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Bohemocentrism and universalism of Charles IV

The range and force of monarchical authority in all spheres of national activity were the basis of the political concept of Charles IV, the King of Bohemia and the Holy Roman Emperor. On implementing his policy, he drew from theoretical framework and political experience of French legalists who adapted the Roman legal code to the new state-legal principles which ordered the life of developed feudal communities¹. Young Charles's theoretical foundations in this sphere were laid during his several year long experience at French royal court and thanks to the contacts he developed there with French ideologues and politicians. Theory was quickly supplemented by practice, when he was appointed head of the *signoria* of the Luxembourgs in Northern Italy. Following his return to Bohemia, he gave life to his own concept of state, based on the former plans, experiences and dreams of the Přemyslids² and coupled with the desire to enrich Central Europe with powerful dynastic authority, essential to strengthen, order and unite the politically fragmented blend of countries, small states and lands constituting the supranational whole called *Sacrum Imperium Romanum*. The Holy Roman Empire occupied the territory of Germany together with Austria, Tyrol, Carinthia and its contiguous lands, Swiss Federation, the entire territory of Northern Italy, part of the current territory of France—this including Alsace, Lorraine, Burgundy, Kingdom of Arles (Dauphiné) and Provence—as well as the current territory of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. In the east, Charles IV owned part of the Slavic (Polish) territories, and, naturally, Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia which, together with the pro-French Luxembourg, constituted the centre of power and the domain of his native dynasty.

This was the first case in the history of medieval Europe when for the reason of ineptitude of the members of the German dynasties, the power over the entire Holy Roman Empire came into a firm grip of the Bohemian king and Bohemia was promoted to the status of political empire. The institution of the Bohemian Crown served as means to consolidate the Bohemian king's power as emperor³. Charles's clear bohemocentrism—which emerged in the course of his establishment of centralized

¹ H. Kämpf, 'Pierre Dubois und die geistigen Grundlagen des französischen Nationalbewusstseins um 1300' (*Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*, W. Goetz, ed., vol. 54, Leipzig und Berlin 1935, pp. 23–53).

² For the latest analysis and theoretical generalization of Carolingian concept of the Bohemian state and the Holy Roman Empire see J. Spěvacek, *Karl IV. Sein Leben und seine staatsmännische Leistung*, Praha 1978, Wien 1978, Berlin 1979, pp. 112–162, and *idem*, *Karel IV. Život a dílo (1316–1378)*, Praha 1979, pp. 261–328.

³ This situation has been presented in the past by numerous historians, yet mostly from the German perspective, i.e.: H. Heimpel, 'Deutschland im späteren Mittelalter' 1200–1500 (*Handbuch der deutschen Geschichte*, vol. I, von O. Brandt, A. O. Meyer and L. Just, Konstanz 1957, p. 61): 'Er [Karol IV] machte Bohmen zum neuen Kern der Reiches'. Much clearer, in line with the spirit of 'the German mission' of the policy of Charles IV, see F. Seibt, *Deutschland und die Tschechen. Geschichte einer Nachbarschaft in der Mitte Europas*, München 1974, kapitel: 'Corona Bohemiae, Zentrale des Reiches', pp. 65–81.



monarchy—was coupled with his ambition to create a universal monarchy. His universalistic policy not only of Germanwide or Europewide—and theoretically, even—worldwide scope—stemmed from the need to face the ever-growing feudal fragmentation of the entire Central Europe and conflicts stirring up political tensions, not so much in the centre of the Empire, but at its peripheries.

Charles's bohemocentric policy of was not grounded in his personal desires but arose from political needs dependent on political, territorial and strategic factors. Its founding political conditions came to life in the realm of the Přemyslids which, despite periodic political upheavals caused by the nearly continuous dual rule of the king and the magnates, was the most stabilized—both politically and economically—state organism and which guaranteed to the thriving dynasty of its rulers both the best power base and the launching pad for temporary unification of the Holy Roman Empire, that is, for the political stabilization of the entire Central Europe.

The bohemocentric policy was, then, a necessary condition for the king to secure to himself the power over both Bohemia and the Empire. Charles IV's preparation of steady ground for his dynasty involved not only consequent and well-thought centralization of state and dynastic authority, but also the revival of old Bohemian customs and making them stepping stones for the so-called 'God's grace' power for his family.

'*Translatio imperii ad Slavos*', namely, Charles's vision of the bohemocentric policy of the Holy Roman Empire, grew out of the lasting Přemyslid tradition of state formation, which was openly and boldly acknowledged by Charles himself following his return from Italy to his homeland in 1333.

The first supporting pillar of Charles IV's bohemocentric policy—remaining in close relationship with the programme and political aims of the Bohemian kings—was, eventually, the synthesis of the traditions of Great Moravia and the Přemyslids (of the legendary Duke Premysl the Ploughman), as well as—with due consideration of historical connections—the tradition of Saint Weneclas. The second pillar of Charles's concept of state reflected the ambition of Charlemagne to create a universal Europewide monarchy. This syncretism resulted with the emergence of specific, unquestionable and legitimistically motivated claims expressed by the young dynasty of Luxembourgs—whose descendant, in the third generation, was also Charles IV—towards gaining a sovereign, historically conditioned political power over the assortment of states of Central Europe. Therefore justified was Charles IV's strong emphasis—in accordance with his political concept of state—on the dynastic tradition⁴.

What results from the above lines is that the relation between the bohemocentric and universalistic policy of Charles IV should be regarded as tantamount to the bohemocentric policy of the Holy Roman Empire. Charles IV, in order to strengthen his position of the newly elected (1346) King of the Romans, had to start with reinforcing his authority within Bohemia. This was not theory but reality brought about by historical necessity and manifested in a specific political strategy adopted by Charles following his accession to the throne, that is, following him being appointed as King of the Romans. This is especially evident in his total focus on the issue of the regulation and the tightening of political-legal bonds between Bohemia and the Empire in the period

⁴ For more details see J. Spěvacek, 'Lucemburske koncepcé českého státu a jejich přemyslovske kořeny' (*Sborník historický*, vol. 24, Praha 1976, pp. 5-51).



from March to September 1348 and from July 1350 to May 1353—when he stayed in Bohemia almost all the time⁵.

Therefore, what became the basis for Charles IV's universalistic ambitions was the consolidation of universalistic royal authority based on the strong position of Bohemia, which stemmed from the Bohemian national tradition, and the imperial tradition of Charlemagne which continued to remain vivid in the collective memory of the medieval communities. It was principally about the authority of secular power which was enriched by the splendour and aid of the Church and its ideology. Charles IV freed his political activity from the participation of Church thanks to the compromise between the earthly and supernatural aims, based on the fact that his political practice of extending state authority was founded on the same principles and laws which in the medieval perspective applied to the structure of the universe which, according to the medieval doctrine, was created by God himself⁶. In the concept developed by Charles IV, the universalistic authority of imperial power—which compensated the downsides of the real imperial power over the state—was actually based not on an idealized relationship, but on the actual economic force of the Bohemian state in the new context of the institution of the states of the Crown of Bohemia.

The mutual relationship between Charles IV's bohemocentrism and universalism was not a futile result of theoretical deliberations but a precedent of the economic and political situation in Central Europe. Hence, the priority of bohemocentrism over universalism was an inevitable consequence, brought about not only by the necessity of developing the imperial basis for the centralistic policy, but also by the economic benefits offered by the Bohemian state. That is why, it was supported by the economic potential of the Bohemian states, anchored in the resources of the Bohemian silver mines⁷. This was clearly illustrated by Charles IV's agreement with his grandfather's brother, the Archbishop of Trier and Prince-elector (*kurfurst*) Baldwin of Luxembourg, signed prior to Charles's appointment as the King of Romans, and which led to the desired result thanks to the Bohemian silver⁸.

In the case of Charles IV, the specificity of the relationship between bohemocentrism and universalism lied in the aforementioned syncretism of Bohemian and all-European, Roman elements of political tradition where the empire was perceived

⁵ This relationship is commented on by W. Hanisch, 'Bohemozentrismus' (*Bohemia*, vol. 20, München–Wien 1979, p. 238); he calls the institution of the states of the Bohemian Crown the 'institution of the Empire' whereof descended 'the imperial centralism' of the Carolingians (he points to the years 1348 and 1356), and, at the same time, he deflects attention from the fact that Charles IV founded his imperial centralism on bohemocentrism which had its source in the Bohemian state tradition of the Přemyslids, which, in turn, together with the imperial tradition of Charlemagne ousted the tradition of the German ruling dynasties, including the Hohenstaufens and Wittelsbachs. Hanisch also expresses a view that the principal and exclusive reason behind the Carolingian bohemocentrism was the so-called 'Imperial Idea'. In reality it was completely different: it was the bohemocentric policy of Charles IV that saved the Empire from downfall.

⁶ For the issues connected with the ideas of universalism in the late Middle Ages cf. F. Baethgen, 'Zur Geschichte der Weltherrschaftsidee im späteren Mittelalter' (*Festschrift Percy Ernst Schramm*, vol. I, Wiesbaden 1964, pp. 189–203).

⁷ B. Mendl, *Česke stříbro* ('Co daly naše země Evropě a lidstvu', Praha 1939, pp. 38–44); J. Janaček, 'Stříbro a ekonomika českých zemi ve 13 století' (*Československý časopis Historický*—hereafter referred to as ČSČH, vol. 20, 1972, pp. 875–906).

⁸ J. Spěvacek, *Nezname souvislosti boje markraběte Karla o římskou korunu* (ČSČH, vol. 16, 1968, pp. 653–663); *idem*, 'Die letzte Phase des Kampfes Markgraf Karls (IV) um die römische Krone' (*Historisches Jahrbuch*, vol. 91, 1971, pp. 94–108).



as the state of Charlemagne. This relation did not have any counterpart in the political concepts of medieval monarchs, since it related to the entire political tradition of both Eastern and Western Europe. What is more, this relation was of a unique sacral character. This specific form was to guarantee to Charles IV's domination not only within the Holy Roman Empire but also over remaining countries of the Christian Europe. One of the main sources of political successes was—typical for his times—immunity of both his monarchic titles (that of the king of Bohemia and that of the King of the Romans and, later, Emperor) which were consistently used by him in the intitulations of documents he issued. The authority of the title of the king of Bohemia, raising a considerable international respect already in the times of the rule of the last Přemyslids and John of Luxembourg⁹, was incomparably high under the rule of Charles IV.

The political partners of Charles IV were aware of the fact that in his concept it is the bohemocentrism that plays a much greater role than universalism. Francesco Petrarca noted with discontent that Charles's authority within the empire was founded on a strong base of the Bohemian state. This is illustrated by one of the Charles's letters: '*Imperator Romanorum vocitaberis, Boemie rex solius*'¹⁰.

Charles IV's bohemocentrism was also reflected in the court historiography written within the Bohemian circles of scribes in universal Latin. He commissioned his historiographic works to be produced in Bohemia. What is remarkable is that neither of the German chroniclers did record the rule of Charles IV in a monographic form. On the contrary, the Emperor's aim was that his reign be described in the universalistic world chronicle by Italian writer Giovanni de' Marignolli.

Among the cardinal principles of his unique concept of state (the Bohemian Crown and the Holy Roman Empire) whose aim was to create a lasting foundation for the institution of the countries of the Bohemian Crown and the powerful supra-state empire, Charles IV placed the majority of his political, legislative and cultural ambitions. He began with establishing an independent Bohemian ecclesiastic province (the Archbishopric of Prague). This was followed by him issuing the relevant documents of foundation (of March and April 1348) and attempting at the codification of the Bohemian state law (*Maiestas Carolina*)—undertaken before the issuing of the Golden Bull of 1356 (which was important both for the Holy Roman Empire and for the Kingdom of Bohemia)—as well as issuing documents which sealed the tightening of bonds among the constituent countries of the Bohemian Crown. When it comes Charles's principal architectural contributions, they include the magnificent reconstruction and extension of the Prague castle and cathedral—the monument of the King's bohemocentrism (the place of eternal rest of the Bohemian princes and monarchs, including Luxembourgs, and the triforium), the building of the New Town in Prague, the majestic Bohemian and universalist metropolis and the symbol of Carolingian universalism—the new monastery of Canons Regular of Saint Augustine. The main focus of Canons Regular was to propagate the bohemocentrically-oriented universalism of

⁹ This is proven, among others, by the document of Emperor Louis IV the Bavarian of August 10th, 1331, where king John was described as follows: '*pura fide veluti imperii membrum potissimum*'; cf. E. Stengel, *Nova Alammaniae* I, part I, Berlin 1921, p. 136, no. 238.

¹⁰ K. Burdach, P. Piur, *Petrarcas Briejwechsel mit deutschen Zeitgenossen Vom Mittelalter zur Reformation*, vol. VII, Berlin 1933, p. 52.



Charles IV¹¹. Charles's remaining architectural contributions that are also worth to mention is the reconstruction of Vyšehrad and the construction of its fortifications¹², as well as of the new bridge over Vltava and numerous monasteries and representative burghers' houses¹³.

In the face of temporary lapses in the political role of France at the time of the rule of the House of Valois, Charles IV came up with the idea to establish a new university in Prague—the first one in Central Europe—which was to replace the declining university of Paris. Despite the fact that, as it follows from its documents of foundation, the university of Prague was formed on the basis of bohemocentric ideology and welcomed students from across the entire Europe—owing to which at the time it was regarded as a universalistic institution—and to certain extent took over the former role of the university of Paris¹⁴. For this reason it had the potential to become a carrier of tendencies which not long later gave rise to the Hussite ideology and to the so-called 'intellectual heresy' in general.

The universalistic policy of emperors descending from German dynasties was enriched by Charles IV by a crucially important element, namely, the all-Slavic tradition which was strictly connected with the tradition of the Great Moravia and the Přemyslids. In line with this spirit, Charles IV established the Benedictine Monastery of Emmaus in the New Town of Prague¹⁵. His bohemocentric-universalistic syncretism found its expression in this sphere in the revival of the Old Christian cultural tradition in the lands of Bohemia thanks to the Croatian monks who followed the Old Slavic liturgy and who were brought to the Emmaus Monastery. Important was also the role of the cult of Saint Hieronymus who was worshipped as 'the Slav' who translated Holy Bible into Old Slavic. The lack of ideological connection with the Italian centres in the area of cultural tradition was compensated by Charles IV with the introduction of the Milanese Ambrosian Rite in Prague. This marked the full French-Italian-Slavic circle of the Carolingian universalism which occupied an important ideological-political position in the concept of state developed by Charles IV.

An important step in the transformation of Prague into 'the second Rome' was making it the place of relocation of cults of foreign saints (including Saint Sigismund) together with their relics. At the same time, these acts were to underline the importance of the Carolingian universalism and the central role of Prague¹⁶. What was regarded as uniquely important not only in the religious sense but also for the elevation of Bohemia's political position and its status as superpower was the fact of making Prague

¹¹ For a more detailed explanation of the discussed ideas cf. especially: J. Homolka, 'Ikonografie katedrály sv. Víta v Praze' (*Umění*, R. 26, 1978, no. 6, pp. 564–575); V. Lorenc, *Nové Město pražské*, Praha 1973.

¹² Cf.: the latest study in the collection *Staletá Praha IX*, Praha 1979—mainly F. Kašička and B. Nechvátal, *Vyšehrad a Karel IV.*, pp. 103–125; Z. Horský, *Založení Karlova mostu a kosmologická symbolika Staroměstské mostecké věže* pp. 197–212.

¹³ D. Libal, 'Gotlická architektura v Praze doby Karlovy' (*Staletá Praha IX*, pp. 45–66); J. Kropaček, *K fundacím Karla IV. na Novém Městě pražském* (*ibidem*, pp. 231–250).

¹⁴ For the universal scope of the University of Prague cf. R. Schmidt, *Begründung und Bestätigung der Universität Prag durch Karl IV. und die kaiserliche Privilegierung von Generalstudien* (Kaiser Karl IV. 1316–1378, *Forschungen über Kaiser und Reich*, H. Patze, ed., Öffingen 1978, pp. 695–719).

¹⁵ K. Stejskal, *Klášter na Slovanech*, Praha 1974; P. Wörster, *Monasterium sancti Hieronymi Slavorum ordinis sancti Benedicti*, (*Kaiser Karl IV...*, pp. 721–732).

¹⁶ For details on Prague's role as the capital city and administrative and cultural hub of Central Europe and the Empire see P. Moraw, 'Zur Mittelpunktfunktion Prags im Zeitalter Karls IV.' (*Europa Slavica—Europa Orientalis, Festschrift für Herbert Ludat*, Berlin 1980, pp. 445–489), *ibidem* extensive literature.



home to imperial regalia: the so-called *sanctuarium sacrosancti Romani imperii*. They were brought to the Karlstejn castle, where a special treasury was constructed to house crown jewels and relics of many European saints. Due to these symbols of the Holy Roman Empire which enjoyed widespread public reverence, Charles IV obtained the permission from the Pope to introduce a new holiday on the occasion of which the jewels were placed on public display for the masses of pilgrims that flocked to the castle and many festivities were held. All these steps served Charles IV to highlight his universalistic policy founded on bohemocentrism. This systematically implemented political programme was to be coupled with making Prague central to the majority of cultural, spiritual values and symbols which were to propagate the universalistic character of the Holy Roman Empire, its sanctity and inviolability, all of this expressed in its lofty name. The heart of the Empire lied in Bohemia which was viewed as the lasting and reliable—in every respect—basis for both the Luxembourg dynasty and the Carolingian bohemocentrism.

The imprint of universalism was placed also on the composition of Charles IV's court and his surrounding cultural elites. These included Czechs, Germans, Italians (humanists) as well as Frenchmen, Poles (Silesian dukes and their circles), Luxembourgiens, Flemish and Brabançon merchants and Pope of Avignon. As opposed to this, the origins of diplomats, secretaries and members of the Charles's council, showed to be the proof of the adherence to the principles of bohemocentrism. The vast majority of them was recruited from the countries of Bohemia and its contiguous lands, which made them worthy of trust in political sense, whereas the Germans constituted only 5% of the group¹⁷.

The political practice of the implementation of both prerogatives of Charles IV characterized with political realism and sober rationalism. The elements of this rationalism—though due to the complex personality of Charles IV clashing with his politically-oriented spiritualism—took the lead on the occasion of examining political problems which emerged as the situation unfolded. Hence, their mutual relationship was only a seeming paradox. In the context of political interests of Charles IV, the ideology of Church and religion served as the protective shield of the monarchical authority. In the Carolingian political practice, religion was the tool of politics. According to Charles, this was to be a direct service, and, possibly, one to remain beyond the control of the Pope and the curia.

The bohemocentric concept of the Holy Roman Empire did not associate the Empire with the Christian universalism. The latter had its roots in the antique universalism and ancient Roman plans to establish worldwide rule. At the same time, the Carolingian universalism was restricted in its day-to-day political practice to the Holy Roman Empire which was not in the least universal, although the very idea of Empire as the main representative of secular authority included certain elements of the idea to rule the world which were tantamount to the universalistic perception of all earthly matters. In the end, the imperial universalism of Charles IV referred to the ideas of antique universalism. The theory of Carolingian universalism was not always clear enough, for it included political consequences which leaned towards the so-called 'worldwide universalism'. And so, in practice, Carolingian universalism was to some

¹⁷ Cf. P. Moraw, 'Franken alis königsnaher Landschaft im späten Mittelalter', (*Blätter für deutsche Landesgeschichte*, vol. 112, 1976, p. 138).



extent a deformation of the principal idea of superpower, in terms of seeking objective opportunities for the introduction of certain instances of hegemony of the House of Luxembourg in Europe. To a large extent, it was only an idealized version of the imperial universalistic concept, that is why it had to be dynamic, capable to expand and transform its impact on the surrounding political forces of the Holy Roman Empire and in continuous confrontation with the candidates aspiring to assume the position of the main power of Europe. They, however, appeared only at certain territories. If it was not for the mutual interpenetration of various theories of power on a Europe-wide scale, the universalistic aspirations of Charles IV would not have been realized within the internally fragmented Europe. He had to strive to introduce universalistic rules in order to gain real power both in a practical and theoretical sense. Otherwise, his empire would have rapidly devolved into disintegration, which would have been inevitably coupled with the downfall of the Bohemian state and Charles's political prestige.

The problem with the character of the power (*potestas*) of the King of the Romans and the Emperor over the Holy Roman Empire was that this power essentially required to be supported by a definite territorial, economical and political entity thanks to which the shortage of imperial power could have been compensated with the weight, authority and sacred glitter of the very imperial crown (*auctoritas, splendor imperii*). In the discussed historical context only the Bohemian state could constitute such lasting territorial whole. Therefore, the aforementioned dominance of bohemocentrism over Carolingian universalism may be, most probably, attributed to the problematic character of the actual political authority granted to emperors in the times of Charles IV. The relative instability or volatility of this authority, dating back to the 13th century, was put under a thorough critical analysis¹⁸. Charles IV was completely aware of the instability of the position of the King of the Romans and the Emperor of the Reich. Therefore, he desired to make up for these downsides. As it follows from his Golden Bull of 1356, to achieve his aim, he had to found his policy explicitly on his Bohemian Empire which—for these very reasons—was intensively developed and legally reinforced by him.

translated by Katarzyna Hussar

¹⁸ R. Schneider, *Probleme der Reichspolitik Karls IV. (ibidem, vol. 114, 1978, pp. 73–101)*.