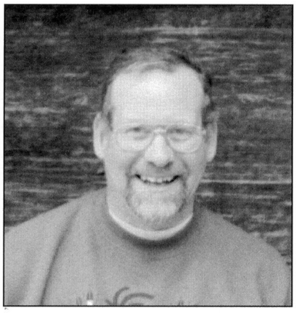
Men-at-Arms

OSPREY
PUBLISHING

The Hussite Wars 1419–36

Stephen Turnbull • Illustrated by Angus McBride



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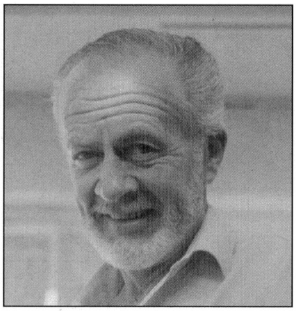

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Series editor Martin Windrow

First published in Great Britain in 2004 by Osprey Publishing
Elms Court, Chapel Way, Botley, Oxford OX2 9LP, United Kingdom
Email: **info@ospreypublishing.com**

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1 84176 665 8

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Editor: Martin Windrow
Design: Alan Hamp
Index by Glyn Sutcliffe
Originated by Grasmere Digital Imaging, Leeds, UK
Printed in China through World Print Ltd.

04 05 06 07 08 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

FOR A CATALOGUE OF ALL BOOKS PUBLISHED BY
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The Marketing Manager, Osprey Direct UK, PO Box 140
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www.ospreypublishing.com

Dedication

For Helen Ainsley, with love and thanks for her support through a very difficult time

Author's Note

The first words of this book were written within the shadow of Rabi Castle in southern Bohemia, where the great Hussite leader Jan Zizka lost the sight from his second eye during the epic siege of 1420. I wish to thank the curators of such institutions throughout the Czech Republic, particularly the Hussite Museum in Tabor and the National Museum and Bethlem Chapel in Prague, for helping me put together this testimony to the Czech people's greatest medieval heroes, whose contribution to world military history may finally be recognized by a wider public. I also thank Martin Windrow for his invaluable support.

Artist's Note

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THE HUSSITE WARS 1419–36

PREFACE

The Hussite Wars, although little known outside the borders of the modern Czech Republic where they were fought, represent an important stage of development in medieval military history. In terms of ideology alone they were fought for a religious principle that anticipated the Reformation by a century and a half, but from a military point of view the Hussite Wars were also ahead of their time. The Hussites' innovative use of artillery and their famous war wagons showed a new way of dealing with mounted knights, and foreshadowed the infantry revolution that was soon to have such an impact on medieval warfare.

Jan Zizka is represented in this bas-relief according to his traditional attributes: with one eye, fighting with a mace, and carrying a shield bearing the chalice device that became the badge of the Hussites. (From the door of the Zizka Memorial on Zitkov Hill, Prague)

CHRONOLOGY

1419	
30 July	First Defenestration of Prague
16 August	Death of King Wenceslas IV
4 November	Battle of Prague begins
13 November	Armistice of Prague
December	Battle of Nekmer
First Crusade	
1420	
17 March	Proclamation of the First Crusade
25 March	Battle of Sudomer
14 July	Battle of the Vitkov
28 July	Coronation of King Sigismund
1 November	Capture of Vysehrad by the Orebites
1421	
June	Diet of Caslav
Late June	Siege of Rabi – Zizka blinded
5 August	Siege of Most
10 September	Siege of Zatec begins
Second Crusade	
16 October	Sigismund enters Moravia
21 December	Battle of Kutna Hora begins

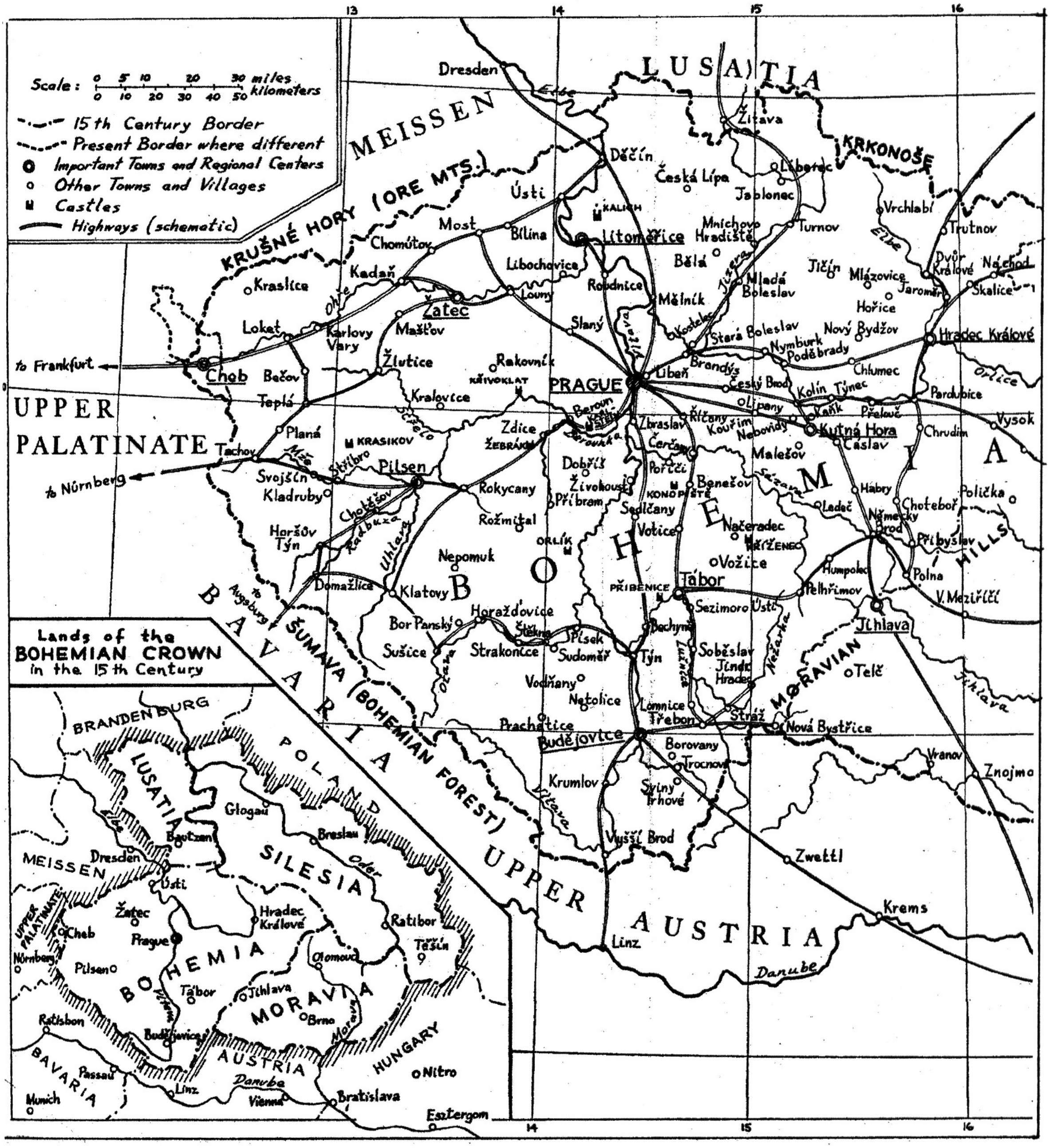
continued

1422	
6 January	Battle of Nebovidy Kutna Hora evacuated
8 January	Battle of Habry
10 January	Capture of Nemecky Brode
Third Crusade	
7 October	Siege of Chomutov
22 October	Siege of Karlstein Castle begins
8 November	Armistice ends Third Crusade
1423	
August	Fighting breaks out between rival Hussite groups
1424	
7 June	Battle of Malesov
October	Jan Zizka lays siege to Pribyslav
11 October	Death of Zizka
1426	
16 June	Prokop's victory in battle of Usti
Fourth Crusade	
1427	
Late July	Siege of Stribro
4 August	Battle of Tachov
14 August	Capture of Tachov
1430	
	Hussites raid as far as Czestochow, Poland
Fifth Crusade	
1431	
14 August	Hussite victory at battle of Domazlice
1433	
	Hussite raid reaches the Baltic near Gdansk
1434	
30 May	Battle of Lipany; death of Prokop the Great and Prokop the Lesser
1436	
16 August	King Sigismund proclaims formal end of the Hussite Wars
1457	
	George of Podebrady becomes Bohemia's first and only Hussite king

THE HUSSITE WARS

The Hussite Wars of 15th century Bohemia are often referred to as the Hussite 'Revolution' or the Hussite 'Crusades', although attacks by crusading armies from outside Bohemia formed only part of the overall series of events. These actions also included civil wars between Czech and German troops within Bohemia, and a number of conflicts arising from splits within the ranks of the Hussite movement itself. Yet whatever the terminology, all the Hussite Wars had their origins in the religious differences that first brought about the Hussite movement and continued to motivate all sides throughout the long and bitter struggle. On one side (when they were not fighting each other) stood the supporters of the martyred religious reformer Jan Hus, while ranged against them were a motley 'international brigade' upon whom was periodically bestowed the coveted title of crusaders against heresy.

The Hussite Wars therefore represent something of a transition point in medieval history. From one point of view they were the last of the great crusades of medieval Europe against dissenting sectarian Christians, the successors of expeditions such as those against the Albigensians of southern France. From another standpoint they can be seen as the first in the chain of European revolutions that led to the Reformation, and that were to produce decisive changes in the structural character of European societies.



Map of Bohemia in the 15th century, showing the places associated with the Hussites and the wars against them.

The martyrdom of Jan Hus

The society in which the Hussite Wars exploded was one that already had within it a huge potential for civil war. By the beginning of the 15th century there had developed a strong feeling of Czech nationalism directed against the powerful position occupied in society by the German-speaking minority. This spirit was particularly acute within the cities and monasteries of Bohemia and Moravia. There was also widespread dissatisfaction with the dominant position of the wealthy Church, and this was linked to a growing Europe-wide movement for religious reform derived from teachings such as those promoted in England by John Wycliffe.

Jan Hus preaching in the open air to the simple countryfolk who flocked to hear his message of religious reform. This was the class which mainly supported his cause after his atrocious death, calling themselves Hussites in his memory. (From the door of the Zizka Memorial, Prague)

These three elements came together in the life and personality of one man: Jan (John) Hus, the Rector of Prague University. Jan Hus was a religious reformer, and it is interesting to note that one of the first of many acts he performed that were to gain him the enmity of the ecclesiastical powers concerned a proposed crusade. This happened at a time when the Papacy was in turmoil, with two, and for a year even three rival Popes, in Rome, Avignon, and briefly in Bologna. In 1412 Pope John XXIII (the Bologna claimant) was planning a war against King Ladislas of Naples, who supported his Roman rival Gregory XII. The financing of this so-called crusade was based partly on the sale of indulgences. An indulgence was in effect a 'safe conduct pass' to heaven for someone who had died; such blessings had often been bestowed upon crusaders in the past by guaranteeing them the forgiveness of sins in return for their military services in some supposedly holy endeavour. To put indulgences up for sale for cash in order to finance a very questionable war was clearly an outrage to the truly devout, and Jan Hus of Bohemia emerged as one of Europe's strongest critics of the practice.

The reaction to Hus's criticism was severe. Pope John XXIII not only excommunicated him, but also demanded the demolition of his church in Prague, calling it a 'nest of heretics'. In the summer of 1412 Jan Hus went into voluntary exile for two years, during which he produced some of his most important writings. He soon attracted a large following, and his listeners were now no longer limited to university students or intellectuals from Prague, but peasants who flocked to his open-air meetings. They saw in his outspoken criticism of the misuse of power by the religious authorities a vision of how their own lot might be bettered. The seeds of a broader revolution were being sown.

Matters seemed to improve in 1414 when Jan Hus was provided with a welcome opportunity to present his ideas to a gathering of the Church hierarchy. The Council of Constance was due to begin in 1415; this was one of the periodic meetings called by the Church to settle doctrinal (and political) quarrels. In the name of restoring unity several factions of reformers and reactionaries argued and intrigued, but there were few more fateful matters for discussion than the heretical views of Jan Hus. Hus knew the bitterness of the opposition he faced from the Church hierarchy, and rightly feared for his life if he dared to put in an appearance. However, he was reassured by a personal guarantee of safe conduct from no less a person than Sigismund of Luxembourg, King of Hungary and younger brother of King Wenceslas IV of Bohemia, and Pope John's main ally.

As Jan Hus had expected, his opinions scandalized the assembled clergy, but instead of facing a theological debate Hus was imprisoned and put on trial for heresy. King Sigismund's pledge proved worthless, and at Constance on 6 July 1415 Jan Hus was burned to death at the stake. All Bohemia erupted at the news of the judicial murder of their hero. Jan Hus was immediately proclaimed a martyr by his followers, and the Hussite movement, as it soon became known, crossed over the narrow dividing line between religious dissent and political rebellion.

One of the first ways in which the Hussites expressed their outrage was through a simple but defiant religious ritual. It had long been the rule under Canon Law that when the congregation took Holy Communion during the celebration of Mass they received only the consecrated bread, with the clergy alone partaking of the wine. One of the elements of religious reform already practised in Bohemia by Hus's priestly followers had been to share the consecrated wine with the congregation, thus giving them 'Communion in both kinds', as it was termed. As the Council of Constance had roundly condemned this ritual, it rapidly became the touchstone for expressing support for Hus's views. Priests who did not agree to give Communion in both kinds were hounded from their churches, which were then taken over by adherents of reform, who took the name of Ultraquists from a Latin expression for 'in both kinds' – *sub ultraque parte.* The chalice that held the wine became the symbol of the reformed Church of Bohemia, and was an image that would soon be displayed upon the banners of a revolutionary army.

Sigismund of Luxembourg, King of Hungary and younger brother of King Wenceslas IV of Bohemia. His major responsibility for the martyrdom of Jan Hus, and his opportunistic accession to the throne of Bohemia, made him the arch enemy of the Hussite movement. This contemporary drawing idealizes him, its composition referring to the sun and its rays. (Hussite Museum, Tabor)

For all the revolutionary fervour that was sweeping Bohemia there were at first few signs of the reaction from outside that would soon engulf the country in war. The Council of Constance plodded on for another three years and dissolved itself in 1418, having achieved one of its main tasks: the resolution of the Great Schism that had given the Church two Popes. The newly elected Pope Martin V represented a fresh state of unity, and was determined to eradicate the Bohemian heresy that was providing him with the first challenge of his papacy.

However, in practice much depended on the attitude of King Wenceslas IV of Bohemia. This hapless monarch was very much under the influence of his brother King Sigismund, who persuaded him by 1419 that his position as King of Bohemia would be under threat unless he took decisive measures against the Hussites. Wenceslas took action, and the results were a disaster.

The Hussites go to war

At the end of February 1419, King Wenceslas IV took the important but dangerous step of ejecting the Ultraquists from all but three churches in Prague. Some Hussite priests, fearing for their lives, left Prague and strengthened the movement in towns elsewhere in Bohemia, but others took more decisive action within the capital. One of the more vigorous of the revolutionary leaders was a priest named Jan Zelivsky.

On 30 July 1419 he preached a sermon to one of his usual crowded services, fiercely attacking the new city council and its oppressive measures against the Hussites. After Mass, Zelivsky took the Sacred Host from the church and led a protest march which was joined by many armed men. The angry crowd eventually made its way to the Town Hall in the New Town at the northern end of Prague's Cattle Market. The leaders of the procession shouted up to the town councillors to parley with them from an upstairs window. Negotiations began; but when the councillors refused to discuss the release of Hussite prisoners the crowd grew agitated, and it was claimed that someone had thrown a stone from the window at the Sacred Host. The enraged mob surged against the doors of the Town Hall and burst in. The hapless town councillors were seized, and thrown from the windows on to the spear points of the armed Hussites standing below. These murders became known as the 'First Defenestration of Prague', from the Latin *de fenestra*, 'from a window'. (A similar act, the 'Second Defenestration', was to take place at Prague castle at the start of the Thirty Years' War 200 years later.)

The shock of this act of violent rebellion proved too much for King Wenceslas IV, who promptly suffered a stroke and died, 'roaring like a lion'. His brother Sigismund, who had been responsible for putting Jan Hus to death, saw his opportunity, and claimed the crown of Bohemia for himself. When the Hussites opposed this cynical piece of opportunism with armed force, the Hussite Wars began.

This huge, strange, modern symbolic statue of Jan Zizka – note the telltale mace – stands on the site of his first important victory using the wagon fort tactic, the battle of Sudomer on 25 March 1420.

The rise of Jan Zizka

It was not long before the energy and fervour of the Hussite rebellion received personal expression through the military skills and determination of the man who became its first and greatest leader. Jan Zizka, a former captain of King Wenceslas's palace guard, was a minor landowner from Trocno near Budweis (Ceske Budejovice) in southern Bohemia. This experienced, one-eyed soldier had served as a mercenary in the fighting against the Teutonic Knights in Poland. We know that he helped garrison the castle of Mewe (Gniew) after the famous battle of Tannenberg in 1410, and he may even have been present on that celebrated field.

Zizka's immediate attentions were drawn to Prague, where his opponents were rapidly strengthening their position. Cenek of Wartenburg, the chief advisor to the queen (Wenceslas's widow), reinforced the garrison of the royal castle of Prague on Hradcany Hill by hiring German mercenaries, and strengthened his position around the castle (Prague's so-called 'Small Side') on the left bank of the Vltava. The Charles Bridge was also seized, along with several strategic points across the river in the Old Town. Cenek also gave strict orders that a planned march on Prague by supporters of the Hussites was to be prevented. This particular group of extremists, who owed their origins to Jan Hus's open-air meetings, called themselves Taborites, after Mount Tabor in the Bible.

Jan Zizka moved quickly to occupy the one fortress left in Prague that had not yet passed into anti-Hussite hands. This was the citadel of Vysehrad, whose garrison – many of them Zizka's old comrades – surrendered the fortress to him. When the Taborites arrived a fierce battle broke out for control of Prague. Much of the Small Side was destroyed, leaving it as a no man's land between the opposing fortresses. Such was the devastation within the city that a peace conference was held. Freedom of Hussite worship was guaranteed in return for the withdrawal of the Taborites and the surrender of the Vysehrad, but this latter concession infuriated Zizka. Feeling that the cause had been betrayed by the effete citizens of Prague who did not share the religious fervour of the Taborites, he left the capital in November 1419 and withdrew to the city of Pilsen (Plsen).

Elated by their relatively easy victory over the accommodating citizens of Prague, the triumphant Royalists turned against Hussite communities elsewhere. In Kutna Hora to the east a fierce persecution began, and when the hangman got too overworked Hussites were thrown down the shafts of the silver mines from which the city derived its prosperity. Pilsen too became a focus of attack; and in March 1420 Zizka decided to move his base further south, to where the Taborites had rebuilt an old strategic fortress called Hradiste and renamed it Tabor. The newly built castle town of Tabor, garrisoned by religious fanatics, was to provide the focus for the Hussite movement throughout the war.

Zizka's march to Tabor was one of two very significant events that took place in the fateful month of March 1420. The other was the proclamation on 17 March of a crusade, with the task of 'exterminating all Wycliffites, Hussites, other heretics and those favouring and accepting such heresies'. From the Royalist point of view the Hussite War had now become the Hussite Crusade; the reaction among the Hussites was to consolidate the resistance movement into a common anti-imperial, anti-papal military front capable of defending its interests to the last.

This magnificent and more traditional equestrian statue of Zizka stands on the site of his victory on the Vitkov Hill, Prague, now called the Zitkov in his honour. Zizka is characteristically depicted with a patch over his right eye, wearing only basic armour – a long mail shirt and coif – and wielding his famous mace.

Long before any foreign crusaders appeared on the scene the local Royalist forces had already been active. Raids were carried out around Pilsen, as the Royalists had no intention of letting Zizka and his men depart in peace for Tabor. They attempted to surprise him near the village of Sudomer but, using the 'war wagons' which were to become a hallmark of his battle tactics, Zizka defeated them on 25 March 1420. The battle of Sudomer was a small affair, but was important as the first significant Hussite victory in the field. It was also a triumph that allowed Zizka to ride in to Tabor as a leader helped and blessed by God. Once there he showed himself to be a competent fortress-builder, arranging for Tabor's defences to be strengthened by a double line of walls above the river.

Zizka's assertion of his authority both on and off the battlefield led to a reassessment of his value among his less enthusiastic supporters elsewhere; and it was not long before an urgent request for help was received from the very citizens of Prague who had previously spurned him.

The long-expected crusading army, under the personal leadership of King Sigismund, was on its way towards the Bohemian capital, where the two main castles were still in Royalist hands (in spite of a temporary defection to the Hussite side of Čenek of Wartenburg). An attempt by the citizens of Prague to take Hradcany before the crusaders arrived failed miserably, and soon the rebels were being intimidated by the sight of a large tented camp of crusaders on the left bank of the Vltava at the place now called the Letna.

Jan Zizka marched north with all the speed that a medieval army could muster. Sigismund's siege of Prague was making use of all the strategic points around the city except one – the long prominent hill to the east known as the Vitkov. Zizka's eye for ground showed him that if the Royalists also took the Vitkov then Prague would be cut off from all sides and deprived of its supply lines. So Zizka's army, about 9,000 strong, headed straight for Vitkov Hill and hastily erected earthworks and wooden bulwarks there. On 14 July the crusader army attacked the position, and were heavily defeated in one of Zizka's greatest victories. While his men defended their field fortifications with great determination, Zizka led a surprise flank attack from the south. Vitkov Hill is now called Zitkov in his honour, and sports a magnificent equestrian statue of the Hussite leader, with a patch over his eye and mace in hand.

The setback at Vitkov showed King Sigismund that Prague might more easily be secured by political means than by military conflict. On 28 July 1420 Sigismund took a symbolic step towards success by having himself crowned King of Bohemia in St Vitus's Cathedral; since the building lies securely within the walls of Hradcany Castle it was hardly a setting for the popular acclamation of a monarch. The coronation soon proved to the only success that Sigismund was to enjoy as the First Crusade began to fall apart. His troops were suffering from epidemic sickness contracted in their encampment, and their brutality towards the Czech people did nothing to endear the king to the populace. By the end of July many of his German supporters had gone home, so Sigismund retired to friendly Kutna Hora.

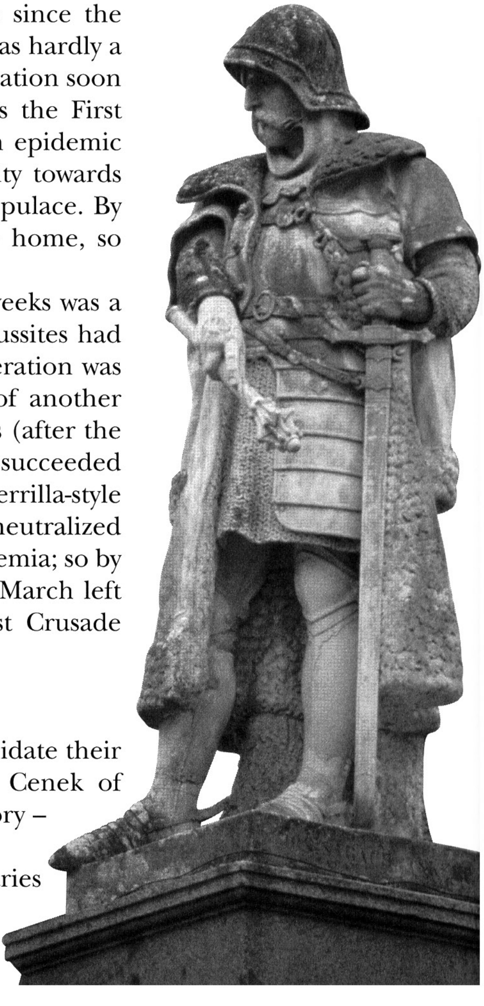
The only significant military operation in the following weeks was a valiant Royalist attempt to relieve Vysehrad, to which the Hussites had laid siege. Zizka had by now withdrawn to Tabor, so this operation was conducted by Hynek Krusina of Lichtenburg, the leader of another brotherhood of Hussites, who called themselves the Orebites (after the Bible's Mount Horeb). At the beginning of November they succeeded in taking the fortress, while Zizka was carrying out guerrilla-style operations elsewhere in Bohemia. Zizka's own actions neutralized Ulrich of Rosenberg, Sigismund's strongest supporter in Bohemia; so by the beginning of 1421 the king withdrew eastwards, and in March left Bohemia altogether. Apart from a few skirmishes the First Crusade against the Hussites was over.

The Second Crusade

The absence of foreign armies allowed the Hussites to consolidate their position during 1421. Hradcany Castle fell to them; and Cenek of Wartenburg – surely one of the great serial turncoats of history – declared once again for the Hussites.

Elated by such developments, in June 1421 the revolutionaries published the Four Articles of Prague at a parliament held at Caslav, where King Sigismund was ritually denounced and religious freedom was proclaimed. But if Sigismund was

Yet another statue of Jan Zizka, in the Town Square at Tabor. As usual, its depiction of his costume and armour are entirely guesswork.



not acceptable to the Czech people, then to whom could they offer the crown of Bohemia? In 15th century Europe the concept of a republic was unknown: under God, power had to reside in a person. The consensus of opinion at a further meeting held in August pointed towards Grand Duke Alexander Vytautas (otherwise known as Witold) of Lithuania, a cousin of the King of Poland, with whom he had defeated the Teutonic Order at the battle of Tannenberg in 1410. Vytautas was duly elected (or 'postulated' in the exact term) to the Bohemian throne – in his absence and without his participation.

The castle of Rabi, where Zizka lost the sight of his other eye during the siege of June 1421.

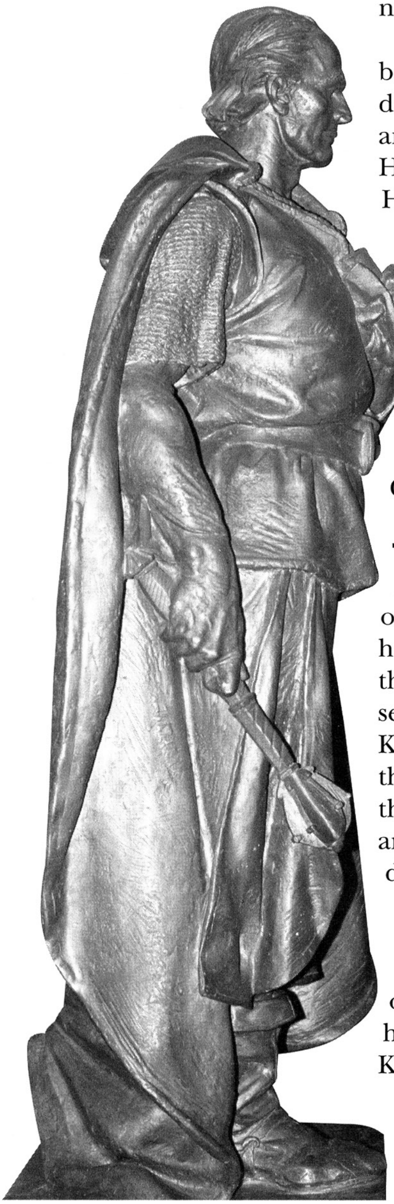
Negotiations with Vytautas were to provide a backdrop to the Hussite Wars for some time to come, but a fight in the immediate aftermath of the Diet of Caslav almost deprived the Hussite movement of its greatest leader. Towards the end of June 1421 Jan Zizka was directing the siege of the castle of Rabi when an archer loosed an arrow from the ramparts and hit Zizka in his good eye. Somehow he survived, to lead his armies in battle for four more years – an almost unique achievement for a now totally blind general.

While Zizka was recuperating in Prague the Hussite movement suffered one of its few military defeats at the siege of Most, which began on 22 July 1421. This, and the siege of Zatec that followed on 10 September, arose out of an attack by a German army under Frederick of Wettin, the Margrave of Meissen, as a prelude to the major invasion of Bohemia that was to constitute the main impetus of the Second Crusade. Zatec held out for three weeks before the news arrived that the blind Zizka was on his way at the head of a relieving army. The Germans fled at the news, thus frustrating King Sigismund's plans for a co-ordinated operation against the Hussites.

Under the circumstances Sigismund might have been wiser if he had postponed the whole enterprise of the Second Crusade until the following year. The campaigning season was now far advanced, but he had by then spent a great deal of money on mercenaries to create a very strong army, and mercenaries had a tendency to desert if they were not used. He had placed his troops under the capable control of one Philip Scolari, otherwise Pipo Spano, a Florentine *condottiere* (mercenary captain) who had made his name fighting the Turks and now led the Hungarian contingent in the crusading army.

In spite of the lateness of the season King Sigismund's force did not hurry unduly, but spent four weeks gathering support in Moravia before heading for their primary objective, the city of Kutna Hora. The rulers of this formerly loyal city had shocked Sigismund by joining the Hussites against the wishes of its predominantly Catholic German inhabitants, who now regarded Sigismund's approach as a promise of liberation. Zizka, however, anticipated the king's intentions and marched towards Kutna Hora with his combined forces. When the crusader army approached the gates on 21 December 1421 they launched a prolonged attack on the Hussite positions on the hills to the west. This action kept the Hussites occupied while Pipo Spano sent some units around Zizka's right flank to the northern gate of the city, which Royalist sympathizers opened to them. A massacre of the Hussites then began within Kutna Hora, from which Zizka was cut off in his wagon fortress on the hills above. Realizing that he had to force a breach in the enemy lines, he chose his moment and his target perfectly. Battering their way through the Royalist ranks using firearms, the Hussites escaped towards the north. There was no pursuit, so they rested at nearby Kolin to plan their next move.

This came quickly, on 6 January 1422; Zizka struck first against a body of crusaders at Nebovidy, whom they drove back in a southerly direction towards Kutna Hora. The Hussites followed confidently, and Sigismund was so alarmed that he decided to evacuate Kutna Hora immediately. He made a brave attempt at a stand at the village of Habry on 8 January 1422, but the pursuit continued to the town of Nemecky Brod (modern Havlickuv Brod), where the bridge became jammed with fleeing troops. The order was given for others to cross on the ice, but after initial success the ice gave way and many were drowned. After a short siege Zizka captured Nemecky Brod, and destroyed it so thoroughly that 'wolves and dogs ate the corpses in the town square', as one chronicler put it. Sigismund fled to the safety of Brno in Moravia, smarting from his greatest defeat since the battle of Nicopolis in 1396. The Second Crusade was over.



A statue representing Prokop the Great, who took over the leadership of the Hussite movement following the death of Jan Zizka. Interestingly, he too is shown armed with a mace. (Town Hall, Tabor)

The Third Crusade

Insult was added to Sigismund's injury when Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania wrote in a letter to the Pope, dated 5 March 1422, that he would take the Czechs under his protection in order to return the schismatics to the fold of Mother Church. To this purpose he was sending as his representative to Bohemia his nephew Sigismund Korybut, who promptly presented himself in Bohemia as the regent of the postulated king. Many of King Sigismund's supporters felt that a third crusade would be the only way to settle matters with the Hussites and to neutralize Vytautas's claim to the throne, although the king was disinclined to take a personal role once again.

The resulting Third Crusade was a half-hearted affair. Crusading armies entered Bohemia from the north and the west in October 1422, and the first city to fall was Chomutov. The next objective was the relief of the siege of the great castle of Karlstein, the only strong fortress to have remained in Royalist hands throughout the war so far. Prince Korybut of Lithuania was currently sitting outside it, and found himself involved as much with negotiations for a truce as with any actual fighting. An armistice was signed on 8 November, and the Third Crusade promptly ended, the only one of the five not to end with a total disaster for the crusaders.

Internal rivalries

Following this peaceful settlement the Hussites were left alone for a longer period than before, but this relative safety in fact threatened to jeopardize the Hussite movement seriously. As long as they were under threat from outside they had stood united, but when that threat was diminished disagreements, usually of a religious nature, began to weaken their ranks. Early in August 1423 such differences erupted into fighting between rival groups of Hussites. One result of this was that Jan Zizka left Tabor and established himself in eastern Bohemia as leader of the Orebites. The most important clash between rival Hussite armies took place on 7 June 1424 at Malesov, where Zizka destroyed a strong rival army raised by the citizens of Prague. By this victory Zizka confirmed his leading role in the movement; soon the Orebites and Taborites were reconciled, and played leading roles for the rest of the war.

LEFT **Impressions of two anti-Hussite crusaders, typical of the multi-national force that followed King Sigismund's banner, in the bas-relief on the door of the Zizka Memorial on Zitkov Hill, Prague.**

ABOVE **The bas-relief on the Zizka Memorial represents various types who figured in the Hussite armies; this unarmoured swordsman is shown wearing riding boots. Cavalry played a considerable part in many of the Hussite victories, and later terrorized much of the region during the period of the so-called 'beautiful rides' into Poland.**

Early in October 1424 Jan Zizka set out on what was to prove his last campaign. He touched his old road of victory by passing through Nemecky Brod, and then laid siege to the castle of Pribyslav. There the old blind general contracted some form of plague, and died on 11 October in his siege encampment. A colourful legend tells us that before he died Zizka ordered that a drum should be made out of his skin and beaten at the head of the Hussite army.

The Wars of the Orphans

The death of Zizka was felt acutely by his followers, particularly the Orebites, who now called themselves 'the Orphans' as testament to the loss they had suffered. Following Zizka's death the military initiative was taken by his successor Prokop the Great (also known as Prokop the Bald), a gifted leader but a man with very different views from Zizka. Prokop radically changed the Hussite strategy. From Zizka's policy of defensive actions against invaders Prokop moved to a pre-emptive pattern of invading any neighbouring territories from which previous crusades had emerged.

This provocative strategy was eventually bound to cause a reaction in the form of a fourth crusade, but before this could be launched Hussite and German armies fought a major battle at Usti in June 1426. Usti lay near the German border, and the victorious Prokop proposed following

Representation of a group of Hussites from the bas-relief, showing a broadly accurate range of features of early 15th century eastern European war gear. Note the kettle hat and visored sallet; the caped hoods and mail shirt; the 'awlpike', 'morning star' and flail, and the woman at left armed with a long spiked mace.

up his success by an invasion of Saxony. This did not materialize, but raids into Silesia and Austria were carried out over the next couple of years.

The **Fourth Crusade** finally opened in 1427, and began with the siege of Stribro. Henry Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester, a half-brother of King Henry IV of England, fought at this battle. It was something of a disaster, because the crusaders withdrew in some disorder at the approach of the Czechs, and suffered losses only when the Hussites caught up with them near Tachov on 4 August. Cardinal Henry, in furious contempt, tore the imperial standard into pieces. This rout brought the Fourth Crusade to an abrupt and premature end. There was no further pursuit across the border by the Hussites – Tachov was a more immediate and promising goal, and the city and its castle fell on 14 August.

For the next four years no attempt was made by Catholic Europe to invade Bohemia. Instead the Hussites took the initiative in grand style, sending raiding forces ranging far and wide through Germany, Austria and Hungary. One raid in 1430 took them as far as Czestochowa in Poland, and the Hussites became notorious for their depredations. The reputation that they earned in some regions far from Bohemia is shown by a remarkable letter attributed to Joan of Arc, who allegedly wrote to Bohemia to threaten the heretics with destruction if they did not cease their blindness. By contrast the Hussites, convinced as ever that God was on their side, termed these raids *spanile jizdy,* 'beautiful rides', though the destruction they wrought was anything but beautiful.

The Hussite raids added to the pressure on King Sigismund, who was now plagued not only by Hussites but other civil wars, rebellions, and a Turkish threat to his Hungarian domains from the direction of Serbia. Retribution against the Hussites was to be delivered through a **Fifth Crusade**. The invading army was intercepted near the town of Domazlice, of which they had been conducting a fruitless siege. On 14 August 1431 the Hussite army scattered the crusaders at the battle of Domazlice, one of the most decisive encounters in all the Hussite Wars. This time the crusaders had war wagons of their own, but these proved to be of no avail since they were used incorrectly; the victorious Hussites were delighted to find that many of the apparently military vehicles were actually supply wagons stocked with wine rather than weapons.

The Catholic humiliation at Domazlice meant that the stage was now set for a peaceful settlement to the Hussite problem. Negotiations began at Basel in January 1433, where the chief representative from the Catholic side was Cardinal Cesarini. He had personal experience of Hussite warfare, as he had been forced to flee from the field of Domazlice.

Meanwhile the 'beautiful rides' went on, culminating in the most audacious Hussite raid of all in the summer of 1433. War had broken out once again in 1432 between the kingdom of Poland and the Teutonic Knights of Prussia. Eager to help, the Hussites signed a solemn alliance against the Order in July of that year, and in 1433 an Orphan army marched through the Neumark into Prussia and captured Tczew (Dirschau) on the Wisla (Vistula) River. Eventually they reached the mouth of the Vistula where it enters the Baltic near Gdansk (Danzig), and performed a victory celebration to prove that nothing but the wide sea itself could stop their advance. (This insult to German hegemony was later summed up by the 19th century Prussian nationalist Heinrich von Treitschke, who wrote angrily how they had 'greeted the sea with a wild Czech song about God's warriors, and filled their water bottles with brine in token that the Baltic once more obeyed the Slavs'.)

The quarrels of success

Of far more significance to the people of Bohemia were the divisions that were developing in the Hussite ranks when the movement was confronted with the prospect of a genuine and lasting peace. The most important religious issue was whether to force the practice of Communion in both kinds upon the citizens of places such as Pilsen, who had remained Catholic and Royalist throughout the war. Some saw a tolerant approach as a necessary concession to achieve unity, others as a serious betrayal of their fundamental religious principles.

A military advance against Pilsen by the more rigid faction proved a failure, and led to a mutiny within Prokop the Great's army. This was followed by an alliance of the high nobility and the Old Town of Prague against the radical Taborite and Orebite brotherhoods. A bloody battle was fought at Lipany on 30 May 1434, at which the brotherhood leaders Prokop the Great and Prokop the Lesser were defeated and both were killed.

From then on the role of the brotherhoods was almost completely neutralized. The tragic internecine battle of Lipany effectively marked the end of the Hussite Wars, and the immediate winner was, of course, King Sigismund. On 16 August 1436 the wily old monarch solemnly proclaimed the restoration of peace between 'heretical' Bohemia and the Christian world, thus formally ending 17 years of war. Eager to avoid antagonizing those Hussites whose internal squabbles had finally secured his throne, he bided his time before launching plans to eliminate the Ultraquist heresy once and for all. But death intervened in September 1437, and as his successor only lived a short time the Ultraquist church used the ensuing interregnum to establish a position as the Reformed Church of Bohemia.

This position became even stronger with the regency, and finally the accession to the throne in 1457, of George of Podebrady, Bohemia's first and only Hussite king. King George had to withstand a short but worrying attempt at a crusade against him by the great King Matthias Corvinus of Hungary in 1468, a time that a Czech chronicler called 'eight horrible weeks'. However, George dealt with the invaders in the same thorough way as his predecessors had defeated earlier crusaders, and ensured the survival of the Hussites' revolutionary ideas for long enough for them to become branches of the continent-wide Reformation in the 16th century.

ARMIES OF THE HUSSITE WARS

The Crusader armies

The combination of religious fervour and personal greed that had sent crusading armies from the Baltic to the Black Sea is reflected in the astonishing list of nationalities present during the First Crusade's attempt to take Prague. Let the chronicler Brezova speak for himself:

> 'There the people were of many different nations, tribes and tongues. Besides Bohemians and Moravians there were Hungarians and Croatians, Dalmatians, and Bulgarians, Wallachians and Szekelys, Cumans, Tassyans, Ruthenians, Russians, Slavonians, Prutenians, Serbs, Thuringians, Styrians, Misnians, Bavarians, Saxons, Austrians, Franconians, Frenchmen, Englishmen, men from Brabant, from Westphalia, Holland and Switzerland, Lusatians, Swabians, Carinthians, Aragonians, Spaniards, Poles, Germans from the Rhine and many others.'

Heymann, the biographer of Jan Zizka, adds in a note that although one-third of these 33 nations were German-speaking, the list represents almost all of medieval Europe except Scandinavia, and that the omission of Italians was probably an oversight...

The motivation that sent this huge number of nationalities to fight in Bohemia ranged from religious devotion to rampant self-interest, and nowhere was a combination of both extremes better expressed than through the personalities of the men who led the crusader armies. On the surface, at least, the epithet of 'crusader' ensured that the Hussites' proto-puritanism was opposed by an equally strong religious commitment to the most extreme expression of medieval Catholicism. King Sigismund had been the leader of the crusade against the Muslims in 1396 that had met with disaster at the battle of Nicopolis, and many of his followers had served in other crusading enterprises such as the Tannenberg/Grunwald campaign. Their spiritual welfare was well catered for, and we know from the imperial ordinance issued for the Fifth Crusade in 1431 that four or five priests were to accompany each troop 'in order to preach to the people and teach them how to behave themselves and how to fight for the Holy faith' – words that could have come directly from the Taborite leaders.

Knightly arms and armour

Mounted knights fought on both sides during the Hussite Wars as the elite on the battlefield, and as the conflict drew in crusaders from all over Europe it is not surprising that a certain uniformity existed in the types of armour seen among the nobility on both sides. The main differences in arms and armour between the mounted elite of both sides would be based on rank and wealth rather than nationality; this applied even in Lithuania (appearing in the list above as Ruthenia) and Russia, which had historically been subject to other influences.

The nobility among the crusaders and the Hussites alike would generally have worn plate armours of Italian style, since northern Italian workshops still dominated this manufacture throughout Europe; a minority would have displayed the output of the southern German armourers who were just beginning to challenge Italian dominance. The second quarter of the 15th century saw simultaneous use of armours dating from the last quarter of the 14th century, through those seen at Tannenberg/Grunwald in 1410 and Agincourt in 1415, to the latest styles of the time of Jeanne d'Arc in the 1430s.

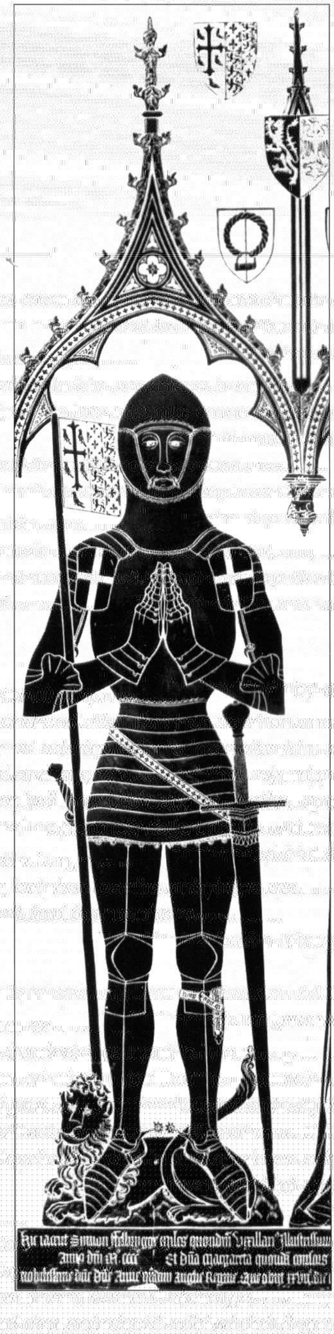
The predominant style of helmet was a bascinet with a hinged visor, fixed to a padded aventail of mail which fell to cape the shoulders. Some 'great bascinets' would also have been seen, with deep bevor plates that reduced the mobility of the head. Many slightly varying styles of broad-brimmed *chapel-de-fer* or 'kettle hat' were common in Germanic lands, sometimes worn in conjunction with plate armour among the knightly class, particularly for foot combat.

The overall trend in body armour was towards complete plate; but the fashion for fabric surcoats over the torso seen in many of the tomb effigies which are our best sources make it difficult to distinguish rigid breastplates from the many types of ringmail, scale or brigandine body defences still worn under or in place of a plate cuirass. Mail is conventionally depicted below plate defences at the groin, elbows and armpits, and the latter were often protected by rondels of plate hanging from straps. Scale armour was notably more common in eastern than western Europe. Two distinctly Germanic styles of breast-plate have been identified: a 'globous' shape with a rounded belly, and a 'box' shape with a squared-off profile at the belly. Complete plate defences for arms and legs would now have been almost universal, but fabric or leather armour with rivet heads indicating inner scales are still seen on the thighs of some effigies. Tight-fitting 'coat armour' and loose-fitting surcoats often displayed heraldic colours and charges, as did the shields that were still quite widely carried, although the latest suits of complete plate made them increasingly unnecessary. Poorer knights would probably have worn simpler and less complete body armour of older styles, making more use of mail, scale and brigandines.

The armour of the Lithuanian, Polish and Russian crusader knights would almost certainly have been of imported Italian and German styles, even though their followers would presumably have shown Eastern influences in a greater use of mail, scale and lamellar armour, leather boots, and, among Russians, conical or 'spired' helmets. The horses of the most prominent knights were covered with caparisons on which their heraldic devices appeared.

From horseback the knight wielded the lance which was his primary weapon. This was backed up by the broadsword, often of hand-and-a-half style, girded on by a belt which sometimes passed around the waist more than once. The shape of the armour at the hip very often supported a low-slung dagger belt, plated and sometimes richly decorated. Secondary weapons were maces, axes and, for foot combat, a range of different pole-axes and other shafted weapons.[1]

The footsoldiers who followed the armoured knights on crusade were armed with crossbows, swords, spears and a range of other polearms. In overall appearance they would not have differed greatly from the better equipped among the Hussite footsoldiers described below.



The brass of Sir Simon Felbrigg in Felbrigg Church, Norfolk, shows armour typical of the decade 1410–20; many of the crusaders who took up arms against the Hussites would have worn full plate like this, and carried hand-and-a-half swords with a long-pointed blade for both cut and thrust. The helmet seems to be a 'great bascinet', with a large bevor plate. (Royal Armouries, Leeds)

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[1] See also MAA 136, *Italian Medieval Armies 1300–1500*; MAA 144, *Armies of Medieval Burgundy 1364–1477;* MAA 166, *German Medieval Armies 1300–1500*; MAA 337, *French Armies of the Hundred Years War*; and MAA 367, *Medieval Russian Armies 1250–1500*

Cenek of Wartenburg was the chief advisor to the widow of King Wenceslas, although he later changed sides more than once. He came to prominence by his defence of Prague against the Hussites, when he reinforced the garrison of the royal castle on Hradcany Hill by hiring in German mercenaries. We illustrate an old-fashioned set of harness dating from the late 14th century, partly based upon the effigy of the knight Hans Haberkon in Mainz Cathedral. The bascinet is fitted with a German *Klappvisier* – a visor attached by a bar and hinge fitting on the brow rather than by swivels at each side. The 'box' shape of his cuirass (*Kastenbrust*) can just be made out under his coat armour, which is halved in his heraldic colours. Below its edge can be seen an eastern European skirt of scale armour, over mail. His arms and lower legs are protected by full plate, but his thighs still show an older style of leather or fabric defences with internal scales. His weapons are a hand-and-a-half sword, and a 'ballock' dagger supported by a richly plated belt worn low on the hips.

C2: Bohuslav of Svamberg

In December 1419, at the head of a fairly strong army, Bohuslav of Svamberg (Schwanenberg) tried to trap Zizka while the latter was laying siege to the Royalist castle of Nekmeř a little to the north of Pilsen. Confident of his superiority, Bohuslav attacked, but was beaten back with heavy losses by Zizka's small force, which fought from behind seven war wagons drawn up between two lakes and armed with artillery.

In the first ten years of the century tomb effigies from all over Europe show the use of bascinets in conjunction with an attached plate defence for the lower face and throat. This bevor was at first worn over the mail aventail; later it grew more massive, and seems to have replaced it, as a separate neck piece seated on the shoulders within which the overlapped bascinet could still move to some extent. Helmet and bevor then merged; and surviving examples of this 'great bascinet' have plates projecting so low at front and back that they clearly could not move with the head – any slight degree of movement must presumably have been within the helmet. We illustrate here a 'houndskull' form of great bascinet of c.1400, believed to be of north Italian make; it has holes around the edge for attachment of a lining or an aventail. We show Bohuslav wearing not tight-fitting coat armour, but a loosely cut surcoat displaying his heraldic arms. Such garments were slit up the sides for access to the sword and dagger.

C3: Ulrich of Rosenburg

At the time of the first crusade Ulrich was King Sigismund's staunchest supporter in Bohemia. His career spanned the whole course of the Hussite Wars, and he is known to have fought at Lipany in 1434. We have therefore chosen to show him in the very latest Italian style of full plate 'white' armour, worn without any external garment (his arms of a rose are shown on a banner). His helmet is a very early form of closed armet, based on the Milanese example of c.1420 from the Churburg armoury. Its two large face pieces hinge at the temples, the right piece closing over the edge of the left; there is evidence that a separate visor could also be attached, as well as a shallow aventail. Ulrich is depicted wearing a c.1425 Milanese armour also from Churburg; it has large, asymmetric shoulder defences, a plackart belly plate overlapping the breastplate, and a lance rest on the right breast.

D: HUSSITE INFANTRY

D1: Crossbowman

This man is spanning his crossbow behind a pavise, the large shield which was carried forward by a second man and propped up to give cover in the battle line. The bow is of the early type, with a massive stave of composite horn and sinew construction covered with waterproofed material. Its mounting on the simple wooden tiller was reinforced by thick lashings; note, too, the heavy construction of the cord, from several separate strings 'whipped' together. The mechanism was re-cocked by bracing a foot in the iron stirrup and pulling the string back by means of a double belt hook, to engage with a pivoting nut secured by the end of the trigger bar. The bowman holds a short, heavy bolt ready in his mouth; fletchings were of leather, heavy paper, or even thin wood, and bolts were carried heads-up in an open box quiver, often shown covered with unshaven hide. The bowman wears a cap-shaped helmet constructed of many iron scales, over a caped mail coif. His hose legs are only laced to his doublet skirt at a few places, leaving his long, loose shirt visible; note that his doublet sleeves are also laced on with 'points'. His only armour is a breastplate, secured by crossed straps behind. His sidearm is a broad, heavy single-edged falchion.

D2: Crossbowman

The shooting bowman wears one of the many types of 'kettle' helmet, this one with a round skull and median ridge, and a deep brim cut with two eye slits. The typical caped hood is often shown with the deep edge cut into a fringe of long lappets. His armour is limited to a mail shirt and a pair of plate poleyns protecting his knees.

D3: Billman

More heavily armoured for hand-to-hand combat, this infantryman has an old bascinet and aventail, but has discarded the visor. He has a *Kastenbrust* cuirass with rondels hanging at the armpits, and plate gauntlets. Note the buttoned opening at the front of his tunic skirt.

D4: 'Morning star' man

Armed with the crude but effective *Morgenstern,* this soldier has yet another style of the ubiquitous kettle helmet, with both the apex of the skull and the front of the brim swept into graceful points. His torso is also well protected, with a typically high-waisted and 'globous' breastplate worn over a sleeveless mail shirt extending to cover the groin.

E: HUSSITE FIREARMS

E1: Handgunner

The weapon is based on the small 'Tabor gun' found at the site of the Hussite headquarters; the bore of its hexagonal, stepped barrel is just over a foot long and of just over 0.7in (17mm) calibre. The simple pole stock, which fitted into a socket cast into the rear of the barrel, was held tightly under the arm, and the powder in the touch-hole was set off with a smouldering match. Larger handguns are depicted with a two-man crew. We have given our gunner plate leg defences, a mail shirt, and a padded aketon – one of the many types of multi-layered or quilted 'soft armour' which were worn all over Europe, both in place of and in combination with mail and brigandine defences.

E2: Trestle gun

This *tarasnice* is taken from a surviving barrel on a reconstructed trestle mount in the Hussite Museum at Tabor; it roughly resembles a large 'hook gun'. Such weapons represented the Hussite 'field artillery'; they were located in between the wagons of a Wagenberg and their crews protected by shields – mantlets or pavises. Such guns could only be traversed by lifting and moving the rear of the trestle, but elevation could be adjusted by the rear arc and pin passing through the pierced stock, and the front attachment where a cast extension from the barrel was pivoted to a wooden support.

E3: Cannon

The *houfnice* was the Hussite heavy artillery, named from the word *houf* meaning 'crowd', suggesting its use against massed enemies, presumably with a load of what would later be called grapeshot. The barrel was of consolidated hoop-and-stave construction reinforced by external bands; it was mounted on a heavy wooden carriage and the axle and wheels from a cart.

F: War wagon

For clarity we have shown only a few of the crossbowmen and hook-gunners inside; in reality at least ten soldiers could man one of these large converted farm carts. Note the built-in box holding stones for throwing in hand-to-hand combat. We see the wagon from the front; note the braces leading from the axle hubs up to the body rim, to support the slanting protective planking dropped down on the left side. This has triangular loopholes for the 'hook guns';

another length of planking was slung beneath the wagon bed, and dropped in battle to block the space between the wheels – this too is sometimes shown loopholed, as is the wagon body itself. Access is by the ramped door on the right side. Flags were commonly displayed, here the goose and chalice motif of Jan Hus. To represent the polearm infantry who rode in the wagons and fought around them in battle, we illustrate a man and a woman carrying flails.

G1: Cardinal Henry Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester

The religious aspect of the Hussite Wars attracted crusaders from the upper echelons of European ecclesiastical society. This English prelate fought at the siege of Stribro in 1427 – something of a disaster, since the crusaders fled before the Czechs arrived, and suffered losses only when the Hussites caught up with them near Tachov on 4 August. Cardinal Henry, in furious contempt at this fiasco, tore the imperial standard in pieces. We reconstruct him wearing a Milanese plate armour of c1420, largely after those from the contemporary Churburg armoury. The great bascinet, with globular skull and visor, has its back and side surfaces drawn down deeply in a single piece, with a riveted bevor under a deep riveted gorget plate at the front. It resembles a number of contemporary effigies from all over Europe; however, the surviving example copied is in fact from Pamplona, Spain, c1425. The shape of the heraldic tabard that he wears over his armour is from the effigy of the Earl of Arundel, made c1435; note that it is slit deeply up both sides to accommodate his sidearms. The charges are a tentative reconstruction of how it might have appeared, based on Henry's coat of arms: those of Beaufort, showing his royal kinship, impaled with the See of Winchester. This man of God is armed for foot combat with a contemporary war hammer.

G2: Sigismund Korybutas

The Hussites chose Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania to be their king in place of Sigismund of Bohemia. To this purpose, he sent as his representative to Bohemia his nephew Sigismund Korybut (Korybutas), who presented himself as the regent of the postulated king. Although much of western Russia had recently been annexed into the combined kingdom and grand duchy of Poland-Lithuania, and the grand dukes' armies became predominantly Russian, the elite aristocratic cavalry certainly remained part of the Western tradition and continued to use European armour. We choose to show a rather old fashioned bascinet with a globular *Klappvisier*, worn with the almost universal Italian-made plate limb armour and a brigandine over a mail haubergeon. Only the shape of the shield is strikingly un-Western, being typical of Poland, Hungary and the Balkans. It bears the arms of Lithuania – the armoured rider known as the *Pogon*.

The background figure represents Cardinal Cesarini.

H1: Prokop the Great

We reconstruct this aggressive Hussite leader, killed at the battle of Lipany in 1434, armed with a battleaxe and wearing conventional armour of the period. He has removed his bascinet and its attached aventail, showing the thick quilted padding inside the latter. An early painting seems to show coat armour of black with a broad red stripe, and the golden chalice motif on the chest in place of any personal heraldic arms.

H2–H6: Hussite flags

The flags of the Hussites are almost invariably shown as bearing the chalice motif, the only exception or addition being the white goose, in reference to the word *hus.* In some cases the chalice is painted in simple silhouette, in others more elaborately, shaded and highlighted to give it a three-dimensional appearance. Some flags seem to have had additional outlining in gold; and a version of H2 bears the gold lettering VERITAS VINCIT – 'Truth Conquers' – on the streamer section. Red is the most commonly depicted ground colour, but all the colour combinations shown here have been suggested.

Two Hussites sheltering behind a pavise, from a contemporary drawing. Note the kettle hat at left, swept into points at the apex and the front of the brim – see Plate D4. His companion has a cervelière or perhaps a simple sallet with additional rondel ear pieces. The body armour, if any, is unclear. (Hussite Museum, Tabor)

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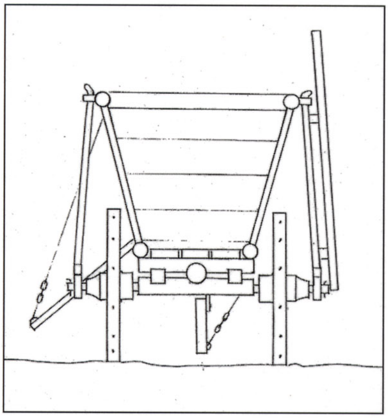

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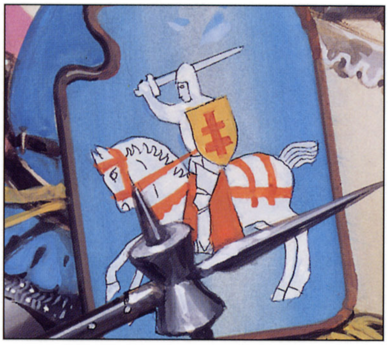

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The Hussite Wars 1419–36

In 1415, the judicial murder of the religious reformer Jan Hus sparked a major uprising in Bohemia. His death led within a few years to the 'Hussite' revolution against the monarchy, the German aristocracy and the Church establishment. For two decades the largely peasant Hussite armies successfully defied a series of international 'crusades'; they owed many of their victories to the charismatic general Jan Zizka, and his novel tactical methods based on the use of 'war wagons'. This remarkable episode in medieval warfare is remembered not only as a milestone in Czech national identity, but as an important forerunner to the wars of the Reformation the following century.

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ISBN 1-84176-665-8

9 781841 766652