

Multilingualism in the Heart of Europe – Prague in the 14th Century

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ABSTRACT

The Bohemian king Charles IV (Karel IV., 1316–1378) was the son of John of Luxembourg (Jan Lucemburský) and his wife Elizabeth (Eliška) of the Přemyslid dynasty. Educated in Paris, with the future pope Clement VI as his tutor, Charles already had a good command of Czech, French, German, Italian and Latin, when he was crowned in Rome as Holy Roman Emperor in 1355. But instead of restoring Rome to its ancient splendour, he decided to make Prague the capital of the Empire. Prague, already the capital of the largest and best-organized state in Central Europe at that time (comprising Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, the Upper Palatinate, Upper and Lower Lusatia as well as Brandenburg), became one of the most prosperous cities in Europe. A census found that in 1378, it already had about 40,000 inhabitants making it the fourth most populated city north of the Alps after Paris, Ghent and Bruges, and the third largest European city in area after Rome and Constantinople.

14th century Prague was not only the centre of European politics, but also a cultural and intellectual hotspot with the first university in Central Europe, east of the Rhine and north of the Alps. The university was sectioned into four parts called *nationes*: the Bohemian (including Bohemians, Moravians, southern Slavs, and Hungarians), the Bavarian (Austrians, Swabians, natives of Franconia and of the Rhine provinces), the Polish (Silesians, Poles, Russians), and the Saxon (inhabitants of the Margravate of Meissen, Thuringia, Upper and Lower Saxony, Denmark, and Sweden). Ethnically Czech students made only about 16 – 20% of all students.

During this time, the population of Bohemia and Moravia is said to have risen as high as three million, but ethnic Czechs probably did not form much more than 60 percent. About a quarter of the population was German, living for the most part in the border regions, but there were also important communities of German burghers in Prague and Brno. Jews, too, had a special position among the minorities living there, using not only Hebrew, but also a variant of Old Czech that is in the medieval Jewish texts referred to as Knaanic language. Moreover, Charles IV also consciously fostered the knowledge of Church Slavonic of a Croatian stamp.

Thus, a visit to Prague of 1365 would have been not only a cultural sensation, but also a multilingual one. However, the main languages used or understood by larger groups of people at that time – at least to a certain extent – were four, which is nicely illustrated by one of the first Czech theatre pieces, *The Ointment Seller* (in Czech: *Mastičkář*). It makes use of all four of them: Old Czech as the official language in the country along with Latin, German and Hebrew.

For this presentation, we will therefore concentrate on two aspects of the multilingual situation in 14th century Prague. First, we will show in general, which languages were used at that time in which contexts (including special cases such as Knaanic and Old Church Slavonic). Second, we will highlight the interactions of the most commonly used languages with several language examples rendered in a way everyone can understand.