



BOTH SIDES NOW: THE IBERIAN PENINSULA AND THE
CZECH LANDS IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES (UP TO
C. 1300)

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Both lands, of the contacts between which in the emergence period of common European identity I now intend to give an account, have in common their limitrophe position in terms of mediaeval and post-mediaeval European culture and civilization. This, of course, does not pertain to Antiquity in which the Iberian peninsula played a major role within the Roman civilization while the Czech lands of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia constituted a north-of-the-border area of free Germania, out of bounds for imperial administration though linked with Rome by means of a network of arteries. Of course, things changed with the advent of the Middle Ages when the Mediterranean was split by a religious frontier that divided the hitherto unified civilization area between the spheres of Christianity and Islam. The gradual (re-)integration of both the Iberian peninsula and the Czech lands into the Christian area fostered their mutual contacts but I wish to point out that as will be seen presently, the links between them are observable from a very early period of time. This points to the conclusion that no part of mediaeval Europe, however remote and isolated it may have seemed, ever lived in complete seclusion from developments on the whole continent.

The documentable contacts may begin at a rather early date. Certain resemblances which may be perceived between the filigree work on the Cruz de los Angeles, a votive cross of gold donated to the Oviedo ca-

thedral by the Asturian king Alfonso II in 808 (de Palol - Hirmer 1991, 161 and Pl. VII; Werckmeister 1993, No. 72 on pp. 146-148) and some of the filigree-decorated mounts discovered in a princely burial of the second half of 9th century at Kolín-nad-Labem, Bohemia (Charvát 1994a, 111-112 with ref., cf. now Lutovský 1996, 50 fig. 5:1-4 and Pl. IV:5 and 6) are probably due to a common origin of both products in the sphere of Mediterranean decorative arts (for parallels in filigree decoration by spheres set in ringlets of pearly wire between Kolín and the St. Ambroggio altarpiece in Milano cf. Gaborit-Chopin 1980-1981, 14 Fig. 11, and Gaborit-Chopin 1990, 96 f.ig. 2).

That the Kolín personage (s) had access to Mediterranean goods is borne out by the fact that the material of a bone pendant set in gold from the same grave, once thought to have represented a (Christian?) relic, has now been identified as elephant, hippopotamus, walrus or even mammoth ivory (Lutovský 1996, No. 18 pp. 47 and 51 and p. 64). On the question of various kinds of early medieval ivory and ivory trade cf. now Hampel-Banerjee 1995; Insoll 1995.

Both lands came into direct contact in the tenth century when a Arabophone Cordovan traveller of Jewish origin (al-Israili), Ibrahim ibn Ya'qub at-Turtushi, passed through the Baltic-littoral Slavic lands, as well as through Prague, in 961-962 or 965-966 (Charvát-Prosecký 1996; Mishin 1996). Much more interdisciplinary research is needed before this voyage delivers all its secrets to modern explorers of the past. Ibrahim, born probably at Tortosa by Barcelona, might have pursued a career of an official of Cordovan municipal administration, as is shown by his interests, revealed by the topics he was apparently most interested in during his voyage. It is difficult to guess why he set out on the particular kind of journey which had brought him - as the only traveller in the history of early medieval Muslim geography - as far east as our part of Europe. Nevertheless, the eventful story connected with the determined efforts at opening a communication between the Cordovan caliphate and the Khazar state in Wolhynia, revealed by the correspondence between a group of persons among whom a pilot personality seems to have been Hasdai ben Shaprut, a vizier of the Cordovan caliph Abdarrahan III (918-961), found in the Cairo genizah (Kaplony 1996) shows that the Cordovan administration did not find it difficult to send embassies even to the most remote corners of Eurasia if its agents deemed it expedient. The general interest of the tenth-century Cordovan rulers in Christian Europe has been mentioned by D. Mishin (1996, 196). A short time ago I have put

forward a hypothesis according to which the Andalusian sovereigns' interest in overland trade might have been strong enough to attempt an opening of a major commercial artery passing Europe from west to the east and linked to the system of commercial routes joining the E fringe of Europe with the area of the Pontic steppes (and perhaps farther eastward) in the manner of the 9th-century Radhanites (Charvát 1994a, 115). It need not be emphasized that whatever the purpose of Ibrahim's voyage might have been, it does not appear to have fructified and the strategy behind it must have failed. This fact notwithstanding, Ibrahim certainly deserves our respect for the feat of courage, dauntlessness and thirst for knowledge which he has accomplished.

A question of particular significance is represented by the slaves of Slavic origin, *as-Saqaliba*, employed by the Cordovan administration as servants and lower-echelon officials (in general, Hrbek 1988, esp. p. 321, and Talib-Samir 1988; cf. also Martínez 1996). These Arabized Slavs turn up in Maghribi and Andalusí sources from the beginning of the 10th century. They played a major role in the various offices of the caliphate, especially at the new capital of *Madina az-Zahra*, founded during the reign of *al-Hakam II* (961-976), in which some of them might even have possessed spacious houses (Barceló-Cantero 1995). Some of them rose to remarkably prestigious social positions after 1031 in the so-called *ta'ifa* period and it has been observed that at one time they were to be found at the head of about one-fourth of these principalities, especially along the SE segment of the Spanish coast from Tortosa to Murcia. Nevertheless, they do not appear to have survived the year 1100 as all references to them vanish at the end of the 11th century. (On the general questions of relations between Christians and Muslims in the early medieval Iberian peninsula cf. now *Cristianos de al-Andalus*.)

The next phase in which we know something of the mutual contact is represented by the 12th and 13th century. It has long been known that the Almohad empire attempted to augment her revenues by fostering maritime trade along the Atlantic and Baltic coasts of Europe and that such contacts left traces on sites close to the present Dutch and N German littoral (Schulze-Dörrlamm 1992, 437 No. 9; Koers-Lanting-Molema 1990; Lanting-Molema 1993-1994). This is most probably the general direction from which precious textiles of Spanish origin, found in some élite graves of the Prague St. Guy's cathedral, came into the country. The first of these might have been buried perhaps already in the grave of bishop Jan II (+ 1236), but certainly in that of bishop Nicholas (+ 1258) with

the last major item deposited in the grave of king Rudolph I (+ 1306, Bažantová 1996).

This very distinct phase of long-distance trade between the Czech lands and the Iberian peninsula thus appears to have been initiated by the Almohad commercial venture of the 12th century and, much as in other European countries, terminated by the final victory of the Italian competition around 1300.

The years on both sides of 1200 are also the time when we have the first tangible evidence of pilgrims from the Czech lands, now fully Christianized, setting out on the way to Santiago de Compostella in order to visit the tomb of one of the most famous saints of medieval Europe and returning safely home.

In our lands, interest in this kind of pious undertaking can be demonstrated from the end of the 11th century but the first documentable proofs of the pilgrimage, such as the St. James's shell found in a well at the medieval town of Most/Brüx, NW Bohemia, filled in during the second half of 13th century (Frolík-Klápště-Smetánka-Žegklitz 1992, 154-159 with ref.), are slightly later.

The Atlantic-Baltic route was clearly so much frequented that it left even more traces in the historical record of contemporary Czech lands. The first reference to a specifically Spanish saint, St. Eulalia of Mérida, appears in the martyrology of a Bohemian manuscript called *Codex Gigas*, written in 1204-1227 in the E Bohemian Benedictine house of Podlažice by Chrudim and comprising a series of religious and literary works that make it a virtually complete monastic library (Charvát 1994b). The martyrology entry on the 10th December refers to St. Eulalia and differs thus deliberately from the martyrology's probable archetype, that of the Benedictine house of Břevnov, which, in the manner of other contemporary sources, has „Melciadis papae“ (ibid. 82 n. 20 and 87). St. Eulalia was also known in SW France and one of our unknown voyagers who took the Atlantic route might have thus brought back the memory of this saint and have it subsequently inserted into the source of the *Codex Gigas* martyrology.

Other manuscripts came from Spain to the kingdom of Bohemia in the course of the 13th century, especially in the regnal period of Přemysl Otakar II (1253-1278). This sovereign, who supported the candidature of Alfonso X of Castille to the imperial throne, received from the Spanish royal court the first delivery of astronomical and astrological manuscripts, instruments and perhaps also specialists. In the reign of his

son, king Wenceslas II (1281-1305), Spanish astrologers worked at the royal court of Prague. From among these, we know the name of at least one, Mr. Alvarez of Oviedo, who came in from Toledo and resided at Prague roughly between 1290 and 1311. His colleagues and followers, some of whom were qualified enough to identify the exceptionally favourable omens for the coronation time of Wenceslas II in 1297 and, alternatively, the gloomy presage of the stars under the influence of Saturn which heralded the murder of the last Přemysl-dynasty king, Wenceslas III, in 1306 continued in the service of the kings of Bohemia until the accession of Charles IV in 1346 (Krása 1971, 48).

Works by authors of Spanish origin were nonetheless not limited to the country's élite audience at the royal court. In the course of the 13th century, at least one ecclesiastical institution of the land, the house of the Premonstratensian canons at Litomyšl, E Bohemia, procured a manuscript containing works by the outstanding specialist in matters of ecclesiastical law, Raimund de Peñaforte, on questions of penitence and on matrimony. The text remained in possession of the white canons of Litomyšl at least one century or so (Hledíková 1994, 43 n. 57).

Contacts between the two lands lying at the „opposite corners“ of Europe, though sparse, were thus nevertheless not entirely extinguished even in the course of the more obscure periods of European history. It may thus be asserted that such a thing as „European identity“ has existed, though at times in a most precarious fashion, throughout the entire Christian period of European history.

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