



The lands of the Bohemian crown during the reign of Charles IV, 1348-78

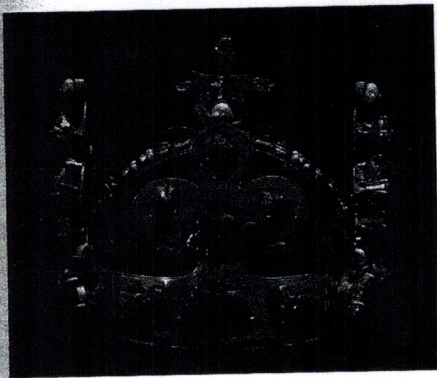
II

Navel of the Earth (Charles IV–Václav IV)

The Bohemian king Charles IV (1316–78) was the son of Jan of Luxembourg and Queen Eliška (Elizabeth) of the Přemyslid dynasty. Christened Václav after his Přemyslid ancestors, he became Charles at his confirmation in France. Like his uncle and host, the French king Charles IV, he modeled himself on no less than Charlemagne. Educated in Paris, with the future pope Clement VI as his tutor, his political career was meteoric. In 1355 he was crowned in Rome as Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV. But instead of restoring Rome to its ancient splendor, Charles decided to rebuild Prague into the likeness of a second Rome. Why Prague? Charles's choice was very shrewd: in the previous century the power of the Bohemian king had increased at the same pace as the centralized empire declined. The Bohemian kingdom became eventually the largest and best-organized state in central Europe.

In 1342 the Prague bishopric was promoted to an archbishopric, and Bohemia and Moravia thus became ecclesiastically subordinated directly

to Rome, further loosening their German ties. After gaining control of Burgundy in 1365, Charles personally ruled all the kingdoms of the Holy Roman Empire. Abandoning the utopian ideal of a universal Holy Roman Empire, he focused on the future of his own dynasty, which he linked firmly with Bohemia. At thirty, Charles began to write his autobiography, *Vita Caroli*, in Latin. He presents his youth as a series of divine interventions, and tries to integrate Czech history into a universal history conceived as the realization of God's plans.



The crown of the Czech kings. Charles IV had it made for his coronation in 1347; it is pure gold (21 to 22 carat) and decorated with precious stones and pearls. From the time it was made, it has been called the Saint Václav (Wenceslas) Crown, because Václav was the Czech "eternal ruler" in heaven; his successors only represent him on earth. © Picture Library of Prague Castle, photo by Jan Gloc.



St. Vitus Cathedral from the east, in an 1830 etching by Josef Šembera. The modern capital of the Czech Republic is still dominated by buildings of the Holy Roman emperor and Bohemian king Charles IV, and St. Vitus Cathedral still looms above the city. After Vitus's martyrdom in 306, his body was buried in Rome. In the ninth century, it reached Saxony, and Vitus became the main saint of the Saxon emperors. In the early tenth century, the Czech duke Václav (Wenceslas) received a relic of the arm of the saint and founded the first church of St. Vitus at Prague Castle. In 1344 Emperor Charles founded the present cathedral, built by Matyáš (Mathias) from Arras and Petr Parléř (Peter Parler). Charles IV secured the head of the saint from Saxony; this important relic marked Prague's cathedral as the center of the Holy Roman Empire. From J. Šembera and G. Döbler, eds., *Malerische Darstellung von Prag*, vol. 4 (Prague: A. Borrosch, 1830).

Under Charles IV, Bohemia was the center of European politics, and remained there until the end of the sixteenth century, when its great prestige was suggested by a saying: "The Roman crown belongs on the Czech one." Anyone with ambitions to become the Holy Roman emperor had first to be king of Bohemia. In Prague one still encounters Charles everywhere in the names of institutions he founded and buildings he erected—Charles University (the first university in Central Europe), Charles Bridge, and Charles Square. This huge square was the center of the New Town, which was founded to double the size of Prague and make the city the true capital of Europe. Karlštejn, Charles's splendid castle, was built a half day's ride from Prague to protect the Bohemian and imperial crown jewels. At the end of the



*Panorama of Prague, with Charles Bridge and St. Vitus Cathedral at Prague Castle (detail), by V. Morstadt, etching, 1830. The bridge named for Charles IV was founded in 1357. The Old Town Bridge Tower boasts rich sculptural decoration celebrating Charles's dynasty. One of the most technologically daring projects in medieval Prague, it remains one of the most beloved. The tower was conceived as a ceremonial gate to Prague Castle on the other side of the river. This and the preceding figure demonstrate that the historic appearance of Prague survived the nineteenth-century building boom that compromised almost all other European capitals. The only significant difference in the old prints is the absence of the western half of the cathedral, which dates from 1873–1929; its construction reflects the high political ambitions in the Czech lands of that era. From C. A. Richter, "Nach der Natur gezeichnet von Vincenz Morstadt," in J. Schembera and G. Döbler, eds., *Malerische Darstellung von Prag*, vol. 2 (Prague: A. Borrosch, 1830).*

fourteenth century, Czech gothic art and architecture reached their peak and began to be imitated abroad.

In Charles's time, Bohemia and Moravia prospered, and Czechs still venerate him as *otec vlasti* (father of their country). The population may have risen as high as three million, but ethnic Czechs probably did not form much more than 60 percent. About 25 percent of the population was German, living for the most part in the border regions, but there was also a very important community of German burghers in Prague and Brno. Jews, too, had a special position among minorities living in the Czech kingdom.

In fourteenth-century Bohemia, *The Ointment Seller* was one of the first Czech theater pieces. In this text, mixing Czech and Latin, we find a combination of spirituality, comedy, and vulgarity, prefiguring the Czech literary tradition of later centuries. From the beginning of the fifteenth century we have also the first examples of ethical writings influenced by Italian humanism—the German *The Ploughman of Bohemia* and the Czech *Tkadleček* (Little Weaver). Moral philosophy would play, alongside the theater, a very important role in Czech culture.