

3 King Foreigner and *Pater Patriae*

When political legitimacy depended on the right of descent, the extinction of a ruling dynasty spelled trouble. During the four centuries of Přemyslid rule, however, the Czechs created a state with enough territorial and institutional stability to weather these problems. Beginning with the later Přemyslids and continuing under succeeding dynasties, a political system emerged based on estates (lords, knights, towns, and sometimes clergy), giving the Bohemian crownlands their characteristic political structure for the next several centuries. During those centuries, the fluctuating fortunes of the realm would also provide much material for later generations to shape into the historical myth-images of golden ages and times of darkness, of “a nation great in glory and suffering.”¹ The first years after Václav III inclined to the latter image.

BOHEMIA UNDER THE LUXEMBURGS: MEDIEVAL HIGH-WATER MARK

After Václav III's death, his sisters Anna and Eliška represented the legitimate Přemyslid line. The Czech nobles preferred Anna's husband, Henry of Carinthia, but Albrecht of Habsburg, King of the

Romans, forced them to accept his son, Rudolf. Rudolf (1306–1307) died the year after his election, whereupon the Bohemian crown went to Henry (1307–1310), but his reliance on the towns and armed support from Carinthia and Meissen made him unpopular. Finally a group of nobles and church leaders approached Henry VII of Luxemburg, King of the Romans since Albrecht's murder in 1308. The Czechs had a friend in the Luxemburg camp, the archbishop of Mainz, who had been Václav II's chancellor. After complex negotiations, Eliška Přemyslovna agreed to marry Henry's son John. In 1310, John's army drove Henry of Carinthia out of Prague, and a year later John was crowned King of Bohemia.

John of Luxemburg: King Foreigner

As Bohemian king, John of Luxemburg (1310–1346) left behind mixed impressions. Coming to the throne as a youth, unable to speak the language, faced with a powerful and self-confident nobility, and married for reasons of state to a proud, passionate, and impetuous queen who saw herself as representing the native dynastic traditions, John never felt at home in the Bohemian crownlands. Instead, he used his position to advance the interests of the house of Luxemburg on the tournament grounds and battlefields of all Europe.²

At the start of his reign, John confirmed important political and fiscal rights to the Czech nobility in an inaugural diploma.³ Nevertheless, the nobles and their new king soon clashed, with the nobility dividing into two competing camps. Eliška entered the rivalries for power, and so did the burghers of Prague, seeking political influence to match their wealth. Into this mare's nest of ambitions John intervened so ineptly that the nobles united against him, and only the intercession of the new Roman king, the Wittelsbach Ludwig of Bavaria, secured a compromise settlement between the king and the nobility at Domažlice in 1318.

Contemporary sources echo the turmoil among the great in the kingdom. The Latin chronicle of Zbraslav abbey supports the crown, while Cosmas's chronicle and the *Alexandreida* emphasize the rights of the native Czech lords and the Czech language against the German-speaking nobles and the town patricians. Another early fourteenth-century Czech source, the *Kronika Boleslavská*, insists that the "true Czechs" (the nobles) represent the whole nation, and that the king should rule in harmony with them. The author expresses such anti-German views that the chronicle influenced Czech national consciousness down to the nineteenth century.⁴

John returned to Luxemburg shortly after the Domažlice agreement. Thereafter, the nobility usually accepted the king's requests for exceptional special taxes, while the king allowed them to administer the kingdom. The result threatened to weaken the king's independent power drastically, a threat increased by John's habit of pawning his own royal domains to the great nobles in return for ready cash. A contemporary chronicler wrote that "during [John's] absence the Czech kingdom enjoys greater peace than during his presence," because he only visited his realm "in order to extract money by force from the whole population of the Czech kingdom, take it away with him, and fruitlessly waste it in foreign countries."⁵

John's "fruitless" diplomatic and military efforts did have some value to the Bohemian crownlands. He added Eger (in Czech, Cheb) to his possessions in 1322, Upper Lusatia from 1319 to 1329, and in 1335, the wealthy town and duchy of Breslau in Silesia. Around it John grouped several other Silesian principalities as vassal territories.⁶ John clashed with the Habsburgs and the emperor over control of Tyrol and northern Italy, but before the Luxemburgs withdrew in 1333, his first-born son, Charles, had gained valuable experience there.

Charles was born in 1316 in Prague. Sent in 1323 to the French court, he became familiar with the culture and politics of the Capetian monarchy. There (at the age of seven) he also married Markéta (Blanche) of Valois, sister to the heir to the French throne. Thus ties with France were already long established when the relationship between the Luxemburgs and the Wittelsbach emperor Ludwig worsened during the 1330s. The papacy, too, welcomed the Luxemburgs as an ally in its struggle with Ludwig. Since 1309 the popes had resided at Avignon, working with, or under the thumb of, the king of France. In later years these factors helped bring Charles to the imperial throne.

At the moment, however, the Bohemian lands demanded all his attention. Many of the leading Czech nobles realized that if royal power declined too far, it could threaten the existence of the monarchy and thus their own interests. Leaving Italy at their invitation, Charles returned to the Bohemian lands in 1333. Some months later, his father invested him with the title of Margrave of Moravia, legalizing his presence in the kingdom and his participation in its affairs.⁷

Those affairs were, by Charles's own account, in a near desperate state. "We found that kingdom so devastated," he wrote in his autobiography, "that we could not find even one free castle that had not been

pledged with all the other royal estates, so that we had nowhere we could settle, except in burgher's houses like any other burgher." The Prague castle had fallen into ruin, and "the lords had mostly become tyrants and no longer feared the king as they should, since they had earlier divided the kingdom among themselves."⁸ Charles succeeded in gaining the support of the great nobles, the leading church dignitaries, and the patriciate of Prague, so that by the early 1340s he had won back most of the usurped royal estates.

Deteriorating relations with Ludwig of Bavaria revived the old connections to France and the papacy, especially after the election of Pope Clement VI, who had been young Charles's tutor and adviser at the French court. The pope supported the heir to the Bohemian throne by approving the elevation of the Prague bishopric to an archbishopric, finally removing its long dependency on German superiors. The pope also paved the way for Charles's election as King of the Romans, by five of the seven electoral princes, in July 1346.

John and Charles immediately set out for France to support the French king against England. There John of Luxemburg perished at Crécy on August 26, 1346. Czech chroniclers praised him in death, quoting England's Edward III, "Never was there anyone like this Bohemian king."⁹ His father's death made Charles king twice over, since he was now also king of Bohemia in addition to his contested Roman title. As long as some electoral princes still supported Ludwig, Charles prepared for war, but Ludwig died of a heart attack while bearhunting in 1347. Charles won over the most significant of Ludwig's supporters by marrying his daughter Anna following Blanche of Valois's death. In 1349, Charles was crowned King of the Romans again, this time in the presence of all seven electors.

Charles IV and Bohemia

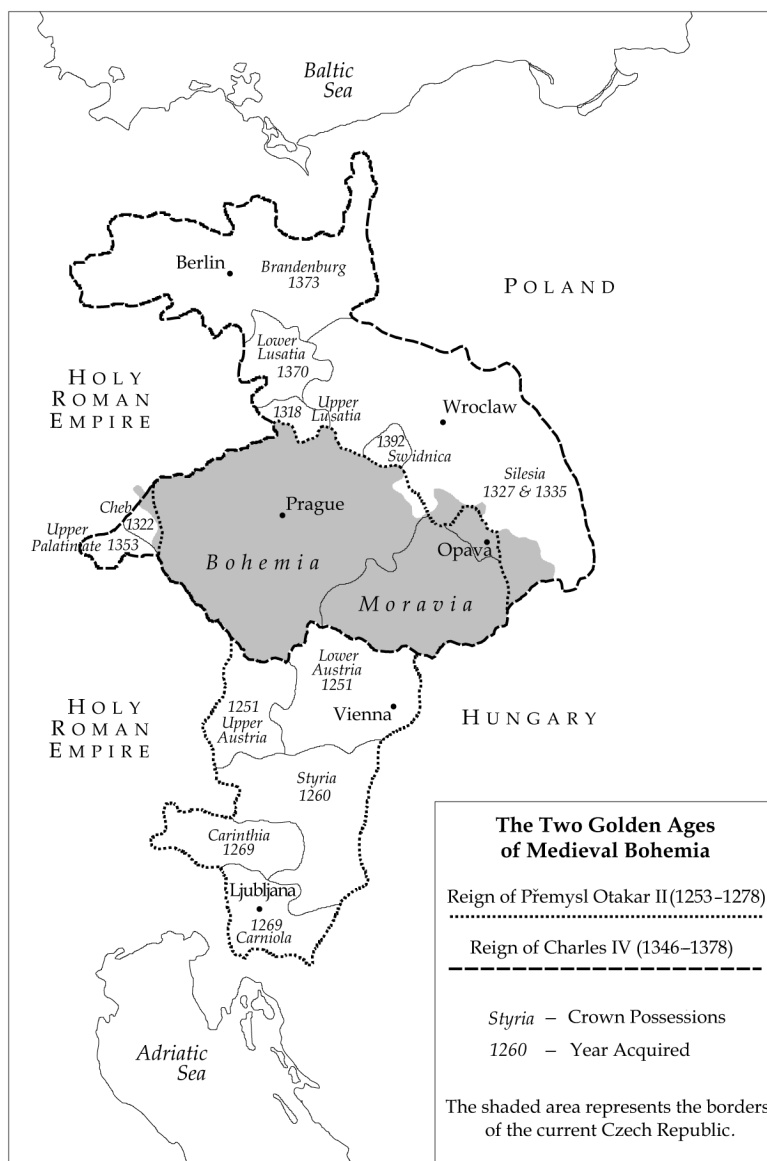
At his christening, Charles IV (1346–1378) was given the name of the Bohemian patron saint and symbol of Czech statehood, Václav, while at his confirmation he assumed the name of the renewer of empire, Charlemagne. Both these traditions were united in Charles's life, as he united both crowns in his person. He emphasized that on his mother's side he "came from the ancient family of Czech kings," and that he spoke and understood the language "like any other Czech."¹⁰ He also supported St. Václav's cult. He had the splendid chapel of St. Václav

built in St. Vitus's cathedral, the seal of his university shows him kneeling at the feet of St. Václav, he had the royal crown, "The Crown of St. Václav," refashioned, he composed a version of the St. Václav legend, and christened his first two sons Václav. Throughout his reign, though, he also left behind memorials to the Carolingian tradition. Outstanding among the foundations dedicated to Charlemagne or bearing his and Charles IV's name is the castle of Karlštejn, built to house the crown jewels, relics, and other treasures of the empire.

Contemporary opponents dubbed Charles IV the "pope's king" for his alliance with the papacy. Czech and German nationalist historians conducted long debates over Charles's nationality. The rhetorical epithet used at his funeral oration, "father of his fatherland" (*pater patriae*), was turned by Maximilian I into the jibe that he was "stepfather to the empire." Later Baroque and nationalist historiography turned this flourish into a literal evaluation, positive (for many Czechs) or negative (for many Germans).¹¹ A strong foundation of Charles's policy in any case was concern for the dynastic fortunes of the Luxemburgs.¹²

John divided his possessions among his sons, with Charles receiving Bohemia, his brother Jan Jindřich Moravia, and his half-brother Václav (John's son by his second marriage) Luxemburg itself. Technically these lands, along with others added during Charles's reign, belonged to the crown of Bohemia. In a series of documents issued in 1348, Charles stabilized the relationships among the crown's possessions. In addition to Bohemia proper, Moravia, and Luxemburg, the crownlands included the Silesian principalities and Upper and Lower Lusatia. By his second marriage, Charles added parts of the Upper Palatinate, and he was also feudal lord of many castles and towns scattered through the empire. His third marriage brought him the last two independent Silesian principalities. Finally, in 1373, Charles added Brandenburg (with its electoral vote) to the lands of the Bohemian crown.

Bohemia's well-being was central to Charles's concerns, and in spite of dynastic and imperial involvements, he devoted himself to it. His choice of Prague for his residence stimulated a building boom that brought foreign-born masters such as Matthias of Arras and Peter Parler of Gmünd to Prague. These artists worked on the reconstruction of the castle, including St. Vitus's cathedral, in Gothic style. Parler's workshop contributed the church of the Virgin Mary before Týn in Prague's Old Town, and other Gothic churches in Kolín and Kutná Hora. A new stone bridge replaced the Judita bridge, joining Prague's Old Town with the



Map 2

Lesser Quarter beneath the castle. On the Old Town side, Charles erected a splendid tower reminiscent of Roman triumphal arches and displaying in stone his conception of his imperial authority.

Charles IV also founded important cultural institutions, the most outstanding of which was the university that bears his name, established in 1348. Underlying the impact of the Charles University were general developments in schooling, as towns and town culture flourished beside church, court, noble castle, and village. During the thirteenth century many royal towns established schools known as particular schools, which imparted chiefly Latin and the rudiments of the arts. After 1348 responsibility for overseeing these schools was vested in the university, though the monastic or parish schools were controlled by the church.

Charles IV's new university influenced the whole of central Europe. Like other medieval universities, Prague's was international, admitting students from all Christendom. Under its chancellor, the archbishop of Prague, the university was a society of corporations based on territorial principles and known as *nationes*, or "nations." The chief executive officer was the rector, elected by the four nations, while each faculty was headed by a dean. The academic officials, students, and teachers formed a special corporate body with its own privileges, and lived together in colleges. The most famous, the Great College or Charles College, obtained the Karolinum, the oldest surviving building of the university, in 1383. At its height, Prague's university was a fully integrated part of the intellectual world of Western Christendom, developing domestic intellectuals and exposing them to the leading trends of European thought.

The kingdom's stability partly rested on Charles's skill in coping with the Přemyslids' old nemesis, the Czech lords. Charles gave them significant positions in his court, but he used the church as a counterweight to the nobles. The church gave him educated officials to administer his possessions, so Latin was widely used in Charles IV's court, and links existed to the first Italian humanists. German was common, especially for contacts with other parts of the empire. But Czech also made its way into administration and justice, with the first preserved official document in Czech dating to 1370. Charles appointed burghers to the positions of chamberlain or master of the mint. During the 1350s he prepared a body of laws aimed at strengthening the king's powers, known as the *Maestas Carolina*, but when it threatened to create noble resistance, Charles compromised, withdrawing it in 1355.

Charles IV approached imperial politics with the same realism, com-

promising with the Wittelsbachs and using the papal curia as a counterweight to the centrifugal tendencies within the empire. After Clement VI died, his relations with Avignon were never again as close. When in 1355 Charles finally staged his imperial coronation in Rome, a papal representative officiated. Instead of founding a new Roman Empire, as Francesco Petrarca urged, Charles collected money from the Italian imperial cities and returned to the other side of the Alps. There, in 1356, he issued the imperial charter known as the Golden Bull. The Golden Bull established imperial election by majority vote, and confirmed the Bohemian king as the foremost secular elector, with the title of imperial cupbearer. It fixed the number of electors at seven, all imperial princes or bishops, leaving no role for the pope. The Golden Bull also urged the electoral princes to teach their children Italian and Czech as well as German.

Later in life, Charles became increasingly concerned with securing his heirs' position. He had his first surviving son, Václav, crowned King of Bohemia as a two-year-old, and in 1376 added his coronation as King of the Romans. Václav's portion of his father's realm included Bohemia, the Silesian duchies held directly by the king, part of Upper Lusatia, Lower Lusatia, the crown's German possessions, and (in theory) the supreme authority over all the crownlands. Most of Brandenburg went to Sigismund, the second son (born 1368), and Jan, the third son (born 1370), received Upper Lusatia and a piece of Brandenburg. Moravia, divided into three feudal fiefs of the Czech crown, was ruled by Jan Jindřich, younger son of John of Luxemburg, and after his death in 1375, by his sons Jošt and Prokop.

Charles's efforts to secure his inheritance also intersected with the wider problem of the pope's continuing residence at Avignon. One purpose of Charles's second journey to Rome from 1368 to 1369 was to explore moving the papal court back to the eternal city, a goal not achieved until late in the pontificate of Gregory XI, in 1377. The pope's return to Rome did not develop as planned. When Gregory XI died in 1378, his successor, Urban VI, quickly alienated his cardinals. Eventually the majority of the college (overwhelmingly French) withdrew from Rome, declared their election of Urban VI invalid, and chose one of their own number as Clement VII. Clement resettled at Avignon, dividing Western Christendom into rival allegiances. Charles IV supported the Roman papacy of Urban VI, but before he could attempt to heal the schism, he died on November 29, 1378.

Responsibility for the core of Charles IV's dominions thus fell on the shoulders of the seventeen-year-old Václav IV (1378–1419). Václav faced challenges that would have given his father pause, but he did not inherit Charles's political skill and dedication. He abandoned the policy of relying on the church to counterbalance the lords, clashing with the archbishop of Prague. The archbishop's general vicar, Jan of Pomuk, was martyred at the king's command in 1393, to be canonized years later as Saint John of Nepomuk (John Nepomucene). Václav was considered incompetent in the empire, where the religious electors deposed him in 1400 and elected an anti-king.

In Bohemia, too, Václav suffered in the competition among Charles IV's descendants. Twice he was taken prisoner, by the lords in 1394, and by his brother Sigismund in 1402, before a compromise ended the family clashes. Václav resigned his Roman title in 1410 to his cousin Jošt of Moravia, who died in 1411, whereupon it passed to Sigismund. Sigismund, who inherited at least some of his father's political skill, eventually gained recognition as emperor. These quarrels suggest that Bohemian politics was becoming more complex as new groups, including the burghers and the lower nobility, sought a voice in the political life of the kingdom. But the crisis that the Bohemian lands endured under Václav IV involved more than politics.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGE UNDER THE LUXEMBURGS

The remarkable cultural and economic flowering of Bohemia under Charles IV was the culmination of trends begun under the last Přemyslids, especially the wave of colonization and the development of the network of towns and smaller cities. The "Black Death" did not affect the Bohemian crownlands as it did the rest of Europe between 1347 and 1352, but this was because the Bohemian lands lay outside the main European trading routes. This fact affected European trade and the domestic market, with imports of standard consumable items (dried or salted fish, wine, spices, salt, fruits) supplemented by luxury goods for the court, nobility, church prelates, or rich burghers. Bohemian artisan products had no demand abroad, so exports consisted of raw materials, Prague silver coins, or silver ingots.

Relative to its eastern neighbors Bohemia had a well-developed town structure, but powerful patriciates existed only in Prague's Old Town, Plzeň (Pilsen), the silver-mining region with Kutná Hora and Kolín, and Cheb. In Moravia a patriciate also existed in Brno, Jihlava (Iglau, another mining center), and Olomouc. The narrowing of the cultural and political gap between the Bohemian crownlands and Western Europe thus affected a narrow layer, the urban patricians, the noble and royal courts, and the church. The commoners, relatively isolated and still influenced by medieval concepts of space and time, valued stability and the familiar above all.

Crisis caught up with the Bohemian lands at the end of the fourteenth century, beginning with the belated arrival of the plague in 1380. It carried off up to 15 percent of the population, reducing demand and disrupting production. Silver output declined, causing inflation and disrupting trade. Landholders' cash incomes fell, leading them either to ease the peasants' obligations to keep them on the land or to use force to the same end. The plague years and the economic decline were accompanied by internal Luxemburg family conflicts and clashes with the great lords, resulting in a series of petty civil wars. The ruler's prestige and authority declined, to be replaced by the "territorial peace" or *landfrýd*, an agreement to preserve law and order, in which the ruler was one among many parties (even if in first place). Many lesser nobles had few choices except to become the client of a great lord, a soldier of fortune, or a brigand.

Social tension erupted in acts of rage and violence. On April 18, 1389, the Prague ghetto was looted and then burned, and many hundreds were murdered. Perhaps the pogrom of 1389 foreshadowed upheavals to come, but it also expressed the hostility toward Jews spreading in fourteenth-century Europe.¹³ These problems also stimulated criticism of society and its powerful institutions. The church drew the most criticism, since it had itself been in crisis for much of the century. The years of the "Babylonian captivity" in Avignon were followed by the schism of 1378, and the attempt to resolve the conflict at the Council of Pisa (1409) ended with three rival popes, each claiming to be the true keeper of the keys of St. Peter. A desire for reform spread in many parts of Europe, both among the university masters and the laity. Social and economic crisis, the decline of important political and religious institutions, and a domestic and international movement for reform culminated in the Bohemian crownlands in the Hussite revolution.