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The episode of the murder of Hungarian King Ladislas IV's officer in the *Chronicle of Spišska Sobota* and its significance

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Introduction

Written around 1460, the *Chronicle of Spišska Sobota* is a rather short narrative in *Ostmitteldeutsch* which relates in a somewhat abbreviated form the history of the Kingdom of Hungary from the end of the tenth century, with a special emphasis on the past of the German- speaking communities of the Spiš (in Hungarian *Szépes*) region where it was created. Among information concerning local history, the chronicler relates briefly the murder of an officer of the Hungarian King Ladislas IV (1272–1290):

> Czu dises koniges geczeiten, Anno d(omi)ni MCLXXVIII adyr eyn Jor dirfuer, Ist eyn her gewest ym Czips des koniges diner, der hatte den Czipsern gros widerdris und smocheit gethon, dorume dirschlugen sy yn und das ist geschen in Donnerstmargt, went In dem Jor Christi pey MCCCCXXVIII, do man den pron vuer der kirchen offente dervon langen Joren verdeckt was, do fandt man in dem selben pron vil menschen peyn und panczer und in dy keller fand man auch peyn, dorume musten dy Czipser disem konig Lasla gros gelt geben.[1]

[1] 'Chronicon, quod in Monte S. Georgii conservatur,' ed. B. Pukánsky, *Scriptores Rerum Hungaricarum*, Budapest 1999 (reprint; first edition: Budapest 1938), vol. 2, p. 283.

The crime is also mentioned in the historical works of Joachim Leibitzer (1566–1623) and Israel Leibitzer (1602–1646), but the brief Latin note dedicated to this event ('MCCLXXXVIII Incolae Quintofori hominem Regium interfecerunt, pro cujus morte notabilem summam pecuniarum dare compulsi sunt'[2]) is clearly an abbreviated version of the excerpt of the *Chronicle of Spišska Sobota*. This chronicle is thus the only source of information available concerning this thirteenth-century crime. In order to better understand the representation and the significance of the episode of the murder of Hungarian King Ladislas IV's officer in the *Chronicle of Spišska Sobota*, this essay is divided into three parts. The first part presents the report of the murder in the chronicle, whereas the second part focuses on the motive for the crime. Finally, the last part focusses on the chronicler's localization of the crime.

1. Report of the murder

The date of the crime

The *Chronicle of Spišska Sobota* states that the event happened during the reign of King Ladislas ('Czu dises koniges geczeiten…'[3]) and adds that it occured 'in 1278 or one year later' ('Anno d(omi) ni MCLXXVIII adyr eyn Jor dirfuer…'[4]). The fact that the author of the *Chronicle of Spišska Sobota* gives two proposals for dates clearly suggests that he was unsure about the real date of this event. It is also worth noting that 1278 is the year in which the chronicler fixed erroneously as the beginning of the reign of King Ladislas ('Anno d(omi) ni MCLXXVIII ist Ladislaus […] konig wurdin…').[5] These different elements suggest that the chronicler did not have precise information on the date of the crime or of Ladislas' coronation, but the fact that he places both events within a short period of time seems to indicate that the chronicler was sure that the murder occurred at the beginning of King Ladislas's reign. The fact that the chronicler seems to have only relative elements of dating at his disposal concerning the crime

[2] 'Selecta ex chroniciis Leibtnerianis,' ed. C. Ferdinand Wagner, *Analecta Scepusii sacri et profani,* vol. 2*,* Trattner, Vienna 1774, 47.

[3] 'Chronicon, quod in Monte S. Georgii conservatur…,' p. 283.

[4] Ibidem.

[5] Ibidem, p. 282.

suggests that the source of his knowledge on the episode might have been of oral nature, although the hypothesis of the use of a written source cannot be formally excluded. Moreover, it must be underlined that although the sentence mentioning the murder appears just after the mention of the great material distress which touched the country during the reign of King Ladislas,[6] the rather vague chronology does not enable us to determine if the murder took place before or during the period of poverty and distress.

The victim

The *Chronicle of Spišska Sobota* describes the victim as 'eyn her […] des koniges diner,'[7] but if the second part of the description obviously reads 'Diener des Königes' (servant of the king), the first part is a bit more problematic, since the words 'eyn her' could be read 'ein Herr' (a lord) or 'ein Heer" (an army, a troop, or crowd). The interpretation of this word is of crucial importance, since the word 'Herr' would mean that there was only one victim, whereas the word 'Heer' would imply a greater number of victims.

Firstly, it is important to underline that the mention of the numerous human bones and armours ('vil menschen peyn und panczer…'[8]) found in the well ('pron') in front of the church of *Donerstmargt* in 1428 cannot be considered as conclusive proof in favor of the hypothesis that there was more than one victim. We must, indeed, bear in mind that the only trace of a link between these bones and the crime is the affirmation of the chronicler that the crime must have happened in this place, a statement that is chiefly based on the discovery of the bones, the origin of which is otherwise unknown.

In this context, a grammatical analysis of the elements concerning the victim(s) in the first sentence relating the crime is clearly the most helpful tool available to determine if the word 'her' shall be read as 'Herr' or as 'Heer.' If the verb 'hatte gethon' is compatible with both solutions, since the two words require the use of a third-person singular verb, the relative pronoun 'der' and the pronoun 'yn,' which according to all probability should be read as 'ihn,' are clearly more

[6] Ibidem, pp. 282–283.
[7] Ibidem, p. 283.
[8] Ibidem.

compatible with the word 'Herr,' the gender of which is masculine, whereas the gender of the word 'Heer' is neuter.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the hypothesis of a single victim is also supported by the relation of the episode in the works of Joachim and Israel Leibtizer, which mention the murder of a 'royal man' ('hominem Regium' [9]), that is to say a man of the King. All these elements lead us to the conclusion that there was only one victim of the crime and that the word 'her' shall be read as 'Herr.'

If the main asset of this result is to enable us to establish that the crime had only one victim, the use of the 'Herr' also gives some interesting information about his social position, since this word suggests that the victim had a rather high political status. The following part of the sentence also gives information about his deeds and his personality, since the victim is said to have done 'great misery and sorrow' to the inhabitants of the Spiš ('…der hatte den Czipsern gros widerdris und smocheit gethon…'[10]). All these various elements give us a more precise picture of the victim, who appears to have been a royal appointee of cruel behaviour.

The murderers

The author of the *Chronicle of Spišska Sobota* reports that the king's officer was killed by the inhabitants of the Spiš that he oppressed ('…der hatte den Czipsern gros widerdris und smocheit gethon, dorume dirschlugen sy yn…'[11]). The only element of identification of the murderer is the name *Czipser* and the plural pronoun '*sy*' (for 'sie'), which allows me to conclude that there was more than one murderer and that the killers lived in the Spiš region. Given the general topic of the chronicle and the composition of the region's population in the Middle Ages, it is highly likely that the murderers were German-speaking settlers. However, the chronicler does not provide any concrete indication about the number or the names of the murderers, probably because he did not know them, a supposition which would be compatible with the hypothesis of the oral transmission of this episode.

[9] 'Selecta ex chroniciis Leibtnerianis...,' p. 47.
[10] 'Chronicon, quod in Monte S. Georgii conservatur…,' p. 283.
[11] Ibidem.

The punishment of the crime

Finally, the *Chronicle of Spišska Sobota* states that the inhabitants of the Spiš had to pay compensation to the King ('…dorume musten dy Czipser disem konig Lasla gros gelt geben'[12]). However, it is important to note that the chronicler does not indicate the precise quantity of this financial compensation. Once again the cause of this omission might be the fact that the chronicler did not have this information, and the absence of this detail is another argument in favour of the hypothesis that the source used by the anonymous author to relate this episode was oral.

Regardless of these considerations concerning the nature of the source used by the chronicler, the fact that the episode concludes after the mention that the inhabitants of the Spiš had to pay compensation to the King suggests that they, indeed, paid it and that there was no further development in this affair. The conclusion of the episode seems, then, to indicate that despite the murder of a royal officer, the inhabitants of the Spiš remain loyal to the King. The loyalty of the people from the Spiš is frequently underlined in the chronicle, one of the best examples being the mention of their participation in the battle of Rozgony–Rozhanovce in 1312 on the side of King Charles Robert.[13]

2. The motive of the crime

As is already mentioned above, the victim is depicted as having being cruel towards the people of the Spiš. It is important to note that the mention of the cruelty of the royal officer in the chronicle is immediately followed by the mention of his murder ('…der hatte den Czipsern gros widerdris und smocheit gethon, dorume dirschlugen sy yn…'[14]). These two elements are linked together by the word 'dorume,' which corresponds to the Modern German word 'darum' (therefore): the use of this word, thus, establishes clearly a relation of causality between the cruel personality of the royal officer and his murder.

This construction clearly implies that the officer was killed because of his wrongdoings, and the tone of this excerpt even seems

[12] Ibidem.
[13] Ibidem, p. 284.
[14] Ibidem, p. 283.

to suggest that the victim fully deserved his fate. The crime is, then, seen as a rightful although not legal action, and these different elements contribute to present the crime as an action of 'self-defence' in the *Chronicle of Spišska Sobota.*

This vision of the 'crime' as a kind of reaction of 'self-defence' against a cruel and unfair royal appointee is of great interest, since its association with the mention of the financial compensation paid to the king because of the murder aims to suggest that the people from Spiš are good subjects, but they do not fear standing up for their rights. This claim for the rights of the Spiš people can also be seen in the codicological environment of the chronicle in its only surviving copy. This manuscript, which is currently kept in the Archives of the Region of Poprad, is composed of two quires of paper[15] of different dimensions and watermarks,[16] although they might have been written by the same hand.[17] The quires were bound together at some point, perhaps shortly after their redaction and they stayed so until the twentieth century. The first quire contains the oldest surviving copy of the so-called *Zipser Willkür*, which is a legal text given by King Lewis the Great to the Saxons of the Czips in 1370[18] (however, one must note that, although articles 1 to 75 were written in the fifteenth century, articles 76 to 90 were added one century later). The second quire contains the transcription of a charter of confirmation of privileges issued by King Sigismund for the Zipsians in 1433 and the chronicle. The chronicle is, thus, clearly associated with two texts that sum up the rights and privileges of the Saxons of the Spiš, which means that this work might have been created to justify their claims with arguments of a historical nature.

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[15] Štátny Okresný Archív v Poprade, Magistrat Mesta Spišská Sobota, Sign. 10034, (the part containing the Chronicle) and Sign. 10035. These archives are located in Spišska Sobota (German *Georgenberg*, Hungarian *Szépesszombat*, Latin *Mons Sancti Georgi*), a fact which explains the name of the chronicle.

[16] See, for instance, J. Sopko, *Kódexy a neúplne zachované rukopisy v slovenských knižniciach / Codices ac Fragmenta Codicum Bibliothecarum Slovaciae (Kódexy slovenskej proveniencie III / Codices qui in Bibliothecis Slovaciae asservantur ac olim asservabantur III)*, Martin 1986, p. 170 (numbers 656 and 657).

[17] See also V. Bažant, 'Spišians and Hungary. *The Chronicle from Spišská Sobota* and Collective Identity of Spiš,' *Studia mediaevalia Bohemica,* in print.

[18] M. Papsonová, *Die Zipser Willkür aus Spišska Sobota: Untersuchungen zum Laut-und Formenstand,* Bratislava 1980.

3. The location of the crime

The author of the *Chronicle of Spišska Sobota* also gives us information about the crime scene, as he states clearly that the murder took place in *Donerstmargkt* ('…und das ist geschen in Donerstmargt…'[19]). This town is now known as *Spišský Štvrtok* (in Hungarian, *Csütörtökhély*; in modern German, *Donnersmarkt*; in Latin, *Villa Sancti Ladislai* or *Quintoforum*; in Polish, *Spisski Czwartek*); it is located ten kilometers west of Levoča, in today's northeastern Slovakia. As I have already pointed out above, the anonymous chronicler justifies this affirmation by the mention of the discovery of bones and armour in this locality in 1428 ('… went In dem Jor Christi pey MCCCCXXVIII, do man den pron vuer der kirchen offente dervon langen Joren verdeckt was, do fandt man in dem selben pron vil menschen peyn und panczer und in dy keller fand man auch peyn…'[20]).

The detailed character of this proves that the author was rather well informed about the discovery and about the local topography. The precision of the information and the presence of a year date also suggests the use of a written source. Its rather exhaustive nature suggests that it might be some historiographical note, perhaps similar to the *Memorabilia* of Kežmarok written by the notaries of the town.[21] Regardless of the nature of this source, the precision of this excerpt and the fact that, to my best knowledge, none of the other sources written in the Spiš region mention this event suggest that this source was probably produced in Spišský Štvrtok and that it was consulted by the author in this place.

This supposition about the nature of the source used by the author of the chronicle in his mention of the discovery of the bones in 1428 would, thus, argue for the existence of some special link between the chronicler and Spišský Štvrtok. Moreover, I would stress that the only other precise description of local landscape in the chronicle concerns 'the mountain on which the Carthusian Monastery was built' ('...off dem berge do der Kartuser closter leyt'[22]). The chronicler mentions, indeed, that before the construction of the monastery

[19] 'Chronicon, quod in Monte S. Georgii conservatur...,' p. 283.

[20] Ibidem.

[21] *Urbis Kesmarkiensis ab anno MCDXXXIII ad MDXLVII memorabilia a scribis publicis ejusdem urbis adnotata*, ed. Carl Ferdinand Wagner, *Analecta Scepusii sacri et profani,* vol. 2, Trattner, Vienna 1774, pp. 104–113.

[22] 'Chronicon, quod in Monte S. Georgii conservatur…,' p. 282.

the inhabitants of the Spiš built a wall, which, according to the anonymous author, can still be seen around the mountain, to protect themselves from the Tatars in the area of the Spiš ('dy Czipser haben czu derselben czeit denselben den pergk mit einer mawer omczogen alz man daz noch syd, vnd aldo haben sy sich mit kynd vnd weib behaldyn vur der Tatarn grawsamkeit'). The monastery in question is the Carthusian monastery of *Lapis Refugii* (in Hungarian, *Menedékkő* or *Menedékszírt*; in Slovak, *Skala útočišťa;* in Polish, *Kamień schronienia*), which is located ten kilometers south of Spišský Štvrtok. The description of the monastery surroundings constitute a second element in favour of the hypothesis of the existence of a link between the chronicler and the area of Spišský Štvrtok.

Moreover, it should be emphasized that, as has been already mentioned above, the only known manuscript which contains this chronicle also contains two texts that sum up the rights and privileges of the Saxons of the Spiš. This suggests that the manuscript could have been prepared by order of the eleven towns of the League of the German towns of the Spiš which were not pawned to Poland in 1412, and it is worth noting that the seat of this league of eleven towns was in Spišský Štvrtok. Along with these different elements, the frequent and detailed mentions of Levoča would suggest that the author probably had ties with the two towns of Spišský Štvrtok and Levoča. It is highly likely that he was a chancellery professional, and he might have worked in both towns, which are located only ten kilometers from each other.

Conclusion

The analysis of the relation of the murder of the Hungarian king Ladislas IV's officer in the *Chronicle of Spišska Sobota* clearly shows that this excerpt is made up of two different elements, namely the report of the crime itself and the presentation of the discovery of bones in Spišský Štvrtok as proof that the murder happened in this town.

The report of the crime insists on the cruel behaviour of the victim: the tone of this excerpt seems to suggest that the victim fully deserved his fate and that this crime was in some way an act of 'legitimate defence', although the author adds that the inhabitants of the Spiš had to pay compensation to the king. The description of the murder

contains very few precise details, which suggests the main source for the chronicler was oral. Oral sources are also likely for two other local events that happened in the thirteenth century and are mentioned in the chronicle: namely, the construction of a wall surrounding the 'Rock of Refuge' by the inhabitants of the Spiš in order to protect themselves from the Tatars, and the foundation of the town of Levoča. In all three cases the anonymous chronicler includes local information obtained orally in the narrative scheme thanks to the chronological framework provided by a written source of a broader perspective, which was mainly a work belonging to the so-called group of the *Hungarian Illustrated Chronicles* and also the *Chronicles of Popes and Emperors* by Martin of Opava.

The mention of the discovery of the bones, which is shorter but much more precise, is probably based on a written source, and this might also be the case with other local events which happened in the fifteenth century. The appearance of written sources in the Spiš in the late Middle Ages clearly marks a turning point in the chronicler's method. Moreover, this excerpt also gives us information about the anonymous author, as it is one the elements of the chronicle which suggest that the chronicler was involved in chancellery work and had strong ties with the area of Levoča and Spišský Štvrtok. The *Chronicle of Spišska Sobota* can, thus, be seen as an example of 'chancellery history' in late Medieval Hungary, a form of historiography which was also represented in the country by other short texts, such as the already mentioned *Memorabilia* of Kežmarok and the *Annals of the Formularium of Somogyvár*.[23]

[23] A. Quéret-Podesta, 'The Annals of the formulary book of Somogyvár,' in: *Matthias and his legacy, Cultural and Political Encounters Between East and West*, eds. A. Bárány, A. Györkös, Debrecen 2009, pp. 187–193.