
Breslau (Wrocław)

Johannes Hess and Zacharias Ursinus

by Irene Dingel

Wroclaw's historical context

Breslau (now Wrocław), the most important city in historic Silesia, is situated on the River Oder and its tributaries and today extends over twelve islands connected by numerous bridges, earning it the nickname “the Venice of Poland”. Historically as well, Breslau always functioned as a “bridge city”. Situated at crossroads leading from Kiev and Cracow toward western and southern Europe, and from Hungary and Bohemia north toward the Baltic Sea, it traditionally connected Europe in every direction, becoming thus a natural center for trade and commerce.

Documentation dating back to the year 1000 attests that Emperor Otto III had founded the bishopric of Breslau and the town had already started to build its first cathedral. A cathedral chapter in Breslau is documented from the year 1100. The diocese of Breslau was part of the archbishopric of Gnesen, whose archbishop was at once both the primate of Poland and the highest-ranking senator of the Polish Republic of the Nobles (*Rzeczpospolita*), which in its own turn was part of a union with Lithuania. Following the Treaty of Trenčín in 1335, however, Silesia became subject to the Bohemian crown, which after 1490 was also combined with the Hungarian crown. When King Louis II of Bohemia was killed at the Battle of Mohács in 1526, the Bohemian-Hungarian crown, and with it Silesia, fell to the Habsburgs, who enjoyed the status of Silesian dukes until 1742.

The first Silesian territorial lord from this dynasty was Ferdinand I. Unlike in the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, where he functioned as a governor for Emperor Charles V, he took little action in Silesia with respect to the religious questions that arose in connection with the Reformation in the sixteenth century.

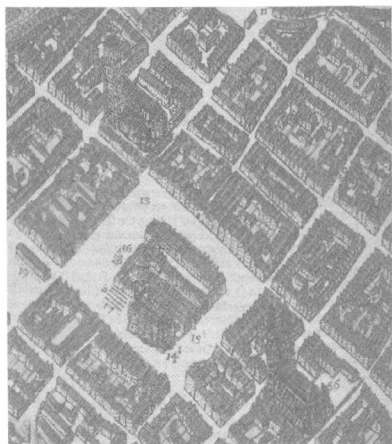
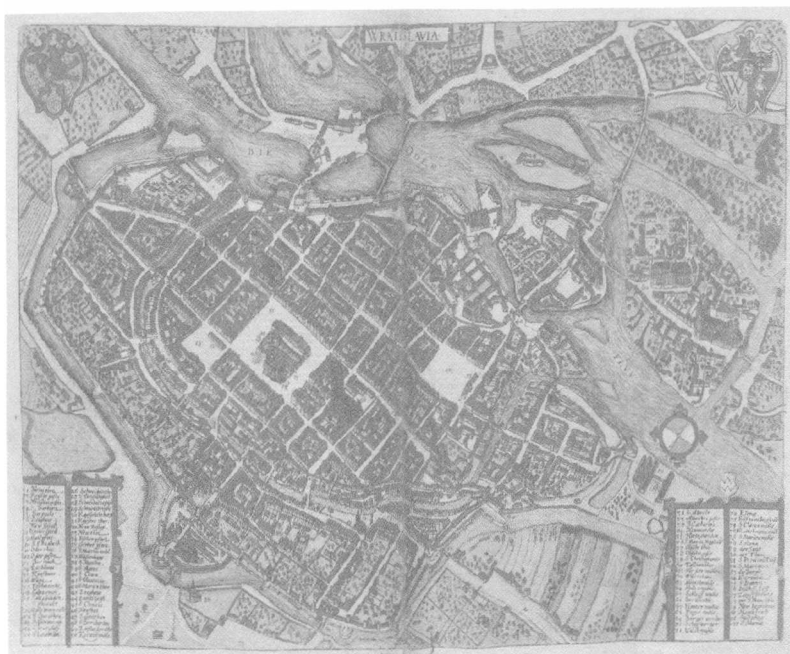
Silesia thrived politically and economically under his rule, including a healthy trade in iron ore with Hungary and extensive commerce with the great merchant families in Nuremberg and Augsburg. The Fuggers had opened an office in Breslau as early as 1517 to oversee their copper trade with Hungary, establishing a significant presence in the city. Their most important business contact and then co-partner was the Hungarian Thurzo family, who later also took up residence in Cracow. A notable member of this family was one of the best-known of Breslau's humanistic bishops, Johann V. Thurzo (bishop 1506–20). Such commercial contacts with imperial cities also influenced intellectual exchange, making it easier for humanistic and Reformation ideas to gain an early foothold in Breslau.

Humanism and the Reformation

In Breslau the humanist movement functioned not only as an influence on education and culture, but also as a powerful impetus for renewal in both church and society at large. Humanism attracted followers especially among members of the city administration and legal community, who often also had positions in church chancelleries. As elsewhere, humanism strengthened historical consciousness and picked up on reform currents within late medieval piety. As early as the late fifteenth century, Canon Kaspar Elyan set up a small printing press that began publishing in 1475. Both Bishop Johann IV Roth (bishop 1482–1506) and his successor, Johann V. Thurzo, promoted humanism and the school system shaped by it. Johann V. Thurzo gathered together Silesia's most distinguished humanists,

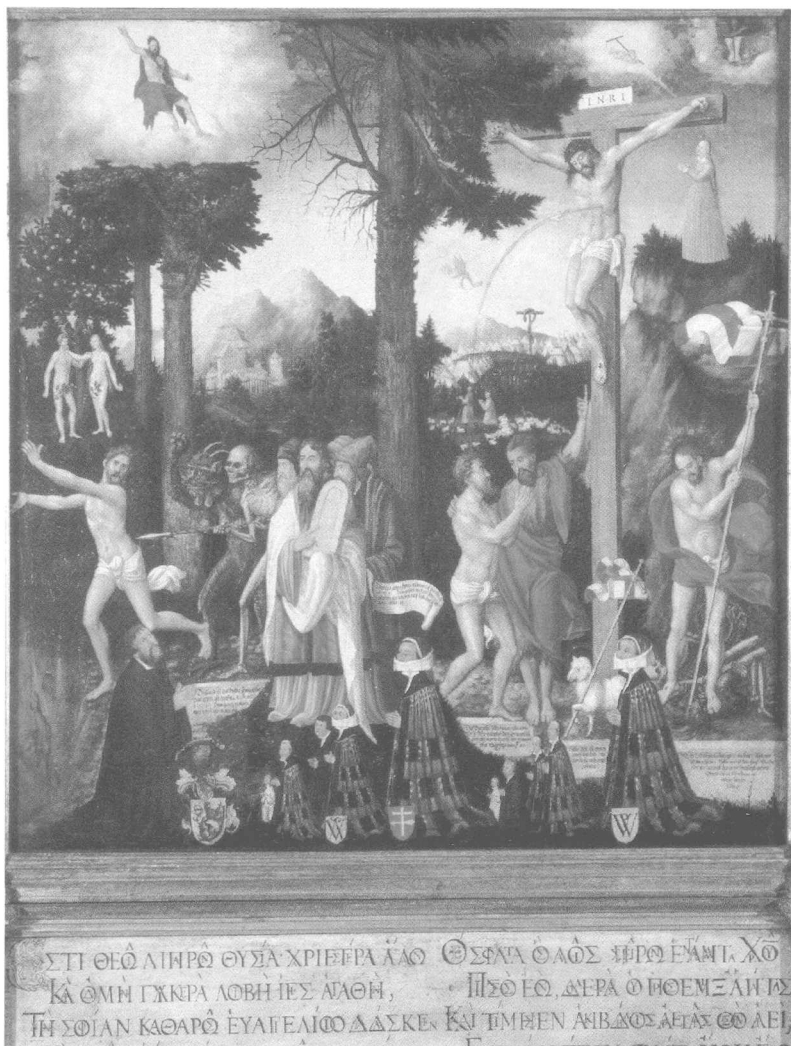


In 1517 Bishop Johann V. Thurzo had a grand Renaissance portal built for the cathedral sacristy. The bas-relief depicts the beheading of John the Baptist; Thurzo as the founder is portrayed kneeling



Colorized town map from Georg Braun and Franz Hogenberg, "Contrafactur und Beschreibung von den vornemhsten Stetten der Welt", vol. 4, Cologne, 1590

Below left: Church of St. Elizabeth (no. 10), the town hall (no. 14), and the Church of St. Mary Magdalene (no. 56); below right: the Cathedral Island with the cathedral (no. 80)



Epitaph of Johannes Hess from the Church of St. Mary Magdalene. Below left: Johannes Hess. Painting by an unknown Breslau artist, ca. 1547/49, based on the well-known motifs for law and grace in paintings of Lucas Cranach the Elder

such as Ursinus Velius, Georg von Logau, Bartholomaeus Stein and the later Reformer Johannes Hess. The most famous humanists born in Breslau doubtless include Johann Crato von Crafftheim, who worked as an extremely influential personal physician in the service of emperors Ferdinand I and Maximilian II.

Against such a background, the Reformation was able to develop in Breslau in what was a calmer environment than in many other places. This humanist sensibility and the will to institute reforms were shared by the bishop and the majority of the cathedral chapter as well as by municipal functionaries, despite ongoing conflicts of interest between cathedral and city, cathedral chapter and council. The council, which also enjoyed regional political control over the territory of the principality of Breslau, had repeatedly tried to appropriate patronage over the municipal churches and in so doing to acquire at least partial control over the church. Once the Reformation, beginning in Breslau and with the help of the Silesian estates, took hold in the entire territory during 1519/20, the council found conditions ideal for pursuing its own interests, not least because the Reformation encountered few opponents. In contrast to Liegnitz, where the influence of Caspar Schwenckfeld von Ossig resulted in rigorous changes in both doctrine and rites, events in Breslau proceeded more cautiously under the leadership of the Reformer Johannes Hess. Although Protestant services were eventually held in all eight municipal churches in Breslau, churches under the responsibility of the canons and those of the Dominicans, the Augustinian canons, the Premonstratensians, and the Knights of the Cross remained with the old faith. Protestant preachers were integrated into municipal society by granting them the rights of citizenship.

Johannes Hess and the adoption of the Reformation in Breslau

Bishop Johann V. Thurzo died on 2 August 1520, and the adoption of the Reformation in Breslau took place under his successor, Jacob von Salza (bishop 1520–39). The lengthy tug-of-war concerning this succession actually proved favorable to this change, since although Jacob von Salza had already been chosen by the cathedral chapter on 1 September 1520, Pope Leo X preferred a different candidate. The Pope finally approved his election on 24 July 1521, in part due to pressure from the Breslau town council. Salza's consecration was performed in November of that year. Breslau chapter records mentioned a *factio lutherana* as early as 1520, and although this presence was not specifically addressed in the minutes of a cathedral chapter meeting until 11 July 1522, it is probably safe to assume that Luther's writings had spread swiftly in Breslau. In any case, in March 1522 fear of such "Lutheran subversives" prompted the removal of the cathedral treasures from Breslau. But while the cathedral chapter not surprisingly turned to



Church of St. Mary Magdalene, in 1728. View by Wilhelm Sander. From [Carl Adolf Menzel], "Topographische Chronik von Breslau", 5th quarter, Breslau, 1806, pp. 432–433

Pope Hadrian VI for help, the town council following a quite different line of action. It seized the initiative and on 19 May 1523 appointed Johannes Hess preacher in the Church of St. Mary Magdalene, trusting that Hess could reestablish calm and orderly circumstances in the city.

Hess had studied *artes liberales* and jurisprudence at Leipzig (1505–10) and Wittenberg (1510–12), then entered the service of Bishop Johann V. Thurzo as a secretary and held various posts as a canon. After additional theological studies in Bologna, he earned his theological doctorate in Italy and on the return journey in 1520 stopped over in Wittenberg again, where he became acquainted with Luther and Melancthon. After his return to Breslau, he was ordained that same year (2 June 1520). Well known for his Reformation tendencies, he entered an uncertain period after the death of Bishop Johann V. Thurzo, with whom he had enjoyed quite close relations. In late 1520 he entered the service of the Duke of Münsterberg-Oels, where he soon began preaching Protestant doctrine. During a brief visit to his hometown of Nuremberg, he received the council's invitation to return to Breslau.

Hess hesitated, however, saying he would accept only on condition that the bishop himself appointed him. Although Jacob von Salza initially confirmed the council's decision, he later refused to conduct the investiture, disassociating himself under pressure from the cathedral chapter, the Polish king, and the pope. Hence on 21 October 1523, the council itself appointed Hess to the pastoral position, and on 25 October Hess delivered his first Protestant sermon in the church of St. Mary Magdalene.

The adoption of the Reformation in Breslau came about via a public disputation, a procedure frequently chosen in towns. Hess had presented nineteen theses addressing the themes "word of God", "priesthood of Christ" and "marriage", all of which he had presented beforehand to Luther and Melanchthon, and also to Zwingli.

The disputation was conducted from 20 to 22 April 1524, in the Church of St. Dorothy, with Hess supported by Valentin Trotzendorf (rector of the school in Goldberg) and Anton Niger (schoolteacher in Breslau), who held the same views. His main opponent was the Dominican Leonhard Czipser, whose objections Hess was able to refute. The council subsequently decreed that all churches would thenceforth preach only Protestant doctrine oriented toward the theology of Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon. Schools were organized according to Reformation principles and finally, with the approval of the council, an ordinance for the care of the poor was passed on 7 May 1525.

Further reorganization affecting the life of the church congregations addressed only what was strictly necessary. The former consecration rituals, masses and the veneration of saints were abolished. However, any ceremonies and ritual acts not viewed as being in contradiction with the correct understanding of the gospel were maintained, such as the tolling of bells, organ music, and songs in Latin, the latter also in deference to the Poles in the city who did not know German. The bishop's jurisdiction also remained intact. And when Hess married on 8 September 1525, about three months after Luther had taken the same step, this decision was also an unequivocal public sign that he was renouncing the old forms of spiritual life and reorienting himself toward Reformation doctrine.

The three great churches in Breslau — St. Mary Magdalene, St. Bernard, and St. Elizabeth — became early centers of Reformation preaching. From 16 May 1525, Hess worked with Ambrosius Moibanus, who had studied under both Luther and Melanchthon in Wittenberg, as a pastor at the Church of St. Elizabeth. The council had appointed him, and Bishop Jacob von Salza performed his investiture. Moibanus contributed to the consolidation of the Reformation in Breslau with his *Catechismus, auf zehn Artikel göttlicher Schrift gestellt, wie man vor Gott und den Menschen ein christlich frommes Leben führen soll* (Catechism, based on ten articles of Scripture, on how a person ought to lead a life of Christian devotion before God and our fellow human beings), published in 1535. As before, however,

the cathedral chapter continued to oppose such consolidation, trying to gain the support of Hieronymus Emser and Johannes Cochläus, two of the most prominent theologians of traditional faith who opposed Luther. In fact, Cochläus, who in late 1536 had himself sought support from the cathedral chapter for the publication of his own piece against Moibanus's catechism, became canon in Breslau in 1539 when a position became vacant.

Zacharias Ursinus and the international Reformation

Whereas the early Reformation as shaped by Hess and Moibanus drew primarily on its Wittenberg heritage, combining elements from both Luther and Melanchthon and continuing to cultivate its humanist roots, the second-generation Reformer Zacharias Ursinus set different accents. Zacharias, whose father had headed the municipal alms office (founded in 1525) as deacon, was born on 18 July 1534, in Breslau. He attended the Latin school at the Church of St. Elizabeth, where Moibanus was his teacher. He left the city in 1550 to study in Wittenberg. Although he did not get to know Luther, who had died four years earlier, he did make contact with Melanchthon, becoming his student and later making the acquaintance of distinguished, internationally known Reformers in the persons of the French diplomat Hubert Languet and the Polish noble John a Lasco. A journey for additional study took Ursinus to Switzerland and France. Encounters with, among others, Heinrich Bullinger and John Calvin, profoundly influenced both him and his theology.

After returning to Breslau in September 1558 to begin work as a teacher at St. Elizabeth's school, he became embroiled in a quarrel with his colleague Johannes Praetorius concerning the understanding of the Eucharist. Praetorius defended the Lutheran doctrine of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the elements of bread and wine, and thus also of a genuine presence not only of the deity, but also of the humanity of Christ in the Eucharist. This position, of course, implied that what was taking place in the Eucharist was not only a spiritual, but also a corporeally experienced communication of Christ and his redemptive activity. By contrast, Ursinus insisted on the individual's exclusively spiritual participation in faith. His view was that in the Eucharist, the bread and wine should not be identified or confused with the body and blood of Christ. Instead, these external elements of the sacrament themselves were able to mediate something to the believer alone, namely, grace and salvation gained through Christ. In this position — influenced by views in Geneva — he was already moving beyond Melanchthon's doctrine of the Eucharist: that the real presence of the deity and humanity of Christ is *in usu*, i. e. solely in the performance of the Eucharist.



Title page of Ambrosius Moibanus, "Catechismus", Wittenberg, 1535

Zacharias Ursinus: portrait from Zacharias Ursinus, "Het schat-boeck der verklaringen", Amsterdam, 1642

This dispute concerning the Eucharist was one of a whole series of controversies during these decades that arose in many places among Reformation followers. Eventually these differences of opinion led to a division into Lutheranism and Calvinism, as major Protestant denominations. Politically speaking, people living in territories under Habsburg rule became doubly suspect if their doctrine was not merely oriented toward the Reformation as set out in the *Confessio Augustana* of 1530 but perhaps even "Zwinglian" or "Calvinist". And indeed, Ursinus himself was expelled and accepted an appointment in Heidelberg in the Electoral Palatinate in 1561. His Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 remains one of the foundational documents of the Reformation legacy in Europe and the world.

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Further reading

KLAUS GARBER, *Das alte Breslau. Kulturgeschichte einer geistigen Metropole*, Wien u.a.: Böhlau Verlag, 2014

ARNO HERZIG, *Schlesien, Das Land und seine Geschichte in Bildern, Texten und Dokumenten*, Hamburg: Ellert & Richter, 2012

Die Reformation in Breslau, vol. 1: *Ausgewählte Texte, vorgelegt und eingeleitet von Georg Kretschmar*, Ulm: Verlag Unser Weg, 1960

Visiting Wrocław

www.wroclaw-info.pl/start/index/lang/EN

www.luteranie.wroc.pl