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Foreword

Since the earliest times, religion, philosophy, and also art have helped humans come to terms with the inevitable reality of death. Awareness of one's own mortality and physical death, as well as struggle to come to terms with this inevitable fact, is part of *loci communes* of all religions and cultures throughout the human past. It is an anthropological constant; a truly existential phenomenon evoking questions that people have sought since the earliest periods; in the Middle Ages as well as today: Is human life in this world only a futile episode followed by the demise of both the body and mind, or is it, seen through the eyes of medieval mystics, a thorny road, a "valley of tears," and a necessary price that the soul imprisoned in the mortal human body needs to pay to be eventually united with the highest being?

The ensuing book does not seek to answer the fundamental questions of human existence, life, and death. Instead, it attempts to outline the perception and presentation of death in Czech late medieval painting in the broadest possible context. So far, with the exception of general studies on contemporary epigraphy and tombstones, detailed studies on death in the context of the Czech lands are missing.[1]

For this reason, the ensuing chapters predominantly focus on mural paintings and book illuminations. These sources represent the best way to explore both the liturgical and pastoral context since the motifs that depict either personified Death or the dead human body are commonly present. This book should thus be understood as the first attempt at a more complex study of the iconography of personified Death and its visual representation in Czech medieval fine arts. It is also intended to serve as a possible inspiration for further research.

Unfortunately, no visual representations of personified Death remained preserved in Czech art until the 1340s. But it is more than interesting that

over the ensuing decades of the fourteenth century, the Czech lands quickly make up for this handicap, and we encounter all fundamental iconographic themes that appear in high medieval art, particularly in Italy and France. These include the Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead and a unique depiction of the Triumph of Death with Death riding a horse. It appears that the Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead in particular was a popular theme in Bohemian monastic environment. Only four examples of this iconography remained preserved in the Czech lands. Nonetheless, despite great losses of original art objects, the preserved torso of the Legend in the church of St Bartholomew in Kočí and the popularity of this theme among the members of the Luxembourg Family suggest that images of the Legend were present in parish churches and book illuminations. In the context of Central European art, the preserved painting of the Triumph of Death in the Broumov charnel house is exceptional. Its unique presence in Czech art also needs to be linked to the pastoral activities of the Benedictine order. The subject of death and the Four Last Things naturally played a great role in late medieval religious practice. In the period of pastoral literature, we encounter unique iconographic concepts connecting macabre iconography with contemporary theology of sin as part of the concept of the so-called good death (*mors bona*).

Late medieval apocalyptic atmosphere substantially sharpened the perception of death in the context of the anticipated end of the world. In the Czech Lands, as elsewhere, these sentiments enjoyed their renaissance both in the pre-Hussite period and with the Hussite theologians who emphasized the moral renewal of society, the church, as well as the moral responsibility of every Christian for their own sins. It is hardly a coincidence that one of the earliest preserved Dances of Death in European book illumination appears in the Utraquist environment. It provides evidence of both confessional neutrality of the theme and, in particular, its universal and original utilization within a general ethical discourse during an uneasy time. The ensuing pages can hardly reveal the face of medieval death. What follows is only a humble attempt since much remains literally hidden or appears only in vague contours. Only one thing is certain: the anxiety of death and dying today is as it was in the late Middle Ages.

NOTE

1. Several partial studies focus on the depiction of death in Czech art: Karel Stejskal, Obrazy smrti ve výtvarném umění a jejich divadelní inspirace, *Miscellanea oddělení rukopisů a vzácných tisků*, vol. 4, 1987, pp. 303–334 (STEJSKAL 1987). Numerous studies exist on medieval epigraphy, and late medieval tombstones where

even in the Czech context those tombstones dated to the beginning of the sixteenth century depict the *transi*, portraying a statue or relief of the decaying body of deceased (the tomb of Jan Hasištejnský of Lobkowicz by Ulrich Creutz in the Kadaň Franciscan monastery), published in *Epigraphica et Sepulcralia*. Jan Chlíbec, Náhrobek Jana Hasištejnského z Lobkovic a místo pozdně gotické sepulkrální plastiky ve františkánských klášterních kostelech, *Umění* XLIV, 1996, pp. 235–244; Idem – Jiří Roháček, *Sepulkrální skulptura jagellonského období v Čechách,* Prague: Artefactum, 2011 (revised edition in English *Figure and Lettering. Sepulchral Sculpture of the Jagiellonian Period in Bohemia*, Prague: Artefactum, 2014); Hana Myslivečková, *Mors ultima linea rerum*, Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2013.

DEATH WITHOUT DEATH

In the midst of life we are in death
Of whom may we seek for succor,
But of thee, O Lord,
Who for our sins
art justly displeased…
Deliver us not into the bitter pains of eternal death!

(Antiphon *Media vita in morte sumus*)

Introduction

The Four Last Things: Dying and Death in the Middle Ages

Cave cave deus videt (Beware, beware, God is watching). These were the words Hieronymus Bosch inscribed underneath the half figure of Man of Sorrows standing in the pupil of the symbolic Eye of God that makes up the center of his famous panel *Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things*.[1] The Eye's iris is made up of segments depicting scenes of the seven deadly sins, the corners of the table show the so-called *quattuor novissima*—Four Last Things: the Last Judgment, hell, paradise, and death, represented by a scene capturing the moment of the sinner's death. The sinner is dying on the deathbed surrounded by the family with the priest administering the sacrament of viaticum that also included confession and penance. The scene is nothing but a depiction of the ideal, so-called good death (*mors bona*); the death that was carefully anticipated and prepared for. Daily preparation for death was one of the fundamental themes of late medieval homiletics and was also reflected in contemporary art.

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Europe experienced times of increased and intensely experienced fear of death.[2] Anxiety of the bad, unexpected, and improvised death *(mors mala, mors improvisa),* leading to eternal damnation was one of the fundamental aspects of late medieval mentality and social experience. But the late medieval person's perception and understanding of death fundamentally differed from our reserved relationship to death, which is usually reduced to a fear of dying and gradual and painful physical demise, and so carefully forced out from our daily lives in the postindustrial society. As Norbert Elias succinctly put it, *The social problem of death is especially difficult to solve because the living find it hard to identify with the dying.*[3] One's relationship to dying and coming to terms with the realization that life is finite is an issue today as it was in the Middle Ages. However,

medieval approach substantially differed from modern society's strategy that for the most part subconsciously ignores or intentionally strives for, to use Phillipe Ariès's words, *Forbidden Death.*[4]

Current pop-culture, especially, with its visual presentation of death that greatly reflects the modern person's withdrawal from awareness of their own mortality, pushes death away to the sphere of sci-fi or fantasy. As if aging, dying, and death did not form part of our world, life, and its reality. Death and old age, accompanied by diminishing physical and mental strength disturbingly erode the cult of beauty, youth, and never slowing productivity of anything, upgraded by current technological progress. How substantially different is the medieval society's approach of the "culture of death," poignantly expressed by the text of the antiphony *Media vita in morte sumus (In the midst of life we are in death).*

Unlike us, the medieval person did not live isolated from dying. Worlds of the living and the dead were not separated by a surgically precise and perfectly sterile incisions but were intertwined both on the level of imagination and everyday reality. That is why death was perceived as part of the world of the living. In medieval imagination, death has not only a face but also human characteristics: it can be good or bad, just, wise, cynical, or lewd; it acts, speaks, discusses, and, toward the very end of the Middle Ages, also acts as aggressively as the living in whose lives death actively and dramatically intervenes. Death represents a universal and strong theme in the whole medieval Europe due to the ability to transcend the purely personal, individual experience of losing a close person and their commemoration to the public and collective, community sphere, and, when concerning death of the sovereign, also the political and historical sphere. *Ars moriendi*—the art of dying and the so-called Four Last Things thus became integral part of the medieval moral discourse, codified in the sacramental practice of the then church.[5]

Medieval practice differentiated between the so-called first death, that is, the physical death (the extinction of the physical body), and the second death, the spiritual (the eschatological death), which is a sort of death without death for the sinful soul never dies but eternally suffers in purgatory, or reunites with the body in hell following the Last Judgment. In hell, death is—to use the words of late medieval homiletics—*always alive*.[6] Whereas nobody can escape the physical death, as it is the result of original sin, the eschatological death was perceived as an extreme and final punishment for committed deadly sins that remained unpunished in the moment of physical death, that is, without effective penance. Medieval preachers often cautioned Christians not to leave the sacrament of penance until the deathbed as was common and criticized practice that the Fourth Lateran Council attempted to overturn by ordering a mandatory annual confession as a condition for and integral part of perfect penance.[7]

The dualistic perception of death logically reflected a complex, ambivalent, and often antagonistic relationship between the body and the soul, which late medieval literature characteristically expressed by the dispute between the soul and the body.[8] The extinction of the physical body was the parallel to the inevitable extinction of the sinful world that will be as cruel, finite, and sudden as the death of the human being. It is not accidental that death is compared to the thief *who watches over us*.[9] Similarly, the Judgment Day will come like *the thief comes at night.*[10] *Memento mori*—the reminder of the physical extinction, as well as the fear of eschatological end, were permanently present in late medieval everyday life and liturgy.

The deceased were remembered during masses, on Ash Wednesday, the priest placed ashes on the heads of Christians to the words *you are dust and to dust you shall return*. Christians largely walked to the church through the graveyard that formed inseparable part of medieval urban landscape, and on the graveyard walls or in the charnel house they could see, in addition to human remains laying scattered everywhere, some of *memento mori* images.[11] These included the Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead or Danse Macabre with cadavers pulling into the whirl of dance figures representing all societal classes—the pope, emperor, as well as beggar or a child, reminding the living that *what we are now you will be*! For a person living in pretty much a caste society and only stepping out of one's own class with great difficulties, death represented the only truly just phenomenon in life. All are equal in death for all not only possess the same body that succumbs to destruction and decay after death but also have the same chance at salvation of the soul.

Fascination with the macabrosity of the physical decay, extensively described in high and late medieval literature and fine arts, is one of the typical characteristics of the then culture of death.[12] One of the aspects that arguably added to the phenomenon was the epidemic of plague, the so-called Black Death that broke out in Europe in 1347.[13] It is estimated that approximately 70 million inhabitants of the old world died, with some regions remaining completely depopulated for a long time. Practically, every generation living in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries experienced the plague epidemic that was returning to medieval towns and villages with frightening regularity. Periodically recurring epidemics of plague bore devastating social, economic, as well as psychological and emotional consequences, accompanied by expressions that were frequently oscillating between pessimistic fatalism, excessive forms of piety, and frenetic hedonism.

Contemporary fine arts, literature, and funeral liturgy clearly illustrate the helplessness and anxiety that Death scything everyone without difference left in people, where the plague frightened its victims not only by the external characteristics that turn the dying into a malodorous, black living cadaver

covered in sores. It was also the speed and suddenness with which the sick were dying, often without being able to receive the last rites or other ritualized acts that were essential prerequisites of the so-called good death. The plague was a carrier of the physical death, both social and eschatological—the still alive were excluded from the then society (the dying were often buried into mass graves along with the dead). It was the feared *mors improvisa*—the death without the right rituals, sacraments, and proper funeral, amidst societal decay caused by the flight of the ruling elites and clergy from the affected localities and then accompanied by otherwise unthinkable social isolation of the dying. It is not surprising that such a dramatic collapse of the world order affected the medieval person as the preliminary image of the Apocalypse perfectly visualized by the renowned painting of the Triumph of Death in Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo from around 1446.[14]

Dying and death were understood to be the last conscious things of human. The so-called good death predominantly meant death that was expected when one was fully conscious, awaiting it (this was, as we shall see later, a very important moment of the *ars moriendi*). One could make advance preparations for the so-called good death and so ensure the salvation of one's soul. In the late Middle Ages, to reach the good, or to use Phillipe Ariès's words *tamed death*[15] was perceived as an art that needed to be learned. Aside from resurrection faith, which was taken for granted, the major prerequisite of the good death was a proper life according to the Gospel and the church teaching, as well as preparation for the moment of death. The preparation was preceded by the writing of a testament that, in fact, represented a continuation of the dying person's confession. Pious testaments were valid legal documents and the priest certified their authenticity before witnesses present by the deathbed of the dying. The testaments often included bequests to religious foundation or gift.[16] Reminders of pious acts performed by the dying literary on the deathbed were part of penance and posthumous commemorative rituals. Most important of these was the Requiem Mass that made the deceased present symbolically and repeatedly by commemorating them (usually on the day of the anniversary of their death), but simultaneously shortening the time their soul suffered in purgatory.

While the dying lay on the deathbed, the priest was called to hear the confession, grant absolution, and give appropriate penance. The dying received one last Holy Communion—exceptionally the dying could receive both the Lord's body and blood—and with a burning candle in the right hand and in prayers while looking at crucified Christ, the dying peacefully awaited death. In the meantime, the priest performed the last rites that began with the prayer for pain relief and restoration of health. Then the priest anointed the dying with sanctified oil, making the sign of the cross on the head, eyes, ears, nose, throat, chest, shoulders, and limbs. Those who were present were praying the

seven penitential psalms beginning with Psalm 130 that starts with the words *De profundis* . . .[17] In the moment of death, the soul of the dying leaves its material dwelling and awaits the Last Judgment when it will be reunited with its restored body so it can be judged by Christ who will ultimately decide its fate.

The remaining question that the church only solved with an official doctrine during the 1330s was the existence of the so-called particular or personal judgment that occurred in the moment of the Christian's death. The new dogma of *iudicium duplex* should also moderate the insecurity regarding the exact location of the soul after its separation from the body until the Last Judgment when it will be reunited with its restored body.[18] This was closely related to the question of purgatory, probed by theologians from the beginning of the belief in its existence, first documented in twelfth-century sources. The official dogmatization of purgatory by the Council of Lyon in 1274 thus merely legitimized the unofficial belief in the three-degree topography of the other world consisting of hell, purgatory, and heaven. Death, the Last Judgment, hell, and heaven were terms related to Christian eschatology. In the high and late Middle Ages, Christians were to be familiar with these concepts, albeit only in the sense of being able to list the terms, as part of their minimum catechetic knowledge. These are also popular themes of late medieval iconography—with the Last Judgment being frequent in painting and sculpture from the eleventh century, similarly to Hell whose concrete topography and punishment imposed on sinners, occupied the minds and imaginations of not only medieval artists but also theologians and mystics.

As we shall see in the following chapters, unlike the images of Last Judgment, Hell, and Heaven, the depiction of Death in late medieval art is more uncommon and complicated, but all the more iconographically diverse. Commissioners and their artists naturally strove to visualize death in all of her semantic accents and contexts. The so-called Four Last Things thus became things of primary importance in medieval culture since theologians believed that the uncertain question of salvation of the soul and its posthumous fate was to occupy the Christian's mind at all times. *Memento mori* was the imperative. Its fulfillment was systematically perceived as part of life according to the Gospel (*vita activa*), the permanent struggle against sin and, not least, path to spiritual perfection.

NOTES

1. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, around 1505. For a more recent discussion of the painting, see Laura D. Gelfand, Social Status and Sin: Reading Bosch's Prado Seven Deadly Sins and Four Last Things Painting, in Richard Newhauser (ed.),

The Seven Deadly Sins: From Communities to Individuals, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007, pp. 229–56.

2. See an excellent study by Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of the Western Guilt Culture, 13th–18th Centuries*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991 (DELUMEAU 1991).

3. Norbert Elias, *The Loneliness of the Dying*, New York: Blackwell, 1985, p. 3.

4. Phillipe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present*, London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1974, pp. 85–107 (ARIÈS 1974); Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death over the Last One Thousand Years*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981 (ARIÈS 1981).

5. The so-called indulgence images (Ablasbilder), in particular, were much criticized. Among the most popular were indulgence woodcuts with the motif of the Mass of St Gregory. The image worked outside space and time, that is, both retroactively (it was possible to pray to it for the dead) and as part of the "economy of the other world," as an investment in the future where it was possible to write off a given number of years in purgatory in exchange for invested financial resources and prayers. Prayers to these images were part of penance. For more on the purpose of these images see, for example, Henk van OS, *The Art of Devotion in the Late Middle Ages in Europe 1300–1500*, Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1994, pp. 112–114; WEHRLI-JOHNS 1994, p. 53.

6. Quoted from an anonymous treatise *Zrcadlo o posledních věcech člověka* (Mirror of the Four Last Things) included in the Jena codex in fol. 103r–107r. Prague, Knihovna Národního muzea, IV B 24, fol. 106r. HOMOLKOVÁ, STUDNIČKOVÁ, and MUTLOVÁ 2009, p. 197.

7. See *Omnis utriusque sexus* ordering the Christians *who had reached the age of reason to confess their sins at least once a year to their priest or, with his permission to other priest* . . . Quoted according to Decr. 21: *Omnis utriusque sexus fidelis, postquam ad annos discretionis pervenerit, omnia sua solus peccata confiteatur fideliter, saltem semel in anno, proprio sacerdoti, et injunctam sibi poenitentiam studeat pro viribus adimplere, suscipiens reverenter ad minus in Pascha eucharistiae sacramentum* . . . Quoted and translated according to SCHROEDER 1937, I., p. 570. More extensively on new modus confitendi and its reflection in the art of the High Middle Ages, KUMLER 2011, pp. 45–101.

8. Cf. BOSSY 1976; HAAS 1989, pp. 35–42; Pietro Boitani and Anna Torti (eds.), *The Body and Soul in Medieval Literature*, Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1999.

9. *O nebezpečném času smrti* (On the Dangerous Time of Death), see JAKOBSON 2002, p. 107.

10. 1. Tes. 5:2.

11. Cf. BINSKI 1996, pp. 29–55.

12. Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, New York: Dover Publications, 1999, pp. 134–46.

13. BINSKI 1996, pp. 126–134; Geoffrey J. Marks, *The Medieval Plague: The Black Death of the Middle Ages*, New York: Garden City, 1971.

14. Jane Bridgeman, The Palermo Triumph of Death, *The Burlington Magazine* 117, 1975, pp. 478–484; VÖSLER 2001, pp. 96–99.

15. ARIÈS 1974, pp. 1–25.

16. Cf. Kateřina Jíšová, Spása duše a očistec u novoměstských měšťanů. K religiozitě novoměstského měšťanstva v pozdním středověku, in: DOLEŽALOVÁ—NOVOTNÝ 2004, pp. 253–268; Eadem and Eva Doležalová (eds.), *Pozdně středověké testamenty v českých městech. Prameny, metodologie a formy využití*, Prague: Scriptorium, 2006.

17. *Out of depth I cry to you, Lord; Lord hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?* (Psalm 130:1–3)

18. For more on the theological controversies preceding 1336, see BYNUM 1995, pp. 283–91. For more on particular judgment, see JEZLER 1994b, pp. 17–22.

FACE OF DEATH

Notice everyone and look at this sad and very desolating image with a scythe and girded by a sheet . . . when the Master saw this image, as he writes, overpowered by the great fear he fell on the ground speechless.

Stephen of Český Krumlov, *Horažďovice Town Law Book*, 1495