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Between dictamen and affair: Latin and Medieval German chancellery departments of the Lithuanian Grand Duke Vytautas writing on the Hussites' heresy

The chancellery of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was finally established during the reign of Grand Duke Vytautas (1392–1430), and immediately came under considerable pressure. Particularly in the 1420s, Vytautas was highly active politically, not only on the battlefield but also through diplomatic correspondence. At this time, the principal topic of communication between rulers in Central Europe and the Papacy was the Hussite movement and the war against it. The present study analyses correspondence relating to Vytautas's involvement in Hussite affairs,¹ including letters written by the Lithuanian ruler himself as well as those he received from Sigismund of Luxembourg, King of the Romans, Hungary and Bohemia, Pope Martin V, various bishops, the King of Poland Władysław II Jogaila, and the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order. The letters 'about Vytautas' are also included, since at that time it was customary to resend official correspondence.² It is impossible to determine which of those letters were readdressed to the Grand Duke directly, given that the entirety of his archive has not been preserved.³ However, the text reuse analyses demonstrated that the rulers with well-developed chancelleries employed the same models in all their letters on the same subject. For instance, the content of letters from the Pope to Jogaila was reiterated in a substantial proportion of the letters from the Pope to Vytautas. It makes it highly probable that the content of all the letters under consideration could be known at the Grand Duke's chancellery.

¹ The key study of the event is J. NIKODEM, *Polska i Litwa wobec husyckich Czech w latach 1420–1433: studium o polityce dynastycznej Władysława Jagiełły i Witolda Kiejstutowicza* [Poland and Lithuania Towards Hussite Bohemia in the Years 1420–1433: A Study of the Dynastic Policy of Władysław Jagiełło and Witold Kiejstutowicz] (Oświęcim, 2015). Cf. also G. MICKŪNAITĖ, *Making a Great Ruler: Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania* (Budapest, 2006), pp. 47–50.

² *Codex epistolaris Vitoldi Magni Ducis Lithuaniae 1376–1430*, coll. and ed. A. PROCHASKA (Cracoviae, 1882: *Monumenta mediae aevi historica res gestas Poloniae illustrantia* 6 = *Editiones Collegii historici Academiae litterarum Cracoviensis* 23) (hereafter: CEV), p. 921; *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch nebst Regesten*, 1/5, ed. F. G. von BUNGE (Reval, 1867) (hereafter: LUB 5), col. 841, 834; *Codex epistolaris saeculi decimi quinti*, pars 2: 1382–1445, coll. in: *Monumenta mediae aevi historica res gestas Poloniae illustrantia* 12, coll. A. LEWICKI (Cracoviae, 1891) (hereafter: CEVX II), p. 149.

³ M. KOSMAN, "Dokumenty wielkiego księcia Witolda" [Documents of Grand Duke Vytautas], *Studia źródłoznawcze* 16 (1971), pp. 139–169, at p. 168.

The diplomatic sources of the time of the Grand Duke are to be found in several nineteenth-century editions.⁴ In order to verify all instances, a [Python script](#) was written. The system accepts plain .txt files, with the majority of source collections accessible thanks to the [Bavarian State Library](#). The files require only minimal cleanup, which includes the removal of the title, preface and index. The script performs a number of functions. Firstly, it splits text by markers such as “I.” or “No. 123.” Secondly, it merges lines. Thirdly, it removes hyphens from line breaks. In the second step of the process, the software utilises regular expression patterns to identify heretical terms⁵ (e.g. *h*ret.**, *ke*er.**) and normalises ligatures (e.g. “æ” → “ae”) before outputting the matching paragraphs to a .docx file. Next, it highlights suitable word roots in red and adds a summary table of match frequencies. The resultant document is stored in a .docx file, accompanied by red highlights and a table displaying pattern statistics.

The present study built upon the research conducted by Přemysl Bar on Vytautas’s and Jogaila’s political correspondence.⁶ It appeared that the script did not include some letters about the Hussites written by Vytautas. The Grand Duke did not always use the accusations of heresy in his early letters about his contacts with the Hussites. Critical discourse analysis was employed to explore the reason for this wording.

The combination of the script and previous historiographical achievements enabled the selection of 145 letters written in Latin and Middle German. The latter was utilised in the context of correspondence among members of the Teutonic Order, as well as between Vytautas and the Order, Vytautas and the bishop of Dorpat, Sigismund and the Order, and Sigismund and the prince-electors. Conversely, Vytautas and Sigismund utilised Latin in their written correspondence. As was stated by Bálint Lakatos during the discussion after my presentation, Sigismund used German for his correspondence with his subjects, and to him Vytautas was not his vassal, but an external international partner. Latin played the role of an international diplomatic language, despite the fact that Vytautas spoke German, but most probably not Latin. The use of Latin was also prevalent in all other instances, including the correspondence between Vytautas and Jogaila (where references to letters in Ruthenian have been made,⁷ though these have not been preserved), and Vytautas and his relative Sigismund Korybut.

⁴ Rare contemporary publications, not available in digital form, have not been included in the computerized data processing.

⁵ The script is adjustable: The search pattern can be easily changed according to the research requirements.

⁶ P. BAR, “Husyci i husytyzm w politycznej korespondencji Władysława Jagiełły i Witolda” [Hussites and Hussitism in the Political Correspondence of Władysław Jagiełło and Witold], in *Jagiellonowie i ich świat: polityka kościelna i praktyki religijne Jagiellonów*, ed. B. CZWOJDRAK, J. SPERKA and P. WĘCOWSKI (Kraków, 2020), pp. 339–374.

⁷ CEV, pp. 827, 831, 834; CEXV II, p. 243.

The inner organisation of Vytautas's chancellery has been well studied.⁸ It consisted of two departments: a Latin-German and a Ruthenian.⁹ The same scribes wrote letters in both Latin and German languages. However, letters about the Hussites written in these two languages demonstrate two distinct approaches, ranging from the well-established *dictamen* and lengthy Latin sentences to the concise and precise German. Earlier Latin texts contain more negative epithets towards heretics, whereas later texts, especially those concerning negotiations, are much more restrained. The Pope uses the most epithets and comparisons, followed in descending order by Sigismund of Luxembourg, Jogaila and Vytautas. The more Vytautas attempted to distance himself from accusations relating to the Hussites – often transferring such allegations to Jogaila – the more aggressive and florid his style in Latin tended to become. German-language texts are more restrained in tone and often lack additional negative epithets directed at heretics.

Vytautas's political interests exerted a significant influence on his choice of vocabulary. In 1421, he received the Hussite ambassadors with a proposition to become King of Bohemia. The Grand Duke accepted the offer and sent his relative Sigismund Korybut to Prague as a representative. This *démarche* called an immediate negative reaction from the side of the Catholic rulers: the Pope, Sigismund and prince-electors. In his correspondence from 1422 and 1423, Vytautas refrained from asserting any allegations of heresy against the Hussites. He established an opposition between accusations of Bohemians of heresy and their 'erroneous' or schismatic status.¹⁰ Schism in Catholic thought was a less severe and radical term than heresy. Unlike heretics, schismatics were not denied the most essential value of Christianity – the right to eternal salvation. In his correspondence dated 1423, Vytautas did not address the issue of heresy. Instead, he focused on errors of the Bohemians and the necessity of accepting the authority of the Catholic Church.¹¹

⁸ M. KOSMAN, "W kancelarii wielkiego księcia Witolda" [In the Chancellery of Grand Duke Vytautas], in *Orzeł i Pogoń: z dziejów polsko-litewskich XIV–XX w.* (Warszawa, 1992), pp. 102–142; S. SZYBKOWSKI, "Kancelaria wielkiego księcia Witolda w dobie wielkich konfliktów z Zakonem krzyżackim w latach 1409–1422. Organizacja, zadania, personel" [The Chancellery of Grand Duke Vytautas During the Great Conflicts with the Teutonic Order in the Years 1409–1422. Organization, Tasks, Staff], in *Kancelaria wielkich mistrzów i Polska kancelaria królewska w XV wieku: Materiały z międzynarodowej konferencji naukowej, Malbork, 2–3 IX 2004*, ed. J. TRUPINDA (Malbork, 2006), pp. 299–318; R. PIETRAUSKAS, "Фармаванне інстытуцыйнага двара вялікага князя ў Літве (XIV – пачатак XV ст.)" [Formation of the Institutional Court of the Grand Duke in Lithuania (14th–early 15th Centuries)], *Arche. Пачатак* 9 (2009), pp. 39–71; S. SZYBKOWSKI, "Polish Staff as a Social Group in the Chancery of Grand Duke Witold", *Quaestiones medii aevi novae* 3 (1998), pp. 75–94.

⁹ M. KOSMAN, "Kancelaria wielkiego księcia Witolda" [Chancellery of Grand Duke Vytautas], *Studia źródłoznawcze* 14 (1969), pp. 91–119, at p. 102.

¹⁰ *Urkundliche Beiträge zur Geschichte des Hussitenkrieges vom Jahre 1419 an*, 1: *Von den Jahren 1419–1428*, ed. F. PALACKÝ (Prag, 1872), p. 187.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

The political situation changed drastically in the spring of 1424. The Treaty of Kežmarok, signed between Jogaila and Sigismund, made the Lithuanian rule over Samogitia – a disputed territory between the Teutonic Order and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – permanent. An alliance with the Bohemians against Sigismund was no longer in Vytautas’s interest. According to his vassal obligations toward Jogaila, the Grand Duke was bound, following his sovereign,¹² to declare war against the Hussites. Even in this document, he did not employ heretical discourse at all, presenting the conflict rather as a matter of Bohemian disobedience to their legitimate ruler King Sigismund.¹³

The crucial issue is both the presence of the term “*heretic*” and the degree of specification – whether the condemned belief is named explicitly. Discussions within the Order principally do not mention which heresy it is referencing; in the majority of cases, they use just the German term “*Ketzer*” in different spellings. However, when a letter is addressed to the city council of Wrocław, it means outside of the Order, the unknown author gives more details: “*der ketzer, das Hussen heysen*”.¹⁴ The choosing of the names was also a matter of personal choice: The only member of the Teutonic Order who used the term “*Wicleffen*” was Siegfried Lander von Spanheim, Land Master in Livonia.¹⁵

Vytautas himself started to write about heresy in 1422, but he had been well aware of the heretical condemnations at least for five years. Vytautas’s representatives were present at the Council of Constance in 1415, when Jan Hus and Jerome of Prague were officially condemned. He also received on 16 May 1417 the personal letter from the Bishop of Dorpat, which announced that Jan Hus was a condemned heretic.¹⁶ Later in the letter from 9 July 1421, Sigismund wrote to Vytautas that “through adherence to the Wycliffites” (meaning by it Hussites) Vytautas could ruin his fame.¹⁷ Pope Martin V used the same term “*pestifero veneno Viclefistarum*” – “pestilential poison of the Wycliffites” – in early 1422.¹⁸ Naming the Hussite movement as Wickliffist was in use in Jogaila’s chancellery.¹⁹ Although Vytautas’s scribes who were trained at more advanced Western chancelleries²⁰ were aware of the ‘heretical

¹² CEV, pp. 637–638.

¹³ CEV, pp. 632–633.

¹⁴ CEXV II, p. 125.

¹⁵ LUB 5, col. 759, 762.

¹⁶ “*Johannes Hus hillich were, und straffede mit grozen schandesignificantly influencedn und scheldeworden, das hilige concilium, wi daz se den selben Johannes mit unrechte vor enen ketzzer hetten vorbrandt*”; CEV, p. 382.

¹⁷ CEV, p. 513

¹⁸ *Liber Cancellariae Stanislai Ciolek, Ein Formelbuch der polnischen Königskanzlei aus der Zeit der husitischen Bewegung*, 2 vols. (Wien, 1871–1874), 2, p. 187.

¹⁹ *Liber Cancellariae Stanislai Ciolek*, 1, p. 47.

²⁰ KOSMAN, “Kancelaria wielkiego księcia Witolda”, p. 111.

naming’, they never applied it themselves. They also refrained from the derogatory term ‘Hussites’ until 1429, when the Grand Duke had lost all connections and hopes for the union with the Bohemians against King Sigismund, as he was actively collaborating with the King of the Romans and was ready to receive a crown from him. The very term ‘Hussites’ was applied in the Church context as early as 1415, and became widespread after 1421.²¹ First to use the term ‘Hussites’ in correspondence with Vytautas was King Jogaila, who applied it as derogatory in opposition to the (for him) neutral term ‘Taborites’ in 1423,²² albeit, without adding to this term any pejorative characteristics (unlike in the letter of the same Jogaila to his subjects in Lviv at the same year²³). Instead, the term ‘Hussites’ in their German form ‘Hussen’ was broadly employed in the Teutonic inner correspondence from at least 1422 onwards.²⁴ Thus, such a choice of naming the followers of Jan Hus depending on the political situation was characteristic not only for Vytautas, but also for other secular political leaders. Jogaila and Sigismund of Luxembourg also shifted terminology, speaking of ‘heresy’ and ‘Hussites’ in war, but of ‘Praguers’, ‘Bohemians’, or ‘Taborites’ in negotiations.²⁵

Inspired by the new methodological approach in Heresy Studies by Reima Välimäki and Marius Aho, namely computational text reuse analysis using BLAST (Basic Local Alignment Search Tool) to compare 189 classical and medieval texts,²⁶ I applied BLAST text reuse analysis to my 145 letters as well. The code was originally provided by [Marius Aho](#) six years ago. Two separate analyses were conducted, one for each language, which is necessary even when both languages use the same writing system. The results allowed for contesting Přemysl Bar’s opinion that the difference in formula between Vytautas’s and Jogaila’s war declaration was a matter of rhetorical preferences of the chancellor.²⁷ Text reuse analysis showed that the letters are mostly repeating each other, but the part about heresy and obedience to the Apostolic See, present in Jogaila’s letter, was omitted in Vytautas’s. It is highly improbable that a scribe (the Lithuanian chancellery in Vytautas’s time did not have a chancellor) could skip the religious component. This decision could belong only to the ruler

²¹ P. SOUKUP, “The Waning of the ‘Wycliffites’. Giving Names to Hussite Heresy”, in *Europe After Wyclif*, ed. J. P. HORNBECK II and M. VAN DUSSEN (New York, 2016), pp. 199–226, at pp. 199–201.

²² CEV, pp. 600–603

²³ PALACKÝ, *Urkundliche Beiträge*, pp. 303–305.

²⁴ CEV, pp. 544–545.

²⁵ CEV, pp. 600–603, 846–850 etc.

²⁶ R. VÄLIMÄKI and M. AHO, “Was It Augustine After All? Patristic Sources of Medieval Anti-heretical Polemics from the Perspective of Text Reuse Analysis”, in *Blurring the Boundaries of Religious Dissent. A New Approach to Heresy in the Middle Ages*, ed. D. I. NIETO-ISABEL and J. L. PETERSON (Bologna, 2024: *I Quaderni del m.æ.S. – Journal of Mediaeval Studies* 22, special issue 1), pp. 67–122.

²⁷ BAR, “Husyci i husytyzm”, p. 366.

himself, Vytautas the Great. The heretical discourse was present in the war proclamation signed by both rulers.²⁸ It let us conclude that this letter was written in Jogaila's chancery.

Vytautas adjusted his wording not only to the political situation, but to his addressees as well. A couple of months after proclaiming the war, he wrote to Pope Martin V, a staunch and fierce opponent of the Hussites, asking for money to launch the war "*contra dictos Bohemos hereticos in exterminium heretice pravitatis*".²⁹ In his dealings with secular rulers Vytautas relied on firm secular arguments to justify the war. When explaining to Sigismund and Jogaila how he had treated the Bohemian ambassadors with deliberate harshness, he again contrasted the King of the Romans' accusations of heresy against the Bohemians with his own opinion about the good people from the Kingdom of Bohemia, "those who have not yet been defiled by the stain of such a great heresy".³⁰ Despite proclaiming war, Vytautas sought to keep an open window for further contacts with the Bohemians.

A radical change in the Grand Duke's discourse occurred in 1429. The period of 1429–1430 marked a new phase in the political life of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and in its relations with Poland. Seeking to free himself from vassal dependence on Jogaila, Vytautas agreed to receive a royal crown from Sigismund of Luxembourg. His shift in rhetoric reflected his growing political ambitions and a redefinition of Lithuania's place within the regional power structure. As a result, Jogaila became Vytautas's immediate adversary, and the Grand Duke employed various diplomatic weapons against him, including accusations of heresy. In May 1429 Vytautas wrote to the Polish king clearly and unequivocally about the Bohemian heretics, treating their existence as an established fact rather than a matter for discussion or doubt.³¹ This escalation is evident in Vytautas's subsequent correspondence. Later in May, writing once again to Jogaila, he went even further in accusing the Polish king of collaborating with the heretics, invoking their names and painting terrifying images for all of Christendom.³² Vytautas fully grasped the gravity of the accusation and skillfully turned it against his accusers. In his letter to the Polish nobility, he appealed not only to Christian values but also to questions of power, authority, and property.³³ He also played the card of the Polish international

²⁸ CEV, pp. 653–656.

²⁹ *Liber Cancellariae Stanislai Ciołek*, 1, p. 50.

³⁰ CEV, pp. 633–636.

³¹ CEV, pp. 830–831.

³² CEV, pp. 832–833.

³³ CEV, pp. 836–838.

prestige.³⁴ Vytautas alluded to the well-known inquisitorial practice of extending suspicion of heresy not only to those already condemned but also to their supporters.³⁵

The BLAST text reuse analyses confirmed that Vytautas's scribes did not reuse the refined expressions from the Pope's or the kings' letters. The Grand Duke tried to remain reserved in his wording to keep open the possibility of 'sitting on two chairs'. This demonstrates the scribes' high level of professionalism and Vytautas's political talent. The greatest degree of textual reuse has been identified in the papal correspondence. As with all papal letters, these were composed based on established models. Several identical letters from the same sender were addressed to different recipients such as Sigismund of Luxembourg or King Jogaila. This allows us to hypothesise that the younger a chancery was, the fewer working models it possessed.

³⁴ CEV, pp. 826–830.

³⁵ “*cum omnes eis participantes in secretis et fovente[s] partem eorum de heresi sunt suspecti*”; CEV, p. 876.