

2 Dukes and Kings

A country's currency gives it an opportunity to display its symbols, and a measure of its self-image, in this most mundane of public transactions. In the Czech Republic, the twenty-crown note bears a portrait of Přemysl Otakar I, first hereditary king of Bohemia. Achieving the status of hereditary kingdom made Bohemia unique among the territories attached to the Holy Roman Empire and granted it stronger legitimacy and political status. To the Czech Republic, the image of Bohemia's monarch asserted that Czech statehood was not new, but had a historical ancestor in Přemyslid Bohemia. Both then and now the development of Bohemia into a kingdom carried important consequences.

THE BOHEMIAN LANDS FROM DUCHY TO KINGDOM

The road to the kingly title was not smooth. Bohemia's location between the Holy Roman Empire and the Polish and Hungarian kingdoms influenced its development over the centuries. Czech dukes had to stabilize their political relationship with the German emperor, usually as his vassal, but Bohemia was never integrated into the empire's internal administration. The Czech rulers expanded against their eastern neighbors during times of weakness, but were forced back when the

Polish and Hungarian states recovered their strength. Internally the major questions involved the ducal succession and the relationship between Bohemia and Moravia, which would set the pattern for other lands as the Bohemian state expanded. Conflicts over the succession after Boleslav II's death weakened Bohemia and opened up prospects for its neighbors to meddle, but the situation gradually stabilized in the first decades of the eleventh century.

The Přemyslid Dukes and Their State

Boleslav II's grandson Břetislav I (1035–1055) made the most of the simultaneous weakness of Poland, Hungary, and Germany early in his reign.¹ His efforts to expand into Poland (where he seized the remains of St. Vojtěch in 1039) and Hungary did not last, and though he defeated the German king Henry III at Domažlice (Taus) in 1040, he had to accept Bohemia as an imperial fief in 1041.² But Břetislav stabilized Bohemia within its traditional frontiers, and extended the castles as centers of ducal power into Moravia. Břetislav also established the principle of seniority, which gave overlordship in the entire Přemyslid lands to the eldest member of the family. To his younger sons Břetislav entrusted Moravia, with appanage seats in Olomouc (Olmütz), Brno (Brünn), and later Znojmo (Znaim).³

The first Bohemian duke to win the royal title was Vratislav II (1061–1092). Already he had worked to strengthen the duke's position by creating a bishopric in Olomouc in Moravia, thereby limiting the Prague bishop's jurisdiction to Bohemia. He also established a cathedral chapter at Vyšehrad, where he moved his residence. Vratislav took the side of the emperor, Henry IV, in the investiture controversy with Pope Gregory VII, and in 1085 a grateful Henry granted him the title "King of Bohemia and Poland" for his lifetime.⁴

When Vratislav died in 1092, the prominent families beginning to develop into a feudal nobility used the conflicts among his sons to play off rival contestants against each other. The empire also meddled, but the Czechs defeated a German invasion in 1126 at Chlumeč, in the foothills of the Krušné Hory. The battle of Chlumeč, where the Czechs fought under the emblems of St. Václav and St. Vojtěch, marked a shift in the way the leading Czechs thought about their relationship to the state. No longer were they merely the duke's retainers, they were a nobility defending their land, represented by their patron saints.⁵

Vladislav II (1140–1172) came to the throne as the candidate of this developing nobility, but he deftly used the support of the first Hohenstaufen emperor, Conrad III, to strengthen his position. In the renewed quarrels between the papacy and the Hohenstaufens under Frederick I Barbarossa, Vladislav supported the emperor. As a reward for Czech support, Barbarossa crowned Vladislav King of Bohemia in 1158, again only for his lifetime. When Vladislav abdicated in his son's favor, Barbarossa seized the opportunity to intervene in Bohemia's affairs. Twenty-five years of practically unbroken strife ensued, during which the throne changed hands twelve times, and each time the decisive voice was the emperor's.

During this struggle, Frederick Barbarossa raised Moravia to the status of border county (margraviate) and granted its united territory to one of the ambitious Přemyslid contestants, Konrád Ota of Znojmo, in 1182. In 1187 the Přemyslid bishop of Prague, Jindřich Břetislav, was proclaimed an imperial prince. Both these developments threatened the unity of the Bohemian lands, but they were reversed before the end of the century. An agreement between Vladislav Jindřich (supported by most Czech nobles) and his older brother Přemysl established Přemysl as Czech duke, and Vladislav Jindřich as margrave of Moravia. These decisions ignored the Holy Roman Emperor, affirmed the supremacy of the Czech duke, ensured the unity of the Přemyslid patrimony, and reasserted Moravia's connection to Bohemia, though it remained a margraviate. During Přemysl Otakar I's reign (1197–1230) the Czech lands would begin a century of development, a development building on changes taking place during the turbulent twelfth century.

Economic Development in the Twelfth Century

Internal colonization in the Bohemian lands nearly doubled the area under the plow. Population growth encouraged people to clear the forests near villages or open up new settlements in what had previously been, in the contemporary term, "desert." Dukes encouraged the process in strategic areas, including the borders where colonization from the German side encroached on their territory. Ducal foundations of great monasteries, especially of the Praemonstratensians and the Cistercians, also contributed to colonization.

The nobility, however, was the major force reshaping the countryside. Instability at the beginning and end of the century allowed them to

turn offices and associated income (benefices) into hereditary possessions. Nobles supported new settlements around the castles, treating the newly cultivated land as their property, and the peasants on it as their subjects. In this way the ancestors of the leading Czech noble families of the middle ages assembled wide possessions. The nobles also built churches and founded monasteries. All of the monasteries established in Bohemia and Moravia before 1100 were founded by the rulers, but between 1100 and 1205, twenty-seven richly endowed monasteries arose thanks to noble patronage.⁶ The castle's importance as a center of trade and craft production increased. Around the larger and more important castles, trading centers grew up that began to resemble towns.

Prague held a unique position. As the duke's residence, it attracted anyone who wanted to be close to the ruler, and they built modest courts, including churches. The clergy of the cathedral chapters at the Prague castle and Vyšehrad required food, luxury and utilitarian goods, and the services of specialized craftsmen. Local peasants and foreign merchants flocked to the markets, and permanent communities of Germans, Latins, and Jews developed.⁷ By the end of the twelfth century stone houses surrounded the marketplace in Prague's Old Town, and in 1172 a stone bridge, the oldest in Central Europe after Regensburg's, was built with the support of Vladislav II's wife, Judita.

Duke Konrad Ota II issued a statute in 1189, the first written legal code for the Czechs, which recognized these social and economic changes, including private ownership of land. The political system began to resemble more closely the feudal system common in the west. By the time of Vladislav II, the great noble families had stabilized, and the king was now the feudal liege lord of a nobility that itself represented the land. The cult of St. Vaclav contributed to this territorialization of originally personal relationships: beginning with Vladislav, the inscription on the ruler's seal suggested that the duke (later king) merely held in his hands and administered the "Pax Sancti Wenceslai" (peace, order, state of St. Vaclav).

BOHEMIA AS A HEREDITARY KINGDOM

Bohemia's rapid political rise during the next century built upon Premysl Otakar I's success in regaining the royal title (1198, with

papal recognition in 1204) by adroit diplomacy during the Hohenstaufen-Welf conflicts over the imperial crown.⁸ Přemysl Otakar I's policies illustrate the Czech kingdom's position as the emperor's power was sapped by the long-running feud with the papacy. The power of the territorial rulers of the Holy Roman Empire increased, and the Czech king might have established an independent kingdom like contemporary Hungary or Poland, or the western dynastic monarchies in France, England, or the Iberian peninsula. Instead, Přemysl chose to retain the Bohemian lands' association with the empire.

The terms of that association were codified by the young Hohenstaufen emperor Frederick II in 1212, in the Golden Bull of Sicily.⁹ This document reaffirmed the royal title for Přemysl Otakar I and his successors, treating Bohemia as an independent state without severing the ties to the empire that gave it such influence in Central Europe. The royal title, affirming that the king ruled "by the grace of God," added to the monarch's position within Bohemia. As they asserted the principle of primogeniture the kings became less dependent on the nobles for election.

The Golden Bull of Sicily confirmed the king's right of investiture of the clergy. At this time, the power of lay patrons in Bohemia over the church was still strong. The bishop of Prague, Ondřej, negotiated the Great Privilegium of 1222, which guaranteed church officials in Bohemia canonical election and economic and legal immunities. In return the king strengthened royal oversight over church property, doing away with the ducal and castle officials who had previously administered it. The church became a major feudal power, closely linked to the crown, and one of the king's most trustworthy pillars of support.¹⁰

Přemysl's son Václav (1230–1253) emerged as a talented ruler in his own right, though Přemysl Otakar I's record was difficult to match. Václav I faced challenges equal to his father's. The continuing conflict between the papacy, the Italian towns, the imperial princes, and the Hohenstaufen family defined the political context of Václav's reign. The Czech ruler preserved good relations with Frederick II, the "Stupor Mundi," by his marriage with a Hohenstaufen, Kunhuta. On the other hand, Václav's designs on the Babenberg inheritance were a source of strain. The Babenbergs controlled the duchies of Austria and Styria, the main communication lines between the empire and Italy. The last Babenberg duke, Frederick II, had no male heirs, and all his neighbors schemed to claim his possessions. Finally, Václav I's second son, Přemysl, was

elected duke of Austria in 1250. When the Styrian nobles also accepted Přemysl, the king of Hungary, Béla IV, objected. War with Hungary lasted from 1252 until a peace agreement in 1254 left Přemysl in possession of Austria, while recognizing Béla's claim to Styria. By this time Přemysl was already king of Bohemia.

Colonization in Countryside and Town

Václav I tends to be cast into the shade by his vigorous and long-lived father and his glorious and tragic second son. As king of Bohemia, however, he succeeded in navigating the treacherous waters of the Hohenstaufen feud with the papacy, and positioned Bohemia to benefit from the extinction of the Babenbergs. The Bohemian lands under Přemysl belonged to the most powerful states of Central Europe, in part thanks to developments under Václav I. Internal colonization begun during the twelfth century gathered speed with the arrival of colonists from abroad, mostly Germans. Peasants, burghers, and specialist craftsmen, especially in mining and related trades, settled in the Bohemian lands, accepting land for farming villages or creating towns with charters from noblemen, church institutions, or the king.¹¹

Colonization from the west brought with it new legal norms, the *ius teutonicum* (German or emphyteutic law), and German town law. German law was a collection of traditions and practices enshrined in a written agreement spelling out the conditions under which the colonists held their land. Typically, in return for fixed, regular payments in cash and kind, the colonists received the hereditary right to farm the land, limited personal freedom, and some self-government. For both parties German law offered advantages. To the peasant, the clearly defined and fixed obligations provided incentives to adopt more productive farming practices. To the lord it offered cash when established, and a regular and dependable income thereafter. German law spread to older, Slavic communities, especially near the developing towns with their ready markets for agricultural products.

Towns were subject to specific town law, and a large part of the population including free craft workers produced for the market without devoting their time to agriculture. Towns could hold markets, build fortifications, and insist that merchants stop and offer their wares for sale. They also had exclusive rights to establish crafts or inns within a fixed distance from the town. With time, town councils dominated by

the patriciate, presided over by the mayor or *purkmistr* (from the German *Bürgermeister*) grew up to represent the town in dealings with its lord. Active in trade, financial, or mining enterprises, the patriciate remained German for many years. The craft workers who formed most of the town population organized themselves in guilds to control training, standards, and access to their crafts. Royal towns were entrusted to the chamberlain or, in the case of mining towns, the master of the mint. When a rich silver lode was discovered at Kutná Hora, the town grew rapidly. German mining experts and workers arrived in great numbers, and in 1300, Václav II established a centralized royal mint there. Imported Italian master minters helped create an entirely new coin, with a standard purity and weight, called the Prague *groš*. This coin would remain the foundation of Bohemia's currency for centuries.

*From Přemysl Otakar II to the End of
the Přemyslid Dynasty*

Under Přemysl Otakar II (1253–1278), Bohemia achieved new heights of influence, made easier by Bohemian silver, and by the long interregnum in the empire after Frederick II's death. The Bohemian lands were united, and the king wielded effective power within them. The Přemyslid kings won the title of imperial cupbearer in 1114, and from the mid-thirteenth century onward, they ranked among the seven electoral princes who chose the emperor.¹² Přemysl extended Czech influence in the Alpine lands, with the strong support of the royal towns (Vienna remained on his side to the bitter end), the archbishop of Salzburg, and other clerics. In 1269, Přemysl succeeded to the Duke of Carinthia's possessions, including also Carniola and the "Wendish marches," peopled by Slavs (today's Slovenia). Přemysl also expanded northward, where Piast Poland was still divided into different principalities. The Bohemian king joined German and Polish knights in crusades against the still pagan Baltic peoples; the city of Königsberg (today Kaliningrad), founded on the Baltic in 1255, was named in his honor.

Thus in a short space of time, the Bohemian king had dramatically expanded his realm (see Map 2, p. 34). Contemporaries admired Přemysl Otakar II, but they also began to fear him. At the imperial election of 1273, the German princes chose the relatively obscure Rudolf of Habsburg. When in 1276 the Alpine nobles rebelled against Přemysl, Rudolf (supported by the other German rulers, the papacy, and Hungary) sup-

ported them. It was a revolt by leading Czech nobles, though, that forced Přemysl to capitulate to Rudolf, give up the Alpine territories, and receive Bohemia and Moravia from Rudolf as a fief.

The rapid changes linked to colonization had created conflict between nobles and king. Přemysl consciously used new royal towns and monasteries to reassert royal power against the now territorialized nobles. Royal institutions like the Land Court also undercut the nobles' powers. By the mid-thirteenth century the Land Court was the highest judicial instance in the kingdom. The king also accepted its limitations: he presided as first among equals, along with the officials of the Prague castle and representatives of the great noble families, but it was St. Václav, as reflected in the seal of the court, who acted as the defender of the law.¹³

Přemysl suppressed the noble rising during 1277, and decided to hazard everything on a decisive battle with Rudolf. The second campaign ended in disaster for the Bohemian king on August 26, 1278, at the Moravian Field (Moravské pole, Dürnkrut). As Přemysl saw that his knights were defeated, "still he did not propose to yield to our victorious banner, but defended himself, a colossus in spirit and virtues, with admirable bravery. . . . Here at last this most glorious king, together with the victory, lost his life."¹⁴ Dying as he had lived according to the knightly code, Přemysl Otakar II, "King of Gold and Iron," became an inspiration to contemporary and future writers.

Since the rise of the Habsburgs dates from Rudolf's victory, the German or pro-Habsburg view sees Přemysl as an overweening upstart whose ambitions led to his downfall. Czechs blame the nobles' treachery, which brought to a premature end the chance to build a Czech-dominated greater state out of the German and Slavic eastern marches of the empire.¹⁵ The immediate result of Přemysl's defeat and death was disaster. With the king gone and the heir, Václav, a child, it seemed the realm might fall apart. The widowed queen, Kunhuta, and Přemysl's former client Jindřich, duke of Breslau (Wrocław), received small territories, while Rudolf took Moravia, and Otto of Brandenburg became regent in Bohemia during Václav's minority. Central power weakened, nobles helped themselves to royal property, and the Brandenburgers extracted as much as they could. The impetus to end these "evil years" came from a group of great nobles and the higher clergy, acting politically as a body for the first time. Pressure from this group, and the payment of impressive sums of money, convinced Otto to return Václav

II to Bohemia in 1283. A similar group gained Rudolf's agreement to withdraw from Moravia, and the kingdom slowly recovered.

Václav, married to Guta (Jitka) of Habsburg, shifted his ambitions to the north and northeast, away from direct conflict with his inlaws. He extended feudal overlordship among the Polish dukes of Upper Silesia, took Cracow, and in 1300 was formally crowned King of Poland. He cemented his claim to Poland by a second marriage, to the Piast princess Eliška Rejčka (Richenza). When the Hungarian Árpád dynasty died out in 1301, a group of nobles offered the crown to Václav II, who had his son, also Václav, formally crowned King of Hungary that year. The rapid recovery of Přemyslid fortunes provoked imperial and papal resistance, and Václav withdrew his son from Hungary in 1304 and renounced his claim before his death in 1305. Václav III (1305–1306), however, hoped to retain at least the core of the Czech-Polish dominion. To this end he prepared an expedition to Poland in the summer of 1306.¹⁶ In Olomouc on his way there, however, Václav III was murdered, in circumstances not fully explained to this day. With his untimely end the Přemyslid family, once so numerous, died out in the male line.

CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE IN PŘEMYSLID BOHEMIA

Accepting Christianity affected the peoples who came into contact with the Christian civilization of Rome and its heirs in many areas, including politics. The most basic political consideration was simple survival: becoming Christian helped prevent extermination. Christianity also contributed to state-building, providing a core of educated, experienced administrators and an organization patterned after the Roman empire. Whether the choice was for Rome or for Constantinople, the new states saw the value of their own church organizations, and native patron saints quickly provided a strong force for cohesion. St. Václav assumed this unifying role among the Czechs. One chronicle tells how, at Chlumec, one of the Czechs holding St. Václav's lance cried out to his companions, "Comrades and brothers, be valiant, for above the point of the holy spear I see St. Václav, who, seated on a white horse and wearing white robes, fights for us; you also behold!"¹⁷ The cult of St. Václav, "eternal duke" of the Czechs, and other patrons remained important in Czech political ideology for centuries.

With Christianity also came writing, and thus literature. Cyril and Methodius's mission had little time to sink deep roots but their legacy did not entirely vanish. The Slavonic rite existed in Bohemia, together with the Latin, through most of the tenth century at least, and with the foundation of the Benedictine monastery of Sázava in 1032 by Procopius a center for the Slavonic liturgy emerged in the eleventh century. The Slavonic liturgical and literary tradition influenced the earliest literary expression in the Czech language, the Czech hymn, "Hospodine, pomiluj ny."¹⁸ Already under Boleslav II the cult of St. Václav produced written texts, the Old Slavonic *Legend of St. Václav* before the middle of the tenth century, and Latin works shortly thereafter. St. Vojtěch, too, quickly became the subject of literary works. The Slavonic tradition was more conservative than the Latin, which opened Czech cultural life to the important influences of Latin Christendom.

The church at first imported Moravian building styles. The most important church in Bohemia, the church of St. Vitus, was constructed as a rotunda in Ottonian style under Václav. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries it was rebuilt as a Romanesque basilica. Twelfth-century Romanesque buildings include St. George's basilica in the Prague castle and Strahov monastery. The Judita bridge in Prague has already been mentioned; not until the second half of the thirteenth century would the stone bridge at Písek rival this achievement. A Romanesque bishop's palace and monasteries graced Olomouc, and in Znojmo the early twelfth-century rotunda of St. Catherine preserves on its walls the Přemyslid vision of Czech statehood, depicting Czech dukes from the mythical Přemysl to the present beside the evangelists and Christ the King.

The church's political role also increased as jurisdictional tensions emerged between religious and secular authorities (the bishops and dukes, abbots of monasteries, and their founders or patrons). Until the middle of the eleventh century the higher church offices were filled by non-Czechs, usually Germans. Czech clerics studied abroad in Germany and France, and on their return entered the church administration or the ruler's service. Thus the first Czech intelligentsia formed, including Cosmas of Prague, whose chronicle transcends the bare recording of local events to give a history of the Bohemian lands as a whole.

When the First Crusade reached Prague in 1096, the crusaders unleashed a pogrom on the Jews, and similar disturbances took place in Brno. Generally, the situation of Jews in the Bohemian lands up until then had been relatively tolerable. From the beginning of the thirteenth

century, they were considered unfree *servi camerae regiae*, fiscal subjects directly under the monarch. In return for his protection, they paid various taxes and special contributions. Otherwise, their contacts with Christian society were strictly regulated, and limited mostly to business. Under Přemysl Otakar II, a *Statuta Judaeorum* codified the legal situation of the Jews (its provisions were extended to Jewish communities in Moravia as well as Bohemia), comparing favorably with their situation in neighboring countries. Přemysl Otakar II's statute remained the foundation of Jewish legislation until the eighteenth century.¹⁹

Gothic style and knightly culture arrived in Bohemia in the thirteenth century. To the traditions of fealty, knightly culture added military training and the art of courtly love. Minnesingers, the German followers of the French troubadour and trouvère, were welcome at the royal court. Nobles built seats with German names, after which they called themselves (the lords of Lemberk, Šternberk, Rožmberk). The old Czech rhyming epic *Alexandreida* (late thirteenth century) reflects their outlook and the military campaigns of Přemysl Otakar II and Václav II.²⁰

The royal court was also a center for devotional life (another knightly virtue, in theory at least). Václav I's sister, Anežka (Agnes), took the veil after her engagement collapsed. She devoted the rest of her life to charity and religious devotion, earning beatification and (in 1989) canonization. She brought the Franciscans and the Poor Clares (known for their poverty, fervent devotion, and activity among the people) to Bohemia, and created a Czech order, the Crusaders of the Red Star, also devoted to charitable works. The chorale "Svatý Václave," war hymn of the Czech nobility in the thirteenth century, expresses the intersection of court and cloister.

The Gothic style spread further through royal foundations of monasteries (Zbraslav, established by Václav II), castles, and towns. Anežka's convent and the Old-New Synagogue in Prague are the earliest examples of Gothic in Bohemia. The five-vaulted monastery church at Sedlec, or south Bohemian monastic foundations (Zlatá Koruna/Goldkron, Vyšší Brod/Hohenfurt), represents late thirteenth-century sacred Gothic. The secular side boasts the royal castle at Bezděz (Bösig) in northeast Bohemia, and less-imposing buildings at noble seats. Gothic in Bohemia peaked, however, under the Přemyslids' successors.

With the murder of Václav III in 1306, the ruling family that had dominated the Bohemian lands for more than four centuries died. Though many of the forty Přemyslids who had ruled the Czechs had to

struggle against rivals, and many were overthrown, never had the family's right to rule been seriously questioned. It was not immediately apparent how the Bohemian lands would prosper under a foreign dynasty. In fact the next century would see the medieval Bohemian kingdom reach its highest point of power and prestige, only to be plunged once more into crisis and conflict.