The following paper has been devoted to the discussion of the expedition brought up in the title, which is supposed to have taken place on the turn of the 13th century. However, our knowledge of the event derives neither from an account nor a historical reference. It is from literature that we learn of Jan of Michalovice’s achievement. Heinrich von Freiberg is the author of that German poem. Before we present some scraps of information about the author himself, it should be pointed out that Heinrich von Freiberg is one of the links of the whole chain of the German court poets who found their home and were given encouragement to write in Bohemia in the 13th century1. Both the last members of the Premysl dynasty and the outstanding representatives of aristocratic families used to be the Maecenases of German minnesingers. It was thanks to their hospitality and — which is still more important — generosity that a whole series of works, written by such poets as Reinmar von Zweter, Siegher, Friedrich von Sonnenburg or Ulrich von Etzenbach, came into being. Naturally, in return, praising the patrons’ deeds became one of the main themes of this kind of literature.

The biographies of these poets are usually incomplete. Some scraps of information may be found in their own works. This is also the case with Heinrich von Freiberg2.


He most probably came from Freiberg in Saxony and a few works have been attributed to him so far. Besides the account of Jan of Michalovice’s adventures, it is also «The Legend of the Holy Cross», based on the Latin original, and «Tristan», a continuation of the outstanding poet Gottfried von Strassburg’s unfinished work, that are meant here3. It is sometimes assumed that Heinrich von Freiberg is also the author of a short humorous work. The chronology of the appearance of his subsequent works is unclear and the researchers’ conclusions considerably diverge in this respect. The precise dating of «Ritterfahrt des Johann von Michaelsberg»4 has


also been questioned. If one accepts the turn of the 13th century as the possible date of the poem’s appearance, the work must have been written between the 80s of the 13th century and the year 1319, i.e. the differences in dating will be as big as for forty years. The poem’s literary evaluation is also inconsistent, as both critical and highly positive opinions concerning its poetic value can be referred to.

The situation is much less complicated as far as the poem’s protagonist, Jan of Michalovice’s biography is concerned. He came from one of the distinguished Czech families, the Markwartice. The first mention about this family could be found in the source material as early as in the first half of the 12th century. The knights of Michalovice are mentioned among other branches of the family. References to Jan of Michalovice appear from 1283 to 1306. A document of 1283 presents Jan as a member of the elite of the contemporary nobility, rallied to young King Venceslas II, who enjoyed considerable advantages and privileges in return for their genuine or alleged services to the King. The document of 28th August, 1283 states that Jan of Michalovice transfers three villages and some vague rights to the estate of Dečín to the King and pays back a debt of 800 monetary units on the appointed time and acquires 4 vast estates and the castles of Velešín, Vitéjovice, Ostré and Děvin from the ruler. The pledge of his future faithful service to the King is meant to compensate for the inequality of this exchange. The information that the King’s generosity was a result of Jan of Michalovice’s friends’ entreaties can also be found in the document. The names of some of the knight’s friends are mentioned, too. Granting Velešín to Jan became the main cause of the unfavourable reaction on the part of the members of the Vítkovci family, as the castle was surrounded on many sides by the estates belonging to this powerful South-Czech family. The bonds between Jan


\[2\] A. Wallner, Reinhartfragen, „Zeitschrift für Deutsches Altertum und Deutsche Literatur“, 63, 1926, pp. 191 seqq., thought that the poem had been prepared to be performed in Prague in 1319.

\[3\] E.g.: R. Wolkan, Geschichte ..., p. 201, thinks that the work is not the apogee of the poet’s literary output, and in: Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters. Verfasserslexicon, ed. W. Stammer, vol. II, Berlin-Leipzig 1936, col. 265, the poem is considered to be an important literary work.


\[7\] Regesta diplomatica ..., vol. 2, p. 630.

\[8\] Ibid., p. 615.

\[9\] Ibid., p. 904.


\[11\] Cf.: W. Iwańczak, Tropem ..., pp. 177 seqq.

to Paris in the developmentalline of chivalric and court literature and culture, the plot itself should briefly be presented. The poet introduces and presents his protagonist by saying that there lives a knight in Bohemia who surpasses all other knights in every respect. As the author is not in a position to describe all his numerous deeds, he will limit himself to describing one of the knight’s achievements, which made him famous all over the world. While looking for adventures in the famous city of Paris, our hero appears in the King’s garden and finds the ruler having his breakfast accompanied by beautiful ladies and a couple of friends. Jan of Michalovice, who unofficially represents the King of Bohemia, hands his sovereign’s gifts to the French monarch and then steps on a carpet, where gorgeous armour and robes are put on him. Then, holding a shield with his coat of arms on it, he mounts his stallion and approaches the King. The latter nods to his two most outstanding knights telling them to get ready for the fight. Neither Anschörant of Belole nor Grinet of Normandy endured the long encounter with Jan of Michalovice. They were both unsaddled and unhorsed. The noble winner, however, enjoying his success, returned their horses to them. This deed was highly appreciated by many beautiful ladies and the knight was given a beautiful steed and numerous jewels by the King. Finally, the author promises to tell us more stories about his hero’s deeds.

It seems convenient to quote a fragment of the knight from Styria Ulrich von Lichtenstein’s “Frauendienst”, of which work we shall say more below. Five reasons for the knight’s participation in a joust are enumerated there: out of the sheer love of tournaments, in the hope of winning the prize, to be in the service of the ladies, for military practice and to win honour. This almost classic listing generally refers to poems depicting knighthood tournaments. Probably all, or at least most of the reasons mentioned, could be found in the account of Jan of Michalovice expedition.

Therefore the following question may be asked: What image of the joust in terms of the governing rules, organization, and symbols, was presented in our poem? The position of the protagonist, placed against the background of the famous Knights of the Round Table and other knights from Arthurian legends, seems to be of vital importance. Therefore we come across Perceval, the unhappy hero stained with the murder of his mother, who after a long quest and numerous encounters finds redemption and becomes the King of the Holy Grail. There is Yvaín, the one who saved a lion from a dragon and had been called the knight with a lion ever since (the animal would accompany him and help him in battle). Sir Gawain, present in almost all Arthurian romances, a model knight, who never became a leading character, also appears in the poem. Erec, Gamuret, Wigmilois, Lancefot, Titurel, as well as St. William, Margrave of Aquitania, are mentioned. The ancient ruler King Alexander, who was clad in medieval knightly costume in numerous works, is not missing, either. The fact that Sir Tristram cannot be found among these outstanding warriors may be surprising, as Heinrich von Freiberg was the author of a poem devoted to this knight. This absence may confirm the supposition that Jan of Michalovice’s story had been written before the poet received Raimund of Lichtenburg’s order to write a continuation of Gottfried von Strassburg’s story.

The enumeration of the names of such distinguished characters was certainly meant to stress the virtues of Jan of Michalovice, who surpasses all the knights in many respects. The fact that Jan of Michalovice's
loyice came from Bohemia is emphasised by the author. The terminology used in the poem is varied. The knight is referred to as „recke“, „wigan“ or „hel“.

All the terms denote a „hero“. The world of medieval legends seems to be a usual point of reference. To praise the knight the author states that the poem’s protagonist is a „new Perceval“.

The presence of King Arthur’s Knights of the Round Table leads us towards a new kind of tournament, in which the characters present different events from Arthurian legends and where other para-theatrical imitations of stories taken from literature may be observed. This type of tournament had flourished from the thirties of the 13th century onwards. Some unsuccessful attempts to organise tournaments of the Round Table in Bohemia were made by Johannes of Luxembourg.

The joust in which Jan of Michalovice takes part is characterized by a few elements which seem to be typical of widespread contemporary tournament practice. Tying the helmet denoted readiness for battle, while untying it meant the end of the fight. The direct encounter of the opponents used to be preceded by music. The whole spectacle takes place in the atmosphere of „courtesy“, referred to as „kurteis“, which means the appearance of one of the crucial terms of court culture. Other similar terms, like e.g. „aventure“ i.e. „adventure“, which has in chivalric romances a very concrete connotation, can also be found in the poem.

The term „aventure“ denotes an incident which culminates in a confrontation, a fight, and becomes a specific challenge. The satisfactory result allows an individual hero to strengthen his attachment to the ethos of a chosen group. The performance, which takes place in the presence of ladies, includes and displays the well-defined elements of the so called courtly love.

The „mimenleicher habedanc”29, the knight’s thanks to the ladies for service, the practice which was meant to honour all the representatives of the fair sex, may be quoted here. During the tournament Jan of Michalovice was clad in „Waffenkleit“, a beautiful garment which was said to have been embroidered by his mistress.

As it is explicitly stated in the poem, the protagonist represents the noble King of Bohemia31. Hence the fact that his opponents in the joust are chosen by the French ruler himself is not surprising. Therefore a fairly well-known motif coming from the circle of chivalric culture is found here: the chosen contestants fight on behalf of their rulers. The importance of the victorious duels fought by the Czech knight is therefore deliberately stressed by the author.

It should also be pointed out that the behaviour governed by official rules, i.e. conventional or symbolic conduct, is often accompanied by quite different prosaic actions. In the courtly poem Jetřich Berůnšký (adapted from the German language), one can read, among others,

»Já tobé, Vitku, radím lépe, vstav helm na hlavu, ať se něklepe«

Therefore it appears that despite the fact that, as has already been said, trying or untying the helmet...
was a commonly understood signal\(^\text{34}\) denoting readiness for the fight or its end, a piece of advice to fix the helmet so as to prevent it from disturbing in battle can also be found in poetry.

The account of Jan of Michalovice’s expedition is also a valuable relic providing information about the knight’s dress and armour. The author celebrates the knight’s preparation for jousting and pretends that the knight’s service to a chosen lady. Such a habit is also known from Wolfram von Eschenbach (Willehalm)\(^\text{35}\). Finally, the horse itself was dressed in an impressive covering (the housing), consisting of two parts. The helmet had a crown with two vulture’s feathers fixed to it. It was decorated with mantling, a yellow cloth denoting “Minne”\(^\text{36}\), i.e. secret love, symbolizing the knight’s service to a chosen lady.

The author of the present paper is especially interested in the issues connected with the coat of arms. The discussed work may also be considered one of the heraldic poems. The hero boasts of his badge displayed in the escutcheon and representing a white lion with an opened mouth. The lion is made of ermine and it is placed on a field of red made of martens\(^\text{37}\). There is no description of the arms. At first the coat of arms was depicted only on the shield. Later it was also placed on other parts of the knight’s equipment. In the present poem the badge appears on the shield, the pennon held by the knight and on the housing. Fragments of attire, the knight’s equipment, may successfully be reconstructed on the basis of horse seals. In Bohemia, among others, Premisl Ottokar II’s and Johannes of Luxembourg’s as well as other Czech lords’ seals have been preserved. Jan of Michalovice’s equestrian seal of 1298\(^\text{38}\) has been preserved in the National Archives in Prague. The details depicted to a considerable extent confirm the truthfulness of Heinrich von Freiberg’s description.

The circumstances connected with granting a given coat of arms may be found in heraldic accounts. In Czech tradition a knight’s achievements in battle or tournaments are frequently referred to. A bit later the so called Dalimil’s chronicle describes such circumstances. One of the stories deals with the election of the Roman King, accompanied by different ceremonies and amusements. Three Czech lords were given coats of arms then, two of them honoured in return for their bravery in a joust\(^\text{39}\). All the three knights are historical characters, mentioned by names. Whereas the event described may have been the election of Alphons of Castile, held on 1st April 1257.

Jan of Michalovice was not the first knight to be commemorated in German literature. According to Biterolf und Dietlieb\(^\text{40}\), a German work dated at the first part of the 13th century, the knights from the territories on the Rhine, the Saxons and the knights from Thuringia are characterized by great skill in battle, whereas the Czechs can be identified by the fact that they do not use lances but swords. In the above circumstances connected with granting a given coat of arms may be found in heraldic accounts. In Czech tradition a knight’s achievements in battle or tournaments are frequently referred to. A bit later the so called Dalimil’s chronicle describes such circumstances. One of the stories deals with the election of the Roman King, accompanied by different ceremonies and amusements. Three Czech lords were given coats of arms then, two of them honoured in return for their bravery in a joust\(^\text{39}\). All the three knights are historical characters, mentioned by names. Whereas the event described may have been the election of Alphons of Castile, held on 1st April 1257.

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mentioned poem dating back to the end of the first part of the 13th century written by the knight from Styria Ulrich von Lichtenstein\(^4\) with the title „Frauendienst” the duels fought by a wandering hero disguised as Venus or King Arthur with Czech knights in South-Czech Krumlov and Wiener Neustadt\(^4\) are referred to.

The question about Heinrich von Freiberg’s possible prototypes can now be answered. This type of poetry is characterized by some recurring motifs, tricks and situations. In German literature a few poems written from a similar perspective can be found. Ulrich von Lichtenstein’s „Frauendienst and, to a greater extent, Konrad von Würzburg’s „Das Turnier von Nantes”\(^5\) may be quoted here. In the third quarter of the 13th century Konrad von Würzburg, a professional poet coming from townspeople, described the tournament of Nantes in which the French and the English kings took part. The competition which took place in Nantes, however, was very different to the encounter fought by Jan of Michalovice, as it involved a large number of contestants. The authors’ heraldic interests are the characteristic shared by all the three poems. The account of Jan of Michalovice’s expedition is also similar to the expedition, mentioned in the 15th century Chronicle of Thuringia, organized by the knight from Styria Waltman von Setilset in 1226. Waltman von Setilset is said to have been accompanied only by a lady, a dog and a sparrow-hawk. He would challenge three knights every day and each defeated knight was supposed to give his ring to the lady\(^6\). In this poem, like in the case of Jan of Michalovice’s expedition, the protagonist acts single-handedly, while Ulrich von Lichtenstein is usually accompanied by a train of attendants when he sets off on his venturesome journeys.

In the course of research carried out in connection with these works two attitudes have clearly been distinguished. While trying to explore the literary contents of the poems on the one hand, one wants to find some connections with contemporary historical reality on the other. The source verification of the events presented is considered to be a success. In the case of Jan of Michalovice’s account one has to do with a similar situation. The researchers can be divided into two groups, characterized by the above mentioned attitudes. A desire to trace a source mention confirming the fact of organizing such a tournament in Paris has existed for a long time. Alois Bernt’s studies of the French material appeared to be a failure. No such tournament was held in Paris on the turn of the 13th century. A tournament took place in Compiègne in 1297.\(^7\) A supposition that the expedition described by Heinrich von Freiberg, as well as the tournament itself, constituted a kind of costume or camouflage meant to hide the true reason of the mission has also been made. Dobroslava Menclová suggested, for example, that Jan of Michalovice had been sent on an important political mission to Paris, where he had acted on behalf of 10 years old Wenceslas II.\(^8\) Consequently, the expedition was to have taken place in 1281. This attempt to date the event precisely, however, is only a controversial hypothesis if we take into consideration the fact that Jan of Michalovice’s name was first mentioned in the diplomatic material in 1283.\(^9\) A mention in the later Dalimil Chronicle referring to Jan of Michalovice’s successes in tournaments, according to the chronicle held between 1293 and 1296, may be regarded as another argument in favour of the „historical” character of the expedition. Dalimil writes, „Sir Jan of Michalovice had fought in tournaments in the Rhineland (the Rhineland) and then arrived in Paris, where he entered the lists rightly and with honour and then returned by the same route to Bohemia.”\(^10\) It is interesting that in the German translation of the so called Dalimil Chronicle made in prose at the end of the first half of the 14th century the event that interests us here is dated at the year 1297. The chronicle says, „At that time the lord of Michalovice set off on his knightly expedition to Paris and then returned by the same route with honour and without any loss”\(^11\).


\(^{5}\) Cf. V. Novotný, op. cit., p. 992; J. Macek, Das Turnier, pp. 371 seq.


\(^{10}\) Cf.: ref. 9.

\(^{11}\) Nejstarší česká rýmovaná kronika, p. 155: „Tedy pan Jan z Michalovic kole po Rynu, až do Paříže jede, tu etně a právě klav, tůž cestů se čistí k Čech i přijíde”.

Firstly, however, this par excellence literary work could hardly be considered to be the source of accurate information, secondly the author of the so called Dalimil Chronicle (the Czech and the German versions) may have made this record after he had read Heinrich von Freiberg’s piece of writing.

The story of Jan of Michalovice’s expedition is a typical product of courtly culture belonging to the Minnesang tradition. It not only explores the world of universal values and the ethics of the chosen knights’ community but also provides interesting information about the organization, attire, armour and the rules according to which knightly tournaments were held. It is not an accurate reflection of knightly reality and the actual conditions of knights and noblemen’s life. This could scarcely be possible. The poem is, however, a genuine picture of their self-consciousness. The author’s fascination with knightly tournaments, which are known to have had the magic power to attract attention, must also be stressed. It was only at the beginning of the 15th century that John Hus sincerely regretted that the painters preferred to present knightly encounters rather than depict Christ’s Crucifixion52.

Translated by Zuzanna Poklewska-Parra
