

The *Chronicle of Dalimil* and the Beginnings
of Czech National Historiography in the Vernacular Language

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The present analysis is focused on the *Chronicle of Dalimil*, the first chronicle written in the Czech language, dating from the early 14th century. The initial premise here was to take into account a range of problems relating to the emergence of a literature in the vernacular language in Christian Europe, with a view to reflecting on the various forms assumed by such new literary production, and on the readership towards which it was oriented, plus to determine which factors were decisive in the process, and what kinds of response the various authors expected to obtain as a result of their endeavours.

The *Chronicle of Dalimil* is a document of major import: indeed, it is the first historiographical text written in the vernacular Czech language (c. 1309 – 1311); apart from that, it is also the second literary text written in Czech, postdating by only a few years the *Alexandreis*, the Czech adaptation of the *Roman d'Alexandre* by Gauthier de Châtillon (c. 1250 – 1300).

The identity of its author, however, is unknown. The name, Dalimil, was attached to it by accident. For a long time, the text it relates was known simply as *Kronika (The Chronicle)*, or *Kronika česká (The Czech Chronicle)*. At the root of what became a resilient misnomer was the Fürstenberg MS (1400 – 1425), wherein the chronicle was assigned the name of *Kronika boleslavská*, i.e., the *Chronicle of Boleslav (town)*. In his turn, Václav Hájek z Libočan cited among the sources he himself had employed in writing his celebrated chronicle in 1541, a certain Dalimil z Mezeřic, Canon of Boleslav (town and parish); and eventually, more than one century later (1673 – 1677), Tomáš Pešina z Čechorodu readily correlated the

one (text) with the other (author). Even though Josef Dobrovský (1753 – 1829) and František Palacký (1798 – 1896) subsequently proved that this was a mistake, the title passed on to posterity, propelled onto the front stage by the success earned by the chronicle most notably during the era of the Czech National Revival, in tune to the aspirations harboured by Czech intellectuals through most of the 19th century for the reassertion of their national identity. Today, notwithstanding the fact that there is no longer any doubt as to the misnomer, it still remains in use, purely as a matter of convenience. Even this writer has found it preferable to refer to the text as the *Chronicle of Dalimil*. The text, in rhyme, comprises 103 chapters which narrate the history of Bohemia, from the mythical dawn through the time of the author's writing. Setting aside the prologue which, in correspondence to the established practice of the time, is reserved for upholding the author's choices and intentions, the text can be divided into three parts: the first of these deals with legendary history, including the ethnogenetic myth and the legend of the coming of the Czechs to Bohemia, as well as the circle of legends around Libuše, which also mentions the emergence of the Czech "state" (Ch. 1 – 24); the second part consists in a historical account drawing on sources (Ch. 25 – 77); and the third part deals with events to which the author himself was personal witness (Ch. 78 – 103). The last two parts can yet be subdivided into two sections, the first of which deals with Bohemia's rise (Ch. 25 – 75), while the second one relates on its decline, starting from the reign of Přemysl Otakar I (Ch. 75 – 103).

Notwithstanding his throwbacks to Biblical stories and mythological motives, Dalimil presents to his readers a thoroughly innovative view of history, compared with the earlier Czech historiographic tradition established by Cosmas (1125). His is indeed a view which breaks away from the contemplative approach to history as description of the implementation of divine plans, to deliver instead a message that is politically engaged, turned towards the future, and looking back at the past through the spectrum of current developments. In a

context where the German threat is real enough, above all in the aftermath of the extinction of the Přemyslid dynasty in 1306, the author intends to mobilise the Czech “nation” against the enemy, by pointing out that German presence in Bohemia was in the past invariably synonymous with misfortune for the country. The text is thus imbued with an extremely sharp-edged spirit of nationalism and spite towards Germans, both traits entirely unprecedented in its time.

For its part, the present thesis is divided into two volumes. The second of these, which will be referred to later on here, is reserved for the translation of the chronicle; the first volume, which contains the scholarly core of the thesis, falls into three major sections entitled: 1. Sources, Texts and Contexts; 2. Collective Identity, Nationalism and Xenophobia; and 3. Society and Political Programme.

The first part is conceived as a set of preliminary conjectures drawing up a basis necessary for the understanding and proper formulation of the subject matter. A good deal of attention is focused there on the person of the author, including a review of all that has been written so far with a view to revealing the identity of the writer known as Dalimil. As was already noted above, no positive finding has been made on this point, regardless of long-standing efforts deployed by Czech scholars for the solution of this enigma. Therefore, preferring to be content with a **mere** tentative portrait of the author, the writer of this thesis has renounced on pointing to any specific individual, taking into account the lack of conclusive information. The discourse then concentrates much rather on the broader historical context of the text’s production: the crisis which reached its climax in 1309 and 1310 (with the Kutná Hora coup d’état, and clashes between Czechs and Misnians) apparently constituted the decisive impulse for the writing of the chronicle, accounting for the essential role of history in shaping the author’s political opinions. The thesis then presents the primary sources it has drawn on, namely, the fourteen manuscripts of the chronicle which have survived to this

date. These were subjected to analysis resulting in a precise codicological description which proved an invaluable instrument in obtaining a more thorough understanding of the text's subsequent use. Finally, this section presents a list of the sources employed by the author of the chronicle, attempting to identify the writings he explicitly mentions (not always an easy task, insofar as these are referred to by the names of the **venues** of their keeping at the time), and to decipher the various allusions scattered throughout the text.

The second section is centered around the text's treatment of the question of a project of national identity, and analyses the nationalist message contained in the *Chronicle of Dalimil*. This said, a clear distinction is drawn between these two issues, as each follows a logic of its own, and they relate to two fairly disparate movements. For its part, the identity project was aimed at providing the Czech nation with a cementing federative principle, by means of building up the awareness of a common past providing the community with a sense of purpose. The first of these axes pivots around three points: 1. the will to set up and canonize an authentically Czech literary genre that would break away from the hitherto dominant Latin and German heritage, with a specific language – namely, Old Czech – and a new, heterometric verse form which would eventually assert itself as the standard form used in pamphlets and thereby as part of political struggle; 2. instrumentalization of the past and rise to prominence of patron saints; 3. the role of space and geography. In its turn, the second axis is turned to the questions of nationalism and foreigners, or aliens. There, the aim of the present thesis was to examine the combination of elements which have been instrumental in the chronicle's being usually regarded as a nationalist-hued, even xenophobic text. Hence this writer's focus on the concept of "nation," in an attempt at determining the exact connotation that Dalimil assigned it in his text. In that respect, while acknowledging the text's predominantly spiteful overall tone, the thesis nonetheless points to Dalimil's concentration on the specific Czech-German antagonism, asserting that his belligerent message calling for

the eradication of the German element in Bohemia would not seem to justify any conclusion as to the presence here of a generalized xenophobia aimed against foreigners at large. Apart from that, the application of a somewhat more detailed examination method reveals that Dalimil happens to be rather more benevolent than most of his contemporaries in his judgments on the Jewish community, and also that he gives proof of feelings of genuine sympathy for other Slavic peoples, as well as for the Hungarian neighbours of Bohemia. Moreover, the present thesis lays emphasis on the need to take account of the role of the wider context, highly specific for the early 14th century, in understanding Dalimil's attitude towards the Germans, as well as pointing out the relevance of the German colonization (12th century), and of the general state of crisis resulting from the interregnum of 1306 – 1310.

Finally, the third section deals with **society in Dalimil's time**, and with the political programme he addresses. Questions related to society occupy a key position in his text whose tone oscillates between a dark vision of the contemporary situation and a stubborn ambition to see the return to a lost golden age. There, the aim of the thesis is to capture and interpret the image of society as delivered by Dalimil's text, with its emphasis on the importance of the tripartite feudal system and the existence of privileged classes. Indeed, Dalimil attaches importance exclusively to nobility and clergy, whereas the bourgeoisie – striving to destabilize the existing social order and to promote a new one tuned to its growing importance – is portrayed as the troublemaker and a surging force that is extremely dangerous for the established socio-political balance. According to Dalimil's logic, the nobles are the only class for which there is a place in the national project which he sets forth: by virtue of the political role assigned to them by their status, they are the sole responsible agents capable of transcending their private interest for the sake of a higher duty. In contrast to that, the commoners (with the urban middle class at their helm) embody the most sordid wrongdoings the vile human being is prepared to commit with a view to climbing higher on the social

ladder and enriching himself. Most importantly, Dalimil does his utmost to see preserved the dominant role of nobility, at a time when it is increasingly challenged. It is there that the political dimension of his text becomes quite evident. Consequently, there appears to be every reason to interpret the *Chronicle of Dalimil* as a political programme. In a society which did not yet know politics as an essentially distinct field, history and the quest of a common past was the privileged subject for authors aspiring to formulate their expectations in this particular domain. Therefore, adequate attention is devoted in the thesis to Dalimil's raised awareness of and response to this trend, and to the way he translates it into opinions spread all through his text. Brandishing the dangers embodied by the Germans and by the urban patriciate, he calls on nobility to rally and to circumscribe the powers of the sovereign, with a view to link up with the good government of the era before the Golden Bull of Sicily (1212) and the absolutist deviations to which it led. The thesis points up the decisive role that Dalimil accords to nobility, and to the diet as the venue wherein enters into force the would-be "contract" which had bonded together the sovereign and his lords ever since Přemysl the Plowman was made duke – according to the legend of Libuše which figures at the beginning of the chronicle. History, the inventing of precedents validating the election of sovereign, or even justifying the right to tyrannicide, are resorted to as veritable arguments in the text which is thoroughly impregnated with the idea that evidence of antiquity equals the most valid form of legitimization. Dalimil's discourse is clearly basically performative, intending to produce a specific response from the public. It is actually the latter which becomes the subject of the final part of this section. Taking as a basis the fourteen manuscripts of the chronicle, copied between the 14th and 15th centuries, the research undertook to identify the motivations underlying the making of the successive copies, by study of the textual environment of the different codices, including additions and marginal notes. This work made it possible to locate in time the discrepancy between the author's original intentions – essentially oriented towards

the dual project of preservation of national sovereignty, and proposal of an ideal form of government – and an increasingly narrow reception of his work, tending to limit its message to its nationalist and Germanophobic content. One of the medieval manuscripts of the chronicle, known as Cerroni's MS (1447), already very clearly epitomizes this evolution still at that early stage, by its inclusion in a codex that is comprised exclusively of Germanophobic and nationalistic texts. From very early on then did this instrumentalization of the text, turning it into a battle-cry of sorts, come into conflict with the ideal of concord championed by the author, however artificial that ideal may have been, serving more than anything else a purely rhetoric purpose.

Part of the present doctoral thesis is a translation of the *Chronicle of Dalimil*, produced with a view to making this highly relevant literary source known to the non-Czech-speaking public. The text has until now never been translated into any modern foreign language, with all the surviving previous translations dating from the Middle Ages. The two existing German translations both date from the 14th century, and express the wish of Bohemia's German community to distinguish themselves from the Germans castigated in the text; these two versions endeavour to build up a specific image of Germans living in Bohemia, image which is not present in the original version, since for Dalimil they were **mere** proxies of those who, lurking behind the borders, were awaiting the propitious moment to encroach upon Bohemia. For its part, the Latin translation (c. 1330 – 1340), found in the form of a fragment in Paris, in 2005, seems to have been motivated by the wish to make accessible – to a non-Czech-speaking addressee – the most comprehensive and most recent chronicle of the time dealing with the history of the Czech people. Apart from its incompleteness, this text suffers from major linguistic shortcomings, such as Czech word calques as well as rather unfortunate translation errors; more likely than not, the priority there was to produce a sumptuous manuscript, as is documented by the richness of its illumination. The present translation is

thus the first attempt at interpreting the original Czech text in unabridged form. The actual source chosen for the purpose was the Vienna MS of the text which has been singled out by numerous linguistic studies as being the closest to the lost original MS. The translation offered here reflects the versified form of the original, albeit without the rhymes. The translation is accompanied by an introduction listing the various obstacles with which the translator was confronted in the process.