

From Legend to Reality: The Bees of Bohemia

by Mark Whelan

Bees are the very reason why the Czech people chose to settle along the Vltava river, at least according to Cosmas of Prague, a cleric and chronicler writing in the early twelfth century. According to the learned priest, it was the great buzzing of bees and the sound of plentiful waterfowl around the watercourse of the Vltava that encouraged the mythical Duke Bohemus to settle his followers there around AD 600. Why a land full of bees and ducks made an attractive location for a future kingdom might puzzle modern readers of Cosmas' *Chronicle*, but not medieval contemporaries. Bees did not just provide wax, a substance used to make candles and in industrial processes such as waterproofing and metal casting, but also honey, prized for its medicinal properties and also the only sweetener available to Europeans before the advent of large-scale sugar imports in the fifteenth century. Ducks, on the other hand, were valued not just as an easy source of meat, but also for their eggs - and feathers, especially their down. Cosmas' account of Duke Bohemus' life is legendary invention, meant to endow his patrons - the (then) Dukes of Bohemia - with a history and status sufficient to rank alongside their neighbours and competitors, especially the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire and the rising powers of Hungary and Poland. Cosmas' emphasis on bees, however, was not as bizarre as it may first seem, and probably reflected a lively beekeeping tradition in his contemporary native land. By Cosmas' time, after all, Bohemia was recognised as an important international exporter of wax, and some of the kingdom's later rulers displayed a noteworthy interest in apiary and bee law.

The bees in Cosmas' legendary tales appear to have been busy from an early period, with the Duchy (and later Kingdom) of Bohemia producing wax in sufficient quantities to export it as early as the tenth century, attracting in the process the attention of neighbouring rulers eager to increase their tax income. In the early 900s King Louis III of East Francia, ruler of a broad region stretching across modern-day central and south-east Germany, promulgated a new set of tolls payable on wares passing through his territories. The fact that he singled out Bohemians and Moravians in particular, stipulating that they needed to pay a special tax at Passau, the port city on the Danube, on all wax



Cosmas of Prague, circa 1045-1125, was a priest, writer and historian

they transported westwards, suggests that the descendants of Duke Bohemus had cornered the market for wax. Bohemia's reputation as a land rich in bees and bee products only spread. An anonymous French tract from the later 1200s listed the principal exports of all the major lands in Christendom and north Africa that wended their way to Bruges in Flanders, then the most important commercial centre in northern and western Europe. The tract noted, first and foremost, that 'from the kingdom of Bohemia comes wax', adding also its export of silver, gold, and tin. The situation was no different come the early sixteenth century, when a member of the Paumgartner merchant family, a wealthy trading dynasty resident in Augsburg and Nuremberg, wrote a treatise describing international trade for the edification of his younger relations who would eventually succeed him in business. Among other important pieces of information, the merchant stated that wax was an important export of the Bohemian kingdom, alongside horses, oxen, and skins, and that Czech merchants could be found in cities across the region, including Linz, Vienna, and Munich, selling wax.

It is no surprise, then, that perhaps the most detailed insights offered into beekeeping and the taxing of bee produce in late medieval Europe are preserved in a remarkable record produced in the Kingdom of Bohemia's chancery. The so-called *Böhmische Salbüchlein* (roughly translated as the 'little Bohemian register book'), produced upon the command of Emperor Charles IV in the mid-1360s, recorded in detail the various properties, estates, and assets, owned by him in the Upper Palatinate, the stretch of heavily forested land on Bohemia's western border to the north and west of

Nuremberg, now in modern-day Bavaria. In an ambitious move made some ten years earlier, Charles IV had detached a string of estates in the Upper Palatinate from their allegiance to the Wittelsbacher, a powerful family of German lords who were often in competition with Charles IV's own family, the Luxemburgers. Not content with annexing these lands for himself, he went one step further and incorporated them into the Kingdom of Bohemia as a distinct territory that he referred to in his correspondence as his 'lordship in Bavaria' or as 'Bavaria beyond the Bohemian forest', staffing its administrative offices with Bohemian nobles, moving the region's court of appeal to Prague, and commanding parish churches there to take confession in both the German and Slavic tongue. Managing this now-Bohemian exclave in a traditionally German-speaking duchy proved challenging, with the production of the *Böhmische Salbüchlein* an attempt to bring a sense of order to this new territory, collecting all royal and seigneurial rights, assets, and incomes, as well as legal materials and regulations, into one convenient book of reference for the new administration that was to be based in Sulzbach.

Aside from its numerous references to the collection of honey and wax rents by royal officers, of most interest to bee enthusiasts in the *Böhmische Salbüchlein* is the copy of the forest law then in practice around the town of Auerbach, a settlement some forty-five kilometres north-east of Nuremberg. Among many other details, the law code prescribed harsh penalties for those found chopping down any trees that held bees or that were capable of holding bees. In this region, as the law code suggests, bees were not just kept in man-made hives, but also in customised larger trees, especially pine and oak, with specialised beekeepers hollowing out cavities in the trunks in which bees could establish colonies. The chopping down of



The Bohemian Palatinate (or Bohemian Upper Palatinate since the 19th century), also called New Bohemia, is a historical area in the north east of present-day Bavaria. From 1353 onwards it was incorporated into the Crown lands of Bohemia by Emperor Charles IV



Above is the Castle of Lauf, founded 1356, also called the Wenzelschloss

Left, this tower in Sulzbach-Rosenberg features the arms of Bohemia, upper right



The linden is the national tree of the Czech nation. Trees were planted usually in fours, one in each compass point, near chapels and places of pilgrimage. In the image is the linden tree of Řepečín in the Šumava region

linden trees and other vegetation liked by bees was also punishable by fine, and the building of bathing houses, the stabling of horses, and the growing of hops were all strictly regulated. Beekeeping here took place amongst a forested landscape that humans could put to various uses, and it is noteworthy that the law sought to protect bees and the livelihoods of beekeepers first of all. The beekeepers themselves had to pay each year a customary rent of one shilling and one large container of honey for each parcel of forest they held. In return, however, they were given largely free rein to adapt what trees they wanted to make them suitable to house bees, to split bee colonies into two when they saw fit, and to chop down 'unfruitful' trees that were incapable of holding



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bees and take the timber away as firewood. The careful recording of bee-focused legislation and content in the *Böhmische Salbüchlein* did not just reflect a desire to keep track of and tax beehives and bee produce, but also reflects Charles IV's own interests in beekeeping and bee legislation. In 1350, for example, Charles had legislated regarding bees within the Kingdom of Bohemia, awarding the rights to all bees and beehives on estates strictly to the owners of the land, before going on to stipulate that tenants could keep bees only if they rendered portions of the wax and honey gained from the colony to their landlord. Access to bee produce was valuable and lucrative and was therefore regulated by rulers across Europe - there are, for example, over seventy communities owing customary payment of honey to the King of England recorded in the Domesday Book of the eleventh century - but with its numerous references to wax and honey rents and its preservation of the forest law around Auerbach, the *Böhmische Salbüchlein* sheds a light on beekeeping in the medieval period as no other source can.

Charles IV's ambitions to extend the Kingdom of Bohemia into modern-day Bavaria has long attracted the attention of historians. Some scholars have even gone as far as describing his estates in the Upper Palatinate as 'New Bohemia' (*Neuböhmen*), a grandiose and misleading term never used by the monarch and that only first appears in

the 1700s. The emperor, however, soon decided to invest his energies into other projects. By 1373, he had pawned most of his possessions in that region to raise funds with which he could purchase the much greater prize of the Margraviate of Brandenburg for his son, Sigismund. The region around Nuremberg continues, however, to remain an important centre for beekeeping, and bees continued to leave their mark on Czech culture and literature in the centuries that followed. When John Comenius came to author his *World in Pictures* in the 1650s, the first illustrated children's textbook in European history, he dedicated several pages to bees, including pictures of beehives and descriptions of their honey and wax-making endeavours. Even today, the Czech Republic enjoys a heightened reputation for apiary. According to data collected by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations in 2018, the Czech Republic had the highest number of hives per square kilometre in Europe and the most beekeepers per capita within the European Union. Were Duke Bohemus to visit his descendants today, one hopes he would not need to ride far before he was struck, once again, by the buzzing of bees.

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Above, an Italian depiction of beehives from 14th-century Italy.

Left, wax figure, votive gift, 17th century, from Makkum in The Netherlands, now in the collection of the Château of Konopiště.