

*The German People
and the Reformation*

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Münster and the Anabaptists

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The interest of historians has often focused on the dramatic events of the early Reformation: Luther, the Peasants' War, the Anabaptist movement, and the Religious Peace of Augsburg. From there, one jumps eagerly to the denouement of the Thirty Years' War. The intervening years, between 1555 and 1618, however, were a crucial period during which the confessional identities of the German territories, the origins of the later conflict, and the character of early modern German society were formed. In his book Society and Religion in Münster, 1535-1618 (1984) R. Po-chia Hsia, an associate professor of history at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, analyzes in detail the interplay between the social, political, and religious forces in the Westphalian metropole between the demise of the Anabaptist kingdom and the beginning of the Thirty Years' War. The following article is an examination of an earlier period in Münster's history. The story of the Anabaptist kingdom is well known, but the article represents an attempt to understand the millenarian revolution within the context of guild ideology, civic conflict, and family history. Hsia is also the author of The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany (1988).

The sixteen-month-long Anabaptist kingdom of Münster, with its millenarian fervor, polygamy, and communalism, was certainly the most dramatic event in the Reformation, and its siege and destruction probably the bloodiest. Although the story itself is well known and the historical literature is immense, the Anabaptist revolution resulted in the systematic destruction of city records, and so the story of the rise and fall of the "New Jerusalem" has been narrated only by its enemies. Historical reconstructions of the movement have also had to rely mostly on hostile sources.¹ The remarkable course of the Reformation in the Westphalian

¹There is an immense literature on the Münster Anabaptist kingdom. For a Marxist interpretation, see Gerhard Brendler, *Das Täuferreich zu Münster, 1534-35* (Berlin, 1966); for a meticulous archival reconstruction of the social composition of the Anabaptist community, see Karl-Heinz Kirchhoff, *Die Täufer in Münster, 1534-35: Untersuchungen zum Umfang und zur Sozialstruktur der Bewegung* (Münster, 1973). Heinz Schilling sees the revolution as an urban conflict between the traditional patriciate and a new group of civic leaders; see his "Aufstandsbewegungen in der Stadtbürgerlichen Gesellschaft des Alten Reiches: Die Vorgeschichte des Münsteraner Täuferreichs, 1525-1534," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft, Bauernkrieg-Beihft* (1975):193-238. For the impact of Münster on Germany, see Robert Stupperich, "Das Münsterische Täuferium im Blickfeld des Reichs," *Westfalen: Hefte für Geschichte, Kunst, und Volkskunde* 58 (1980):109-16; Günther Vogler, "Das Täuferreich zu Münster im Spiegel der Flugschriften," in Hans-Joachim Köhler, ed., *Flugschriften als Massenmedium der Reformationszeit* (Stuttgart, 1981), pp. 31-48, and "Das Täuferreich zu Münster als Problem der Politik im Reich: Beobachtungen anhand rechtsständischer Korrespondenzen der Jahre 1534-35," in *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 42 (1985):7-24. For a short English overview of the major events and an analysis of the millenarianism of the Anabaptists based essentially on the tracts of Bernhard Rothmann, see James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, Kan., 1972). For the impact of Münster on the Anabaptist movements in central and south Germany, see Claus-Peter Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History, 1525-1618* (Ithaca, 1972). There are two major contemporary sources on the Anabaptist kingdom: an account written by the shoemaker

metropole has been variously interpreted as a revolution of the common man, an antipatrician urban insurrection, a sectarian revolution,² a reign of terror,³ a millenarian psychodrama,⁴ and an episode in collective religious fanaticism.⁵ Even after 450 years of polemics and scholarship, however, we still do not fully comprehend the social complexity and the multiplicity of meaning of the Anabaptist kingdom, nor, as it seems, have historians uncovered all the sources that relate to the revolution.⁶ In this essay I offer tentative interpretations on three themes that have not received sufficient attention in the analysis of the Münster Anabaptist movement: women and the Anabaptist movement, kinship and religious revolution, and guild ideology and millenarian communalism. First, however, I will briefly summarize the sequence of events.

In the wake of the Peasants' War of 1525, unrest spread to the north German cities, fusing the late medieval social and constitutional struggles in the cities with the new anticlerical movement. Urban insurrections spread from Frankfurt northward to Cologne, Münster, and Osnabrück but were suppressed after the defeat of the common man in the spring and summer of 1525. Voices raised in Münster against the economic privileges of the clergy were silenced in 1525, but the Evangelical movement found its leader six years later in the person of a fiery young priest, Bernhard Rothmann.

Heinrich Gresbeck, who betrayed the city to the besieging troops, and the historical work of the Münster schoolmaster Hermann von Kerssenbroch. For Gresbeck's personal account, see *Berichte der Augenzeugen über das Münsterische Wiedertäuferreich* (Münster, 1853), pp. 3–214. For Kerssenbroch, see Hermann von Kerssenbroch, *Anabaptistici Furoris Monasterium incitum Westphaliae Metropolitim evertentis historica narratio*, ed. Heinrich Detmer, 2 vols. (Münster, 1899–1900). The most recent survey of the historiographical debate over the Münster Anabaptists is James M. Stayer, "Was Dr. Kuebler's Conception of Early Dutch Anabaptism Historically Sound? The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Münster 450 Years Later," *Menonite Quarterly Review* 60 (1986):261–88.

²See Othelin Rammstedt, *Sekte und soziale Bewegung: Soziologische Analyse der Täufer in Münster* (1534–35) (Cologne, 1966). This study applies Max Weber's concepts of "church/sect" distinction and "routinization of charisma" rather mechanically to the archival analysis of Kirchhoff.

³Eike Wolgast, "Herrschaftsorganisation und Herrschaftskrisen im Täuferreich von Münster, 1534–35," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 67 (1976):179–201.

⁴Hedda J. Herwig, "Das Münsterische Täuferium: Prototypische Charakteristika und Ursachen einer politischen Erlösungsbewegung, dargestellt am historischen Beispiel," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 31 (1979):173–84.

⁵Robert Stupperich, "Das Königreich Zion in Münster (1534–35): Fragen zur Täuferherrschaft in einer belagerten Stadt," in Wilhelm Bitter, ed., *Massenwahn in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Stuttgart, 1965).

⁶Robert Stupperich has recently discovered two autographs by Bernd Knipperdolling, second in command to Jan of Leiden in the Anabaptist kingdom, in the Staatsarchiv Marburg. See Robert Stupperich, "Zwei bisher unveröffentlichte eigenhändige Briefe Berndt Knipperdollyncks," *Jahrbuch für Westfälische Kirchengeschichte* 77 (1984):41–58.

Appointed to a vicarship in 1531, Rothmann won rapid fame and widespread civic support by his biting sermons against clerical abuses. In its structure the Evangelical movement in Münster resembled that in many other German cities: a popular preacher echoed Luther's message and called for reform, attacking monasticism and clerical abuses; citizens rallied to his cause, adding their resentment of the church's economic competition to the call for moral regeneration; spontaneous sacramental and liturgical innovations were tolerated by the magistrates, who disagreed regarding their responses; the reform movement became part of the struggle between burghers and magistrates, which often took the form of opposition between the guilds and the city council, and a final, usually bloodless constitutional reform incorporated many of the demands of the Evangelicals while averting a social revolution; cloisters were closed, clerics took civic oaths, ecclesiastical properties were secularized, and reforms institutionalized in a new Evangelical church ordinance; finally, the magistrates came out with more authority, a few ruling families lost power, but the social order was preserved.⁷

The events in Münster from 1531 to the spring of 1533 followed roughly this model of urban reformation. Rothmann appealed to the city council to take up the cause of religious reform, and the Evangelical movement turned into a popular political movement when the guilds pressured the city council to protect Rothmann against the prince-bishop. A public debate in the summer of 1532 pitted Rothmann against the Franciscans; the momentum of reform culminated in the mustering of the civic militia, which captured the Catholic patrician magistrates and cathedral canons in a surprise attack on nearby Telgte, one of the sites of the *Landtag*, on Christmas Day 1532. Elections in February 1533 returned a solidly Evangelical city council, with the guild elite replacing the Catholic patriciate, who had evacuated the city, and an Evangelical ordinance was promulgated in April to consolidate the gains of the Reformation.

In the summer of 1533 the alliance of reformers and magistrates fell apart. Persuaded by the teachings of wandering preachers who believed in a symbolic understanding of the Eucharist, Rothmann, now superintendent of the new church, parted company with the Lutheran magistrates. The city council, under the leadership of its syndic, Dr. Johann van de Wyck, saw developments in Münster as part of the larger picture of religion and politics in the empire: as one of the Evangelical cities,

⁷See, for example, Thomas A. Brady, *Ruling Class, Regime, and Reformation at Strasbourg, 1520–1555* (Leiden, 1978); Hans-Christoph Rublack, *Eine bürgerliche Reformation: Nördlingen* (Gütersloh, 1982), and *Die Einführung der Reformation in Konstanz von den Anfängen bis zum Abschluss 1531* (Gütersloh, 1971); and Günther Vogler, *Nürnberg, 1524–25: Studien zur Geschichte der reformatorischen Bewegung in der Reichsstadt* (Berlin, 1982).

Münster needed to protect its newly won full autonomy from the prince-bishop and to ally itself with the other Protestant princes and cities in the Schmalkaldic League. After the promulgation of the Evangelical church ordinance, the reformation movement was over, and the duty of the new ministers was to inculcate the new religious teachings and obedience of magisterial authority and to preach civic morality and harmony. Rothmann's sacramentarian ideas smacked of Zwinglianism; there was too much of the common man, too much "turning Swiss" for the magistrates to stomach. For many authorities after the Peasants' War of 1525, "turning Swiss" meant assuming the antifeudal and antinoble aspirations of the common people of the Alpine Highlands. It symbolized disobedience and rebellion, and Zwinglianism was, at least in the eyes of many magistrates and princes, the religious-political ideology of commoners.⁸ The split became public in August 1533 when Rothmann and the "radical" preachers confronted the Evangelical ministers and the council in a disputation. Political divisions followed the pattern of the theological split. The "common men," represented most visibly by the craftsmen organized in the *Gesamtgilde*,⁹ faithfully supported Rothmann and forced a confrontation with the council when the magistrates attempted to exile the popular preacher and church superintendent. In the autumn and winter of 1533-1534, the influx of Anabaptists, primarily from the Netherlands, to the godly city more than compensated for the voluntary exile of alarmed Catholic ruling families. In the elections of February 1534, the radical party won handily, with most of the Evangelical magistrates of 1533 reelected and the few who continued to oppose the turn of events voted out of office.

The elections took place in an atmosphere of imminent civil war. The prince-bishop, Franz von Waldeck, had actually called up his feudal levies to attempt to crush rebellion and heresy. Thus one of the very first acts of the new regime was the enforcement of rebaptism on all inhabitants and the exile of dissidents. In the New Jerusalem under siege, the regime was an unstable mixture of traditional civic government and informal prophetic leadership. The former comprised artisans of the *Gesamtgilde*, who had supported Rothmann and the Evangelical movement from the beginning, substantial burghers, and native Münsteraners; the latter were

immigrant Netherlanders, the prophet Jan Matthys and his disciple Jan Bockelszoon of Leiden. Alongside the traditional city council, headed by the patrician Bürgermeister Hermann Tilbeck and the shopkeeper Bürgermeister Bernd Knipperdolling, the Dutch prophets exercised their personal charismatic and extrainstitutional power over the believers. Their influence rested partly on the massive migration of Anabaptists from many parts of northwest Germany and from the Netherlands to Münster, people for whom the political traditions of the Westphalian metropole meant little in comparison with their vision of a heavenly city, but the remaking of Münster into the New Jerusalem also depended on cooperation between the old civic elite and the new religious leadership.

The turning point came after the death of Matthys during the first days of the siege. His disciple, Jan of Leiden, assumed the prophetic mantle and organized a successful repulsion of the first major attempt by the episcopal troops to storm the city. The first step toward the dissolution of the dual civic-religious power structure was the institution of a community of goods. Acting according to the historical example of the earliest Christian communities recorded in the Acts of the Apostles and responding to the real need to house, clothe, and feed the many immigrants, the leadership abolished private property in the city of the saints; outlawed the use of money inside Münster; confiscated ecclesiastical properties and the possessions of burghers who had fled the city; and appointed twelve elders who were to supervise the stockpiling of surplus food, clothing, and wealth in communal stores and to oversee their distribution to the needy. Native Münsteraners took on many of the new positions of power, all modeled after the institutions of the ancient Israelites. The authority of the city council was effectively bypassed when Bürgermeister Knipperdolling became the swordbearer of the new prophet Jan of Leiden.

Since the community of goods was rooted in a deep civic sense of communal solidarity and represented, moreover, a siege economy, it was accepted without perceptible opposition. The next policy of the Anabaptist regime, however, brought to the fore the tensions within the community. It provoked a bloody uprising and effectively eliminated all vestiges of traditional civic society in Münster.

The introduction of polygamy must be understood in terms both of the ambitions of one man and of the larger demographic picture. When Jan of Leiden first arrived in Münster, he married a daughter of Bürgermeister Knipperdolling. After the death of Matthys, Leiden wanted to marry the prophet's beautiful young widow in order to bolster his own claim to prophetic leadership. Eventually he found biblical justification in the Old Testament and succeeded in persuading Knipperdolling and the civic elite to take more than one wife. For the Anabaptist leadership, polygamy also

⁸See Thomas A. Brady, *Turning Swiss: Cities and Empire, 1450-1550* (Cambridge, 1985).

⁹The *Gesamtgilde* was the union of seventeen independent craft guilds. It represented the corporate political strength of the artisans and defended their interests versus the city council. Officers of the *Gesamtgilde* were chosen by the masters of the member guilds; together, the *Olderlude* and *Mesterlude* formed a sort of shadow city council and were guaranteed certain positions in the city government. See Robert Krumboltz, *Die Gewerbe der Stadt Münster bis zum Jahre 1661*, (Leipzig, 1898), Section 1, chap. 4.

served as a means by which the many single women in the city could be subjugated to male authority. The decree that all women must find husbands to protect and rule over them, however, met with fierce opposition from many native Münsterans. Led by the blacksmith Heinrich Mol-lenhecke, they denounced the tyranny and false prophecy of the Dutchmen, clamored for the restoration of traditional civic ways, and devised a plan to turn the city over to the bishop. The Anabaptist elite, however, stood firm, and the uprising was crushed mercilessly; two hundred men were killed in battle or were subsequently executed. Opposition from the women to polygamy was also fiercely repressed; the former beguinaage of Rosenthal became a prison for women who defied spousal authority.

With the successful implementation of polygamy and the defeat of internal dissent, Jan of Leiden acquired sufficient power to proclaim himself king, justifying his royal pretensions by claiming divine revelation. His kingship was to be a restoration of the holy kingship of David; his mission was to eradicate the godless, to establish the kingdom of God on earth, and to pave the way for the return of Christ. Having set up his court, Leiden had lavish costumes cut and gold coins struck; the pomp and circumstance of the eschatological king were to reflect the glory of Christ.

While this theater of power and vanity was being played out in Münster, the military situation was becoming desperate. In the winter of 1534, the imperial estates of Westphalia and the Lower Rhine joined hands to fight the Anabaptists. Catholic as well as Lutheran princes closed ranks against this grandiose rebellion of the common man: the archbishop of Cologne, the duke of Cleve, and the landgrave of Hesse all pledged financial assistance, and Bishop Franz was able to raise enough troops to blockade Münster, effectively cutting off provisions.

Leiden sent out apostles to seek help from Anabaptist communities in northwest Germany and the Netherlands. Many of them were caught and killed by the besiegers, but others made their way through the lines. During the winter months of 1534-1535, the Anabaptists in Wesel, Amsterdam, Friesland, and other towns and territories made preparations to send munitions, food, and reinforcements to their brethren in Münster. The promised deliverance never came, however, because the bishop of Münster quickly and ruthlessly suppressed these preparations within Westphalia, and Habsburg authorities quickly crushed concurrent Anabaptist uprisings in the Netherlands.¹⁰ In Münster itself, famine took a

¹⁰For the Anabaptist movement in the Netherlands, which had close theological and personal ties with the Münster kingdom, see Albert F. Mellink, *De wederdopers in de noordelijke nederlanden, 1534-1544* (Leeuwarden, 1981), and *Amsterdam en de wederdopers in de zestiende eeuw* (Nijmegen, 1978). For published archival sources on the suppression of the Dutch Anabaptist uprisings, see *Documenta Anabaptistica Neerlandica. I: Friesland en Groningen (1530-1550)*, ed. Albert F. Mellink (Leiden, 1975).

heavy toll among the women and children; by the spring of 1535, some had begun to desert the city. In spite of the hardship, the faith of the majority remained firm, and the writings of Rothmann consoled the Anabaptists with the vision of a final reckoning, when the wrath of God would wreak vengeance upon the godless. In the end, Münster's fall was due not to hunger or cowardice but to betrayal by a mercenary who opened the city gates to the besieging troops. In the night of 24 June 1535, the city was taken after intense street fighting and great slaughter. Leiden and his lieutenant, Knipperdolling, were captured, tortured, and executed. After eighteen months of siege warfare and great loss of life, the Münster kingdom was finally destroyed, but the spectacle of the Anabaptists was to become a moral and political example for the succeeding centuries.

I

Estimates of the Anabaptist population differ, but they range between eight and ten thousand; some fifteen hundred to two thousand were able-bodied men, and most of the rest were women.¹¹ What accounts for the preponderance of women in the godly city? Some historians argue that Anabaptism, and the Radical Reformation in general, found more sympathy among women because of the greater independence that some of the sects allowed for female religious leadership.¹² Other historians have argued that the Reformation in general was welcomed by women and that it resulted in the creation of improved gender roles for the oppressed sex.¹³ There is, in fact, some evidence that women in Münster took an active part in the Evangelical movement. The chronicle of Überwasser Convent recorded in 1533 that many of the sisters had been seduced by evil teachings and agitated for permission to leave the cloister; others defied authority and returned to their families or got married.¹⁴ The Anabaptists who paraded about the streets of Münster crying for repentance included many women.¹⁵ We have the names of a few women whose zeal

¹¹See Gresbeck, *Berichte der Augenzeugen*, p. 107.

¹²George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia, 1962), pp. 505-17; the position of women in the Münster Anabaptist kingdom has received almost no attention, the only exception being one article: A. J. Jelsma, "De koening en de Vrouwen, Münster 1534-1535," *Gerformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift* 75 (1975):82-107.

¹³See Steven E. Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983). Along a different line, Thomas Max Safley has demonstrated that women had the right to divorce in reformed territories; see his *Let No Man Put Asunder: The Control of Marriage in the German Southwest: A Comparative Study, 1550-1600* (Kirkville, Mo., 1984).

¹⁴See "Klosterchronik Überwasser während der Wirren, 1531-33," ed. Rudolf Schulze, in *Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte der Stadt Münster*, vol. 2 (Münster, 1924-26), pp. 149-65.

¹⁵Jelsma, "De koening," p. 103.

in supporting the religious convictions of their husbands was prominent enough to merit notation by hostile Catholic writers.¹⁶ Still other women apparently chose the new faith over the objection of their spouses and remained in the city when their husbands fled. The most dramatic example was Hilla Feicken, who imitated the example of Judith in the Old Testament and attempted to assassinate Bishop Franz in the camp of the besieging army.¹⁷ At least in the early stages of the Anabaptist movement in Münster, women enjoyed greater freedom: they could divorce their unbelieving husbands and enter into new marriages.

To focus our attention only on the relationship between women and the Anabaptist movement, however, is to ignore the entire spectrum of the very different experiences of men and women during the Reformation. In the case of Münster, there is scattered evidence that many women were violently opposed to the reform. Not only did an older generation of nuns resist first the reform and later the Anabaptist takeover, but also laywomen, probably members of parish confraternities, clung to their religion with vehemence. The Franciscans of St. Catherine had many female supporters who defended their beloved cult with violence, as a later Franciscan chronicle notes in praise, and according to the same source many women accepted rebaptism under duress but secretly remained steadfast to their faith.¹⁸ It seems reasonable to assume that the common people, women and men alike, were for the most part too preoccupied with the toils of daily life to be able to devote very much time and energy to the religious movements. Many women and men were overtaken by the onrush of events; they did not bequeath records of their thoughts and reactions. Active female supporters and opponents of the Anabaptist movement probably constituted a minority of all women in Münster. The preponderance of women among Anabaptists in Münster can be explained by the conjunction of two factors. First, fearing for their safety, many men left Münster, leaving their wives behind to look after the family property. Women generally were not targets of political repression, and many Münsterans thought that the Anabaptist episode was but a short interlude during which the men could ride out the storm in the haven of the neighboring towns while their womenfolk remained behind,

safeguarding the family possessions. A second factor was the demographic structure of Münster, which resembled all premodern cities in that women usually outnumbered men because of higher death rates among males. Moreover, single working women—spinners, widows, and young servant girls—constituted a distinctive segment of the urban population, one which formed the lowest stratum of urban society. They were often recipients of public charity, dwellers in sheds, and paid the least taxes. They were the ones who could not flee Münster even if they had wanted to and became, by default, Anabaptists when rebaptism was declared obligatory for all inhabitants in February 1534.

Seen in this context, the introduction of polygamy in July 1534 takes on a new significance. The ostensible reason given by Jan of Leiden and the Anabaptist elite was the emulation of the patriarchal age of the Old Testament; theologically, the saints must heed the call "to be fruitful and multiply" and to fill the earth with the eschatological number of 144,000.¹⁹ The practical concern was, however, to ensure political control over the majority of the population, whose religious-political loyalties were manifest only in a minority of cases. For the women of Münster, the initial promise of the Anabaptist movement quickly turned into the reality of subjugation. Religious ecstasy and prophecy could challenge the hierarchy of Anabaptist rule, and women visionaries were forbidden to communicate their messages. Furthermore, Anabaptist women were denied direct access to salvation and sanctity. They were to their husbands as their husbands were to Christ; the salvific path for women was a tortuous one through a double intermediacy of men and Christ.²⁰ It is not surprising that the introduction of polygamy provoked the active resistance of some women, who were either incarcerated in the women's prison or, in a few outstanding cases of female defiance of male authority, executed, as was the fate of one of Jan of Leiden's many wives.²¹

The women of Münster enjoyed a relatively high degree of rights and freedom before the Anabaptist regime: although they were excluded from political office and from some of the guilds, wills and other notarial papers testified to their right to own real property, retain their dowry, practice many handicrafts, act as business partners with husbands, make their own wills, represent themselves in court, keep their patrilineal names in legal documents, and by and large choose their own mates and lovers. In the Catholicism of the Rhineland, Westphalia, and the Low Countries,

¹⁶A 1532 "list of Lutherans" compiled by their opponents in Münster named eighty individuals, including three women. See Kirchhoff, *Die Täufer*, pp. 17–18.

¹⁷Kerssenbroch, *Narratio*, pp. 605–6. For her confession after capture, see Josef Niesert, ed., *Münsterische Urkundensammlung. I: Urkunden zur Geschichte der münsterischen Wiedertäufer* (Coesfeld, 1826), p. 40.

¹⁸Stadtharchiv Münster Miss. 4, "Chronik des Minoritenklosters zu Münster," p. 19. The chronicle was compiled in the mid-eighteenth century by the cloister archivist, brother August Westmark, and was based on documents that are no longer extant.

¹⁹See Bernhard Rothmann's treatise "Restitution rechter christlicher Lehre," chaps. 14–16, in Robert Stupperich, ed., *Die Schriften Bernhard Rothmanns* (Münster, 1970), pp. 258–66.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 269.

²¹Kerssenbroch, *Narratio*, pp. 688–89.

beguines assumed a crucial role in providing an institutional outlet for the pietistic expression of laywomen who did not have either the wealth or the inclination to enter into a religious life in a noble cloister. In pre-Reformation Münster there were four beguines, and the sisters enjoyed a high degree of civic esteem as being economically and spiritually independent.²² In spite of the initial excitement and promises of the Evangelical and Anabaptist movements, the Reformation in Münster represented an attempt to subjugate women by restricting their social and religious roles, by transforming them, ultimately, into obedient (and protected) wives and daughters of a polygamous, patriarchal, and sacred tribe.

II

Enemies of the Anabaptist kingdom ascribed the worst motives to the introduction of polygamy; it was supposedly an excuse to satisfy the lust of the seditious heretics.²³ What they failed to grasp was the meaning of polygamy in creating a fictive tribe, a chosen people, the "New Israel," a holy nation for a sacred city. It was the means by which the new social order was literally to be created, a theocratic ideology endowing a fictive ethnicity with the power of blood and sanctity. Unlike the family, the godly people as a tribe was comprehensive, not exclusive; communal, not private; sacred, not profane; eternal, not ephemeral; harmonious, not divisive; spiritual, not material. In the months before the Anabaptist regime, Münsterers noticed how the Anabaptists would greet one another only as brother and sister, exchanging the kiss of peace and ignoring the other citizens on the streets. The fictive sacred kinship of the saints was comprehensive in the strictest endogenous sense because intercourse with the "impure" members of society was prohibited. When the Anabaptists transformed Münster into the New Jerusalem, they extended this idea of a sacred endogamy to the understanding of urban space. Boundaries between parishes and districts no longer existed, nor were distinctions between sacred and secular and between public space and private recognized. Food, clothing, wealth, and living space were to be shared by all; the Anabaptist elite ordered all doors to be kept open to signify the abolition of private, familial, and exclusive space.²⁴ The city, the houses, and the

community were all sacred bodies within which corporeal distinctions were abolished, whereas the exogenous boundaries were reinforced to protect the pure from contamination. This sense of a sacred kinship as well as the contingencies of siege warfare prompted the Anabaptist leaders to prohibit all trade and contact between the saints and the outside world.²⁵

In stark contrast, the structure of family life in pre-Anabaptist Münster showed that the boundaries between public and private spheres, urban and family space, and sacred and secular interests overlapped in a complex and intricate matrix, as is evident from an examination of the family structure of the ruling elite before the Reformation.²⁶ It has been astutely observed that the family was the basis of social power in medieval German cities.²⁷ The more relatives and friends (in premodern German usage, the term often denoted kinship) one had, the more physical and social security one enjoyed, and the family of the urban upper classes in late medieval and early modern Germany resembled a network of power alliances that linked the patrician and mercantile elites of many cities. In Münster the families of the patriciate (called *Erbmänner*), the rentier, and the mercantile and guild elites were institutions that inherited, accumulated, and bequeathed wealth, cemented marriage alliances with others like themselves, and exercised political power by providing civic and corporate offices with successive generations of males. In addition to being a kinship group organized around sizable property holding, the upper-class families impressed the city with their private space by building the most sumptuous townhouses, by purchasing family pews and burial lots in parish churches, by endowing chantry mass for the salvation of the lineage, and by memorializing themselves in the many artistic works commissioned for pious donations. The socioeconomic space of upper-class families was not confined to the city but extended into the countryside, where patricians and the leading burgher families held feudal fiefs, owned allodial estates, and imagined themselves lords of their manors. There, too, the guild and mercantile elites invested their family wealth in farmlands and pastures.

In the complexity of upper-class family structure we find reflected the multifarious social and spiritual character of pre-Reformation Catholicism: kinship and salvation were linked in a curious mixture of sublimity and crass self-interest, piety and greed, equality and hierarchy. Precisely

²⁵Kerssenbroch, *Narratio*, p. 561.

²⁶See Hsia, *Society and Religion*, pp. 16-23, for an analysis of the family structure of the restored Catholic ruling elite after 1535.

²⁷See Erich Maschke, *Die Familie in der deutschen Stadt des späten Mittelalters* (Heidelberg, 1980).

²²For the beguines in pre-Anabaptist Münster, see Karl Zahorn, "Die Beginnen in Münster," *Westfälische Zeitschrift* 91 (1935):1-149; for the beguines after 1535, see R. Po-chia Hsia, *Society and Religion in Münster, 1535-1618* (New Haven, 1984), pp. 36-37, 40-41.

²³Kerssenbroch, *Narratio*, p. 619.

²⁴See Gresbeck, *Berichte der Augenzeugen*, p. 47.

because upper-class families were often marriage alliances of power, the status of women was better protected. The spouses often acted as partners who had the luxury to grow in love and mutual respect in the common management of family wealth, the direction of domestic servants, and the rearing of children. On the other hand, upper-class family life of course also provided numerous causes for disputes engendered by disagreements over inheritance, which pitted siblings against one another, patrilineal relatives against matrilineal relatives, and children against mothers and stepmothers. The crucial point nonetheless remains clear: the upper-class urban family was a powerful institution of kinship and wealth with the strength to resist change. Except for one patrician family, none of the families that constituted the ruling class in Münster, dominating the city council and the leadership of the *Gesamtgilde*, went over to Anabaptism. The Catholic church gave these families the means to unite kinship solidarity and salvation. To Borchard Heerde, a wealthy merchant who belonged to the ruling elite, the lessons of heresy taught that steadfastness to the true religion (Catholicism) and family prosperity went hand in hand.²⁸ For these families, corporate unity was the real blood tie that connected specific people to wealth and the bond between past, present, and future generations that created the corporate perpetuity of the ruling class.

As the above discussion of models of kinship and salvation makes apparent, family structures in Münster had a class specificity that expressed itself in terms of its ability to respond to changes and its predilection for certain forms of religiosity. We have seen how the upper classes were successful in resisting the Evangelical and Anabaptist challenges by maintaining family solidarity. Who were the Münsterans who found the Anabaptist idea of a fictive sacred kinship compatible with their own understanding of society? In reconstructing the Anabaptist community from records of confiscated Anabaptist houses, Karl-Heinz Kirchhoff has shown conclusively that the saints were recruited heavily from the ranks of the handicraft guilds. They were house owners, taxpayers, solid burghers, and heads of families. Since Kirchhoff's sources are records of the confiscation of the real properties of burghers implicated in the Anabaptist regime, two other groups are automatically excluded: the poor and the immigrants.

From extant documents it is impossible to reconstruct the extent of participation by the unpropertied lower classes in the Anabaptist movement. In the lists of known Anabaptists, however, men employed in a low-status occupation—construction work, gravedigging, milling, weaving, street cleaning—hardly ever appear. Single women who belonged to

the lower strata of urban society, as I have argued above, probably represented the poor in the Anabaptist kingdom. In any event, whereas the middle strata of urban society were overrepresented in the millenarian movement and provided the overwhelming majority of the regime's leadership, there is no evidence to indicate any active lower-class support of the Anabaptist revolution.²⁹

There are only scraps of information about the immigrant Anabaptists. Those who came from the Westphalian towns and villages seem to have arrived in family groups. Catholics charged that entire communities in the Münsterland turned Anabaptist.³⁰ Sources on the Dutch Anabaptists who wanted to move to the heavenly city are much more abundant. Entire communities were affected by the preachings of the Anabaptist prophets and apostles; the Hapsburg authorities in Holland found hundreds of men, women, and children—whole families—waiting for transportation to take them to the promised sanctuary.³¹ Underlying the self-concept of the Anabaptists as a holy people were the collective emotions of communal solidarity. The common theme that ran through the Evangelical and Anabaptist movements was the assertion of Christian communalism, or literally, the "common weal" (*Gemeinnutz*) over selfishness (*Eigennutz*). By communalism, sixteenth-century Christians meant concern for the welfare of some larger social corporation above the family, whether the confraternity, the neighborhood, the village, the parish, the guild, the city, or all of Christendom. Selfishness meant not only the greed of an individual but also that of a family, a craft, or a corporation that pursued its interest to the detriment of the good of the whole. Thus a grain merchant who inflated prices in times of famine was just as selfish as a guild that practiced its craft to the disadvantage of a civic community or a group of powerful families that exchanged private wealth and kinship solidarity for salvific credit. The domination of the Catholic church by the feudal nobility, the preponderance of patricians and rentiers on the city council, and the control of the *Gesamtgilde* by a small group of guild families could all be interpreted as manifestations of *Eigennutz*; for the urban ruling classes, the family bred power, confusing the boundaries between private and public in the marriage of kinship and salvation. The Anabaptist revolution attempted to restore the sense of a Christian community and, by imposing the ideology of a fictive sacred kinship, hoped to do away with the inherent tensions between private and public, family and civic society. The ideology of a sacred tribe aimed to compensate for the absence of real

²⁹Kirchhoff, *Die Täufer*, pp. 78–88.

³⁰Kerssenbroch, *Narratio*, pp. 508–11.

³¹Mellink, *Amsterdam en de wederdopers*, pp. 30ff.

blood ties in the fictive kinship community and to create an ideal nation from diverse social elements, just as the Israelites created their sacred nation out of many peoples. Although the Old Testament furnished the Anabaptists with the historical precedent, the theological arguments, and the social images for their creation of a Christian community—the language, one may say—the social and political ideology of the guild community in Münster formed the underlying grammar for the text of the millenarian drama.

III

In binding individuals and families that practiced the same craft, the urban mercantile and handicraft guilds harked back to Germanic, pre-Christian forms of fictive kinship associations. Guilds arose after the eleventh century with the rapid spread of urbanization in the Holy Roman Empire, when first merchants and then artisans banded together in sworn associations for common defense and the promotion of mutual interests. Guild rules, rituals, communal feastings, common religious practices, and intermarriage solidified the bonds of occupational interests, and members of a particular guild would often inhabit a specific street or neighborhood in the medieval city.³²

In many ways the guilds in Münster resembled other forms of associations in early sixteenth-century Westphalia: the parish confraternities that banded laymen and laywomen in a collective struggle for salvation and the many neighborhood associations (*Nachbarschaften*) found in the small towns and villages of the Münsterland. The other associations that promoted social solidarity, however, lacked the elaborate corporate ideology and political power that the guilds had developed by the later Middle Ages. The history of cities in late medieval Germany abounds with examples of guild revolts as merchants and artisans demanded a share of the power held by the patrician régimes. Guildsmen formed civic militias, overthrew old régimes, battled feudal armies, and shaped the face of urban society between the late fourteenth and early sixteenth centuries.³³ The Münster guilds played a pivotal role in the war of the Münster bishopric (1450–57), which gave the Gesamtgilde a share of power on the city council for the first time. The Evangelical and Anabaptist movements were supported primarily by the artisans; after the Catholic restoration in

June 1535, the prince-bishop abolished all guilds, condemning the Gesamtgilde as the instigator of heresy and rebellion. Only with the full restoration of civic liberties in 1554 were the individual guilds and the Gesamtgilde allowed to reconstitute themselves. In his *History of the Anabaptist Fury*, Kerssenbroch boldly asserted that the guildsmen were to be blamed for the debacle of 1534–1535; a libel suit followed immediately, and the hapless schoolmaster of the Gymnasium saw his manuscript confiscated by the city council and its publication prohibited.

How did guild ideology and practices engender widespread artisanal support for the religious movements? First, the Catholic church represented a powerful economic competitor: the cloisters manufactured their own products, the clergy were exempted from guard duty and taxation, and the domination of the church by arrogant feudal noble families was all too apparent. Beyond economic anticlericalism and implicit class antagonism, however, the guilds had developed a socioreligious ideology of their own, which posited an ideal of Christian communalism against the corruption of the Catholic church by selfish familial interests. This ideology of Christian communalism can be described as a sacred corporatism, and it was enshrined in the statutes of the Gesamtgilde and in the practices of the guilds.

In Article 43 of the Redbook, which contained the statutes of the Gesamtgilde, compiled between the mid-fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the guilds were defined as Christian organizations whose economic and social practices conformed with pious religion.³⁴ This identification of a particular socioeconomic practice with religiosity was characterized by an obsession with defining boundaries. The officials of the Gesamtgilde arbitrated disputes between guildsmen and other citizens and between member guilds over the delineation of economic activities; the individual guilds themselves defined the rules of apprenticeship, work, the quality and prices of products, admission criteria, marriage, feasting, and burial customs. The object was to define a boundary between guild and city, between a qualified, incorporated craft and a common one, between artisan and citizen, and between quality and vulgarity. Underlying the various demarcations was the fundamental idea of maintaining corporate purity: substandard merchandise was to be destroyed; the socially undesirable were to be kept out. Thus the statutes of the Gesamtgilde barred from entry Jews, heretics, bastards, parsons' sons, and people from "tainted" occupations—executioners, millers, gravediggers, and others. All of these groups carried with them elements of impurity, whether false re-

³²See Hans Planitz, *Die deutsche Stadt im Mittelalter: Von der Römerzeit bis zu den Zunftkämpfen* (Graz-Cologne, 1954), pp. 205ff.

³³*Ibid.*, pp. 325ff.

³⁴Krumbholz, *Die Gewerbe*, pp. 15–16.

ligion, illegitimate birth, or the results of pollution by sex and death.³⁵ The stigma attached to bastardy was an important means by which the guild community distinguished itself from both its social superiors and its inferiors. Bastardy was not only common among the lower classes—servants and maids who did not have the permission or means to marry—but was also a distinctive feature of the amorous life of the nobility and the urban aristocracy. Men from patrician and ruling families often mentioned “natural children” in their wills and provided for their upbringing. Illegitimacy was an important fact of demographic history, and it did not close the doors of social advancement for those with important family connections.

For the guilds, however, the preservation of corporate purity depended on a strict endogamy, which was enforced de facto if not de jure: artisans almost always married daughters or widows who were, if not from the same craft, then from other guilds. The statutes of most of the crafts within the Gesamtgilde gave preferential treatment to accepting sons of masters as members, usually by setting a much lower entry fee; foreign journeymen had to prove their purity of blood by showing a birth certificate of legitimate burgher heritage.³⁶ Purity of blood and piety seem to have formed the twin pillars of guild corporate status upon which rested the entire body of practices and ideas of the urban guild economy.

It is thus not surprising that the Evangelical movement in the 1520s conjured up many voices attacking usury, monopolies, and unbridled commercial greed, in addition to criticizing the burdens of the old religion. Besides being the fusion of the sacred and the economic, Christian communalism, as it was manifested in guild ideology, also expressed itself in articulating a corporate view of human society.³⁷ Like the guild community in Florence, the ideology of the Münster Gesamtgilde was also characterized by a tension between a corporatist and a consensus model.³⁸ The tension was implicit in the metaphorical use of the body in political language: a body may be unified in its functions, but the status of the various organs and members differs. Thus the head and eyes, or the rational faculty, must rule and direct the movements of the limbs and control the appetite. The consensus model argued or implied the rule of

the body by its “better parts,” whereas the corporatist model defended the equality of all the constituent members. In the statutes of the Gesamtgilde, each of the seventeen member guilds was guaranteed an equal vote in electing officials to the umbrella guild, as “no one should put himself before others.” Likewise, within each guild, all master artisans ideally stood on the same footing, sharing responsibilities and exercising equivalent power. The reality of guild politics, however, was that some guilds dominated the Gesamtgilde by virtue of their wealth, whereas the wealthier artisans controlled affairs within each guild. In Münster the most powerful of the seventeen guilds was that of the clothiers, who supplied most of the Olderlude to the Gesamtgilde. The reality of hierarchical gradations was perpetuated by an electoral system within member guilds and the Gesamtgilde, whereby presiding guild masters and Gesamtgilde officials nominated the electors, who inevitably elected the outgoing officials for another term. Although the facade of equality and democracy was preserved, the reality, at least by the beginning of the sixteenth century, was the consolidation of a guild oligarchy that formally exercised power through guild institutions of professed egalitarianism but that in reality based its influence on family wealth and status, much as the families of the ruling elite maintained their hold on the city council. In fact, some of the families of the ruling elite belonged to the clothiers’ guild in the mid-fifteenth century but severed their ties to the corporate world of the guilds when family wealth alone could sustain their standing in the political class.

Although we do not have direct evidence of tensions within the Gesamtgilde prior to 1533 (the protocols of the Gesamtgilde are extant only from 1569), three conclusions can be drawn from the fragmentary lists of officeholders within the Gesamtgilde and the individual guilds and from the guild statutes. First, there was evidently a “guild aristocracy,” which collectively controlled the politics of the member guilds and the Gesamtgilde; in some guilds, sons succeeded fathers as guild officials, and in almost all guilds, outsiders had to pay hefty entry fees to become masters. Second, during the Evangelical movement from 1531 to 1533, the guildsmen were solidly behind Rothmann, and the officials of the Gesamtgilde signed petitions to the city council on his behalf. Third, a crucial split seems to have occurred within the Gesamtgilde during the transition from the Evangelical movement to the Anabaptist movement: the elections to the city council of 1533 (the Evangelical council) and 1534 (the Anabaptist council) returned artisans and merchants of the Gesamtgilde who had at most held minor civic offices before, and none had served on the city council before 1533. More significant is the fact that, although individuals of the guild aristocracy served on the 1533

³⁵Cf. Werner Danckert, *Unehrliche Leute: Die verfeimten Berufe* (Bern, 1963), and Redbook, statutes 39–41, in Krumpholtz, *Die Gewerbe*, pp. 13ff.

³⁶See Helmut Lahrkamp, ed., *Die Geburtsbriefe der Stadt Münster, 1548–1809* (Münster, 1968).

³⁷For a synthetic study of guild ideology, see Anthony Black, *Guilds and Civil Society in European Political Thought from the Twelfth Century to the Present* (Ithaca, 1984).

³⁸See John M. Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus in Florentine Electoral Politics, 1280–1400* (Chapel Hill, 1982).

council as Evangelicals, they were not returned to office in the 1534 elections.³⁹ New men, more committed to radical religious ideas and to a more thorough transformation of society, took their places in city hall. These new men, also drawn from the guilds, were committed to the restoration of Christian communalism, a vision that informed the egalitarian ethos of the guilds. For them, the Anabaptist movement was the fusion of a religious renewal and a sociopolitical restoration, a return to an ideal age of moral purity and corporatist communal politics.

To the men who supported the Evangelical movement throughout its Anabaptist metamorphosis and on to the bitter end of the millenarian kingdom, the underlying vision was the consensus of a Christian republic. Their preacher Rothmann expressed it best when he expounded on the symbolic nature of the eucharist, before his conversion to Anabaptism. A sacrament, Rothmann reminded his flock, was simply an oath, something sacred not by virtue of the object of remembrance, be it bread or wine, but by the act of consensus that constituted the community. The eucharistic feast thus became a symbolic rite to commemorate and celebrate the existence of the community of believers.⁴⁰ The structural parallel with guild practice and ideology is exact. Guilds and communes arose as sworn associations, conjurations, constituted by the mutual consent of equals. Not surprisingly, communal feasting played a ritualistic role in articulating the sense of fellowship and reaffirming the social boundaries of the guild community. Eating was quintessentially a social act and food a social object. The repeated criticisms of gluttony and drunkenness in the sermons and moral tales of the early Reformation years amounted to a critique of antisocial selfish eating habits. Similarly, the disagreements between the reformers on the correct understanding of the Last Supper touched on the different social meanings of food. For the Catholics and the Lutherans, the sanctification of bread and wine implied the reification of a hierarchical, coercive social relationship: only a clerical elite could "prepare" the sacred food, the consumption of which by the laity depended on the censure of their behavior and attitudes by the very same clergy.⁴¹ Alternatively, in the case of a prominent Catholic in Münster, food was a display of wealth and piety when he endowed a fund in his will to feed the poor after his death for the salvation of his soul. In these cases, food was not so much eaten as it was fed—forcibly, as in the requirement

³⁹Kirchhoff, *Die Täufer*, pp. 65–69.

⁴⁰Rothmann, "Bekentnis von beiden Sacramenten," in Stupperich, ed., *Die Schriften Bernhard Rothmanns*, p. 141.

⁴¹For communion as coercion in Lutheran Württemberg, see David W. Sabean, *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 37–60.

to take communion in Catholicism and in the new Evangelical ordinances, or voluntarily, when the strong, wealthy, and pious fed the poor and the weak in body and spirit. In Rothmann's exposition of the eucharistic sacrament and in the communal feasting of the Anabaptist kingdom, the act of communal eating, sharing, and equal exchange was restored: food was to the saints merely a symbol of the voluntary community constituted by equals.⁴²

In line with the social meaning behind Rothmann's interpretation of the eucharist, his advocacy of believers' baptism also stressed the need for consensus in defining the community of the faithful. Rothmann's sermons must have encouraged the artisans in the *Gesamtgilde* in their struggle to restore corporatist politics against the elitist domination of a few families; in civic life, the restitution was the renewed quest for communal equality of all citizens versus the selfish regime of the self-styled *Obrigkeitt*.

The Christian republic, however, granted equality only to males. The creation of a fictive, patriarchal sacred kinship received its inspiration partly from the Old Testament and partly from the social practices of the guilds. Outside the Catholic clergy, the guild community was the social locus in which exclusive male association was most clearly defined. The youthful members of the guild community, the unmarried apprentices and journeymen, formed their own associations, with the permission of the masters, and played a prominent role in the traditional celebration of carnival. Women were excluded from officeholding in the member guilds and *Gesamtgilde*, even though widows were occasionally permitted to continue practicing the craft before they turned over the shop to a new husband or a grown son. Unlike the upper classes, with their powerful families, and the lower classes, with their precarious existence as married or single individuals, the artisans of the guild community lived in a social world in which an extrafamilial male corporation, with its ideology of a fictive kinship, a fraternity, reinforced their own positions as heads of households, as fathers and husbands, within the nuclear family. For the guildsmen of Münster, there was a fundamental continuity between patriarchal domination in family and corporate life, on the one hand, and patriarchal rule in a polygamous sacred "tribe," on the other.

⁴²Jan of Leiden and his wives fed the entire Anabaptist community every Sunday in a communal feast on the cathedral square. See Greshock, *Berichte der Augenzeugen*, p. 103.