

A Bohemian Devil in Sweden: The 'Codex Gigas' and its Travels

by Mark Whelan PhD

At almost a metre tall and half a metre wide, the *Codex Gigas* ('Giant Codex') is the largest European manuscript to survive from the medieval period and is easily one of the most important cultural artefacts from the medieval Kingdom of Bohemia. *See back cover.* Its size, however, is but one among many of its claims to fame. Its 310 leaves of parchment not only weigh in at a hefty and remarkable seventy-five kilograms and make the manuscript over 20 centimetres thick, but also preserve a wealth of theological and historical materials that point to the rich and varied intellectual culture present in medieval Bohemia. These include not just a complete bible (including the Old Testament) and spiritual works on penitence and exorcism, but also valuable historical works, including those of Josephus, a classical historian active in the first century AD, and the *Chronicle of the Bohemians* by Cosmas of Prague. Written in the early twelfth century, the latter is one of the first historical works on the history of the Bohemian lands, beginning with the mythical foundation of the Bohemian kingdom and continuing to chronicle the deeds of the Přemyslid dynasty until 1125. The texts throughout are accompanied by exquisite illuminations in red, blue, yellow, green and gold, and modern studies of the handwriting in the Codex have confirmed that the texts spread across its 310 leaves of parchment were copied by the hand of a single person. This alone is remarkable, for whoever compiled and copied these works must have toiled for years, if not decades, and the Codex probably represents a lifetime of work. The hard-working scribe in question was probably a monk based in the now destroyed monastery of Podlažice in the thirteenth century, the remains of the site lying roughly 100km east of Prague.

The Codex's size, content, and decoration alone would have ensured the Codex a place in any textbook account of medieval manuscripts and a prized place in any museum or library collection. The Codex is, however, most famous for its striking illustration of the devil on folio 290 recto, an image which has earned the manuscript the nickname of the 'Devil's Bible' and has made it one of the most well known manuscripts to have survived from the medieval world. The devil, dressed in an ermine loincloth and resplendent with his fiery red horns and finger and toe nails, stares

out from the parchment with dazzling red pupils. These pupils are set into white eyes and onto a green and snarling face, which boasts a mouth with a set of sharp and shiny teeth. His stance and his crossed-eyes give him a frenzied air, while his forked tongue protrudes outwards, as if to strike out at any reader who would dare to gaze on his image for too long. The striking illustration of the devil and the astounding size of the manuscript soon gave birth to a host of legends, including the tale that such a monumental codex could not have been produced by any mortal man, and that the scribe made a pact with the devil in return for help in bringing such a great work to completion. This pact did not just involve the scribe forfeiting his soul, but also included an illustration of the devil in the Codex.

So many have gazed at the image of the devil since its inception in the thirteenth century that the leaf of parchment has darkened over the years as a result of its over-exposure to light. The Codex circulated between several monasteries in the centuries after its production, until Rudolf II, King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor, borrowed the Codex from its then owners in Břevnov to be transcribed by his secretary. Rudolf never gave it back, and it eventually formed part of his royal collection in Prague around 1600. Fifty or so years later the Codex would begin another journey that would see the manuscript traverse the roughly 1500 kilometres north to Stockholm. The Codex's journey began in the summer of 1648 when a Swedish army sacked Prague

Engraving showing Emperor Rudolph II





Břevnov Monastery, a Benedictine archabbey on the edge of Prague, founded in 993.

Castle and its environs during the closing phases of the Thirty Years' War, a deadly series of conflicts that consumed vast swathes of Central Europe for the better part of a generation. The Codex was not seized by Swedish soldiers at random, but was deliberately sought out under the orders of Queen Christina of Sweden who had ordered her generals to seize any valuable books and manuscripts that they could lay their hands on. Once in Swedish hands, these priceless manuscripts were packed into thirty large chests and rushed northwards to Queen Christina as soon as possible. Time was very much of the essence, as Christina feared that the imminent completion of the peace negotiations then ongoing in Münster and Osnabrück would force her to relinquish her prized war booty if it was not securely in her hands in Sweden. Transported from Prague first overland and then by ship via the Elbe, the manuscripts safely reached Christina and the royal court in Stockholm.

True to form, the 'Devil's Bible' continued to attract legends and tall tales in its new home in Stockholm. When fire ripped through the royal castle in 1697 and engulfed much of the royal library in flames, legend has it that the Codex was only saved by being thrown out of a window from the fourth storey. It apparently emerged from its drop relatively unscathed, although it did injure the unfortunate individual whom it landed on. The Codex was soon returned to the refurbished royal library where it remained until 1877, when it was transferred to the National Library of Sweden. It continues to travel occasionally and has in recent years visited cities such as New York, London, and Prague, but the current home of the Codex and its devil remains the National Library in Stockholm.

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*From the **Codex Gigas**, Bohemian, early 12th century, see page 14*
Courtesy of the Royal Library, Stockholm