IV

Struggles for Court, City, Country (Vladislav II Jagiellon–Rudolph II)

The fragmented feudal society of the Middle Ages, with its agricultural economy and focus on religion, came to be increasingly dominated by central political institutions, with an urban, commercial economy and lay patronage of education, the arts, and music. This so-called Renaissance (French for "rebirth"), began not in France but in the flourishing cities of north-central Italy in the fourteenth century. During the next two centuries it spread to the rest of Europe, reviving interest in classical Greek and Roman models in art and architecture, philosophy, and literature—with countless local variations that included the Prague Royal Court and Czech and Moravian cities. The invention of the printing press contributed to a quick dissemination of innovative ideas. Already in 1476 a printing house was established in Pilsen; other publishers soon followed, mostly in Prague.

From their very beginning, Czech cities were to a certain degree self-governing, but their dependency on local sovereigns showed itself in the absence of town halls, which appeared much later than in Western Europe; the first was established in 1338, in the Old Town in Prague. In the sixteenth century, free royal towns such as Prague stagnated. Meanwhile, client towns prospered under the support and protection of their aristocratic lords, as in Český Krumlov, in southern Bohemia, seat of the mighty Rožmberks, which still retains its Renaissance aspect today.

The prosperity of client towns stemmed from the advent of aristocratic businessmen who at the end of the fifteenth century appeared also in the Czech lands. The Rožmberks enjoyed the services of Jakub Krčín of Jelčany (1535–1604), the foremost Czech Renaissance economist, manager, and engineer, who centralized the administration of the Rožmberk domain. For them he created a versatile economic structure; in a very short time he promoted vegetable production, especially grain, animal husbandry (cattle and sheep), brewing, and flour mills. Krčín's fish ponds, constructed next to south Bohemian cities, were integrated into their economic infrastructure and fortifications, but from the beginning they also served as recreation areas. At Třeboň,

Town Hall of Olomouc, Moravia, built in 1420 as one of the first Czech town halls. In 1591 the Renaissance loggia was added to outdo the town hall of its rival city, Brno. New town halls in the style of the Italian Renaissance, or spectacularly reconstructed Gothic ones, attest to the fact that Czech towns prospered in the years 1520–1620. Used by permission of Jan Bažant.

for instance, Krčín constructed a long embankment (1,525 meters) between the city and his pond, aptly named "Svět" (the world), on which he planted an alley of oaks which still serves also as a city promenade.

Systems of ponds linked by artificial canals were established also in regions east of Prague, around Poděbrady and Pardubice. In Moravia, pond basins were set up in the regions of Šumperk, Mikulov, Hodonín, and Znojmo. Products of economic activities at aristocratic domains in Czech lands began to be exported—grain, glass, metals, and linen produced in the northern border regions. Imported articles included salt, spices, southern fruits, livestock, metal products, and precious textiles. The basis of the Czech economy was mining and refinement of metals. Czech pewter rivaled that of English provenance. From 1519 the silver thaler, minted at Jáchymov, quickly established itself in international trade and later gave its name to the American dollar.

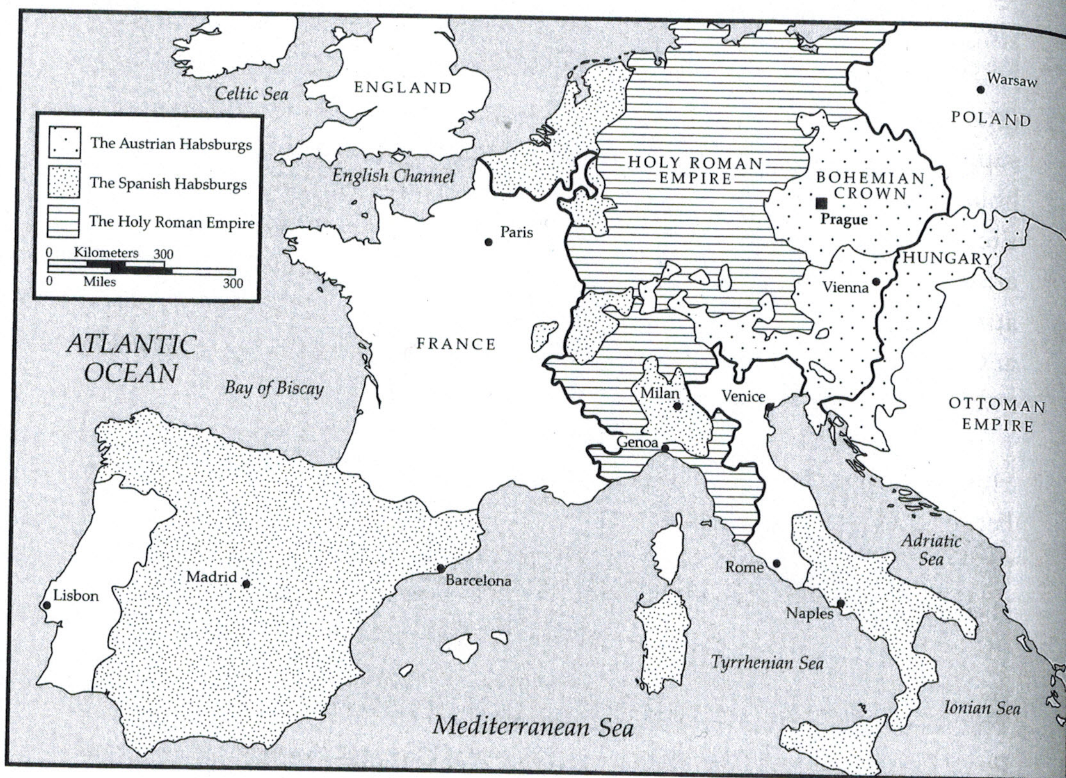
From 1471, the Bohemian kingdom was ruled by Vladislav II and his son Ludvík (Louis) from the Polish House of Jagiellon, but the actual power was in the hands of aristocratic landholders like the Rožmberks. In 1526 the

kingdom of Bohemia passed to Catholic Habsburgs, and Ferdinand I moved swiftly to establish royal power, which led to bloody conflicts with his Protestant Czech subjects. In the spring of 1547 the king took advantage of the suppressed rebellion to campaign against the privileges of the Estates (landholders and cities) as well as the Czech religious reformation. Throughout Europe the movement toward absolutist rule spread, and the Czech landed aristocracy and city burghers lost one position after another. The political atmosphere in the Czech lands was again charged with religious fanaticism and nationalism. The Habsburg courts became the center stage where old tensions and new energies were played out.

The Danube Empire, embracing Austrian lands and the kingdoms of the Hungarian and Bohemian crown, was an important step forward, because Ferdinand I (1526–64) founded it as a centralized bureaucratic state. The king personally never led his soldiers to attack; he was much more interested in a new type of army—state scribes. His victories were fought by efficient administrators and rigorous clerks equipped with pens, inkpots, and tons of paper. In Ferdinand's state, written documents definitively replaced oral agreements. The main institutions he founded and with which he ran state affairs—the Privy Council, Court Chamber, and Court War Council—remained functionally the same until the mid-nineteenth century. There can be no better proof of Ferdinand's foresight and managerial skills.

When the Habsburg Rudolph II became Holy Roman emperor (1576–1611), he moved his court from Vienna to Prague, which once again became a political and cultural capital. With an estimated sixty thousand inhabitants it was the largest city in Central Europe. Deeply eccentric, to say the least, Rudolph II had a great deal of intellectual curiosity and interest in the arts—and in the sciences, from the astronomical to the occult. He invited the best artists of the time, the most adventurous scientists, and the most colorful charlatans to his court. John Dee, famous English astrologist, alchemist, and magician, arrived in 1584 with his assistant, Edward Kelly. Some historians speculate that in the Prague court it was known they were in fact secret agents of Queen Elizabeth I—which would explain why Rudolph, so passionately addicted to the occult sciences, received Dee very coldly. The German Oswald Croll (born ca. 1580), another alchemist in Rudolph's services, was also probably a spy, in this case of his former lord, Christian I, the Protestant prince of Anhalt-Bernburg.

Rudolph II was a great collector, amassing in his brand-new palace at Prague Castle collections of ancient sculpture, modern painting, and natural curiosities. Unfortunately, while Rudolph indulged his interests and art and science expanded, he paid little attention to governing his restive empire. By



The Habsburg Empire, circa 1557

1608, given his gradually increasing melancholia and fits of madness, he was forced to cede the reign of Austria, Hungary, and Moravia to his ambitious brother Matthias, and three years later, the Bohemian crown as well.

While Catholics and Protestants were battling, and monarchs were trying to tame the rebellious Estates, people were pursuing their own interests, which were surprisingly multifarious. Czechs began to journey abroad, and Prague, as a true cosmopolis, became very attractive to foreigners. In 1568 Philippe de Monte had entered into the service of Emperor Maximilian II as the head of the court music ensemble in Vienna, and then moved with Emperor Rudolph II to Prague. In his time de Monte's works were published by the best European printers, but only recently has he begun to be acknowledged as one of the most talented composers of the late Renaissance; certainly he was the most prolific (he wrote more than a thousand madrigals). The most famous scholar at Rudolph's court was the German astronomer Johannes Kepler, the acknowledged key figure in the so-called Copernican Revolution. He is best known for discovering the law of planetary motion, that is, that the planets move in elliptical orbits around the sun. With his discoveries he founded the science of astrophysics.

The Royal Summer Palace, Prague Castle, 1537–63, was built by the Italian Paolo della Stella for Ferdinand I, the first Habsburg on the throne of the Bohemian kings. After Paolo's death in 1552, a local architect, Bonifác Wolmut, added the second story and high roof with a conspicuously northern Renaissance double curvature. The building is one of the first echoes of the Italian Renaissance north of the Alps, and its architectural conception and rich sculptural decoration were meant to represent the political ambitions of Ferdinand, who became Holy Roman emperor in 1558. It is one of the earliest examples of the revival of the suburban villa of ancient Rome. The decorative stone reliefs use ancient Roman imagery inspired above all by Virgil's *Aeneid* to celebrate Ferdinand as the second Jupiter and predestined ruler of the world. Used by permission of Jan Bažant.

Maize (*Frumentum indicum* or Indian corn), engraving from *Herbarz: Ginak Bylinář* by Pietro Andrea Mattioli. Mattioli came to Prague as a personal physician of Archduke Ferdinand, son of King Ferdinand I and governor of Bohemia. While there, Mattioli began a fruitful collaboration with the printer Jiří Melantrich of Aventinum. In 1544 Mattioli published in Italian his first edition of the work of Pedanius Dioscorides, an ancient Greek who founded medical botany around the year 60. From 1555 on, Mattioli's editions of Pedanius were illustrated with excellent woodcuts by Giorgio Liberali and Wolfgang Meyerpeck. Mattioli was not the first to use prints to illustrate descriptions of flowers, but his editions of Dioscorides, with their bulky commentaries, were translated into many languages and appeared in many editions. What made them the most widely read books on botany of the time were not only the illustrations but also Mattioli's expertise. He was the first, for instance, to suggest the American origin of maize, which immediately after 1492 established itself in Asia, Africa, and Europe, where it was known as Turkish wheat or grain. Mattioli derived his information from Fernández de Oviedo, *Historia general y natural de las Indias*, 1535, bk. 2, chap. 2. Image from Pietro Andrea Mattioli, *Herbarz: Ginak Bylinář* (in Czech) (Prague: G. Melantrich, 1562), bk. 2, chap. 11, illus. 93.

Some of the issues hotly discussed in Prague were, however, very old—such as the status of the Jewish wife. Jakob Polak, a rabbi in Prague at the beginning of the sixteenth century, repeated that under no circumstances could a wife remarry without the written consent of her husband or a document proclaiming him dead. This problem (*agunot*) had been discussed often in earlier times, and is still a burning issue in the modern state of Israel. In 1594 Polak's text was published under the title *Teshuva al aguna–pesak* (Responsum concerning a deserted wife) with a commentary by Rabbi Löw, the legendary creator of Golem, another marvel of Rudolphine Prague.

Tycho Brahe, appointed in 1599 as the court's imperial mathematician and sometime astrologer, informed Rudolph that the emperor shared a horoscope with his favorite lion cub, a gift from the Sultan of Turkey. In 1612, deposed from the throne and ill, Rudolph learned of the death of the lion, Otakar. He closeted himself, refusing his doctors' attention. Three days later, he died.