

The lower nobility in the Kingdom of Bohemia in the early 15th century, based on the example of Jan Sádlo of Smilkov

Silvie Vančurova

Preliminary communication
UDK 177.6:32>(437.3)“14“

Abstract

During the Hussite revolution, the lower nobility became an important, complex and powerful political force and exerted considerable influence over the Czech Kingdom. The life of Jan Sádlo of Smilkov is used as an example of a lower nobleman who, due to the political situation, was able to become an influential person and become involved in political developments prior to the revolution and in the revolution's first year. The story of his life offers some possible interpretations of the events that may have impacted the lower nobility's life at the beginning of 15th century.

Keywords: Lower nobility, Jan Sádlo of Smilkov, pre-Hussite period, Deeds of Complaint, Hussite revolution

In the pre-Hussite period, the lower nobility represented a largely heterogeneous and also quite numerous class of medieval society. The influence of this social group on the growing crisis in the pre-Hussite period, its very involvement in the revolution and its in many regards not inconsiderable role during the Hussite Wars have been explored by several generations of historians thus far (Holeček 1979, 83-106; Polívka 1982b, Mezník 1987; Plaček 2008, Grant 2015). Yet new, unexplored issues still arise regarding the lower nobility's property (Polívka 1978: 261-272, Jurok 2000: 63-64, Šmahel 2001: 230-242), its local position (Petráň 1994; Mezník 1999: 129-137, 362-375; Mlateček 2004) and continuity, as well as kinship ties (Mlateček 2014) and its involvement in politics. Due to the unclear idea of the number of lower noblemen (Klassen 1978: 43, Šmahel 1996a: 279), it is extremely difficult to find a typical representative of this

class whose nomenclature was, after all, quite diverse as well. The period sources used names such as *dědiník*, *nápravník*, *zeman*, *panoš*, *vladyka*, *rytieř*, *clientes*, *Milites*, and *ritter*. Therefore the reconstruction of a lower nobleman's general profile seems rather difficult. F. Šmahel delineated several types, and there were petty noblemen who acquired some education, and were appointed to interesting posts or became priests. In addition, however, many of them were attracted to military life, a many of these prospective warriors participated in warfare in foreign countries as mercenaries. The lower nobility also saw membership in bands of thieves as a way out of their poor economic situation. Alternatively, some of them gained their property through the practice of shrewd marriages. Generally, we may speak of families living on land rents, families benefitting from rents but also living on services, families whose livelihoods based on small holdings depended on the performance of services, and families who lived solely on services. A certain role was always played by contacts with more influential people, as well as ties to the sizeable lower nobility (Šmahel 1996a: 273-288, Šmahel 2002a: 245-271). Mikuláš of Hus, for example, initially served as sort of an advocate or guardian of rural noblemen before the provincial court (Šmahel 1996a: 274-275), while Jan Sádlo of Smilkov, to whom the substantial part of this study is devoted, exploited his contacts with members of the lower nobility within the Vyšehrad vassalage (Vančurová 2012).

When writing a history of the lower nobility, there is always the risk that the information found applies only to a smaller portion of that nobility. Unfortunately, historians are always dependent on sources that are often incomplete and strongly focused on just a few personalities. For economic matters, the volumes of Court Tables (Friedrich 1929) and Land Tables (Emler, 1872) may be used, and many deeds were recorded by František Palacký in his works (Palacký 1844, 1859, 1872, 1873). The revolutionary outbreak led to particularly rich chronicling activities, from which it is possible to extract a great deal of detail about the context of that period and about the opinions of the chroniclers themselves (Emler 1893a, Emler 1893b). From the mosaic they created, it is possible to compile intriguing biographies and in some cases reveal the ups and downs they experienced. The destiny of one of the key persons, Jan Žižka of Trocnov, attracts the most attention (Pekař 1992), but the portrait of the later Hussite warrior, Mikuláš of Hus, is also extremely interesting (Polívka 1982); the recent biography about Jan Smil of Křemže is also noteworthy (Polách 2011). Others about whom biographies or studies have been published are, for example, Jan Čapek of Sáňy (Papajík 2011), Jan Kolda of Žampach (Wolf 2002) or Zdeslav

Tluksa of Buřenice (Garkisch 2010). Another popular topic is the issue of the petty nobility that managed to take assume posts during the reign of Wenceslas IV (Novotný 2012: 432-438). It is precisely this issue that is closely related to the present study focusing on the career of Jan Sádlo of Smilkov, originally a lower nobleman.

Whether an event in the pre-Hussite period which allowed the self-identification of the lower nobility may be found is highly debatable. Although a more detailed description of Jan Sádlo's life does not necessarily yield insights which may be generally applicable either to a lower nobleman of this period or to a lower nobleman of his type, because considerable differences can be found even among noblemen of his type, the story of his life nonetheless offers possible interpretations of which events may have impacted the lower nobility's life at the beginning of 15th century.

Jan Sádlo of Smilkov was a lower nobleman from Central Bohemia. The year of his birth is unknown; he appeared in available sources as an adult in 1405 (Čelakovský 1895: 1007). Initially he lived in the Blaník region, but he gradually managed to additionally obtain small estates in South Bohemia and in other Central Bohemian villages. His properties were not vast, as he usually owned parts of villages. But he had good contacts with representatives of the Church; his uncle, of the same name, was a canon in Vyšehrad, (Tomek 1875: 181) and his brother Chval held several minor offices and eventually became a canon in Olomouc (Krafl 2010: 296-297). Sádlo slowly widened his circle of contacts. He took advantage of the sympathy King Wenceslas IV showed for members of the lower nobility and became one of his favourites.

A favourite was a person close to Wenceslas IV, who was subject to the king's goodwill and who thus received various gifts. The existence of favourites was even recorded in official deeds and by the chroniclers of the time. Their records show who could be described as a favourite and when. Favourites basically played the role of the king's advisers and confidants (*dilecti* or *graciarum regis* in Latin) and most of them were lower noblemen.

Recently, Robert Novotný rehabilitated to the term "favourite" (*milec* in Czech); in one of his studies, he pointed out that the negative picture of favourites was created by envious nobles and by religious representatives to create an image of a good king and vile advisers, and this interpretation was then later accepted by modern Czech historiography. In his text he also attempted to rehabilitate the favourites to some degree, showing that the preference of lower

noblemen on the Royal Court did not apply solely to the Kingdom of Bohemia (Novotný 2008: 215-229).

Jan Sádlo was not initially among the best-positioned favourites, but he established firm contacts with numerous lower noblemen, most often from Vyšehrad, thereby bolstering his own position within the group. He was mostly active at the local level. In 1413, he obtained the king's acknowledgement for Zbořený Kostelec Castle in the Sázava region, now defunct (Palacký 1844: 482). In 1414, for example, he joined forces with the local nobility, probably in response to the ongoing plague epidemic. In the context of the plague of 1413-1415, he received some supplies from his partners. He also became guardian of the descendants of Václav of Křelovice, strengthening his presence in today's Pelhřimov region. Gradually he took control of Křelovice, Hořepník, Loutkov and Buřnice (Emler 1872: 113). Despite these minor achievements, he still remained only a small local nobleman. However, his ties to the Royal Court propped up his chances for a future career.

At the time of the campaign raging against John Huss in 1411-1413, he openly supported the preacher, just like many other lower noblemen, and maintained this stance until his death. The pope escalated his pressure not only against Huss but also against his supporters, and Jan Sádlo was certainly one of them in 1411. Sádlo's alleged defence of Huss' ideas even resulted in accusations of heresy, made in the pope's letter from 1412, and Sádlo was in fact summoned to Rome. Jindřich Lefl of Lažan, governor of Wrocław, and Jan Řitka of Bezdězice were also summoned. They were both lower noblemen (even though Jindřich Lefl was promoted for his services for the king) who had built up positions of importance (Emler 1893: 574).

In September 1415, Sádlo was one of the signatories to the Deeds of Complaint against the burning of Hus at the stake. The Deeds of Complaint were signed by representatives of the most prominent families and by many members of the lower nobility, so that 452 noble seals were attached to it. At that point it became clear just how broad the base of supporters of John Huss and his teaching among the nobility was, and the initial outlines of their demands and attitudes were discerned. Although this base was not yet complete, it was clear that the lower nobility predominated in it. Although the Council of Constance announced in February 1416 that all 452 of the seals on the Deed of Complaint against Hus' execution were suspected of representing heresy and the nobles were thus obliged to come to Constance in 50 days, it did not in fact bind any these signatories (Zilynskyj 1983: 195-237). On the one hand, the high number of

signatures can be interpreted as an effort by the lower nobility to claim allegiance to help set the country's destiny; on the other hand, however, their high participation can be explained by rather parochial interests. It turned out that the nobles were often joined by relatives and friends and particularly by the clients of noblemen and servants of the lower nobility (Šmahel 1996b, 284). Therefore it is very difficult to refer to this event as a kind of a political gathering of the lower nobility who prevailed among the signatories thanks to their number. However, the possibility that it was one of the first events foreshadowing the future involvement of the lower nobility in the Hussite revolution should not be discounted. For some at the very least it played an important role, as seen in the example of Jan Sádlo (Vančurová 2012: 77).

After the death of John Huss, the atmosphere in the Kingdom of Bohemia became increasingly tense (Palacký 1859: 590-595). The conflict between opponents and supporters of the preacher slowly gained intensity. Jan Sádlo remained one of Hus' supporters and his influence grew rapidly. In 1416, he managed to obtain the vacant post of the bishop of Olomouc for the royal candidate Aleš of Březí, his brother-in-law. Jan Sádlo had earlier married his sister, Martha of Březí (Sedláček 1998: 41).

At the same time, however, Jan Železný, the bishop of Litomyšl, was also interested in the Olomouc Diocese and arrived in Olomouc earlier. On 21 September 1416 he was elected bishop by his adherents among the canons in Olomouc. Aleš of Březí and Jan Sádlo came to Olomouc subsequently under the protection of Lacko and Petr of Kravaře and others. They took advantage of the fact that the first vote was not attended by all canons and organized a new vote, which took place on 3 October and ended with a victory for Aleš of Březí (Šmahel 1996b: 303-304, Klassen 1978: 69). It is worth noting that one of the Olomouc canons was Sádlo's brother Chval of Smilkov, which confirms that a network of individuals from the circles of the lower nobility was being established up behind the royal policy and these persons were helping each other and facilitating each other's career advancements.

Jan Sádlo of Smilkov slowly gained the king's full confidence. He worked as the administrator of royal expenses and as such managed the court and the monarch's needs concerning all royal revenues coming into the central administration. This office was one of the most vital, and kings appointed the most trusted individuals to hold it (Palacký 1844: 490). Just like some of the king's older favourites from among the lower nobility, such as Jíra of Roztoky and Filip Laut, Sádlo was appointed to the office of Master of the Hounds. His duties

included care for the royal forests, as he supervised the latter and ensured that they were only used by the monarch himself (Tomek 1881: 46). Tied to these offices, he also had a seat on the Royal Council as an advocate of Hus' reforms in the Church from 1417 onward.

Around the same time, a song appeared according to which Jan Sádlo was among the most significant adherents of Hus and, in the eyes of his opponents, a heretic. A satirical poem was written a year later, also aimed against heretics, and Jan Sádlo was once again one of them (Palacký 1873: 521). He was mentioned as one of the members of the Royal Crown Council who seized the Church's assets to the benefit of royal finances, thereby burdening the king with sin. The activities of many influential people from the lower nobility were driven by their efforts to enrich themselves as much as possible at the expense of the Church. This is often mentioned as one of the reasons why they supported Hus' efforts to restore the Church's former poverty.

The introduction of communion from the chalice resulted in an internal split among the Hussite nobility, which had been more or less unified until 1418. The division of the nobility by the chalice may be considered the next event influenced the further direction of the lower nobility, although it did not come into focus until the Hussite Wars, when there were fights on behalf of or against the chalice.

In spite of all this, Jan Sádlo did not compromise on his reformist views and remained a leading representative of the Hussite nobility. He even reinforced his position by becoming the Burgrave of Karlštejn (Palacký 1872: 272-275).

Unrest was growing in the country and Jan Želivský, an increasingly popular preacher, roused the people to march in front of the New Town Hall on 30 July 1419. Several attackers entered the Hall and threw the burgomaster and the councillors down from the windows. According to some speculation, the overthrow was successfully legalized also thanks to Jan Sádlo, Petr Zmrzlík of Svojšín, the Burgrave of Vyšehrad Jan Řitka of Bezdědice and the Vice-chamberlain Jan Bechyně, lower noblemen who had great influence at that time. The First Defenestration of Prague shocked King Wenceslas, who died of a heart attack shortly thereafter (Šmahel 1996b, 314-318; Spěváček 1986, 606).

After the king's death, the throne was vacated for his brother Sigismund, who intended to restore order and return the heretical country back into the bosom of the Church. The supporters of Hus' teachings strongly opposed him, however, and prevented him from ascending to the throne. A number of nobles increased their wealth at the expense of the Church. The ringleaders of the opposition were lower noblemen who had been recently impoverished and whose living conditions had deteriorated, as well as prominent favourites of the Wenceslas era. One of them was Jan Sádlo, who lost all his offices after the arrival of Sigismund. As always, however, he relied on his good contacts to the lower nobility and, at the Čáslav Assembly in June 1421, he was elected on behalf of the knights to a temporary 20-member body that governed the country until a suitable candidate for a ruler was found (Emler 1893b: 487). Such a ruler would have to tolerate the religious and proprietary demands of the Hussite nobility.

The number of representatives of the lower nobility in the country's interim government (7 out of 20) reflected its increasing political importance. (Šmahel 2002b: 1158-1187). Although it did not signal any palpable changes for many poorer noblemen, because they had still had to eke out a living and this consequently precarious economic status meant they could hardly afford to participate in politics, for the engaged noblemen it constituted further impetus for their activities. In the past, certain posts, such as supreme judge (Klassen 1978: 47-50), had been set aside for them, and during the reign of Wenceslas IV they infiltrated the Royal Council, which was also the case of Jan Sádlo, and now they held even more important posts. On the other hand, the towns also had greater representation.

Jan Sádlo himself gained great popularity not only among the lower nobility, but also in Prague (Emler 1893b: 515), and this was one of the reasons why the radical preacher Jan Želivský had him eliminated. In October 1421, he invited Sádlo to Prague and unexpectedly arrested and executed him. This paved the way to Želivský's dictatorship in Prague (Emler 1893b: 515).

The death of Jan Sádlo of Smilkov was tragic, for his life ended on the execution ground in a manner certainly not typical for most representatives of the lower nobility in Bohemia and Moravia. However, the reconstruction of at least some episodes in his life facilitates a different view of the events of that period, roughly spanning the years 1405-1421. It has been confirmed that events pertaining to the university in the first decade of the 15th century did not influence the lives of the petty nobility. The increasing tension surrounding John Huss in 1411-1415 had a great impact on the lives of some members of the lower

nobility, as shown in Sádlo's case. Hus' burning at the stake in Constance in 1415 had a similarly immense impact on many petty noblemen, although their reasons for attaching their seals to the Deeds of Complaint were not always clear. Sádlo's fate repeatedly showed how important interactions with the lower nobility were. The mutual cohesion between certain families and friends was a considerable advantage for many petty noblemen. Sádlo adroitly used his contacts with the gentry, resulting in successes for him during both periods: the reign of Wenceslas and the onset of the Hussite revolution. He belonged to the impoverished nobility from the peripheries of Central and Southern Bohemia, but he managed to gain admittance to the Royal Council and then the interim government. In a way he exemplified the rise of politically engaged lower noblemen who were initially interested only in their holdings, but political and confessional matters gradually began to broaden their horizons.

Bibliography

ČELAKOVSKÝ 1895

Jaromír Čelakovský (ed.), *Sbírka pramenů práva městského Království Českého. Codex juris municipalis Regni Bohemiae, II: Privilegia královských měst venkovských v království Českém z let 1225 až 1419*, Prague 1895.

EMLER 1872

Josef Emler (ed), *Pozůstatky desk zemských království českého roku 1541 pohořelých*, vol. II., Prague 1872.

EMLER 1893a

Josef Emler (ed), *Fontes Rerum Bohemicarum, V. (Prameny dějin českých), Chronicon Universitatis Pragensis (Tzv. Kronika Pražské university)*, Prague 1893.

EMLER 1893b

Josef Emler (ed), *Fontes Rerum Bohemicarum, V. (Prameny dějin českých), Laurenti de Brzezowa Historia Hussitica (Vavřince z Březové Kronika husitská)*, Prague 1893.

FRIEDRICH 1929

Gustav Friedrich (ed), *Desky dvorské Království Českého VII., První kniha půhonná z let 1383–1407*, Prague 1929.

GARKISCH 2010

Miloš Garkisch, "Zdeslav Tluksa z Buřenic, karlštejnský purkrabí v době husitských válek", *Středočeský sborník historický*, 36, Prague 2010, 22-43.

GRANT 2015

Jeanne E. Grant, *For the Common Good. The Bohemian Land Law and the Beginning of the Hussite Revolution*, Leiden 2015.

HOLEČEK 1979

Jindřich Holeček, "Příspěvky k metodologickým aspektům výzkumu české šlechty v období husitské Revoluce: Marxistická nobilitologie, její metody a techniky," *Ústecký sborník historický*, Ústí nad Labem 1979, 83–106.

JUROK 2000

Jiří Jurok, *Česká šlechta a feudalita ve středověku a raném novověku. Majetková a sociální struktura, politická moc a kulturní reprezentace šlechty a feudalit v českém státě ve 13. - první polovině 17. století*, Nový Jičín 2000.

KLASSEN 1978

John Martin Klassen, *The Nobility and the Making of the Hussite Revolution*, Boulder 1978.

KRAFL 2010

Pavel Krafl (ed.), *Regesta Bohemiae et Moraviae Aetatis Venceslai IV*, vol. VII, Prague 2010.

MEZNÍK 1987

Jaroslav Mezník, "Der böhmische und mährische Adel im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert," *Bohemia* 38, München 1987, 69-91.

MEZNÍK 1999

Jaroslav Mezník, *Lucemburská Morava 1310-1423*, Prague 1999.

MLATEČEK 2004

Karel Mlateček, "Nižší šlechta na Moravě před husitskou revolucí," in: *Evropa a Čechy na konci středověku. Sborník příspěvků věnovaných Františku Šmahelovi* (eds. E. Doležalová, R. Novotný, and P. Soukup), Prague 2004, 281-290.

MLATEČEK 2014

Karel Mlateček, *Rytíři z Lulče a jejich přátelé*, Brno 2014.

NOVOTNÝ 2009

Robert Novotný, "Ráj milců? Nižší šlechta na dvoře Václava IV.," in: *Dvory a rezidence ve středověku II: Skladba a kultura dvorské společnosti* (eds. D. Dvořáčková-Malá and J. Zelenka), Prague 2008, 215–229.

NOVOTNÝ 2012

Robert Novotný, "Milci a nižší šlechta na dvoře Václava IV.," in: *Lucemburkové* (eds. F. Šmahel and L. Bobková), Prague 2012, 432–438.

PALACKÝ 1844

František Palacký (ed.), *Archiv český čili Staré písemné památky české i moravské*, III., Prague 1846.

PALACKÝ 1859

František Palacký (ed.), *Documenta Mag. Joannis Hus: Vitam, doctrinam, causam in Constantiensi consilio actam et controversias de religione in Bohemia annis 1403-1418 motas illustrantia*, Prague 1859.

PALACKÝ 1873

František Palacký (ed.), *Urkundliche Beiträge zur Geschichte des Hussitenkrieges in den Jahren 1419–1436*, 2, Prague 1873.

PALACKÝ 1872

František Palacký (ed.), *Archiv český čili Staré písemné památky české i moravské*, VI., Prague 1872.

PAPAJÍK, 2011

David Papajík, *Jan Čapek ze Sán. Jezdec na konec světa. Vojevůdce, kondotiér a zbohatlík 15. Století*, České Budějovice 2011.

PEKAŘ, 1992

Josef Pekař, *Žižka a jeho doba*, Prague 1992.

PETRÁŇ 1994

Josef Petráň, "Krajina pracující k revoluci," in: *Husitství, renesance, reformace I* (eds. J. Pánek, M. Polívka, and N. Reichertová), Prague 1994, 261–272.

PLAČEK

Miroslav Plaček, "Ke vztahu sídel nižší šlechty a jejich hospodářského zázemí," *Archeologica historica*, 33, Prague 2008, 209–220.

POLÁCH 2011

Jaroslav Polách, *Jan Smil z Křemže. Život táborského hejtmana a loupeživého rytíře*, České Budějovice 2011.

POLÍVKA 1978

Miloslav Polívka, "A Contribution to the Problem of Property Differentiation of the Lesser Nobility in the Pre-Hussite Period in Bohemia," *Hospodářské dějiny / Economic History*, 2, Prague 1978, 331-360.

POLÍVKA 1982

Miloslav Polívka, *Mikuláš z Husi a nižší šlechta v počátcích husitské revoluce*, Prague 1982.

SPĚVÁČEK 1986

Jiří Spěváček, *Václav IV. (1361-1419). K předpokladům husitské revoluce*, Prague 1986.

SEDLÁČEK 1998

August Sedláček, *Hrady, zámky a tvrze Království českého, XV., Kouřimsko, Vltavsko a jihozápadní Boleslavsko*, Prague 1998 (reprint).

ŠIMŮNEK, 2008

Robert Šimůnek, "Mikrosvět společenských vazeb drobné šlechty v pozdním středověku. Vladykové z Radíče okolo poloviny 15. Století," *Středočeský sborník historický*, 34, Prague 2008, 3-36.

ŠMAHEL 1996a

František Šmahel, *Husitská revoluce, I., Doba vymknutá z kloubů*, Prague 1996

ŠMAHEL 1996b

František Šmahel, *Husitská revoluce, II. Kořeny české reformace*, Prague 1996.

ŠMAHEL 2001

František Šmahel, *Husitské Čechy. Struktury, procesy, ideje*, Prague 2001.

ŠMAHEL 2002a

František Šmahel, *Die Hussitische Revolution I*, Hanover 2002.

ŠMAHEL 2002b

František Šmahel, *Die Hussitische Revolution II*, Hanover 2002.

TOMEK 1875

Václav Vladivoj Tomek, *Dějepis města Prahy*, III., Prague 1875.

TOMEK 1881

Václav Vladivoj Tomek, *Dějepis města Prahy*, V., Prague 1881.

VANČUROVÁ, 2012

Silvie Vančurová, *Osobnost Jana Sádla ze Smilkova*, MA Thesis, Prague 2012.

WOLF, 2002

Vladimír WOLF, *Jan Kolda ze Žampachu. Život táborského hejtmana, loupeživého rytíře, kondotiéra a psance*, Hradec Králové – Trutnov 2002.

ZILYNSKYJ 1983

Bohdan Zilynskyj, "Stížný list české a moravské šlechty proti Husovu upálení. Otázky vzniku a dochování," *Folia historica Bohemica*, 5, Prague 1983, 195–237.