

The Effigies of Přemyslid Rulers in Prague Cathedral and the Beginning of Portraiture in Bohemia

by Jana Gajdošová

Often known as the father of the country to many Czechs, the celebrated Emperor Charles IV did not have an easy beginning as a Czech ruler. Although he was born to Elizabeth of Přemyslid, a Bohemian princess, his father was John of Luxembourg, dubbed the foreign king because he spent most of his time away from Bohemia. During his time away, the Czech nobility took control of the country, a power that they subsequently found difficult to surrender. To make matters more complicated, when Charles was only seven years old, his father took him from his mother in Prague and sent him to Paris – where he was heavily influenced by the Parisian court of his uncle Charles IV of France. When Charles returned to Prague in 1333, after his seven-year-long stay in Paris and his two-year military campaign in Italy, he was shocked at the desolate place that he found. In his autobiography, Charles described Prague as such:

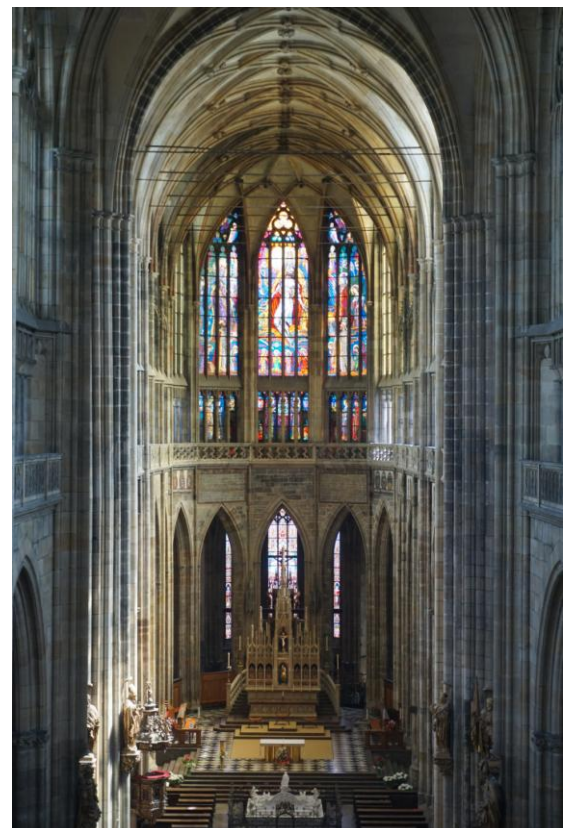
‘We found the kingdom so forsaken that there was not one castle which was free and not mortgaged together with all its royal property, so that we did not have anywhere to stay except in houses in the cities just like any other citizen. Even the castle in Prague was desolate, in ruins, and reduced from the times of King Ottakar so that it has crumbled almost to the ground.’

So immediately after his return, Charles began two large building projects - a castle and a cathedral on the Hradčany hill – and it is clear from the start that Charles was directly involved in their conception. The particulars of both projects express Charles’s preoccupation with his legitimacy and his identity at this time, which was driven by the fact that he bridged two great dynasties, the Přemyslids of the past and the Luxembourgs of his envisaged future. And it is this preoccupation with

his identity that fuelled many of his other projects too. Genealogical cycles were central to this as they communicated the unbroken continuity of a long line of rulers and the role of Charles in that succession. Amongst these were the painted genealogical cycles of Holy Roman Emperors in Karlštejn and a painted genealogy of Přemyslid rulers in Prague castle, neither of which survives today. In the new cathedral, which was begun before Charles was even crowned King of Bohemia, this preoccupation was manifest first and foremost by a grand new chapel, tomb and reliquary for Saint Wenceslas – the canonised Bohemian ruler.

Some scholars argue that this focus on Charles’s Bohemian lineage was present only at the beginning of his reign, while after his coronation as Holy Roman Emperor in 1355, Charles focused more on his imperial lineage. Yet Charles commissioned the grandest genealogical programme of Přemyslid rulers just two years before his death – the tomb effigies of Přemyslid rulers in the radiating chapels of Prague Cathedral. Documentary evidence notes that it was in 1373 that the Emperor ordered the bodies of Přemyslid rulers to be exhumed from the old basilica and to be placed in the new royal mausoleum below the

The Choir of St Vitus' Cathedral



choir of the new Gothic cathedral. He also commissioned a series of royal tomb chests with effigies to be placed in the radiating chapels above them. His own tomb was to be staged right in the centre of the cathedral, clearly marking his importance in that dynastic succession. Moreover, Charles commissioned busts of himself along with other family members and people who contributed to the building of the cathedral directly above the tombs in the triforium.

There are six surviving effigies of Bohemian rulers – two in each of the three easternmost radiating chapels of Prague Cathedral. Each tomb monument consists of a tomb chest, decorated with heraldry and an effigy of a ruler, his feet resting on either a lion or on a dog. The tombs are not arranged chronologically and they alternate between a ruler in armour and a ruler in robes. Although the remains of the rulers were originally buried in the choir below, in the 1980s they were moved again directly into the tomb chests, which now act as sarcophagi. One of the obvious things to note about the tombs is that there are only six of them, thus lacking dozens of other important Bohemian rulers. The reason that the bodies were not all here in the 14th century is that many Bohemian rulers of the past chose to be buried in royal mausolea elsewhere, such as the mausoleum of kings of Bohemia in Zbraslav.

Sculpturally, the most famous of these six effigies are the tombs of Přemysl Ottakar I, who was the first king to gain hereditary right for his successors and who died in 1230, and his grandson Přemysl Ottakar II, who is considered one of the greatest rulers of Bohemia. Přemysl Ottakar I was clearly important to Charles and to the history of Prague, especially as Charles contrasts the renowned Prague of Přemysl Ottakar I with his description of the desolate state of Prague in his autobiography (as quoted above). After his death, Přemysl was buried in the basilica of St Vitus and then transferred to the Gothic choir in the 14th century.

His tomb chest is particularly interesting because it is the only one that is directly connected to the hand of Peter Parler, the ingenious master mason of Prague Cathedral, in the so-called *Wochenrechnungen* of the Cathedral. The *Wochenrechnungen*, which are the accounts from the workshop in the Cathedral, mention that in 1377 Peter Parler was paid 15 heaps of groschen for the statue of Přemysl Ottakar and that this was an order made directly by the Emperor. The

Wochenrechnungen do not mention any other effigies after this but we also know that 1377 was a year when there was a push to move things along more quickly. In that year, there is the highest number of stonemasons working at the workshop – 36 in all. Based on style, most scholars agree that the tomb of Přemysl Ottakar II was also carved by Peter Parler.

Stylistically, the tombs as a whole represent some of the most fascinating sculptures from the Parler workshop. Albert Kutal drew connections between these statues and the statues in Schwäbisch Gmünd, where the young Peter Parler first worked with his father. Even more convincingly, the effigies can be compared to those in the triforium and the clerestory of Prague Cathedral, as well as to those on the façade of the Old Town Bridge Tower – all completed more or less at the end of the life of Charles IV. The bulging eyes, realistic faces, short beards, drapery and physiognomic composition are all comparable. While the Parler workshop had no way of knowing what the Přemyslid kings of the past actually looked like, the stonemasons were undoubtedly instructed to use the likeness of Charles IV when creating the effigies in order to emphasise a continuity between the Emperor and his ancestors.

The effigies are highly individualised, extremely expressive and marked by time. The figure of Přemysl Ottakar I is the most dramatic, having some of the most realistic facial features. The sinuous hair, the thick layers of drapery, the furrowed brows and deep wrinkles all communicate a sense of drama. As Albert Kutal argued, there are very few portrait heads in 14th century Europe that have the same visual power as this sculpture, which exhibits a type of idealism that is strengthened by its realism. And it is this head that demonstrates the experiments with portraiture that were present at the court of Charles IV. Nevertheless, to call these effigies ‘portraits’ would not be correct because these are not by definition portraits. They are imagined portraits. Still, they attempt to communicate a real likeness and an identity – even if that likeness is only imagined.

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Above, Přemysl Ottakar I

Below, Přemysl Ottakar II

