

The Devil's Bible - Codex Gigas

The Secrets of the World's Largest Book

At the beginning of the 13th century, a remarkable literary work was created in Bohemia. In past ages, it was rightfully dubbed the Devil's Bible, Codex Gigas, Liber Pergrandis or Gigas Librorum. The first mention of the Devil's Bible comes from the year 1295, but it is supposed



that the manuscript is about 65 years older. The book was owned by a small Benedictine monastery of Podlažice near Chrudim, most likely around 1229. However, no records about its origin, author or reason for writing it have been preserved.



The Largest Manuscript Book of the World

The book is unusually large; it is thus no wonder that it was compared to the Seven Wonders of the World in the Middle Ages. It is about 900 mm tall, 505 mm wide and weighs an awesome 75 kilograms. It contains 312 parchment folios, hence 624 pages. It is reckoned that the skin of about 160 animals was necessary to acquire the writing material. What is fascinating is the unity of the book, concord of the writing and initial letters, harmony of the overall composition and individual details; all the texts are still legible even today. All the indications are that it was a life work of one person. Historians estimate that the scribe in question must have conceivably spent as many as twenty years on such a monumental work.



A Work of the Devil

The existence of the book is connected with a legend about the Devil, according to which it was also given its popular name – the Devil's Bible, and the very depiction of the devil is its integral part.

The legend tells of a monk who once lived in the east of the Czech kingdom, in the monastery of Podlažice, and was sentenced to be walled up alive for his sinful deed.

In order to avoid the punishment, he promised to write the largest book that the world had ever seen in a single night. Yet already at midnight he realised that he could not finish it in time. Therefore, he called upon the devil for help.

The legend has it that the monk drew the image of the devil into the book out of his gratitude. However, even though he escaped the punishment, his life turned to hell.

Despite the Satanic legend, the Codex was never condemned by the Inquisition but, on the contrary, it became the focus of interest of scholars and lovers of art and curiosities.

What Does the Manuscript Contain?

The book is written in Latin and contains fourteen texts of different character. The actual text begins with the Bible – the Old Testament, followed by texts of varying subject matter. One of these is the so-called Penitential – a manual for priests with a list of sins and appropriate ways of atonement. And exactly here, on page 290 recto, the most extraordinary thing can be found – an almost half-a-metre-tall colour figure of the devil is depicted here. Several pages that follow are dark and gloomy both in their appearance and in their content. They contain medical incantations to drive out falling sickness, ague or to detect a thief. This chapter is followed by the most valuable document – The Chronicle of Bohemia (*Chronica Bohemorum*) by the Dean of the Prague Chapter Cosmas (1045-1125). This copy is one of the oldest and best. At the very end, there is a list of the days on which Easter would fall over the next few years.



About the Exhibition

The National Library of the Czech Republic, in conjunction with the National Library of Sweden, is preparing an exhibition where the original Devil's Bible will be presented to the public.

The exhibition will be open to the public

on 20th September 2007 and will continue until 9th March 2008.

Apart from the original of the rare manuscript itself, the visitor will also have the opportunity to become better acquainted with the content of this largest mediaeval book and follow its dramatic journey through the centuries. The first place connected with the existence of this manuscript is the monastery in Podlažice near Chrudim, from which the book travelled to Sedlec near Kutná Hora having been pawned to the Cistercians there. From Sedlec, the pledge was redeemed in 1295 by the abbot Pavel Bavor for the library of the monastery in Břevnov, where it became an object of interest of the Bishop of Prague Gregory (Řehoř Zajíc of Valdek) and other scholars of that time. In May 1420, Taborites together with Praguers plundered, burnt and damaged the Břevnov monastery. During the storms of the Hussite Wars, however, the Benedictines of Břevnov took refuge in the fortified monastery in Broumov taking with them a number of valuable objects, including the Devil's Bible. The book was vigilantly guarded in the monastery until it passed to the famous collections of Rudolph II. From there at the end of the Thirty Years' War, it was carried off as a particularly valued part of the war booty to Sweden.

The exhibition will take place in both Baroque Corridors of the Klementinum Gallery, and the loaned Devil's Bible will be on display in a new special vault.

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