

5. WHO WAS THE AUTHOR OF THE *CLAVIS
APOCALYPTICA* OF 1651?

MILLENARIANISM AND PROPHECY BETWEEN SILESIAN
MYSTICISM AND THE HARTLIB CIRCLE

The year 1654 was rather unpleasant, filled with rumours about the beginning of the millennium.¹ Cromwell ruled England, Queen Christina abdicated in Sweden, and Germany was still paralyzed by the horrors of the Thirty Years War. Although peace had finally been made in 1648, there was great discontent, especially in the eastern regions of Bohemia and Silesia, because the treaty of Münster had not restored Protestantism in these regions but had in fact solidified the Catholic rule of the Hapsburgs.² A steady flow of refugees continued to leave the region, and there was constant anticipation of new military action against the Catholic side.

In Vienna, nervousness was mounting. A secret correspondence between Johann Heinrich Bisterfeld and John Dury regarding millenarian plans for a unification of all Protestants had been found. The emperor offered a reward of 4000 thaler on the head of the author of a work entitled *Clavis apocalyptica*.³ The book had come out anonymously in English in 1651, and included a foreword by John Dury in the form of a letter to Samuel Hartlib. Joseph Mede's book of the same title most certainly had served as a guide for it, but in the newer version the predictions were more concrete and the beginning of the millennium was pinpointed for the year 1655.

Knowledge concerning the identity of the author was limited to the presumption that he was German, since the manuscript was written in that language, and that he must have given it to Comenius, who sent it on to Hartlib. There have been numerous suggestions that the author may have been Abraham von Franckenberg,⁴ but for all his millenarian views Franckenberg had quite a different conception of the coming of Christ. Besides, Franckenberg died in 1652 whereas the emperor offered the reward in 1654, after having learned the name of a suspect who was still very much alive. Peter Figulus wrote that same year in the beginning of July to Hartlib, telling him

how he admired the steadfastness of the writer.⁵ So who, then, was the actual author?⁶

We may indeed obtain a clue to the solution of this mystery from Abraham von Franckenberg, who had known the author of the *Clavis apocalyptica* and associated with him. The library at Gotha contains a letter written from a physician from Aschersleben, Matthias Engelhart, to Johann Friedrich Münster. This letter, too, was written in 1654, only two weeks prior to the letter from Figulus, and it, too, was apparently a response to rumours of the imperial blood money. Engelhart writes about the recently published *Apocalypsis reserata* and the *Clavis apocalyptica*, and relates something which he had learned about their author from Abraham von Franckenberg before his death in 1652. "In addition, Mister A.V. Franck[enberg] wrote me that the author of the named texts had something complex under preparation at the time, which would be [...] an important work. Mister Güler is a persona politica and a secretary with the duke of Brieg, but does not like his name to be made public."⁷

Who is this Güler? He is Michael Gühler (Güler, Gueler), a revenue- and tax-collector for Georg III, viceroy of the duke, at the court of Brieg in Silesia.⁸ We know that his first wedding took place in 1636 in Brieg and that he was born in Gräditz in 1598. He went to school at the Gymnasium of Schweidnitz until 1617; then he traveled through the Holy Roman Empire and stayed for two years in Preßburg (Bratislava). In 1621, he went to Wittenberg where he studied theology and mathematics. After he finished the university in 1626, he returned to Silesia and became *praeceptor* of the children of Georg Friedrich von Senitz. Then, in 1629, Gühler came to Breslau and functioned as a teacher again, now for the children of Adam von Franckenberg und Proschlitz auf Reinersdorf. Maybe it was through that connection with a member of the Franckenberg family that Gühler came in contact with Abraham von Franckenberg.⁹ From Breslau he soon went to Brieg to start his career as a revenue-collector.

The court of Brieg, of which we are informed only in broad outline, was Calvinist, and Duke Johann Christian had taken in Bohemian exiles in 1620 after the defeat of the Winter King at the battle of White Mountain. Thus, many of the compensatory ideas which had originated around the Palatine Elector Frederick V after the Bohemian tragedy – one may recall for instance the prophecies of Christoph Kotter – came immediately to Brieg.

A leading purveyor of such ideas was Hans Theodor von Tschesch, who assembled a circle of like-minded people who engaged in the study of mysticism, the Kabbalah, chronology, and the apocalypse.¹⁰ One member of this circle was Abraham von Franckenberg, who in the train of war turmoil (from 1639 onwards Silesia became the main seat of war after the Swedish invasion) left the region and went to Danzig.¹¹ The works of Jakob Böhme were read and edited in the circle, yet interest was also shown in contemporary natural sciences and scientific chronology. The manuscript of a *Chronologia omnium temporum*, which contained a number of predictions for the future, could also be found in Brieg.¹² It seems to have been written around 1630, at a

time when Gühler was still a young man, possibly by Paul Kaym, who – like Gühler – was a toll collector in the neighboring town of Liegnitz.¹³ Incidentally, Tschesch, too, like Franckenberg, fled the war: in 1641 he was supposedly planning to go to the Holy Land but was hindered by pirates from doing so; instead, he went to Holland and from there to Elbing near Danzig, where he died in 1649.

The millenarian circles around Tschesch exchanged views on texts and insights concerning the prophecies of the *Book of Revelation*. Revenue officials like Kaym and Gühler dealt with mathematics and had through this employment a natural affinity for chronology, which was often pursued by mathematicians and astronomers. Gühler cites exegetical and chronological works by Scaliger, Pareus, Graser, Reusner, Calvisius, Krentzheim, Helvicius, Napier, Piscator, Crell and Clüver – an impressive bulk of academic literature.¹⁴ After writing the *Clavis* he seems to have worked on another, ‘complex’ and ‘important’ book – at least this is what Franckenberg reported¹⁵ – but we do not know anything further about it.

Already in 1642 one finds Franckenberg corresponding with his old friend Johann Permeier, now living in Frankfurt am Main, about a *Clavis apocalyptica*, possibly the work of Mede that Permeier had offered to send to his friend in Danzig. Franckenberg replies: “I gladly await the clavis and take it (with God) under consideration. ApOca! is naturally in itself the true Clavis Script[uræ] S[anctæ] and of the secrets sealed therein, hence also of current times; as to how the clavis of the Apocalypse should be [...] discovered, however, I believe it not to be quite accessible to one (person) alone.”¹⁶ Franckenberg seems sceptical about the possibility that one man – like Mede – should be able to interpret the Revelation in a satisfactory manner. Rather, he appears to believe that one can gain results by consulting the entire tradition of commentaries as well as through an exchange between scholars.

Let us suppose that Gühler belonged to the close circle around Franckenberg and had hitherto not been acquainted with Mede’s book. In this case, Permeier’s sending the book from Frankfurt (known for its book trade) could have been a possible way for him to become familiar with the work. At least one must suppose that Gühler’s book was inspired by the discussions that took place in Brieg, Liegnitz, Breslau, Elbing, and Danzig. Franckenberg himself – although he was interested in prophetic chronology¹⁷ – seems to have reserved his opinion when it came to specific datings of the anticipated last days. He was more inclined to a ‘subtle’ millenarianism in terms of an anticipation of a spiritual renewal.¹⁸

The German manuscript of the *Clavis* must have reached Hartlib and Dury in England around 1650. It was then translated and made into an English published edition, to which Dury wrote the foreword. In it, Dury makes very clear that he had soon become aware of how much the German work was influenced by Joseph Mede’s book of 1627: “In effect I finde that it is an abbridgment of our friend Mr Mede (now with God) his interpretation of the Revelation, with som additions confirming the truth thereof, and applying the same to the present state of affairs in Europe and in Asia, more closely, and

circumstantially than hee did, to show the distinct events which are shortly to bee fulfilled.”¹⁹ This was the main difference from Mede: at points where Mede was still vague, the new work tended to specify particular circumstances, applying the calculations to the current political state – and it did this with considerable urgency, as the beginning of the millennium was predicted for the year 1655.

In England the work was quite a sensation, and even Cromwell was apparently influenced by it.²⁰ On the continent, however, the work was hardly known. This was about to change, though, as an anonymous book was published in ‘Christianstadt’ in 1653 under the title *Apocalypsis reserata, Das ist: Geöffnete Offenbahrung Johannis*.²¹ Here, too, the assertion was made that 1655 was the key year. But most importantly, the reader would find an appendix with a further German text entitled *Clavis apocalyptica*. Textual comparison shows without doubt that it is the very same text which Hartlib and Dury had translated into English; hence, it must be the first edition of the German original by Gühler. ‘Christianstadt’ may mean the town of Duke Johann Christian, that is, Brieg. In the English version, the more elaborate *Apocalypsis reserata* was made into the second part of the work published by Hartlib and Dury, and was therefore not mentioned in the title. This inverted order has hitherto prevented the bibliographic identification of the German and English works.

The German edition made both the prediction of the onset of the millennium in 1655 and the related decline of the papacy and the Hapsburgs instantaneously known in the empire. In 1654 a reprint was made in Elbing and Danzig, which were already well-established centers of followers of Böhme and Comenius.²² Vienna’s reaction and the offering of a reward on the author’s head was only too understandable. It was just as understandable that orthodox theologians like Johann Heinrich Ursinus were asked to write refutations.²³

How might one suppose that Hartlib obtained a copy of the *Clavis*? Although we can only speculate, there are a few indications based on connections among Brieg and Transylvania, Poland, and England. In his foreword to the English edition of the *Clavis* dated 28 November 1650, Dury had included the letter Comenius had sent to Hartlib together with the German manuscript. Comenius explains: “my son in law hath been away these two weeks, beeing sent to Warsaw, and to Brieg, hee bring’s no news but terrors, by reason of the Peace, which is to bee feared will afford nothing but new tortures to the confidences of those that are deserted by it, and excluded from it. Nor are the forerunners hereof wanting.”²⁴ So it may have been Comenius’s son-in-law Peter Figulus who, on his short journey to Silesia, had made a stop in Brieg and obtained the *Clavis*. Dury translates Comenius’s *Wratislaviam* falsely as *Warsaw*, since what is meant is neither Warsaw nor Bratislava, but Wroclaw (Breslau). In order to report on the rather unpleasant news, Figulus had thus been to the two Silesian towns, Brieg and Breslau.

Now it is no longer surprising that Figulus had written to Hartlib in 1654 praising the steadfastness of the author of *Clavis* – after all, he was one of the few who actually knew the author’s identity, and furthermore the one through

whom the manuscript first became publicly known. Gühler had apparently asked Figulus to bring the manuscript out of devastated Silesia, yet urged him to keep his name secret because of his position as a 'politicus.' Comenius at any rate goes directly from describing Figulus's journey to his remarks about the *Clavis* and the *Apocalypsis reserata*: "Behold, here I import unto you these Germane Treatises, concerning the Periods of the Reveleation-times, drawing to an End (Godgrant they may not bee lost, nor fall into other hands) but upon this condition that you shall let us know your Judgment thereof; for to this effect, hee that is the author of them caused them to bee communicated unto us, that whoever should read, should also judg and censure. I have heard a little while ago of this book, that is the true revelation of the Revelations; and that which will bee most comfortable (if hee hath hit right) is, that wee are so near the term prefixed. I praie you communicate this to your men, if yet you have anie Joseph Medes amongst you; but it must first bee translated into English." The fact that Comenius knew about the existence of the text beforehand suggests that he might have sent Figulus to Brieg with the explicit purpose of contacting the author.

There had long existed contacts with Brieg in the circles around Comenius. There was Cyprian Kinner, for example, an old friend of Hartlib's, who since the mid-1630s had collaborated with Bisterfeld and from the mid-1640s also with Comenius: he had started out as Gühler's colleague, a physician in ordinary at the Brieg court. During the years 1646 to 1650, which is the time during which the *Clavis* was most probably written, he was in close association with both Franckenberg and Hartlib.²⁵ The fact that Gühler was affiliated with the ideas of the Comenius-circle through Franckenberg and Kinner becomes quite evident even by the choice of words of the *Apocalypsis 'reserata'*, this being a widespread metaphor due to Comenius's *Janua linguarum reserata*.

There are still further inquiries which need to be made concerning the relationships of the 'Third Force' described by Richard Popkin²⁶ with the so-called 'Silesian mysticism' in the works of Gühler and even more so in such persons as Tschesch and Franckenberg. The similarities of the two groups are striking and call into question the hasty pigeonholing of the Silesians under the categories of 'mysticism,' 'escapism,' and 'stoicism.' It would certainly be incorrect to view such texts as the German *Clavis apocalyptica* as nothing but an immediate reaction to or reflection of the war situation and confessional conflicts. First of all, one must note that there existed something of a 'millenarian International.' Comenius alludes to this when he speaks of "anie Joseph Medes amongst you" – which included mutual contacts among such men as Tschesch and Franckenberg, the Dutchman Petrus Serrarius, the Lutheran Georg Lorenz Seidenbecher, John Dury, and Menasseh ben Israel.²⁷ Secondly, recent research – especially that of Howard Hotson²⁸ – has made us aware of the fact that the 'scientific' form of millenarianism represented by Alsted, Mede, and their followers was in no way contrary to philologically and humanistically oriented historical research.²⁹

The first generation of main-stream Protestants, Hotson argues, broadly agreed in their identification of the papacy as Antichrist. Since, according to

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