

# Cosmas' *Chronica Boemorum* and Czech national identity

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## Abstract:

Czech national identity, and to a certain degree our understanding of the roots of other central European cultures and nations such as the origins of the Poles and Hungarians have undergone painful histories full of turmoil and struggle, and a long journey towards united nationhood. In understanding central Europe's mediaeval historiography, in particular works such as the *Chronica Boemorum*, we can see the roots of Czech national identity and reframe the roots of the struggle of the Czech people for nationhood and independence.

Czech literature has been rife with politically-charged works that have reframed the chronicles of figures such as Cosmas of Prague in both admirable and detestable lights, specifically given Cosmas' role as a priest, and his western European-leaning views of Czech societal advancement in the early mediaeval era. Despite this, Cosmas' *Chronica Boemorum* has had significant impacts on several facets of Czech societal knowledge; his work has not only chronicled the early Czech struggle for independence and nationhood in the face of various other foes and given us records of some of the Czech people's greatest historic battles with other nations, but it has also served to reinforce the roles of other great historic Czechs such as Svatý Václav, a Duke of Bohemia nowadays considered to be one of the Czech people's most admirable and virtuous leaders, and patron saint of the modern Czech state. By understanding the impact of works such as *Chronica Boemorum* on Czech national identity and framing its revival as a major historic source in the post-communist era, we can understand the extent to which mediaeval works have defined the very notion of a Czech nation and the impacts of this definition throughout Czech history.

Throughout the mediaeval period, the Czech, or Bohemian lands, were bordered by and influenced by a host of different central european neighbours. Early scholar Cosmas, in his manuscript *Chronica Boemorum*, captured some of the earliest recorded history of Czech culture and identity formation, as well as the mythical origin surrounding early Czech history which has become key to Czech identity all the way through to the present day. In this essay, I will discuss how *Chronica Boemorum* acted as a significant source for the social development of Bohemia at the time and how it acts as a primary source for studying this era of Central European history. Furthermore, I will discuss its subsequent interpretations and inspired works acted as major sources for the formation of modern Czech identity, and how *Chronica Boemorum* acted as a template for other mediaeval manuscripts of the era, as well as how it served as a source for noble classes in Bohemia to enshrine and preserve early understandings and lores of Czech identity and origin related to language, culture, and geographical connections to the Bohemian lands.

Although *Chronica Boemorum* is widely regarded as a key primary source for studying and understanding Czech national identity formation in the mediaeval period, *Chronica Boemorum*, *Gesta principum Polonorum* and the *Annales Posonienses* all serve as sources for the history of the Czech Lands of Bohemia and Moravia between the 9th-12th centuries, although they also focus on the formation of and close cultural links between the Czech people and those of Poland and Hungary. *Chronica Boemorum*, however, stands out both in its wider, more detailed content describing the history of the Czech lands during those times and because of its description of the relations between Czech rulers and their Polish and Hungarian counterparts during this period. Consequently, *Chronica Boemorum* has become a guiding source in understanding early Central European mediaeval history, and lay the guidelines for subsequent chronicles of Czech history in the 14th century, where *Chronica Boemorum* was used as a template and reevaluated Czech identity.

This subsequent chronicle laid out a narrative for the origins of the Czech nation (alongside references to the origins of the Hungarian and Polish nations), stressing the linguistic heritage the residents of Bohemia share, their longstanding connection to the Bohemian lands, and the ancestral roots of the mediaeval Czech ruling class in Přemysl the ploughman. *Chronica Boemorum*, which was written by Czech chronicler Cosmas of Prague, laid the groundwork for the most significant and impactful pieces of early Central European written history, and in doing so acted as the roots for Czech identity as a longstanding nation indigenous to the Bohemian lands.

Written in Latin in a series of manuscripts between 1119 and 1125, *Chronica Boemorum* was divided into three books. The first book dealt with the largely mythologised prehistory of the Bohemian lands, writing one of the earliest histories of the earliest Czech forefathers, Čech, Lech and Rus, who led their people from the areas between the Visla and Dnieper rivers to occupy the

lands that are now known as Bohemia. The first book also focuses on the later Christianisation of Bohemia, with the baptism of the Přemyslid ruler, Bořivoj I, and his introduction of churches in the Bohemian lands. Ending with the reign of Břetislav I, the first book concludes Czech prehistory and the introduction of early Czech mediaeval history in the year 1034. The second book focuses on the continued history of the Přemyslid dynasty up to the year 1092, documenting the increased Christianisation of the Bohemian lands inhabitants, including the forceful conversion of the earliest Czech Jewish communities, and the history of the crusades at the time which saw crusaders from the now French and German lands travel through Bohemia to Hungary towards the Holy Land. The third book covers the history of the lands up until Cosmas' death in 1125, when the current ruler, Vladislav I, also died.

Rather importantly, however, the death of Cosmas did not see the final conclusion of *Chronica Boemorum*. Rather, several anonymous clergymen known collectively as “Cosmas’s continuators” continued to extend the history covered in the chronicle with a series of supplementary annals, which did not follow the chronicle format that Cosmas used, but did give later scholars an accurate picture of the historic landscape of the Czech lands from Cosmas’ death in 1125 to 1283, though other continuators such as Henry the Carver and Henry of Heimburg wrote their own chronicles as continuations of *Chronica Boemorum*, with the scope of their work covering the period up to the year 1300 (Curta 2019, 603-604).

It is important for the sake of understanding the purpose of the manuscript’s existence who Cosmas was. Cosmas, who was the dean at Katedrála Svatého Víta, Václava a Vojtěcha, today known as the St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague, was a learned priest ordained in what would today be Esztergom, Hungary, a full 20 years before he began writing *Chronica Boemorum*. Like many who sought education at the time, Cosmas travelled west in his youth to what we know today as Belgium, receiving an education in Liege. This education allowed him to better prepare for his role in the church, and gave him the necessary Latin literacy skills needed to eventually author *Chronica Boemorum*. Not only was he a priest, and therefore exposed to the early world of learning available to members of the clergy at the time, but he was, according to Czech historian Jan Hasil, closely connected to the Czech ruling class and upper echelons of the clergy - many of whom would have been personal friends and likely his primary audience (Bak and Rychterová 2020, XXVII). Hasil also points out that the preface of the first book not only implies its use as a historical source, and potentially political tool for his friends in the Czech political system, but is also directly addressed to Provost Sebir of Melnik and Master Gervasius, who was at the time the archdeacon of the Prague chapter, and a direct superior of Cosmas within the clergy’s hierarchy.

Though many primary sources, such as the annals of the Prague chapter have since been lost, Hasil has theorised that the original intention of such a chronicle, at least initially may have been to expand on the annals of Prague, and in doing so reinforce the Prague Chapter as a legitimate authority over the Bohemian lands as part of the Catholic Church’s apparatus in central Europe.

Furthermore, as Cosmas was often privy to the business of the courts during his time as author of the manuscript, it has also been theorised that the focus of the first book on the mythological origins of the Czech people as the collective descendants of Přemysl the Ploughman would likely have served the political purpose of legitimising the reign of Přemyslid in power during Cosmas' lifetime (Bak and Rychterová 2020, XXIX).

Not only did Cosmas's continuators extend *Chronica Boemorum*'s time scope, but they also broke from Cosmas' style in several ways, making the entire finished chronicle a spectrum of various presentations and interpretations of the histories they recorded. In his book *Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages*, Florin Curta points out that, unlike Cosmas, his continuators shunned his comparisons of Czech historical figures and events to Greco-Roman heroes and historic figures. This allowed Cosmas to begin drawing connections between the Czech people and the Israelites, increasing the biblical rhetoric in Czech literature and historiographic interpretation, as the Bohemian lands were slowly but increasingly seeing Christianisation spread across the kingdom as a result of the policies of various 12th century Czech rulers.

Though only a chronicle of early mediaeval history, *Chronica Boemorum* would become a critical piece of nationalistic historiography that was revived within Czech scholarly circles as a key primary source describing the origin of the Czech people, language and culture. In the aftermath of the 1848 revolution, Czech nationalistic sentiment was bolstered, particularly within the middle and upper classes of Czech-speaking society. During this period, major events such as the first Slavic Congress of 1848 took place in Prague, a major turning point in defining a sense of Czech nationalism detached from the identity of their Austrian superiors. One of the earliest mediaeval examples of this was through the intermarriage of Luxembourger nobles to members of the Přemyslid dynasty. With the first Luxembourger ruler of Bohemia, Jan I, a rift was created between the King and the nobility due to Jan's disdain with Bohemian politics. He often left Bohemia to the rule of the nobility while he went back to Luxembourg, and in doing so created enough of a conflict over domestic affairs when he returned that nobles would often use the rhetoric of native populism created in *Chronica Boemorum* as part of enforcing their true connection to the land, as opposed to Jan's, who was persistently reminded he was an outsider (Teich 1998).

Moreover, *Chronica Boemorum* served not only as a major source of Czech history but served to popularise important Czech heroic figures and mythological figures that remain today as important figures in Czech cultural spheres. Given the access of noble spheres to church institutions where sections of *Chronica Boemorum* would have been translated and read, their familiarity with the figures made popular by Cosmas' work inspired the first artistic portrayals of historic Czech leaders and figures in both religious and non-religious contexts, making these figures known to the wider public by virtue of visual, and less so textual depiction (Bláhová

2016). In this sense, *Chronica Boemorum* is actively affiliated with the popularisation of Czech mythological figures, and by extension Czech cultural awareness, among the illiterati of this era.

A result of this was not only Cosmas' work becoming a major force in identifying and relaying the early history of the Czech people and documenting historically significant events and key mythological and real origins, but the reconsideration of Cosmas' reputation in Czech history. Cosmas' quickly gained status as one of the great Czechs of history, known as "Cosmas the historian" for his work's role in preserving the early history of Bohemia and Moravia. Introduced to nationalist zeitgeist by Gelasius Dobner and František Palacký alike, Cosmas and his work became a key source for the cultural movement known as the Czech National Revival during the early 19th century (Kopal 2017). This period of Czech history saw scholars resist and slow down the Germanisation of the Bohemian lands, and create a Czech identity and sense of nationhood rooted in the use of the Czech written and spoken vernacular as part of everyday life, the enrichment of Czech culture and the conservation of an early, mythological history of the nation, both with regards to revering great historic Czech figures, and to emphasise the Czech people's connection to the Bohemian lands. This movement, therefore, relied critically on *Chronica Boemorum*, as little other sources from early mediaeval Czech history existed, or their pedigree dubious when their authenticity was challenged.

Cosmas' works and legacy may be influential in determining the course of Czech nationhood and national identity in the centuries that followed his death and the chronicle's completion, but his legacy and the importance of *Chronica Boemorum* extends far further than that. As a primary source for young Czechs today, *Chronica Boemorum* has become a crucial piece of Czech literature explored in modern Czech classrooms in order for pupils to understand their nation's cultural and historical roots. A survey conducted in 2014 in classrooms in Plzeň shows that one of the key topics of interest when studying *Chronica Boemorum* that both students indicated and teachers predicted would be of interest was the death of Svatý Václav, a Přemyslid dynasty ruler of the Bohemian lands, and one of the most revered figures in Czech history, known today as one of Czechias most virtuous leaders, and the Patron Saint of the modern Czech state (Satoria 2014).

Even outside of the sphere of history as a subject and history classes in the Czech education system, *Chronica Boemorum* and Cosmas's own legacy as a writer and chroniclers of early Czech history emerges in the curriculums of Czech language and literature classes, as well as civic education and citizenship classes. In his paper "Kosmova kronika na základní škole", Josef Satoria discusses potential further applications aside from history for *Chronica Boemorum*. One application he discusses is the use of Cosmas' work in geography classes, as the chronicle contains detailed descriptions of the Bohemian realm's geography during Přemyslid rule to the degree that some locations described in *Chronica Boemorum* could still be identified based on the original descriptions in the present day (Satoria 2014).

One important aspect to remember is also the original text having been written in Latin, which was quite customary for chronicles of the time. Part of the chronicle's legacy is the political purpose it served, reinforcing the role of the church (and therefore Latin) and the Přemyslid dynasty as being inherently connected to the roots of the Czech nation. Dalimil, who famously wrote his chronicle in vernacular, likely did so as a "modernising" technique, as part of the political aspirations of Jan I of Bohemia, Bohemia's first ruler from the House of Luxembourg. Jan's rule was troubled heavily by his friction with the native Czech noble class, many of whom were seen by Jan to be preserving the ideology of the previous Přemyslid dynasty and thus reinforcing the concept of nativity to Bohemia. As *Chronica Boemorum* was not translated until the 1920s, the quality of translation from Latin to Czech has been described as a remarkably accurate translation that loses little meaning from the original text (Rychterová 2021). Karel Hrdina's translation work on *Chronica Boemorum* then, in itself, can serve as a vector through which students of Czech language and literature or the Latin language can understand the Latin roots of the Czech language and gain a deeper understanding of Latin chronicles from the period by comparing and contrasting translated versions of *Chronica Boemorum* with the original Latin version.

Just as Czech scholars sought out historic texts in search of a better definition of what it means to be Czech and where we come from, *Chronica Boemorum* serves a uniquely significant role in history and in the future of Czech nationhood and independence. It gives Czech culture and nationhood a beginning, whether or not those beginnings may be mythological rather than fact that historians today can evidence. It gave Czech people for centuries to come a narrative on which the future of a Czech people and a Czech nation could be maintained as a unique entity that isn't completely dependent on the cultures that surround it, whether those cultures are Germanic or Slavic in nature. Most importantly, perhaps, *Chronica Boemorum* set a precedent for the collection of historical narratives in Czech historiography and began a tradition of scholars investigating, promoting and preserving a distinct Czech identity rooted in the Bohemian lands, and dependent on the Czech language, rather than on exterior influences. This identity eventually did break from Cosmas' emphasis on the Přemyslid roots of the Czech people, and eventually the precedent of historic manuscripts did shift from Latin to vernacular. That being said however, without Cosmas' precedent for manuscript style and focus, much of early Czech mediaeval history may have indeed been lost.

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