

Description of Prague during the Time of Rudolph II

Pierre Bergeron (1585–1638)

In 1600 Pierre Bergeron arrived at Prague in the service of the ambassador Louis Potier de Gesvres, who was sent to Rudolph II by the French king Henry IV. Three years later Bergeron returned as an ordinary tourist—moreover, as a burgher without aristocratic contacts, though he did have an excellent humanistic education. His report of 1603 describes places and monuments that can still be visited four centuries later.¹

The imperial palace, a very extensive building in the old style, looms high above the city. The main façade, from which the whole city, river, bridge, and surrounding plain can be seen, faces south. In this castle is a very spacious hall, in which it is allowed to walk freely, as in the hall of the palace in Paris. . . . By the castle there are an enormous number of buildings where the emperor and his brothers reside. The emperor himself almost never goes out in public, and so he can be seen only very rarely, except by newly arrived ambassadors who come with their retinue to pay their compliments. He speaks with them as a rule in Italian or Spanish.

Inside the castle is a stable, which must be one of the best equipped anywhere, because there are always about three hundred horses from all possible countries and they are among the finest in the world. There is also a menagerie with lions, leopards, civets, and a rook as white as snow. There is also a hall for ballgames in the French style. The great hall was once the throne room of the Czech kings; from it the whole city and the bridge can be seen. Around nine or ten in the morning many gentlemen promenade there, and there are also countless shops. To the east of the castle, in the direction of the garden, there is at the same level a space in the shape of a terrace two hundred paces in length; only at this appointed place and nowhere else is it possible to fight duels without penalty.

To visit the gardens one must leave the castle and cross the moat by a

covered wooden bridge with a small secret corridor above. Through this the emperor secretly visits his gardens, so that no one sees him, while he sees everyone he chooses. Similar galleries he has arranged through the whole palace and in the three gardens. In the middle there is an orchard, which is composed of fruit trees of selected species. There is also a space where oranges and figs are cultivated. In the last garden there is a bronze fountain that plays like wind pipes [perhaps an organ]: the water springing at its top falls into the basin in such an ordered way that it produces a harmonious sound similar to that instrument.

By the garden is a charming palace with several bronze statues, where the emperor sometimes goes for pleasure. In the great hall there is a group of statues of Orythia being kidnapped by Boreas, and also renderings of two horses of an Indian breed, both so remarkably colored that they beggar description; the animals were once given as gifts to the emperor, but then they perished. One horse was whitish and the other a pale sand passing to unusual shades of color. On the ground floor arcade, in the galleries of the summer palace, one can see countless spheres, globes, astrolabes, quadrants, and thousands of other mathematical instruments, all made from bronze and tin and fantastic in size. There are analemas, quadrants, spheres, dioptries, and Ptolemaic scales for the exact determination of height, distance, and constellations of the sun and stars. They are divided into many smaller parts and are on a scale of sixty. There are also many instruments for the measurement of weight.

All of this was made during the time of the great Tycho Brahe, the Danish mathematician who was a guest of the emperor for a period of time. In Prague, Brahe made interesting and exact astronomical observations and it was also here where he died several years earlier. In one room of the Belvedere we can behold his portrait, in which he is shown with a bust of Euclid in his hand; furthermore, next to one of the large instruments, there are likenesses of the Spanish king Alphonse X, Charles V, Rudolph II, and the Danish king Friedrich II. Ptolemy, Albateginus, Copernicus, and Tycho himself are also depicted.

In the garden of the summerhouse, a very fine covered hall of extraordinary length and a columned portico serve for ballgames. In the populous and enormously extended city of Prague there are many magnificent aristocratic palaces. . . .

The emperor is . . . the first among Christian rulers; he took over the rights of the Roman Empire and his task is to defend the church and faith, the peace and general welfare of all the Christian world. Besides seven electors, four archbishops, seven abbots, great masters of German and Jerusalem knights, the empire has also thirty-four dukes, among whom the archduke of Aus-

tria has the highest rank, and among them is the king of Denmark, as the duke of Holstein. Then there are marquesses, landgraves, princes, barons, and free cities. Once there were ninety-six of these cities; today there are only sixty and their duty is to contribute two-fifths of what the assemblies decided upon. Some of these cities are called imperial, and pay the emperor a tax of fifteen thousand golden coins. Even though it is estimated that revenues from the entire empire amount to over seven million golden coins, the inhabitants are not so burdened and afflicted by taxes as in France or Italy.

Note

1. Cf. François-George Pariset, "Pierre Bergeron à Prague (1600): Relations artistiques entre les Pays-Bas et l'Italie à la Renaissance," in *Études d'histoire de l'art publiés par l'Institut historique belge de Rome* (1980), 4:185-98; Eliška Fučíková, ed., *Tři francouzští kavalíři v rudolfinské Praze: Jacques Esprincharde, Pierre Bergeron, François de Bassompierre* (Prague: Panorama, 1989), 78-89.