkind language to describe the excesses of the pilgrims’ devotions. Much of this description is taken from the equally unkind Trithemius of 1514, but Widman adds imaginative touches of his own. It is not merely that fieldworkers left the fields, carrying their tools, it is that ‘Wives left husbands, husbands wives’. Women and men slept by each other in the fields, but there were also taverns set up in the fields, for ‘the grape harvest had been excellent’. When the pilgrims bewailed their sins, ‘it may be that it was really the drink in them causing their misery’. They did not merely cast their vanities into the fires, they took all their clothes off and wandered around in their shifts.

Widman tells a detailed story of a ‘pig–sticker’ and his wife from the Fischach valley near Schwäbisch Hall, who faked the wife’s lameness, invented a vision from the Virgin, and play–acted a miraculous cure, in order to get money for drink. Widman takes his criticism to a new level, beyond even the vitriol of Trithemius. This may be because Widman’s target is the entire institution of pilgrimage, while Trithemius’s was the stupidity of common folk. Widman indicts pilgrimage as hopelessly corrupt, and even seems to be levelling an accusation against his own parishioners by way of the Fischach pig–sticker story. But even such a purpose would not normally raise Widman’s disgust with the pilgrims to this level. Widman is the first ever chronicler to incorporate into his story the supposed sermon in which the Drummer had instructed the pilgrims to return armed to the village in a week. This sermon was only mentioned by Rudolf von Scherenberg, bishop of Würzburg, for the first time six weeks after the events in 1476, and no chronicler before Widman considered it a genuine part of the story. According to Widman, when the bishop of Würzburg heard of this sermon, he was ‘afraid of the misuse such rebellious peasants would make of the Gospel’. This gospel can only be the gospel of the Peasants’ War. In this way, Niklashausen becomes a historical parallel to the Peasants’ War, in which the strong retaliation by the princes is vindicated.

The account of Niklashausen by the Würzburg bishops’ secretary, Lorenz Fries, in his *History of the Bishops of Würzburg* of 1546, contains so much common text with Widman’s

81 Widman in Strauss, *Manifestations*, 219-20. Some of the historiography has taken as fact, Widman’s defamatory allegations that the Niklashausen pilgrims were all drunk and participated in illicit sex in the fields. For instance, Lackner, ‘Hans Böhm’, 76. Also Carlheinz Gräter, *Der Bauernkrieg in Franken* (Würzburg: Stuttgart Verlag Würzburg, 1973), 9, who then seems to try to reclaim these alleged antics as part of some sort of universal jolly–drunken (*feuchtfröhliche*) spirit of the working class.
account that scholars have been unable to determine which is the original source of the other.\textsuperscript{84} Fries began service at Würzburg under Bishop Konrad von Thüngen in 1520, continuing to serve the next two bishops.\textsuperscript{85} His \textit{History of the Peasants' War in East Franconia}, compiled with the use of the bishop of Würzburg's correspondence, is one of the major and most reliable sources for the Peasants' War in Franconia.\textsuperscript{86} With his relatively judicious tone and expansive quotations from original sources, Fries has been described as the 'father of [modern] Franconian history writing'.\textsuperscript{87} However, while Fries's account of Niklashausen mitigates Widman's energetic accusatory tone, much of the content of the allegations against the pilgrims remains. In the pen–and–ink illustration which graces the earliest surviving manuscript, the Drummer stands on an upturned vat in a field, with peasant pilgrims gathered around him (some carrying their tools), women and men separated like in church, and a bonfire with backgammon boards off to the side. In other illustrations to this chronicle, standing on something signifies preaching or learned disputation, an action usually depicted indoors, behind a lectern.\textsuperscript{88} This is a scene of high drama, in which the flames on the pilgrimage candles echo the flames of the bonfire. The separation of the men and the women, and the placing of the Drummer in the position of preacher (except on a vat), seems to posit the gathering as an outdoor anti–church of peasants. Fries also relates the story of the supposed sermon in which the Drummer called the pilgrims to arms, and it is his elaborated version of this sermon which many modern historians have taken as fact.\textsuperscript{89}

Both Widman and Fries' accounts are exciting, dramatic narratives in which events of the past (the purported referent) are woven together with events closer to the present, elaborated with new details and painted in bright colours. In the earlier Reformation accounts, in the shadow of the Peasants' War, Niklashausen was a story those who feared revolt told each other. While some accounts swept Niklashausen up into Catholic or Evangelical polemical narratives, others simply tweaked the details to make Niklashausen suggestive of post–1525 religious politics in flexible ways. Later accounts to 1550 still retain the memory of 1525 as an ultimate referent, but settle down to the serious business of enjoyable myth–making, with its requirement for detail and narrative flow.

***

History is public memory — it is the past actively operated upon to make it a meaningful frame for the present. It is easy to forget that such operations are already present in the documents that we, as modern historians, call primary sources. In the history of contemporary interpretation of the Niklashausen pilgrimage, we see the sometimes quite intrusive reinvention of events of the past into a shape which appears to illuminate ongoing issues in late medieval German religious politics.

For the pre–Reformation chronicle tradition, primacy must be given to clerical suspicions regarding the religious understandings embedded in an increasingly elaborated lay religious practice. These suspicions were not merely touched off by Niklashausen, rather they predated Niklashausen and decisively informed interpretation. These chroniclers wrote not so much about what actually happened, as about the events that could be anticipated in disorderly mass pilgrimages in general. For the post–Reformation tradition, it is clear that the historical connection of the Niklashausen pilgrimage to the German Peasants' War needs to be seen in a far more subtle and dynamic light. Whether Niklashausen's status as a precursor of the Peasants' War has a prior existence, or whether it is something created in discourse during and after the Peasants' War, should be carefully considered. History is written and re–written to make the present thinkable, and this may be the true relationship of the events at Niklashausen in 1476 to the religious and social upheavals that swept Germany in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

\textit{University of Melbourne}

\textsuperscript{84} Arnold, \textit{Niklashausen}, 16.
\textsuperscript{85} ADB, vol. 8, 83-4.
\textsuperscript{88} Cf. illustrations 96 and 50. The exception to the rule is illustration 50, in which a preacher who provoked a pogrom is shown preaching outdoors, causing the violence shown. Ibid.
\textsuperscript{89} Arnold, \textit{Niklashausen}, 114.