

Special exhibit

The Anabaptists of Münster 1534-1535

The term “Anabaptist” describes a group of people within the reformation movement in the 16th century. Adult baptism, which has its origins in early Christianity, was their main objective. Further demands were abandonment of the world and to refrain from holding public office. The Anabaptist movement was considered revolutionary and was prohibited throughout the Holy Roman Empire in 1529. Thereafter, the persecuted followers of this movement continued to operate in secret. They also believed that the world would soon come to an end and that they could prophecy when it would take place. Only those who were baptised would survive the apocalypse in “New Jerusalem” and re-establish God’s kingdom there. As Anabaptists in the Netherlands, led by Jan Matthys and



Jan van Leiden (see illustration), had calculated that the end of the world would occur by no later than Easter 1534, baptisms had to resume and the “New Jerusalem” had to be found. The city of Münster seemed suitable. At the instigation of the reformist preacher Bernhard Rothmann and his followers and, despite the resistance of the city council and the prince bishop, Protestantism established itself in all of the parish churches, although Catholicism was still represented in Münster. In the ensuing period,

tensions increased between conservatives and Rothmann as a result of the radical reformers' rejection of child baptisms. In early 1534, Dutch Anabaptists, including Matthys and van Leiden, began settling in Münster. They remained very active yet covert, and managed to attract a large number of followers: Rothmann was also baptised. When the city council finally issued a religious tolerance decree, allowing the anabaptism movement, it breached the imperial decree of 1529, to which the bishop reacted by laying siege to the

city. There was a mass exodus of those who rejected anabaptism. The anabaptists gained the upper hand and Matthys established the "New Jerusalem", which was based on the original Christian community. After his death during the siege of the city, Jan van Leiden became the new leader. He declared himself king and founded the strict "regiment of the 12 Apostles". Despite heavy public resistance, he introduced polygamy, referring to passages from the Old Testament to substantiate the move.

Anabaptist rule came to an abrupt end when the bishop's troops took control of the city in the summer of 1535. The bodies of the three executed leaders of the movement were exhibited in iron cages which hung from the St Lamberti church. These cages are still hanging today. Münster returned to its old faith.

The coins which were minted during the period of the Anabaptist rule in 1534-1535 served propaganda purposes only as the Anabaptists were prohibited from possessing and using money. Optically, they differ from all of the other coins in circulation at that time in that they bear only writing and no images whatsoever. The design of the coins reflected the anabaptist message as well as the idea of the reformation with its rejection of clerical pomp.



The bishop's Thaler of Münster of 1535, with the image of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, was probably not minted until the city was captured by Franz von Waldeck, using the silver from the Anabaptist treasure that was confiscated.

400 years later, this episode in the city's history was commemorated on Münster's emergency banknotes in 1921.

Illustration: - enlarged reproduction of a medal minted in Nuremburg around 1728
with a portrait of Jan van Leiden.

- Thaler 1535 of the Prince Bishop of Münster, Franz von Waldeck, minted in Warendorf.

Literature: - The City Museum of Münster (ed), *Die Wiedertäufer in Münster*, Münster, 1982.

- Barbara Rommé (ed), *Das Königreich der Täufer in Münster – Neue Perspektiven*, Münster, 2003.