



Edited by Lenka Panušková

The Velislav Bible, Finest Picture-Bible of the Late Middle Ages

Biblia depicta as Devotional,
Mnemonic and Study Tool

Amsterdam
University
Press

The Velislav Bible, the Finest Picture Bible of the Late Middle Ages

Central European Medieval Studies

The series focuses on the geographical centre of the European continent, but also a region representing various historically changing meanings and concepts. It challenges simplistic notions of Central Europe as a periphery to the medieval 'West', or, equally, a border between barbarity and civilization; an area of a lively convergence of different ethnic groups, and a socially and culturally framed common space; a point where different 'Others' met, or an intermediary 'bridge' between the Roman Catholicism and Latinity of the West, and the Slavic Orthodoxy and Hellenism of the Byzantine East.

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This publication was supported by the Czech Science Foundation project 'Imago, Imagines: Metamorphoses of the Function of Medieval Art in the Bohemian Lands,' no. 13-39192S, and the project 'Cultural Codes and Their Transformations in the Hussite Period,' no. P405/12/G148. It was also supported by the European Regional Development Fund-Project No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734, as well as by Charles University Research Development Program 'Centre for the Study of the Middle Ages' (PROGRES Q07), both undertaken at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague.

Anna Kernbach assisted with the editing of this volume.

Cover illustration: Vision of Holy Trinity, Velislav Bible, Prague, Národní knihovna České republiky, MS XXIII C 124, f. 149v

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6298 044 0

e-ISBN 978 90 4852 973 5 (pdf)

DOI 10.5117/9789462980440

NUR 684

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Preface

The finality is false, because there you still are, the reader, the observer, the listener, with a gaping chasm in front of you, left out of the resolution of the story that seduced you into thinking yourself inside it. Then it's done and gone, abandoning you to continuation, a con trick played out and you were the mark. An ending always leaves you standing in the whistling vacancy of a storyless landscape.¹

No research has its end. It keeps on going, enquiring into further possibilities, changing points of view, asking other questions that have been raised by previous researchers or else that have been more or less overlooked. This is precisely the aim of this monograph, one that focuses on the Bohemian picture Bible named after the figure of Velislav, who is depicted on its last folio: to approach the manuscript in a more complex perspective that allows image and text to be examined in close interrelationship.

The Velislav Bible plays a key role in Bohemian manuscript painting of the first half of the fourteenth century, as there are only a handful of examples from that period still extant. However, knowledge of the circumstances in which the Bible originated, as well as of its donator, is very sparse; neither does the name of the Velislav kneeling in the last scene depicted in the manuscript provide us with any further information on the manuscript itself.

Within the time that has passed since the manuscript was researched in its entirety by Antonín Matějček in 1920s² and by Karel Stejskal 50 years later (in the 1970s),³ new approaches and methods have been introduced in manuscript research in order to further advance our knowledge of the Middle Ages. That is why discussion on the Velislav Bible now has to be revised and viewed from a vantage point different to that from which previous scholars observed it.

All the essays in this book target the relationship between word and image in the Velislav Bible both in a more general and in a very specific way, working with stories specially selected from the pictorial narrative. Exploring this relationship enables us to think about the audience for which the manuscript was intended.

1 Diski, *Stranger on a Train*, p. 2.

2 Matějček, *Velislavova bible*.

3 Stejskal, *Velislav Biblia picta*.

At the outset, in their essay 'Studying the Velislav Bible: An Overview' Anna Kernbach and Lenka Panušková provide the reader with a brief resumé of studies dealing with the Velislav Bible up as far as the brief commentary by Zdeněk Uhlíř that was published together with the CD-ROM version of the manuscript.⁴ In the second part of the introduction the identity of Velislav is discussed against a background of preserved written sources in which the name Velislav in its medieval variations (Welko, Welek, etc.) is mentioned. The popularity of this name in the period under investigation now casts doubt on the hitherto indisputable identification of the kneeling figure with the Velislav who served as notary and protonotary of King John of Luxembourg and his successor, Charles IV, and reopens this issue to further inquiry.

In the second essay, entitled 'Image and Text in the Velislav Bible: To the Interpretation of an Illuminated Codex' and also authored by Anna Kernbach and Lenka Panušková, the authors discuss the image-and-text relationship in more detail. Analysis of the *tituli* sheds light on the way in which the scribes compiled them, using quotations not only from the Bible but also from various school manuals, or even writing them out from memory. In the New Testament section of the manuscript Anna Kernbach has succeeded in following a chronology which corresponds to the pericopes read during the liturgical year. At a certain point the authors then return to the enigmatic figure of Velislav. They draw attention to the symptomatic distinction between the Latin diminutive form *famulus* that identifies Velislav and the *famula* description that refers to the female figure depicted at the bottom of f. 149v.

A more general point of view is taken by Lucie Doležalová in 'The Velislav Bible in the Context of Late Medieval Biblical Retellings and Mnemonic Aids,' where the author examines the Velislav Bible's narrative in the context of medieval Biblical retellings. She explores the selection of texts contained in the Velislav Bible but, unlike in the other contributions to this volume, she focuses on the visual narrative with regard to the medieval *ars memorativa*. Although observing many differences between those images designed to be used as mnemonic aids and the illustrations contained in the Velislav Bible, she concedes that there is a very close relationship between the manuscript and the concept of memory.

An art history-oriented study by Lenka Panušková entitled 'The Books of Genesis and Exodus in the Picture Bibles: Looking for an Audience' looks closely at the iconography of the images illustrating biblical events from

4 Uhlíř, *Velislavova bible*.

the first two books of Moses. Compared to other picture Bibles in which the depicted scenes are very carefully selected to suit the needs of the manuscript's user, in the case of the Velislav Bible no special purpose has yet been ascertained. In fact the very opposite is true, for the images depend very closely on the biblical narrative. In several instances this dependency is even complemented with other popular, nonbiblical material in order to emphasize the desired historical, typological or moral interpretation and to present the ideal model of Christian behavior. This is obviously the aim of the pictorial cycle which renders the story of Moses as told in the Book of Exodus. The Lord has chosen Moses to lead Israel from Egyptian captivity into the Promised Land. Especially in those scenes that describe the process of persuading the pharaoh to release the Israelites, Moses (depicted with a halo) acts as a mediator between the people and the Lord. Moreover, it is Aaron, Moses's brother, identified very symptomatically by a tonsure, who performs all the miracles announced by the Lord through Moses, and this emphasizing of the roles of both brothers implies that the Velislav Bible would have spoken to a specific audience. These, then, constitute the visual evidence for a chapter school's probably having been the environment in which the manuscripts were to be used.

The following two essays are concerned with the Antichrist story depicted on ff. 130v-135v in the Velislav Bible. While Pavlína Cermanová's study 'The Life of Antichrist in the Velislav Bible' focuses on the process of its creation, taking into account various literary influences, Kateřina Horníčková's essay 'The Antichrist Cycle in the Velislav Bible and the Representation of Intellectual Community' is concerned rather with its visual form. Focusing on the position of the Antichrist motif in salvation history and tracing its roots back to the early medieval patristic authors, Cermanová observes distinct changes in the characteristics of Antichrist, from his role as a through-and-through evil creature to his displaying of negative human characteristics as he acts in opposition to Christ and the latter's acts on Earth. She then goes on to compare the previously examined textual sources with the image cycle in the Velislav Bible. Horníčková also exploits the typological parallel between Antichrist and Christ and the lives of the saints contained in the last portion of the manuscript's images. Like Cermanová, she is interested not only in how the Velislav Bible cycle differs from earlier depictions of Antichrist, but also in the features they have in common. She recognizes, however, the emphasis on moral lessons that is implied in the evil doings of Antichrist and his followers. Her analysis finishes in pointing out the didactic function of the Antichrist's pictorial cycle.

Milena Bartlová's essay '*Tibi predicat hominibus: In Search of the Practical Function of the Velislav Bible*' constitutes a logical conclusion to this monograph. In it the author contemplates the practical function of the medieval manuscript with precise theoretical erudition. In order to define the character of the visual narrative provided by the Velislav Bible she does not hesitate to adapt the terminology used in the modern theory of comics narration. She briefly summarizes the pivotal thesis formulated in the previous essays in this volume and introduces a further hypothesis regarding the original practical purpose that fundamentally influenced the form of the Velislav Bible. Her suggestion that the Velislav Bible was designed as a manual to aid preachers in composing their sermons on various biblical topics is to be perceived as one complementary to the hypothesis proposed in other essays that the Velislav Bible was used as a didactic tool at the Vyšehrad Chapter school. That is to say, both hypotheses are equally plausible, besides also combining to reflect the multifunctionality of arts in the medieval age.

The essays presented in this book are supplemented with Anna Kernbach's edition of the *tituli*, short Latin inscriptions written just after the pictures were completed. Although it is the image that is the main mediator of the content, it is only through properly interpreting the *tituli* that detailed research of the text-image relationship may be carried out.

This monograph does not set out to provide a complex and definitive interpretation of the pictorial as well as textual material comprised in the Velislav Bible. On the contrary, it rather presents a variety of approaches to the selected topics in order to identify the environment for which the Velislav Bible might have been produced. In this book the Bible's manuscript is not treated here as a luxurious work of art to be locked away in a glass cabinet as manuscripts are usually exhibited in museums and galleries, but is viewed as an object of daily use, designated to be held in the hands and browsed through. In contrast, however, with Jenny Diski's feeling of the reader's being abandoned 'in a whistling vacancy of a storyless landscape,' the authors of the present monograph hope to leave *their* reader with the feeling of having gained a deeper insight into the reading of medieval images.

In conclusion, I wish to thank to all the authors who contributed to this volume for their patience and their willingness to look for solutions. My sincerest thanks go to Sarah Gráfová and Iva Dostálová, Stephen Douglas and also Michaela Ramešová and to my colleagues at the Department of Medieval Art of the Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, especially to Klára Benešovská, Kateřina Kubínová, and Hana Hlaváčková, who brought the Velislav Bible to my attention. I also wish

to thank Robert Novotný of the Centre for Medieval Studies at the Czech Academy of Sciences, Jan Salava, David Vrána, and all those others who were always happy to provide help. Finally, I am highly indebted to Jana Viktorová, who has been a constant support to me.

Canterbury, 22 May 2016
Lenka Panušková