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*The Representation of the Kutná Hora Mining
Community (1443–1547)*

A Summary of Doctoral Thesis

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In 1467, the representatives of the miners of Kutná Hora began to resist the authority of the municipal council and forcefully demanded that their corporation be subordinated to the jurisdiction of the supreme mintmaster.¹ The sudden manifestation of disobedience by an association that had hitherto appeared only indistinctly in the sources culminated in 1476 in the conclusion of a mutually acceptable compromise. As a result, the miners' community secured a significant position within the corporatively structured urban society. The transformation of Kutná Hora's power arena at a time of significant upsurge in mining activity invites reflection on political decision-making and the participation of the lower strata of Kutná Hora's society in the exercise of power. The miners themselves generally did not belong to either the wealthy or the influential individuals.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Western European historiography witnessed a renewed interest in conflicts studied from below. Their research soon drew

¹ State District Archives Kutná Hora, Kutná Hora City Archives, book no. 7, fol. 114r.

historians' attention to the unexpectedly high capacity for action demonstrated by ordinary people in the course of unrest.² Gradually, however, scholarly attention shifted from the 'hot' phases of conflict to the (more common) non-violent forms of protest. Alongside this shift, interest increasingly focused on questions related to decision-making processes and the participation of the lower social classes in political practice.³ This interest was further intensified by the outcome of the Brexit referendum. Since then, the extent of participation – even if only informal – in political activity has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Earlier views, which had asserted that the popular classes lacked both political consciousness and a concrete vision of what they themselves sought to achieve, have been refuted. Recent research agrees that popular groups held clear political ideas which they were unafraid to articulate publicly and

² Justine FIRNHABER-BAKER, *An introduction: medieval revolt in a context*, in: Eadem – Dirk Schoenaers (edd.), *The Routledge history handbook of medieval revolt*, London 2017, s. 1–15.

³ Ben EERSELS – Jelle HAEMERS, *Introduction: shaping urban politics from below. Citizen participation in late medieval Europe*, in: B. Eersels – J. Haemers (edd.), *Words and deeds: shaping urban politics from below in late medieval Europe*, Turnhout 2020, s. 7–29.

to promote.⁴ In Czech historiography, however, these impulses have so far met with limited response. The present study therefore seeks to align itself with the above-mentioned current of research.

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The miners' community has so far received only limited attention in the scholarly literature. During the interwar period, Jan Fiala published a positivist study focusing primarily on the (self-)governing mechanisms of the corporation.⁵ His work was followed in the early 1960s by Anita Křepelková,⁶ who approached the community from a Marxist perspective. In her view, it represented a partially *reactionary* institution – an assessment grounded in the socio-economic disparities

⁴ J. HAEMERS – Jesús A. SOLÓRZANO TELECHEA, *Are 'popular groups' powerless? Towards a research agenda*, in: J. Haemers – J. A. Solórzano Telechea – Beatriz Arízaga Bolumburu (edd.), *Los grupos populares en la ciudad medieval Europea*, Logroño 2014, s. 545–554.

⁵ Jan FIALA, *Havířský pořádek v Kutné Hoře*, Kutnohorské příspěvky k dějinám vzdělanosti české 11, 1941, č. 1, s. 1–24.

⁶ Anita KŘEPELKOVÁ, *Havířský pořádek v Kutné Hoře do roku 1547*, in: Lubomír Vaněk (ed.), *Příspěvky k dějinám Kutné Hory 1*, Praha 1960, s. 37–70.

between the membership and the leadership – in which she chiefly appreciated the social benefits it provided, such as assistance in times of need or in cases of injury. Characteristically, Křepelková reduced the functioning of the organisation to a leadership (loyal to the urban elites) and a mass of ordinary members who, in her view, exercised no influence over the corporation's decision-making processes.

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It is symptomatic that Křepelková (like other scholars until quite recently) paid no attention to the political demands of the miners. She confined the political activity, apparently initiated by the association's representatives, to the dispute over the right to appoint the miners' delegates, which took place between the mintmaster and the municipal council. In doing so, she ignored the clear manifestations of political initiative from below, which at that time arose from an ordinary (though numerically exceptional) urban corporation.

The present study is based precisely on these manifestations. Its aim is to explore the representation of

the miners. By this term, I primarily mean an analysis of the creation and dissemination of an artificially constructed self-image through which the association sought to influence ‘public opinion’ in relation to itself.⁷ The purpose, however, is not merely to capture the produced content or the media through which the miners addressed their audience, but to analyse the shifts in the corporation’s position of power within Kutná Hora’s society. The aim of representation was to achieve and improve, or defend and justify one’s own power position.

According to the wording of the relevant source, the miners’ community was restored (!), its roots probably date back to the pre-Hussite era, in 1443 as a routine urban guild. At that time, the representatives of the corporation, being too weak, were compelled to accept a number of conditions that the councillors imposed as prerequisites for granting their consent to the establishment of the institution. The miners’ political

⁷ Milena BARTLOVÁ, *Reprezentace*, in: Tomáš Borovský – Jiří Hanuš – Milan Řepa (edd.), *Kultura jako téma a problém dějepiscectví*, Brno 2006, s. 63–70; Tomáš KNOZ, *Reprezentace a místa paměti*, in: Idem – Jiří Lach – T. Borovský (edd.), *Kultura ve středoevropských dějinách. Rozprava mezi humanitními obory*, Praha 2020, s. 173–194.

communication reveals that by the mid-1460s, the situation looked entirely different. Instead of servile guild representatives, the councillors were now negotiating with self-assured envoys who were demanding a restructuring of the power order.

We thus have at our disposal precisely the kind of sources – in the Czech context largely unique – that make it possible to fulfil the aims of research into political communication as proposed some time ago by Jan Dumolyn.⁸ The Belgian historian maintains that for the analysis of political communication to be meaningful, it must be conducted not only from above, but primarily from below, and in the context of conflicts between ordinary people and the ruling elite in the process of negotiation. Only then, he argues, can it reveal anything about the prevailing ‘political culture’. By examining a decade-long clash between the miners and the municipal councillors the second section of the present study seeks to respond to this call.

⁸ Jan DUMOLYN, *Political communication and political power in the Middle Ages: a conceptual journey*, *Edad media: revista de historia* 13, 2012, s. 33–55.

The third section is dedicated to identifying the forms and media of the miners' communication. The spectrum of media through which the association disseminated its self-image was significantly broader and more diverse than might have been expected. According to prevailing assumptions, the miners were not counted among those corporations that could sustain an exclusive form of public representation. I have therefore sought to document the media employed as thoroughly as possible. Particular emphasis was also placed on assessing the effectiveness of these media in relation to their potential audiences. Finally, I examined whether the shift in the association's position of power was in any way mirrored in the content it conveyed.

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From a methodological point of view, the second section of the text is based on the most comprehensive possible analysis of key acts of communication. The focus is not only on the actors, content and form of these acts, but especially on the space in which they took place. In this respect, the writings of my supervisor were an

important source of inspiration and formed the basis of my methodological approach.⁹

The third section of the dissertation mainly consists of an analysis of symbolic communication. The importance of conveying messages through symbols in a predominantly illiterate medieval society has often been highlighted.¹⁰ The study of symbolic communication therefore has a long tradition, including in Czech scholarship,¹¹ and I was able to build on its findings.

The tool of investigation is thus communication in the broadest sense. This is an extremely loose concept

⁹ Martin ČAPSKÝ, *K postavení Vratislavi v českých korunních zemích v pozdním středověku*, Český časopis historický 115, 2017, č. 2, s. 346–383; TÝŽ, *Rezidence, stolice, rezidenční město. Příspěvek k reprezentaci Nového Města pražského v pozdním středověku*, Mediaevalia historica Bohemica 21, 2018, č. 2, s. 59–89; TÝŽ, „*Na pranýř jej namalovati dali*“. *Politická komunikace v pozdně středověké Jihlavě*, Studia mediaevalia Bohemica 11, 2019, č. 2, s. 213–257.

¹⁰ Jacoba van LEEUWEN, *Introduction*, in: Eadem (ed.), *Symbolic communication in late medieval towns*, Leuven 2006, s. vii–xx.

¹¹ Particular mention should be made of the collective monograph edited by Kateřina HORNÍČKOVÁ, *Faces of community in central European towns. Images, symbols and performances, 1400–1700*, Lanham – Boulder – New York – London 2018. Among other studies, I refer only to Robert ŠIMŮNEK, *Český Krumlov v 15. století. Pozdně středověké město jako jeviště sakrální reprezentace*, in: Martin Gaži (ed.), *Český Krumlov. Od rezidenčního města k památce světového kulturního dědictví*, České Budějovice 2010, s. 475–520.

that is difficult to define precisely in theoretical terms. In this text, it is taken to mean practically any act that has some kind of audience, which receives and interprets it.¹² While this understanding is vague, it is commonly used.

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The analysis of the miners' political communication in the second half of the fifteenth century confirmed the importance of symbolic communication within the urban society of the time. At first, the corporation expressed its dissatisfaction with the current power structure in Kutná Hora through open protest against the town council, and subsequently strove to assert their distinct position in relation to the other associations, to which they still belonged. The miners therefore sought to change the titles used for their community (from *cech* to *pořádek*) and for their leaders (from *cechmistrři* to *starší havěřští*). The councillors agreed to change the name and from then on no longer referred to the corporation as a guild. However, they refused to allow the miners' delegates to

¹² M. ČAPSKÝ a kol., *Reprezentace a praxe sociální kontroly v pozdně středověkých městech*, Dolní Břežany 2023, s. 12.

be appointed by the supreme mintmaster. The leadership of the miners therefore remained under the authority of the town council.

This changed in 1472, when the royal court was staying in the town. At that time, the miners turned directly to the king, who granted them a privilege allowing the renewal of their leadership to take place in the royal mint (the Italian Court) in the presence of the mintmaster. The royal favour was a response to the miners' request, which they justified by referring to their importance for the functioning of the entire mining district. The king's approval meant that the miners were released from the supervision of the town council and placed directly under the authority of the king's representative in the town – the supreme mintmaster. The council rejected this and tried (without success) to prove its right to ultimate authority over the miners.

The miners did indeed achieve what they had been striving for. They distanced themselves from the ordinary guilds and aligned more closely with corporations that fell under the authority of the mintmaster but they did so in a somewhat confrontational, even underhand, way. In

1476, they therefore accepted, if not directly initiated, a peaceful settlement of the conflict. They gave up their ties to the mintmaster, once again accepted subordination to the town council, but secured the right to maintain the specific status of their corporation, which now positioned itself between the two dominant bodies of the mining district.¹³ In doing so, they strengthened their distinction from the guild sphere and strengthened their unique position within Kutná Hora's society.

But the issue extended far beyond titles or the formal renewal of their leadership. The symbolic separation they established was also accompanied by a shift in power. The assertion of their corporation's special status also meant claiming a peculiar power position, and the miners succeeded in gaining broad recognition for this. Through deliberate and sustained pressure, they transformed the political framework of Kutná Hora in accordance with their own intentions and expectations. They achieved this not only through skilful political communication, which played one authority off against another, but also thanks

¹³ State District Archives Kutná Hora, Kutná Hora City Archives, book no. 7, fol. 232av.

to the significant mining boom that underlined their indispensable role in ore extraction.

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The widespread acceptance of the miners' association's importance within Kutná Hora's society is also evident from the significant increase in its visual presence in the urban space.¹⁴ From the 1480s onwards, the number of messages displayed in exclusive locations within the town's topography grew noticeably. The content of these messages, however, did not change in any fundamental way. The miners continued above all to emphasise that the town's prosperity was rooted in their hard work underground. A new element was the explicit depiction of miners extracting ore. Although such a working scene had appeared for the first time on the frontispiece of a liturgical manuscript commissioned by the miners and produced in 1471,¹⁵ this artwork was designed chiefly for the internal life of the community.

¹⁴ The bond between visual presence in the urban landscape and significant social role was justly emphasised by K. HORNÍČKOVÁ, *Introduction*, in: Eadem (ed.), *Faces of community*, s. xii

¹⁵ National Library of the Czech Republic, sign. XXIII A 2, fol. 1r.

Its aim was to help strengthen the collective identity shared by the members of the corporation, not to represent it externally.

The direct depiction of work was not the miners' own invention, as working scenes had already appeared in the decoration of the minters' and coining corporation in the 1460s.¹⁶ The miners, however – unlike the minters – applied this theme across a broad range of media. The most significant location featuring a work-related motif is the main entrance to the church of St Barbara.¹⁷ A simple scene, accompanied by the association's coat of arms and a statue of the church's patron saint above it, gave the corporation the means to express its vision of the miners' contribution to the town's prosperity to the broadest public.

The significance, of the small relief also lay in its inclusion in the overall iconographic scheme of the

¹⁶ Jan DIENSTBIER, *Prostor pro výtvarnou inovaci? Středověké nástěnné malby v městských farních kostelech v českých zemích*, in: Jan Hrdina – Kateřina Jišová (edd.), *Městský farní kostel v českých zemích ve středověku*, Dolní Břežany 2015, s. 313–315.

¹⁷ Michaela OTTOVÁ, *Pod ochranou Krista Spasitele a svaté Barbory. Sochařská výzdoba kostela svaté Barbory v Kutné Hoře (1483–1499)*, České Budějovice 2010, s. 43–60.

decoration, which expressed that it was the town's community that had built the impressive church. By including the miners (and their working scene) in the decoration representing the Kutná Hora community as a whole, the special position granted to the miners and their work within the town's society is made clear. The miners gradually became something of an emblem of the mining community, and their work – seen as the source of the town's wealth and self-confidence – was properly recognised and even sacralised.¹⁸ This also explains why the corporation so frequently chose to communicate this particular motif.

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This, however, was not the only message the association sought to convey. The miners also aimed to draw attention to their piety, which, according to the shared beliefs of the time, was seen as one of the conditions for the abundance of ore underground (the so-called *božské nadělení*). The mining community was the only corporation in the town whose presence was visible

¹⁸ J. DIENSTBIER, *Prostor*, s. 317.

in all the churches in the centre of Kutná Hora. In this way, they demonstrated not only their piety but also their financial possibilities.

The purchase of their house had the same effect. The miners were the only association in the town that kept its own building. Furthermore, it was a large house located in one of the most prestigious areas at the heart of the town. In 1513, the miners bought it from the royal mining official and did not hesitate to pay 400 schokk groschen for it. Through the ownership of this house, the corporation (after 1515) proudly demonstrated its status to the public each year, as the ceremonial appointment of the institution's leadership – which had previously taken place at the Italian Court – was now held there, with the participation of the mintmaster.

Symbolically, an even more significant act was the purchase of an allodial estate, which made the miners the lords over the peasants in the village of Čepí (near Pardubice). By owning the allodial estate, the corporation was once again distinguished from the other associations in the town, except for the minters and coiners. It was a highly prestigious act, as it allowed the miners to

demonstrate their role as fair judges and upholders of order to the inhabitants of Kutná Hora.¹⁹ The corporation acquired Čepí around 1535, by which point mining had already fallen into crisis. The acquisition may therefore also have served as a symbolic message of the institution's financial stability, aimed at convincing investors of the worthiness of further investment in ore extraction.

Another attribute that the miners actively promoted and highlighted was their loyalty. The corporation did not hesitate to display this, even when it found itself in open conflict with the town's elite at the end of the fifteenth century. At that time, the miners stressed that the purpose of their protest was to protect the king's interests. The royal treasury, they claimed (justly), was being robbed by the intrigues of the king's own officials during the purchase of ore – a process through which the miners themselves were also being cheated. The miners asserted that they were simply trying to prevent this. Their actions went as far as an armed strike outside the town walls,

¹⁹ M. ČAPSKÝ, *Příběh polabské vsi. Čepí a jeho obyvatelé do konce 17. století*, Dolní Břežany 2025, v tisku.

which cost ten of their leaders their lives. A martyr cult later formed around these men, and the miners continued to foster it,²⁰ using it not only to show their piety but also to strengthen the identification of new members with the community.

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By the end of the fifteenth century, the transformation of the miners' community into an emblem of Kutná Hora's society was crowned by the granting of the role of shield-bearers to the miners on the town's coat of arms, where no specific shield-bearers had appeared before.²¹ The association's extraordinary standing was also evident in its role during the ceremonial reception of distinguished visitors. The miners – once again as representatives of the only town corporation granted such a privilege – were named alongside the councillors at

²⁰ Martina ŠÁROVCOVÁ, *The execution of the miners of Kutná Hora at Poděbrady and in Křivoklát in 1496. On the veneration of the miners of Poděbrady in the sixteenth century*, in: Zdeněk V. David – David R. Holeton (edd.), *The Bohemian reformation and religious practice*, vol. 10, Praha 2015, s. 266–267.

²¹ Josef NUHLÍČEK, *O pečetích a erbu Kutné Hory*, in: L. Vaněk (ed.), *Příspěvky k dějinám Kutné Hory 1*, Praha 1960, s. 147–202.

these honorary events, while delegates of other groups remained part of the undifferentiated crowd of onlookers. On all such occasions, when the existing social order within the Kutná Hora community was displayed,²² the miners also held a leading position in the hierarchically organised processions, standing directly behind the councillors. It is also remarkable that the work of the miners was routinely demonstrated as part of the official programme for distinguished visitors to the town. It would be hard to find a clearer example of how deeply the work ethic had been internalised by the entire Kutná Hora community. This was expressed not only in the appreciation of the work and in prayers for its protection by the town's patron saints, but also in its use for political and power-related purposes.

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The mining community simply enjoyed a special and highly influential position within Kutná Hora's society.

²² Tomáš BOROVSKEÝ, *Svátky a slavnosti středověkého města*, in: Martin Nodl – František Šmahel (edd.), *Slavnosti, ceremonie a rituály v pozdním středověku*, Praha 2014, s. 371–410.

In my view, the image of weak and exploited poor people that has been handed down over the years – although no doubt justified in many individual cases²³ – needs to be distinguished from the status of the corporation as a whole. Through the corporation, even the most destitute members of the association participated in the prestige of an institution that played a key role in defending a decent standard of living for the lower social classes.²⁴

The corporation also took care to display its leading position in a highly visible way. The media it used for this were remarkably varied and effectively reached all strata of Kutná Hora's society. These social classes, whether they wanted to or not, were forced to perceive the message that the miners' association formed the foundation of the town's prosperity. Without the hard, dangerous, yet highly skilled and worthy work,²⁵ the community could hardly have laid claim to the proud title of 'the jewel of the kingdom'.

²³ A. KŘEPELKOVÁ, *Havířský pořádek*, s. 69–70.

²⁴ J. DUMOLYN, "I thought of it at work, in Ostend": urban artisan labour and guild ideology in the later medieval Low Countries, *International review of social history* 62, 2017, s. 399–403.

²⁵ Catharina LIS – Hugo SOLY, *Worthy efforts: attitudes to work and workers in pre-industrial Europe*, Leiden – Boston 2012, s. 408.

List of published results related to the topic of the dissertation:

- *Profesní společenství kutnohorských havířů: cech, nebo pořádek?*, *Studia mediaevalia Bohemica* 10, 2018, č. 2, s. 241–253.
- *Povstání kutnohorských havířů v letech 1494–1496*, in: M. Čapský a kol., *Reprezentace a praxe sociální kontroly v pozdně středověkých městech*, Dolní Břežany 2023, s. 302–326.
- *Reprezentace kutnohorského havířského pořádku*, *Mediaevalia historica Bohemica* 25, 2024, č. 1, s. 77–102.