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Karsten Igel (Osnabrück)

From Siege to Murder: Church spaces as Conflict Spaces

Violence and murder are not among the first things we think of when looking at churches. The fact that both occurred in churches and their surrounding closes, their sacred character notwithstanding, is, nevertheless, well known. Take, for example, the murder of Thomas Becket in Canterbury cathedral. This paper does not investigate whether, when or why these actions took place, but rather asks why they manifested in the church or on the close, rather than elsewhere. It has to be looked at in terms of a deliberate choice of site for the staging of an act of violence. The act of siege, to which the title of the paper refers, indicates that larger numbers of participants and a larger area must be taken into consideration.

The first example leads us back to the Stralsund of the end of the fourteenth century. According to the report of the Pomeranian chronicler Thomas Kantzow, the councillor Johann Hosanck was excluded from the city council after a dispute in the year 1390 and banished from his place in the council's church pews in St. Nicolas Church of Stralsund. By this, of course, he was also deprived of his social and political position in the town within sight of every church-goer. Goaded by the loss of his social position and the resulting disgrace he took the following course of action: He bought a knife from a blacksmith and entered the St. Nicolas to murder the mayor Segefried while he sat in the council's church pews. The action failed, because he was arrested by the town guards who were apparently then guarding access to the church pews. He paid for the attempted murder with his life, broken on the wheel. The purchase of the knife shows that he did not act spontaneously 'in the heat of the moment', but that he followed a deliberate plan; instead of waiting for a favorable opportunity, committing his revenge in secret, Johann Hosanck chose the council's church pews in St. Nikolai, accepting the public nature of his action and the near inevitability of arrest.

The second example, to be presented more briefly, took place on the Ash Wednesday of the year 1440 in the cathedral of Osnabrück. As all cathedral priests had to participate in the service during that day, in the case of feuds the dominant cathedral chapter took the opportunity to attack the excommunicated minority around the dean of the chapter. Supported by their armed servants they pounced by force on the smaller group; the dean and three canons were locked up, while other canons of the minority party managed to escape through the windows and chapels of the cathedral. The attack took place here almost of necessity, on account of the favorable opportunity. Whereas in this case only the choir stood as the focus of the conflict (the archbishop of Cologne subsequently imposed an interdict on the bloodstained cathedral), sixteen years before the whole cathedral with its surrounding close had become a "battlefield" in the conflict between the city and the cathedral chapter. Smouldering tensions found their climax in the election of a new bishop in October 1424. While the individual chosen as bishop was not in question, the city council demanded participation in the election, which had apparently been granted to them by the chapter before. Instead, the election took place in secret. Only the inauguration of the elected bishop, accompanied by the bells of the cathedral, involved the council; they reacted immediately by closing of the cathedral. Their

possession of the keys indicates that the council was well prepared for the ensuing conflict. A peal from St. Mary's church called the citizens together, who arranged themselves after guilds and quarters, and with flags, weapons and artillery they occupied the cathedral close and created a siege ring around the cathedral. The almost entirely assembled clergy of the city and the diocese, including the new bishop, remained inside the cathedral, surrounded by heavily armed citizens who called on the knights of the diocese for support. The contested power relations could not be visualized more clearly! The looting of Curias which occurred simultaneously rendered the whole action even more reminiscent of the siege of a city whose surrounding area was devastated. The presence of a full range of urban militia, including the barely-necessary artillery, suggests a deliberate staging, which made the power of the city within the diocese unambiguously clear and ended after three days in success when the bishop and the chapter agreed to the contract dictated by the city.

The siege of the cathedral in Osnabruck was not unique to fifteenth-century Westphalia, as already in October 1406 the citizens of Minden had enclosed their cathedral chapter. In this case they did not demand participation in the election of the bishop but aimed to force the chapter by this Konklave, which was still aggravated by the lack of food and fuel, to elect the desired bishop.

In both of the latter examples the cathedral was simultaneously both place and symbol of the conflict between citizens and clergy; indeed, in the almost regular staging of the siege in Osnabruck, the actual power relations were made obvious. In the conflict within the cathedral of Osnabruck chapter as well as in the murder attempt by the excluded councillor in Stralsund the choir or the church pews of the council were the common assembly-places within the church, where symbolic presence was concentrated, and where conflict could be powerfully played out.