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ICONS OF THE VIRGIN MARY AND THE SHAPING OF IDENTITY IN CENTRAL EUROPE

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ABSTRACT

Virgin Mary adoration spread to an unimaginable extent in Catholic countries in the Counter-Reformation period, as Catholics, unlike Protestants, defended Mary's divine nature. Thus, new sacred images of the Virgin Mary appeared in the 17th century (such as *Mariahilf* (Mary Help of Christians), Mary with tilted head, Mother of Good Counsel, etc.) and were widely copied. Such copies spread via monastic and dynastic connections, and copies of images that played an important role in battles with the Ottomans were especially popular. In this paper, the role and the spread of the devotional image of *Mariahilf* are demonstrated by an example. An icon of *Mariahilf* was worshipped in Passau and had an important role already in the Thirty Years' War; it was believed that it ensured the victory over the Ottomans in 1683 in the Battle of Vienna. The pious Emperor Leopold I was its loyal worshipper. He married his third wife under the icon and prayed to it every day during the siege of Vienna. After that battle, *Mariahilf* images spread throughout Central Europe and can thus be found in parish churches, monastic, succursal and pilgrimage churches as well as private aristocratic chapels and painting collections. Furthermore, *Mariahilf* was often depicted on the facades of private houses. When certain aristocrats (e.g. Georg Gotfried Count Lamberg, the Provincial Commander of Teutonic Knights) identified themselves with the icon of *Mariahilf*, this contributed to their career success in the service of the Emperor. Therefore, the spread of certain icons in the Central Europe should not only be understood as a means (or the binary code) of demonstrating Catholic identity as opposed to Protestant identity, but also as a means of demonstrating Christian identity as opposed to Muslim identity.

KEY WORDS

Virgin Mary Icons, Central Europe, Lamberg, *Mariahilf*, Art in the 17th century

Virgin Mary adoration spread to an unimaginable extent in Catholic countries in the Counter-Reformation period, as Catholics, unlike Protestants, defended Mary's divine nature.¹ Thus, new sacred images of the Virgin Mary appeared in the 17th century (such as *Mariahilf* ((Mary Help of Christians), Mary with tilted head, Mother of Good Counsel, etc.) and were widely copied.² Such copies spread via monastic and dynastic connections, and copies of images that played an important role in battles with the Ottomans were especially popular. They were also spread by fraternities which were on the rise in the 17th century.³ The spread of icons was connected with pilgrimage churches which were established in large numbers and propagated by Counter-Reformers, since such churches made it easier for them to not only attract the masses, but also control them. Copies of icons were in fact one of the external symbols of the Catholic faith, which had to be re-taught by the Church in the first half of the 17th century. The basis for the veneration of devotional images should be sought in the teachings of the Council of Trent, which, unlike Protestantism, recognized the major role of visual arts and placed great importance on the veneration of images. The importance of images is further demonstrated by the Profession of Faith of the Council of Trent (1564), which was required from people taking up leadership positions in the Church; the part of the Profession of Faith relating to images reads as follows: "I most firmly assert that the images of Christ, of the Mother of God, ever virgin, and also of other Saints, ought to be had and retained, and that due honor and veneration is to be given them."⁴

In this paper, the role and the spread of the devotional image of *Mariahilf* are demonstrated by an example.

In this context, we rely on the theory that identity is a process resulting in differentiation of an individual or a collective from others.⁵ The spread and the role of an icon will be analysed in a social context and examined within the framework of Marxist theory.⁶ Furthermore, it will be shown how icons reinforce the ideology of the ruling class and thus strengthen the identity of a certain community.

For the Austrian Habsburgs, Mary served as a symbol of Catholic renewal and reconquest. Devotion to the Virgin (alongside devotion to the Eucharist and the cross) became a key element of the *pietas Austriaca*, the "dynastic political myth" that ascribed faith and Christian merit to Austria's ruling house. Personal devotion of members of this ruling house was closely linked to the political dimension. Ferdinand II, who vowed at *Mariazell*, which was considered the Habsburg place of pilgrimage, recognised Mary as the "Generalissima" of his army during the Thirty

Years War. During a splendid ceremony on 18 March 1647, Ferdinand entrusted and consecrated himself, his dynasty, his subjects, his armies and his lands to God and the Virgin, as ruler and patroness of Austria.⁷

Thus, Mary came to constitute a key part of the Catholic identity in the former Habsburg lands roughly corresponding to today's southern part of Central Europe. This development was driven by the reform of Marian holidays and pilgrimage processions, the renovation or construction of numerous new pilgrimage churches, the establishment of fraternal orders as well as the veneration and the spread of devotional images of the Virgin Mary.

The *Mariahilf* painting from Passau is a copy of a painting by Cranach from around 1537. The latter was part of the painting collection of Johann Georg I, Duke and Elector of Saxony, which was kept in Dresden. The painting was chosen by Austrian Archduke Leopold V while he was on a diplomatic visit to Dresden in 1611, and he took it to Passau where he served as Archbishop. In 1619, he took it to Innsbruck, where he had been appointed Regent (Administrator) the year before, and it was replaced in Passau by a somewhat larger copy made in 1611 by the court painter. Cranach's painting soon became a devotional image and was hung on the main altar of the Innsbruck Parish Church, today's Cathedral, in 1650. Its copy in Passau became more widely known, since it was publicly displayed (it was hung in a wooden chapel at the foot of a hill which was later named *Mariahilfberg*) around 1618, during the Thirty Years' War, when this transition area was at risk, based on a vision by the Dean of Passau Marquard von Schwendi. The painting instilled courage in the troops, and a call for help "*Mariahilf*" was soon formed (naturalized). A large two-tower church was built on the mentioned hill in 1627 with pilgrimage steps leading to it, and it soon became a massively visited place.⁸

Leopold I was very religious and was initially supposed to become the Bishop of Passau. As Emperor, he married his third wife Eleonora von Pfalz-Neuburg under the Passau icon of the Virgin Mary in 1676. It is said that Eleonora lived an almost monastic life at the court.⁹ The painting played an even more important role during the Turkish siege of Vienna, when the court moved to Passau, where Leopold I and his wife Eleonora made a pilgrimage to the top of the hill every day to pray before the painting. Furthermore, "*Mariahilf*" became the rallying cry of the men defending Vienna. In 1687, Leopold I and Prince Paul Esterhazy built the *Mariahilf* pilgrimage church in Vienna to thank the Virgin Mary for the victory over the Turks.¹⁰ The church was built on the site of a cemetery where a copy of the painting from Passau had been publicly displayed for veneration since 1660.¹¹ The day of the victory, i.e. 12 September, was declared a Marian holiday by Pope Innocent XI and thus *Mariahilf* became the most important devotional image of the Habsburg state and a symbol of the struggle against the Ottoman Empire.¹² Before 1660 copies of the painting spread only to areas surrounding Passau, and after that year they started spreading massively. The function or role of the painting or Leopold's trust in it is best demonstrated by Kilian's print made in 1674 according to Egid Schor's sketch and used for thesis sheets by Innsbruck University graduands. On the left side of the print is Leopold I with theatrical scenery depicting Passau in the background, and on the right is Leopold's second wife Claudia Felicitas of Austria-Tyrol. They are both kneeling in prayer, their attributes illuminated with rays of light coming from the *Mariahilf* painting, which is carried by angels, and their heads with wider beams of light which are also coming from the painting but are reflected off two mirrors in which there is a reflected image of Virgin Mary. Leopold has a globus cruciger, and Claudia Felicitas a shell with a pearl, which is a symbol of fertility.¹³ Therefore, the Emperor is merely a reflection of God's power on earth.

Identification with a devotional image – in this case the *Mariahilf* painting, in which Emperor Leopold I placed immense trust – contributed to the career success of noblemen who were loyal to the Emperor. This will be demonstrated by an example relating to the nobleman Gotfried Lamberg. The Lambergs are a very old and widespread noble family from Carniola/Kranjska (today in Slovenia). Maximilian Lamberg, who fought in the Thirty Years' War, was the Emperor's minister and a diplomat. His son Janez Filip became the Archbishop of Passau in 1689, prior to which he served as a Canon of Passau. This appointment was certainly a great honour, since previous bishops of Passau were Austrian archdukes. The treasury of the church in Passau keeps a chalice that belonged to Janez Filip's nephew Jožef Dominik, Archbishop of Passau and a Cardinal. He used the chalice when celebrating his consecration in 1703 as well as its 50th anniversary (the golden jubilee).

A large painting of *Mariahilf* with the coat of arms of the Lamberg family (in addition to the Teutonic cross) dated 1660 hung on the main altar of the Church of the Order of Teutonic Knights in Ljubljana. The painting has not yet been subject to art historical analysis, since it has not been accessible to the public since the nationalization of the property of the Order of Teutonic Knights after the Second World War. The questions that arise here are: which member of the Lamberg family commissioned the painting, why was it made in 1660, why was this motif chosen, and why was the painting hung on the main altar of the Church of the Order of Teutonic Knights?

Among the many members of the Lamberg family, Jurij Gotfried Lamberg from the branch of the Lamberg family from Črnelo was – according to information available so far – the only one to join the Order of Teutonic Knights. He became a member of the Order in 1648 as an imperial ensign. Soon after the painting was commissioned, more precisely in 1664, he already had the title of the Provincial Commander (Komtur) of the Austrian province (Balei) of the Order of Teutonic Knights.¹⁴ According to the inscription on his portrait made in 1666 (when he was 47 years old) and kept at the National Gallery in Ljubljana, he was the owner of the Črnelo estate and estates at Jablje, Mengeš and Brdo near Lukovica. When the portrait was made, he already had the title of Imperial Chamberlain, which he acquired in 1664, in addition to the hereditary title of the Stable Master for Carniola and the Slovenian March.¹⁵ As the Provincial Commander of the Order of Teutonic Knights of the Austrian province, he was responsible for the *Kommenden* (administrative units) in Vienna, Velika Nedelja, Ljubljana, Lech near Graz and Friesach in Carinthia. Furthermore, Witting writes that Jurij Gotfried Lamberg was promoted to the title of Landgrave (Landgraf) in 1667 in

Vienna. Lamberg built the house of the Teutonic Order in Vienna, renovated the Teutonic Order's Church of St Elizabeth, re-established the Order's residence at Velika Nedelja and was a benefactor of the Order's church at Friesach. He died on 7 February 1672.¹⁶ Thus, Lamberg was promoted from an imperial ensign to a chamberlain, Landgraf and Provincial Commander of the Order of Teutonic Knights, which is certainly a successful career. But how did the mentioned painting contribute to his success?

When the painting was made, namely in 1660, Janez of Črnomelj was the Commander of the Order of Teutonic Knights in Ljubljana, and Archduke Leopold Wilhelm of Austria (a member of the Habsburg family, the youngest son of Emperor Ferdinand II, brother of Emperor Ferdinand III and uncle of Emperor Leopold I) was the Grand Master of the Order. The Archduke visited Ljubljana in September 1660 together with Emperor Leopold I on the occasion of provincial estates' hereditary homage. This was a remarkable event, since emperors rarely visited Ljubljana. Before Leopold's visit, citizens of Ljubljana had the opportunity to see Emperor Maximilian in 1514, when he visited Ljubljana due to the Battle with the Venetians.¹⁷ As many as five members of the Lamberg family, including Jurij Gotfried, who was then still a baron, attended the banquet held on the occasion of the hereditary homage in the Archbishop's Palace, more precisely in the Hall of the Corpus Christi Brotherhood. Jurij Gotfried sat at the third table, at the head of which sat Count Francis Lamberg, the Emperor's Chief Chamberlain. It is not known whether Emperor Leopold I saw the painting during his stay in Ljubljana; however, Archduke Leopold Wilhelm of Austria certainly saw it, since he stayed in Ljubljana due to his poor health, while his nephew attended another hereditary homage in Gorizia. Meanwhile, the Archduke moved to another apartment, namely to the Kommende in Ljubljana (because the air there was fresher and there was a beautiful garden next to it). On 26 and 29 September, he performed his devotions in 'in the Church of the Order of Teutonic Knights, and General Count Herbart Auersperg's musicians played for him.¹⁸ As regards the painting, Lamberg chose a motif that Leopold I was very fond of.

To sum up, Jurij Gotfried Lamberg commissioned the *Mariahilf* painting in 1660 – when the Emperor visited Ljubljana on the occasion of the provincial estates' hereditary homage – in order to find favour with Leopold I and show him his loyalty to the Emperor and the entire imperial house, which was known for its piety. In fact, Lamberg knew that *Mariahilf* was very important to Leopold I, and he hung the painting in the Church of the Order of Teutonic Knights because he was a member of the Order and because Leopold's uncle Archduke Wilhelm, who accompanied his nephew, was the Grand Master of the Order of Teutonic Knights. His stay in the Kommende must have been pre-planned.

Copies of the *Mariahilf* painting later became the subject of popular piety. After pilgrimage had been eliminated or prohibited by the Church and the state authority and devotional images had been removed, moved or confiscated, a copy made after the mentioned *Mariahilf* painting from the church of the Teutonic Order became widely venerated in Gorenjska, although it was initially not meant to become miraculous. The copy was made by Lauer and has been displayed for veneration at Brezje since 1814. The church at Brezje soon (namely, at the time of the awakening of nations) became a pan-Slovenian pilgrimage centre and remains the most visited religious site in Slovenia, and the painting is the most famous Slovenian painting.

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¹ Bridget Heal, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Modern Germany: Protestant and Catholic Piety, 1500-1648* (Cambridge: University Press, 2007), 46.

² Hans Aurenhammer, *Die Mariengnadenbilder Wiens und Niederösterreich in der Barockzeit. Der Wandel ihrer Ikonographie und ihrer Verehrung* (Vienna: Verlag des Österreichischen Museums für Volkskunde, 1956).

³ Aurenhammer, *Die Mariengnadenbilder*.

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⁹ Leuschner, "Das Gnadenbild zwischen," 24.

¹⁰ Möller, *Das Mariahilf-Bild*.

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¹³ Leuschner, "Das Gnadenbild zwischen," 24-25

¹⁴ Johann Baptist Witting, "Der Adel in Krain," *Jahrbuch der k.k. heraldischen Gesellschaft Adler* 5, 6 (1895), 182.

¹⁵ Witting, "Der Adel in Krain," 182.

¹⁶ Witting, "Der Adel in Krain," 182

¹⁷ Janez Vajkard Valvasor, *Slava vojvodine Kranjske*, ed. Mirko Rupel (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1978), X, 371.

¹⁸ Valvasor, *Slava*, 386.