

## THE ORIGIN OF MEDIEVAL MANUSCRIPTS MAINLY IN THE CZECH LANDS

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### **Abstract**

*This article deals with the origins of manuscripts, their production process, materials used for writing and people who participated in it. It also presents the manuscript from the point of view of its structure (incipit, explicit and others). It depicts different types of decorations in Middle Ages and adds examples of particular pieces of writing. According to the content the books are divided into two basic categories. The first one are ecclesiastical books (Bible and other liturgical books) and the second one are secular books (scholastic books, books for entertainment and historical books). In this article some major Czech manuscripts are presented and depicted.*

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In this paper I would like to explain the term *medieval manuscript*, how and in what environment manuscripts came to existence and what their value was. I would also like to make the readers familiar with several books which originated in that period and were written on the area of the Czech Lands or were even written in the Czech language.

The form of a medieval book was *hand-written codex*. *Codex* is a book composed of sheets bound together along one edge. Its production process was very long and costly. This is also the reason why the number of medieval books was considerably lower than in Modern Period (after the invention of book printing). The medieval manuscript was very rare and it was often a part of cathedral treasures.

In these books it is possible to find originals as well as some transcripts. The most used and the most popular books, e.g. the Bible, liturgical books, etc., used to have more copies. The transcripts were written by different scribes and in different times, which caused differences in particular pieces of texts and growing number of mistakes. Often one manuscript was composed of several pieces of writing more or less related.

From the contemporary point of view we can divide the inner structure of medieval manuscripts into several parts. The first of them is *titulus* or *title* and the name of the author. However in many cases this basic information is not mentioned or was destroyed.

One of the most important parts of medieval books is a so called *incipit* or *begins*. It is the beginning of a text or of an individual text within a larger piece of writing. In present *dictionaries of incipits* have been written which enable us to identify the title of the book or its author in case this information is not included in the text. The final part of texts is called *explicit* or *unfolded*. Another important part of a manuscript is *colophon* or the end of the text written by the scribe. It was situated at the back of the book.

Each sheet of a manuscript is called a *folio*. Nowadays the upper side of a folio is called *recto* and the reverse side *verso*. To ensure the correct order of *folios* special marks (e.g. Roman numerals or letters) called *kustos* were used at the bottom of the folio.

As mentioned above the production process of a medieval book was very long and costly. The material used for writing was *parchment*, later replaced by *paper*.

The word *parchment* (in Medieval Latin *pergamenum*) is derived from the name of the city of Pergamum the king of which is said to have invented it due to the need of different writing material. Parchment was used in Ancient and Middle Ages, seldom in Modern Period too. It was made from animal skins, mainly cow, sheep (or lamb) or goat. The preparation of parchment was a slow and complicated process. Very important was the selection of a good skin because farm animals suffered from various diseases and this made it impossible to use the skin for writing. The parchment has two sides – called “flesh side” and “hair side”. The “flesh side” was generally whiter and softer than the “hair side”. In southern Europe were made softer parchments than in the middle of Europe. An extraordinarily soft type of parchment was a so called *vellum* made of the skin of still unborn lambs.

Because the parchment was very expensive it was often used even two or three times. The original text was scraped out and a new piece of text was written on it. Such a parchment is called *palimpsest* or *codex rescriptus*.

Originally the parchment production was task for monks in monasteries, later it moved to towns. People who made the parchment were called *percamenarius*, *parchment-maker* or *parchmenter*.

The later writing material was *paper*. The Arabs learned techniques of paper manufacture from the Chinese in the mid-eighth century. It got to Europe through Spain thanks to the Arabs in 12th century. The paper spreaded from Spain to Sicily, France and Germany from 12th to 14th century. The first mention about “paper book” in the Czech Kingdom comes from 1310, this book is called “*Liber vetustissimus*” – “The oldest book”. The first mention about a papermill though comes from the end of the 15th century. In the beginning this material was very expensive and that is why the parchment was still a popular writing material. The use of paper expanded in the Modern Period mainly due to book-printing.

Paper was originally made from cotton or linen rags, sometimes other materials were also added. Paper was manufactured in *papermills*. Each papermill had its own sign which they incorporated in the paper during its production and which enables us to identify the particular papermill and the approximate period (decades) of its production according to the paper. The signs are called *watermark*.

The most frequently used device for writing on these materials was *plummet*. Usually these were goose-quills, later removed by metal plummet in the 19th century. By cutting the end of the goose-quills the scribe reached thin or thick lines.

The substance used for writing on the paper was *ink*. For its production several recipes existed. The colour used for the body of the text was black, the titles were differed by red or blue. The ink was kept in pots made of animal horns. To remove mistakes, a sponge, knife or a pumice were used.

Several people usually participated in the production of one manuscript. These were the already mentioned parchmenter, a scribe, sometimes these could be one person, an illuminator and a binder.

The manuscripts were written by *scribes*. Their work lasted for a very long time, because they could only scribe by day light. Scribes did not work with a candle. The letters should have looked alike and the handwriting should have been nice and neat and the text was supposed to be clear. That is why the work of scribes was very slow. In many cases several scribes participated in writing one manuscript. Their work usually concurred, though it might have happened that somebody interfered in the original text even a few decades after its finishing.

Manuscripts, mainly in the Gothic period, were specific by their decoration. One of the most frequent decorative elements were the initials of individual chapters called *illuminations*. People writing illuminations were called *illuminators*. An illuminator began his job only after the scribe finished his job. He left a free place for a decorative initial and wrote there the letter which the illuminator was to use and decorate.

Another person who participated in the process was a *binder*. His task was to bind the manuscripts together to make a book. There were a lot of types of binds, such as leather, parchment, paper, cloth or velvet. The bind used to be very decorated, mainly gilded – application of gold or silver on the surface.

Scribes and illuminators worked in *scriptorium*. The first and in the Middle Ages the most scriptoria were in monasteries, where monks, occasionally nuns worked. Mainly these orders dealt with writing manuscripts: Benediktines (St. Benedikt, the founder of the order, introduced into his holy orders the rule about writing and reading activities in benediktine monasteries), Augustinians, Cistercians,

Premonstrats and Dominicans. New libraries arose in their monasteries and convents where mainly the Bible and liturgical manuscripts could be found.

Originally writing activities and making manuscripts spreaded in ecclesiastical environment, i.e. cathedral (e.g. in Lyon or Sevilla), where new school centres were inceptioned.

In secular ambient the manuscript production and a deeper interest in them spreaded mainly thanks to universities. The oldest universities originated from the end of the 11th Century and in the 12th Century. Between them belong universities in the north of Italia, e.g. Bologna (from 1088, it is the oldest university in Europe) or Padova, French University in Paris, English University in Oxford or Cambridge. The Prague University (at this time Charles University in Prague) is the oldest university in the area of the Central Europe and it was originated in 1348.

In this atmosphere the activities of so called *stationers* also enlarged. Stationer was originally a municipal scribe. In connection with the inception of universities the interest in literature grew and that is why his function changed. He started to lend individual parts of manuscripts for charge.

Later the manuscripts were ordered by noblemen and monarchs. Their interest contributed to establishing manuscripts libraries on their courts, as before in monasteries and universities. Secular libraries obviously contained manuscripts with different topics than the ecclesiastical ones.

Medieval manuscripts were extraordinary by their decorations. The work of illuminators has already been mentioned above. Initial illuminations were typical mainly for the Gothic period. Their topics could be figural, ornamental or floral. We also meet scenes from the Bible, often pictured in iconographic symbols. Initials could be also gilded.

One of the manuscripts excelling in rich decoration of initials is the medieval encyclopaedia from the 13th Century called *Mater Verborum*.<sup>1</sup> The book was written in Latin. It is possible to recognize both the scenes from the Bible, e.g. Crucifixion or Hanged Judas, and secular motives, such as Wine-grower in the letter Y.

Not only initials were decorated. Floral, figural or ornamental motives can also appear along the hole text which often used to be written in two columns in the Gothic period.

In some manuscripts one or several motives appear in different variations throughout the whole manuscript. We can mention e.g. the manuscript of German

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<sup>1</sup> J. Krása, České iluminované rukopisy 13. – 16. století, Praha 1990, s. 24 – 35.

*Bible of Václav IV.*<sup>2</sup> (1361 – 1419) where several such drawings can be found – King, Kingfisher, Wild man and others. This Bible was written at the end of the 14th Century and comes from the plentiful library of the king Václav IV. It exceeds others by its exceptional decorations.

Here I would like to mention some information about library of the king Václav IV. He inherited from his father the collection of books with varied contents and in 1348 the university in Prague was established. Consequently he had good conditions to establish the library of the court. Nowadays we haven't got any sources about this library from the period of Václav IV. (e.g. the list of books) and only eight manuscripts from his library are still extant. About the Bible has been already written in this article. Between the other belong books with religious theme, astrological manuscripts, law manuscript and one knightly epos – this kind of literature was very popular in Middle Ages, especially in the courts.<sup>3</sup>

Another popular type of decorations were *picture manuscripts* where the text was replaced by pictures and only short commentaries were added. A good example of this type is manuscript of *St. Hedvika's Legend*<sup>4</sup> where 65 illustrations are placed on 33 folios. They are usually accompanied by short Latin title in the head of the picture depicting the content of the given picture. The whole codex consists of 204 parchment sheets but the pictures appear only in one part of the manuscript – *Legend Maior*.

This type of decorations was also used for Bibles, these are called *Picture Bible* or *Biblia pauperum (Bible of the Poor)*. The text was renarrated in an abbreviated form, fused with illustrations, such as in *Velislav Biblia Picta (Velislavova bible)*,<sup>5</sup> a picture manuscript of a “comics” type of the Czech origin from the mid-14th Century. The original manuscript contained 200 sheets, out of which only 188 with 747 pictures have been preserved. As well as at the other manuscripts of this type the pictures express the story line, the role of the text has only secondary function. The text is written in Latin and presents only a brief excerpt from the Bible. The man who ordered the manuscript was called Velislav – notary in the office of Jan Lucemburský (1296 – 1346) and his son Karel IV. (1316 – 1378).

The text of medieval manuscripts could also be enlivened by whole-page pictures, which were connected with the content but they did not make the story line any more. We can find whole-page pictures in *Tours of John Mandeville*<sup>6</sup> manuscript or more precisely in its Czech translation written by Vavřinec z Březové. The manuscript was written at the end of the 15th Century and contains 28 whole-page pictures on 14 parchments. The pictures though relate to only one tenth of the

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<sup>2</sup> Krása, *ibid*, s. 153-167.

<sup>3</sup> Krása, *ibid*, s. 148.

<sup>4</sup> Krása, *ibid*, s. 59 – 84.

<sup>5</sup> Z. Uhlíř, *Velislavova bible – Velislav biblia picta – Velislaus Bible*, Praha 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Krása, *Obcit*, s. 268 – 296.

text. *Tours of John Mandeville* was a very popular travel book in Middle Ages. The author, knight John Mandeville, was born in England and according to this travel book he travelled the whole world. But explorers who studied his book wrote that he copied a lot of chapters from other travel books.

Besides the decorations the content of medieval books is also very interesting. A big part of manuscripts originated in ecclesiastical environment and also their topics corresponded with it. These were mainly the Bible and liturgical books, which created the most numerous group of manuscripts. They were very expensive mainly due to costly binding, colour and gilded illuminations. These books were often used for centuries.

The Bible was the most important book of our medieval cultural area. Throughout Middle Ages a lot of translations were made. At the beginning the Latin translations were the most spreaded, such as *Vetus Latina*, the Latin translation from the Greek Bible made in 2nd – 3rd Century and *Vulgata*, which became the most spread. Its author is St. Eusebius Hieronymus and the book comes from 383 – 405 AD.

The first Czech translation of the Bible dates to 1360 and it is so called *Dresden Bible*.<sup>7</sup> Nowadays we are only able to study it thanks to photocopies and its transcript, which contain only approximately one third of the whole text. The Bible was destroyed in a fire in Belgic city of Lovan where it was transported in order to make documentation of this piece of writing. It happened during the invasion of German troops during the World War I in July 1914. *Bible Litoměřicko-třeboňská*<sup>8</sup> from 1411 – 1414 and *Bible Olomoucká*<sup>9</sup> from 1417 rank among the first Czech translations of the Bible. There are also decorations in these Bibles. The typical is The Invention of World by God which is present in six medallion.

The Bible had also importance in Hussitism's epoch when a plenty of transcriptions originated. The Latin *Vulgata* was again translated. The new version of Czech Bible should mostly respected original *Vulgata*. It is e.g. Padeřovská bible which was written from 1432 to 1435.

For biblical studies so called *biblical concordances* are very important and thanks to them we are able to search quickly various quotations from the Bible.

*Bibles of the poor*, already mentioned above, were also very popular in Middle Ages.

Except from the Bible, liturgical books containing rules of liturgical festivities, for instance the *Missal* containing prayers, lectures from the Bible and

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<sup>7</sup> V. Kyas, *Česká Bible v Dějinách Národního Písemnictví*, Praha 1997, s. 53 – 54.

<sup>8</sup> Kyas, *ibid.*, s. 57 – 60.

<sup>9</sup> Kyas, *ibid.*, s. 60 – 61.

songs. The first Missal comes from the turnover of 9th and 10th Century so as the priest could celebrate the Mass without assistance. Missal draws inspiration from other liturgical books, such as *Sacramentary* (the celebrant recited the prayers during the Mass), *Antiphonary* (containing antiphons, the sung portions of the Divine office) and *Lectionary* (chosen parts of the Bible).

Another example of a liturgical book can be a *Breviary*, which contains various texts, hymns and notations necessary for daily prayers. It is usually divided into two or four parts according to the seasons. It consists of several liturgical books as well as the Missal.

Throughout Middle Ages a lot of secular books originated. These were mainly books from scholastic environment. Among schoolbooks we rank especially *Alphabet books* or *Abececlarii* or various kinds of grammar books. University books were focused on *Law, Medicine, Philosophy* and *Theology*.

Another type of popular secular books were books written for entertainment, e.g. *travel-books, astronomical books, cookbooks, books on warfare, hunting manuals, chansons de geste, romans* or *bestiaries (the book of Beasts)*. In *Bestiaries* we can find descriptions and moral interpretations of animals, birds, fantastic creatures, stones and plants. These kinds of books were generally written in the vernacular and they had rich pictorial decoration. These books were usually ordered by monarchs or noblemen.

Also history books appeared in Middle Ages. At first they were shorter and less detailed *annals*, later especially *chronicles*. These were usually written in Latin. Chronicles written in vernaculars appeared since 13th Century.

One of the best-known chronicles of the Czech Middle Ages is *Chronica Bohemorum*. Its author was Kosmas (1045 – 1125), the dean of the Prague kapitule and it was written in Latin. Worth mention is also *The Chronical of so called Dalimil*, whose author remained unknown. This chronicle depicts the Czech history until 1314. It is the first chronicle which was written in Czech language. A lot of chronicles originated in Karel IV.'s epoch and in Hussitism's epoch.

From the above mentioned text we can say that medieval manuscripts are very valuable not only because of a long and expensive process of production but mainly thanks to their uniqueness. Nowadays they occupy an important place in history and culture of each nation. They are a significant part of its cultural heritage which in case of destruction cannot be replaced by anything else.

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