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Stone Altars, Wooden Tables, Silver Chalices, Unleavened Hosts, and Plain Bread: The Long Reformation of the Eucharist's Materiality in the Pays de Vaud (1400–1600)

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Abstract: Recent scholarship on the late medieval Pays de Vaud has allowed for a better understanding of the Reformation (1536) in this region, revealing it as a period marked not only by ruptures but also by significant adaptations and continuities. This article employs a trans-periodic approach to explore the material culture of the Eucharist, tracing its developments across the late medieval and Reformation periods. Key findings include the transition from stone altars to wooden communion tables, the contested continuity in the substance and shape of chalices, and the gradual shift from unleavened hosts to plain bread. These changes highlight a complex interplay of theological and practical concerns. The study provides a nuanced perspective on the Reformation in the Pays de Vaud, emphasizing the ongoing influence of medieval ecclesiastical reforms and the gradual nature of liturgical transformations. This analysis underscores the importance of material culture in understanding religious and cultural shifts during this pivotal period.

Keywords: material culture; reformation; liturgy; altar; communion table; chalice; eucharist; host; communion bread; Pays de Vaud; Bern; Pierre Viret

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1. Introduction

A 1537–1538 entry in a Protestant Bernese bailiff's accounts from the Pays de Vaud records a fine levied against a man and three women from Villeneuve for procuring "blessed bread" (*gesegnettz brott*) in Vouvry, a village in the neighboring Catholic Valais region. The man was fined 10 florins, and each woman 5 florins, totaling 25 florins (Christofis 2020, p. 65). This episode is one of many instances of fines imposed for resisting the Reformation. Such acts of defiance often manifested in attachment to material objects, whether liturgical objects like chalices, prayer beads, and crucifixes, or consumables such as consecrated hosts and blessed bread. These historical accounts invite investigation into the evolution of material liturgical culture before, during, and after the Reformation.

Historians of the Reformation in the Pays de Vaud (1536) have traditionally sought to understand this period within the context of the late medieval Church (Ruchat 1707; Vuilleumier 1927a, p. 1). However, earlier Protestant historiography often depicted the Reformation as a stark rupture, interpreting contemporary polemical texts uncritically. Such interpretations persisted until the early 20th century, primarily due to the paucity of archival research on the 15th and early 16th centuries, with significant advancements occurring only slowly until the 1980s. Scholarly interest in the medieval Pays de Vaud was significantly revitalized in 1981 with the appointment of Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, a specialist of the medieval papacy, as full professor of medieval history at the University of Lausanne. He established the *Cahiers lausannois d'histoire médiévale*, a series that has greatly expanded our knowledge of the medieval Pays de Vaud, publishing 61 volumes to date and stimulating extensive local archival research.

Paravicini and his intellectual progeny have enabled early modern historians to reexamine the Reformation within its broader historical context, particularly in the northern

and eastern Lemanic regions of the Pays de Vaud and the Chablais vaudois, from the perspective of the "long Reformation" (Wallace 2004; Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo 2016). This approach has fostered fruitful collaborations between early modern and medieval historians, such as Karine Crousaz and Bernard Andenmatten, in both scholarship and teaching (Yildiz 2023; Jordan 2020; Christofis 2020; Abraham 2020).

Indeed, examining sources from circa 1400 to circa 1600 has led to a more nuanced understanding of the continuities and ruptures throughout this period. Specifically related to the materiality of the Eucharist, certain ruptures have been overstated, while continuities—particularly in the areas of liturgical vessels, furniture, and the sacramental elements—have often been overlooked.

Research on the materiality of the Eucharist and its developments before and after the Reformation has been notably conducted in the English, German, and Dutch contexts. These studies have often been part of broader investigations into cultural and religious changes over extensive periods (Scribner 2001; Duffy 2022). Some scholars have illuminated the significance of liturgical objects by examining the rituals and gestures that specific objects accompanied or enabled (Karant-Nunn 1997). Others, focusing particularly on the English and Dutch contexts, have provided valuable interpretative approaches by studying altars, which can be applied in historical research in other regions (Fincham and Tyacke 2007; Spicer 2014). Additionally, liturgical vessels, and their ambiguous survival and "recycling", have been key objects of study for those seeking to understand the processes of transformation and continuity during the Reformation (Spicer 2016; Walsham 2017; Yeoman 2018; Tarlow 2018). The stimulating results from these domains of historical scholarship in English, German, and Dutch contexts suggest that such approaches could be effectively deployed in the Pays de Vaud.

This article focuses on the materiality of the Eucharistic celebration in the Pays de Vaud. Given its centrality to both pre- and post-Reformation Christianities, the study aims to delineate the material manifestations of this ritual before and after the Reformation. Additionally, it analyzes the doctrinal and practical changes the Eucharistic celebration underwent until it stabilized at the dawn of the 17th century, with particular attention to the objects used, their functions, and their contemporary perceptions.

Significant changes in material substance are observed: stone and wooden altars coexisted in medieval churches, with religious authorities favoring the former, while in Reformation churches, stone and wooden communion tables coexisted, with religious authorities favoring the latter. In the Pays de Vaud, late medieval bishops promoted a shift from wooden liturgical vessels to those made of noble metals, such as silver. Reformation churches retained this cultural heritage despite Reformed theologians' calls for simpler materials. Furthermore, while the medieval use of unleavened hosts continued in the early years of the Reformation, it gradually gave way to plain bread as the new faith became firmly established.

Although many changes were driven by the new understanding of Eucharistic doctrine, rooted in the Protestant exegetical method that sought to interpret the Bible independently of Roman Catholic tradition, we argue that certain processes emerging in the late medieval Church influenced these changes.

2. The Pays de Vaud in Context

In the 15th and early 16th centuries, the Pays de Vaud extended geographically from Lake Leman in the south to the Jura mountain range and Lake Neuchâtel in the north. Its western and eastern borders neighbored the Genevan Republic and the Cantons of Fribourg and Bern, respectively. Politically, the Pays de Vaud was part of the Duchy of Savoy, which itself was a constituent of the Holy Roman Empire. However, its capital, Lausanne, was a principality governed by a bishop. The Bishop of Lausanne presided over a diocese that extended beyond the Pays de Vaud, reaching into neighboring regions such as Neuchâtel and Solothurn to the north, and Fribourg and Bern to the east (Morerod 1997a, p. 138; 1997b, p. 233; Andenmatten 1997, pp. 191–98).

In the aftermath of the Burgundian Wars (1474–1477), Bern acquired a portion of territory southeast from the Pays de Vaud, known as the "Chablais vaudois", which included the bailiwicks of Aigle, Les Ormonts, Bex, and Ollon. Additionally, together with Fribourg, Bern gained joint control over the bailiwicks of Orbe, Echallens, and Grandson, situated in the central and northern parts of the Pays de Vaud (Bruening 2011, pp. 44–50).

When Bern adopted the Reformed faith in 1528, the Mass was abolished in the bailiwicks under its sole control: Aigle, Les Ormonts, Bex, and Ollon, making these the first French-speaking Reformed territories in Europe. Since the Canton of Fribourg remained loyal to the Roman Catholic Church, Bern and Fribourg faced the challenging task of addressing the needs of divided religious communities within their shared bailiwicks.

In the rest of the Pays de Vaud, the Roman Catholic Church persisted until 1536. Taking advantage of the Duke of Savoy's weakness, Bernese forces invaded the territory early in the year. Initially, the new rulers declared that the population could continue practicing the traditional faith, believing that evangelical preaching would be sufficient to convert the population. However, in October, a disputation was organized in Lausanne Cathedral, where the Reformed camp emerged victorious against an unprepared opposition. Consequently, Bernese authorities declared the abolition of the Mass and the implementation of the Reformed faith in the newly conquered Pays de Vaud (Bruening 2011, pp. 53–67).

In the Pays de Vaud, the Bernese authorities implemented their own variant of Reformed religion, which combined elements of German and Swiss Protestantism, heavily influenced by Basel and Zürich. In the realm of liturgy, authoritative voices included Martin Bucer and, more significantly, Huldrych Zwingli. Although Guillaume Farel (1489–1565)—a Frenchman and disciple of the humanist Lefèvre d'Etaples—and Pierre Viret (1509/1510–1571)—a native of the Pays de Vaud—were initially aligned theologically with Zwingli and the Bernese, from 1536 onwards they joined forces with John Calvin to gradually develop a new strand of Reformed theology with a distinct religious culture, which later came to be known as "Calvinism".

3. From Stone Altar to Wooden Table

3.1. Diocesan Visits

In the Pays de Vaud, the Reformation (1536) did not occur against the backdrop of a Church in material decline. In fact, by the time of the Reformation, most churches had been renovated and well maintained during the preceding century, requiring no significant structural modifications until the late 17th and 18th centuries (Grandjean 1988, pp. 21–206). Bishops had conducted numerous visits to their diocese and cathedral from the early 15th century until the early 16th century (Challant 1921; Saluces 1993; Berclaz 2022). The primary focus of these visits had been the material state of the churches (*visitatio rerum*), with decreasing emphasis on the moral state of the clergy and parishioners (*visitatio personarum*). The commissioners had instructed the clergy and parishioners to repair their buildings, construct new furniture, and furnish their altars. Most renovation instructions concerned the material aspects of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. Visitors encountered both orderly and chaotic parishes, and their overarching goals were to harmonize liturgical practices within the diocese and to elevate the perceived dignity of the sacrament. This necessitated that all parish churches and chapels contain the same objects, made of the same materials, to enable the clergy to perform uniform rituals. Indeed, certain ritual gestures required specific objects, without which they could not be properly executed.

The earliest extant records of a diocesan visit, conducted in 1416–1417 at the behest of Bishop Guillaume de Challant (Challant 1921), provide insights into the essential liturgical equipment required in each church: an altar, upon which would be a secure wooden cabinet (*custodia*; *armatrium cum clavi*) for storing consecrated hosts, chrism and oil. Additionally, the altar was to be draped with a cloth and equipped with a chalice for wine, a paten for hosts, and other liturgical vessels, which will be detailed later in this study. The visitation reports predominantly highlighted instances of broken or missing items that required repair or replacement to meet the bishop's standards, painting a critical picture of the material

state of the churches. Consequently, items rarely discussed were presumably in satisfactory condition or not pertinent to the visit's focus on the Eucharist. This suggests that relatively few churches needed to address issues with their altars, censers (*turibulum*), or chalices—key components of the Mass—indicating their likely good condition, appropriate material composition, and conformity with episcopal standards at the time of inspection.

3.2. Altars and Their Materiality

The diocesan visitation records of 1416–1417 focused primarily on structural issues when assessing altars; they mandated repairs or alterations only if altars were found to be fractured, uneven, or insufficiently sized to accommodate liturgical objects upon their surface (Challant 1921, pp. 38, 39, 59, 81). Little attention, however, was paid to the material composition of altars unless these structural concerns arose. In contrast, the subsequent diocesan visitation of 1453, commissioned by Bishop Georges de Saluces, revealed a significant evolution in episcopal standards and liturgical practices within the diocese. Notably, this visitation emphasized the requirement for altars to be constructed from stone, marking a departure from their wooden predecessors.

In approximately one-third of the cases, this new standard for stone altars concerned parish churches (Saluces 1993, pp. 477, 487, 494, 561, 564, 566, 595, 619, 641), while the remaining instances pertained to newly established chapels, secondary altars, and hospital chapels that had not existed during the previous visitation forty years earlier (Saluces 1993, pp. 175, 293, 310, 362, 440, 471, 477, 486, 525, 531, 543, 557, 567, 601, 615, 617, 626). Interestingly, the requirement for stone altars was not explicitly articulated in the episcopal ordinances for the Lausanne diocese, known as the *Constitutiones synodales*, initially published by Georges de Saluces in 1447 and subsequently reissued in print by later bishops. However, the prohibition against celebrating Mass on a fractured altar was clearly stipulated (Saluces [1447] 1989, p. 15; Berclaz 2022, p. 458).

The decision to adopt stone for altars echoed the reasoning articulated by Durandus (c. 1230–1296) in his *Rationale divinorum officiorum*, a prominent and widely endorsed medieval commentary on liturgical practices. Protestant reformers in the Pays de Vaud, for instance, perceived Durandus's work as emblematic of Roman Catholic liturgical norms (Viret 1554, p. 469). According to Durandus, the use of stone in altar construction mirrored the practice of Old Testament patriarchs (Durandus [<1286] 1477, f. 6r-v; Lauwers 2004, pp. 305–7). Moreover, regarding the prohibition of using fractured altars, Durandus invoked Exodus 20:25 which seemed to mean that the Lord was prohibiting the making of altars with fissured stones (*sectis lapidibus*), as rendered by the Vulgate (Durandus [<1286] 1477, f. 6v).

While stone held symbolic value in medieval Church doctrine—such as Christ being likened to a rock, cornerstone, and altar (2 Co 10:1–4; 1 P 2:4–8; He 13:10)—it is noteworthy that throughout Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, Mass was performed validly—although certainly not widely—on wooden altars across Europe (Durandus [<1286] 1477, f. 10r; Perrin 2001, p. 36; Howard and Crossley 1917, p. 135). The demand to replace wooden altars with stone, as observed in the 1453 diocesan visitation, often followed positive assessments of church conditions, such as in the case of the village of Rances where "everything was in order and well arranged, except for some points..." (*omnia et singula competenter stare et esse comperierunt preter aliqua*...), (Saluces 1993, p. 477).

Moreover, movable wooden altars, termed *arae mobiles*, were found acceptable during the 1453 visitation, evidenced in a hospital chapel and as secondary altars in two parish churches (Saluces 1993, pp. 289, 362, 541). Such altars were considered licit by late medieval ecclesiastical authorities due to their consecration, ornamentation, equipment, and endowment, which invested them with sacrality, rendering their surface suitable for hosting the Eucharist (Durandus [<1286] 1477, I.II, I.VII; Palazzo 2008, pp. 153–80; Kaspersen and Thunø 2006). Even the Saint-Maur chapel of Lausanne Cathedral's cemetery and the Franciscan cloister of Saint-François had altars made of wood (Stammler 1902, p. 40; Lavanchy 2003, p. 161). However, adherence to these doctrinal standards varied in practice;

some altars, even those of stone, faced potential demolition or suspension of Mass until rectified if lacking proper decoration, equipment, or endowment, as seen in instances like a side altar in Lausanne Cathedral (Challant 1921, pp. 6, 46; Berclaz 2022, pp. 457–58).

The records of the 1453 visitation reveal a perceived loss of control by bishops over the condition and use of altars. Masses were frequently conducted on altars that were insufficiently adorned, unequipped, unendowed, fractured, or even unconsecrated, across various parishes (Saluces 1993, pp. 325, 361, 387, 447, 523, 525, 584, 599, 600, 604, 620, 623, 637). For instance, in the villages of Penthéréaz and Vidy, although visitors judged the churches to be well equipped, their main altars were not consecrated and their consecration was ordered within a two-year deadline (Saluces 1993, pp. 620, 637). This suggests that rural priests and their congregations sometimes delayed or disregarded directives to meet liturgical standards, confident in the efficacy of their Masses as perceived locally. In contrast, in Lausanne Cathedral in 1529, visitors encountered priests who exploited loopholes—such as missing liturgical vessels or damaged altars—to justify not performing assigned Masses (Berclaz 2022, pp. 450–62). Some have interpreted such cases as due to priests' struggles to perform the growing number of Masses ordered through testaments by clergy and laity alike (Bisseger 2003, pp. 84–90; Lavanchy 2003, p. 169). Across the diocesan and cathedral visitation reports of the 15th and early 16th centuries, altars in major towns nevertheless seem to be well equipped and highly decorated with carvings, colorful textiles, and painted wooden sculptures of biblical figures, saints, and animals (Berclaz 2022, pp. 463–70; Saluces 1993; Challant 1921)—thus reflecting a vibrant religious culture, which Chiffoleau (2011) has called "la religion flamboyante" of the late Middle Ages.

3.3. Breaking the Altars

One of the first French-speaking regions under Bernese rule to witness the abolition of the Mass was the bailiwick of Aigle. On 7 February 1528, Bernese authorities, implementing their new Reformation mandate, issued orders for the demolition of altars, the burning of "images", the destruction of paintings, and the removal of all traces of idolatry, aiming "to not let anyone imagine that the days of popery would return" (Grandjean 1988, pp. 23, 541; Vuilleumier 1927a, pp. 42–44).

In the Pays de Vaud, which was annexed by Bernese forces in early 1536, the authorized dismantling of traditional liturgical elements commenced swiftly after the Reformed theologians achieved victory at the Lausanne disputation held from 1st to 8th October. Specifically, on 19 October 1536, the first Edict of Reformation for the Pays de Vaud was issued by Bernese authorities (Republic of Bern 1536, pp. 13–14). The process of dismantling altars spanned a year, as evidenced by municipal records from towns such as Cully, Morges, Aubonne, and Lutry, which detail the costs associated with labor to extract and break the altars, as well as to level the surfaces they once occupied (Grandjean 1988, p. 541). Remarkably, the sole intact medieval altar, walled up in its chapel in 1537, was discovered in Saint-Saphorin in 1969 (Grandjean 1988, pp. 29, 543).

However, Protestants in the Pays de Vaud began targeting altars before such actions were officially sanctioned. A crucial account documenting these early attacks on the Mass is found in the anonymous *Chronique de Pierrefleur*, believed to have been authored by Guillaume de Pierrefleur, a lifelong opponent of the Reformation and a patrician of Orbe. Orbe was one of three bailiwicks—Orbe, Echallens, and Grandson—shared between the Protestant canton of Bern and the Roman Catholic canton of Fribourg, where both faiths were obliged to coexist under what historians refer to as a *simultaneum* (Grosse 2018). This arrangement persisted from Bern's adoption of the Reformation in 1528 until a majority of male parishioners in each parish of these bailiwicks voted to embrace the Reformed faith and abolish the Mass. Orbe and Grandson subsequently abolished the Mass in 1554, while Echallens remained biconfessional (Bruening 2011, p. 79; Les confréries Catholique et reformée d'Echallens 1965, pp. 33–34).

The earliest instances of altar destruction were initiated by Bernese Protestant troops passing through the Pays de Vaud in 1530 en route to aid their Genevan allies (Pierrefleur

[1530–1569] 1933, p. 8). Indigenous Protestants began independently breaking altars a year later, with Pierrefleur chronicling these events as they unfolded in the shared bailiwick of Orbe. On Sunday, 2 July 1531, the feast of the Visitation of the Virgin Mary, Christophe Hollard, a supporter of the reformer Farel, publicly destroyed the main altar in the chancel of Orbe's primary church. According to Pierrefleur, this act took place before a congregation attending Mass, who, shocked and confused, did not intervene, believing Hollard acted under Bernese authority (Pierrefleur [1530–1569] 1933, p. 37). The following day, Hollard and a dozen accomplices proceeded to dismantle all 26 altars across the seven chapels and churches in Orbe. Despite these efforts by Protestants to hinder the Mass by destroying altars, priests continued celebrating Mass as early as the next day, albeit now on wooden tables (Pierrefleur [1530–1569] 1933, pp. 37–38).

This adaptability in continuing Mass on makeshift altars mirrors the liturgical flexibility that had unsettled diocesan visitors before the Reformation. As of 1531, the bishop still maintained that Mass could not be celebrated on unconsecrated altars; moreover, only he and his delegates could consecrate altars, a process that could not feasibly occur within a single day (Saluces [1447] 1989, p. 39; Montfalcon 1523, f. 9v; Durandus [<1286] 1477, ff. 9r-10v; Palazzo 2008, pp. 85–118).

3.4. Celebrating the Protestant Eucharist

Protestants not only denounced and physically attacked the Mass but also introduced and defended a new method of celebrating the Eucharist. Guillaume de Pierrefleur, remaining faithful to the Roman Catholic Church, observed with perplexity the religious transformation unfolding in his homeland, leading him to document the evangelical movement in a quasi-anthropological manner. His narrative intricately describes the reactions of the local population upon encountering Protestant practices firsthand, illustrating their surprise.

This is particularly evident in Pierrefleur's vivid account of the first Supper conducted by Protestants in Orbe under the leadership of Guillaume Farel in 1531:

> "On the day of Pentecost, which was the 28th day of the month of May, the first Eucharist (*Cène*) in the town of Orbe was done (*fait*) by the preacher Farel, in the following way: First, Farel preached at 6 in the morning; after the preaching, they extended a cloth (*toile*) on a bench (*banc*) and placed upon it some wafers (*oublies*) or hosts (*hosties*), and some wine; as Farel went on one side of the bench and all the others knelt on the other side, Farel said to them: "Do you all forgive each other?" And they answered that they did. Then Farel gave them each a piece (*lopin*) [of wafers/hosts], saying that he was giving it to them in memory of the Passion of Christ, and then he gave them to drink. The number of those who took the Supper was seven: noble Hugonin d'Arney, Christophe Hollard, his mother, Jean Cordey, his wife, Guillaume Viret, and Georges Grivat, alias Calley. Having done this, our Lutherans[1] went their way, and we commenced singing the Mass." (Pierrefleur [1530–1569] 1933, p. 33)

As previously mentioned, Orbe being a shared bailiwick, both religious communities shared the parish church. Protestants held their services starting at 6 a.m., which included one or more sermons, concluding just before the Catholic Mass commenced at 9 a.m. The above passage illustrates how the two communities' presence would overlap, as Pierrefleur's relating of the Eucharist indicates his being present at the end of the Protestant service just before the Mass.

It is not explicitly stated whether Guillaume Farel specifically planned to conclude the service with the Supper as a deliberate demonstration of the new Eucharistic practice. Farel's liturgy published in 1533 indeed placed the Supper after the sermon, with an epilogue following the consumption of the elements (Farel 1533, ff. 38r–39r). The brevity of the service's conclusion may have been intentional, considering the violent reactions Farel and his followers had previously encountered for disrupting traditional liturgical proceedings (Pierrefleur [1530–1569] 1933, pp. 14, 16, 17, 26).

Whether intentional or not, the Protestant Eucharist made a significant impression on Pierrefleur, who meticulously describes its simplicity. Firstly, Protestants refrained from using the altar, as their ceremony was not a sacrifice but rather a supper (Farel 1534, f. 24v). This distancing from the altar symbolically marked a rupture. However, lacking plain wooden tables in the church, Pierrefleur notes they improvised by using a bench. Although, in the Pays de Vaud, pew benches were an innovation of the Reformation, transforming churches from sanctuaries into auditoriums, late medieval churches did have a few benches for pregnant women and the elderly (Grandjean 1988, p. 47). The bench, though not a wooden table, served well enough to emphasize the meal-like nature of what was placed upon it, rather than a sacrificial offering.

To mitigate the bench's perceived simplicity, Farel and his co-religionaries covered it with a cloth, a practice dating back to medieval times that persisted after the Reformation, lending dignity to the makeshift table. Indeed, Reformers did not deem the Eucharist as something devoid of solemnity or gravitas, for the wine and bread were not vulgar elements, and it was no small thing (*parva res non est*) to drink and eat them in Christ's Church (Zwingli 1527, p. 82; Sulzer 1532, f. 20r; Piaget 1928, p. 170; Crespin 1560, ff. 37r-v).

During the Reformation era, historical sources document how towns in the Pays de Vaud, alongside other regions (Riess 2021, pp. 51, 140; Duffy 2022, p. 492), began crafting wooden tables to replace traditional altars for celebrating the Eucharist. In smaller and medium-sized churches, a single table sufficed, typically positioned in the nave near the pulpit. In larger towns like Lausanne, Vevey, Yverdon, and Lutry, two communion tables were used: one designated for men and the other for women (Grandjean 1988, p. 480).

However, by the late 16th and mid-17th centuries, wooden tables were gradually replaced by stone tables. Some parishes had already adopted stone tables at the onset of the Reformation (Grandjean 1988, p. 44). Many of these stone tables were constructed using former medieval baptismal fonts as their bases, with a rectangular, round, or oval stone slab placed atop them. In some instances, medieval altar slabs were halved to create surfaces for these communion tables, a practice still observable at the parish church of Panthéréaz (Grandjean 1988, p. 44).

The predominant style of these communion tables featured a single foot, though by the 17th century, medieval baptismal fonts ceased to serve as bases for new tables. Instead, stone communion tables in the 17th and 18th centuries were often crafted with two, four, or five feet (Grandjean 1988, pp. 483–89). For Reformers—whether magistrates or theologians—and their successors, the primary concern with medieval altars was not their material substance but rather their form: altars were rectangular prisms, whereas communion tables resembled ordinary tables, upon which communicants would have had their suppers during the week.

From wood to stone, back to wood, and then back to stone again, the surface upon which the sacrament of the Eucharist was celebrated in the Pays de Vaud changed several times in the span of a few generations. As observed, these changes were not driven solely by theological paradigm shifts. In the first case, religious authorities sought, on the one hand, to harmonize practices in the diocese and apply the theological meaning of the Mass to its material performance: sacrifices were being performed upon altars, the matter of which had to cohere with their doctrinal significance. On the other hand, the records of the diocesan visits give the impression that altars had to be of great value, and thus of great expense to the parishioners, with the intention of enhancing the value of the sacrament.

Conversely, when some Reformed parochial churches in the late 1530s replaced stone altars with stone tables instead of wooden ones, the motives behind this change are less clear. It raises questions of whether this was also an effort to dignify the sacrament or perhaps a form of resistance or reluctance to discard what had been a significant investment for parishioners. Alternatively, it could have been a compromise, reflecting the Bernese authorities' gradual approach to religious transformation, where patience was considered crucial (Bruening 2011, pp. 154, 241, 260–61). In tension with the Bernese authorities, figures such as Pierre Viret advocated for the return to wooden tables for communion,

aligning closely with Zürich Reformers who preferred wooden furnishings and vessels in their liturgical reforms (Viret 1548, p. 483; Zwingli 1525a, ff. 2v-3r; Locher 1979, p. 146).

4. Liturgical Vessels

4.1. Developments in Medieval Liturgical Vessels

Pierre Viret, drawing on his knowledge of patristic sources, highlighted that in the early Church, vessels used for worship included materials such as wood, clay, and glass (Viret 1545, p. 27). However, by the Carolingian era, there was a shift towards using precious metals like silver and gold for these vessels, a change Viret interpreted as reflecting the belief that a more lavish and elegant divine service would better honor God (Viret 1554, p. 203). Thus, household utensils used in worship in Late Antiquity had become a new category of object: liturgical vessels (Philippart 2001, p. 11).

In the early 15th-century Pays de Vaud, metallic vessels had become standard due to mandates from the bishop (Challant 1921). However, rural parishes often resisted efforts to standardize liturgical practices, including the use of uniform liturgical objects. This resistance may have been partly driven by economic concerns, as parishioners were responsible for purchasing and maintaining liturgical equipment. The demands placed on parishes varied widely, with deadlines ranging from two months to five years to procure missing or damaged items, a burden that could be particularly challenging depending on the size and resources of the community (Challant 1921).

Another reason for the persistence of wooden vessels may pertain to both the physical and symbolic qualities of wood, though further scholarship on this topic is needed (Pastoureau 2004, pp. 91–109). Historians have mainly focused on wooden statues rather than liturgical vessels (Baxandall 1980; Legner 1977; Bandmann 1969; Park 2003). Durandus argued that chalices should not be made of wood because it is a "porous and spongious body" (*porosum et spongiosus corpus*) that could absorb the blood of Christ (Durandus [<1286] 1477, f. 5v). This absorption, situated at the boundary between the physical and the spiritual, could potentially transfer sanctity to another body, much like relics and other forms of "holy matter" (Bynum 2015, pp. 27–28). One wonders if this porous quality was instrumental when, in the village of Montpreveyres, the 1416–1417 visitors discovered a consecrated host in a wooden vessel containing wheat and lentils (Challant 1921, p. 137). This incident suggests that the choice of wood might have had symbolic significance, reflecting deeper beliefs about the material's interaction with both the sacred elements and other profane substances it contained.

In the minutes of the 1416–1417 diocesan visit, the focus on liturgical vessels centered on their material substance and cleanliness. In 75% of the churches, visitors found the consecrated hosts stored in wooden vessels (*vas ligneo*), typically accompanied by a clean shroud (*sindon munda*). The visitors frequently ordered that brass vessels (*vas ereum*) be used instead. Their remarks indicate that many parishes lacked another brass vessel for transporting consecrated hosts to the sick, as well as a glass vessel (*vas vitreum*)—or monstrance—for displaying the consecrated host during Corpus Christi (*die Eukaristie*). In the rural parishes, visitors often encountered either wooden vessels or none at all. This issue did not extend to censers and chalices, which were only mentioned if they were absent, and such instances exclusively pertained to newly founded chapels (Challant 1921, pp. 44–47, 63, 81, 126–30). The responsibility for adequately equipping these altars fell upon the chapel founders. The expectation that chalices should be made of brass, silver, or gilt silver is evident from instances where visitors specifically mandated the creation of a chalice from "fine silver" (*argenti fini*), as well as from later diocesan and cathedral visits (Challant 1921, p. 81; Saluces 1993; Dupraz 1906, pp. 125–67), and the 1536 Bernese inventory of secularized ecclesiastical goods (Stammler 1902, pp. 70–292).

4.2. Translatio Vasorum?

The passage from Pierrefleur's *Chronique* quoted above does not describe the liturgical instruments that Farel used in 1531. If he did at all, Pierrefleur's lack of details suggests the

use of some expectable or unsurprising vessels, such as a wooden, brass, or silver plate for the hosts, and a brass or silver chalice for the wine. If Farel had used a wooden cup instead of a metallic chalice, following the custom in Reformation Zürich where Zwingli had advocated returning to the use of ordinary household vessels that communicants would have used in daily life (Zwingli 1525a, ff. 2v-3r; Locher 1979, p. 146), it is probable that Pierrefleur would have noted it. This omission might indicate that Farel used vessels that were more in line with traditional expectations, such as metal chalices and plates, which would not have warranted specific mention from Pierrefleur.

Pierre Viret developed an argument for the return to the simplest materials and shapes for communion vessels in his *Dialogues du désordre qui est à present au monde* (1545), a book composed of fictitious dialogues between four protagonists. He set this argument within the context of his philosophy of history, beginning with Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2 of a statue with a golden head, silver chest and arms, bronze abdomen and thighs, iron legs, and feet of clay and iron. According to the prophetic narrative, a stone collides with the statue and reduces it to rubble. Viret interpreted the statue as a foretelling of successive empires, each worse than the one before, with the Roman Empire being the last and the stone that destroyed the statue representing Jesus Christ (Viret 1545, pp. 17–21).

Viret then drew a parallel between this biblical vision and the ancient Greek myth of five successive ages that degrade from the Golden Age to the Iron Age (Viret 1545, p. 23). He used these stories to introduce a third narrative that highlights a pattern of inversely proportional progress: in an ancient past, people had simple, iron money but their morals were golden. As their morals deteriorated, their money was made of increasingly noble metals, culminating in the worst morals coinciding with the use of gold money. Viret's conclusion was that historical progress involves a decline in morality paralleled by an increase in material wealth (Viret 1545, p. 24). Viret's next step was to add a religious dimension to the preceding trope:

> "You led me to remember a story, which was told to me, of a bishop who had entered a temple (*temple*, i.e., church) to see the relics of the saints, in which he found an elderly woman who showed him the pastoral staff of some old saint who had been bishop. And because the staff was made of wood, she told him: "See here, once upon a time, bishops' staffs were made of wood, and bishops were made of gold; but now to the contrary, bishops are made of wood, and their staffs are made of gold"" (Viret 1545, p. 24).

Pierre Viret's story draws inspiration from a narrative he encountered in the work of the 9th-century monk Walafrid Strabo (Viret 1554, p. 206) and likely from Durandus ([<1286] 1477, f. 5v), who had succinctly reformulated the trope, substituting the pastoral staff with a chalice: "For, then, chalices were made of wood and priests of gold; but now it is the contrary" (*Tunc enim erant lignei calices et aurei sacerdotes: nunc vero e contra est*). Viret uses this inversion to critique the moral decline of bishops and clergy from a patristic "golden age" to a present "wooden age". Concurrently, he decries the shift in ecclesiastical objects, such as episcopal staffs and church vessels, from humble materials to ones of great wealth and luxury. He then further specifies his critique by turning to liturgical vessels:

> "When the Church had neither chalice, nor paten, nor dishes, nor images, nor relics of gold or of silver, and when Christians and the faithful were content to celebrate the holy Eucharist (*saincte Cène*) of our Lord Jesus Christ, and holy Baptism, with simple vessels of clay or of wood, the Church had prophets, apostles, evangelists, doctors, bishops, priests, pastors and ministers of gold and of silver, of more faith (which is more precious than gold) and of more love (*charité*); and [they were] clothed (*ornés*) with all virtues and divine knowledge, which rendered the Church so much more beautiful, noble, rich and precious than if all the gold, silver and precious stones of the world were there. [. . .] When do you think that the Supper of Jesus Christ was celebrated with the greatest honor and reverence? In the time of the Apostles, and of their true successors, when only vessels of wood and of clay were used? Or since Pope Sepherinus [(199–219)], who was

> first to order the use of vessels of glass? Or since Pope Urban [(222–230)], who forbade the use of anything other than gold or silver, or at the very least brass?" (Viret 1545, pp. 25, 27).

Regarding the materials of liturgical vessels, Viret was synthesizing his view of Church property (Moutengou Barats 2017) as well as his aspiration for the Church to return to its original evangelical material humility and poverty. Viret argued that as long as there were ministers to remunerate, students, schools, and academies to fund, and poor people to care for—which would always be the case—there was no justification for introducing luxurious items into the Church (Viret 1545, p. 957). The late medieval Lausanne Cathedral had become overcrowded with altars and cupboards holding hundreds of liturgical vessels. In 1513, this accumulation had necessitated the cathedral chapter to limit access to the chancel to its 85 chaplains and institute a weekly rotation (Berclaz 2022, pp. 412–13). With the Reformation, most of these objects were melted or sold, benefiting both the city of Lausanne and the Bernese Republic, which was financing the burgeoning Academy of Lausanne (Crousaz 2011, pp. 209–16). Consequently, church interiors transformed from being ornately decorated sanctuaries into sober auditoriums where most of the metal had been stripped away, leaving bare wood and stone. The reduction in the quantity of chalices and other liturgical vessels was dramatic, decreasing from approximately 40 chalices listed for the 40 altars of the cathedral, its cloister, and its cemetery, as recorded in inventories from the decade preceding the Reformation (Stammler 1902, pp. 20–41; Dupraz 1906, pp. 108–86), to just two chalices for the two communion tables.

Much to Viret's disappointment, Bernese authorities did not revert the churches of the Pays de Vaud to using wooden cups and plates, as had been done in Zürich. Studies on extant medieval and early modern chalices preserved in the region reveal that silver and gilt silver remained the enduring standard for chalices, although all forms of iconography disappeared after the Reformation (Grandjean et al. 1984, pp. 7–11; Jequier 1982, pp. 99–108, 157–87; Guth-Dreyfus 1991, pp. 246–48; Spicer 2016). Not only was there continuity in the substance of chalices, but their shape also remained unchanged—unlike in the Dutch and Scottish contexts where "communion cups and beakers were larger than medieval chalices" (Spicer 2016, pp. 132–33). The similarity is such that the study of silversmith signatures has been crucial in distinguishing pre-Reformation chalices from post-Reformation ones. Moreover, when chalices did begin to change shape in the 17th century, their diameter grew smaller, aligning with contemporary household fashion (Jequier 1982, pp. 157–87; Spicer 2016). This evolution signified the Reformers' success in transforming liturgical material culture by adopting vessels that resembled those used in everyday household settings.

Ultimately, for Viret and other Reformers, the problem was not with the chalice as an object. Rather, the central issue was the parishioners' access to the chalice—access that the late medieval Church had denied. The Reformation aimed to restore to the laity the access to the chalice, which they had previously only seen in the hands of the priest. Thus, it made sense not to change the object but to keep it as it was and offer it to the lips of the parishioners and, in time, to their very hands (Sulzer 1532, f. 20v). Zwingli emphasized the communion effected by the assembly's partaking *together* in this sacrament of the body and blood of Christ (Zwingli 1525b, pp. 223–24; 1527, p. 82; Engeler 2023, p. 277). Viret stated that there was "no true communion" in the Mass, even at Easter, because the priest drank the wine alone (Viret 1547, pp. 113–14), thereby celebrating "division" instead of communion (Viret 1548, p. 455). In alignment with Zwingli, Viret understood the sacrament of the Eucharist as a "true sacrament of peace and of union and of edification" (Viret 1548, p. 687), which could only be achieved by the sharing of the chalice and the bread.

5. From Unleavened Host to Plain Bread

5.1. Maintaining Hosts

The passage about the first Protestant Eucharist reported by Pierrefleur in 1531 also provides crucial information regarding the Eucharistic body of Christ. Farel is noted to be

using wafers or hosts, rather than simple bread. In an effort not to scandalize the population accustomed to hosts, the Bernese pastors, supported by civil authorities, deemed it "good to use unleavened bread, which we call hosts (*panibus non fermentatis, quas hostias vocant*), and if not small ones, then larger ones that can be broken to distribute" (Sulzer 1532, f. 20v). The use of both small and large hosts was not an innovation of the Reformation: in the late Middle Ages, the host in the priest's hands at the elevation was indeed larger than those received by lay communicants (Kumler 2011, pp. 182–85). A larger host size ensured better visibility (Bynum 2015, pp. 19, 128; Dumoutet 1926) and highlighted the separation between clergy and laity—a separation already evident in the priests drinking from the chalice alone. This large host held greater significance for the laity because it was the one consumed by the priest, paraded during processions, and used as the *viaticum* for the sick and dying, sometimes inducing a "sacred terror" (Lemaître 1988, p. 319).

By prioritizing the use of larger hosts that could be adequately broken—a gesture with great, albeit different, importance for theologians on both sides of the Reformation—and shared—another gesture, this time only practiced by the Protestants—the Bernese were offering parishioners hosts of somewhat greater importance according to pre-Reformation standards. Three times per year (Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas), communicants now received not only what, previously, only the priests had regularly eaten, but also what they had never been allowed to drink (Sulzer 1532, f. 20v). This practice clearly performed and implemented the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, symbolizing equal access to the sacrament for all the faithful. However, the gradual implementation of these new practices was deemed necessary, as communicants were sometimes overwhelmed by their newfound intimate access to the elements.

When Pierrefleur indicates that Farel "gave them" a piece of the hosts and then "gave them" to drink, it is likely that the communicants passively received the elements into their mouths from the minister's hands. The *Acta synodi Bernensis* advised ministers to condescend to parishioners who were not yet accustomed to considering their holding of the bread and chalice themselves as not sinful (Sulzer 1532, f. 20v), echoing the "sacred terror" observed elsewhere (Lemaître 1988, p. 319; Kingdon 2012, p. 114). Thus, the Reformation's emphasis on communion was both a doctrinal shift and a gradual cultural adjustment, accommodating the communicants' initial discomfort with these new practices.

The use of cast-iron host presses illustrates another instance of material continuity between late medieval and Reformation liturgical culture. However, these objects were likely modified during the Reformation. Before the Reformation, hosts produced by these presses were often embossed with crosses, liturgical phrases, Eucharistic symbols, or images of the suffering Christ (Kumler 2011, pp. 184–85, 189–90). Such imagery would have been intolerable to iconoclast Reformers, leading to the probable removal or smoothing out of these patterns from the presses. Although specific scholarship on this modification is still lacking, evidence suggests the creation of new presses. For instance, in Nyon and Morges, a baker was commissioned to produce 1,200 hosts for Christmas 1537, indicating the adoption of new presses to meet Reformation standards (Ruchat 1728, p. 493).

5.2. Breaking Plain Bread

The material continuity in the shape and substance of the communion body of Christ did not last long, perhaps having fulfilled its initial purpose. Although John Calvin, who advocated for the use of plain bread in communion, initially faced conflict with Genevan authorities adhering to Bernese customs in 1536 (Grosse 2008, p. 226), opinions on the matter quickly evolved. A Bernese Reformation mandate published on 15 August 1537, titled "Mandate pertaining to the Eucharist of our Lord Jesus Christ and other things related to the Reformation" (*Mandement touchant la Cène de nostre Seigneur Jésus Christ et aultres choses appartenantes à la reformation*), addressed to churches in the Pays de Vaud, suggested the possibility of using plain bread (*pain commun*). It noted that using plain bread was not contrary to Holy Scripture but proposed continuing the use of hosts to avoid scandalizing communicants (Republic of Bern 1537, f. 29r).

By 1548, Pierre Viret emphasized the importance of breaking the bread (*pain*) as a crucial element of the sacrament. He argued that using small individual hosts was inappropriate since they were sometimes swallowed whole to avoid breaking them, which both contradicted the communal aspect of the sacrament (Viret 1548, p. 477; Izbicki 2015, pp. 153–58) and was reminiscent of late medieval doctrines and practices of Eucharistic consumption (Ménard 1551, f. 78r-v; Clavasio 1492, Euch. 1.38–39). Viret consistently referred to the sacramental body of Christ as bread (*pain*) and never as host (*hostie*, *oublie*), though this terminology did not exclude the use of large hosts. This shift reflected a broader move towards plain bread in line with Reformation principles emphasizing communal sharing and simplicity.

As the history of the shift from hosts to plain bread in the Reformed canton of Bern has not yet been written, it is uncertain whether the 1537 mandate mentioned above reflected a development in the Bernese churches, or whether it signaled an effort to adapt to the culture in their newly conquered territory. Indeed, a text from the second half of the 16th century, written by the influential Bernese theologian Benedict Aretius (1522–1574), points to a possible factor that facilitated the shift to using plain bread in the Bernese homeland. In his *Problemata theologica* (1578), a textbook of theological commonplaces, Aretius dedicated a chapter to the subject of the breaking of bread (*de fractione panis*), in which he indicated that the unleavened bread that the Hebrews used for Pesach was easier to break manually than to cut. To which he added:

> "And today still, the breads of the alpine people are large and not thick, [and] are easily broken, [and] are likewise not cut. *Sibenthaler brott*, *persten brott*, *klepffen*, etc." (Aretius 1578b, II, f. 32b)

In effect, not only did the canton of Bern—especially its southern region—have a different agricultural landscape than the fertile plains of the Pays de Vaud, their linguistic and culinary cultures were also different: the Bernese were turned to the Germanic world, the Vaudois to France and Savoy. Were breads in the Pays de Vaud of the same consistency and shape—and thus as adapted to being manually broken—as the Bernese breads?

By 1606, the use of plain bread had finally been accepted and prescribed in all the Pays de Vaud (Vuilleumier 1927b, pp. 421–25). The use of plain leavened bread was a return to practices of the early Church, as preached by Viret. However, it was also reminiscent of a late medieval custom: while lay communicants had received consecrated hosts at Easter Mass, they had also received "blessed wine"—i.e., non-sacramental wine—to help swallow the host, and on other Sundays they had received "blessed bread" (*panes benedicti*, *eulogia*) as a substitute for the consecrated host (Pollet 2019, pp. 75–76, 80, 91, 123; Izbicki 2015, p. 157; Kingdon 2012, p. 29; Rubin 1991, pp. 73–74; Ott 1980). Attached to this practice, those who were discontent with the Bernese Reformation were prepared to risk a fine in order to procure themselves some "blessed bread" in neighboring Catholic territories (Christofis 2020, p. 65). In 1551, mentioning this practice as prevalent in "several French churches", the ex-Franciscan turned Protestant minister in the Bernese Pays de Vaud, Jean Ménard (d. 1570), understood it as a "relic" of the Eucharistic practices of the ancient Church (Ménard 1551, f. 47v). Both the initial receiving of hosts and the later use of plain leavened bread were in apparent continuity with what parishioners had known before the Reformation.

Nevertheless, although the bread of the Protestant Eucharist had not been subject to a priest's consecration and had not undergone transubstantiation, it still was more than the late medieval "blessed bread", for the latter was not a sacrament. The only similarities between these breads were the gestures of which they were instruments: just as the priest had been the dispenser of the "blessed bread", so too the Protestant minister was the one who gave the bread to his parishioners—whereas the chalice of wine could be held by a commendable member of the political elite (Vuilleumier 1927a, p. 344; Aretius 1578a, p. 9). Additionally, while the priest had distributed unbroken hosts to the laity, he had manually broken and distributed pieces of the "blessed bread". This act of breaking a loaf

and distributing pieces was somewhat identical with the Protestant minister's breaking of the communion bread into pieces to distribute to his parishioners.

The late 16th-century theologian of the Lausanne Academy, Guilielmus Bucanus (1544–1603), emphasized that breaking of the bread be done in front of the assembly, for it was "essential and sacramental, belonging wholly to the end or goal, and thus, to the form of the Holy Supper" (Bucanus 1602, pp. 677–78). In promoting the public breaking of the bread, Bucanus was possibly reacting to the new practice of cutting the bread with a knife before the celebration of the sacrament—a practice that would become common in the 17th century (Registres de la Classe de Morges dès 1570 à 1637 n.d., p. 153). The necessity of seeing the host—and later the bread—broken, for the sacrament to fully communicate its meaning, was subtly in partial continuity with the late medieval emphasis on vision in the Mass (Dumoutet 1926; Scribner 1989; Bynum 2015, pp. 19, 52, 128). "Blessed bread" and communion bread, broken and shared, brought about physically and visually the unity of the Church consuming a "meal" together. Though the Reformation provoked a shift from a visual to an auricular apprehension of the sacrament of the Eucharist, such observations on the breaking of the bread warrant a more nuanced approach to understanding this on the part of the clerical figure, and its perception by the parishioners, as something in between change and continuity (Hahn 2021; Kvicalova 2019).

6. Conclusions

Current understandings of ritual—as externalized piety—and interiorized piety still perceive the Reformation as disinterest of the former in favor of the latter (Stausberg 2002, p. 108). Following Christian Grosse's (2008) seminal scholarship on the Eucharist in Reformation Geneva, this article has strived to demonstrate that the ritual of the Eucharist and its material manifestations continued to be of great import in the Pays de Vaud after the Reformation. The transition from stone altars to wooden communion tables, the contested stability of the substance of chalices, and the gradual replacement of unleavened hosts with plain bread highlight a complex interplay of theological and practical continuities, adaptations, and ruptures.

These findings challenge earlier views of the Reformation as a stark rupture from medieval practices, instead showing significant continuities, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist on a wooden surface, the crafting of chalices with noble metals such as silver, as well as in the lingering use of hosts.

Collaboration between medieval and early modern historians has been crucial in understanding this period. This approach has revealed how both late medieval ecclesiastical reforms and local material liturgical culture influenced the implementation of the Reformation in the Pays de Vaud. It has likewise provided a new regional case study that can be compared with other regions, where the Reformation took place in different material cultural contexts and engendered different outcomes (Spicer 2016).

In conclusion, the Reformation in the Pays de Vaud, viewed through the lens of material culture, unveils three parallel processes of continuity, adaptation, and rupture. This study contributes to a more nuanced historical narrative and underscores the importance of material culture in understanding religious transformations. Future research could further explore regional variations and investigate other liturgical objects, such as reliquaries and monstrances which, in other contexts, were subjected to other processes such as repurposing (Yeoman 2018; Tarlow 2018; Walsham 2017). Furthermore, our results warrant the future study of testaments from the vantage point of "long Reformation", as they constitute important witnesses to developments in material culture.

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Note

1 Pierrefleur consistently designates all Protestants as "Lutherans"; whether it is out of ignorance or out of contempt is difficult to ascertain, but such a terminology is in continuity with how the pre-Reformation elites called the first preachers in the Pays de Vaud (Tappy 1988, pp. 442–50).

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