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Out of Germany: the pilgrim badges as a tool of communication, using the example of the badges of Wilsnack

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Abstract

Imagery still plays a crucial role in a world of various languages and dialects. However, during the Middle Ages, when the masses were illiterate and the outside world often unknown and incomprehensible, images and visuality created a safe and coherent support for those who witnessed it. Iconography as a mode of non-verbal communication was often used by the Church, but people communicated among themselves through images, too. One of the popular modes of visual communication in the Middle Ages were badges – small objects, usually made to be worn pinned to the front of clothing or hats, or suspended. The badges existed in both the religious and secular spheres of human life and were meant to communicate an individual's personal or business affiliations, religious beliefs or even jokes.

The following paper will focus on the religious badges using the example of the pilgrim badges of Wilsnack. It will analyse the levels on which these badges communicated not only visually, but also as indirect mediators of information, agents of private conversations with God and saints, and as tools of surprising unification of pilgrims during the times of Wilsnack controversy.

Keywords

lay piety; Catholicism; badges; pilgrimage; communication

Introduction

The symbolism of medieval badges or signs was epitomized in their almost universal connection to all aspects of human lives. Their imagery represented diverse aspects of medieval European society, with depictions varying from guild representations to religious confessions, and even erotic satire. The badges were generally made from a tin-lead (pewter) alloy,¹ poured into a stone mould. This made them cheap, hence easy to be mass-produced and available to practically everyone. The badges were meant to be worn visibly on clothes like brooches² and thus communicate meaning “through their use of [...] once widely used and commonly understood images and symbols.” Rasmussen (2021: p. 12). The identification of badges as signs also points out to their ability to forward meanings and information. Rasmussen (2021: p. 4).

Badges of all sorts were uncovered in various places during archaeological research but also by treasure-seekers or during ground removals. Koldewej (1999: pp. 161–188). Those findings that were reported are now registered in two major online databases. These databases, stemming from academic projects, organise lists of physical badges, as well as the depictions of badges and their secondary creations, such as home altars or badges incorporated into statues or bells. The first project is the *Pilgerzeichen Datenbank*. The input data are based on the collection created by Kurt Köster. Over the course of his professional life, this German historian and librarian put together a significant assemblage of relevant information and research regarding the pilgrim badges in Germany. Now the collection data have been digitized and made available for further research through the cooperation between the German and Czech cultural institutions.³ The second database is an academic project named *Kunera* from the Netherlands.⁴ Both projects are ongoing, collecting data from active archaeological excavations, recording reports from individuals and assembling information on various kinds of medieval badges.

It is evident from the available data that major founding sites of badges are located predominantly along water streams and original medieval routes.⁵ The European land-

1 This material was widespread during the Middle Ages due to its price – a cheap metal alloy allowed large amounts of pilgrim badges being casted very quickly. Modern experiments show, that “a badge a minute could be cast with the potential for thousands of badges in a single day, further increasing their profit potential.” In Blick (2019: p. 7).

2 Although the pilgrims often repurposed their badges after they returned home, while out on the journey, the badges were meant to be seen and potentially understood by fellow pilgrims and travellers. Many examples of how the pilgrim badges were worn can be found in contemporary written as well as visual sources. Both will be analysed further in this paper.

3 *Pilgerzeichen Datenbank*, online available from <https://www.pilgerzeichen.de/>. The project commenced as an initiative of the Department of Christian Archaeology at the Humboldt University in Berlin and was later taken over and widened by the German library network system GBV (VZG). It currently cooperates with the Museums of Decorative Arts in Berlin and in Prague, Monastery in Hannover, Dominican monastery in Prenzlau and the Academy of Sciences in Göttingen.

4 *Kunera Database*, online available from <https://kunera.nl/>. The *Kunera* research project is maintained by the Radboud University in Nijmegen. Its goal is to preserve, document and make accessible the visual culture of the Middle Ages, with the emphasis on various depictions of medieval badges.

5 The map at the *Pilgerzeichen Datenbank* shows locations of the badges discovered, with the possibility to

scape in the Middle Ages was interweaved with merchant routes, pilgrim paths and passages where people from different places and cultural spaces met and interacted. The badges – visibly pinned to outfits and hats – served as a universal and nonverbal means of communication between strangers on the roads.

The religious pilgrims were a large subcategory of people, who often occurred on the roads of European countryside in the Middle Ages. They were usually easily distinguishable from other travelers: “For a far greater number of pilgrims in the late Middle Ages (from the twelfth to mid sixteenth century) badges were sewn onto the characteristic cloak, hat or bag. The complete ensemble, plus a staff, identified the wearer as a pilgrim.” Koldewejj (1999: p. 163). The pilgrims wore badges not only for recognition, or as an expression of their faith, but also for protection. “Religious badges functioning as amulets were intended for many viewers: the human beings, the demons and other malevolent forces, and the divine forces such as saints. Badges carried with them and radiated, as it were, the divine power of the saint or holy event whose image they bore, not really or only as representations but rather more as extensions of them. The divine power of the saint was not fragmented as more and more images (badges, statues, paintings) were produced; rather, it multiplied. Even a humble lead badge participated in this augmentation of divine power.” Rasmussen (2021: p. 94).

The following article will look more closely at the various ways the badges – with focus on the pilgrim badges and especially the pilgrim badges of Wilsnack – communicated with their surroundings and their formative role in medieval society. Apart from actual physical badges, this article will pay attention to the portrayals of badges through various media, and it will also analyse contemporary written sources that often provide in-depth descriptions and opinions about the usage of these pilgrim badges. What were the various layers of communication the badges conveyed? How did a badge transmit information and communication between fellow members of society and how it differed from the way it was supposed to mediate communication with God and various saints? How could the badges serve as means of unification during the Wilsnack controversy? Finally, what do the medieval written sources tell us about the internal schism of Catholic Church in regard to the Wilsnack events and how differently were the pilgrim badges perceived by authorities on both sides?

The Wilsnack events

The town of Wilsnack in northern Germany became a pilgrimage site in 1383, after three hosts supposedly survived a destructive fire, kindled by the robber knight Heinrich von Bülow, following his feud with the Bishop of Havelberg.⁶ The hosts were discovered

filter them as per the founding place or the relevant pilgrimage site. [Online available from https://www.pilgerzeichen.de/wallfahrtsorte-karte?add=1&no_cache=1&tx_jomuseo_pi1009%5Bcontroller%5D=Museo&tx_jomuseo_pi1009%5Blocation%5D=Bad%20Wilsnack%20%28Wallfahrtsort%29&cHash=956cd0d9f3849340e897d09fecfc4f9#].

6 At the time of the events, Wilsnack belonged into the Bishopric of Havelberg. Surviving woodcuts, creat-

in the ruins of the local church, a droplet of blood present in the middle of each one. The Bishop of Havelberg was at first rather sceptical towards the miraculous essence of this discovery. However, he became convinced after the hosts began to bleed in front of him during a mass. Kühne (2012: p. 22). The events initiated massive pilgrimages to Wilsnack, first from Germany and soon from abroad, making this town the most popular pilgrimage site of northern Europe. Kühne (2012: p. 22). Pilgrimages in medieval Europe were viewed as both events of solitary contemplation and a social gathering. The Wilsnack pilgrimages were no different. As its fame rose, the town became progressively overcrowded. The reality of the mass pilgrimages to Wilsnack was reflected in the writings of contemporary critics of the events. The Czech Catholic theologian and reformer Jan Hus wrote in his work *De Sanguine Christi* about masses of people, who “are running towards the Holy Blood as if they had lost their senses.” Hus (1904: p. 34). Wilsnack native Matthaëus Ludacus specifies, that the „*maximus concursus*“, when the most people come, was on the Day of St. Bartholomew. Ludacus (1586: Vorrede).

While the written sources talk about the vast amounts of pilgrims arriving to Wilsnack, another source of information comes from the actual archaeological excavations and research. The archaeological research is particularly significant in relation to the badges that are being retrieved and further explored, providing details about pilgrim routes, their customs and an estimate of the number of pilgrims that visited Wilsnack, bought a badge there and eventually left, taking the badge with them to foreign places and countries.

The pilgrim badges of Wilsnack

Wilsnack pilgrim badges were instituted in 1396 following a common practice of other medieval pilgrimage sites, where the badges were sold for profit. Badges at popular pilgrimage sites had to be regulated by the Church to control the monetary income from sales and suppression of false relics. “To counteract the proliferation of unofficial images and relics, churches encouraged veneration of approved images. Some churches tightly controlled pilgrim souvenir production, renting out casting moulds and denying touch access to shrines of those badges not made in such moulds.” Blick (2019: p. 7). The selling of Wilsnack badges was approved by the bishop of Havelberg and the expected profit was divided in three parts – one for the Wilsnack church, one for episcopal buildings, and one for the cathedral chapter. Ludacus (1586: nr. XIII). The badges of Wilsnack were produced nearby the actual pilgrimage site by selected craftsmen. The pilgrims, who successfully finished the journey, could obtain them at the respective parish as proofs of their achievement and as a token of protection on their way back home.

The badges of Wilsnack had a simple shape, representing the three miraculous hosts. They were designed to be “quickly drawn and [...] immediately recognisable.” Koldeweij

ed during the 16th century, show the story of the bloody hosts in 15 images, accompanied by short texts. It says that Wilsnack was burned down by “the enemies” (durch die Feinde). The woodcuts, together with the introductory information, were incorporated into an edition by R. Buchholz and K.-D. Gralow – *Die Geschichte von der Erfindung des heiligen Sakraments zu Wilsnack*, published in 1992.

(1999: p. 168). The badges were made, as was customary during the Middle Ages, from an alloy of tin and lead. The size of a typical Wilsnack badge was approximately 3×3 cm.⁷ It had a triangle shape and consisted of three circle-like objects, representing the hosts. Two hosts were at the top and one at the bottom and in a clockwise order they tell the tale of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. The hosts were connected in a triangle form. Originally, the top hosts were crowned with one cross each, as can be seen in the image nr. 1. All three hosts were originally painted red.⁸ The crosses, as well as the paint did not survive in majority of retrieved badges, as they were too fragile. The image 2 shows a badge found in Gdańsk, Poland. It is missing all the fragile parts, like the crosses from the top hosts, even its triangle framing and only the middle part with three hosts has survived.

The badges retrieved in Gdańsk are good examples of this. One is missing all the outer fragile parts, like the crosses and majority of its framing.⁹ The second example even has the inner circles broken.¹⁰ Similar defects can be viewed on other retrieved badges as well. All are documented in the Kunera database, together with images. Unfortunately, the images provided in the databases are not in resolution high enough to download, but the details can be viewed in the provided links.



Image 1. The original Wilsnack pilgrim badge.

- 7 Both the *Pilgerzeichen Datenbank* and the *Kunera database* provide information on each of the discovered badges that were registered. In case of the original badges – not the depictions or castings – the average size is 3×3 cm, but smaller versions were retrieved as well, such as one tiny badge of $1,5 \times 1,2$ cm (*Kunera database*, obj. n. 00136) or larger badges of $3,7 \times 3,1$ cm (*Kunera database*, obj. n. 00131). Further information could be retrieved online: <https://database.kunera.nl/en> [retrieved 15.09.2023].
- 8 This detail is apparent from visual depictions of the Wilsnack badges but also from contemporary sources. Ludacus, for example, writes about the badges being painted red “like drops of blood.” In Ludacus (1586: Vorrede). Examples of paintings, showing the red pilgrim badges from Wilsnack can be filtered within the *Pilgerzeichen Datenbank* [online available at https://www.pilgerzeichen.de/pilgerzeichen?add=1&no_cache=1&tx_jomuseo_pi1009%5Bcontroller%5D=Museo&tx_jomuseo_pi1009%5BobjectTypeHierarchy%5D=Pilgerzeichen%2Fbildliche%20Darstellung&cHash=9ad5c3338159f96b66421f7c8ca22e64; retrieved 15.09.2023].
- 9 Kunera database, obj. n. 20384. [online]. Available from: <https://database.kunera.nl/en/collectie-object/b3a5afa0-b55b-4af6-a9ac-6da6632be865>.
- 10 Kunera database, obj. n. 20390. [online]. Available from: <https://database.kunera.nl/en/collectie-object/81114acf-2197-4721-906d-d28c25de8af5>.

The badges of Wilsnack were retrieved in various forms, however. The actual, physical badges are of course the largest group, and they were discovered around the original pilgrim routes and in towns from which pilgrims most often arrived to Wilsnack. Apart from this, the badges of Wilsnack were discovered depicted in paintings,¹¹ sculptures,¹² cast on religious objects such as church bells¹³ or cemetery crosses¹⁴ or even discovered in forms of private altars and other objects of secluded devotion¹⁵. These objects of domestic piety were meant for secluded forms of worship, and they varied in designs, as the pilgrims creatively appropriated them to their tastes. Generally, though, “devotees used all kinds of cheap adornment to create interactive works of art as reliquaries and sacred images to be used at home.” Blick (2019: p 2). These private altars are, no doubt, ways through which the pious pilgrims communicated with God or the respective saints in the intimate privacy of their homes.

A private communication with God

While en route, the badges protected the pilgrims from harm and dangers lurking on the roads. Once they reached the safety of their homes, however, the badges did not lose their spiritual significance. Rather, the pilgrims slightly repurposed them, so they gained a new trait and became a stable component of the interior.

Private settlements, such as houses but also convents and monasteries were at one point witnesses to the acts of these private devotions, these inwardly directed, private forms of conversation with God or the saints that the badges represented. By doing so, the pilgrims transformed the badges into the vessels of intimate, individual domestic altars, intended for secluded contemplations. Rasmussen (2021: p. 34).

The badges of Wilsnack were no exception to this. Pilgrims, arriving mostly from northern parts of Europe, brought the badges with them on their journey back, sometimes losing them or giving them up mid-way, sometimes carrying them all the way back home. The archaeological excavations found Wilsnack badges or their fragments across northern European countries. In Germany, the most prominent founding site was the port of Stade. Kühne & Ansorge (2016: pp. 11–44). Outside of Germany, the Wilsnack badges were found in the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Scandinavia, but

11 For an example, see: Kunera database, obj. n. 06401. [online]. Available from: <https://database.kunera.nl/en/collectie-object/b8147922-4d0a-4b51-bbdc-b267ea63a0df>.

12 For an example, see: Pilgerzeichen Datenbank. [online]. Available from: https://www.pilgerzeichen.de/pilgerzeichen/bbba6e43-8ee2-41a6-8edc-23ba832af411?no_cache=1&tx_jomuseo_pi1009%5Bh%5D=1&tx_jomuseo_pi1009%5Bjopaginatepage%5D=1&cHash=63dd66eb9a9b200e660ea4259a941cf2.

13 For an example, see: Kunera database, obj. n. 11731. [online]. Available from: <https://database.kunera.nl/en/collectie-object/43a49d9d-2ad7-41fb-aaf7-8bdfe9475d83>.

14 For an example, see: Kunera database, obj. n. 23301. [online]. Available from: <https://database.kunera.nl/en/collectie-object/d9dd6f78-7d6f-4886-84c0-f51442f5cbe8>.

15 For an example, see: Kunera database, obj. n. 04673. [online]. Available from: <https://database.kunera.nl/en/collectie-object/2d3d6ad5-b1fa-48b4-b643-608dcb9eecba>.

also England, Austria and Poland.¹⁶ Possibly the best example of an object of domestic piety, consisting of pilgrim badges is the object nr. 04673 in the *Kunera database*.¹⁷ This narrow piece of wood displays the Wilsnack badge alongside the badge of Blomberg. A detailed study of this object, that was originally excavated in Amsterdam, was carried out by Kurt Köster. Köster (1974: pp. 9–18). A. M. Koldewey claims, that “the custom of fixing the extremely fragile lead-tin badges to a piece of wood [...] has been archaeologically documented”, suggesting that it was not a rare occurrence but rather an example of a more common medieval practice. Koldewey (1999: p. 183). Ann Marie Rasmussen writes about this practice: “...the board was purpose-carved, as is indicated by the wall-mount hole and the careful creation of a framed space imitating an architectural feature associated with high-value stonework and commonly seen in late medieval, painted altarpieces, where saints are shown enclosed in arched, crowned niches. The board may be a homemade altarpiece or icon intended for intimate or domestic use, built up around the badges, which occupy the spatially honourable position within the arch. Someone carefully crafted this object to give the badges a similar function to that of saints in an altarpiece or niche.” Rasmussen (2021: p. 34). The wooden board, designed as a sort of altar was, however, only one example of how the badges were utilized by their pious owners. Art historian Megan Foster-Campbell researched the concept of pilgrim badges being sewn into manuscripts. This practice occurred within the prayer books, suggesting the role of pilgrim badges as mediators of a private prayer, a booster of the communication between the pilgrim and God. This practice expressed the individual, inwardly oriented form of communication. The “badges in prayer books shed light on how their owners continued to personally interact with and respond to pilgrim badges beyond the pilgrimage roads, and after the completion of a pilgrimage.” Foster-Campbell (2011: p. 229). Foster-Campbell further explains that the pilgrim badges appeared as part of the marginal imagery in the manuscripts during late medieval times, referencing “the actual practice of sewing pilgrim badges in manuscripts.” Foster-Campbell (2011: p. 258). The badges of Wilsnack were found painted as part of the marginal imagery too. Foster-Campbell (2011: p. 264). Although not generally preserved in their original form, the outlines of the Wilsnack badge were so typical, that it left not much space for speculation as to what kind of religious badge was originally sewn into the manuscript. Foster-Campbell (2011: p. 268).

16 According to the *Kunera database*, the complete number of Wilsnack badges is 421. This number includes original badges, badges casted on bells and crosses, painting and sculptures. The *Pilgerzeichen Datenbank* (PD) records 185 badges. The difference is caused mainly by the badges found abroad. While the recorded number of Wilsnack badges in Germany is 162 according to the PD, Kunera only counts 116. However, the number of badges found for example in the Netherlands is 134 according to Kunera and only 12 according to PD. Findings in Poland count 90 according to Kunera and only 2 according to PD. Other countries' counts are as follows: Denmark 4 (Kunera), 5 (PD). Belgium 2 (Kunera), 0 (PD). France 0 (Kunera), 1 (PD). Sweden 2 (Kunera and PD). United Kingdom 2 (Kunera), 1 (PD). Austria 0 (Kunera), 1 (PD). Apart from the listed countries, the *Kunera database* also counts found Wilsnack badges with sites listed as “irrelevant” – 39 (mostly paintings) and “unknown” – 31 [data retrieved 14.09.2023].

17 [Online available at <https://database.kunera.nl/en/collectie-object/2d3d6ad5-b1fa-48b4-b643-608dc-b9eeeba>; retrieved 14.09.2023].

A significant excavation site was at the Prenzlau convent. These badges located here might have belonged to pilgrims who passed through the convent and perhaps spent a night there, but the more plausible theory is that the badges were the private property of local Dominican nuns, who brought them back from their own pilgrimages to Wilsnack and then used them as objects of personal piety. Foster-Campbell (2018: p. 264).

Vagabonds, vagrants and the Wilsnack badges

Although the restrictions on selling the pilgrim badges did to some extent help prevent suspicious re-sales outside of the particular places of pilgrimage, this tactic was not bulletproof. The itinerant beggars, vagrants and vagabonds became associated with pilgrim badges during the late Middle Ages, when they were noted to misuse the typical garments and visage of a pilgrim. In 1510, an anonymous publication was printed in Germany, named the *Liber vagatorum*, or the Book of Vagrants. It advises on various kinds of beggars and vagrants, their appearance, manifestations and typical features. The publication had no known author, it was however reprinted and translated in 1528 by Martin Luther and in 1860 an English version named *The Book of Vagabonds and Beggars with a Vocabulary of Their Language* was published together with a foreword by John Camden Hotten.

It is apparent from the book that pilgrim badges became associated with certain types of beggars and vagrants. The anonymous author describes the Stabülers, or the Bread Gatherers, who often travel from place to place, usually with their whole families, and “their hats (wetterhan) and cloaks (wintfang) hang full of signs of all the saints, – the cloak (wintfang) being made (vetzen) out of a hundred pieces.” Luther (1860: p. 10). Next, there are Christianers or Calmierers, who “wear signs in their hats, [...] which they sell to each other so that it shall be thought they have been in distant cities and foreign parts. For this reason, they wear these signs, although they have never come thence, and they deceive people thereby.” Luther (1860: p. 40). It is worth noting, how specifically the pilgrim badges were being used by the beggars. They chose the signs of the saints – not the secular badges – to communicate their worthiness and create an impression of humble, rather unfortunate but pious and godly men in the eyes of other members of the society. These efforts, however, were not always successful. As A. M. Koldeweij notes, “the associations between badges and pilgrims had long since become generalised and, by the time the *Liber vagatorum* was written at the beginning of the sixteenth century, pilgrim badges were associated to some extent with cheats and frauds.” Koldeweij (1999: p. 182). The anonymous publication therefore only mirrored a broad opinion that already existed in the medieval society.

This is partially confirmed by a series of sketches, drawn by Hieronymus Bosch and his students between 1470 and 1480, named *Beggars and Cripples* or *Procession of Cripples*. The series associates physical disability with vagrant lifestyle, shedding an unfavourable light on the disabled members of the medieval society. These sketches were not out of the ordinary, however, while the disabled were subjected to social ostracism, as they were

often associated with mischief, lying and swindling. "...these malformed figures generally failed to arouse sympathy in contemporary viewers, but rather evoked the widespread fear of deformity, poverty, and disease. The prevailing notion that spiritual qualities left their mark on the physical self that an ugly body housed an equally unsavoury soul, stamped the typology of the beggar as surely as did the notion that physical handicaps were either one's own fault or God's punishment for living a dissolute life." Pokorny (2003: p. 293). It is only natural, then, that the disabled figures were so often associated with malevolent vagabonds. The sketches by Bosch and his students, shown in for example in the image 2, depict people with various types of physical impairments while some figures are wearing what can be recognized as pilgrim badges. The badges of Wilsnack can be seen on the figure in the middle of the second row – a kneeling man is wearing it on the right side of his chest. They can be easily recognized by their shape of three circle-like objects. "The Wilsnack badge was appropriate to the questionable atmosphere in which Bosch places it here, for there was severe theological criticism of the devotional aspects of this shrine and the badge itself. The miracle was not considered all that credible and the wearing of the Host the body of Christ as a badge was regarded by some as intolerable." Koldeweij (1999: p. 168).



Image 2. H. Bosch - Beggars and Cripples.

Wilsnack badges as the agents of unification

A rather unexpected use was demonstrated by the wearers of Wilsnack badges in those areas where the state or the Church authority tried to ban the pilgrimages. The badges, as signs of miracles and hope for the masses, created a unifying feature for people, who then continued to visit Wilsnack despite the ban. The contributing factor, no doubt, was the familiar visual of the badges – red paint for blood and three circles for the three miraculous hosts which created simple and understandable imagery that resembled the original hosts and kept the story of Wilsnack alive in the minds of common folks. A good example is Prague, where the Archbishop Zbyněk Zajíc banned pilgrimages to Wilsnack, following a university debate and publication of Jan Hus' tractatus *De Sanguine Christi glorificato* in 1406. Zajíc "gave a synodal order and instructed all parish priests and ordained preachers throughout the diocese of Prague to inform the people every Sunday that no one, under the penalty of curse according to the pronounced sentence, ought to go to Wilsnack to visit the aforementioned blood." Hus (1904: p. 266).

The key role of visuality in the world of common laity was indirectly emphasized by Hus, when he wrote, that one of the evils that Wilsnack presents is that the laity "believes that the visible blood is more legitimate than the blood in the Sacrament. That is apparent from the testimonies of those, who want to visit the blood and once they visit it, they claim that this blood is more legitimate." Hus (1904: p. 264). The psychological impact of badges, who kept the visuality of Wilsnack miracles alive among the common pilgrims was not negligible. Hus further writes about people, who "for money travel around towns and villages and advertise miracles that never existed [...]," and "greedy priests as well as greedy laity who talk about miracles, priests for sacrifices and laity for gifts and others for the arrival of pilgrims, who are then asked for food." Hus (1904: p. 264). Hus was providing evidence of greedy individuals or groups of people here, who were promoting the Wilsnack miracles among laity for their own personal gain. Hus (1904: p. 263). Hus' text inspired other critics from the ranks of the Catholic Church, who proceeded to elaborate their own opinions in speech and writing. In 1412 a synod at Magdeburg recognized the events as a fraud and forwarded 10 articles upon the matter to the Bishop Otto of Havelberg. On the issue of the Wilsnack pilgrim badges, the 10th article reads: "The greed dominates many things there: that the pilgrims are asked for money, that the signs are being sold, which, however, correspond with no seal..."¹⁸ The argument was that the pilgrim badges sold at Wilsnack had no theological basis and the events are a fraud, henceforth the pilgrims are committing idolatry by travelling to the place and worshipping the hosts.

Heinrich Tocke, a canon from Magdeburg, argued vigorously against the veneration of the Holy Blood in Wilsnack and urged the Catholic authorities to stop the pilgrimages. In his *Synodalrede* in 1451, Tocke provided a comprehensive argument against the bloody hosts. He considered the Wilsnack events a fraud orchestrated for profit and claimed

18 Original inscription reads: *Multa insuper ibidem dominatur avaritia: ille pro pecunia visitat peregrinos; ille vendit signa, quibus tamen nullum correspondet signatum...* In Gieseler (1855: p. 62).

that upon his investigation, undertaken in the company of the priest of Wilsnack and the provost, nothing miraculous or marked in red was discovered on the said hosts. Breest (1881: pp. 193–195). Tocke also mentioned the case of Konrad von Soltau, who was a bishop of Verden at the time of the events, and who ordered to forcibly remove all Wilsnack badges from the clothes of pilgrims passing through his diocese. According to Tocke, this happened in the 1400s, which would make it one of the first recorded practical attempts to forcibly stop pilgrims from worshipping the hosts of Wilsnack. It also provides an example of how popular the badges were among the laity and hints on their meaning to their wearers.

The Synod of Magdeburg was presided over by the Papal legate Nicholas of Cusa, who was deeply affected and eventually persuaded by Tocke's speech. Cusanus published a decree after the Synod, where he did not mention Wilsnack, but condemned such pilgrimages that are based on fraud and material enrichment. "...In order to remove every opportunity for the deception of simple folk, we, therefore, order that [...] the clergy [...] should no longer display or promulgate such miracles or allow pilgrim badges (*signa plumbea*) to be made of them, [...]." Gieseler (1855: p. 63). Again, the efforts to either forcibly remove the pilgrim badges or to stop their production points towards their significance and popularity among the pilgrims.

These efforts were nevertheless fruitless, and the conflict escalated to the point where the archbishop Friedrich of Magdeburg, who opposed the pilgrimages, and the bishop of Havelberg, who supported them, excommunicated each other. The archbishop further placed an *interdict* upon the town. The conflict was eventually halted by the Pope Nicholas V. He declared the decree of Nicholas of Cusa null and approved of the pilgrimages. Pope's only request was that the Wilsnack authorities frequently add a freshly consecrated host to the three displayed hosts.

An eyewitness to the mass pilgrimages to Wilsnack and at the same time an opponent of the supposed miracles was a theologian and lawyer Matthaeus Ludacus. Born in Wilsnack in 1517, he lived during the peak and downfall of the pilgrimages. In his treatise, *Historia von der erfundung, Wunderwercken und zerstörung des vermeinten heiligen Bluts zu Wilssnagk*, published in 1586, Ludacus notes the following about the pilgrim badges: "Now when the pilgrims have made their vows / performed the sacrifices and want to return home / special symbols are cast for them from lead / like a host with three red stains / like drops of blood / prepared / as a testimony / that they have visited the holy city / been informed / Which sign that the fellow pilgrims have fastened to their hats and to the front and thus gained permission to go on a pilgrimage." Ludacus (1586: Vorrede).

Towards the late Middle Ages and approaching Reformation, Wilsnack pilgrim badges proved to be as popular as ever, being worn by the pilgrims as confirmations of their participation (experience) on the pilgrimage and as a token of protection. Through their badges, the pilgrims sent non-verbal information to casual passers-by and fellow pilgrims. They communicated their religious beliefs and conveyed their support of the particular pilgrimage site. The aspect of expressing support was especially vital in the case of Wilsnack. Despite the controversy, the support from laity, indirectly unified

under the sign of the three bloody hosts helped the pilgrimage site to survive well into the times, when Reformation reached Brandenburg.

The Reformation itself, however, brought with it the end of the Wilsnack pilgrimages. While Protestants in general did not support the worship of objects, the controversy that accompanied Wilsnack events did little to help preserve this holy site. In 1552, a newly installed evangelical preacher Joachim Ellefeld ostentatiously destroyed the hosts by burning them. In this way, the hosts symbolically ceased to exist the same way they supposedly came into existence. Ellefeld was incarcerated at the Plattenburg castle for this action.¹⁹ The pilgrimages to Wilsnack gradually stopped and the town returned to its former quiet existence. Nonetheless, the iconography of the three bloody hosts became closely associated with the town and the visual symbolism of the badges keeps living further to this day. If a tourist or a pilgrim visits the town today, they may encounter a recently reconstructed pilgrim route, that leads from Berlin to the Church of St. Nikolai on the main square in Bad Wilsnack. The route was reconstructed as per the archaeological findings and original maps that depicted the way. Nowadays, the route is easily identifiable by a symbol of three orange circles, painted on trees and fences along it. The orange circles represent the hosts and thus remind the visitor of the town's famous past. If contemporary pilgrims or tourists successfully reach their destination, they can buy their copy of a Wilsnack pilgrim badge, traditionally handmade from a tin-lead alloy. However, modernity reached even the pilgrim ways and now, the Wilsnack badges are also available to buy online.

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¹⁹ For further information see Ludecus (1586: Chapter *Folget die destruction oder Zerstörung des falschgedichten Wunderbluts zur Wilsnack*). Ludecus also provides copies of the letters concerning Ellefeld and those that Ellefeld wrote from Plattenburg as well as the letter written by Ellefeld's brother Caspar in 1552. In Ludecus (1586).

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