



Václav Žurek

CHARLES IV
Portrait of a Medieval Ruler

KAROLINUM

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

Today, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Bohemia Charles IV of Luxembourg (1316–1378) represents an untouchable monument in Czech history, carved into the marble of admiration and clichés.

Charles's governmental achievements, his foundational and endowment activities in the arts and architecture, as well as monuments devoted to him, to this day constitute an inseparable part of the Czech historical consciousness and identity. The current identity of the inhabitants of the Czech Republic is strongly anchored in medieval history, in particular that of the Kingdom of Bohemia, with which the contemporary republic, which arose in 1993, openly identifies on the basis of geographical similarity as well as linguistic and cultural tradition. In view of this identification, medieval history plays a fundamental role in the construction of the master narrative of Czech history. One of the key points of this narrative is precisely the period of Charles's reign (1346–1378). Charles's presence in the contemporary life of the Czech Republic is substantial – his name is borne by the country's oldest university, the famous medieval stone bridge in Prague, as well as by several castles and the spa town of Karlovy Vary (Karlsbad). In short, the trace of Charles in the historical memory is omnipresent. And this trace is constituted by the recollection of a great and successful ruler connected with the cultural, economic and political blossoming of the medieval Czech Lands.

Meanwhile, it may have seemed that the young prince Wenceslas (Václav), who only first received the name of Charles in Paris at his confirmation after his uncle, French King Charles IV, the Fair, was not born into a favourable period. As the chronicler Peter of Zittau narrates, the year 1316 was accompanied by a terrifying sign (a comet), an extremely rainy summer, and the Kingdom of Bohemia as well as the surrounding countries in Central Europe were threatened with famine.

‘The year of the Lord 1316 contains in itself so many pestilential blows and suffering that the ear avoids listening to them and the mind shudders. In this year, as we recounted above, a comet appeared and, directed by God, it prognosticated very many dangers. Because in the summer, on account of the unending rain in contrast to the natural character of that time of year, such enormous floods occurred that in numerous places buildings, walls and castles were overturned as in a deluge. [...] This deluge of water flooded the plains and the valleys, it destroyed hay and corn, and washed away with it a great many things which it had overwhelmed. Immediately afterwards there came a piteous dying of people, and this dying spread out so very much that in many villages and towns they dug deep pits in order to cover the massive number of corpses together like carcasses. Corn and hay were in short supply, pasture was also in short supply, and so people and also cattle began to starve and perish.’¹

When we add to this further phenomena of crisis that accompanied the following decades of Charles’s life, for instance the biggest floods of the millennium in 1342, the outbreak of the Black Death after 1348, a swarm of locusts that destroyed the harvest and other unfavourable climatic phenomena, it is almost surprising how it came about that precisely Charles IV, or to put it better his image, is virtually unproblematically positive in the current era.²

Therefore, one of the fundamental questions of this book is in what way and on what basis his legacy as a ruler has been formulated. Primarily, this is a case of questions concerning how much this image is influenced by the literary production at Charles’s court and his own performance of government, and how much it is a case of later reflection, whether in the later Middle Ages or in the modern period.

The book has the ambition of explicating the actions of Charles IV in the context of his period, and therefore individual chapters concentrate on fundamental and characteristic topics from the period of his government. The framework of the first half of the book represents a chronological description of his life, which enables the topics analysed to

¹ *Cronica Aule regie*, 360.

² For the environmental context of his reign see Bauch, ‘Jammer und Not.’

be placed in the more broadly conceived history of the Luxembourg era. The second half of the book offers a closer look at Charles's rulership style and also focuses on phenomena which, in our opinion, reveal more about the conception of his performance of power and also enable a better understanding of the reign and historical legacy of Charles IV in the Czech and European context.

History represents a constant dialogue between the past and the present, and it is precisely in this context that it is necessary to perceive the current picture of Charles IV, who is regarded by specialists and by the general public as a very successful statesman. Especially in connection with the writing of the history of art in the 14th century as a story of culture radiating from the centre – that is, from the Prague court – in recent years researchers have demonstrated a tendency to present this ruler from the Luxembourg dynasty in an unequivocally positive light and in essence in an unproblematic way. This book, on the contrary, endeavours to critically assess this relatively established conviction and to draw aside the veil of the various forms of Charles's self-representation, which to this day considerably influences the popular and also the specialist explication of the history of his period of rule.

An advantage of examining the life and rulership of Charles IV is the fact that a large quantity of documents from his period have been preserved. These are primarily works compiled at his court or at his personal order, which not only reflect Charles's stances and political opinions, but chiefly openly express the ideology of his royal court. We have at our disposal a larger number of sources about Charles IV and his reign than in the case of other contemporary Central European kings, which is advantageous for a historian, but at the same time naturally suspicious and urges us to cautiousness. It is in fact evident that many of these sources arose precisely in order to persuade their readers of the exceptional role of Charles IV in history. Therefore, we should examine them with the greatest caution and meanwhile attempt to reveal what the intention was behind their compilation.

This book is not merely a new biography of the medieval ruler, but rather represents a deeper analysis of the fundamental themes of Charles's governance which can reveal a lot to us about the ideas on which his rulership programme was based. However, we should not

forget that Charles's reign was not merely a chronicle of triumphs and successful political steps. Many times the ruler failed or was forced to change his strategy in order to achieve his aims. Therefore, the book focuses in detail on the most characteristic expressions of his performance of the ruling function – on his rulership style.

The axis of this explication is Charles's government and its symbolic dimension, which encompasses both concrete ordinances as well as very subtle nuances of his public self-representation which gave the necessary effect to his politics. For better understanding we place our deliberations about Charles IV as emperor and king into the context of an explication of his life and government, because it is precisely this perspective that enables us to reveal the sources and various accents of Charles's government. Perhaps in this way this book will contribute to a better understanding of the environment from which the idealized image of Emperor and King Charles IV arose and the intention behind this image – an image which still surrounds us to this day.

In the regional context research about Charles IV has a long tradition. Expert treatments of his life are available in many versions, both older and relatively recent. However, in English, apart from the outdated book by Bede Jarrett (1935), there is no modern biography of this ruler, whose rule nevertheless influenced a substantial part of Europe.³ In spite of the fact that he achieved the highest secular rank, when 100 years after Frederick II he renewed the imperial title of Holy Roman Emperor as the head of Western Europe, and ruled a multilingual Empire which included parts of a whole number of current-day states (Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, Switzerland, France, Luxembourg and Italy) in the pan-European context he tends to be rather neglected.⁴

This is also partly true of the entire dynasty of the Luxembourgs, who for 100 years not only dominated Central European politics, but also left behind a significant trace in the cultural history of the European Middle Ages. One of the reasons for this is the linguistic diversity of the sources, but also the geographical fragmentation and division of the medieval heritage among several contemporary states. Apart

³ Jarrett, *The emperor Charles IV*.

⁴ We must of course mention here the book by Seibt, *Karl IV*. from 1978 and also the recent biographies of Monnet, *Charles IV* (2020) and Rader, *Kaiser Karl der Vierte* (2023).

from the Czech Republic, Charles IV and his dynasty are hardly present in the national historical memory of these states. Meanwhile, the Kingdom of Bohemia was far from being the only place ruled by Charles IV, even though it did constitute the economic foundation of his rule. Continuing the territorial policies of his father, Charles IV incorporated Silesia, Lower and Upper Lusatia, and later also Brandenburg under the rule of the King of Bohemia. In 1348 he thus established a personal union under the dominance of the King of Bohemia which he called the Lands of Bohemian Crown, which also contained the territories mentioned above. Moreover, in addition to these territories, which he ruled directly from his position as King of Bohemia and immediate ruler, he was also ruler of the Holy Roman Empire (covering the area of current-day Germany, northern Italy, and parts of France, Austria and the Low Countries). First of all he was elected and twice crowned as King of the Romans. Crowned in Rome in 1355 he became Holy Roman Emperor – that is, the highest secular ruler of Latin Europe. From this position he played a leading role in European politics for many years, maintaining peace and encouraging the Pope to return from Avignon to Rome. By his contemporaries Charles was called the new Constantine, Solomon, the embodiment of the legacy of Charlemagne, and father of the homeland (*pater patriae*). The fact that one of the key figures of the late Middle Ages remains overlooked primarily in Anglophone scholarship is partly also due to the inaccessibility in English of the sources and primarily the specialized literature. This book aims to contribute to correcting that deficiency.

This book, originally written in Czech, was first published by Nakladatelství Lidové noviny in Prague in 2018 as a response to the jubilee of the 700th anniversary of Charles IV's birth in 1316 and the various forms of his commemoration as it was recollected and present in Czech public life and in specialist discussion in the jubilee year. The footnotes have been completely reworked for the English version, although references have been limited to the most relevant sources.

I would like to thank the Karolinum Press for the preparation of the publication of this book and translator Ian Finlay Stone for his translation of the Czech text into English.

Prague, Spring 2024

NOTE ON USE OF PERSONAL AND LOCAL NAMES

In this book preference is given to current names over historical German/Latin/archaic names.

As far as it is easily possible, Christian names are anglicized (Charles, Elizabeth, John, Ernest, Peter), while place names are only anglicized in accord with contemporary usage (Prague, Vienna, Munich). Otherwise, place names used are the contemporary ones of the country within whose borders that place is currently situated (Wrocław, Olomouc, Pardubice, Karlštejn). We try to distinguish between the use of Bohemian in the territorial sense and Czech in the ethnic and linguistic sense for the medieval period. However, this is not always clear-cut, and tradition also plays a role, hence Czech lands in the spatial sense, but Lands of the Bohemian Crown denoting a political entity.

I THE FAMILY ORIGIN OF YOUNG WENCESLAS

‘I desire therefore it not remain unknown to you that the Roman Emperor, Henry VII, begat my father, named John, from Margaret, the daughter of the Duke of Brabant. He in turn married Elizabeth, the daughter of King Wenceslas II of Bohemia, and obtained the Kingdom of Bohemia through her, because the male line in the royal family of Bohemia had died out. He expelled Henry, Duke of Carinthia, who had married the older sister of his aforementioned wife. (This sister later died without heir.) Henry had obtained the Kingdom of Bohemia before John by virtue of this sister’s position. All of this is more fully contained in the chronicles of the Bohemians. This same John, King of Bohemia, begat through Queen Elizabeth his first-born son who was named Wenceslas in the year 1316 on the fourteenth of May at the first hour in Prague.’⁵

With these words Charles IV in his own biography known under the title *Vita Karoli* briefly summarized his family origin, which he perceived as an important part of his identity, and outlined the circumstances of his own birth. The use of his Přemyslid origins, in an effort to make them of present relevance, was one of the marked features of Charles’s politics and an inherent part of the picture that the Czech ruler built up during his period of rule. The marriage of John of Luxembourg and Elizabeth of Bohemia and the alliance of their families played a fundamental role in the political standing of the Luxembourgs. In view of the fact that Charles himself devoted a relatively large amount of attention to ancestors from both lines, it will not be amiss to start his portrait by sketching how the Count of Luxembourg came to the Kingdom of Bohemia, as well as the political and social situation into which his first-born son Wenceslas (later Charles) was born in 1316.

⁵ *Vita Karoli*, 21, 23.

The murder of the young King Wenceslas III on 4 August 1306 in Olomouc represented a very unpleasant shock even for a developed country with stable social relations and political structure such as the Kingdom of Bohemia was at the beginning of the 14th century. The dying out of the Přemyslid dynasty by the sword changed the political situation in Central Europe, but primarily the internal relations in the kingdom. The family, which over the past few generations had not only intensely supported the economic development of the Kingdom of Bohemia, but had also attempted to expand its power territorially into the Austrian Lands (Ottokar II of Bohemia; r. 1253–78), Poland (Wenceslas II; r. 1278–1305) and Hungary (Wenceslas III; r. 1305–06), suddenly disappeared from the scene, leaving behind an exceptionally attractive inheritance.

The person with the best starting position for obtaining this Přemyslid inheritance was the husband of Wenceslas III's oldest sister Anna, Duke of Carinthia Henry, whom the deceased king himself had nominated as the kingdom's administrator in his absence. However, Henry most probably did not have good relations with the Bohemian nobles, which had a fundamental effect on his standing on the Bohemian political scene. Members of the upper nobility, who already in the period after the death of Ottokar II partially deputized for royal power and more and more regarded themselves as a part of society without whom the kingdom could not be administered, also intervened decisively in the situation immediately after the extinction of the dynasty. King of the Romans Albert I of Habsburg also entered the political disputes over the succession and declared the Kingdom of Bohemia as an escheat imperial fiefdom, which he had allocated to his sons. This would most probably have not played any role, but the members of the domestic nobility were not united and so some of them did not acknowledge Henry's claim and rather supported the new candidate, Albert's son Rudolph of Habsburg. In order to strengthen his claim, this aspirant for the throne even concluded a marriage with Wenceslas' II widowed queen, Elizabeth Richeza of Poland. However, shortly afterwards in 1307 he died during the campaign for his recognition, and so entered the annals of Czech history mainly through his nickname of 'King Porridge' for his thriftiness.⁶

⁶ Spěvácěk, *Jan Lucemburský*, 113–114.

*Bust of Elizabeth of
Bohemia on the triforium of
Cathedral of St Vitus recalled
Charles's Přemyslid origin*



After Rudolph's death, Henry of Carinthia returned to rule the kingdom with the support of a relatively substantial part of the nobility. Nevertheless, he evidently failed to sufficiently fulfil the expectations of a section of the secular and spiritual elites, and therefore a new plan for how to overthrow him was hatched which involved installing another king on the throne through marriage with the younger sister of the murdered Wenceslas III, Elizabeth. By coincidence in 1308 an opportunity arose to make use of a change on the imperial throne and the election of Count of Luxembourg Henry VII as King of the Romans. If we can believe the description of Peter of Zittau, author of the Zbraslav Chronicle, Heidenreich of Sedlec and Conrad of Zbraslav, the abbots respectively of two important Bohemian Cistercian monasteries in Sedlec and Zbraslav, conducted negotiations in the name of an influential group of Bohemian nobles. They addressed the King of the Romans with an offer to connect the Luxembourg dynasty with

the Bohemian throne and he agreed to the marriage of his only son John with the potential heiress of the Bohemian throne.⁷

This was an insightful decision and fitted in well with the picture of the dynamic rise of Henry VII and his family on the political map of Europe. The count's family controlled a substantial territory on the border between the German and French cultural environments. Luxembourg was a part of the Holy Roman Empire, but also under the strong influence of Francophone culture and its counts traditionally gravitated towards contacts with the Paris court. In the course of the 13th century the influence of French courtly life, culture and literature grew there. The chivalric way of life spread from the south, bringing with it models of behaviour and new artistic forms. In the case of Luxembourg counts this influence already made itself apparent during the rule of Count Henry VI (d.1288), who introduced French as the official language of his office and started to issue decrees in it. His successors, primarily Emperor Henry VII, continued this trend.

The moment when Henry VII became Holy Roman Emperor in 1308 represented a pivotal point in his effort to strengthen his dynastic position. Meanwhile, 20 years earlier it had seemed that the entire dynasty was on the verge of extinction, when a whole generation of the male members of the Luxembourg family fell in the Battle at Worringen in 1288. The dispute, which originally broke out over the attractive Limburg inheritance, gradually grew into a wider conflict over control of the region to the west of the Rhine. In the battle Duke John I of Brabant with his allies won a clear victory and the Luxembourg side suffered a defeat. Of the entire family Henry VI's widow, Beatrice d'Avesnes, remained, and hope was thus represented by her five children. Paradoxically, the victor of the fateful battle, Duke John I of Brabant, also contributed to maintaining the position of the Luxembourg family in the region. Thanks to the mediation of Guy, Count of Flanders (Guy of Dampierre), and also French King Philip IV the Fair, in the end the mutual negotiations on the conclusion of peace were sealed by the marriage of the Brabant bride Margaret and the eldest Luxembourg scion Henry, which was the first step leading to the family's ascent.

⁷ *Chronica Aule regie*, 195–199; on the chronicle see Marani-Moravová, *Peter von Zittau*; Cf. Šusta, *Král cizinec*, 94–99; Bobková, *Jan Lucemburský* 13–24, 42–68.

The Luxembourg brothers Henry VII and Baldwin entered the world of grand affairs already in their youth at the French court, under the protective wing of King Philip IV the Fair. However, their political rise is connected with the Holy Roman Empire. Baldwin was first of all elected and installed as the Archbishop of Trier, thus becoming not only one of the highest ranked church dignitaries in the Empire but also a prince-electoral – an elector of the King of the Romans. He very quickly made use of this rank for the benefit of his own dynasty, when in 1308 he helped achieve the election of his older brother Henry as King of the Romans.

In his new position Henry wasted no time and made efforts to quickly assert his power, which was relatively shaky. Henry, therefore, placed all the more emphasis on supporting his legitimacy on the basis of ceremonial acts. Less than two months after his election, on Three Kings' Day (Epiphany, 6 January 1309) he was crowned King of the Romans along with his wife Margaret in Aachen and set out on the traditional tour around the Empire. During this journey he was met at Heilbronn by the two aforementioned Cistercian abbots from Bohemia, who negotiated with Henry in the name of the nobles of the Kingdom of Bohemia. They tried to persuade him to drive out Henry of Carinthia and install his own son on the throne. According to contemporary accounts, King Henry hesitated for some time and offered his younger brother Walram for the Bohemian throne. However, the abbots feared that Bohemian interests would be side-tracked and they did not want to even countenance the foundation of a Luxembourg secundogeniture cadet branch. In the end Henry yielded and agreed with the marriage of his only son John with Elizabeth of the Bohemian royal family of the Přemyslids.⁸

From the beginning Henry of Luxembourg showed himself as a man of grand politics and not as a diffident count. At the imperial Diet in 1309, in an attempt to strengthen his position, Henry declared that within a year and a day he would set out on a journey to Rome for the imperial crown. The decision was somewhat surprising, in view of the fact that since the death of Frederick II in 1250 no one had dared

⁸ *Cronica Aule regie*, 210–213; see also the recent volumes on this union *A royal marriage; Johann und Elisabeth/Jean et Elisabeth*.

to undergo an imperial coronation in Rome. For a few years already not even the Pope had been resident in Rome, having recently taken up residence in the border area between the imperial and French frontiers at Avignon. However, Henry succeeded in persuading the Pope and also the French King to support his coronation journey. Before his departure for the south King Henry succeeded in resolving another Bohemian question: in concord with some leading imperial counts he declared the claim of Henry of Carinthia as invalid and announced an *acht* (imperial curse) over him. He awarded the Kingdom of Bohemia in fief to his son John, whose claim he strengthened through the marriage with Elizabeth of the Přemyslid family, held in Speyer on 1st September 1310.⁹

Following that, King Henry with his wife Margaret set out for Italy. His army was not very numerous; it is estimated at around 5,000 men. In view of the political situation in northern Italy, which was afflicted with minor conflicts between individual towns, he was welcomed by many as a saviour. Some scholars and poets, including the famous Dante, dreamed of a return of a strong imperial power which would put an end to the constant fighting and bring peace and unity. However, when Henry had crossed the Alps with his army, he did not proceed as easily as he had assumed. At the beginning things went well and in January 1311 he was already crowned with the Iron Crown of Lombardy in Milan. However, the ground in Italy became more and more uncertain for him and he was forced to fight at every step, which constantly slowed down his progress. Many city communes did not have any interest in any form of imperial overrule and thus they did not welcome him as a unifier of Italy, but on the contrary stood in resistance to him. In May 1312 Henry finally fought his way to Rome and on 29 June he was crowned Emperor by cardinals sent by the Pope in the Lateran basilica of St John, because St Peter's Cathedral remained closed to him as it was in the power of his opponents. After more than 60 years, in the person of Henry VII the Christian world once again had a Holy Roman Emperor. A man who a few years ago had been a mere Count of Luxembourg had achieved the highest

⁹ Antonín, 'Der Weg nach Osten'.

secular title. Henry, enthused by the imperial crown, had an encyclical sent to important rulers of Europe in which he emphasized the idea of an imperial universal rule, which however contrasted sharply with his actual political situation. Henry did not even have the city of Rome under his control. Primarily, French King Philip IV the Fair rejected the Luxembourg's claims of universal rule, contending that in his opinion the Holy Roman Empire and France had an equal standing. Henry then started a campaign against King of Naples Robert the Wise. However, on his journey south he died after a few days fever at Buonconvento not far from Siena.

Emperor Henry of Luxembourg left a significant mark in history, especially through his Italian campaign, which stirred the blood in the veins of savants longing for a strong and united Italy under an imperial government. Thirty years later, Charles IV would have to come to terms with this legacy, to which he also laid claim. However, at the moment of Henry's death the Luxembourgs had quite other concerns.¹⁰

Already since autumn 1310 John of Luxembourg had been trying to assert his authority on the Bohemian royal throne. Although his father Henry had given him the kingdom in fief, arranged his marriage with one of the inheritors of the Přemyslid claim to the throne and also equipped him with advisors, Henry had then once again devoted himself to his Italian campaign. For the journey, John received an accompaniment, including primarily advisor Peter of Aspelt, who was not only Archbishop of Mainz but who also in his role of the former chancellor of King of Bohemia Wenceslas II had an excellent knowledge of the local situation in the Kingdom of Bohemia from his time spent at the court. In addition, he was also a skilled negotiator who helped John enormously over the next few years.

The biggest obstacle for John was the fact that Henry of Carinthia with his wife Anna, the oldest daughter of Wenceslas II, continued to reside in Prague and to act as the King of Bohemia. With the support of Meissen units in the fortified town Henry evidently felt safe. John, therefore, did not head directly for Prague. However, when towns Kutná Hora and also Kolín did not open their gates to him, in the

¹⁰ *Vom luxemburgischen Grafen zum europäischen Herrscher; Rom 1312. Die Kaiserkrönung Heinrichs VII.*

continuing winter he nevertheless proceeded to the biggest city. Thanks to subterfuge and the opening of one of the gates, on 3 December 1310 John's troops succeeded in occupying the Old Town of Prague. Henry hid in Prague Castle, but in the end, he conceded and left the country. King John now controlled Bohemia, but the nobility was not unanimously on his side, and the new king therefore had to gain its favour with the help of concessions and promises. In the uncertain times after the death of Wenceslas III the nobility had gained great power, which they were disinclined to give up to the benefit of a 14-year-old youth and moreover a foreigner. At the hastily convoked Diet, King John confirmed the role of the nobility in the kingdom's administration and also continued in his attempt to strengthen his position. Formally, the accession of the royal pair was confirmed, and thus Peter of Aspelt was able to crown him already on 7 February 1311 in Prague. After this, John hurriedly proceeded to negotiations with the Habsburgs, which led to the repurchasing of Moravia from its mortgage to them. In the summer of the following year the royal pair were thus able to visit Olomouc and Brno and receive homage there from the local nobility. In Moravia also the king issued a so-called inaugural diploma, which confirmed the claim of the nobility to participate in the country's administration. This calmed the situation temporarily, but it was also a clear confirmation of the influence that the nobles had acquired. The dispute over the relative share of power between the nobility and the king was a significant factor in John's entire rule and was the cause of many quarrels. King John surrounded himself with advisors whom he had brought with him and who contributed significantly to the results of negotiations with the Bohemian nobles. In addition, without these advisers he would not have got by in imperial politics, which he did not intend to give up. In contrast, the Bohemian nobles were not overjoyed at the foreigners around the king and from the beginning they endeavoured to get rid of them.

At the moment when Henry VII died in Italy on 24 August 1313 and thus the imperial throne became vacant, John's situation was relatively complicated. Naturally, he tried to put forward his claim to the Roman royal title, but it soon became apparent that this was not going to be possible. One of the candidates, Frederick of Habsburg, had not in any

way given up the possibility of influencing government in the Kingdom of Bohemia and he still had Henry of Carinthia in reserve, who had not given up his claim to the Bohemian throne. Even though John along with Peter of Aspelt and his uncle Baldwin had three of seven votes at his disposal, he had to give up the Luxembourg candidacy and in the end supported Louis of Wittelsbach, the Habsburg's opponent, in the election. At the end of 1314, a disputed election of both Louis and Frederick occurred and consequently also a dual coronation. King John's support for Louis influenced his position in the future. He succeeded in gaining many concessions and the title of Imperial Vicar, though at the same time he committed himself to assist the King of the Romans militarily.



Gravestone of King Přemysl Ottokar I in St Vitus Cathedral created by Peter Parler.