

# Observations on the Old Prussian Basel Epigram

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

As is well known, the Old Prussian Basel Epigram is considered to be the oldest extant Baltic document. Stephen C. McCluskey discovered it in 1974 on fol. 63ra of MS Basel, Univ.-Bibl. F.V.2. The manuscript comprises 140 folios and contains various texts of a philosophical nature. Two parts of the codex include the date of origin in their colophons. The epigram appears in the first part immediately after the colophon, dated 1369, of the *Questiones super Meteororum* of Nicole Oresme (fol. 2ra–63ra). Jean Buridan's *Questiones super De generatione* make up the second part (fol. 64ra–86rb), which is dated Prague, 1376 (fol. 86rb).

The aim of the present article is (1) to present the first high-quality facsimile of the epigram, (2) to examine in detail the paleographic evidence by comparing the hand of the epigram with other parts of the manuscript, and (3) to shed some further light on the cultural background of the manuscript and the epigram that it contains.

I will not particularly be concerned with the linguistic details of the Prussian text, some of which remain problematic; for a critical discussion of various interpretations see Schmalstieg 1976, 87–90, 93–97, 419 and Dini 1997, 405–08. I think the first analysis by McCluskey, Schmalstieg, and Zeps 1975 is still basically valid, taking into account the corrections proposed by Mažiulis 1975 and, subsequently, Kortlandt 1998a. Other readings by Schmid 1982, Bammesberger 1998a, and Matasović 2001 are less satisfactory (cf. also Kortlandt 1998b).

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Professor M. Steinmann of the Manuscript Department of the University Library Basel for his permission to reproduce fol. 63r and 86r of MS F.V.2, and Mrs. E. Maeder of the Slavic Department of the University of Basel for helping me to obtain digital copies of the manuscript. Professor S. C. McCluskey (West Virginia University) kindly provided helpful comments on his work on the Basel manuscript nearly 30 years ago. I am greatly indebted to Professors J. P. Gumbert (Leiden University), J. M. M. Hermans (University of Groningen) and again M. Steinmann for sharing their expert opinion on the difficult paleographic aspects of the investigation. Of course, I am solely responsible for the opinions here offered.

The text has been tentatively transliterated by McCluskey et al. 1975, 159 as follows:

**Kayle rekyse •                    thoneaw labonache thewelyse •**  
**Eg • koyte • poyte                nykoyte • pēnega doyte •**

In the German translation by Mažiulis 1975, 131 and the English by Kortlandt 1998a, 115, we have the following ironic-humorous text:

“Zum Wohl, Herr!                Du bist kein gutes Onkelchen mehr,  
wenn du trinken willst,        [aber] kein Geld [mehr] geben willst.”  
‘Hello, mister!                    you are no longer a nice little uncle!  
If you want to drink,            you do not want to give a penny!’<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Facsimile

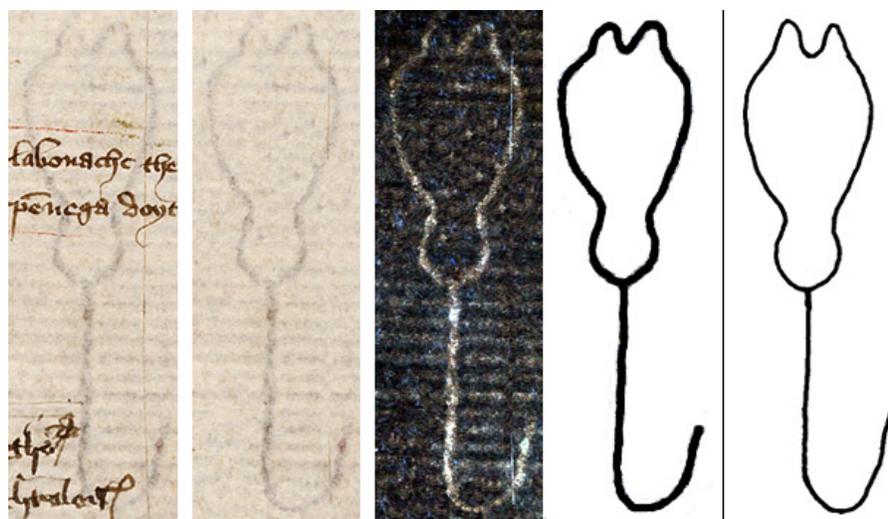
The only available facsimile copy of the epigram and a part of the surrounding Latin text on fol. 63ra was made in gray-scale from a microfilm of the original manuscript in the early 1970s. This copy is reproduced in McCluskey et al. 1975, 160, Schmalstieg 1974 (in the frontispiece of the book) and Mažiulis 1975, 126. In addition, the library’s catalogue of dated manuscripts (Burckhardt et al. 1977 [2], 15, plates 26 and 28) offers copies of what appears to be the same microfilm, showing us a somewhat larger text portion of fol. 63ra as well as a part of fol. 86r (including the colophon). Unfortunately, the facsimile of the epigram in the catalogue is of little use because the last letters of **thewelyse** at the end of the first line are cut off. The facsimile copies that have been published do not meet modern standards of facsimile reproduction of medieval manuscripts and are unsuitable for a more detailed paleographic analysis of the epigram.

As far as I know, of the scholars who investigated the epigram after its discovery by McCluskey it is only Schmalstieg who has seen the original manuscript in Basel. He reports: “... in fact I spent several hours looking at it and there is really nothing essential that isn’t revealed by the photographic copies. There is a little illumination, and there is a watermark which doesn’t appear in the photograph. Presumably from the watermark one would be able to determine the origin of the paper at least” (1982: 21). After two inspections of the manuscript in 2002, I obtained high-resolution and full color digital copies of

<sup>2</sup> The translations are almost identical, but the reconstructions of the Prussian text deviate in a number of instances:

Mažiulis: *kails rikīs, tu n’au labans tēvelis / ik k(v)āi-tu pōt, nik(v)āi-tu penigan dāt.*

Kortlandt: *kaile rikīs, tu ni jau labōnas tēwelis / ik kwai tu pōtwei, ni kwai tu penega dōtwei.*

Watermark fol. 63 (original → no text → invert → drawing)<sup>3</sup>

Piccard, nr. 277

f.ol. 63r and 86r. The two files form the basis of the paleographic analysis and are partly reproduced above.<sup>4</sup>

As for the watermark on fol. 63, it is indeed possible to determine the origin of the paper. On the basis of the reference works by Briquet (1968) and Piccard (1983), the watermark can be classified under “fruit en forme de poire ou de figue” (Briquet 1968: I, 401–02 = III, nrs. 7324–44). More specifically, it can be identified with a subgroup (nrs. 7341–44), in which “la queue du fruit se termine en crochet.” The closest resemblance is nr. 7341, dated 1366 and located in Udine. In fact, “[t]out le groupe est de provenance italienne.” See also Piccard 1983, 9, 31–32, and 224–29 = nrs. 251–96, where the origin is narrowed down to northern Italy; the shape of the watermark of the Basel manuscript is very similar to nr. 277 from Gemona del Friuli, 1368. The watermark confirms the date in the colophon on fol. 63ra. Of course, the provenance of the paper does not have to coincide with the place where the text was written.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See also [/baselepigram/watermarks.jpg](#).

<sup>4</sup> A website on the Internet accompanies the present article and contains images of all relevant parts of fol. 63r and 86r as well as several compositions and detailed letter comparisons; see [www.schaeken.nl/lu/research/online/editions/baselepigram/](http://www.schaeken.nl/lu/research/online/editions/baselepigram/) (henceforth: [/baselepigram/...](#)).

<sup>5</sup> Whereas the same watermark is clearly visible on many pages of the first part of the codex, the watermarks in the second one (Buridan’s *Questiones super De generatione*) are difficult to identify. The paper reveals at least two different types: on fol. 66 and 86

### 3. Transcription

The first transcription (see above, section 1) has always been taken for granted in subsequent studies of the epigram, although McCluskey et al. already indicated some uncertainties: “it is quite possible that a direct inspection would be helpful” (1975: 159). A later transcription in the Basel catalogue (Burckhardt et al. 1977 [1], 190) deviates in a number of instances: **keyle rekyse thoneasv labonachc thesvelyse / Eg. koyte. poyte. nykoyte. pennega doyte**. I have the following comments to make on the transcription in the catalogue:

- The period after **poyte** in the second line is correct, as was already noticed by Mažiulis 1975, 125 and others. However, in the first line, the catalogue omits the clearly visible punctuation marks after **rekyse** and at the end of the line.
- The broad horizontal stroke over **pennega**, which reaches from **p** to **n**, indicates a nasal consonant in medieval Latin and German scribal practice, so that Burckhardt et al. are right in reading **pēnega** as *pennega*.
- The transcription of **sv** instead of **w** in **thoneasv** and **thesvelyse** is incorrect (cf., e.g., the shape of the initial letter of *Wills* = *Willelmus* in Cappelli 1928, 400).

Furthermore, Schmid 1982, 206 raises the question whether the second **a** in **labonache** is “gleichwertig” with the first **a** or the **a** in **Keyle**. We find two types of *a*: a simple *a* of the cursive in **Keyle** and **labonache**, and a two-compartment **a** of the textura in **thoneaw**, **labonache** and **pennega**.<sup>6</sup> Especially in German writing practice of the 14th century, it was quite common to use both types of *a* indiscriminately.<sup>7</sup>

McCluskey et al. 1975, 159 already pointed out that “some of the *e*’s cannot be distinguished from *c*’s.” In the case of the last letter of **labonache** we must seriously doubt the reading of **e** instead of **c**: **labonache**? **labonachc**? The paleographic evidence points to a reading **labonachc**,<sup>8</sup> but it does not lead to any interpretation that makes sense. There seem to be no parallels in Middle High German of a spelling *chc* representing a consonant (or cluster of con-

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type “arc” (Briquet 1968 I, 53–55 = III, nrs. 779–833; cf. esp. group 779–807, dated between 1335 and 1433) and on fol. 68 and 69 type “deux cercles à côté l’un de l’autre” (idem I, 217 = III, nrs. 3230–34; cf. esp. nr. 3230, dated 1367, and nr. 3231, dated 1371). As for their provenance, both types can be associated with Italy, as in the case of the watermark on fol. 63. I was unable to find any traces of the latter in the second part.

<sup>6</sup> See also */baselepigram/letters1.htm*, letter *a*.

<sup>7</sup> J.P. Gumbert by letter, 15 August 2002. Cf. also Bischoff 1986, 181, 189–90.

<sup>8</sup> See also */baselepigram/letters1.htm*, letters *c* and *e*.

sonants) of any kind (cf. Paul 1989, 152–65). It cannot be ruled out that **c** is a simple scribal error for **e** (both letters are for obvious reasons frequently confused in medieval manuscripts) and that we have to stick to the traditional reading **labonache**. This form most probably represents the root *lab-* ‘good’ (cf. Lith. *lābas*), a suffix *\*-ān-* (cf. Lith. *geltónas* ‘yellow’, Russ. *velikán* ‘giant’) and the ending *-as*. The strange spelling **-ache** can be explained best within Kortlandt’s theory that the scribe of the epigram was not a native speaker, but a German who noted down the words dictated by a Prussian colleague (cf. also Bammesberger 1998a: 126).<sup>9</sup> The scribe perhaps had an optional *-e* in his own speech (cf. also **rekyse** and **thewelyse**) and “may have perceived the Prussian *\*-s* as very different from his own because it was not opposed to a velar fricative” (Kortlandt 1998a: 117; cf. also 1998b: 127, 1998c: 39).

In sum, we arrive at the following transcription:

**Kayle rekyse • thoneaw labonach{e/c?} thewelyse •**  
**Eg • koyte • poyte • nykoyte • pēnega doyte •**

#### 4. The Epigram in the Context of the Manuscript

On fol. 63r, the epigram is surrounded by different text portions. In accordance with McCluskey et al. 1975, 163, I shall label them A through F:

- A. The hand of the main text of the *Questiones*, the ending of which comprises the first 16 lines of the first column. The last two lines read:  
**... et ric est finis queſtionum oren** [i.e., Oresme]  
**ruper metheororum ad honorem dei glorioſi amen deo gracias**
- B. The hand of the heading:  
**EXPLICIUNT QUEſTIONES METHEORORUM.**
- C. The hand of the colophon:  
**Anno domini milleſimo ccc̄ r exagerimo nono** [i.e., 1369] **finite runt queſtiones metheororum per manus illius qui ſcripſit eas etc.** [crossed out]  
**in vigilia epiphanie per manus illius qui ſcripſit eas**  
**Omnibus omnia non mea ſompnia dicere poſſum amen**
- D. The hand of the German text written in the banner:  
**IHS** [i.e., Jesus] **ICH LEID**

<sup>9</sup> Additional arguments provided by Kortlandt 1998a, 117 are **Kayle rekyse**, in which case forms appear to be mixed up, the vocalism of **poyte** and **doyte**, which “seems to reflect a form of umlaut which is alien to the Prussian language,” and the vowel reduction in the final syllables of **koyte**, **nykoyte**, **poyte**, **doyte**, which is “also unexpected for a native speaker of the language.” Taking also into account that the interpunction of the second line suggests that the text was dictated, it is difficult to adhere to Mažiulis’s assumption (1975: 131) that the epigram was written by a native speaker and that all problematic details can be explained by metrical and rhythmical constrains.

- E. The hand of the Prussian epigram (see above, section 3).  
 F. The hand which completes the text on fol. 63r with the *Registrum*:

**Registrum quartium librorum metheororum ...**

The first column ends in the middle of the seventh Question:

**Utrum quatuor elementa semper et immutabiliter habeant eandem  
 proportionem ad invicem ...**

As for the identification of the different hands, McCluskey et al. 1975, 163–64 come to the preliminary conclusion that the six different parts are possibly the work of three different scribes: one who completed the main text (A), one who produced the heading, the colophon and the figure, including the German and Prussian text (B, C, D, E), and one who added the *Registrum* (F). They stress that the similarities between B, C, D and E are “suggestive but inconclusive.”

Purkart 1983, who worked with the facsimile provided by McCluskey et al. (leaving aside hands A and F), offers a different interpretation of the paleographic evidence: B, C, D and the figure were produced by the same scribe. However, the text of the epigram “was not only written in a different script, but is also to be dated later, namely in the 15th century” (ibid., 33).

On the basis of a direct inspection of the manuscript, I would like to make the following observations.

First, the *Registrum* (F) must have been added after the completion of all other parts on fol. 63ra, including the epigram. The hand, which is very careless and difficult to read, is clearly different from all other hands.

Second, it is very well possible that the scribe of the main text (A) also wrote the heading and the colophon (B and C), since we must take into consideration that we are dealing with different *styles*: an ordinary Gothic cursive in A, a textura in B, and something between a cursive and textura in C.

Third, it is also possible that D and E are executed by the same hand, displaying two styles: again a textura for the German text and a more formal cursive for the Prussian epigram. In fact, it is very difficult to detach E from the figure and to imagine a scenario in which the epigram was added later by a different hand; the size and position of the figure on the manuscript page nicely fits the length and syntax of the Prussian text. We have to presuppose a single composition to which, of course, also the German text in the banner belongs.

Fourth, the ink of A, C, and D is of exactly the same brown color. The much darker color of the ink of the heading (B) can be explained by the different way in which the large letters were put on paper. The figure shows basically the same variety of brown ink as A, C, and D. However, on closer inspection we see that the curves of the body, especially around the waist, are

drawn twice.<sup>10</sup> It looks as if the scribe first made a provisional sketch of this part of the figure and afterwards emphasized the curves by redrawing them with lines that are thicker and appear slightly darker on the paper. It is this darker ink which corresponds with the color of the ink of the epigram. In addition, it should be noted that the ink of the main hand of the *Questiones* displays a range of coloring that is very similar to the differences between A, C, and D on the one hand, and E on the other. On several instances, the color changes abruptly from pale brown (as in A, C, and D) to deep brown (as in E or F).<sup>11</sup> Thus, the color of the ink seems to me inconclusive for the identification of the different hands on fol. 63ra.

Fifth, if we take a closer look at the red color used on fol. 63r, we discern different varieties: a lighter color in A, B, C, D, and the figure, a slightly deeper color in E (i.e., in **K** of **Kayle**), including the lines above and below the epigram, and for the most part an even darker shade in F.<sup>12</sup> The distribution might support the idea that the red lines surrounding the epigram and the coloring of the initial letter **K** were added at a later stage (perhaps by the scribe who wrote the *Registrum*?). However, parallel to the case of the ink, the different shades of red also appear in other parts of the main text (e.g., on the preceding fol. 62v) and therefore provide no evidence for the investigation.

Sixth, the question can be raised whether the hand of A, B, and C is the same as the one of D and E.<sup>13</sup> McCluskey et al. 1975, 164 already pointed out similarities in the shape of the letter **h** in B (**METHEORORUM**), C (**metheororum, epiphanie**), D (**IHS** and especially **ICH**), and E; the flourishes in C of the final letters **m** (**porrum**) and **n** (**non, amen**) which are similar to those of the letter **y** in E; and the correspondence between the shape of **p** in C (especially in **scripūt** and **epiphanie**) and E. Furthermore, in the case of **d**, similarities can be found between E and C (particularly in **domini**), and in the case of **l** between E and C (cf. **vigilia**) on the one hand and between D (**LEID**) and B (**EXPLICIUNT**) on the other. However, in two instances the similarity between the handwritings of E and C are less obvious: compare the shapes of **g** and the elongated **s** in E with those in C (e.g. **rexagerimo, vigilia, porrum**).

The principal investigators of the epigram provide an additional argument to associate E with the colophon: “The final line of the colophon is rhymed, as is the epigram: Omnibus omnia / non [itica] sompnia / dicere possum / amen”

<sup>10</sup> Cf. in detail [/baselepigram/63ra\\_figure.jpg](#).

<sup>11</sup> Cf., e.g., the changes within column 9vb (light > dark) and 18ra (dark > light > dark), between the columns 20va and 20vb (light > dark), or between the folios 30vb and 31ra (light > dark), as well as 58vb and 59ra (light > dark).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. in detail [/baselepigram/redcolor.jpg](#).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the letter comparisons at [/baselepigram/letters1.htm](#).

(1975: 64). It should be noted that the text does not read *itica* but *mea*. Also, we are not dealing with a verse that was made up by the scribe himself: exactly the same hexameter (*Omnibus omnia non mea somnia dicere possum* ‘I cannot tell everyone all of my dreams’) occurs in a number of other manuscripts from the 13th century onwards (cf. the list in Walther 1965: 632; for an additional example in the rich collection of proverbs in MS Basel, Univ.-Bibl. A.XI.67, see Werner 1966: 87). Although the metrical correspondence between the Latin verse and the Prussian text is obvious, the relationship with respect to the contents remains unclear. According to Purkart 1983, 30 the Latin text would mean “how many times I fell asleep while copying,” which I think is far from certain. It is more likely that the verse alludes to “forbidden” (day)dreams. The German text *Jesus ich leid* may be associated both with the lamentation in C and in E.

In sum, I conclude:

- The ink and the red color on fol. 63ra do not play a decisive role in the identification of the hands.
- It is very possible that parts A, B, and C were written by the same hand.
- The latter also applies to D and E.
- There is no hard paleographic evidence to prove that the hand of A, B, and C is different from the one of D and E.
- The metrical correspondence between the Latin verse in C and the Prussian text in E rather suggests the opposite. It is not unlikely that we are dealing with a single composition executed by one hand.

If it is true that the main hand of the *Questiones* was also responsible for writing down the epigram, we might go one step further and take the second part of the codex into account.

In the Basel catalogue (Burckhardt et al. 1977 [1]: 190), the colophon of the second part on fol. 86rb is transcribed as follows: *Expliciunt questiones libri de generatione Reuerendi magistri Johannis biridani per petrum fru. prage scripte Anno domini. 76<sup>o</sup> Cycli aurei numeri. 9. sol.[is] 13. kalendas Julij.* In conclusion, it is stated: “Höchstwahrscheinlich der ganze Band von der Hand des Petrus Fru.” In my opinion, this possibility cannot be ruled out. The main hands of the first and the second part reveal a similar style,<sup>14</sup> especially if we take into account that the two texts are of a different age and that the handwriting may have slightly changed over the years. Also, the style of the epigram resembles the one of the colophon of the second part (cf. especially the shape of the letters **b**, **d**, **l**, and **p**).<sup>15</sup> Of course, on the basis of the circumstantial paleo-

<sup>14</sup> See [/baselepigram/composition1.jpg](#) (main hands on fol. 63ra and 86rb).

<sup>15</sup> See [/baselepigram/composition2.jpg](#) (epigram on fol. 63ra and colophon on fol. 86rb) and the letter comparisons at [/baselepigram/letters2.htm](#).

graphic evidence, it is only a hypothesis to conclude that the writer of the epigram can be identified as “Petrus Fru,” or to be more accurate, as “Frun” or “Frum,” because the horizontal stroke over the final letter **u** points to a nasal consonant. As for the etymology, the name can be connected with Middle High German *vrum*, *vrom* ‘brave, diligent, virtuous’.<sup>16</sup> That the figure on fol. 63ra might be a self-portrait of Petrus Frum, as suggested in the Basel catalogue (*ibid.*, 271), is, of course, pure speculation.

### 5. *Habent sua fata libelli*

It is intriguing to find out how a Prussian text turned up in a Latin manuscript from the 1360s which is now kept in Basel. Fortunately, there is a notation on fol. 1r which tells us more about the former owner of the manuscript: *Hunc librum emebat vniuersitas [i.e., Basel – JS] de li[bris] m[agistri] pe[tri] de olma*. As McCluskey et al. (1975, 164) already pointed out, we are dealing with “the physician Peter of Ulm the younger (fl. 1427–62), whose career took him to Ulm, Heidelberg, Bern, and Basel. At some point in his travels he obtained this manuscript, which he later sold to the library of the University of Basel.” There are two other manuscripts kept in the same library that were purchased by the University of Basel (founded 1460) from Peter of Ulm: MS F.I.11 and MS F.V.10 (cf. Burckhardt 1959, 164–66, Burckhardt et al. 1977 [1], 171, 192). It is interesting to note that MS F.I.11 is closely related to MS F.V.2: it also contains Oresme’s *Questiones super Meteororum*, it is dated 1369, and most probably also originated at Prague, “assuming it was written at the same place as Buridan’s *Questiones super De anima*, which immediately follow it” (McCluskey 1974, 82). In fact, both manuscripts belong to a group of 15 complete manuscripts of Oresme’s *Questiones* dated between 1366 and 1470 (*ibid.*, 80). On the basis of a detailed analysis of the manuscript tradition, McCluskey concludes that they all appear to be derived from an archetype at the University of Prague:

Oresme’s *Questiones* ... spread throughout the newly founded universities of Eastern Europe from a source at Prague where they were apparently read intermittently as part of the arts curriculum from the 1360’s to as late as 1433.... Moreover, by this time Oresme’s *Questiones* had gained a firm hold in the intellectual framework of Eastern Europe and continued to exert a long-lasting influence. (*ibid.*, 23)

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<sup>16</sup> By the way, the last name *Frum* is not unknown in the German-Austrian-Hungarian area (cf. [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org), with attestations from the end of the 16th century onwards).

In addition to MS F.I.11 and F.V.2, there are at least five other copies of Oresme's *Questiones* which directly point to Prague (cf. *ibid.*, 81–95):

1. Kraków, Biblioteka Jagiellońska, MS 749, dated between 1360 and 1370 (cf. Kowalczyk et al. 1993, 292–94). As in the case of the Basel manuscript, the codex also contains Buridan's *Questiones super De generatione*, which, according to the colophon, was written at Prague.
2. Kraków, Biblioteka Jagiellońska, MS 751, dated between 1360 and 1370 (cf. *ibid.*, 296–300), also containing Buridan's *Questiones super De generatione*, and most probably written at Prague.<sup>17</sup>
3. Kraków, Biblioteka Jagiellońska, MS 2095, dated 1406, written at Prague by Johannes Stolle.
4. München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, CLM 4376, dated 1366, written at Prague by Johannes Krichpaum of Ingolstadt.
5. Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, MS 5453, dated c. 1433, presumably written at Prague.

By tracing our manuscript back to the capital of the Holy Roman empire of Charles IV, we can easily image a situation in which a German scribe was in contact with someone who knew Prussian. As McCluskey et al. 1975, 165 already noted: “At that date Prague was a cosmopolitan university drawing students from the whole of Bohemia, Germany, Poland, and beyond.” In his study on the relations between Charles IV and the Teutonic Order, Jähnig states: “Die Bedeutung der Universität Prag für Preußen zur Zeit Karls IV. wird nicht nur durch eine so hervorragende Gestalt wie den Theologen Johannes von Marienwerder deutlich,<sup>18</sup> sondern etwa durch zahlreiche preußische Studenten in der böhmischen Hauptstadt” (1978, 127). Historical demographic studies point out that in the late 14th century the great majority of students from Prussia chose to study at the University of Prague. According to Boockmann 1971 (cf. especially the accompanying map “Die Universitäten”), the historical records show that until c. 1410 at least 245 students from Prussia were enrolled in one of the four faculties of Prague university. It is quite possible that one of these students was our Prussian informant for the scribe of the Basel epigram.

<sup>17</sup> There is a gloss in Old Czech on fol. 114v: *Butte dobrzy et przyete Czechom dobrym* (Kowalczyk et al. 1993, 300).

<sup>18</sup> Johannes von Marienwerder (1343–1417), named after his hometown Marienwerder, now Kwidzyń (located between Toruń and Elbląg), studied and taught in Prague between 1365 and 1386.

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