

The Anabaptist kingdom of Münster

by Peter E. Lewis



Jan van Leyden baptizing a maiden by Johann Karl Bähr, 1840. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

MARTIN Luther began the Protestant Reformation in 1517 when he nailed his 95 theses on the door of the castle church at Wittenberg. The effects were soon felt all over northern Europe with dissident groups rising up in various centres. One of these groups believed that infant baptism was wrong and that people should be baptized only when they understand what it means. The members of this group were called Anabaptists. 'Ana' means 'again', and they rebaptized people who had been baptized as infants. Various Anabaptist sects developed according to the doctrines that they espoused. One sect, which followed the teaching of Menno Simons, was pacifist. His followers exist today and are known as Mennonites. The most radical and bizarre sect was in the city of Münster, which is in western Germany about 60 kilometres from the border with the Netherlands. Münster was a prosperous city with



Figure 1 – Gold coin (6 ducats) of Christoph Bernhard, prince-bishop of Münster from 1650 to 1678. (Image used with the permission of Fritz Rudolf Künker GmbH & Co. KG, Osnabrück. The owner of the coin image is Lübke & Wiedermann, Stuttgart.)

about 9000 inhabitants in 1533. In the centre stood a magnificent cathedral, St Paul's, and there were ten other churches as well as an imposing city hall. The river Aa flowed through the middle

of the city and provided enough water to fill a double moat. The city's defences were very strong with a double wall and stone forts guarding its ten gates. These features can be seen on the reverse of a large gold coin that was issued in 1661 by Christoph Bernhard, who was the prince-bishop of Münster from 1650 to 1678. (Figure 1) The shield on the obverse is Christoph's coat of arms, and his mitre sits on top of one of the helmets. On the reverse the twin towers of the cathedral are in the centre. To the right, with its steeple touching the clouds, is St Lambert's Church. To the left, the tallest steeple belongs to the Overwater



Figure 2 – View of Münster in 1570 by Remius Hogenberg. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 3 – Portrait of Franz von Waldeck, prince-bishop of Münster from 1532 to 1553. He wears a cross and a mitre, and holds a crozier, but his princely armour and sword are menacingly apparent. This oil painting is unsigned and undated. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Church, so-called because one had to cross a bridge over the River Aa to reach it. On the far right, the building without a steeple is the Ludgerikirche (Ludger's church). Ludger was sent by Charlemagne in 793 to be a missionary in the region. In 804 he was consecrated bishop of Münster and built a monastery there. Under the image of the city are the words MONAST.WESTPH for Monasterium Westphalia. Monasterium (Monastery) was the Latin name of the city and Westphalia was the region. The name, 'Münster', derives from 'Monaster'. Above the city, St Paul, its patron saint, appears in the clouds. This 6-ducat coin sold at auction in October 2012 for AU\$12,400. A similar picture of the city was made in 1570 by Remius Hogenberg (Figure 2) and the man who en-



Figure 6 – Medallion minted at Münster in 1535. The legend around the image of Jan reads, 'Jan van Leyden, King of the Anabaptists of Münster.' (Photocopy of coin 44 in 'Martin Luther und die Reformation auf Münzen und Medaillen' by Hugo Schnell. Published by Klinkhardt & Biermann, München, 1983.)



Figure 4 – Wiedertäufertaler (Anabaptist taler) of Münster issued in 1534. (Collection of St John's Cathedral, Brisbane)



Figure 5 – Notgeld (emergency paper money) issued by the city of Münster in 1921 showing Jan as king. (Author's collection)

graved the die for the gold coin must have been aware of it.

In 1532 Franz von Waldeck (Figure 3) became the prince-bishop of Münster although he did not actually reside there. His residence was at Ahaus, about 40 kilometres to the north-west. At this time there was much unrest in Germany. The Peasant's Revolt against Church and State, which broke out in 1524 and continued intermittently for a few years, was brutally stamped out by the authorities. It is estimated that a hundred thousand peasants died, but still there was disquiet and religious fervour everywhere.

In 1533 Jan Matthias, a fanatical Anabaptist, became the leader of a radical sect that advocated violent rebellion, and in early 1534 he arrived in Münster. At about the same time Jan Bockelson arrived from Leyden in Holland to co-ordinate Anabaptist activities in the city. Although only a tailor's apprentice he was a charismatic young man.

Münster became a hotbed of religious excitement, with many believing that the

Second Coming of Christ was imminent. After a cosmic battle between good and evil forces, the Millennium, a thousand year period of peace and prosperity, would begin. The Anabaptists in Münster believed that they had been chosen to prepare for this event. Spreading out from their base they would purify the world in readiness for the miraculous future.

After the arrival of Jan Matthias a new city council consisting entirely of Anabaptists was formed, and the Catholics and moderate Lutherans were driven from the city. The prince-bishop was alarmed. On 28th February 1534 he began a blockade of the city and made preparations to seize it by force. Meanwhile the Anabaptists were transforming the community into what they thought the first Christian community was like in the first century. There was renunciation of property, with all goods shared by everyone. Even food was eaten communally. And the people would be purified of sin.

In 1534 the city minted coins, large silver talers, which were unusual in several



Figure 7 – Engraving of Jan van Leyden made in 1536 by Heinrich Aldegrever. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

ways. (Figure 4) The inscriptions were in German, which people could actually read, not in Latin, which few people understood. (By 1534 Martin Luther had translated the whole Bible into German.) There were no images on the coin, which complied with the Second Commandment prohibiting images. It might seem inconsistent that the city where all goods were shared needed coins, but the coins were for trade with the outside world and for propaganda. What an effective way to get their message across!

On the coin the legends are in Old German, which is not easy to translate. On the obverse THO MVNSTER (to Münster) appears on a shield, with the



Figure 9 – Notgeld (emergency paper money) issued by the city of Münster in 1921 showing Jan being tortured to death. (Author's collection)

date 1534 above. The surrounding legend reads, 'One God, one faith, one baptism.' The outer legend reads, 'As recorded, in God's kingdom, one righteous king over everyone.' At the top are crossed swords, which represent the city regiment. On the other side the inscription reads, 'The Word became flesh and dwells in us.' (John 1:14) The surrounding legend reads, 'Who is not born of water and spirit is unable.' (John 3:5) The original coins are rare today but restrikes were made in the 17th century.

So far, all this seems innocent enough, but there was a dark side, and it was very dark indeed. No deviation from the

path outlined by the leader was tolerated. In March 1534 an incident occurred that illustrated this: Herbert Rusher, a blacksmith, complained about the harsh conditions in the besieged city and questioned the rule of Jan Matthias. He was brought into the Cathedral Square where Matthias proclaimed that evildoers must be punished. At this point Jan Bockelson stepped forward and stabbed Rusher in the back. It was the first of many such executions.

The people accepted Matthias' fearful rule because they thought he was a prophet. He was probably mentally unhinged because on Easter Sunday in 1534 he rode out of the city to challenge the bishop to single combat just as David had challenged Goliath. He was accompanied by twelve supporters, but they were no match for the Bishop's army and were quickly annihilated.

Jan Bockelson, who became known as Jan van Leyden (John of Leyden) assumed the leadership. He inspired the citizens and when the bishop's forces attacked the city on 25th May 1534 they were repulsed. Subsequently Jan's dominance was strengthened. In accordance with the custom of the Old Testament patriarchs he advocated polygamy and married sixteen women. He went even further back in time, to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and advocated nudity. On one occasion he ran naked through the streets of the city.

On 28th August 1534 another attack by the bishop failed, and he determined to starve the city into submission. Soon after the attack the people acknowledged Jan as king. On emergency paper money (notgeld) issued by the city in 1921 Jan



Figure 8 – Notgeld (emergency paper money) issued by the city of Münster in 1921 showing the three cages. (Author's collection)

is shown in his regalia looking stern. (Figure 5) He began to live like a king in a palace, and any opposition to his rule was punished by death. Two women who opposed polygamy were beheaded.

The city now minted medallions proclaiming Jan as king. His ego had grown to such an extent that Old Testament scruples were put aside and his image appeared on the obverse. (Figure 6) The imperial orb hangs around his neck. A very similar portrait of Jan was made as a copper etching by the artist, Heinrich Aldegrever (Figure 7) but it bears the date 1536. As Jan died on 22nd January 1536 it seems that the etching was made just before or after his death, but the date on the medallion is 1535. The most likely explanation is that Aldegrever made a sketch of Jan in 1535 and the engraver of the die for the medallion copied this sketch. Aldegrever then made his more detailed engraving after Jan's death.

In response to the propaganda coming from Münster, Martin Luther wrote a letter to the Anabaptists there: "Since you are led astray by the devil into such blasphemous error, and are drunk and utterly captive to your delusions, you wish, as is Satan's way, to make yourselves into angels of light and to paint in brightness and colour your devilish doings." He went on to say, "You want to make it [Scripture] point to your Tailor-King, to the great disgrace and mockery of Christ."

The darkness was not all on the side of Jan and his followers. The bishop was merciless and ruthless, and he also executed those who opposed him. Because his plan was to starve the city into submission anyone fleeing the city was killed. This was to discourage people from leaving so that the inhabitants would run out of food more quickly. Hundreds of men, women and children were massacred as soon as they were outside the city walls.

Eventually, on 22nd June 1535, a night attack by the bishop succeeded. Most of the Anabaptists were killed and their leaders captured. The bishop rode into the city in a splendid coach drawn by six white horses. When he alighted, Jan stood before him dressed in rags and bound with chains. In a scornful tone the bishop said to Jan, "Bist du ein König?" The word 'du' was used to address inferiors, so that his statement meant, "Are you a king?" Jan replied, "Und bist du ein Bischof?"

The punishment that the bishop meted out to Jan and two others was terrible in the extreme: their bodies were torn to pieces by red-hot tongs. When they finally died the corpses were hung in metal cages from the tower of St Lambert's Church. All this is shown on notgeld



Figure 10 – Photo of the three cages. (Source: Wikimedia Commons. The photo was taken by Rüdiger Wölk.)

issued in 1921 by the city of Münster: the three cages hang from the church (Figure 8) and the iron tongs glow bright red on either side of the scene of torture (Figure 9). Although the skeletons were removed after fifty years the cages are still there, as shown in a recent photograph (Figure 10).

These coins and medallions of Münster are important because they remind us of a time of aberration in human society when things went terribly wrong. But could anything like that happen in modern times? In the 1930s Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen, a German Catholic, wrote that the Münster episode was an example of 'mass insanity'. He argued that the Anabaptist kingdom and its king were forerunners of Nazi Germany and Hitler. Although an opponent of Hitler he could only watch helplessly as 'truth was distorted and history falsified.' Needless to say, he later died in Dachau concentration camp.

Anthony Arthur, the author of *The Tailor-King: the Rise and Fall of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster* (St Martin's Press, New York, 1999), from which much of the information in this article was derived, considered that human nature does not change. In his final paragraph he wrote, "Jan van Leyden and his Company of Christ shook the foundations of their world. What makes them worth remembering is that they were the precursors and to some degree the progenitors of the political and religious violence that have become so much a part of our world today."

☆☆☆

MAKE YOUR FIRST CALL TO THESE SUPPORTING ADVERTISERS (AND PLEASE TELL THEM... YOU "SAW IT IN CAB")

AFS Coins & Investments	43
ANDA	51
APTA	21
Bentleigh Coin Fairs	30
Chris Rudd	47
Coin Trends	63
Classy Collectables	47
Classical Numismatics Group . . .	18
Downies	7
Fred Lever	49
IA	
The I.S. Wright Group	25
Klaus Ford	38-39
Lindner	18
M.E.F. Books	8
Mickel Smits	3
Newcastle Coins	21
Noble Numismatics	2
Renniks Publications	76
Romanorum	43
Royal Australian Mint	19
Roxburys Auction House	75
Stacks & Bowers	43
Steele Waterman	66
Trevor Wilkin Banknotes	74
Universal Coin Co.	9
Velvet Collectables	13
vpcoins	31
Ye Olde Coin Co.	21

TO BE UPDATED