

Denotat attoniti quid tremor iste soli?

Earthquakes as Representations of Crisis in Bohemian Literary Texts before 1620*

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Abstract. The paper focuses on earthquakes as one of the representations of crisis in the early modern Bohemian literature of the pre-White Mountain period (1590–1620). The earliest extant texts discussing an earthquake to have happened in the Bohemian lands date back to 1590. These five texts, written in Czech and Latin and including sermon-like treatises, news, epic and elegiac poems, relate to the earthquake that occurred in the Bohemian lands in 1590. They are surprisingly concurrent in dealing with this natural disaster, giving it an important religious meaning, i.e., God’s warning and punishment. This strong religious message remained the central theme in earthquake discourse throughout the entire pre-White Mountain period, in which four other earthquakes are said to have happened, and was included even in a university thesis. Besides the five 1590 texts about the earthquake, a further nine sources describing or mentioning an earthquake have survived from the pre-White Mountain period, all of which will be analysed in this paper. Employing a series of examples taken from Czech and Latin source material, provided herein with the author’s English translation, this paper considers the main points and transformations of the earthquake discourse as presented by contemporary Bohemian authors, who appear to have mostly belonged to the broader University of Prague milieu, and thus were non-Catholic. Importantly, the position of the earthquake discourse among discussions of astronomical phenomena and other disasters is assessed.

Keywords: earthquakes, natural disasters, crisis, astronomical phenomena, early modern literature, Melanchthonism in the Bohemian lands

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Introduction: Early earthquake discourse in Bohemia: genres, languages, functions

When in 1590 Vienna and the surrounding regions were struck by a destructive earthquake, a number of Bohemian authors presented a surprisingly standardised discussion on the causes and consequences of this terrifying phenomenon, although a disaster of this kind was a relatively new topic in the Bohemian Humanist literary tradition.¹ From then on, however, earthquake discourse appears to have gained a fixed place in Bohemian literature, recurring approximately every ten years across various genres and languages. The Bohemian intellectual circles of the time, from which most literary production originated, were largely non-Catholic, centring around the Utraquist² University of Prague, whereas Catholics were a minority. When, however, the University joined the Bohemian Revolt against the Habsburg dynasty and the Protestant Bohemian estates were defeated at the 1620 Battle of White Mountain, the Bohemian non-Catholic intellectuals were faced with a difficult choice of either converting or emigrating. Since most chose to emigrate,³ there was a considerable change in literary production.⁴ The number of the extant texts suggests that the earthquakes played an important role in the disaster discourse of the pre-White Mountain period. Significantly, the corpus has turned out to be compact enough to allow more general conclusions to be drawn. Taking a series of extracts from both vernacular and Latin sources of various genres, I will map the earthquake discourse in the thirty years prior to the Battle of White Mountain, observe its transformations, and examine its position among other disasters, both natural and civic, and astronomical phenomena as contemporary representations of early modern crisis.⁵ All the texts discussed in this paper are by non-Catholic authors, as no Bohemian Catholic account of an earthquake has been preserved from the period.

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- 1 Two earthquakes affecting the early modern Bohemian lands were documented by contemporary literary sources. According to Prokop Lupáč (*Ephemerides*, 1584, Coronis, 16), Václav Dasypodius from Nymburk composed a poem describing the earthquake of 1581, which had its epicentre in Vienna and could be felt even in Moravia. Several sources considered the earthquake of 1588, but are lost today. Due to the lack of the sources, neither of these two earthquakes are discussed in this study, see Michal, *Zemětřesení*, 1–5.
 - 2 The Utraquist Church was a faction of the Hussite movement. However, Utraquists were mild in their views of the Catholic Church and other churches, see Haberkern, *Patron Saint*, 3–4.
 - 3 For the Bohemian Revolt, the Battle of White Mountain and its consequences for Bohemian society, see Thomas, *A House Divided*, 251–94.
 - 4 For more about the changes to Bohemian literary production in the post-White Mountain period, see Malura and Vaculínová, *The Literature of Late Humanism*, 58–59.
 - 5 For the concept of early modern crisis, see Parker and Smith, eds, *The General Crisis*, 4–5; Burke, “The Crisis in the Arts,” 240–41; Lehmann, “Die Krisen des 17. Jahrhunderts,” 23–24; see also Parker, “Crisis and Catastrophe,” 1053–79; Parker, *Global Crisis*.

The 1590 earthquake is documented by several Bohemian sources, including Czech printed news and sermon-like treatises, and an epic poem in Latin. With its epicentre in Vienna, the earthquake appears to have spread to Moravia and Bohemia, hitting the Central Bohemian town of Kutná Hora. *Noviny nešťastné z Hory Gutny* [Unhappy News from Kutná Hora], published by the Prague printer Jan Filoxenes Jičínský (ca. 1560–1591) probably in early 1591, gives a detailed description of the disastrous event, dated 24 December 1590:

“Two gables fell from the elegant house of Mr. Zikmund Stejšek, who had it built in the Square at great expense (on the same day every year, bakers would sell bread and rolls in front of this house, and a huge crowd of local people and visitors would gather there and make a lot of noise). These two gables fell on the people and on the bakery shops and stands, killing, suffocating, or crushing anything they hit. It can be safely estimated (although others give a higher number) that 21 persons, both sellers and buyers, locals and visitors, died at the place.”⁶

According to the anonymous author of the text, this was a horrible accident: there was a lot of blood, two pregnant women were killed, and some people were so deformed that they could not even be identified. Panic broke out among the survivors, and when whatever had remained of the gables collapsed, fearing that the entire town would cave in, both locals and visitors decided to flee. The author concludes that in the general chaos that had erupted the terrified people failed to notice that the earth had shaken twice, which happens in cavernous areas such as Kutná Hora, a town completely undermined for its silver veins.

6 Anonymus, *Noviny nešťastné*, A3r: “Z domu pana Zikmunda Stejška v Ryňku velmi nákladně a pěkně vystaveného (před nímž každého roku na týž den pekaři husce své zvyklým obyčejem prodávali, kamž se velká síla lidu i domácího i přespólního shromáždila v tom takovém hluku) dva štíty na lidi se překotily a spadly na ty pekařské krámy neb boudy, a co postihly, všecko pobily, zdromaštily, zdávily, zmačkaly, takže jakž se jistotně najíti může (ač jiní o větším počtu praví), XXI osob lidí prodávajících a kupujících, domácích i přespólních zahynulo a na místě zůstalo.” I thank my colleague Dr. Tomáš Havelka for his kind help with the transcriptions from Old Czech. In these, I follow the editorial rules that are commonly applied to Old Czech texts, such as preserving the peculiarities of the Old Czech pronunciation of some words (“postihly” instead of modern “postihly”; “hejbe” instead of “hýbe”), while at the same time making the text accessible to modern readers. The latter is especially apparent in the orthography in which I eliminate the Old Czech digraphic system in favour of modern diacritics (“sstítý” are transcribed as “štítý”). I correct any inconsistencies in grammar that can be classified as grammar mistakes from the modern point of view, if these interventions do not affect the phonetic side of the text (“sstítý se překotili” is corrected to “štítý se překotily”). I also standardise upper and lowercase letters and punctuation according to modern use. If not indicated otherwise, all translations from Czech and Latin are my own.

The 1590 earthquake is depicted in four other extant sources, but its course, date, and extent do not always correspond. Thus, the broadside *Pravdivé noviny o znamenitém a strašlivém země třesení* [Truthful News on the Remarkable and Terrible Earthquake], published in Olomouc by Valentin Klín (died ca. 1595),⁷ dates the earthquake to 15 September and identifies damage to St. Stephen's Cathedral tower in Vienna: due to the earthquake, the stucco decorating the tower loosened and fell through the roof into the church, and the tower was so shaken that it could not be used anymore. Then the earthquake spread through Austria to Moravia and Silesia. In his *Žalostné sepsání o novém země třesení* [A Sad Account of a New Earthquake],⁸ Matěj Jahodka of Chrudim (ca. 1540–1604), an Utraquist parish priest based in the Central Bohemian town of Kolín, also dates the earthquake to 15 September, but he shifts the focus to the Kingdom of Bohemia including Kutná Hora, only later coming to report on Silesia, Moravia, Austria, Hungary, and the areas controlled by the Turks. We find the same in the anonymous volume in prose *Spis kratičkej o hrozném země třesení* [A Very Short Account of a Terrible Earthquake], which deals with the earthquake described as having occurred in “this Bohemian land of ours, Moravia, Austria, and elsewhere,”⁹ but dates it to the summer of 1590. Finally, probably the most general description of this earthquake is presented by the University of Prague professor of philosophy Adam Rosacius (ca. 1560–1624),¹⁰ who in his epic poem *Tempestates praecedentis et Votum secundorum auspiciousum ineuntis anni* [Disasters of the Previous Year and a Prayer for an Auspicious Upcoming Year] does not give any specific dates and, despite clearly alluding to the earthquake that afflicted the Bohemian lands, almost seems to address the whole of humanity in his sinister prediction of the darkness that is to envelop the world.¹¹

7 Anonymus, *Pravdivé noviny*.

8 Jahodka dates the earthquake to the Saturday after the Feast of the Cross, which was celebrated on Friday 14 September. Jahodka, *Žalostné sepsání*, A1r. We have limited information about Jahodka's life and studies. Jouzová (“Kolínští humanisté,” 50) assumes that he was a graduate of the University of Prague.

9 Anonymus, *Spis kratičkej*, A1r: “<v> této naší České zemi, v Moravě, Rakousích a jinde...”

10 Rosacius was a University of Prague alumnus, having graduated with a master's degree in 1584. He was a professor of philosophy at the University of Prague from 1589 until 1594, giving lectures on Aristotle. For more about Rosacius, see Podavka, “Rosacius, Adam,” (forthcoming).

11 Rosacius, *Tempestates*, A4v: “Sic commota semel maturo regna tumultu, / Exitium crudele ferent in viscera tota / Totius populi et postremi secula ferri / Fatali involvent totum ferrugine mundum.” (Thus, once the kingdom was shaken by sudden turmoil, it will spread the cruel destruction in the inmost parts of all, until the last iron age of people causes the world to be enveloped in fatal darkness.). All Latin transcriptions are my own. Minimal interventions have been made to the original text. Therefore, I preserve lowercase and uppercase letters as found in the original. However, I do not reprint accent signs, nor correct inconsistencies in Humanist spelling; e.g., I transcribe “fraena” instead correcting it for the classical “frena”. For the benefit

These inconsistencies, however, are irrelevant, since none of the aforementioned texts is a primarily historical work. On the contrary, whatever the allusions to the natural causes¹² of the Kutná Hora cave-ins seem to suggest, all the texts agree that the motor behind the earthquake was Divine power. This means that they carry a strong religious message. The main points of this religious discourse show remarkable consistency across all the texts studied and are well exemplified by an extract from Adam Rosacius' *Tempestates*:

“...God himself shows the impure world its transgressions and sad disasters. Thus, the earth, subdued and suffering, wavers under its weight. Thus, the stricken earth wails over human sin and falls apart. What would be the use of searching for other causes? Sin is the reason why nature threatens us with so many troubles and disasters everywhere. You call them signs? They are signs, but alas, bringing ruin, whenever they appear to mourn over the disorder... ...we confess our mistakes to you and with a humble voice we pray to you at your manger: avert your wrath...”¹³

We learn that an earthquake is God's doing, who in this way shows the people that they have sinned and, at the same time, warns of further catastrophes to come. The earthquake is the earth's cry over human transgressions. There is no need to search for other reasons why nature threatens people with so many troubles and calamities: they are signs of disorder, omens bringing further ruin. The only solution is to profess one's sins and pray to God to avert his wrath.

Therefore, it transpires that only true piety can help protect people against the impending doom. The very same conclusion can be found in Matěj Jahodka's *Žalostné sepsání*, that starts with a Czech elegiac poem, *Pobožnost k člověku* [Piety to a Human], in which a personified Piety scolds a human for neglecting her and

of the reader, however, the semivowel *u/v* has been transcribed as *u* in the position of a vowel, while in the position of a consonant it has been transcribed as *v*. Final *-ij* and *-ijs* have been transcribed as *-ii* and *-iis*, respectively. The rhetorical punctuation has been replaced with the logical.

- 12 The discussions of natural causes of the earthquakes were primarily based on Aristotle, who believed that earthquakes (not unlike comets and droughts) were all symptoms of hot and dry exhalations. Schechner, *Comets, Popular Culture*, 20; Carter, *Meteors, Prodigies, and Signs*, 121–22.
- 13 Rosacius, *Tempestates*, A4r–B1v: “...monstrat sua crimina monstrat / Ipse Deus mundo immundo tristesque ruinas... / Sic aegro tellus sub pondere victa labascit, / Sic gemit humano pro crimine et icta fatiscit. / Namque alias horum quid prodest quaerere causas? / Nempe scelus causa est, quod tantas undique nobis / Natura aerumnas tempestatesque minatur. / Signa vocas? Sunt signa, sed heu ducentia cladem / Ordine turbato quoties moerere videntur... / ...tibi nostra errata fatemur / Perque tuas cunas humili te voce precamur / Iram averte tuam...”

threatens vengeance and punishment from God.¹⁴ Jahodka lists the natural causes of earthquakes as discussed by scholars and philosophers¹⁵ but concludes that the only remedy is to pray to God, who moves the earth he himself created immovable.¹⁶ He does so not only to show his anger, punish impiety, and warn of further catastrophes but also to simply demonstrate his power over the world and over all powerful people.¹⁷ Through earthquakes, he aims to frighten the impious and call them to penitence,¹⁸ an earthquake is a sign that Judgement Day is coming and serves as a perfect simulation of that day.¹⁹ Surprisingly, an earthquake is also a sign to those who pray to God, for in this way he shows the pious that he hears them.²⁰ The argument that an earthquake does not have to be considered an altogether sinister disaster can be also found in the aforementioned *Spis kratičkej o hrozném země třesení*, from which we learn that even a destructive event like an earthquake may be meant as a kind warning.²¹ These last two details, in which an earthquake is an expression of God's goodwill, are only present in some of the texts considered in this paper. Concerning the other points, however, the texts show perfect agreement.

14 Jahodka, *Žalostné sepsání*, A1v–A2r.

15 Jahodka, *Žalostné sepsání*, C5r–C6r.

16 Jahodka, *Žalostné sepsání*, C7r: “Neb jeho všecko stvoření jako Svořitele poslouchá ... Tak nebe, moře, vody, řeky i ta země, že se hejbe k jeho přikázání. Ačkoliv Bůh zemi (magnam molem), tu tíž velikou a nepohnutelnou učiniti ráčil” [Everything created obeys him as his creator ... Heaven, sea, waters, rivers and earth, which moves at his command, although God made the earth, that heavy mass, immovable.].

17 Jahodka, *Žalostné sepsání*, D3r: “Nejprve dopouští Pán Bůh někdy země třesení, aby moc svou Božskou svrchovanou a nejvyšší ukázal, nade všechny monarchy a potentáty světa nejmocnější a nepřemožené, že má moc, kdy chce a co chce učiniti...” [First, God sometimes makes an earthquake to show his Divine and supreme power, which is greater than that of any monarch or potentate who may be most powerful and unconquered. He has the power to do as he wishes, whenever he wishes to...].

18 Jahodka, *Žalostné sepsání*, D4r: “...aby lidi zlého a bezbožného svědomí zdesil a zstrašil a k sobě obrátil, totiž k pokání.” [...to call to himself evil and impious people without conscience and to frighten them, so they make penitence].

19 Jahodka, *Žalostné sepsání*, D5v: “...aby den Soudný přibližující se k lidem den ode dne blíže okázal a před oči co nějaký obraz stavěl.” [...to show that Judgement Day is approaching day by day and put it like a picture before the eyes of the people].

20 Jahodka, *Žalostné sepsání*, D5r: “...aby se tím přiznal k svým svatým a voleným..., že je slyší a přijímá, jich modlitby prorážejí nebesa a přicházejí před obličej jeho a daremné nejsou.” [...to profess that he hears and accepts his pious and chosen people, that their prayers break through the heavens, that he sees them before his eyes and that they are not in vain].

21 Anonymus, *Spis kratičkej*, A1r. The notion of “God's kind warning” (*laskavé jeho nápomenuť*) can be found right in the title on the front page.

Clusters of disasters

This perfect agreement is especially apparent in the notion that disasters never stand alone but that they come in clusters. Adam Rosacius discusses this cluster-like tendency of catastrophes both generally and specifically. In the extract from his *Tempestates* quoted above,²² he mentions “sad disasters” (*tristes ruinas*) and “so many troubles and catastrophes everywhere” (*tantas undique aerumnas tempestatesque*), using the plural to hint at their capacity to never strike alone. He is more specific elsewhere in the text, while enumerating all the catastrophes that are supposed to have happened the previous year: there were wars all around the world, murders, killings, robberies,²³ a heatwave, and a flood, followed by poor crops, inflation, poverty, and many other disasters.²⁴ Besides all that, there was an eclipse of both the Sun and Moon.²⁵ Only after these blows did the earthquake strike.

The important observation is that in these clusters, each disaster followed another and all had the same function of warning of the next one to come when the previous had no effect. It may be argued that Rosacius’ poem transcends the scope of the earthquake discourse because his focus is primarily on the multitude of disasters, where the earthquake is only one among many. The following example, taken from *Noviny nešťastné z Hory Gutny*, proves that the cluster-like tendency of disasters was in fact a central concept of the earthquake discourse and beyond, as will be shown below. The anonymous author on the Kutná Hora earthquake concludes:

“Two disasters happened in quick succession, one after another, the first having been a minor forerunner and indicator of the following, which was

22 See above, page 82.

23 Rosacius, *Tempestates*, A2r: “...Caedesque cladesque domi funestaque bella. / Nam quis in his quaesio regionum tractibus usquam / Tutus ab insidiis fuerat locus? urbe remota / Non tuti vixere homines multusque viator / Carpsit iter factus saevorum praeda latronum...” [...murders and losses at home. For I ask, which place in these regions has ever been safe from ambush? The people have never lived in safety here, and many travellers have fallen prey to vicious robbers.].

24 Rosacius, *Tempestates*, A3v: “Tanta sitis terrae, tantus fuit amnibus aestus. / Hinc frugem, segetes, hinc pabula terra negavit. / Hinc precia accrescunt cunctis male prodiga rebus. / Hinc tanta annonae gravitas, hinc farris acervi / Exigui, hinc inopes multi, hinc furesque rapaces / Atque aliae pestes, quarum numeratio longa est.” [There was such thirst of the earth, such surges in the rivers. Thus, the earth refused to yield fruit and crops and food for the livestock. Thus, prices are rising, and everything is most costly. Thus, the grain is so dear and its stock so low. Thus, there are many poor people, many greedy brigands, and plagues too legion to enumerate.].

25 Rosacius, *Tempestates*, A3v: “Vidimus et Phoebi latebras Lunaeque labores. / Atque quod est rarum, fuscum est sydus utrumque / mense uno pariter, nec erat formidinis expers.” [We have seen Phoebus’ retreat and Luna’s hardship. And what is rare is that both stars were obscured within the same month; there was no one without fear.].

greater and gloomier. And this is what God Almighty does: first, he uses a light fatherly punishment and punishes as a father his child with a tiny rod, ready to forgive and expecting correction; when, however, he finds none and sees that his clemency has no effect, he proceeds to harsher and heavier punishment as though with a whip or a club... The first disaster happened on Saturday before the fourth Sunday of Advent around 2 o'clock at night, a great fire erupted in Česká Street..."²⁶

The second greater punishment, in this case the earthquake, therefore happened as a consequence of the first having been insufficient. Nevertheless, not unlike Rosacius, the author of *Noviny nešťastné z Hory Gutny* reflects on the previous unhappy year, when there was not enough rain, therefore the earth was dry, and consequently there were no crops; there was such a heatwave that wells, rivers, and creeks dried up as a result.²⁷ And then the earthquake struck, preceded by the fire. In addition, the previous year saw various signs in the sky, such as enormous flashes of light and fiery columns. All these were messengers and servants of God, predicting the coming of the supreme judge on Judgement Day.²⁸

From what has been said so far, it may seem that the earthquake was regarded as the ultimate catastrophe, the culmination of a chain of catastrophic events just before Judgement Day. Yet, it turns out that the cycle of crises is infinite and earthquakes are only one type of disaster to befall humanity.²⁹ Therefore, they should not be studied separately from other catastrophes, whose general functions appear to have been either the same or very similar.

In 1598, the University of Prague graduate and imperial notary of the Old Town of Prague office Nicolaus Pelargus (1568–after 1607) published his *De ternario poenarum* [On Three Penalties], a volume comprising three elegies, each dealing with one type of

26 Anonymus, *Noviny nešťastné*, A2r: "Dvoje neštěstí v brzkém času, jedno po druhém tam se zběhlo, však jedno menší, druhé větší a žalostnější, onono jako tohoto předchůdce a předukazatel. Tak ovšem všemohúcí Bůh činívá: Nejprv užívá otcovského lehkého trestání, maličko jako otec dítě metličkou tresce, shovívaje a čekaje nápravy, potom pak když žádného polepšení a prospěchu v dobrém nesezná, tvrdším a těžším trestáním přikračuje jako s ňákým bíčem a kyjem... Přední nešťastná příhoda zběhla se v sobotu před nedělí čtvrtou adventní k druhé hodině na noc, oheň veliký vyšel v Český ulici..."

27 Anonymus, *Noviny nešťastné*, A1v–A2r.

28 Anonymus, *Noviny nešťastné*, A2r: "...skrze ně nám o příští Syna svého soudce vši pravosti káže a předpovídá, že již blízko a ve dveřích jest" [...through these, he tells us about the future righteousness of his Son, the judge, and predicts that he is near and at the door].

29 For recent research into natural disasters in early modern times, see Akopyan and Rosenthal, eds, *Disaster in the Early Modern World*; Barker, "Translating Tempests," 183–212; Asperen and Jensen, eds, *Dealing with Disasters*; Patel and Chiari, eds, *The Writing of Natural Disaster*; Chiari, ed, *The Experience of Disaster*.

punishment with which God strikes people for their transgressions and warns them of further catastrophes to come.³⁰ These three disasters are famine, war with the Turks, and the plague. The elegy on famine presents a very similar discourse to that which we have been observing regarding earthquakes, although its focus is on a different type of disaster. The poem opens with a call to repentance and continues as follows:

“Hardly had the Lord loosened the reins of his anger by causing the terrible, dangerous, and deadly destruction, he is pressing again with new spurs and taking the scourge of justice in his vengeful hand. And he is not to stop any time soon, because our transgressions know no bounds. And how much of humanity changes its heart and is corrected? Who can be seen making penitence? Will the impious world call for Divine help only when there is no hope amidst all the disasters?”³¹

Pelargus considers the famine to be a direct consequence of the earthquake, which he dates to 17 September 1590.³² Not unlike the earthquake, the famine is punishment for a sinful life and impiety. Through the lack of penitence, humanity will bring further and further disasters upon itself. It therefore appears that the disaster discourse was easily transferable to any type of catastrophic event, be it a natural disaster such as an earthquake or famine, or a civic one such as war, which Pelargus discusses in the second elegy, *Bellum* (War). Right at the beginning, he repeats that the war was preceded by a sequence of disasters which had failed in their aim of correcting humanity and had served as an omen.³³

Knowing that the earthquake was considered but one type of disaster among many, it transpires that the discourse was present in Bohemian Humanist literature

30 Pelargus received his bachelor's degree in 1591. He is documented as a burgher of the Old Town of Prague and an imperial notary of the Old Town of Prague office ca. from 1600. In 1603, he held the position of official translator for the same office. Vaculínová, “Pelargus, Nicolaus,” (forthcoming).

31 Pelargus, *De Ternario poenarum*, A2r: “Postquam funestae post dira pericula stragis / Admisit Domini vix bene fraena furor, / Ecce novis iterum stimulis urgetur, ut usque / Ultrici repetat justa flagella manu. / Nec desistet enim coeptis: quia plurima longe / Excedunt omnem crimina nostra modum. / Et quota pars vitam renovato pectore mutat? / Quem tandem sceleris poenituisse liquet? / Scilicet in cumulibus, ubi jam spes nulla, malorum / Imploret superam perfidus Orbis opem?”

32 Pelargus, *De Ternario poenarum*, A2r. Pelargus gives the date in the Roman calendar as <ante diem> “15 Calend<as> Octob<res>”.

33 Pelargus, *De Ternario poenarum*, A4r–v: “Melpomene longe vidit fatalia solvens / Ora, nec augurii flebilis omen abest. / Fundamenta gravem tremerent cum vasta ruinam / Orbis, et attonitum stare negaret opus...” [Melpomene did see it long ago and unfettered her fateful tongue and there is also an omen of misery. When the immense foundations of the earth shook and the shaken mass would not stand...].

much earlier than what the texts dealing with the earthquakes may seem to suggest. When the poems of the early Wittenberg graduates of the 1540s and 1550s are inspected, it appears that the disasters had much in common with celestial phenomena, such as comets and solar and lunar eclipses.³⁴ These were also regarded as omens which warned of various future punishments for impiety but usually lacked the feature of being punishments in themselves. This, among many other aspects, was in perfect accordance with Philip Melancthon's teaching on celestial signs.³⁵ Therefore, the disaster discourse as found in the broader University of Prague milieu exemplifies an adaptation of Melancthonism in the Bohemian lands.

Developments of the earthquake discourse

To find out whether the earthquake discourse went through any development in the pre-White Mountain period, later works have been researched. It turns out that there are only slight differences. Thus, in 1607, the Lutheran pastor Václav Bruncvík Miletínský (active 1593–1614) published *Kázání o země třesení, kteréž se stalo léta dobihajícího 1606* [A Sermon on the Earthquake that Happened at the End of 1606], in which he specifies that the earthquake was supposed to punish, among others, sorcerers (*lidí čarodějně, kouzedlné*), shameful idolaters (*modláře hanebné*), and heretics, who are blasphemous and engaged in contradicting the articles of faith (*kacíře rouhavé, artikulům víry odporové*),³⁶ but he omits its function as a warning. The Utraquist pastor Jiří Tesák Mošovský (ca. 1547–1617) in his 1613 sermon *Tonitrua*

34 See, e.g., *Carmen de eclipsi solis* [Poem on the Solar Eclipse] by the University of Prague professor Sebastianus Aerichalcus (ca. 1515–1555). The poem, composed probably as early as 1546, accompanies Aerichalcus' *Descriptiones affectuum, quae extant in libello de anima*, which is a poetic variation upon Philip Melancthon's *Liber de anima*. Aerichalcus depicts the solar eclipse as "a prediction of troubles in life, studies, and religion" and as "a sign sent by gods, who are displeased with human morals." Storchová, "Aerichalcus, Sebastianus", 840–88. Storchová, "Strategies for Adapting Knowledge," 177–208. See also Storchová, *Řád přírody*, 175–77, on the five poems on lunar eclipses by Petrus Codicillus (1533–1589), the earliest of which was written in 1558.

35 Methuen, "The Role of the Heavens," 395; Barnes, *Astrology and Reformation*, 141–50; Vermij, "A Science of Signs," 648–74; Schechner, *Comets, Popular Culture*; Carter, *Meteors, Prodigies, and Signs*, 107–33; Storchová, *Pulcherrimus ordo naturae* in this thematic issue.

36 Bruncvík Miletínský, *Kázání o země třesení*, B3r–B4r. Not much is known about Václav Bruncvík. His epithet suggests that he came from the northeast Bohemian town of Miletín. In his *Kázání o země třesení* (C7v), Bruncvík mentions his studies in the west Moravian town of Velké Meziříčí, where he claims to have experienced the 1590 earthquake while he was studying under Burian Stradonius (died ca. 1617) and Johannes Ursinus (died 1613), graduates of the University of Prague and Wittenberg, respectively. Bruncvík worked as a parish priest in the east Bohemian Chroustovice.

et Tempestates [Thunders and Tempests] explicitly distances himself from natural causes for the catastrophes and stresses that they are of God's making, adding the biblical quotation, *Non est malum in civitate quod Dominus non fecerit*³⁷ to support his reasoning that those who think that the catastrophes are the works of the Devil or sorcerers are "grossly mistaken".³⁸ The emphasis on these issues points to the conclusion that he is polemicising against the views of another church, most probably the Catholic Church. As already noted, no Catholic discussion of an earthquake has been preserved from the sixteenth or early seventeenth century Bohemian lands, the non-Catholic churches having dominated the region up to the 1620 Battle of White Mountain. However, there is German evidence, for example, that Jesuit scholars, among others, were deeply interested in meteorology and meteorological phenomena but elaborated on theories found in Aristotle, Seneca, and Pliny the Elder. At the same time, as believers in miracles, they tried to find a balance between natural and supernatural causes for the catastrophes. As a result, they proclaimed that God was the motivating force behind natural disasters, although sometimes he may have permitted evil spirits or demons to do the work. The latter appears to be especially true of the early Jesuit scholars of the sixteenth and turn of the seventeenth centuries.³⁹

The second decade of the seventeenth century saw an acceleration in the earthquake discourse, with three earthquakes recorded by Bohemian literary sources between 1613 and 1620. Considering that a major conflict, the Thirty Years' War, was imminent, one cannot help wondering whether this density of disastrous events mirrors reality or perhaps reflects the general mood of the Bohemian people before the impending doom of the imminent war. Some literary texts dealing with the three earthquakes provide evidence that, at least sometimes, this may have been the case,

37 Tesák Mošovský, *Tonitrua et Tempestates*, B4r–v: (There is no evil in the state not wrought by God.). For the Latin quotation, see Amos 3:6. Aquinas, *De malo* q. 1, a. 3, arg. 10. Born in Mošovce in today's Slovakia, Tesák is documented in Bohemia from 1579, when he married in Kutná Hora. Having served as a parish priest, dean and archdeacon in several Bohemian towns, he went to Prague, where from 1611 to 1617 he worked as a parish priest at the Church of St. Castullus in the Old Town. Hejnic and Martínek, *Rukověť humanistického básnictví* 5, 344; Podavka, "Tesák Mošovský, Jiří," (forthcoming).

38 Tesák Mošovský, *Tonitrua et Tempestates*, B5v–B6r: "Bývali také ještě i jiní scestného smyslu lidé a posavad se nacházejí, kteří ty a takové věci vejš připomenuté, že by od ďábla a jeho nástrojův kouzledníkův a kouzlednic pocházeti a posílány býti měly, se domnívali a podnes se tak domnívají, ale na tom velice se hrubě mejlí a žádná to pravda nebyla a není ani býti nemůže." [There used to be and still are people of a misguided opinion who thought or still think that those things discussed above come from the Devil and his instruments, i.e. sorcerers and sorceresses, who send them. In this they are grossly mistaken, since this has never been, is not, and can never be true.].

39 For more about Catholic views on meteorological phenomena, see Vermij, *Thinking on Earthquakes*, 104–13.

and that the disaster discourse was primarily a religious tool in which the event itself was secondary and interchangeable. For example, Tesák's *Tonitrua et Tempestates* deals with a hailstorm and thunder so strong that the earth shook.⁴⁰ This means that there was no proper earthquake occurring in 1613. Václav Štěfan (1565–1621), an Utraquist parish priest in Kutná Hora, in his 1615 sermon *De terrae motu, To jest O zemětřesení, kteréž se stalo na Horách Kuttnách* (De terrae motu, i.e., On the Earthquake which Occurred in Kutná Hora) admits that the earthquake was merely superficial, because the miners did not feel it.⁴¹ This admission, however, does not prevent him from predicting changes in the Church⁴² and heralding the end of the world.⁴³

Two other works about the 1615 earthquake have been preserved. The first, Σὺν τῷ θεῷ. *De motu et hiatu terrae territorii Prachensis ... kázání* [With God. A Sermon on the Earthquake and the Chasm in the Prachatice Territory], is by Zachariáš Bruncvík (ca. 1570–1634), who located the earthquake in the south Bohemian town of Prachatice, where he was working as an Utraquist priest at the time.⁴⁴ The second is an elegiac poem by the Prague University professor Johannes Campanus

40 Tesák Mošovský, *Tonitrua et Tempestates*, A6r: “Fulminis ad sonitum tellus concussa tremiscit, / Fulminis ad sonitum cuncta creata pavent.” [The earth is trembling, shaken by the sound of thunder; all creatures are frightened by the sound of thunder.].

41 Štěfan, *De terrae motu*, A4r: “Tak toto země třesení 20. Febr. povrchně šlo. Nebo havěři v dolích ho necítili...” [This earthquake of 20 February was superficial, because the miners in the mines did not feel it...]. Václav Štěfan (Stephanus), born in the northwest Bohemian town of Teplice, studied both at the University of Prague and in Wittenberg, where he was ordained a priest in 1588. After his return, he served at the Utraquist parish at Saint James' Church in Kutná Hora.

42 Štěfan, *De terrae motu*, A7r: “...aby skrze zemětřesení byly předukázány nastávající proměny v církvi.” [...to predict the coming changes in the church through the earthquake].

43 Štěfan, *De terrae motu*, A7r: “Aby bylo znamením a svědectvím skonání světa...” [For it to be a sign and testimony of the end of the world...].

44 Bruncvík was born in the east Bohemian town of Pardubice. He was ordained a priest in 1600 and later served in several Bohemian towns, including the Old Town of Prague, the northwest Bohemian town of Žatec, and Prachatice from 1614 to 1615. Little is known about his educational background, apart from the fact that he was a deacon under the University of Prague graduate Martin Galli Černovický (died 1620) and that, despite being an Utraquist, he received his ordination from the Archbishop of Prague. Hejnic and Martínek, *Rukověť humanistického básnictví* 1, 230. Bruncvík is documented as having written another sermon on the 1615 earthquake, which he situated in the south Bohemian town of Bechyně. Unfortunately, the text, *Kázání o hrozném zemětřesení v kraji Bechynském a jinde stalém* [A Sermon on the Terrible Earthquake in the Bechyně territory and elsewhere], has not been preserved, so we cannot know whether he described two events that struck both these south Bohemian towns or in fact discussed but one disaster whose location he adjusted to his and his audience's needs. For the unpreserved sermon by Bruncvík, see *Knihopis českých a slovenských tisků*, K01327, <https://knihoveda.lib.cas.cz/Record/K01327>, accessed 7 December 2024.

(1572–1622), whose Σεισμογραφία [Seismography] summarises all the main points of the disaster discourse as outlined above and, apart from its indisputable artistic value, offers no new insights into the matter.⁴⁵ Another University of Prague professor Daniel Basilius de Deutschenberg's (1585–1628) *Disputatio de terrae motu* (Disputation on the Earthquake) also shows that the discourse had its place not only in vernacular sermons and Latin poems but also in academic theses.⁴⁶ While Basilius primarily focuses on the natural causes of earthquakes as discussed by Aristotle and other ancient sources, he does not omit to mention, if only briefly and without going into much detail, that some earthquakes are caused supernaturally.⁴⁷ Clearly, the discourse was deeply rooted in non-Catholic Bohemian intellectual circles.

The earthquake discourse culminated in two 1620 works that both claim that there was a direct connection between the earthquake and the ongoing Thirty Years' War. The University of Prague alumnus Andreas Rochotius (1583–after 1622),⁴⁸ in his epic poem Σεισμογραφία *in clyti regni Boemiae* [Seismography of the Renowned Kingdom of Bohemia], goes back to the 1615 earthquake, which according to him was the reason why “the entire world is rushing into actions in which arms clatter”.⁴⁹ The poem was inspired by the most recent earthquake, that of January 1620 in the Hradec Králové⁵⁰ district, but its conclusion conveys a general message: earthquakes

45 Campanus was a professor of poetics, history, and Greek and an exceptional Bohemian poet, both in Latin and Humanist Greek. See Vaculínová, Slavíková and Jacková, “Campanus Vodnianus, Ioannes,” 219–36.

46 Basilius was a professor of physics, mathematics, and Hebrew, and also served as dean of the Arts Faculty three times during his career. See Frimmová, “Basilius de Deutchenberg,” 159–62.

47 Basilius de Deutschenberg, *Disputatio de terrae motu*, A3v and A4v.

48 Rochotius, born in the town of Partizánska Ľupča in today's Slovakia, is documented in the Lesser Town of Prague as early as 1602. He received his bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Prague in 1603 and 1610, respectively. His later life is mostly related to the east Bohemian town of Chrudim, where he settled down, having worked as a headmaster of the local school for some time. He was in close contact with the prominent Moravian politician Charles the Elder of Žerotín (1564–1636), to whom he dedicated his poetry. Škovierová, “Slovak humanist Ondrej Rochotský,” 69–87; Frimmová, “Rochotius, Andreas,” (forthcoming).

49 Rochotius, Σεισμογραφία, B2v: “Sexcentisimus Annus iit decimus vice quintus. / Pandere vicenam properabant Februa Lunam, / Cum subito gemitum dedit horrida murmure tellus. / Dices! nil nobis laevi tremor attulit ille: / Nil tulit, ach! status hic rerum testatur abunde, / Totus ad Armisonos ruit orbis concitus actus.” [The year 1615 had arrived and the twentieth day of February was about to open, when suddenly the earth wailed with a terrible rumbling. You may say that earthquake did us no harm. No harm? Oh! The state of the world bears ample witness, the entire world was roused and now is rushing into actions in which arms clatter.].

50 Rochotius, Σεισμογραφία, A2r: “Nunc, quo visa quati Tellusque vicina tremore est / motaque districtu Grecenosi viscera terrae / Scaevaque quae tales sunt juge sequuta tremores / Mense cano Jani.” [I sing of how the nearby ground was seen shaking and the inner parts of the earth in the Hradec district moved and of what evils followed such tremors in the month of January.].

bring wars.⁵¹ Finally, Havel Phaeton Žalanský (1567–1621),⁵² a parish priest based at St. Giles Church in Prague, suggested by the mere title of his work, *O sedmi ranách Božích těžkých a velikých, které mezi jinými válku Českou předešly a hlásaly... traktátů sedm* (Seven Treatises about Seven Grave and Great Plagues from God which, among other things, Preceded and Heralded the Bohemian War), that whatever disasters had struck the Bohemian lands in the preceding years, they were all warnings pertaining to the Thirty Years' War.

Conclusion

The extant Bohemian literary sources of the pre-White Mountain period discuss at least four earthquakes to have afflicted the Bohemian lands between 1590 and 1620. They are depicted across various genres, including news, sermons, and sermon-like treatises, epic and elegiac poems, and a university disputation. Czech and Latin are used in these texts, Latin being reserved for the poems and the university disputation, while the news and sermons are in Czech. The depictions of each event differ in detail due to the fact that none of the texts aim at historical accuracy but bear a strong religious message. Therefore, it transpires that earthquakes were not only a newsworthy subject, to be addressed immediately after they had happened and soon forgotten, but that they were considered an example to humanity and discussed long afterwards. The pre-White Mountain Bohemian lands were dominated by non-Catholic denominations. As such, most of the texts about earthquakes were written by Utraquists who were either graduates of the Utraquist University of Prague or were otherwise connected to this milieu. One extant text was written by a Lutheran pastor, and another by an Utraquist priest who, however, strongly sympathised with Calvinist views. No Catholic account of an earthquake has been preserved from the period. As far as the earthquake discourse is concerned, no major differences can

Rochotius never states the year of this earthquake, nor can it be found anywhere in the volume, since the date was omitted from the printer's impressum. However, it may be conjectured as 1620, since in accordance with Phaeton Žalanský, Rochotius locates the earthquake in the Hradec Králové district.

- 51 Rochotius, Σεισμογραφία, B1r: “Proelia quae taleis sunt jube sequuta tremores / Commemorare lubet paucis.” [I would like to say a few words about the wars that followed these tremors.]. Rochotius, Σεισμογραφία, B2a: “Sic praesaga fuit terrae trepidatio Belli...” [In the same way, the shaking of the earth was a foreboding of war...].
- 52 Phaeton Žalanský studied at the University of Prague and at the Calvinist *gymnasium illustre* in Zerbst, where he may have even been ordained priest in 1592. He worked as a parish priest in several Bohemian towns, most notably in Kutná Hora and Prague, and is documented to have had conflicts with his parishioners due to his radical Calvinist views. See Malura, “Phaëton Žalanský, Havel” (forthcoming).

be observed in the accounts of the three non-Catholic denominations, these clearly having shared many ideas. Thus, according to them, earthquakes may have natural causes but since nature is ruled by God, they are caused by divine power and are purely God's rather than the Devil's or sorcerers' doing. Following the crisis discourse at the time, several functions were attributed to earthquakes. First, an irate God sends an earthquake to show his anger at humanity's transgressions. At the same time, it is a display of his power over the world and over all its powerful people. Next, an earthquake is a punishment for impiety; it is supposed to frighten the impious and call them to penitence. Finally, an earthquake is God's warning of further catastrophes to come and is a perfect simulation of Judgement Day. It is noteworthy that some of the texts also consider an earthquake to be an expression of God's kindness, who in this way shows the pious that he can hear their prayers. The most important feature of the earthquake discourse is the notion that earthquakes come in clusters together with other disasters that befall humanity. Be they natural disasters, such as floods, plagues, droughts, famines, or civic disasters, i.e., wars, murders, and robberies, they all have, among other things, the same function of God's warning, which was also ascribed to celestial signs, such as comets and solar and lunar eclipses. Therefore, although the earliest Bohemian earthquake discourse dates back to 1590, its origins can be traced to the first Bohemian graduates of Wittenberg University of the 1540s and 1550s who adapted Philip Melanchthon's teaching on astronomical phenomena for the University of Prague milieu.

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