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**Duke Wenceslas and the possible reasons for his assassination  
in the context of the social transformations  
of the central Bohemian territory  
in the first third of the tenth century**

1. Political and social context – 2. Shaping society – 3. Testimony of the sources –
4. Reasons to assassinate the Duke?

The issues within the present paper is the connection between three historical phenomena: the situation of society during the reign of Duke of Bohemia Wenceslas (921–935), the social and power influence of Christianity on the formation of the social circumstances and, finally, the legendary life of Duke Wenceslas. In other words, I intend to ask the question of how much the narration of the legends about his effort to introduce Christian values into the life of Bohemian society in the first third of the 10<sup>th</sup> century could correspond to the reality, in which social framework it might have happened and what Wenceslas' possibilities were in this respect. Of course, the most limiting factor is represented by the sources.

### **1. Political and social context**

There are a rather extensive set of legends about St Wenceslas and St Ludmila. It is undoubtedly a specific source, whose usability and credibility have been subject to many discussions, let alone the issues of their absolute and relative dating and filiations. The legends follow the traditional schemes of narration, passing on motifs, loci communes, topoi, but their main objective is to celebrate the saints and encourage believers rather than record historical events. Moreover, the legends shift

in time and some of them originate from ethnically and socially different territories, which makes their testimonies even more problematic, although their authors probably had “reliable” patterns and solid information<sup>1</sup>.

The extraordinarily complex task of outlining the social organisation or form of the community living in the Bohemian Basin is complicated not only by the lack of sources, but also by the cultural and civilizational distance and by the movements within the social field, of which we, once again, make more guesses than actually know. According to Petr Charvát, the formation of early medieval Bohemian society, which “was not fundamentally behind” the level of most regions of our part of Europe in “all basic parameters of social life”, was completed already by the ninth century<sup>2</sup>. However, what does that mean? What did society look like then?

Around 900, the ruler, surrounded by a retinue of warriors, was travelling around the stronghold of castles he held. Significant social stratification undoubtedly existed. A primordial tribal democracy, of which F. Palacký dreamed, had been long gone at the time of Duke Wenceslas. Society was divided into a rich class of magnates residing at their fortified courts led by the duke accompanied by his warrior retinue, and the numerous class of agricultural producers, whom we can probably divide into the group of “heirs” or “free farmers” and the personally non-free people of serf or slave status<sup>3</sup>. It is evident that already the 9<sup>th</sup> century communities were solidly organised and achieved surpluses of energy; it was both necessary for the construction of extensive fortified compounds<sup>4</sup> and for defence against external enemies. Contacts with the western neighbours are documented, apart from the not very numerous records in foreign chronicles, above all by rich grave goods with finds originating from all over Europe, sometimes of extraordinary quality and geographic dispersion<sup>5</sup>.

Sovereigns such as Bořivoj (875–888/890), Spytihněv (894–915) and Vratislas (915–921) were taking over Frankish models modifying the economic-social arrangement of the Central Bohemian Přemyslid domain, which they directly controlled, according to them. The success of their doings, of their solution of the organisation of society is proven by the fact that they defended their independence and avoided the fate of the Great Moravian Empire, and that they prepared

<sup>1</sup> On the first Bohemian legends, their filiations and testimony level, see: D. TŘEŠTÍK, *Počátky Přemyslovců. Vstup Čechů do dějin (530–935)*, Praha 1997, p. 225–248.

<sup>2</sup> P. CHARVÁT, *Zrod českého státu. 568–1055*, Praha 2007, p. 117.

<sup>3</sup> Extensively on this topic T. PETRÁČEK, *Power and Exploitation in the Czech lands in the 10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> Centuries. A Central European Perspective*, Leiden – Boston 2017, p. 52–110.

<sup>4</sup> J. SLÁMA, *Střední Čechy v raném středověku. II. Hradiště, příspěvky k jejich dějinám a významu*, Praha 1986, p. 14–16.

<sup>5</sup> P. CHARVÁT, *Zrod českého státu*, p. 127.

conditions for the completion of the unification of the land under the reign of the Boleslases (935–972, 972–999). The imposition of obligations on the “free” farmers must have been a fundamental change, although the duke’s situation might have been simplified by taking over or “inheriting” the obligations that had been originally related to the common good of the community. Based on archaeological finds<sup>6</sup>, the current research ascribes the role of the builder of the Central Bohemian domain to Duke Spytihněv, who pushed through the tax burden in favour of the sovereign’s treasury with the use of his apparatus<sup>7</sup>. The needs of the nascent state certainly tended to increase rather than decrease in this respect. The process was reinforcing itself: an apparatus was needed to administer the land and collect the levies, and it was in its interest to carry out the collection as efficiently as possible in order to enable its survival and development.

The introduction and collection of levies was internally connected with the construction and development of new castles as strong points and centres of the ducal administration of the castle districts, dated by P. Charvát and M. Lutovský to the reign of Duke Spytihněv. The castles were supposed to improve the control of the population, collection of the taxes, levies and labours, serve as the centres of judicial power and administration of the ducal estates directly subordinated to the Prague centre, and finally as regional assembly points for armies<sup>8</sup>. Apart from controlling important communications, they convincingly demonstrated the ducal power not only to the neighbouring rulers<sup>9</sup>, but also to the local populace. Their construction also documents a period of economic competence and the organisation ability of the administrative apparatus of that time, which was capable of mobilising dozens and hundreds of workers for a time and energy-demanding economically “non-productive” construction of fortifications. During the reign of Duke Wenceslas, each of these castles was equipped with a Christian shrine; managed by the clergy, they represented the centres of ecclesiastical administration and gradual Christianization of their surroundings<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> M. LUTOVSKÝ, *Po stopách prvních Přemyslovců. I. Zrození státu (872–972). Od Bořivoje po Boleslava*, Praha 2006, p. 13, 14, 79, 93–97, 106–107.

<sup>7</sup> P. CHARVÁT, *Zrod českého státu*, p. 168.

<sup>8</sup> The creation of castles which functioned as gathering places for levies and centres of the ducal power on the outskirts of the Central Bohemian domain is dated to the time of Wenceslas’ predecessors, Vratislas or Spytihněv. See: I. BOHÁČOVÁ, *Stará Boleslav v raně středověkém přemyslovském státě*, in: I. BOHÁČOVÁ (ed.), *Mediaevalia Archeologica 5. Stará Boleslav. Přemyslovský hrad v raném středověku*, Praha 2003, p. 19, 472.

<sup>9</sup> M. LUTOVSKÝ, *Po stopách prvních Přemyslovců. I. Zrození státu (872–972). Od Bořivoje po Boleslava*, Praha 2006, p. 105–107.

<sup>10</sup> J. SLÁMA, *Střední Čechy v raném středověku*, p. 24.

Christianity established itself in Bohemia during the ninth century, achieving a definitive formal victory at its end. For a long time afterwards, however, the church was not to have any institution (the bishopric was only founded in 973) and no potential independent influence that would allow it to intervene significantly in the process of reshaping the social circumstances during the dynamic period of the late ninth and early tenth centuries. The presence and social weight of the church depended on the ducal family and the favour of the magnate circles, and this situation was to change only very slowly. The first representative of the church who demonstrated the possibility of social influence, both symbolic and real, and of independent actions was the second bishop of Prague during the last quarter of the tenth century. Symptomatic is not only his failure among the Bohemian elites of that time, when Adalbert (Vojtěch) left the country, having twice attempted to achieve a more consistent application of the Christian principles in the life of society and being twice rejected, but also the relative anchoring of the church as an institution in the Czech lands, as proven by the foundation of the Břevnov monastery, the awareness of the elites that the land needed a bishop and the absence of a pagan reaction during the crisis of the Bohemian state at the turn of the millennia.

It is therefore evident that the church, its representatives and institutions could not have been the direct bearers of a prospective social change motivated by Christianity, because they were simply non-existent at that time, and would lack the needed strength for a long time. The power was held by the sovereign and the magnates, who wielded the authority and strength necessary to assert their will, as well as a motivation to introduce changes in the structure of society and the rules of its functioning. Could Duke Wenceslas systematically shape the society of the Bohemian Basin in the sense of Christian values, and what might it mean for him?

## 2. Shaping society

According to the portrayals by his biographers, Wenceslas' appearance was extraordinary, surpassing his contemporaries. As regards his monkish piety and education, it need not necessarily have been a topos or the ignorance of the hagiographers who as if did not know any other type than monastic sainthood, and therefore mechanically applied it also to the character of the sovereign. We know legends about sovereigns who lacked such characteristics and yet were regarded as saints, above all as the builders of the state and instillers of Christianity, great penitents, founders of churches and monasteries and protectors of the church. The

protection of the rights of the church and care for its development represented the basic qualities of a Christian sovereign, whereas defects in their personal life, their individual piousness or prospective flaws in their marital morale were of lesser importance. Wenceslas' monastic piety does not necessarily disqualify the reports of the hagiographers. After all, Wenceslas could not have a different type of piety, as the models of layman piousness, more appropriate to his state and his type of religiously fervent person, did not exist yet. Leaving aside the complex issue of the sacral aspects of the sovereign's power, a lay sovereign could achieve sainthood as a protector of the church and a generous donor and founder, but if he wished to enter the path of personal spiritual growth and seek a deeper connection to God as an individual, he must have followed the models of clerical and, more likely, monastic piety and spirituality.

If we admit Wenceslas' education and its limits<sup>11</sup>, he was probably prepared for an ecclesiastical career, let us ask what could his prospective inspirations and models for the formation of society of his time have been. The messages from the Gospels and the New Testament were certainly among them. Already the primary community of believers was faced with the contradiction between the radical new freedom preached by Jesus (Gal 3:28) along with the joyful tidings of human dignity, and the existing social circumstances. The inertia of the social *status quo* and the eschatological horizon led Paul the Apostle rather to accept the circumstances (Rom 13, Philemon), whereas other passages of the New Testament give even a socially "revolutionary" impression (Rev 21:4). The direct influence of such peaks of scriptural reflection cannot be overestimated – the mental stereotype (it has "always" been like that and it cannot be different), as well as the necessity of ensuring the elementary functioning of society and of its material needs impacted even on the representatives of the church rather in favour of conservation of the existing situation with minor improvements and moral appeals to moderation from the lords.

Jesus' preaching is centred on the arrival of the Heavenly Kingdom. Christians are called to build, to create the Heavenly Kingdom already now on Earth<sup>12</sup>. This is all the more true for Christian rulers, who are responsible for the salvation of the souls of the subjects entrusted to them. This could well follow in the role of the ruler as the guarantor of religious conduct in pre-Christian stages of devel-

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<sup>11</sup> J. SLÁMA, *Střední Čechy v raném středověku*, p. 55–56; M. LUTOVSKÝ, *Po stopách prvních Přemyslovců*, p. 99.

<sup>12</sup> On the development of the understanding of this concept see: T. PETRÁČEK, *Man, Values and the Dynamics of Medieval Society. Anthropological Concepts of the Middle Ages in the Transcultural Perspective*, Lublin 2014, p. 24–45.

opment. In the studied period, the sovereign was a protector of the church and a guarantor of its mission even more than at the later times, when the position of the church was more autonomous. Nevertheless, neither the New Testament, nor the concept of the Heavenly Kingdom provides a ready-made *formulae* for creating a model state.

However, as people need specific instructions, various very particular texts of normative character asserted themselves. Their example can be found already in the New Testament in the form of the “household code” of Paul the Apostle. Despite the coarse and ritual character of Christianity<sup>13</sup>, people at the beginning of the tenth century had a clear notion of the “Christian order”, of what is right and acceptable and what is not. It is evidenced by penitentials and other ecclesiastical regulations, which count on alms in favour of the poor as a tool of redressing the guilt for one’s sins<sup>14</sup>. Other pre-prepared norms were offered by the albeit rudimentary, Western canon law<sup>15</sup> or by the Great Moravian law patterns (*Zákon sudnyj ljudem*). The examples of Christian mercy in the legends also provided an inspiring theoretical model.

Even at that time, we can find cases of advanced Christian reflection of the social circumstances. As an example, let us name Wenceslas’ contemporary, Bishop of Verona Rathier (ca. 890–974), who very seriously took to heart Italy’s decline after the Magyar invasions. Apart from lamenting the decadence of the morals, above all among the clergy, he regarded the uncontrolled desire of property as the main cause of the moral and social destruction. He did not question the social order and the existence of inequality at all – they were not against the divine order. He did not work with the notion of poverty, did not seek “systematic” solutions. The poor are individuals who are in distress because of fate’s disfavour and the rich have the obligation to use their affluence to help them. The church ought to play the main part in it, encouraging the rich to be generous, collecting alms and dividing them among the needy<sup>16</sup>.

Rather than reading the scriptures and other theoretical sources, inspiration could be drawn from the approaches applied in the neighbouring regions of Western Europe, which were more advanced in terms of civilisation. Wenceslas could have known them from his own experience, although we do not have cer-

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<sup>13</sup> A. ANGENENDT, *Geschichte der Religiosität im Mittelalter*, Darmstadt 2000, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> J.-L. GOGLIN, *Les misérables dans l’Occident médiéval*, Paris 1976, p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> J.A. BRUNDAGE, *Medieval Canon Law*, London – New York 1995, p. 22–32.

<sup>16</sup> J.-L. GOGLIN, *Les misérables dans l’Occident médiéval*, p. 41–43.

tainty here<sup>17</sup>. We are constantly faced with the danger of anachronism. Even if Wenceslas wished to adjust the circumstances in his Central Bohemian domain in a “more Christian way”, he could exceed the period limits of thought and action only to a certain extent. It was not a liberal society of the present time, with its emancipation ethos and assertion of minority rights. After all, even Wenceslas’ clergy, the people who could hand over their experience to him and become an inspiration for him, came from territories that did not offer a really alternative, more humane and Gospel-like attitude to socio-economic relations from today’s perspective, although many elements of social life were more civilised there from our point of view.

We can read information about manifestations of Gospel-motivated engagement in favour of socially needy groups in the earliest Bohemian legends. The chronicles mention demonstrations of social care, charity towards the weakest links of society – orphans and widows being explicitly mentioned – by prominent persons, especially bishops and female members of the ruling dynasty. Historians are of the opinion that alms and aid to the needy were at that time motivated by fear of hell, a desire to make amends for one’s sins or an effort at self-sanctification rather than by care for other people’s difficulties<sup>18</sup>. In most cases, it was a mere *epiteton ornans*, *topos*, which is to demonstrate the spiritual qualities of the deceased, but does not offer the possibility of deeper insight into the issues of the care for disadvantaged social groups. In my opinion, the first undoubted document of care for the poor is the set of activities ascribed by Cosmas to Bishop Jaromír-Gebhard (bishop 1067–1090)<sup>19</sup>. Disregarding the author’s liking of the person of the bishop, the particular description of the individual measures indicates their trustworthiness. A comparison with earlier legends suggests a certain shift in the perception, which is in accordance with the chronology postulated by Georges Duby, who puts the beginning of really efficient charity, which no longer serves only to sanctify the person of the donor, but is a really effective help to the needy, to the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Wenceslas’ travels to Saxony are considered by M. LUTOVSKÝ, *Po stopách prvních Přemyslovců*, p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> J.-L. GOGLIN, *Les misérables dans l’Occident médiéval*, p. 46; A. ANGENENDT, *Geschichte der Religiosität*, p. 48–50.

<sup>19</sup> *Cosmae pragensis Chronica Boemorum*, MGH. SRG Nova series II, B. BRETHOLZ (ed.), Berlin 1923, Liber II, ch. 42, p. 147.

<sup>20</sup> G. DUBY, *The Three Orders. Feudal Society Imagined*, Chicago – London 1980, p. 262.



### 3. Testimony of the sources

Some authors attribute a greater informational value to the list of the “model attitudes and qualities” that are ascribed to Duke Wenceslas by legends, from *Crescente fide* to Christian’s. Despite all reservations about their informational value and reliability, we will not do without using legends as sources in our case: we will either trust them more, including their individual, particular aspects, although always after a thorough examination; or less, only as an expression of a trend, a direction or an echo of something that once gave rise to the emergence of the cult of the Přemyslid duke. If we gave up the testimonies of the legends altogether, we would logically have to abandon our attempt to discuss the issues in question. We intend to follow the model of Professor Sláma, who distinguishes between the relatively “realistic” description of Wenceslas’ visit to the Boleslav castle from the “hagiographically coloured depiction” of Wenceslas’ night, private journeys to other castle churches<sup>21</sup>. With this methodological reservation and warning in mind, let us have a look at what the legends offer.

The classical lists of Christian mercy are apparently of no informational value:

He also had much mercy with orphans and was father of the lamenting and widows, and comforter of the injured; he fed the hungry, provided drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked in his clothes; he visited the ill, buried the dead, kindly welcomed guests as his own; he reverentially served priests and clerics, and was showing the path of truth to the lost. Moreover, he also manifested humility, patience, temperance and above all love<sup>22</sup>.

Other St Wenceslas legends exalt the duke using different, but very similar variants. In St Ludmila’s legend, Christian depicts equally stereotypically that she moderated the want of the poor, fed the hungry, refreshed the thirsty and provided clothing to foreigners and the miserable<sup>23</sup>. In all cases, these are deeds of Christian mercy that will not help us in any way.

Apart from these traditional lists of merciful deeds, we can find some specific features, suspicious from the viewpoint of the performance of the sovereign’s power, such as avoidance of trials (with an evidently confusing reference to the Gospel

<sup>21</sup> J. SLÁMA, *Střední Čechy v raném středověku*, p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> *Nejstarší legendy přemyslovských Čech*, O. KRÁLÍK (ed.), Praha 1969, p. 30.

<sup>23</sup> *Legenda Christiani. Vita et passio sancti Wenceslai et sancte Ludmille ave eius*, J. LUDVÍKOVSKÝ (ed.), Pragae 1978, ch. 3, 26.



of Luke) and of the obligation to condemn to death, or the pulling down of jails and gallows<sup>24</sup>. What could the pulling down of jails and gallows have meant in reality? Perhaps the abandoning of the sharp violent methods of assertion of the sovereign's authority that had accompanied the presumed initiatory social disciplining of the rural population, which Wenceslas could afford thanks to certain stabilisation of power in the territories subjected to the Přemyslid authority? It quite certainly does not mean denial and abolition of capital punishment. However, it may express Wenceslas' effort to avoid bloodshed. This does correspond to a monastic and perhaps also authentically Christian way of thinking, but it could hardly be brought into accord with the natural obligations of a ruler such as punishing criminals and keeping order for the public good.

On the contrary, the absolutely fundamental virtues of a Christian ruler of that time include assuring the material needs of his retinue or generosity towards clerics, and we should not neglect the emphasised respect to proprietary rights, that "he did not deprive anyone in the world of anything by violence or trickery"<sup>25</sup>. This praise of moderation refers to two sources. The first of them is the influence of the church and its concept of limited power. Even a powerful ruler who dominates the power structure and whose rivals do not pose a threat will be accountable to the supreme power at the hour of his death at the latest. Even he must therefore rule justly and not misuse his dominant position. The praise itself, however, demonstrates that the sovereigns often succumbed to this temptation, and the legend acts here, in didactic function, as a model for future rulers. The other source is a reflection, built in the traditional culture, to protect tradition and established rights, which are not to be violated; on the contrary, the sovereign is entrusted with protecting them as the buttresses of stability and order. Both these attitudes lead to respect towards tradition and the time-tested complexity of the rules of coexistence that cannot be changed unilaterally and unjustly, i.e. without balancing the benefits and the losses.

The tension between Wenceslas' piety and the obligations of the Christian ruler in *Crescente fide* are apparently reflected by *Gumpold's legend*:

However, he feared that he would have to pay for the faults of the people entrusted to him if he did not use the law [that is] adequate to the civil sphere. However, not racking his brains overlong, he smartly chose the right path, neither neglecting what

<sup>24</sup> *Crescente fide*, in: *Fontes Rerum Bohemicarum* I, J. EMLER (ed.), Praha 1873, p. 183; *Nejstarší legendy přemyslovských Čech*, p. 30.

<sup>25</sup> *Crescente fide*, in: FRB I, p. 183, aslo *Legenda Christiani*, ch. 6, 56.

he was supposed to perform within his secular obligations, nor having to fear for the future that he would neglect anything due to a craving for heavenly affairs. Put simply: dwelling in a pleasant and very modest palace, he endeavoured to soften the provisions of laws by his ducal instruction for the general benefit of both the citizens and his retinue<sup>26</sup>.

Gumpold retains the information about his escapes from trials whenever a capital judgement was imminent, and elaborates further on his lenient treatment of the guilty.

Yet violence itself in service to the good seems to be in essence absolutely acceptable also to the duke, as is recorded in the legend *Crescente fide*:

He approached peaceful people kindly; however, when he found out of people who were bullies, or wandering without reason, drinking in taverns and falling away from Christianity, he immediately had them tied with their bellies to a table and strictly lashed with many whips<sup>27</sup>.

The duke who seemed to be so hesitant in the performance of his judicial powers suddenly manifests unexpected sternness and forcefulness. Although this reflection may go too far, it seems as if his priorities were different, as if instead of power chastising the rural population aimed at the fulfilment of their obligations towards the ducal apparatus, he focused his attention on pushing through the moral and social norms of Christian society.

Christian records Wenceslas' habit: during the greatest Christian holidays, on Easter and Pentecost Saturdays, when mass baptisms took place, he purchased young slaves on the market and had them baptised if there were lack of catechumens ready for baptism<sup>28</sup>. This illustrates well the period-conditioned limits of this, at first glance undeniable, act of Christian mercy – redemption of slaves. Wenceslas' primary motivation was to secure complete liturgical celebrations of the holidays, rather than care for young pagan captives who had been driven by the merchants to the Prague marketplace. Could these new Christians return to their homes

<sup>26</sup> Gumpold, *Vita Wenceslai*, in: FRB I, p. 149; *Nejstarší legendy přemyslovských Čech*, p. 39.

<sup>27</sup> *Crescente fide*, p. 186; *Nejstarší legendy přemyslovských Čech*, p. 32; also Gumpold, *Vita Wenceslai*, p. 151; *Nejstarší legendy přemyslovských Čech*, p. 41.

<sup>28</sup> *Legenda Christiani*, c. 6, pp. 66, 68: *Sed et sacrosanctis diebus, pasche dico et penthecostes sabbatis, quando baptisma generale celebrari solet in sancta Dei ecclesia, ut nichil ex hiis, que Deo sunt, sibi deesset, si parvuli scrutiniurum tempore non inveniebantur; mittebat ad forum et pueros, quotquot venales manus vendetis attulerat, pro solius Dei amore sibi emebat et ita deitatis operi operam beatus spiritus dans, numquam quidquam consuetudini divine deesse sufferebat.*

as freemen? We do not know, but it is much more likely that after their baptism they were assigned places at the ducal manorial farm estate as serfs and continued belonging to the duke. After all, no one asked the slaves themselves whether or not they wished to accept baptism, and such a question evidently did not even occur to anyone. Yet we can presume that the socio-economical position of these catechumens improved thanks to Wenceslas' doings, although they were "purchased" rather than "redeemed". The duke did not intend at all to cancel relationships of individual non-freedom: elsewhere in the legend, he donates slaves to clerics, a deed that is assessed positively<sup>29</sup>.

An interesting contradiction can be found in St Wenceslas legend concerning the assessment of physical, agricultural work. There is a traditional, ancient notion, shared also in this period, that agricultural work in itself is in a certain respect incompatible with full freedom<sup>30</sup> and that physical work is not worthy of a free man. The hagiographer, Christian, seemingly confirms it by stating that God punished some of the men who had participated in murdering Wenceslas by death, while letting others live, but they had to earn their living with their own hands as punishment<sup>31</sup>. In another place, he says that Wenceslas harvested grain and grapes from fields and vineyards, making bread and wine from them himself with his own hands<sup>32</sup>. Even if we passed over the extreme unlikeliness of such doings of the duke, it would only be a seeming contradiction. Wenceslas did not work for his own living – the preparation of bread and wine for the celebration of the liturgy was his personal contribution to the dignified celebration of the service and, at the same time, a tool and form of sanctification.

#### 4. Reasons to assassinate the Duke?

Finally, let us ask: Did Duke Wenceslas have any scope at all to model, reshape the society of his time based on the principles of the Gospels? Was it possible at that time? Examples of thought-out intervention in the functioning of society are contained for example in the efforts of Charlemagne. He, however, had a relatively

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<sup>29</sup> The notion *mancipium* is rarely documented in the Bohemian sources (*auri vel argenti copiam, crusinas mancipiaque vel vestimenta*) – *Legenda Christiani*, c. 6, pp. 60, 68.

<sup>30</sup> M. BLOCH, *A contribution towards a comparative history of European Societies*, in: M. BLOCH (ed.), *Land and Work in medieval Europe. Selected papers*, Berkeley – Los Angeles 1967, p. 62.

<sup>31</sup> *Si qui vero supersunt, stipendiorum sibi victum manibus queritant propriis*. *Legenda Christiani*, c. 8, p. 76.

<sup>32</sup> *Legenda Christiani*, c. 6, p. 58.

stable society, institutions and apparatus at his disposal to implement his will. It is impossible to push through certain norms of conduct, rules or laws from ideological positions without the existence of an ideological and repressive apparatus that efficiently asserts the new norms and oversees their application.

Despite all the transformations of the social organisation, history manifests itself as a dialectic game of balancing and pushing various interests in which each player strives to maximise their benefits, to assert their interests as much as possible. Never, not even in the toughest regimes, is an absolute dictate unilaterally forced by the stronger party in the power struggle. This does not mean, however, that power and violence were not used to push through social transformations, especially during the creation of the Bohemian state in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. In Bohemian history, we have it documented for example by the existence of “resettlement villages”, in which the inhabitants are purposefully settled at a significant distance from their original community. The main motivation was apparently not the colonisation aspect, but an effort to isolate them from their original bonds – such uprooting reduced the potential of a prospective revolt and increased their dependence on the ducal apparatus<sup>33</sup>.

Each sovereign had to act circumspectly during these operations, because he had to overcome an obstacle in the form of the pre-modern understanding of what is just, right and true as things that had been here from times immemorial, in connection with distrust towards innovations in an agrarian society<sup>34</sup>. A ruler who systematically or radially exceeded the limits met with hard resistance, possibly of different forms. In the extreme case it might even include turning for help to a neighbouring ruler, as it is recorded of 857, when the Frankish armies were invited against a duke by the name “Slavitah”, who ruled his people unjustly<sup>35</sup>.

Duke Wenceslas had a warrior retinue, the beginnings of a castle organisation and a large number of clergy at his disposal as the basis of power inherited from his ancestors. He could prepare the reshaping of Bohemian society by gradually building institutions that are part of Christian civilisation and culture. There is no reason to question the reliability of the legends that inform about the arrival of more clergy from abroad and their support by Wenceslas. Yet, we should be careful when assessing the influence of the clergy as the bearers of the social change in the sense of the application of more humane, more Christian attitudes of the manorial lords towards their serfs or farmers.

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<sup>33</sup> P. CHARVÁT, *Zrod českého státu*, p. 135.

<sup>34</sup> J. PETRÁŇ, L. PETRÁŇOVÁ, *Rolník v evropské tradiční kultuře*, Praha 2000, p. 83.

<sup>35</sup> Literally: *tyrannidam exercebat*. Cf. P. CHARVÁT, *Zrod českého státu*, p. 136.

Symbolic gestures of Christian thought and actions represent a second moment. According to a remarkable theory by Petr Charvát, Duke Wenceslas was the first to have the courage to build a Christian shrine at the extraordinarily sensitive and symbolically important place of Prague Castle, thus symbolically and definitively sealing the victory of Christianity. Moreover, the church was built in a way that emphasised relation to Rome and the imperial shrine in Aachen<sup>36</sup>, and the duke asked King Henry I directly for the most valuable treasure: relics of St Vitus<sup>37</sup>. The construction of more churches at other Přemyslid castles<sup>38</sup> and the individual deeds of Christian mercy are in the same category. It enabled Wenceslas to permanently adapt the circumstances in his domain using a more Christian ethos influenced by the societies of Saxony or Bavaria.

The time of transformations and social motion offers the possibility to enter into the processes and direct them. If the basic formation of social circumstances of the Central Bohemian Přemyslid domain had been carried out by Duke Spytihněv, Wenceslas might indeed have played rather the part of a moderator of the original sharpness of the new regime, precisely as the Wenceslas legends suggest it. In a similar manner, Boleslas' cruelty, emphasised by the hagiographers, might have been related to the return to a sharp course after the period of Wenceslas' less consistent enforcement of the relatively new forms of coexistence in the name of Christian mercy. Knowing that we are entering onto very thin ice, can we not see a possible cause of his murder here? Wenceslas' effort to apply norms without demonstrative brutality, motivated by his personal religious zeal, threatened to destabilise the recently established and not yet consolidated situation.

The sovereign was significantly limited by his social role: his contemporaries expected a certain type of conduct from him, and he was therefore not allowed to fail repeatedly and for a long time. Permanent disagreement was followed by a loss of authority and deposition. Was this precisely what happened in the case of Duke Wenceslas? Leaving aside the unjustified theory that a mere coincidence took place at Boleslav, how far did Wenceslas have to divert from those around him, from the Bohemian magnates, before they dared to raise their hands against him in a deed that was basically accepted by their contemporaries? Can we understand the murder of Duchess Ludmila and the death of Duke Wenceslas as a protest aimed against rapid progress of Christianization and the assertion of new, Christian social norms at the expense of the consistent and strong exercise of state power?

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<sup>36</sup> P. CHARVÁT, *Zrod českého státu*, p. 137–138, 142–145, 183–184.

<sup>37</sup> A. ANGENENDT, *Geschichte der Religiosität*, p. 126–127.

<sup>38</sup> M. LUTOVSKÝ, *Po stopách prvních Přemyslovců*, p. 107, 114.

Although Duke Spytihněv was apparently the builder of the Central Bohemian domain and Boleslas the unifier of the Bohemian state, Duke Wenceslas represents inspiration, ethos and a permanent challenge. In history, we repeatedly encounter the phenomenon when the original bearer of an idea is rejected along with it, but their idea is accepted after some time and pushed through precisely by those who originally suppressed it. According to the hagiographers, Duke Wenceslas devoted his deeds as the head of the Přemyslid polity to building a Christian state following the model of the neighbouring regions, Saxony and Bavaria. The translation of his remains testify to an intentional continuation in his work; glorification came where withholding would have been expected, “natural”. The claiming of allegiance to his legacy is not psychologically impossible; on the contrary, it suggests a certain catharsis of the culprits. A confessed and forgiven guilt may bring the good which cannot take the original loss away, but can make up for it many times. The changes asserted by the Boleslauses in the tenth century needed a religious sanction, a guarantor, an authority that would facilitate their assertion and acceptance. The cult of the saint duke Wenceslas and his legacy could provide it.

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**Abstract:** In this paper the author analyses sources of the tenth century to reconstruct the social history of Bohemian territory in a period of transition towards a centralised state organisation and develops a new theory on the possible reasons for the assassination of Duke Wenceslaus in the year 935.

**Keywords:** Duke Wenceslaus, Bohemia, 10<sup>th</sup> Century, history.

**Streszczenie:** Książę Waclaw i możliwe powody jego zamordowania w kontekście przemian społecznych w środkowych Czechach w pierwszym trymestrze X wieku. Autor analizuje źródła z X w. w celu zrekonstruowania historii społecznej Czech w okresie przemian w kierunku zcentralizowanej organizacji państwa i rozwija nową teorię dotyczącą możliwych powodów zamordowania księcia Waclawa w 935 r.

**Słowa kluczowe:** książę Waclaw, Czechy, X wiek, historia.