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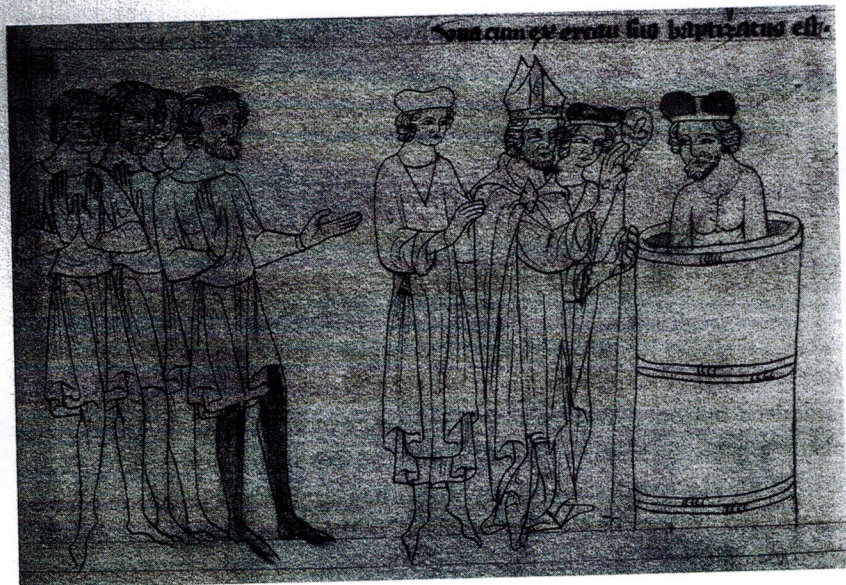
Between Myth and History

(The Přemyslid Dynasty)

Romans called the Celtic tribes in the Czech lands *Boii*, and from this name is derived not only "Bohemia" and the German word *Böhmen*, but perhaps also the name for Bavaria. At the end of the first millennium BCE, the Celts died out in the Czech lands, followed by the Germans, who left the country around 530 CE. Czechs and Moravians arrived in East Central Europe soon after, together with Slovaks, Poles, and other western Slavs. They supposedly called the land *Čechy*, after a mythical ancestor. In the nineteenth century, the term "Czech" began to be used to distinguish ethnic Czechs in Bohemia and Moravia from their German and Jewish compatriots.

In the Czech lands nomadic pagans soon metamorphosed into settlements of Christians, led by rulers in the rough castle town of Praha (Prague). This history is fragmentary and fraught with the dynastic clashes and murderous ambition so often romanticized in the propaganda of nation building. There is no doubt, however, that the establishment of the Carolingian empire in the second half of the eighth century was of crucial importance for the future of the Czech lands. Central Europe was actually created by Charlemagne, together with the first Western European empire. Western Europe needed a chain of vassal states to protect its inland borders, a huge buffer zone separating it from Eastern Europe.

The earliest historical accounts—and rich archeological records—come from southern Moravia. There, in the ninth century, the Great Moravian Empire was established, adopting Christianity and expanding into southwestern Slovakia and Bohemia. In 880 a papal decree describes the archbishopric of Great Moravia, with Methodius as its head, and the Slavic liturgical language, then used alongside Latin.¹ Methodius and his brother Cyril—Greeks from Thessalonica, where both Slavic and Greek were spoken—had been dispatched by the Byzantine emperor as missionaries to the Great Moravian Empire. The brothers founded the Slavic literary tradition by translating Christian liturgical texts into Old Slavonic. In 863–67, Cyril wrote an important



The first historically documented Czech ruler is Bořivoj, of the house of Přemysl (ca. 852–ca. 889), grandfather of Saint Václav. Bořivoj converted to Christianity, which, in time, brought literacy, learning, and monumental art and architecture to Bohemia. The picture shows Bořivoj's baptism, as depicted in the Bible of Velislav, produced in Bohemia sometime before 1350. From K. Stejskal, *Velislav Biblia Picta*, facsimile in National Library, Prague, xxxiii ms 23 c 124 (Prague: Sumptibus Pragopress, 1970).

prologue to his translations of the four Gospels, the first poem in Old Church Slavonic.

Only in the tenth century did political power move to Prague, after the Great Moravian Empire was destroyed in 906 by a Magyar invasion. From Prague to Mikulčice, the presumed center of the earliest western Slavic empire, is today only two and a half hours' drive. But in Czech history this topographical shift meant a leap from the edge of the Byzantine Empire, Greek culture, and Old Church Slavonic into the orbit of Latin and the Roman Empire, which was reinstalled in 962. Old Church Slavonic survives in the song "Hospodine pomiluj ny" ("Lord, have mercy on us"), still sung in Czech churches. Not only does it contain Old Slavic words like *pomiluj*, it does not include any word that might not have originated in that language.²

In the creation of the Czech state, the crucial role was played by Duke Boleslav I (935–72), at first adversary and later ally of the first Holy Roman emperor, Otto I. Boleslav I is called "the Cruel" because he assassinated his ruler and older brother, the later sanctified Václav I (ca. 907–35). His reason was that he opposed not his brother's Christian zeal but Václav's fealty to the

Germans. Boleslav began to rule Bohemia (and perhaps also Moravia) from a network of castles, extracting taxes to maintain his powerful armed forces. We have an eyewitness report of Boleslav and the Slavs of his time from a Jewish trader who visited Prague in the tenth century.

The ambitious vision of Boleslav I was later realized in the Golden Bull of Sicily of September 26, 1212, wherein Emperor Frederick II affirmed the Přemysl Otakar I (1198–1230) as the king, rather than the duke, of Bohemia and recognized the independent position of the Bohemian kingdom in the empire. From that time onward the election of the Bohemian king was an internal matter, but the Czech ruler, as one of the foremost imperial princes, had a key position in electing Holy Roman emperors.

The rise of Prague's rulers led them to claim a respectable past. Cosmas of Prague (ca. 1045–1125), who wrote the first Czech chronicle, played down the Moravian roots of the Czech state and replaced them with a founding myth starring the soothsayer Princess Libuše and Přemysl the Ploughman. The story, significantly set west of Prague, suggested an exceptional dynasty and a state without equal. Not long after Cosmas finished his chronicle, the Prague-centered myth of Přemysl the Ploughman was painted on the wall of the Přemyslid rotunda in Znojmo, one of the oldest "historical" paintings in Europe. Following the collapse of the ancient Roman Empire, the visual arts survived in only a few places; monumental architecture, sculpture, and painting began to revive only in the twelfth century. Czechs were active participants in this revival.

What made possible this rapid acculturation of Czech lands? The reasons are manifold, but monastic orders certainly played a role. In 1142, the first Cistercian monastery in the Bohemian kingdom was founded in Sedlec, near Kutná Hora. Unlike the Benedictines, who preferred mountain sites, the Cistercians set up their monasteries in fertile valleys, because they preached economic self-sufficiency, not only to live in isolation but also to create a "Divine Order" in the landscape through their rational planning and perfectly organized work. A quick spread of technological innovations was secured through the Cistercian ideal of unity. Cistercians across Europe worked and lived uniformly and prayed in identical monastery churches, all consecrated to the Virgin Mary. The Cistercian model, centered on the mother house of the order, Cîteaux in Burgundy, linked Bohemia with the economic and cultural heartland of Europe.

Colonization of the densely forested country began in the eleventh century, and the foundation of cities in the thirteenth century brought an influx of foreigners, above all Germans, but also Jews. The Czech glosses in Bohemian Hebrew manuscripts are among the oldest examples of the Czech

language. Bohemian Hebrew literature was soon more extensive than that written in Latin, which had become the sole literary language of Bohemia after the Old Slavonic culture died out. Of the Prague Hebrew texts of the twelfth century, only titles are preserved, but from the thirteenth century we have several works of the local Talmudic school, influenced by French Judaic tradition.

Germans were invited by Czech rulers as early as the reign of Otakar I. German farmers settled in the mountains at the periphery of the Bohemian kingdom; German miners and craftspeople populated the new towns. German colonization peaked in the thirteenth century, and the colonists profoundly changed their new homeland. The German legal code (*ius teutonicum*), which suited the requirements of a market economy better than the indigenous law codes, prevailed in villages and towns throughout Bohemia and Moravia.

In the thirteenth century, silver was discovered in Bohemia, spawning a city around one of the richest European mines of that time. Kutná Hora (literally, Cowl Mountain, after miners' hoods), soon began to match Prague in size, wealth, and political importance. Around 1300 Václav II centralized minting in his kingdom at the so-called Italian Court in Kutná Hora, named for the Italian coin minters who worked there. Here the Prague *groschen* (from Latin *denarius grossus*, i.e., thick) were produced. They were one of the most popular coins in Central Europe until the beginning of the fifteenth century. Václav II also issued the *Ius regale montanorum*, the first written mining code, which was based on ancient Roman law.

In Dante's *Divine Comedy* "Ottacchero, the mighty Bohemian," is modeled on Otakar II; he and his kingdom are commemorated (*Purgatory* 7, line 100). While the political ambitions of the thirteenth-century kings brought fame and prosperity to the Bohemian kingdom, they also created new problems. As might be expected, one of the first literary works written in the Czech language is the militantly anti-German and xenophobic *Dalimil Chronicle* of the early 1300s. At that time Germans had influenced the Czech royal court to adopt French chivalric culture. The chronicle's anonymous author, presumably a nobleman, urges Czech kings to rely exclusively on Czechs. He finishes by recommending that Czech aristocrats elect kings from the local people, as advised by "Libuše, who was never mistaken."

The last Přemyslid on the Bohemian throne was Queen Eliška (Elizabeth), who married Jan (John), son of Henry VII of the Luxembourg dynasty, who was the German king and Holy Roman emperor. Jan of Luxembourg signed the Visegrad Treaty in 1335, a political milestone in the early history of Central Eastern Europe. In this treaty the kings of Bohemia, Poland, and

Hungary committed themselves to mutual cooperation, attempting through diplomacy to avoid military conflicts. These commitments were renewed in 1991 by the leaders of Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, who later became members of the European Union. They still met as the Visegrad Four, although all four states' borders had changed countless times in the previous millennium.

Notes

1. The Pontifical Letter "Industriae Tuae" of John II, in *Registrum Vaticanum* 1, fol. 99v-102v.
2. "Hospodine pomiluj ny" is a vernacular version of one of the most important prayers of Christian liturgy, composed in the second half of the tenth century. The first explicit mention of the song was in 1249, when it was sung to welcome King Václav I to the Prague Castle church. Charles IV incorporated it into the coronation ritual of Bohemian kings, but it was not written down until 1397. The concluding Greek phrase, *Kyrie eleison* (Lord, have mercy on us) is misrepresented as *Krles*.