

Between Place and Function:

Notes on the Portrait Galleries in Charles IV's Residences of Karlstein and Prague

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During his lifetime, Charles IV (d. 1378), a descendant of the House of Luxembourg, accumulated a great quantity of titles, from 'King of Bohemia' to 'King of the Romans'. In 1355, Charles IV finally became the Holy Roman Emperor. Since his family had only recently acquired links to the upper strata of society in Central Europe, gaining a more exalted position at the beginning of the fourteenth century, Charles urgently needed an elaborate and highly efficient representative system to legitimize his reign and to ensure the succession of his heirs. One of his principal tools was the use of history, particularly the cult of his ancestors and predecessors. This method allowed Charles IV to visualize the continuity of the political entities over which he ruled, namely that of the Holy Roman Empire and of the Kingdom of Bohemia by assembling the portraits of great monarchs of the past. In what follows, we shall discuss 55 fresco portraits for Karlstein and about 120 portraits on panel for Prague castle. Such cycles of paintings constituted, at the time, some kind of codification of historical reality – a pictorial document that had the same historical value and validity as a written document of the same content.¹

Charles IV owned portrait galleries of his ancestors in three of his castles: the Prague and Karlstein genealogies are considered by most scholars to have been commissioned soon after 1355, while the Tangermünde cycle is more recent, having been executed in 1374. Unfortunately, none of them survived, so we have to use documentary evidence and copies included in manuscripts to reconstruct the lost paintings.

Although both art and architecture at the court of Charles IV have generally received a great deal of attention, his cultural politics require a closer inspection of, for example, the relation between the chosen location and concrete function of his portrait galleries. Overall, research has been limited to defining the location of these paintings rather spuriously as in 'the castle hall'² or in the 'audience hall' for Prague castle.³ As regards the Karlstein genealogy,⁴ we are often informed about specific premises: for example, we learn that the genealogy was to be found in a second-floor room of the castle,⁵ which is often referred to as an audience hall as well. Such issues are, however, fundamental for our understanding of these pictorial cycles, since they might help us with determining their 'target' audience and with defining their function. In my essay, I intend

to concentrate on these tangible aspects for the two portrait galleries at Karlstein and Prague. Firstly, I focus on the location and the public accessibility of the spaces, in which the portrait cycles were displayed. Secondly, I concentrate on the composition and pictorial concept of ancestors' galleries. These two main points of my investigation provide the foundation for a re-evaluation of the traditional interpretation of these types of embellishment and may shed new light on the portraits' actual role in the representation of Charles IV.

The Location of the Galleries in the Palace in the Light of Written Evidence

In October 1414, Edmund de Dynter, secretary of the duke of Brabant, Anthony of Burgundy, travelled to Bohemia on a diplomatic mission, as is borne out by his own account. On this occasion, he met Wenceslas of Luxembourg, the son of Charles IV in Bohemia. Both Dynter and Wenceslas had an interest in the succession to the title of the duke of Brabant. In the course of his report, Edmund de Dynter describes a visit to one of the royal residences. Here, Wenceslas took the diplomat by the hand and led him towards a room, where:

were painted the precious images of all the dukes of Brabant down to John III. These images had been commissioned by the Emperor Charles, Wenzel's father. The King also said to me that this was his genealogy, and that he was descended from the progeny of the Trojans, and more specifically from the emperor Saint Charles the Great and the noble house of Brabant. For he said that his great-grandfather, the emperor Henry of Luxembourg, was married to the daughter of John I Duke of Brabant from which union sprang his grandfather John, king of Bohemia and Poland.⁶

Unfortunately, the report does not specify the name of the castle where this event took place. In the previous paragraph, Edmund de Dynter had spoken about his visits to three of Wenceslas's residences, Karlstein, Točnik and Žebrák,⁷ which are located very close to one another. The castle of Žebrák, founded in the thirteenth century, was in use during the lifetime of Charles IV but nearly two decades after his death, in 1395, a great fire devastated it. Wenceslas left the ravaged building and had another castle built next to the old one. Since Točnik also dates to this period, it is, therefore, without doubt that Dynter's description refers to Karlstein, when he speaks about paintings commissioned by Wenceslas's father.⁸

As a result, we may safely consider the above quotation as a reference to Karlstein castle (fig. 1) and as a highly important report, since it preserves a reference to the diplomatic use of the portrait gallery. As for the exact original position of the room, in which the gallery was situated, it is an issue of much scholarly debate. Some authors state that it could be found on the castle's first floor; others – indeed the majority – mention a room on the second floor. Today, it is the second-floor room, which is set-up as an audience room with a more recent ancestors' portrait gallery. A small-size reconstruction of the supposed original look of the Portrait Hall is also presented in the castle (fig. 2).



Fig. 1 Castle of Karlstein, Czech Republic.



Fig. 2 Reconstruction of the Hall of the Luxembourg Genealogy, Karlstein Castle.

In the light of Edmund de Dynter's written account, there are, however, some issues that need clarification. The author affirms plainly that he was led to another room from the one where he and his companions were originally received by the king. From this statement, we may conclude that the genealogy was not displayed in the Audience Hall but in another room. It would seem logical to assume, therefore, that it was situated in a room adjacent to the Audience Hall or, more likely, on the second floor, exactly above the first-floor Audience Hall. The terminology of 'quandam aulam' (to a certain hall) also suggests a room of greater dimension.

Another issue, already addressed by previous research, was the question of accessibility of the Portrait Hall. As Martindale had asked, though without providing an answer, 'If that was the chamber to which Edmund de Dynter was led by Wenzel, where had he and his diplomatic colleagues just been received in audience and how did they get there without already passing by the genealogy?' Nonetheless, if we accept that the audience room, where the diplomats were received, was on the first floor and that the other room, which actually contained the genealogical cycle, was found on the second floor of the palace, exactly in the same position as the reception hall, it could perhaps solve the problem. The plan of the castle makes the easy access from the Audience Hall of the first floor to the Portrait Hall on the second storey possible, without passing the private rooms of the king.⁹

It seems that this Portrait Gallery was, therefore, not identical to the customary Audience Hall but located in another room, access to which was perhaps reserved for special guests of the sovereign. It also raises important queries about the function of this cycle, since we can exclude, as a result, that this room was the stage of Charles IV's principal official appearances and affairs of state. It is also important to remember that during the fourteenth century there was not yet a standard processional route laid out for the visitors to the castle as would, however, be developed during the next century.¹⁰ The Luxembourg family tree was perhaps 'reserved for the privileged few'.¹¹ It was in this sense comparable to the innermost sacred spaces of Karlstein, which was also not located in the same part of the castle complex as the Portrait Gallery.

Edmund de Dynter's is not the only account; another written source also preserves information about the actual location of the genealogical cycle. In the 1597 renovation report of Karlstein castle,¹² we learn that 'the lineage of Charles IV' had been painted 'in the palace'. The report specifies that the room, in which Charles IV had resided during his lifetime, was decorated with wooden panelling and had a vaulted bay. According to the report, this room's function had changed and, while it had formerly been inhabited by Charles IV, it was now called the Audience Hall. From this very room, one could access the Hall where the portraits of the ancestors of Charles IV had been depicted. The walls of this Hall had since been whitewashed but the report stated that it might be possible to find traces of the historical frescoes under the whitewash. In addition, the report seems to confirm that the genealogy was situated on the castle's second floor, since the other rooms mentioned can be identified with rooms adjacent to the second-floor hall but not with the neighbourhood of the first-floor hall.

In the case of Prague Castle, the situation is somewhat more complicated. Charles IV had this castle 'constructed at great expense on the pattern of the royal palace of the French kings'¹³ and, according to contemporaneous writers, aimed 'to demonstrate the magnificence of the glory of his kingdom of Bohemia, since princes, administrators, and nobles were pouring in to visit him from all parts of the world'.¹⁴ The king and emperor himself described the event in his autobiography:

Prague castle was completely desolate, ruined and destroyed and from the time of King Ottokar [II] levelled to the ground. In that place we had a large and beautiful place built anew and equipped it with many and sumptuous goods, which can be seen today.¹⁵

Unfortunately, such is no longer the case, for the disposition and the decoration of the Luxembourgian castle are only known in fragments and from written sources. The castle of Charles's era was rebuilt around 1500 by Benedikt Ried, but was subsequently destroyed by a great fire that devastated the architecture of the castle complex in 1541.

The portrait gallery commissioned by Charles IV was situated in the room, which is known today as the Hall of Wladislaw (fig. 3). To reconstruct the original (that is to say, the fourteenth-century) state of the castle, we may avail ourselves of the renovation reports of the castle dating to the twentieth century and containing stratigraphic measurements as well as of a contemporary document concerning the original construction: the *Coronation Order* of the Bohemian kings, recently analysed by Richard Němec.¹⁶



Fig. 3 Prague castle, Wladislaw Hall.

The *Coronation Order* indicates that the procession passed from the bedroom (*thalamus*) to a ceremonial hall (*sala regia*). After that, the procession continued through a gate on its way to the Cloister of Saint George. Earlier scholarship had suggested that the Hall of Wladislaw was divided into three spaces during the age of Charles IV: a large room to the East next to the chapel of the Virgin Mary and, finally, a large room assumed to be the Audience Hall. Since we can locate the above-mentioned gate to the North of the room and in the light of the new results presented by R. Němec,¹⁷ it can, however, be confirmed that the Hall of Wladislaw was not divided under the House of Luxembourg. Therefore, we may identify this room with the original location of the Portrait Gallery.

The *piano nobile* of the palace can thus be reconstructed as follows: it fell into two parts, each with a different function. On the right hand, a representative part with the *sala regia* was located whereas on the left, the less public rooms, with the *privatissima*, the bedroom (*thalamus*), an antechamber (*anticamera*) and other rooms, including the *studiolo*, were laid out. Alongside this spatial division the liturgical spaces, for example the Chapel of the Virgin Mary at the south end of the hall and the Chapel of All Saints on the east side found their place.¹⁸

If we look at the spatial setting of the two galleries, we note a significant difference. As far as we know at present, it seems that the Karlstein gallery was not located in the main reception hall but in another room, situated next to the private rooms of Charles IV. The Prague gallery, to the contrary, was painted in the main Audience Hall of the sovereign. Therefore, the two galleries addressed diverse audiences: a large group of spectators might gain access to the Prague paintings, which functioned as an important element in Charles IV's courtly/official representation. In his residence at Karlstein, however, the Portrait Gallery may have been part of a more intimate environment and been reserved for special guests. In this context, we should also not forget the dimensions of these rooms. The Audience Room at Prague measured 30 x 16 m during the age of Charles IV. Karlstein, during that same period, had a smaller *aula* of 22 x 8.5 m,¹⁹ although it is possible that the hall was not identical with the genealogy's location.

Composition of the Galleries

After an overview concerning the spatial situation of the ancestors' galleries, we should turn our attention to their composition. As regards the reconstruction of the Portrait Gallery at Prague, two hypotheses have dominated scholarship. The first, based on the publication of Joseph Neuwirth at the end of the nineteenth century, is considered to this day.²⁰ It proposes that Charles IV had painted his Přemyslid ancestors in the Prague castle, beginning with Přemysl the Ploughman, the mythical ancestor of the Přemyslid dynasty. This thesis is based on three manuscript copies (one is illustrated), preserved in the Austrian National Library at Vienna.²¹ It needs to be stressed that this assumption is accepted by many scholars, it continues to influence research to some extent and to lead conclusions in a certain direction.

In accordance with the other theory of reconstruction, first published by Antonin Salač in the 1960s,²² the original cycle commissioned by Charles IV did not represent his Bohemian ancestors but included a series of royal portraits from antiquity to the time of Charles IV. This assumption is based on inscriptions found at Prague Palace in combination with a written source from the sixteenth century.

Petrus Apian's *Inscriptiones Sacrosanctae Vetvstatis* have been preserved in several manuscripts.²³ On one page, we can read the words 'Bohemiae Regni Inscriptiones' next to the mention of 'Pragae aula regia'. Thereafter, four monarchs of antiquity, i.e. Ninus, Alexander the Great, Tola and Romulus are listed. From the description it becomes clear that the mentioned 'inscriptions' were situated in the *aula regia* of Prague palace.

In the above-mentioned Hall of Wladislaw, two inscriptions were found in the middle of the twentieth century (fig. 4). Salač, who first published the discovery, dated them to the fourteenth century. The first one ('LXXXI Karolus III Grossus Gallicus cepit impare anno dni. DCCC LXXX. Et impavit annis. XII'), refers to the reign of Charles III the Fat (839–888) while the second commemorates the Byzantine Emperor Leo IV (750–780) ('LXV. IIII [...] cepit impare anno dni. DCC. LXX. VII et impavit annis V.') Each person is numbered and mentioned by the date of death and the years he reigned. In addition, a fifteenth-century manuscript, compiled by an Augustinian friar, Oldrich Kriz of Telc, preserved the Czech translation of a catalogue of emperors. In this work, Marie Blahova was able to identify the translation of the inscriptions once displayed in and now rediscovered at Prague castle.²⁵

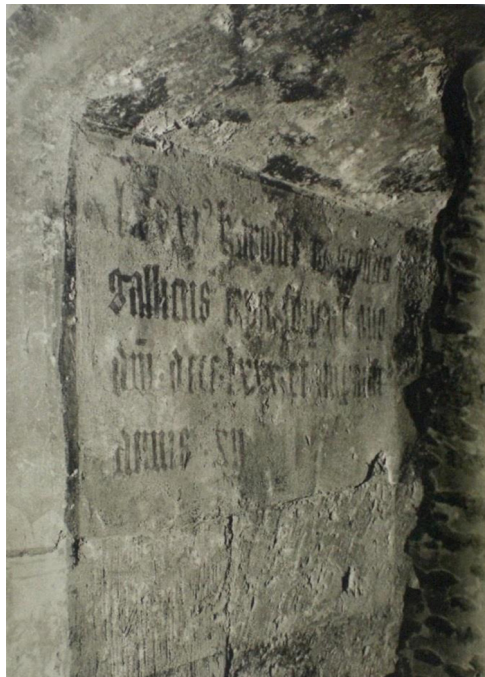


Fig. 4 Inscriptions found in Prague Castle.

We need to turn to yet another manuscript in order to prove that Prague Castle hosted an Imperial Gallery rather than a cycle of Přemyslid kings during the time of Charles IV. On the margin of a page of the *Marcha* written by Marco Battagli da Rimini was added a note, next to the name of Henry VI (erroneously identified as Henry VII): 'Usque huc imperatores in pallatio regali sunt depicti in castro Pragensi [...]'.²⁶ Since Emperor Henry VII was not included in the alleged Přemyslid cycle (i.e. in the mentioned copies of the Austrian National Library), this piece of information suggests as well that instead of the Bohemian ancestors, the imperial predecessors had been depicted, providing further evidence for the reconstruction of the gallery.²⁷

In this case, the manuscripts of the Austrian National Library, which actually documented a cycle of portraits of Bohemian rulers, might refer to another pictorial cycle. This more recent portrait gallery started with Přemysl the Ploughman and presented the Bohemian rulers until the Jagellonian Louis II (1506–1526). The fact that this cycle of portraits disappeared, as had done the original portrait gallery of Charles IV, may have given rise to the on-going confusion.

We can, therefore, reconstruct the Prague cycle as a series of 120 portraits, starting with four important monarchs from antiquity: Ninus, Alexander the Great, Tola, Romulus. It was continued with the Roman emperors from Julius Caesar onwards. The Byzantine emperors were also represented and, finally, the Holy Roman emperors ended the cycle.



Fig. 5 Portrait of Rudolf IV of Austria, Vienna, Dom- und Diözesanmuseum (PD-Art template).

As for the appearance of the portraits, Mateusz Grzęda recently linked the Prague gallery to the famous panel painting representing Rudolf IV of Habsburg, preserved in the Diözesanmuseum in Vienna (fig. 5).²⁸ Based on the inscriptions found in Prague Castle, he argues that an inscription, which was placed separately on plaster above every panel, identified each figure with black letters on a white background. Not only the type of inscription but also its position suggests, in his opinion, that the Prague series of portraits might have provided a model for the Viennese panel in terms of composition.²⁹ If we accept this hypothesis, we can imagine, not only conceptually but also visually, a series quite different from the Karlstein one. Nevertheless, we have to remain very cautious about such attempts to reconstruct the actual visual elements of this cycle.

In the case of Karlstein, two manuscript copies (1569–1575)³⁰ preserved the original decoration and thus allowed for the clear reconstruction of its contents, if not on a stylistic then at least on a programmatic level. The first manuscript is preserved today in the National Library of Austria (ÖNB 8330) and the second one can be found in the Archives of the National Gallery of Prague (AA 2015), known there as *Codex Heidelbergensis*.

The pictorial cycle with the ancestors of Charles (figs. 6 and 7) contains three main groups: Biblical ancestors, classical gods and heroes, and finally historical rulers, beginning with Pippin the Short and ending with the reigning emperor. The parallel text of this pictorial cycle can be found for example in Giovanni di Marignola's 'ancient history',³¹ which related that 'through the uninterrupted kinship in the Trojan blood of Aeneas, Charles descended from the pagan gods Saturn and Jove.'³²



Figs. 6 and 7 Figures of Charles IV and his mother, Elizabeth of Bohemia, from the Luxembourg Genealogy painted on the walls of Karlstein Castle, now lost. Copies preserved in the *Codex Heidelbergensis*, Prague, Archives of the National Gallery, AA 2015.

If we analyze the content of the cycle, we will note that among the Přemyslid ancestors, it was only Elizabeth, mother of Charles IV, to be represented. Nevertheless, this fact does not necessarily mean that Karlstein contained no representation of members of the Přemyslid branch, since the stairway of the Great Tower contains frescoes of the legends of St. Wenceslas and St. Ludmilla as well as other portraits of the family of Charles IV. We need to remember that until recently the decoration of the southern stairway in the Great Tower did not attract much scholarly attention and that interest in it did not start before the beginning of this century. However, the stairway held a unique position in the carefully conceived Karlstein iconography, since it provided access to the Chapel of the Holy Cross on the second floor.³³ Unfortunately, the murals are in a pitiful state, but tracings were made from them before they were removed in part. In the case of the representation of the family of Charles IV, corresponding older iconographic sources may help us with the identification. A copybook, preserved today at the Herzog August Library at Wolfenbüttel (the *Linea Caroli Quarti*), includes copies of Karlstein paintings (fig. 8). Folio 17r is divided into three horizontal bands. The top band is a copy of the scene of *Exaltatio Crucis* (as in ÖNB 8330) from the Chapel of St. Catherine's in the Lesser Tower, faithfully reproducing the original painting. The drawings in the two horizontal bands at the bottom were in all likelihood also executed after originals in Karlstein; we find them in the uppermost fields of the inner and outer wall of the stairway, although in a badly damaged state.³⁴ Six large and two smaller figures in the middle band of the Wolfenbüttel drawings are turned to the right, while nine figures in the bottom band are turned to the left. This counter-orientation of the kneeling figures clearly documents their original location, i.e. on opposite walls.

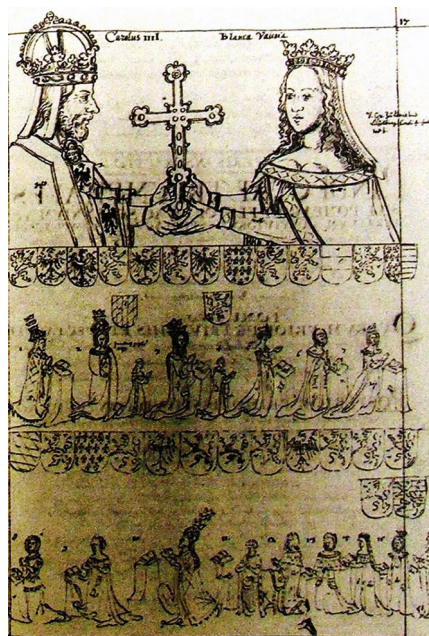


Fig. 8 The *Exaltatio Crucis* from the Chapel of St. Catherine and the *Family of Charles IV* from the top of the stairway in the Great Tower of Karlstein Castle. Drawings from the *Linea Caroli Quarti*, Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf 60.5 Aug. 26.

In any event, in the case of such complex structures as the castles at Karlstein or Prague, we evidently cannot aspire to a unique and exhaustive interpretation. Nevertheless, we should pay close attention to the diverse levels of meaning and review the conventional categorization that aims to describe particular places as scenes of imperial or royal representation. One of the most important conditions for the realization of such an endeavour is the exact location of these pictorial cycles as well as the reconstruction of the accessibility of these spaces. Needless to underline that terms such as propaganda are not always appropriate to describe the intended functions of all works of art;³⁵ this term seems to be particularly unsuitable when presenting a fourteenth-century reality.

Conclusion

As regards the specific portrait galleries at Prague and Karlstein, the outline of two different concepts seems to emerge. The Prague cycle, presenting 120 paintings, accentuates the continuity of a particular political entity, that of the Holy Roman Empire. The location of this cycle in a highly representative context, which was accessible to a larger public, seems to correspond to its more official content. Of course, we may ask why an Imperial Gallery was set up in Prague Castle, which served after all as the royal residence. Perhaps it was meant to blazon forth the ambitions and aspirations of Charles IV who wished to secure the imperial throne for his descendants, even though he failed to establish the Luxembourg dynasty on the imperial throne for the long term.

The Karlstein cycle, however, does not present a series of predecessors in office but Charles's alleged ancestors. The space reserved for this decoration formed part of the more intimate premises within the castle and should, therefore, be decorated accordingly. Even though written records, in particular the documents issued by the royal chancellery, prove that Karlstein was the hub of political and administrative activities and that at least part of the royal chancellery was situated at Karlstein, it seems that the Luxembourg genealogy corresponded to another function of the castle. Since Ferdinand Seibt called Karlstein Charles's 'geistliches Lustschloss',³⁶ we may add that it served not only as 'spiritual pleasure palace' but also as a 'place of delight', intended for courtly entertainment.

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Illustrations

Figs. 1–3 Photo author.

Fig. 4 published in Salač 1962.

Fig. 5 Vienna, Dom- und Diözesanmuseum (PD-Art template).

Figs. 6–7 Codex Heidelbergensis, Prague, Archives of the National Gallery, AA 2015 (Friedl 1956, figs. 75 and 74).

Fig. 8 *Linea Caroli Quarti*, Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf 60.5 Aug. 26. (Fajt 2003).

¹ Dvořáková 1964, p. 54.

² Fajt 2005, p. 10. Wammetsberger 1967, p. 89. Bogade 2005, p. 170.

³ Neuwirth 1896. See also recently Zurek 2014.

⁴ Similarly to the Prague cycle, the fundamental publication on this cycle dates to the end of the nineteenth century: Neuwirth 1897. The portrait cycle is discussed in detail in Friedl 1956, as well as in Stejskal 1976; Stejskal 1978 and Stejskal 1996. In the field of history, see Melville 1987, in particular pp. 260–64; Clemens 2001; Blahová 1986 and Blahová 2008.

⁵ Bogade 2005, p. 171.

⁶ de Dynter 1857 (1414), III, pp. 73–74. English translation in Martindale 1988, p. 5.

⁷ Menclová 1972, II, pp. 153–71.

⁸ See also Neuwirth 1897.

⁹ For a plan, see Menclová 1972, p. 50.

- ¹⁰ See the presentation of Krista De Jonge at the Bamberg colloquium and her essay included in the present volume.
- ¹¹ Scales 2012, p. 233.
- ¹² Fajt 1998, p. 51. For the original in Czech, see Wocel 1858a, pp. 70–1; a paraphrase in German is included in Wocel 1858b, pp. 274–5. See also Dvorsky 1897, pp. 512–3.
- ¹³ These are the words of the chronicler Frantisek of Prague, cited in Crossley 2003, p. 113: 'ad instar domus regis Francie cum maximis sumptibus edificavit'.
- ¹⁴ From the *Chronicle* of Benes Krabice of Weitmile 1333, cited in Boehm and Fajt 2005, p. 75: 'quoniam ad ipsum confluebant principes et procur[atores] ac nobiles de omnibus partibus mundi, volens ostendere magnificentiam glorie regni sui Bohemiae [...]'.
¹⁵ Nagy 2010, chapter 8, p. 95: 'Castrum vero Pragense ita desolatum, destructum, ac comminutum fuit, quod a tempore Ottogari regis totum prostratum fuit usque ad terram. Ubi de novo palacium magnum et pulchrum cum magnis sumptibus edificari procuravimus, prout hodierna die apparet intuentibus'. English translation in Crossley and Opačić 2005, p. 59.
- ¹⁶ Němec 2012.
- ¹⁷ Němec 2012.
- ¹⁸ Němec 2012.
- ¹⁹ Menclova 1972, II, p. 168.
- ²⁰ See for example Rosario 2000, Clemens 2001 and Bogade 2005.
- ²¹ ÖNB 7304, 8491, 8043.
- ²² Salač 1962, pp. 304–06.
- ²³ Ingolstadt, 1534 [VD16 A 3086, p. CDLII], Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg, available online.
- ²⁴ Salač 1962, p. 305.
- ²⁵ Blahová 2007, p. 56, n. 37. Blahová 2008, p. 394, n. 66.
- ²⁶ Massera 1912, AA 1212–1354, XXXV, XLVI.
- ²⁷ Blahová 2007, p. 57. The editor of Marco Battagli's chronicle also wrote about another instance, likely added after the first, which stated 'Ego Andreas vidi picturas in castro Pragensi' but there is not sufficient evidence that the writer referred to the decorations from Charles IV's period rather than to the later painted cycle.
- ²⁸ Grzęda 2015. I would like to thank Mateusz Grzęda for kindly sending me his article before publication.
- ²⁹ Grzęda 2015.
- ³⁰ On the dating process see: Neuwirth 1897: 1569–75; Stesjkal 1978: 1574–75.
- ³¹ Regarding additional parallels, see recently Zurek 2014, chapters II–III.
- ³² 'Karolus autem ex deorum gentilium Saturni et Jovis recta linea per Troyanos nascitur descendisse et de qua per Enee filium [...]. per Laviniam, filiam regis Jani [...] atraxit originem.' FRB III, p. 520. Translation as cited in Tanner 1993, p. 97.
- ³³ Fajt 2003, p. 16.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- ³⁵ See for example the book title of Rosario 2000: *Art and Propaganda: Charles IV of Bohemia, 1346–1378*.
- ³⁶ Seibt 1978, p. 392.