

Vladislav Hall
Old Royal Palace

17. – 30.9. 2024



Bohemian Crown Jewels

The mysterious power of gemstones



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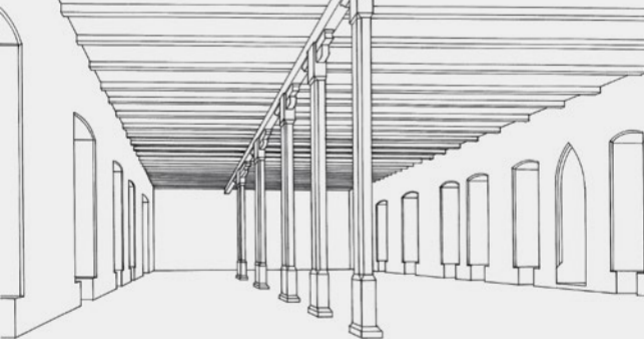
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Vladislav Hall

The Great Hall, named after its patron, King Vladislav Jagiellon of Bohemia and Hungary, occupies nearly the entire main palace floor. It is not only the largest but also the most important space within the royal palace. At the time of its creation, it was undoubtedly intended for the most important events; here, the regional assembly convened, spectacular celebrations following the coronations of Czech kings took place, and the King was honored by the Bohemian estates and foreign delegations. A large hall had already been built on this site by Charles IV during the mid-14th-century renovations of the palace. At that time, however, the hall was not vaulted, and its flat ceiling was likely supported by a line of columns. In the southern perimeter wall is preserved the triumphal arch of the palace chapel, whose modest presbytery protruded from the façade as a polygonal bay window.



Reconstruction of the hall during the reign of Charles IV (drawing by Petr Chotěbor)

The hall assumed its present form during a reconstruction undertaken by Benedikt Ried for King Vladislav Jagiellon. Ried preserved the three perimeter walls of Charles's Hall, only bricking up the original windows and replacing them with much larger ones. The main end of the hall, where the sovereign's throne stood during ceremonies, was formed by a new eastern wall, pierced by a portal and large windows. Above them is still visible Vladislav's monogram featuring the year 1500 and the coat of arms of the Kingdoms of Bohemia and Hungary, with the numbers 29 and 10 indicating the length of the king's reign in each realm. The stunning impression of the hall, which continues to captivate visitors, is largely due to the bold circular vault, which has no internal supports, thereby leaving the interior completely open. The patterns created by the vaulting ribs stand out thanks to the abundance of light streaming in through the vast windows.

Major state events continued to be held in the hall even after the royal palace ceased to be the permanent residence of Bohemian monarchs. Although the banquet following the coronation of Ferdinand I in 1836 was the last of the coronation ceremonies held at Prague Castle, the tradition of a central state space was carried on, albeit in a modified form, by the Czechoslovak Republic. After the hall underwent restorations, the election of the President of the Republic was held here in 1934, followed by others. The premises continue to serve the needs of state representation to this day. ■

Petr Chotěbor



The Orb

Ever since the end of the 4th century, a globe topped with a cross has symbolized the universal rule of the Roman emperors over the Christian world (the globe as a symbol of the Earth and the cross as a declaration of the Christian faith), which they were said to receive “by the grace of God”. During the Middle Ages, in the restored Western Holy Roman Empire, Pope Benedict VIII commissioned the creation of a golden orb studded with precious stones, known as the *globus cruciger* (cross-bearing orb), and gave it to Henry II in Rome before his imperial coronation on 14 February 1014. Over time, this symbol became widely adopted and, together with the royal crown and sceptre, became the fundamental emblem (insignia) of royal authority.



The front side of the cross with pearls, blue sapphires, and red spinels. The sapphires and spinels have cut facets.

The Royal Orb of Bohemia

In 1533, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Bohemia, Ferdinand I, ordered the coronation orb for the Kingdom of Bohemia – together with the sceptre and crown – from the Augsburg goldsmith Hans Haller as his domestic (i.e., non-coronation) Roman insignia. Made of 18-carat gold sheet, weighing 780 grams, and with a diameter of 11.9 cm and a height of 9.8 cm, it has the shape of a slightly flattened sphere. Including the cross on top, it measures 22 cm tall. The cross and bezel are set with eight blue sapphires, six red spinels, and 31 white pearls.

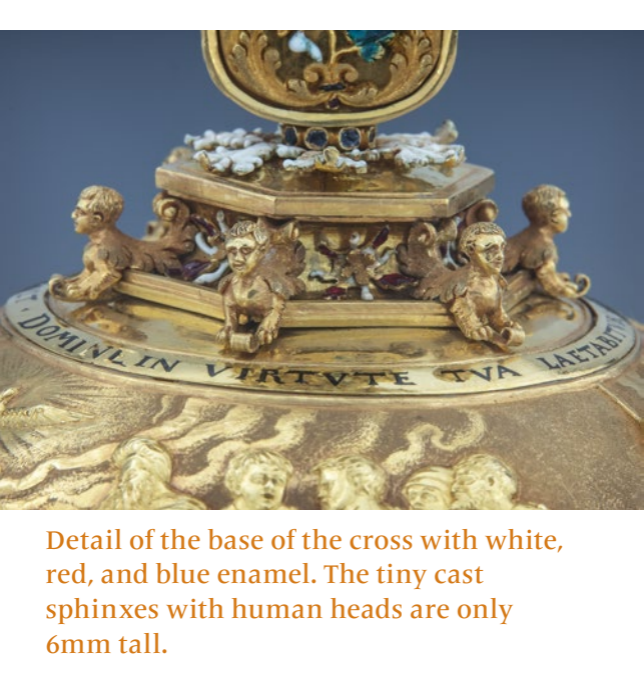


Detail of a decorative band with pearls, red spinel, blue sapphire, and white and blue-green enamel on 18-carat gold.

Decoration

The upper part of the orb, beneath the cross, is engraved with the Latin inscription: *DOMINE IN VIRTUTE TUA LETABITUR REX ET SUPER SALUTARE TUAM EXULTABIT* (Lord, in Your power the king shall rejoice and in Your salvation he shall exult). On the back of the cross, in the middle, is a small inscription: *DEUS CELUM REGNAT ET REGES TERRE* (God rules the Heavens and kings, the Earth).

The orb’s two hemispheres feature embossed reliefs depicting scenes from the Old Testament. The upper half illustrates the anointing of David as king and his battle with Goliath. The lower half shows Adam kneeling before the Creator, Adam being brought into Paradise, and the Creator warning Adam and Eve away from the Tree of Knowledge.



Detail of the base of the cross with white, red, and blue enamel. The tiny cast sphinxes with human heads are only 6mm tall.

When did the insignia become Bohemian?

As a domestic, non-coronational insignia, this Renaissance royal orb (and its accompanying sceptre) was explicitly listed in the 1619 inventory of the late Emperor Matthias’s personal property in Vienna. From the 17th century, when the Bohemian Crown Jewels were stored permanently in Vienna, the Habsburgs attended their imperial coronations dressed as Bohemian kings (a hereditary title since 1627). It is also possible that they used their own domestic imperial orb and sceptre during these ceremonies, as well as during their Bohemian coronations (Ferdinand III in 1627, Ferdinand IV in 1646, and Leopold I in 1656). Beyond a doubt, however, this royal orb and sceptre were first used in a Bohemian royal coronation by Emperor Charles VI in Prague on 5 September 1723. It was also used by his daughter Maria Theresa at her royal coronation in Prague on 12 May 1743, and later by her son, Leopold II, on 6 September 1791. Charles VI and Maria Theresa took all the royal regalia (crown, sceptre, orb, cloak, and ring) back to Vienna after her coronation. It was not until 1791 that Emperor Leopold II, at the insistence of the Bohemian estates, agreed to deposit the Bohemian Crown Jewels in Prague. Along with the St. Wenceslas Crown, the Renaissance orb and sceptre were also transported to Prague; only from this point could the insignia be legally considered part of the Bohemian Crown Jewels. ■



The Sceptre

The sceptre, an ornate rod of precious metal studded with jewels, symbolized the ruler's worldly power during the Middle Ages. Together with the royal crown and orb, it forms the essential symbols of the royal government, the so-called regalia.

The coronation sceptre of the Bohemian Kingdom was commissioned by Ferdinand I, alongside the royal orb and crown. It is made of 18-carat gold, consists of five parts, weighs 1,013 grams, and measures 67 cm in length. It is adorned with four sapphires, five spinels, and 62 pearls. The handle is distinguished by coloured enamel and outer rings of pearls, while the stem bears a relief plant decoration and the head has the form of a stylized flower with plant stems set with gemstones. As a domestic, non-coronational insignia, this royal sceptre met the same fate as the Bohemian royal orb. ■



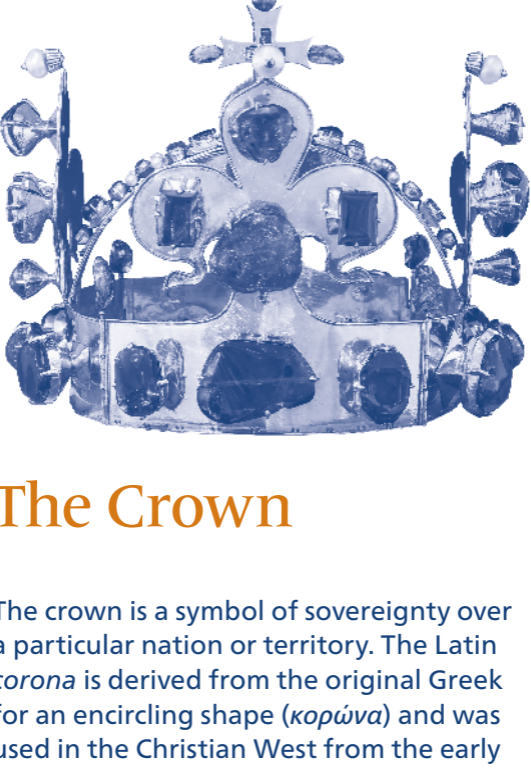
Sceptre head. Detail of decorative gold leaf with veining, pearl, and red spinel strung on gold wire.



Detail of the middle part of the shaft of the sceptre with a chiselled decoration of gold leaves. In the centre, a stylized flower with white and red enamel on 18-carat gold.



Sceptre head. Detail of a spirally-wound gold shaft with pearl, red spinels, and blue sapphires strung on gold wires.



The Crown

The crown is a symbol of sovereignty over a particular nation or territory. The Latin *corona* is derived from the original Greek for an encircling shape (*κορώνα*) and was used in the Christian West from the early Middle Ages to denote an open crown (*corona aperta*).



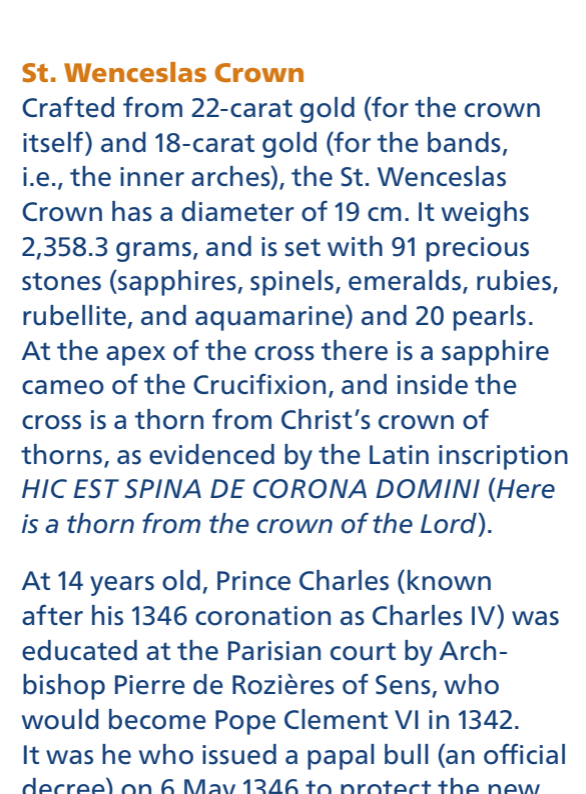
View from above. Twelve parts from Queen Blanche's former belt are attached to the gold settings.



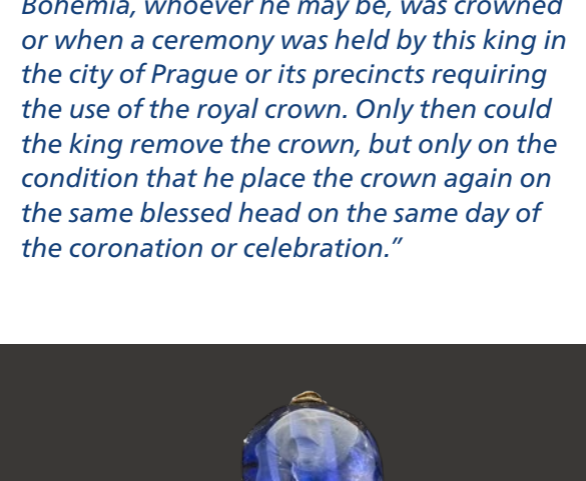
Front with the largest blue sapphire on the band, a large red rubellite in the middle of the lily, and a beautiful red spinel on the upper leaf of the lily.



Left side with blue sapphires and red spinel.



Right side with blue sapphires, red spinel, and blue-green aquamarine at the top of the lily.



Back with a large blue sapphire on the band.

St. Wenceslas Crown

Crafted from 22-carat gold (for the crown itself) and 18-carat gold (for the bands, i.e., the inner arches), the St. Wenceslas Crown has a diameter of 19 cm. It weighs 2,358.3 grams, and is set with 91 precious stones (sapphires, spinels, emeralds, rubies, rubellite, and aquamarine) and 20 pearls. At the apex of the cross there is a sapphire cameo of the Crucifixion, and inside the cross is a thorn from Christ's crown of thorns, as evidenced by the Latin inscription *HIC EST SPINA DE CORONA DOMINI* (Here is a thorn from the crown of the Lord).

At 14 years old, Prince Charles (known after his 1346 coronation as Charles IV) was educated at the Parisian court by Archbishop Pierre de Rozières of Sens, who would become Pope Clement VI in 1342.

It was he who issued a papal bull (an official decree) on 6 May 1346 to protect the new Bohemian royal crown, stating that the then Moravian margrave "Charles, out of devotion and reverence for St. Wenceslas, once King of Bohemia, had a very precious royal crown newly made, and dedicated it to the noble head of this saint, whose body rests in the church of Prague. He had it placed on his head so that it would not be removed, except when a new King of Bohemia, whoever he may be, was crowned or when a ceremony was held by this king in the city of Prague or its precincts requiring the use of the royal crown. Only then could the king remove the crown, but only on the condition that he place the crown again on the same blessed head on the same day of the coronation or celebration."

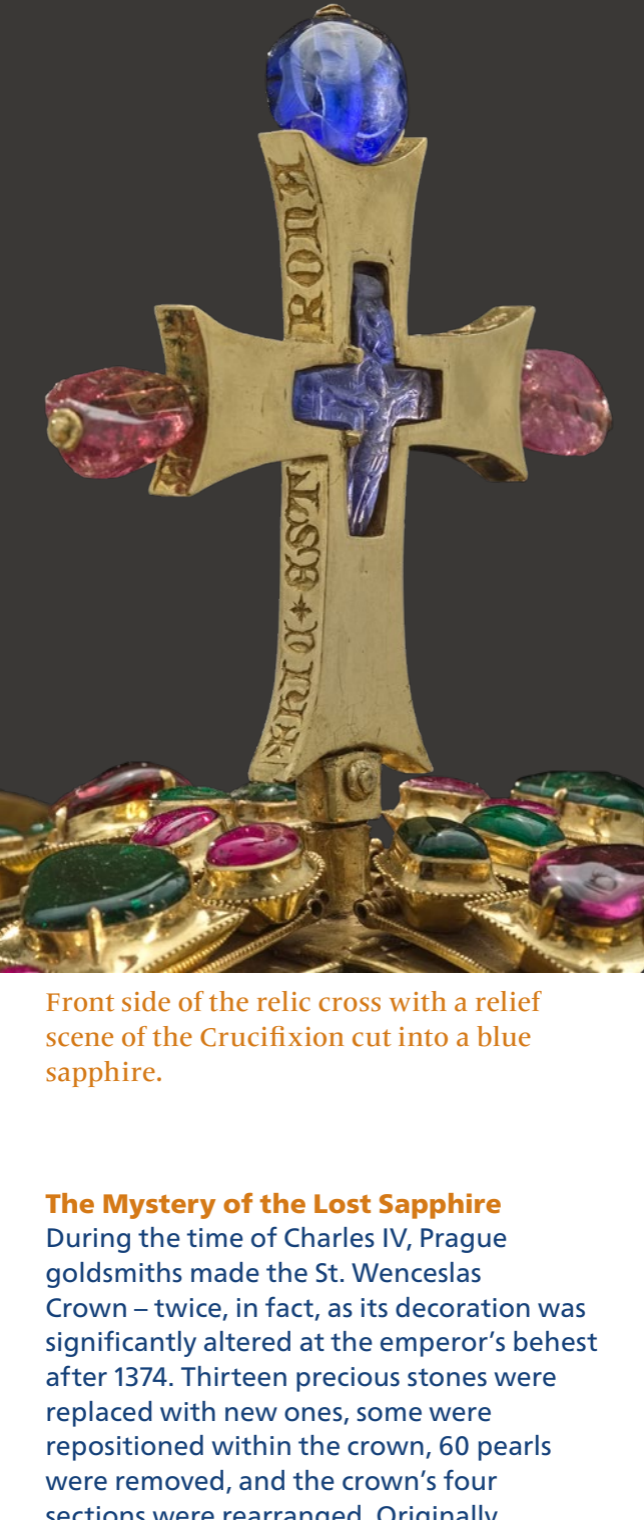
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Front side of the relic cross with a relief scene of the Crucifixion cut into a blue sapphire.

The Mystery of the Lost Sapphire

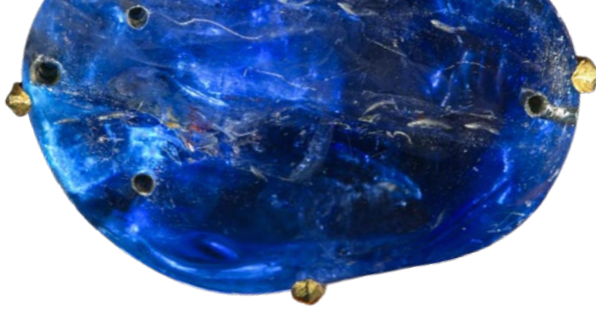
During the time of Charles IV, Prague goldsmiths made the St. Wenceslas Crown – twice, in fact, as its decoration was significantly altered at the emperor's behest after 1374. Thirteen precious stones were replaced with new ones, some were repositioned within the crown, 60 pearls were removed, and the crown's four sections were rearranged. Originally, a *globus cruciger* (cross-bearing orb), featuring a large round blue sapphire in a gold twisted band with a small gold cross and sapphire cameo, was placed atop the crossing of the sphere's arches (i.e., the inner arches). This hollow cross served as a reliquary and could be opened, although one of the four latches was lost by Charles IV. Today, no visible trace of the closing mechanism on the cross remains, and notably, the round lower section is missing; it is now attached to the crossing of the arches by a strong gold pin.

Old depictions of the St. Wenceslas Crown and its royal bearers reveal that the last king to wear the crown with the upper "cross-bearing orb" (likely still made of the large blue sapphire) was Leopold II, on 6 September 1791. After this date, the crown jewels were permanently stored in Prague, and when the crown was bestowed upon Emperor Ferdinand (the Benevolent) on 7 September 1836, it was already missing the blue sapphire; the orphaned cross was then attached only by a pin. ■

Petr Kroupa

The Blue Stones

At first glance, the most striking stones on the crown are the sapphires. Sapphire is the blue variety of the mineral corundum (Al_2O_3). Today, sapphires come from various locations worldwide, but when the crown was made, most large, higher-quality specimens came from Sri Lanka. Dark blue and slightly less transparent sapphires have been mined in France since the 10th century from a small site in the Massif Central highland region, and similar stones are found in the Jizera Meadow here in the Czech Republic. This type of sapphire appears on the St. Maurus Reliquary and several items from the Treasury of St. Vitus Cathedral, but not on the crown.



The large sapphire on the back of the crown is the only one with four holes perpendicular to the surface; it was likely originally set in another object.



The largest sapphire on the crown is located at the bottom of the front. It is a beautiful deep blue colour and 52 mm long.

Sapphires from Sri Lanka

Sapphire mining in river deposits in Sri Lanka dates back thousands of years, with stones originally drilled lengthwise on-site and worn as necklaces. They reached Europe along arduous routes – by sea or the Silk Road – starting in Roman times. The crown's sapphires are mostly drilled and polished pebbles, though a few have very primitive symmetrical cuts, likely done in Europe when the crown was created. It was a very technologically demanding process, as sapphire, with a hardness of 9 (on the 10-point Mohs scale), is the second hardest mineral in existence and can only be ground with diamond powder.

The crown's sapphires are unusually large by modern standards, with the largest measuring 5.2 cm long. Contemporary sapphires over 1 cm are rare; those over 2 cm are even rarer. Well-cut, colourful stones of this size can fetch tens of thousands of dollars per carat. However, the crown's sapphires have one major drawback – they are drilled, and recutting them into modern faceted stones would require first cutting them into several smaller stones. In any case, their historical value is incalculable. They are undoubtedly among the largest and finest sapphires found on historical objects around the world.



The three sapphires on the right side of the crown have a primitive symmetrical cut. The colour of the aquamarine stone is greenish blue, unlike blue sapphires.

A Single Aquamarine

The greenish-blue stone on the crown's right side was long believed to be a sapphire. However, research in 1998 revealed it to be an aquamarine, a blue variety of beryl. It contains several visible yellow fibres, previously mistaken for the mineral rutile. New microscopic studies have revealed these fibres to be hollow channels irregularly filled with yellow iron oxides. This aquamarine might have arrived with the sapphires from Sri Lanka, where gem-quality stones are still found today.

Pearls

The crown also features 20 pearls – four large ones at the top of the lilies and 16 smaller ones on the arches. These are natural pearls, almost certainly of marine origin. Historically, the highest-quality pearls have come from the Indian Ocean, particularly the Persian Gulf, from which the four large pearls on the crown most likely originate. Their size and quality are exceptional, and their current market value would be quite high. Large natural pearls are extremely rare today, mainly due to ocean pollution. Global production is estimated at merely tens to hundreds of kilograms per year, whereas cultured pearls (more than 90% of which are freshwater and come primarily from China) are produced in thousands of tons annually. ■

The Red Stones

Most of the crown's red stones are spinels (MgAl_2O_4). Because of its resemblance to a genuine ruby, spinel was once nicknamed the "palas ruby", and only since the last century have we been able to reliably distinguish between these two minerals. The crown features two types of spinels: smaller, bright-red stones with many inclusions, and larger, dark-red stones, which are relatively clean and found mainly on the front.



The central red stone on the front is not a ruby, as was long assumed, but rubellite, a red variety of tourmaline. Rubellite is strongly included, with the most common inclusions being hollow channels, some of which are curved.

Spinel and Their Origin

Historically, small red spinels have been found alongside sapphires from Sri Lanka. A less likely source is the Mogok region in Myanmar (Burma). Larger, higher-quality spinels have been known since the 10th century from the Badakhshan region on the border of Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Archaeological research at the Kuch-i-Lal site on the Tajik side of the border river has confirmed the existence of these historic mines, which were also described in Marco Polo's travelogues. In addition to the largest spinel on our crown, several other famous historical spinels once thought to be rubies (e.g., the Timur Ruby and the Black Prince's Ruby, both part of the English Crown Jewels) come from this region. However, historical spinels from Badakhshan are blood-red, whereas modern mining there yields only pink spinels. Thus, the exact origin of the crown's spinels remains unresolved.

High-quality large spinels have always been rare, and most of the stones on the crown are similar in size and drilling, suggesting they were originally strung together as beads on a single string. When creating the crown, however, the craftsmen lacked the two red spinels needed to complete the correct grouping of five stones on the back. Unable to obtain similarly sized and coloured spinels, they found a simple solution – they used one almost colourless spinel and one pale-blue sapphire, both backed with red foil. This made them indistinguishable from the surrounding spinels when viewed from the front. Over the centuries, the colour has faded, making the differences more apparent today.



The upper spinel on the front of the crown belongs to the highest quality in the world and is probably the most expensive stone on the crown.

Ruby or Rubellite?

The largest red stone at the centre of the front of the crown was so important to Charles IV that he had the crown modified to accommodate it. This stone was long considered a ruby and was even described in the literature as the world's largest ruby set in jewellery. It was only in 1998 that research revealed it to be rubellite, a red variety of tourmaline. Its origin remains a mystery, but this type of rubellite is found only in lithium pegmatite, a special rock commonly found in Afghanistan and northern Pakistan. Thus, the stone may have originated from this region. It appears to be a section of a three-sided crystal that was likely rounded through prolonged tumbling in a river. ■

Jaroslav Hyršl

Orphanus (Orphan)

Medieval chivalric romance often featured the mythical motif of a mysterious, precious gemstone, comparable to the mystique of the Holy Grail. This brilliant red stone of extraordinary size, believed to have come from the Orient, was known as “Orphanus” due to its uniqueness and distant origin. It was brought to Europe by the eponymous hero of the chivalric romance, *Herzog Ernest*. The storyline, inspired by a real-life conflict between two European rulers, depicts Orphanus as having the miraculous power to reconcile the warring parties. The famous Minnesinger Walther von der Vogelweide placed this gemstone on the front of the Imperial Crown of the Holy Roman Empire. However, this motif was popular and rather widespread, so the Imperial Crown from the mid-10th century was not unique. Such a large red gemstone was also set in the front of the crown worn by Eastern Roman emperors, and it adorns the front of the Hungarian Crown of St. Stephen. The Bohemian King and Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV originally had five red spinels arranged in a cross on the front of his crown. Towards the end of his life, he longed to obtain the mythical red gemstone, which he managed to do only a few months before his death. According to contemporary records, “a ruby was found and sold to the emperor, and he ordered it to be set in the crown”. This large red “ruby” (in fact, a rubellite) was set in 1378 on the front of the St. Wenceslas Crown. The Czech specimen is by far the largest medieval miraculous Orphan. ■



The Original Form of the St. Wenceslas Crown

On 11 June 1341, at the State Diet in Prague, King John introduced his son, Charles, to the Czech people as the future King of Bohemia. Charles, who was 25 years old and held the title of Margrave of Moravia, had a clear vision of his mission. Although he endeavoured to hold his coronation during his father's lifetime, he did not succeed. Nevertheless, it is believed that he commissioned a new coronation crown from Prague's goldsmiths during this period. We do not know the extent to which it was completed or what it looked like, but in terms of its material, this crown undoubtedly became the basis of the St. Wenceslas crown, as referenced in a papal document dated 6 May 1346. With this crown, Charles was officially recognized as King of Bohemia on 2 September 1347. Descriptions dated before 1374 provide us with details of the gems that adorned this crown. The arrangement and colour composition of the gemstones on the rim significantly differed from the crown we know today. Among the 40 large stones that adorned the gold rim with distinctive lilies, there were 22 red spinels and 13 green emeralds. There were only five blue sapphires, and the hoop with lilies was studded with 60 pearls.

Transformation

Sometime after 1374, perhaps following his return from Paris in April 1378, Charles IV ordered significant alterations to the decoration of the Bohemian royal crown. The 60 pearls were removed from the lily ring, and all 13 green emeralds were replaced by 11 blue sapphires and two red spinels, ensuring a consistent alternation between blue and red stones. Consequently, the sequence of the individual sections of the crown was rearranged (the golden band with large lilies consists of four segments connected by pins). Only the front segment with the red stones remained in its original position. The heraldic left segment, featuring red spinels, was moved to the back, and in its place, the former heraldic right segment with green emeralds, now completely replaced by blue sapphires, was repositioned. The segment with blue sapphires, originally at the rear of the crown, now forms the heraldic right side of the crown. The six newly installed large blue sapphires, believed to possess healing properties and offer magical protection, likely came from Charles's personal collection. In 1378, Charles IV acquired only one new stone: a large red rubellite, set in the centre of the front lily, replacing two smaller red spinels. After Charles IV's death on 29 November 1378, the new royal crown was displayed on the catafalque alongside the monarch's body, which was dressed in ceremonial robes. ■

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