

The power of marvellous objects

Charles IV of Luxembourg, Charles V of Valois and their gemstones

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This paper explores the interest of Charles IV of Luxembourg (1316–1378), King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor, in collecting gemstones, which has hitherto been little studied. It analyses this interest in connection with the fourteenth-century French royal court, and especially with the collecting activities of Charles V of Valois (1338–1380), King of France. Both of these sovereigns had an interest in ancient gems and they used them in the same manner; their practices prove to have been inspired by the reinvented traditions of the saintly Capetian monarch Louis IX, King of France, and of the ancient Roman Empire. This study shows how Charles of Luxembourg and Charles of Valois sought out and used precious and semi-precious stones as instruments of their royal self-images and claims to power.

CHARLES IV of Luxembourg, King of Bohemia (r. 1346–78) and Holy Roman Emperor (r. 1355–78), was undoubtedly one of the most avid imperial collectors of sacred relics. A man of international education, he proved himself a very capable and effective ruler; he also accumulated many of the most sacred relics of Christendom, and it was during his reign that Prague gained its reputation as a repository of the most holy relics. Less widely known is that, in addition to relics, Charles IV also amassed various precious objects of both ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ provenances. Among them were many antique, Byzantine and medieval carved gems – delicate, durable and rare objects, with considerable dynamic potential to bridge the gulf between profane and sacred, and with the capacity to forge multiple kinds of connections and relationships over space and time. Charles’s interest in assembling gemstones was inspired by various stimuli, one of the most important of which was the fourteenth-century French royal court, to which attention is given here.

At the outset it should be said that relationships between Paris and Prague in the Middle Ages have long been the subject of historical study; there exists a considerable body of literature on this topic,¹ and special attention has been paid to the relationship of Charles IV with the King of France, Charles V of Valois. It has been observed that the social practices of both rulers not only overlapped but also displayed certain similarities,

including comparable forms of self-image and self-presentation, which both men consciously constructed and assiduously promoted. Another shared interest of the two monarchs was their passion for gemstones, especially ancient cameos and intaglios. However, the literature includes only a few studies to date that have engaged with this topic in any detail – namely, those of Krzysztof Pomian, Danielle Gaborit-Chopin, Daniel Alcouffe and Emanuel Poche.² Two principal reasons may be suggested to explain this scant level of attention.

The first concerns the historiography of art, and in particular the authority of Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) and his *Vite de’ piu eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* (1550). It was Vasari who, in the second edition of his book, published in 1568, promoted the separation of crafts from architecture, sculpture and painting, uniting these under the heading of ‘arti del disegno’, a term that is still in use today. This idea – a construct of the Italian Renaissance and entirely foreign to medieval thought – contributed to the subsequent undervaluation of decorative arts in general.³

The second reason for the limited interest in this subject relates to the formation in the nineteenth century of European national myths. This era encouraged art historians to focus their attention on highly visible and static monuments – works that could be identified as embodying a supposed essence of national identity, objects with secure provenance and authorship, chiefly

monumental architecture, sculpture and painting. Portable decorative, applied or ornamental objects, often lacking a firm origin or authorship – items such as engraved precious and semi-precious stones – were generally disregarded. In addition, research on these objects usually took an approach that considered them independently from their historical context and from the narrow perspective of the specialized fields of art history and archaeology.⁴ Furthermore, such investigations were all too often confined to formal analysis.

In the present essay, the gemstones in question will be examined from a different perspective, tracing the ways in which Charles V of Valois and Charles IV of Bohemia ‘collected’ gemstones and how they used them. This examination will be carried out in relation to object studies and in the light of a wider historical and cultural context, using a comparative approach. It takes the form of a dialogue with the past in time and space, which allows the two sovereigns to be placed side by side, without privileging either of them. Charles of France is considered first and then Charles of Bohemia, in order to establish their shared characteristics and their relationship.

Charles V of Valois

We begin with Paris and the French late medieval royal court. In 1328 the Valois, a branch of the Capetian dynasty, acceded to the French throne. In a period of continual political unrest, the early Valois monarchs were forced to make repeated efforts to underscore their royal legitimacy and to establish their place in the royal lineage of France. This was particularly true in the case of Charles V of Valois, King of France from 1364 to 1380, who inherited a country forcibly deprived of a third of its territory and whose government was dominated by the exigencies of war. In spite of this, Charles is seen today as a patron of intellectuals – mostly the philosophers and jurists whose works endorsed his royal authority. Charles’s time was also a period of considerable artistic patronage: he stood behind numerous projects in Paris and elsewhere, and his name was associated with luxury objects commissioned to adorn his apartments, his dining tables and even his person. Fashioned from costly and rare materials, these objects played a role in courtly rituals that Charles revived, visibly supporting the royal authority and Charles’s distinctive image as an exemplary Christian prince. In addition,

he consciously cherished tradition and developed an antiquarian interest in the remains of the past, paying special attention to objects believed to have been at one time in the possession of great men. In particular, he was especially attentive to objects associated with St Louis, his revered and illustrious predecessor.⁵ Sadly, little remains today of the buildings that Charles commissioned or remodelled, and the same is true of the valuables he selected for their interiors. In light of these losses, the extensive inventories that have come down to us of Charles’s movable treasures are of key importance – extraordinarily valuable sources of information about a largely vanished world of precious objects that Charles once amassed.

The first of these inventories, based on earlier registers, was drawn up in 1363, shortly before Charles succeeded to the throne; it lists about 860 objects. Unfortunately, the recorded objects were dispersed six years later, owing to the parlous state of the king’s finances. The second – testamentary – inventory, more detailed in nature, was completed in 1380, the year of Charles’s death: it lists over 3,900 objects of all types and sizes, located in the principal royal residences at Melun, the Palais du Louvre, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Saint-Pol, Beauté-sur-Marne and Vincennes.⁶ Both inventories were evidently produced primarily as records of royal ownership, but today they offer much more: they provide an insight into what the Valois royalty of this period preferred, appreciated and valued. It is mainly through these inventories that we know that Charles of Valois was not alone in accumulating and enjoying gemstones; so did his brothers, the royal princes Louis, Duke of Anjou (1339–1384), Jean, Duke of Berry (1340–1416), and Philippe II, Duke of Burgundy (1342–1404).

The king and his treasures

One of Charles’s favourite residences was the château of Vincennes near Paris, and it was in this massive fortress, which had replaced an earlier hunting lodge, that Charles deposited a significant part of his treasury. His private rooms were located in the six-storey tower (on the second floor), and were linked to the central chamber, creating a comfortable and secluded space where the king could relax, converse with friends and take pleasure in his *joyaux*. The king’s rooms included his study, located in the north-west part of the tower.⁷ As the inventory of 1380 informs us, it was in this room that

Charles gathered about 500 precious objects of various sorts: ancient coins, reliquaries, tableaux, jewels, mirrors, prayer beads and a great number of ancient gems. The concentration of treasures at Vincennes amounted to more than all of those recorded in his study rooms at Melun, the Louvre, the Hôtel Saint-Pol and Saint-Germain-en-Laye. The inventory's entries concerning these goods are generally short, and give no information about how Charles kept his objects. However, we do know how he approached them. Christine de Pisan (1364–c.1430), Charles's court writer and biographer, in her volume *Livre des faits et bonnes moeurs du sage roi Charles V* (1404), provides a relatively detailed report. We are told that after his afternoon rest, Charles regularly retired to his private rooms, where he spent time with his most intimate companions in pleasant diversions, perhaps looking at his jewels or other treasures. During these leisure hours, merchants would also come to present him with velvet textiles, cloth of gold and all sorts of beautiful, exotic objects or jewels, which had already been shown to family members recognized as connoisseurs of such things.⁸

Another part of the treasury was preserved by Charles in special coffers – his private treasury, a reserve of resources available only to him.⁹ Charles was still an itinerant king, and in the 1380 inventory these coffers are described as being continually carried with him whenever he changed his residence. Only the king carried the keys.¹⁰ The importance assigned by Charles to his coffers is evident from the fact that he was personally involved in editing their inventory.¹¹ Among other things, Charles evidently stored here the objects most valuable and dear to him – relics, talismans, personal signets and gifts, as well as a great many engraved gemstones. The inventory entries concerning the last are brief, recording mainly the signs, scenes or figures featured on the cameos and intaglios. It may be inferred, therefore, that rather than the material value of the gemstones themselves, it was the engraved images and their visual and tactile aspects that attracted the king's attention, as well as the quality of their craftsmanship. In contrast to objects made of gold or silver, gemstones could not be melted down or easily sold, exchanged or converted into coinage. However, Charles's focus on assembling gems seems to have been an expression of something more than the desire to make a capital investment:¹² it may be suggested that it was also a reflection of a more

intimate personal approach, driven by the wonder and curiosity of the royal owner.

The practical uses of Charles V's gems

As numerous inventory entries reveal, Charles used engraved gemstones precisely as they had been used in ancient times. They served him as seals, amulets and *ornamenta*. There are frequent references to personal signets, used for sealing the documents in which the monarch expressed his will and decisions. Almost all of Charles's signets were furnished with ancient intaglios, mostly of carnelian, jasper, topaz, ruby or sapphire.¹³ In this he followed a tradition established during the reign of the first Valois king, Philip VI of France (1293–1350), although it was only in Charles's time that the custom became completely regularized. Surviving seal impressions show that, before he became king, Charles used as his seal an ancient intaglio depicting a bearded man seen in profile. Another prominent personal signet in his possession was an oriental ruby representing the head of an unbearded man wearing a crown, which he used to seal letters signed by his own hand.¹⁴ This carved ruby may have been identical with the mid-fourteenth-century purple spinel intaglio set in a gold signet ring, preserved today in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.¹⁵ It is important to stress that the custom adopted by the early Valois of wearing these rings set with ancient gems referred to a significant aspect of the royal ideology of the period, which sought to draw flattering comparisons between the kings of France and the emperors of ancient Rome.

For Charles of Valois, as for the ancients, gemstones were treasured also for their amuletic powers and spiritual virtues, even though the Christian Church opposed instrumental magic in almost all its forms.¹⁶ Charles's inventory records reveal that, apart from other precious objects, he valued stones understood to possess healing properties. One such stone was believed to aid women in childbirth: 'une pierre appellée la Pierre Sainte, qui ayde aux femmes à avoir enfant.'¹⁷ The stone, mounted in gold set with pearls, emeralds and balas rubies, was kept in a casket emblazoned with the arms of France. Charles also possessed an oriental sapphire for touching the eyes, set in a gold fillet,¹⁸ as well as the Lapis Albahazar, a renowned bezoar, supposedly an antidote to poison,¹⁹ stored in a small, elaborately wrought container.

Some of the incised gems in Charles's possession were used as votives, deployed with a new social and political purpose. For instance, a small-scale (9.8 × 8.7 × 4.6 cm) Roman chalcedony bust (c.315–30), depicting Constantine the Great (272–337) wearing a *lorica plumata* (feather cuirass), was donated by Charles in 1379, shortly before his death, to the Sainte-Chapelle.²⁰ Before the donation, the ancient piece had undergone a radical change: in the 1360s the bust was inserted into a new medieval setting created especially for this occasion, most likely by the king's goldsmith, Jean (Hennequin) du Vivier. Close examination reveals that a draped element of the body made of silver gilt was added to the Roman bust, together with silver arms and hands. The *gorgoneion* (a gorgon amulet) on the emperor's chest was partially erased and replaced by a cross, and the remodelled object was provided with new attributes – a crown of thorns and a double reverse cross – in addition to a new base originally decorated with Charles's emblems – the fleurs-de-lys and dolphins. After this intervention the new composite statuette was placed on the top of the ceremonial mace, *baculus cantoris*, of the Sainte-Chapelle. Hence, Charles's cameo was no longer a rare object from the ancient past: dislocated from former contexts of production and display, the Roman carving was transformed and subsequently incorporated into a powerful ritual object, closely linked to the Christian cult. Thus, once celebrated by Constantine, the cameo now effectively served the King of France and proclaimed his authority.

Charles's practices with these ancient precious objects clearly recall ancient times. The mutable effects of precious gems in different circumstances of use and function had been a source of fascination for royal courts in antiquity. Also well-known to the ancients were small-sized statuettes in precious materials, consisting of draped bodies cut from semi-precious stones, to which heads and limbs of chalcedony, amethyst or ivory might be added. Some of these are mentioned in detail by Pliny the Elder (AD 23/24–79) in his *Historia naturalis*, a book that investigated a wide variety of materials and objects made of them.²¹ Thus, one may even speculate whether Jean du Vivier might have had an opportunity to study *in situ* intaglios and cameos in Charles's possession.

Gemstones and the Valois princes of the blood

Charles of Valois shared his enthusiasm for gemstones with his younger brothers, and especially with Jean de

France, Duke of Berry. Louis d'Anjou preferred to have his most valuable gems incorporated into larger objects, although he is assumed to have possessed the Late Antique vase carved from a single piece of agate, known today as the Rubens vase (c.400).²² But in the case of Jean de Berry, the situation was more complex.²³ The Italian Marquis of Saluzzo, in his *Le chevalier errant* (written c.1400), recorded that the duke never permitted affairs of state to interfere with his passion for small luxury objects; during a court session held to discuss the regency of Languedoc, for example, he immediately excused himself when he learned of the arrival of two Venetian merchants offering him gems.²⁴ Almost fifty years after his death (c.1464), the Florentine artist and theorist Filarete (c.1400–1469) still praised the Duke of Berry in his famed treatise, *Sforzinda* for his delight in gemstones.²⁵ In fact, the duke's inventories, written and compiled by his *gardes des joyaux*, Guillaume de Ruilly and Robinet d'Étampes, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, register numerous gemstones, albeit briefly; almost all are scattered today.

Among the few identifiable items that survived are those that were originally part of the monumental reliquary bust of St Benedict, commissioned by Jean de Berry and donated to the abbey of Saint-Denis in 1401.²⁶ An engraving made for the historian Michel Félibien some 300 years later shows the bust opulently displayed, encrusted with gemstones and ancient carvings.²⁷ The biggest of these was a cameo depicting the emperor Domitian (AD 51–96), placed in the base of the reliquary's neck collar.²⁸ The bust, made of silver gilt, was melted down during the French Revolution, but some of the gems that once decorated the object survive.

Like Charles, Jean de Berry favoured gemstones. The inventory of his treasury registers gives prominence to rubies, sapphires and emeralds, the most highly valued precious stones of medieval times. The duke is credited with amassing one of the greatest assemblages of such stones of his day, comprising over forty rubies and balas rubies. Many of these he purchased from Italian merchants, mostly Genoese, Venetian and Florentine, who served his financial needs and procured for him objects of many kinds, though specializing in precious stones. Other gems came to him as gifts: two rare rubies, for example, were presented to him by his nephew, John the Fearless of Burgundy (1371–1419). They were so splendid and

rare, and so treasured by Jean de Berry that he gave them distinctive nicknames such as *Bonnhomme*, *Coeur de France*, and *Le Roi des Rubies*.²⁹

Charles of Bohemia and his secular spaces

The Bohemian king and emperor Charles of Luxembourg was also a member of the Valois royal family. The eldest son of John of Luxembourg (1296–1346) and the grandson of Henry VII of Luxembourg, Holy Roman Emperor (1269/74–1313), he was christened Wenceslaus. His mother was Elisabeth (1292–1330), the last princess of the Czech royal house of Přemysl. He spent his boyhood at the court of Charles IV of France (r. 1322–28) and his wife, Marie of Luxembourg (1304–1324), who was his aunt. Here he accepted the name Charles from the French king, and used it for the rest of his life. The ties with French royalty were strengthened by his marriage to Blanche of Valois (c. 1316–1348), a sister of Philip VI of France (1293–1350). In addition, Charles's sister, Bonne of Luxembourg (1315–1349), married the future King John II of France (r. 1350–64), so that Charles became closely related by marriage to Charles V and to the royal princes.

From the outset of his reign in 1346, the young King of Bohemia made every effort to establish his position by linking it with an indisputably prestigious past. Charles placed particular emphasis on constructing links with the Roman Empire, especially with Constantine the Great and Charlemagne (747?–814), to whom he claimed a blood relationship through his grandmother, Margaret of Brabant (1276–1311). In addition, he also consciously maintained the local Bohemian traditions of the Přemyslid dynasty, and purposefully promoted the image of St Wenceslas, patron saint of Bohemia. Like Charles of Valois, he was associated with numerous artistic projects, mostly launched in Prague.

Charles completely regenerated Prague, turning a rather provincial city into a new political, economic and cultural capital of the Holy Roman Empire. He provided the city with all the features appropriate to its newly created centrality, notably an entirely rebuilt St Vitus Cathedral, befitting its status as coronation church and necropolis of the Bohemian kings, and he renovated Prague Castle as further tangible evidence of his majestic imperial presence.³⁰ He is also

documented as having built or renovated a number of other castles in Bohemia and elsewhere in his territories. In pursuit of his strategy of self-presentation, Charles arranged for several of these to be named after him – an unusual practice in the late Middle Ages – among them the Karlštejn, an imposing stronghold near Prague.³¹ It is often emphasized that Charles built the Karlštejn as a place for the safekeeping of the imperial regalia and the Bohemian crown jewels and holy relics, but it is less often mentioned that the castle was originally constructed as Charles's occasional residence, a place of retreat, with an imperial palace and a free-standing great tower with a chapel at its heart. Unfortunately, whereas the artistic decoration of Prague Castle, and of the sacred spaces of the Karlštejn has been well studied, the historical records tell us almost nothing about the furnishing of the emperor's private apartments. In addition, by contrast with the state of our knowledge of the possessions of Charles of Valois, as far as we know, no fourteenth-century inventories of the movable treasure of Charles IV's residences have survived. Little is known about the precious objects once located in their interiors.

Gemstones and ornamenta

Despite this, it is known that Charles of Luxembourg favoured gemstones, largely because he dedicated a considerable part of his collection of precious objects to the service of the Church as *ornamenta*. In fact, the fourteenth-century inventories of the treasury of St Vitus Cathedral record many lavishly embellished objects donated by the emperor. For instance, Charles gave the cathedral a reliquary with a fragment of cloth that was understood to be the tablecloth from the Last Supper, which he had received as a gift from King Louis of Hungary (1326–1382) in 1348. The reliquary was a pear-shaped ewer made of rock crystal, likely to have served originally as a drinking vessel,³² however, shortly after 1348 the object was provided with a new openwork lid, which must have replaced a damaged crystal one, and the foot was encrusted with gemstones, including Bohemian amethyst and jasper. These interventions transformed the piece from its secular function into a container for the precious relic. Another magnificent ancient piece in Charles's possession, which he bestowed upon St Vitus Cathedral, was a Byzantine bowl,³³ carved from one piece of reddish sardonyx. Charles may have acquired this object

in Italy, most probably in Venice, during his stay in the city in 1337. About 1350, the bowl was provided with a new mount, including a foot to which the imperial and Bohemian coats of arms were added, and was transformed into a chalice (Fig. 1). Thus both of these precious objects acquired by Charles – the crystal ewer and the sardonyx bowl – were culturally redefined and became part of the treasure of the new cathedral, where they promoted Charles as King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor.

Charles IV undoubtedly had an opportunity to observe precious objects preserved in the treasuries of Saint-Denis and the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris and in other cities in France. During his numerous travels he also became acquainted with renowned church treasuries in Italian cities, including Rome, and he was certainly familiar with Aachen Cathedral and its treasury, to which he donated various pieces. The historical record proves that he saw some of the most splendid religious objects in the German lands, such as the Shrine of the Three Kings in Cologne Cathedral and the famous crown reliquary of St Elizabeth of Hungary in the church dedicated to her in Marburg (it is now in the Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm), which



Fig. 1. The Chalice of Charles IV of Luxembourg, c.1350, Byzantine sardonyx bowl from the mid-tenth century, mounted in a silver gilt and enamel setting (15.5 × 17.6 × 13.5 cm), Treasury of St Vitus Cathedral, Prague. Reproduced from A. Podlaha and E. Šittler, *Chrámový poklad u Sv. Víta v Praze: jeho dějiny a popis* (Prague, 1903), p. 21, pl. 64.

are both fine examples of the re-use of ancient gems in the medieval period.³⁴ Thus Charles's visits to church treasuries to examine ancient and precious objects are certainly evidence of his devoted piety, but they also testify to his interest in a legendary heritage of myths and events of the past.³⁵

Charles IV's crowns

But to return to Charles and his own treasures: among the most impressive valuables he donated to the cathedral of St Vitus in Prague were the objects dedicated to St Wenceslas. Already in the 1330s, the future King of Bohemia commissioned a series of twelve free-standing statues of apostles made of silver for the cathedral, in memory of the royal saint; and later he is documented as having donated a golden reliquary and commissioned the saint's tomb.³⁶ Perhaps the most interesting piece, however, is a magnificent crown that Charles had made for his own coronation as King of Bohemia in 1347 and subsequently donated to the St Wenceslas treasury as a votive gift. The St Wenceslas or coronation crown (Fig. 2) still survives almost in its original fourteenth-century shape.

The Bohemian coronation crown³⁷ is an object to which Charles paid special attention until his last days. It is also a good example of the personal passion of the King of Bohemia for precious stones. The crown takes the form of a golden diadem in four sections, from each of which rises a large fleur-de-lis, richly embellished with gemstones. The diadem itself supports two arches, crossing at right angles and encrusted with precious stones. A small golden cross with a sapphire cameo tops the point where the arches intersect; a Latin inscription on the cross explains that it functioned as a container for a relic of the Crown of Thorns. Thus, the crown was a reliquary too. A bull of Clement VI, dated 6 May 1346, states that the crown Charles of Luxembourg had had made to adorn the reliquary bust of St Wenceslas in the cathedral treasury was used for Bohemian coronations, so it is now assumed that the crown must have been created in 1346, or slightly earlier. Three elements of the crown are of different provenance: the precious royal diadem already existed and was remodelled for the crown; the golden arches also formed part of an earlier object, thought to have been created at the beginning of the fourteenth century; and the Byzantine sapphire cameo set into the cross dates to about 1200.



Fig. 2. The crown of St Wenceslaus, fourteenth century, gold, gemstones and pearls, with a Byzantine sapphire cameo dating from c. 1200, Treasury of St Vitus Cathedral, Prague. Reproduced from K. Schwarzenberg, *Obrazy českého státu* (Prague, 1939).

The cameo itself might originally have served as a pectoral cross, since it is pierced with a hole, through which a cord or chain could be passed.

The descriptions of the Bohemian crown in fourteenth-century inventories reveal that in the course of time the shape of the crown was altered.³⁸ The most significant changes seem to have been made in the period shortly before Charles's death, in 1374–78. Technical examination of the crown has revealed traces of the secondary mounting of gemstones, and the fact that various stones came from other jewels. In addition, the manipulation of all sections of the diadem has been detected. Smaller gems were replaced by bigger ones, and some precious stones were reshaped or replaced. Finally, the colour composition of the crown was significantly altered in the remodelling: numerous white pearls that originally embellished the crown were almost all removed, and the emeralds became less prominent. Archival sources reveal that the last precious stone Charles acquired for his crown was a big ruby, redeployed on the prominent front face.³⁹ After the final redesign, the object was dominated by gold and by the blue of sapphires and red of rubies, redubellites and spinels.

Scholars have argued that the Bohemian coronation crown's last refurbishment might have been

inspired by a French model that Charles had the opportunity to inspect during his final visit to France in 1378.⁴⁰ In fact, the biography of Charles V written by Christine de Pisan, cited above, in which the emperor's stay in France is thoroughly described, supports this idea. During his stay in France, Charles of Luxembourg particularly wished to see the crown of the king of France: 'la belle couronne que le roi avoit fait faire'. The crown was brought to him at the château of Beauté-sur-Marne, where he was staying, and the king took it in his hands and looked at it attentively from all sides. Then he returned it, saying that he had not seen so many rich and beautiful stones together in all his life.⁴¹ In fact, this is a description of Charles's keen examination of the work as an object, and of the attempt to read forms and colours as an experience in itself. 'La très grande, très belle et la meilleure couronne du Roi la quelle il a fait faire', which Charles IV admired at Beauté, has not survived, but it was described in detail in the inventory of Charles V's treasury.⁴² From this description we know that the diadem of the French crown differed from the Bohemian one in having four additional fleurs-de-lis, but it is clear that the selection of the precious stones inserted into the Bohemian crown in the 1370s – principally rubies and sapphires – was, indeed, inspired by the crown of the King of France. The optical effect created by the gemstones set into the two objects was almost identical.⁴³

It is well known that in the Middle Ages precious stones were understood to possess not only magical but also spiritual properties, which referred to the Bible and to God. The foundation stones of the heavenly Jerusalem were said in scriptural texts to be multiple gemstones, including sapphires, chalcedonies, emeralds and sardonyx. Other biblical texts refer to the sumptuous decoration with gems of the high priest's breastplate.⁴⁴ Charles and his learned advisers must have been aware of these examples and Charles himself surely regarded the precious stones in his crown as symbols of God's beauty. Nevertheless, a distinction between the aesthetic merits and the utility of such objects was already recognized, and, as we have seen, the dazzling beauty of gems and the formal qualities of the workmanship were valued too.⁴⁵

It is important to note that the Bohemian crown is not the only one with which Charles of Luxembourg concerned himself. The magnificent crown capping the reliquary bust of Charlemagne in Aachen

Cathedral is another splendid object associated with him.⁴⁶ The gem-encrusted crown of Charlemagne is regarded as a goldsmith's masterpiece, but it is less often remarked that this object appears to be a unique assemblage of an impressive number of ancient gems. Apart from many other precious stones, no fewer than twenty-one cameos and intaglios are incorporated into this crown, some of which have Roman origins.⁴⁷ Another nine cameos, Roman, Byzantine and medieval, are mounted on Charles's cross, created after 1357 (Fig. 3).⁴⁸

The emperor's signet rings

In general, we possess little information about the personal treasures of Charles of Luxembourg. One exception is the jewels that Charles inherited from his grandfather, Henry VII of Luxembourg, Holy Roman Emperor, which have been little studied. This family inheritance included two precious rings.⁴⁹ One was a sapphire seal-ring, which Henry had received as a gift in Pisa, and used as his 'secret signet'.⁵⁰ Charles

employed this ring as an additional secret signet of his own, chiefly in the 1340s and 1350s. The image engraved in intaglio on the sapphire set into the seal-ring is documented only from the surviving impression. It is oval in shape and shows a ship with a sail and a mast topped with a cross, on which a Latin inscription in memory of Henry VII is incised. The meticulously fashioned carving indicates medieval Venetian work.⁵¹ The second ring was an amulet with thaumaturgic properties. In a letter sent by the emperor to the metropolitan chapter in Prague in 1354, the jewel is described as a ring with a stone of the colour of ruby, which possesses the power to stop bleeding.⁵²

The taste for gem-set seal-rings was certainly not, in itself, new in the late fourteenth century. The ancients were passionate collectors of gems, and employed cameos and intaglios for their signet rings. We know, for instance, that Pyrgoteles, the celebrated gem-engraver of the fourth century BC, was the only artist who was permitted to engrave seal-rings for Alexander the Great (356–323 BC). And Dioscurides, the first century BC seal-cutter to the Roman emperor Augustus (63 BC – 14 AD), achieved a considerable reputation by cutting the emperor's portrait for his ring.⁵³ The primary use of this sort of seal in antiquity was – as it was in the medieval period – to establish the authenticity of documents and to verify administrative warrants. Such engraved gems set in rings, including those used by Charles IV, were evidently closely related to the exercise of power, and can be regarded as important material instruments by which imperial authority was transmitted.

No signet rings belonging with certainty to Charles of Luxembourg or Charles of Valois have survived intact. Nevertheless, a good example, which can give us at least some idea of such royal rings and their uses, is the seal-ring traditionally associated with Edward, the Black Prince (1330–1376), eldest son of Edward III of England (1312–1377).⁵⁴ Made of enamelled gold, in the third quarter of fourteenth century, this ring was equipped with an ancient ruby intaglio depicting the head of a putto, presumably understood in the medieval period as an angel. According to the *Book of Minerals* by the thirteenth-century Dominican friar Albertus Magnus (1200–1280), a ruby possessed more powers than all other stones. It was to other stones as gold was to other metals, and the ruby's special efficacy was to disperse poison in air or vapour.⁵⁵ In addition, the Black Prince's ring was embellished with

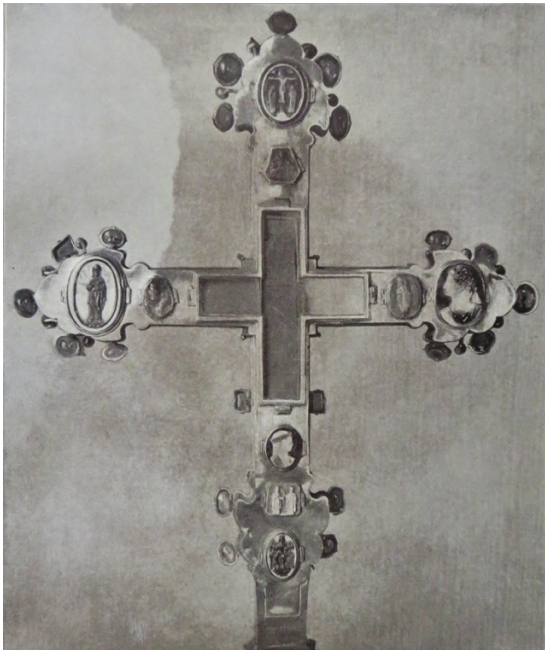


Fig. 3. Reliquary cross, after 1357, gold, rock crystal plates, gemstones, pearls and cameos, set on a base dating from 1522, Treasury of St Vitus Cathedral, Prague. Reproduced from A. Podlaha and E. Šittler, *Chrámový poklad u Sv. Víta v Praze: jeho dějiny a popis* (Prague, 1903).

several Latin thaumaturgical inscriptions, which gave the object multiple protective virtues. The gem-set ring thus served not only as an *ornamentum*, an impressive piece of royal jewellery, indicating wealth and prestige, but also as a *sigillum secretum* and an object with amuletic significance. By direct contact with the finger of its possessor, the ring gave him special power deriving from the stone itself, from the image of the angel (so interpreted) carved on it, and from the protective inscriptions.

The public presentation of Charles's gemstones

We have already observed that political power was surrounded with sacred aura and demonstrated through various kinds of precious objects. These objects, chiefly insignia and ritual items, formed the symbolic inventory of medieval monarchy. Gems were used to decorate both secular and religious objects, and thus were regarded as actively participating in political power. Highly valued, they were always well guarded. Nevertheless, on solemn occasions, such as royal ceremonies and processions of relics, gems were taken out and placed on public display. Among such occasions were the public presentations of the Christian relics accumulated by Charles of Luxembourg in Prague.

Before paying further attention to these spectacular events, it should be briefly noted that Charles had ambitions to modify not only the political map of central Christendom but also the religious one. By collecting a huge quantity of relics in record time, he made every effort to transform refurbished Prague, now the new imperial metropolis, into the second Rome. Kept in costly shrines in St Vitus Cathedral and in his castle the Karlštejn, the most important relics were presented to the faithful during major festivals of relics, which Charles staged in the city. In this, he followed his imperial ancestors, the two Holy Roman Emperors Charlemagne and Charles the Bald (823–877). According to tradition, Charlemagne publicly presented relics he had acquired in Constantinople and deposited at Aachen. The ceremony of the ostentation of the relics was later transferred to Saint-Denis by his grandson, Charles the Bald,⁵⁶ and we may assume that Charles of Luxembourg was aware of this practice. He had objects containing relics put on show in Prague for the first time on Palm Sunday in 1350, on a temporary raised wooden stage in Charles Square (the

Great Market) in his New Town. And from 1356, with the inauguration of the feast of the Holy Lance and the Holy Nails, reliquary objects, opulently decorated with gems, were displayed there annually.⁵⁷ In the medieval imagination, relics and gemstones – the first contained in costly shrines adorned with the second – were closely related. Gemstones augmented the appearance of relics which had no intrinsic material value, and in exchange they gained a spiritual potency from this physical proximity. Thus both relics and stones were considered to be the vessels through which the divine could speak to human beings.⁵⁸ In public displays such as those in Prague, gems acted jointly with relics as powerful tools to mobilize pilgrim devotion. The process, in turn, served both to demonstrate and to reinforce Charles's image and self-promotion as a pious ruler.

The last meeting of Emperor Charles IV and Charles V of France

Charles, King of Bohemia, and Charles, King of France, met for the last time in January 1378 in France. The visit of Emperor Charles IV and his son Wenceslas (1337–83) to Charles of Valois was an occasion of particular importance and splendour, to which long passages are devoted both in the *Grandes chroniques de France* and Charles V's biography by Christine de Pisan. The emperor's stay was also recorded visually in a series of magnificent illuminations in a copy of the *Grandes chroniques* made especially for Charles V,⁵⁹ which depict the most important meetings that took place during the visit and the crucial role that sumptuous objects played at the Valois royal court. One miniature illustrates a moment of leave-taking and the personal exchange of gifts between the two rulers, in which Charles IV and Charles V directly exchange three golden rings set with precious stones. The rings have already been removed from fingers: Charles IV holds two in his hands while Charles of Valois holds one, and both sovereigns display them as evidence of their bond. Other miniatures from this series show the dukes of Berry and Burgundy presenting to the emperor and his son various precious objects on behalf of the King of France,⁶⁰ evidence that, in the circle of Charles V and the Valois princes, such precious objects – apart from their other functions – acquired the status of

highly valued luxurious presents. It was customary for friends of the King of France and the members of his household to provide elaborate goldsmiths' objects, ornamented with gemstones, as gifts for ritual exchange on solemn occasions, including diplomatic meetings.⁶¹ The visit of Emperor Charles IV to France was just such an exceptional event, and not only Charles of Luxembourg and his son Wenceslas but also members of their entourage were given many superbly crafted precious objects.⁶² Although we are quite well informed about the gifts offered by the King of France to the emperor, little is known about what Charles IV brought for his nephew. Considering the passion of both rulers for precious stones, we may assume that among numerous valuables the emperor carried to Paris were gemstones. And, indeed, in Charles V's testamentary inventory there is a minutely described fine ruby, 'en façon de triangle', which the Valois received from the emperor during his visit. Charles kept this gemstone in one of his coffers at the château of Melun.⁶³

Conclusion

Charles IV, successful diplomat and influential ruler, the second Luxembourg king to rule Bohemia and the second of his line to achieve the status of Holy Roman Emperor, held his royal throne and imperial position for a long thirty-two years. From the very beginning, he made every effort to strengthen his royal and imperial legitimacy, and his close connections with the French royal court and with the tradition of St Louis were closely tied to this political ambition, as was his interest in gemstones, especially in ancient carvings. As we have seen, Charles enjoyed their beauty, but his collecting of precious and semi-precious stones was motivated by more than his appreciation of their formal qualities or artistic features for their own sake: the spiritual and magical agency accorded to these stones certainly played a role, and one might ask whether Charles viewed some of the objects he commissioned or acquired as talismans that would bolster his power. What is clear, at least, is that he used gems as instruments of his imperial self-image and his claim to authority, as did Charles of Valois.

Esteemed, marvelled at and even venerated, these seductive objects never lost their prestige and

close links with real political power and its rituals, but retained their high-status position and value throughout later periods. At the end of the sixteenth century, Rudolf II of Habsburg (1552–1612), Holy Roman Emperor, made Prague the imperial city once again. Rudolf's interest in minerals and precious and semi-precious stones was well known to his contemporaries. Objects of this kind achieved a special importance at his court and found a prominent place in his famous cabinet of curiosities, located in Prague Castle; among his treasures was the magnificent Roman cameo, the Gemma Augustea, to which various magical properties were ascribed. Thus in his passion for glyptic rarities, Rudolf continued a tradition that Charles of Luxembourg had established.⁶⁴

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- 48 E. Poche, 'K otázce ostatkových křížů Karla IV.', *Sborník Národního Muzea v Praze*, Acta Musei Nationalis, Series A: Historia 21, nos 4–5 (1967), pp. 239–46; Poche, op.cit. (note 2), pp. 88–9; *L'Europe Gothique (XIIe–XIVe siècles)*, exh. cat., Musée du Louvre (Paris, 1968), cat. no. 470. By way of comparison, the famous collection of cameos amassed by the Duke of Berry contained about thirty-three pieces, only some of which were of Roman origin; Meiss, op. cit. (note 24), p. 303.
- 49 J. Šusta, *Karel IV.: za císařskou korunou, 1346–1355* (Prague, 1948), p. 351.
- 50 Charles's seal-ring might be connected with 'unum sigillum secreti de uno safirii posita in auro' listed in the inventory of precious objects in the possession of Henry VII in 1313. See G. Doenniges (ed.), *Acta Henrici VII Imperatoris Romanorum et monumenta quaedam alia medii aevi*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1839), p. 91; H. Bresslau and H.-W. Kleritz, *Handbuch der Urkundenlehre für Deutschland und Italien*, vol. II (Berlin, 1958), p. 580. Henry received this small gem in Pisa c.1312 as a gift from local dignitaries to celebrate his safe voyage from Genoa. See also T. Lindner, *Das Urkundewesen Karls IV und seiner Nachfolger (1346–1377)* (Stuttgart, 1882), p. 52; H. Wentzel, 'Mittelalterliche Gemmen: Versuch einer Grundlegung', *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft* 8 (1941), pp. 45–98, at p. 90; J. Krása, 'Karlovy pečeti', in *Karolus Quartus*, ed. V. Vaněček (Prague, 1984), pp. 405–19, esp. p. 413.
- 51 Wentzel, op. cit. (note 50), p. 90.
- 52 Charles described this ring as follows: '... unum annulum... cum gemma habente colorem quasi rubini, cuius virtute et tactu restringitur sanguinis fluxus', letter from Charles IV to the Prague metropolitan chapter, 17 February 1354; Podlaha and Šittler, op. cit. (note 32), p. 32.
- 53 M. Henig, 'Roman sealstones', in *7000 Years of Seals*, ed. D. Collon (London, 1997), pp. 88–106, esp. pp. 89–92; M. Henig, 'Gems, jewellery and glass', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. E. Bispham, T. Harrison and B. A. Sparkes (Edinburgh, 2006), pp. 217–25, esp. pp. 217–18.
- 54 Département des Objets d'Art, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. OA 9597. See B. Chiesi, 'Anello d'oro con sigillo, detto del "Principe Nero"', in *Il Medioevo in viaggi*, ed. B. Chiesi, I. Ciseri, B. Paolozzi Strozzi and D. Berné, exh. cat., Museo Nazionale de Bargello (Florence, 2015), p. 195, cat. no. 62.
- 55 Albertus Magnus, *Book of Minerals*, trans. D. Wyckoff (Oxford, 1967), p. 77.
- 56 E. Bozóky, *La politique des reliques de Constantin à Saint Louis. Protection collective et légitimation du pouvoir* (Paris, 2006), pp. 135–9.
- 57 *Monumenta vaticana res gestas Bohemias illustrantia, II. Acta Innocentii VI, 1352–1362*, ed. J. Novák (Prague, 1907), pp. 89–90, nos. 209–10. The most important source on this subject is H. Kühne, *Ostensio reliquiarum: Untersuchungen über Entstehung, Ausbreitung, Gestalt und Funktion der Heiltumsweisungen im römisch-deutschen Regnum* (Berlin and New York, 2000), pp. 106–9, 112–14.
- 58 For the affinities between stones and relics see B. Büttner, 'From bones to stones: reflections on jeweled reliquiaries', in *Reliquiare im Mittelalter*, ed. B. Reudenbach and G. Toussaint (Berlin, 2005), pp. 43–59. See also P. Cordez, 'La Chasse des Rois Mages à Cologne et la christianisation des pierres magiques aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles', in *Le trésor au Moyen Âge: discours, pratiques et objets*, ed. L. Burkart, P. Cordez, P. A. Mariaux and Y. Potin (Florence, 2010), pp. 315–32.
- 59 C. R. Sherman, *The Portraits of Charles V of France (1338–1380)* (New York, 1969); A. D. Hedeman, *The Royal Image: Illustrations of the Grandes chroniques de France, 1274–1422* (Berkeley, 1991), pp. 128–33; F. Autrand, 'Mémoire et cérémonial: la visite de l'empereur Charles IV à Paris en 1378 d'après les Grandes chroniques de France et Christine de Pizan', in *Une femme de lettres au Moyen Âge: études autour de Christine de Pizan*, ed. L. Dulac and B. Ribémont (Orléans, 1995), pp. 91–103.
- 60 'Les Grandes chroniques de France de Charles V', Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, MS 2813, c.1375–80, fols. 478v, 479r.
- 61 On the Valois and gifts see B. Büttner, 'Past presents: New year's gifts at the Valois courts, ca. 1400', *Art Bulletin* 83 (2001), pp. 598–625.
- 62 R. W. Lightbown, *Secular Goldsmiths' Work in Medieval France: A history* (London, 1978), pp. 36–9; F. Šmahel, 'Dary pro císaře a jeho družinu', in *Cesta Karla IV. do Francie, 1377–1378* (Prague, 2006), pp. 338–43.
- 63 'Ung ruby fin, cabuchon, en façon de triangle, et le donna l'empereur Charles le IIIe, oncle du Roy, quant il le vint veoir à Paris', Labarte, op. cit. (note 6), inv. no. 404. There was another precious stone, 'une grant pierre, à façon d'un amatiste, que l'Empereur donna au Roy, bordée d'argent' (ibid., inv. no. 2826), preserved in Charles's study at Vincennes, which was, likewise, a gift to him from Charles of Luxembourg, presumably during this visit.
- 64 R. J. W. Evans, *Rudolf II and his World: A study in intellectual history, 1572–1612* (Oxford, 1973), p. 174.

