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Hana Pátková  
**Script in town books  
in late medieval Bohemia**

*The development of script at selected border sites 1420–1520*

Digital Editing of Medieval Manuscripts - Intellectual Output 1:  
**Resources for Editing Medieval Texts (Paleography, Codicology, Philology)**



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# Script in town books in late medieval Bohemia

*The development of script at selected border sites 1420–1520*

L'Harmattan  
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## *Foreword*

Paleography in the stricter, narrower sense is a historical discipline that fits into a rear compartment of the general history toolbox, although rather paradoxically, it is also more or less a primary key to source study not only in medieval and modern-era history, but also in the most recent history. This particularly applies when researchers who do not only deal with printed sources send out an SOS. For anybody who does not (correctly) read and chronologically categorize undated manuscript texts exposes himself to the risk of not understanding the context, which may indeed lead to misinterpretation. However, even texts with seemingly problem-free dating should be treated with caution, as they may be associated with dates transcribed from an original text some time later, and other possible pitfalls might also be mentioned. But then even if the dating is beyond doubt, it is important to know, or at least to try to find out, which hand wrote the item in question, because establishing the background, – whether “pragmatic” or based on a literary codex or modern collection, can provide important information that may be used to discover its historically informative value.

However, in order to be able to perform this optimum historical research to at least some extent, it is necessary to move forward from this “applied” paleography (or paleography as an auxiliary discipline of historical studies) to pure paleography, or one might say paleography for the sake of paleography, which seemingly ranges beyond time and space, although this is not actually the case, as paleography of this kind necessarily focuses on both time and space, and their fullest possible depiction, because whatever it provides researchers in its “service function” (in the best sense, of course), it must first create sufficiently solid foundations. One way of achieving this is to categorize one of every kind or type of script and letter (in any particular written text) within a development scheme, which continually forms and reforms, even though letters do also rarely appear



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that are “hors système”, so that different procedures are required to identify them. However, a qualified paleographic analysis is not possible without both an understanding of the nature of script in general and without an analysis of the morphology of individual letters in particular. For there is nothing more deceptive than when a researcher decides “at first glance” on a detailed time classification or even the identification of the scribe’s hand on the basis of two or more documents (and vice versa of course), without realizing that this possible proximity is only the result, for example, of similar background or training, or on the other hand the development of an individual scribe or the influences that he might have undergone over the decades. Hence it is only a more detailed analysis of individual scribe’s segments that can confirm such an assumption, but also on occasion even refute it. Of course, these variables can undergo all kinds of modifications due to various circumstances, whether objective circumstances in time and space, as indicated above, or involving the activities of every individual creator of these artifacts, i.e. the scribes, for various subjective reasons (perhaps due to past illness or old age with the need for a rapid recording). There may also be pitfalls involved when we realize that a scribe could be and often was able to alternately use various forms of a single type of script, as testified by several script sample books offered by professional scribes with a broad range of options from calligraphy to maximally perfunctory styles. Of course, these were primarily professionals who were often active for a generation or two, but to a certain extent they might also have been “amateur” (with no pejorative connotation intended) scribes in their approach to their writing activities. These were both anonymous individuals and those whom we know by name, to whom we can attribute other products and activities besides those of a scribe, particularly non-scribal activities indicating their social status.

Of course, the above makes it clear that it is not easy to recognize the circumstances in which scribes’ products were written, and if there is a lack of continuous comparative material it is often simply not possible, both in the administrative and diplomatic spheres and in the context of scribes’ output of a non-diplomatic nature. In order



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to arrive at more solid conclusions it is, however, necessary to avoid this by hard, sometimes almost microscopic, work, the depth of which is clearly dependent on the question raised. The following text would also benefit from a survey of this kind, which will not and cannot resolve general questions, but using specific examples would like to lay down the foundations for the creation of preconditions for a more detailed knowledge of script and its structure and development in late medieval and early modern-era Bohemia, i.e. not (yet) in the Czech lands as a whole. However, it is generally not within the capacity of individual ones to fully handle this for a number of reasons. This has also led the author to choose an approach that involves individual surveys, which are also meant to prepare and serve as a basis for other surveys to cover a broader territory and a wider timeframe, as well as integrating the script from other material groups and looking around close neighbours abroad and referring to the aforementioned script sample books that have been preserved since the period under review.

A few words ought to be said on the material under review, which may, but need not, persuade readers, though it will definitely surprise them anyway. In the second case it should be a challenge for them to set their hand to the task and one way or another to expand the current material base. The author has understandably been led to choose it on purely pragmatic grounds, the basis of which was the author's examination of one of the important diplomatic categories in the Czech state, i.e. Czech town books. Although we can observe their development from the latter half of the 14th century, we only see their full development in the 15th and 16th centuries, when their existence is testified in practically every town, and if it is not then it should at least be assumed. At the same time it should be remembered that in the 15th and 16th centuries the Kingdom of Bohemia was literally dotted with towns both large and small of varying importance. In a nutshell, these basically comprised some thirty royal towns of varying kinds (most under the king's or his vice-chamberlain's direct rule, while some others were dowry or mining towns). Here we should distinguish between the Prague towns,



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which together with Kutná Hora and the pledged imperial town of Cheb made up the elite, several prominent towns (particularly Plzeň, České Budějovice, Litoměřice and Hradec Králové) and the others which can be described as more or less regional. Out of the large number of tributary towns, a few of them achieved the economic importance of royal regional towns (e.g. Jindřichův Hradec), while others remained a purely local phenomenon.

We should subsequently refer to the timeframe (and its definition) for this work and its justification. Despite many extensive losses the town-book material base is so broad that in general it is practically impossible for an individual to manage it all, even though extensive monograph literature already exists, particularly in the form of (Masters') theses from university departments engaged in auxiliary disciplines. Despite various laudable exceptions referred to below, it should be made clear that these works focused more as a rule on diplomatic and administrative-historical aspects, rather than on detailed morphological paleographic analyses and thus limited themselves for the most part to ascertaining the identity of, or difference in, scribal hands.

All of the above indicates that the paleographer is presented with an extraordinarily broad and rewarding field of activity, particularly with regard to opportunities for a deeper reconstruction of the local administrative structure. I shall endeavour to clarify this to some extent. The author has not only attempted to present as much of the territorially far-reaching material as possible, but also to incorporate within it representatives of the entire range of types of individual towns, without drawing a boundary between royal and tributary towns, but taking into account their different financial circumstances. Within the framework of the former, "first category" towns have been left to one side and attention has been focused in particular on a circle of large and small towns in marginal areas of Bohemia, particularly to the north. Hence attention was focused primarily on locations of lesser importance and those of a purely local nature, where a role was played by questions of scribes' (usually an individual's) identity, often isolated with regard to their "art" and thus to a large extent preserving older, traditional forms of script,



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as these scribes were often the kind of people who were only involved in writing activity, because writing work in their locality tended to be occasional in nature, which meant that their development as writers was in a way restricted to “part-time” work with rather limited practice.

However, town books were not the product of some canonized form, but a diplomatic category, which over time increasingly clearly and often varied with regard to their practical application and even their function. Hence the premise applies that the script used varied (or could vary) as a result of this. Of course, the solitary nature of documents is not just a direct consequence of losses, but in the case of smaller communities in particular frequently a matter of the very limited dynamics of their administrative activities, when a single book might cover a century (*civitas unius libri*), whereas elsewhere several specialized series might be kept in parallel, with one book filled with entries not just from a few lustra, but the events of a single year.

The questions which need an answer or at least an attempt at an answer, based on a detailed analysis of very varied material on several dozen large and small towns are of a purely paleographic nature, which should again be highlighted, so that diplomatic information that can be found in the quoted literature need not be sought. The following primary points are basically involved:

1) the primary basis is a breakdown of letters into “prime elements” with the aim of ascertaining the composition of individual letters and their potential mutual links including abbreviation systems;

2) a characterization of the development or lack thereof (conservation) of individual letters from individual scribes and any (gradual) changes, as well as the discovery or identification of broader abilities among individual scribes involving parallel usage of differing writing types for entries (or books) with varying importance;

3) the possible influence of an older scribe’s writing usage on his assistant or successor;

4) the possible linguistic “interventions” or “influences” of the three languages that come into consideration, namely Latin, Czech and



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German, both regarding the morphology of the letters and on the overall character of the script;

5) the overall layout of the pages and individual types of entry is not neglected either, as this also to some extent makes up part of the individuality of the scribes in question. In general, the reader will find that various other conclusions can be drawn from the material involved, allowing for a deeper insight into scribal activities at individual locations. Stone must be laboriously placed next to stone in this never-ending work on the mosaic of our awareness of developments in manuscript script, for our knowledge of it to be increased and enhanced.

Naturally, there is still a long road ahead towards broader conclusions on the dynamics of diplomatic script in Bohemia and ultimately in other Czech lands, but this is a road which we must take.

Ivan Hlaváček



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## *Methodological starting point and sources*

*More generally on the development of lettering  
in the observed period – anticipated state*

The century in question – ca 1420–1520 – is a period when the bastard lettering makes significant inroads in the written production of Czech provenience, but the definition of this lettering in the research so far seems problematic. Beside the bastarda, also cursive developed, where their delimitation is very ambiguous, or it was resigned on all together and bastarda and cursive merge.

Essentially, it is possible in all cases to count with lettering, which has a single-looped a, the letters s, f, are lengthened below the baseline. The letters b, d, h, k, and l have loops – at the beginning of the period in question it is a rule from which only the letter d sometimes deviates, which is looped like the uncial d and sometimes does not have the shaft of an loop.

The miniscules generally correspond to, for instance, the letters of the so-called Prague tractate on notule. The uppercase letters are very variable, namely also in letters of the same scribe. The anticipated development in the observed period could go in several directions. First, it is necessary to consider the penetration of the humanistic lettering. It appears in the official documents very much as a trace in the chancellery notes of the deeds of Ladislaus the Posthumous and George of Poděbrady. However, it is a very limited appearance. Nevertheless, it comes to the land with writings of foreign issuers – from the 1430s it is penetrating in papal briefs, it also appears in the letters of the papal legates and Council of Basel. It thus had to have been received and read in the land. In the Jagiellonian period, its appearance somewhat increases, mainly after 1490, when Władysław II moved to Buda and the influence there began to work significantly on his chancellery. The influence of humanistic lettering can also be seen in the writings of the administrators of the Prague archbishopric. The second circle is the influence of



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the imperial chancery and the German milieu in general, predominantly in the influence of the early forms of Kurrent. It is necessary to follow here also how the various types of lettering penetrated depending on the language milieu and on the language of the writings prepared. We must approach these two assumed directions of the development by observing the morphological transformations of the individual letters, the metamorphosis of the duct and module, namely independently of the above indicated directions, because also the transformations and development taking place completely within the continual Late Gothic milieu have to be recorded and according to the amount interpreted.

Whereas in the material preparatory work for this component synthesis – in the Album of Late Medieval Lettering – it was approached strictly geographically according to the individual localities and within them chronologically, it now seems to be a more suitable approach, connecting the lettering rather on a chronological basis. Another perspective that can approach that is the type of municipal book, from which the lettering comes, and thus the way of keeping the book, how much it influenced the scribe's execution of the record. Possible regional oddities and differences on this common base clearly stand out and will be more clearly distinguishable from the prevailing trends.

Lettering did not exist in a vacuum; it was created under certain conditions. It is therefore necessary to present also the basic information on the urban locality, its size, legal position and relation to certain authorities at the given time, and also on its confessional appurtenance and national composition, because it could all influence the written communication in the town.

Finally, the immediate creator of the lettering were the town scribes. It is also necessary to pay attention to them. It is clear already in these preliminary considerations that the prosopographic data on the absolute majority of them are entirely fragmentary or rather none. Several exceptions exist but they are rather lost or unproved in the overall sum. Nevertheless, it is necessary to pay attention to them, because from a methodological perspective the relationship between the results of the palaeographic analysis and the possibili-



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ties and results of the prosopographic investigation of the scribes is substantial.

The material base for this work was for the greater part created by the project “Regional Editions as the Base for Observing the General Development of Lettering 1-3”. The methodological starting point of this research was formulated in 2000.<sup>1</sup> The project was aimed at the preparation of palaeographic editions of the material from the period of the Late Middle Ages. The research of lettering began in 2000 (atlas Loun, Scriptorium Praha 2002). In 2002–2004, the project “Regional palaeographic editions as the base of observing the general development of lettering I” (GAČR 404/02/0187) created the basis for the research of lettering in North Bohemia (Ústí nad Labem, Česká Lípa, Kadaň, Chomutov, some smaller towns). A project following West Bohemia (CSF 404/06/0609), and South and East Bohemia (CSF 404/09/0388) built on it. The publication output of these projects was a series of palaeographic albums or atlases, devoted to selected municipal books in individual localities of the investigated region.<sup>2</sup>

Municipal books were used as sources so that the selected towns lay in border regions of Bohemia. In the north – hence towards Lusatia and Saxony – they were the towns of Česká Lípa, Ústí nad Labem, Louny, Kadaň, Chomutov, beyond them then – as if in a second line – the small towns of Ústětk, Hošťka and Třebenice. Towards the west – the Cheb district was left out, because it is a distinctive and independent region – there followed Žlutice, Stříbro, Domažlice, Klatovy, Sušice, Kolinec and Horažďovice. From there to the south, the

<sup>1</sup> Pátková, Hana, Projekt regionálních paleografických edic jako základ sledování obecného vývoje písma [Project of regional palaeographic editions as the base of observing the general development of lettering]. In: Septuaginta Paulo Spunar oblata, Praha 2000, p. 632–633.

<sup>2</sup> Album scripturae medii aevi posterioris/Album pozdně středověkého písma 1-14 [Album of Late Medieval Lettering], Praha-Dolní Břežany 2002–2013.



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municipal books were treated from Český Krumlov, Vimperk, Velhartice, Prachatice, Netolice, Jindřichův Hradec, towards the east – and the borders of Moravia – there followed Pacov, Pelhřimov, Přebyslav, Polička, Litomyšl, Česká Třebová, Náchod and Broumov.

These twenty-nine localities can have a somewhat arbitrary impression in terms of the selection. They are not always commensurate seats. On the one hand, it is given by the very uneven preservation of the sources – which in palaeographic research cannot be circumvented by some analogies or statistical functions, either the lettering is preserved from a particular place or it is not – on the other hand by the need to observe the lettering in towns of various sizes, various communication levels and in the end also different ethnic compositions of the population.

“Circumventing” around the borders of the land has its sense – it is an assumption that in the border region it could be easier to capture the influence of the neighbouring lands and at the same time whether and how much the influences from the centre of land, mainly from Prague, spread here can be observed. Lettering can thus be one of the evidences of the communication connections and cultural transfer.

The absolutely ideal state would occur, if it was possible to follow municipal books of the same type, kept in the same way, but that is not possible because of the structure and the preservation of the sources, and so it was necessary to work with what was available.

The municipal books were followed – with small differences – roughly from the 1420s to the 1520s. Both the scribal manifestations of the individual hands were followed and the lettering of these hands roughly in five-year intervals. This made it possible to acquire a relatively extensive collection of material, in turn allowing a certain comparison on the one hand and on the other hand monitoring the developmental tendencies also within an individual town. However, not all of the books cover the entire delimited period by far with their records. Therefore, the source base is narrow for some decades, other times it is broad, because if the material from a certain period was not preserved in a certain locality, there is nothing to work with.



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The situation is provided graphically by the following table, capturing the representation of the sources used in individual decades.<sup>3</sup>

	1420– 1430	1431– 1440	1441– 1450	1451– 1460	1461– 1470	1471– 1480	1481– 1490	1491– 1500	1501– 1510	1511– 1520
Broumov	x	x	x	x	x					
Česká Lípa					x	x	x	x	x	x
Česká Třebová	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			
Český Krumlov	x			x	x	x				x
Domažlice									x	x
Horažďo- vice				x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Hošťka								x	x	x
Chomutov					x	x	x	x	x	x
Jindřichův Hradec							x	x	x	x
Kadaň					x	x	x	x	x	x
Klatovy										x
Kolinec	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Litomyšl	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Louny	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Náchod			x	x	x	x	x	x		
Netolice								x	x	x

<sup>3</sup> The timeframe was rounded with a precision of 2 years so the it was possible to put the data in a compatible form.



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Pacov						x	x	x	x	x
Pelhřimov	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x
Polička		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Prachatice	x									
Příbyslav			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Stříbro	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Sušice					x					
Třeбенice		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Ústí nad Labem		x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x
Ústěк										x
Velhartice	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Vimperk						x	x	x	x	x
Žlutice		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x