A Mercurial Monarch and His Magical Metropolis

Rudolf II's Prague and Its Alchemical Association

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Abstract

In 1583 the Habsburg emperor Rudolf II established Prague as his *Residenzstadt* and thus shifted the political center of gravity within Central Europe to his Bohemian capital. As a result, the city emerged as the focus of Europe's intellectual and creative universe. Rudolf, whose curiosity was legendary, amassed a celebrated cabinet of curiosities with objects from afar afield as India. His imperial court attracted the Renaissance's best artists and architects, while also cultivating an esoteric enclave in which alchemists vied for the sovereign's patronage. Indeed, Rudolf sponsored the fervent exploration of alchemy in an attempt to create harmony within his discordant world. This article further demonstrates the ubiquity of alchemical intrigue within Prague, revealing a lexicon which served numerous interests both within and without the royal court. Alchemy, Hermetic philosophy, and mystical theosophy were indelibly inscribed onto the urban canvas by Rudolf II but were also pursued by various actors throughout the Holy Roman Empire and beyond. Whether as a pathway to apotheosis sought by European rulers or as route to fame and favor for interlopers of the state, alchemy was a mutable concept that spawned expansive connections throughout Central Europe.

Article

The German cartographer Heinrich Bünting (c.1545-1606) presented Bohemia as the beating heart of the entire continent in his anthropomorphic map of 1587, *Europa Regina* (Figure 1).[1] Certainly, Rudolf II, newly crowned as Holy Roman Emperor in 1576, pre-empted Bünting's visualization, as he had transferred the seat of his Habsburg government from Vienna to the kingdom's capital by 1583.[2] The eminent German astronomer Johannes Kepler supported this appreciation of Prague as the veritable center of Europe's intellectual universe by writing in his *Deliberation on a Bohemian Sojourn* (1600), "Prague is fitting for my studies; there is lively interaction between nations here."[3] In one sense, its position as the new imperial capital meant that

[1] Peter Meurer, "Europa Regina: 16th Century Maps of Europe in the Form of a Queen," *Revue belge de géographie*, 3-4 (2008): 8, https://doi.org/10.4000/belgeo.7711.
[2] R. J. W. Evans, *Rudolf II and His World: A Study in Intellectual History 1576-1612* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 22.
[3] Johannes Kepler, "Deliberation on a Bohemian Sojourn (1600)," in *Alchemy and Rudolf II: Exploring the Secrets of Nature in Central Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries,* eds. Ivo Purš and Vladímir Karpenko (Prague: Artefactum, 2016), 160.

it became rapidly filled by visiting ambassadors, each hoping to marvel at the emperor's famous "cabinets of curiosities" (*Wunderkammern*) within the imperial palace. Similarly, the finest Flemish landscapists and Italian sculptors aspired to have their work displayed in Rudolf's metropolitan, Mannerist showcase.

Figure 1: Heinrich Bünting, *Europa Regina*, 1587.

Yet, in spite of this influx of foreign interest, Bohemia represented a region that was already defined by cultural and social heterogeneity. Throughout the preceding centuries, Prague had witnessed the emergence of a variety of confessional voices, all vying for supremacy within its urban space; naturally, this conflicting sectarian cacophony resulted in frequent incidents of violence. By acknowledging the latent divisions present within the Habsburg territories, we can contextualize the emperor's interest in those fields which advocated an underlying unity within the world. Rudolf II's distinct patronizing of alchemical pursuits symbolized a concerted effort to promote a novel, conciliatory "language" that stressed cooperation and cross-over between different religious authorities.[4] It was in accordance with his yearning for divine illumination and universal harmony that the emperor began to shape his imperial center in both physical and political terms.

[4] Pamela H. Smith, "Alchemy as a Language of Mediation at the Habsburg Court," *Isis*, 85, no. 1 (1994): 4-5, http://www.jstor.org/stable/235894.

The Bohemian Crown Lands, comprising of Bohemia, Moravia, the Lusatias, and various small Silesian duchies, had been riven by the Hussite Wars of the early fifteenth century. These conflicts witnessed a pre-Lutheran reformism gain the support of a significant proportion of the local population. Its leader, Jan Hus, was burned at the stake at the Council of Constance in 1415. In the wake of this convulsive episode, the supporters of Hus continued his agenda, establishing a strongly ingrained Utraquist tradition within the Bohemian estates and maintaining urban strongholds such as those of Kutná Hora throughout Rudolf's entire reign. What's more, these territories were characterised by cultural and linguistic dissimilarities, as well as this formidable Utraquist presence. Whilst those areas near the Silesian border spoke predominantly German, in the Lusatias a Slavic dialect, Wendish, was spoken.[5] In addition to this varied confessional landscape of Bohemia, the surrounding German principalities were among the main stakeholders of Luther's Protestant movement, whilst the more rebellious, Calvinist activity centered upon the Palatinate.

All in all, Rudolf II was confronted with a true confessional concoction to administer, and this task was made harder by the constant pressure exerted from Rome. In direct response to these various strands of Protestant reformism, the pope convened the Council of Trent (1545-1563), whose Jesuit supporters hoped to impose a stricter form of Catholicism on Rudolf's imperial and monarchical territories. It is paramount to understand here that Rudolf II was an elected sovereign of both his Royal Hungarian and Bohemian lands, the majority of which were not Catholic. He did not possess his uncle Philip II's zeal to carry out a Central European *Reconquista* and was eager to sponsor "an imperial ideology that did not subscribe to a narrow religious formulation."[6] During a prolonged period of Ottoman threat to his Balkan frontier as a result of the Long Turkish War (1593-1606), an intra-imperial conflict would have been a disastrous occurrence for the Habsburg monarch.[7]

Thus, Rudolfine Bohemia represented a confessional "contact zone" within Latin Christendom in which several hostile sects of the sixteenth century hoped to grapple with, and assert dominance over, one another.[8] In order to negotiate this uneasy religious climate and for his empire to prosper rather than internally disintegrate, Rudolf's fascination with magic and alchemy was a "serious attempt to reconstruct certainty" in a world of "division and doubt."[9] It was alchemical science, posits Pamela Smith, that "functioned as a language of mediation" because it possessed a potent metaphysical dimension that stressed universal unity.[10] It was alchemy's constant reflection upon the balance and harmony of the material and spiritual worlds that

[5] Evans, *Rudolf II and His World*, 23.
[6] Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Princes and Artists: Patronage and Ideology at Four Habsburg Courts, 1517-1633* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 86.
[7] Gábor Ágoston, "The Ottoman Empire and Europe," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern European History: 1350 – 1750*. *Volume II. Cultures and Power,* ed. Hamish M. Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 612-637.
[8] Mary Louise Pratt, 'The art of the contact zone', *Profession* (1991): 34.
[9] Paul Monod, *The Power of Kings: Monarchy and Religion in Europe, 1589-1715* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 56; James R. Palmitessa, "The Prague Uprising of 1611: Property, Politics, and Catholic Renewal in the Early Years of Habsburg Rule," *Central European History*, 31, no. 4 (1998): 300, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4546814.
[10] Smith, "Alchemy as a Language of Mediation," 4.

proposed an ideological alternative to both militant Tridentine Catholicism and unyielding Calvinism.

This notion of universal harmony and conciliation had been theorized well before the advent of Rudolf's "magic circle" in Prague, however, and there were several ideological antecedents: Jean Bodin (1530-1596) and Guillaume Postel (1510-1581), two renowned French scholars, had stressed the possibility of a religious and political unity within all humanity by the mid-sixteenth century.[11] By closely studying alchemy, astrology, and occult texts saturated with mystical inscriptions, natural philosophers hoped to uncover the multivalent connections that existed between the macrocosmic workings of the universe and those minute details of terrestrial existence. The alchemical belief in Hermetic consonance — "as above/as below" its oft-cited maxim — propagated further Neoplatonic ideas that the world of man and the world of nature were not only linked, but inherently reflective. Therefore, in order to have complete control over his temporal domain, Rudolf II believed that he needed to access the information hidden within the earth's substance. In commanding and redeeming disparate written sources into one virtuous whole, reflective of his territories' religious heterogeneity, the Habsburg ruler believed that he was protecting his domain from destructive corruption.[12] Essentially, by accruing all available knowledge, regardless of its religious or textual source, Rudolf II hoped to gain a deeper insight into nature's code and, from that, augment his own power over a cosmopolitan empire.

Whilst Rudolf II's "Letter of Majesty" of 1609 was undoubtedly a measured political expedient, it can also be interpreted as a manifestation of this "accommodating intellectual Humanism" that mirrored alchemy's objectives to reconcile and redeem.[13] Within it, Rudolf wrote concerning both the Catholic Crown and the Bohemian estates, ordering that "they shall not worry one another, but keep good friends with one another, nor shall one party vituperate the other."[14] Admittedly, this proclamation of religious freedom was intended first and foremost as a bargaining chip to ensure the estates' loyalty against the hostile Austro-Hungarian confederation led by the emperor's brother Matthias.[15] Rudolf also decreed that the "cities of Prague, Kutná Hora, and other cities shall be allowed to practice their religion *sub utraque* and in any place they like."[16] Nonetheless, in avoiding ruinous sectarian friction when faced with an invasionary threat, Rudolf believed that a congenial relationship between Christian denominations would mirror God's intended balance of the cosmos, thus imputing his divine kingship with a powerful pansophic precedent. In a similar vein, the alchemist Giordano Bruno's (1548-1600) *160 Articles against the Mathematicians* (1588) was dedicated to the Holy Roman Emperor and rehearsed the ideal philosophy of a single, universal religion rooted in occult tradition.[17] It was through reciprocal dialogue between all of nature's

[11] Evans, *Rudolf II and His World*, 17-18.
[12] Ivo Purš, "Rudolf II's Patronage of Alchemy and the Natural Sciences," in *Alchemy and Rudolf II: Exploring the Secrets of Nature in Central Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries,* eds. Ivo Purš and Vladímir Karpenko (Prague: Artefactum, 2016), 147.
[13] Evans, *Rudolf II and His World*, 42.
[14] Rudolf II, "Letter of Majesty 1609," in *The Czech Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, eds. Jan Bažant, Nina Bazantová and Frances Starn (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 81.
[15] Palmitessa, "The Prague Uprising of 1611," 302.
[16] Palmitessa, "The Prague Uprising of 1611," 302.
[17] Giordano Bruno, "One Hundred and Sixty Articles Against Contemporary Mathematicians and Philosophers (Prague, 1588)," in *Alchemy and Rudolf II: Exploring the Secrets of Nature in Central Europe*

assorted elements, whether inanimate or living, confessional or cultural, that natural philosophers believed that God's true power would be made apparent.

As R.J.W. Evans argues, for Rudolf and his alchemists, "the Creator was approached through the harmony of His Universe."[18] The "leitmotif" of this esoteric field was the transformation of the "lower" to the "higher": by deepening his understanding of different creeds, he hoped to unlock a more holistic celestial power. Resultantly, since Prague was the center of Rudolf's world, he sought to attract as many alchemical and magical experts as possible to aid him in his intellectual quest. Whilst his imperial predecessor Charles IV (r. 1355-1378) had been an assiduous collector of relics that emphasized his personal piety, Rudolf instead hoped to collect a variety of different perspectives upon esoteric manuscripts and occult practices, and thus display instead the universality of his knowledge. Jan Jesenský (1566-1621) was one such scholar who embodied this accretive approach to different and opposing ideas, an approach that was common among the imperial court's intelligentsia. Jesenský himself reprocessed and cannibalized various aspects of oriental wisdom, combining these notions with classical Platonism and Christian theology. It is therefore no surprise that Jesenský gravitated towards Rudolf's court and then, in contrast, fervently opposed the hostile Catholicism of his brothers Matthias and Archduke Maximilian of Austria later. [19]

Not only was alchemy a "language" that supported a more clement attitude towards different Christian denominations within the Habsburg court, but it was itself a practice that facilitated the close collaboration of these different sects. The English alchemist John Dee and his assistant Edward Kelly were both nominally Protestant, yet due to their renowned expertise in alchemical practice, they were first accepted by Polish lord Albrecht Łaski, before entering Prague in the mid-1580s to appear in front of the emperor. Dee had in fact dedicated his *Monas Hieroglyphica* (1564) to Rudolf's father Maximilian II, which included a combined astral and alchemical symbolism that supposedly precipitated "universal spiritual transformation."[20] Whilst Hugh Trevor-Roper claims that it was in "the more tolerant, Protestant courts under learned, eccentric princes where these views throve," the example of Dee and Kelly's progress through the Bohemian lands exhibits how they were equally accepted by the Catholic nobility.

In fact, what unified various Bohemian rulers, even those of small duchies, was the same desire as Rudolf to express the universality of their sovereignty. To do so, they had to engage with those alchemists who could reveal the hidden forces of the microcosm, those disguised natural "semiophores" that would then engender a more complete individual understanding.[21] To take one example, the powerful Vilém Rožmberk hoped to attract various alchemical practitioners to his court and tap into their mystical mastery regardless of their reputations. Rožmberk, the Burgrave of Bohemia, employed

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in the 16th and 17th centuries, eds. Ivo Purš and Vladímir Karpenko (Prague: Artefactum, 2016), 169; Evans, *Rudolf II and His World*, 230.

[18] Evans, *Rudolf II and His World*, 247.

[19] György E. Szónyi, "Scientific and Magical Humanism at the Court of Rudolf II," in *Rudolf II and Prague: The Court and the City,* ed. Eliška Fučíková (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 224.

[20] Evans, *Rudolf II and His World*, 221.

[21] Alexander Marr, "Introduction," in *Curiosity and Wonder from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, eds. R.J.W. Evans and William Marr (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 9.

approximately fifty alchemists to work in his numerous laboratories dispersed across his lands.[22] Just as he welcomed Edward Kelly following the Englishman's departure from Prague, his brother Petr Vok entertained Oswald Croll (c.1563-1609), another of Rudolf's former physicians as well as an alchemist.

Evidently, the wide-ranging obsession with alchemy and natural philosophy provided another important link between Prague and those provincial courts that often differed in their religious and political outlook. A shared desire to gain a stronger grasp of the world's microcosmic realities, and thus a path to greater personal power, drew these actors towards Prague's palace complex. Alchemical interest, whether real or feigned, provided an exclusive opportunity to communicate with, and relate to, a more reclusive emperor. The Prague residences of the Lobkovic and Rožmberk families were situated adjacent to the imperial *Kunstkammer* in the Hradčany castle district perched high on the west bank of the Moldau; these nobles hoped to access the emperor during his most contemplative and relaxed state. Alchemy was thus also utilized by the Habsburg court to arouse the interest of several Bohemian power-brokers, such as the Rožmberks, and to keep them in constant communication, and favor, with the metropole.

This intellectual drive to unveil the hidden mysteries of nature, and the belief that alchemical secrets were stored within ancient and occult texts, also brought Christian, natural philosophers into closer contact with Central Europe's Ashkenazi Jewish community. Running in parallel to the Hermetic strivings of the late sixteenth century was a popularizing of the Kabbalah, a strand of Jewish mysticism founded on a body of mystical writings.[23] Heinrich Khunrath, an influential German theosopher of the period and resident physician of the emperor, produced the *Sigillum Dei* engraving in 1595.[24] This contained the Hebrew text of the Ten Commandments, along with the twenty two letters of the Hebrew alphabet from which the Torah is composed.[25] Within this work alone, there was a definite interest in the combination of differing strands of information, regardless of their provenance and religious context. Crucially, the alchemists and natural philosophers present within this scholarly environment all shared an "irenic impulse" that hoped to access a greater level of complete knowledge via the collaboration of different sects and confessions.[26]

Rudolf II invited many Jews to pursue the metallurgic arts under his patronage, granting Josef Zoref the privilege of working gold at the imperial castle with the option of employing Christian journeyman as the need arose.[27] The Mantuan Jew Alberto Colorni was invited to Prague in 1590, and provided an imperial stipend to work on improving the production of saltpeter for the imperial powder works. Here, again, the conciliatory atmosphere engendered by alchemical and scientific engagement is manifest. For the

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[22] Ivo Purš and Vladímir Karpenko, "Alchemy at the Aristocratic Courts of the Lands of the Bohemian Crown," in *Alchemy and Rudolf II: Exploring the Secrets of Nature in Central Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries,* eds. Ivo Purš and Vladímir Karpenko (Prague: Artefactum, 2016), 59.
[23] Evans, *Rudolf and His World*, 236.
[24] Christopher Partridge, *The Occult World* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2016), 547.
[25] Peter Forshaw, "Curious knowledge and wonder-working wisdom in the occult works of Heinrich Khunrath," in *Curiosity and Wonder from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, eds. R.J.W. Evans and William Marr (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 122.
[26] Noah J. Efron, "'Our forefathers did not tell us': Jews and natural philosophy in Rudolfine Prague," *Endeavour* 26, no. 1 (2002): 15.
[27] Efron, "Our forefathers did not tell us," 16.

early modern Jew who potentially faced occupational discrimination and communal violence throughout much of Central Europe, the opportunity to work directly under the emperor, and to employ Gentile staff, was novel. Moreover, one of the most noted examples of Christian and Jewish interaction occurred between the emperor himself and Judah Loew ben Bezalel (1525-1609), the Maharal of Prague.[28] In 1592, the rabbi was personally summoned to the royal court to discuss several "mysteries" with Rudolf though the details of this "long and secretive conversation" went unrecorded.[29]

Whilst alchemy and other occult studies were heavily patronized by the emperor, he did not have a monopoly on its usage. The sixteenth century saw the creation of an ebullient market for natural philosophy, which although catalyzed by the vernacular printing and elite interest within Bohemia, spread far beyond its boundaries. Both Dóra Bobory and Jennifer Rampling note that alchemical practitioners from "the far ends of the continent" exchanged scientific information through "epistolary correspondence, recipes, and books traded by commercial networks."[30] Those wandering scholars naturally disseminated a wide variety of ideas and methods, all in the hope of currying favour with their next courtly audience.[31] The ability to impress and captivate local patrons not only provided a "passport to the emperor" but also secured a valuable safety net if one was to encounter financial difficulty.[32]

For example, following a failed experiment in front of the Rudolf II, John Dee was offered a residence at the court of his previous employer, the Polish noble Albrecht Łaski in 1584. Similarly, the opportunistic Polish alchemist, Michael Sendivogius, exploited previous contacts to enter the circle of Ludvík Korálek of Tešín, another magnate fascinated by the occult arts. Following the same experiment he had performed for the emperor, in which he transmuted several nails into "solid silver," Sendivogius was able to earn a substantial sum from the lord.[33] Evidently, alchemists exploited this specialized interest of wealthy local lords and benefitted handsomely from their fierce competition to attract their services. Besides, even if transmutations were unsuccessful or certain mysteries remained unrevealed, the production of detailed manuscripts that were dedicated to local princes were frequently deployed as forms of esoteric tribute. In this way, would-be patrons received mystical objects that could be displayed to enhance their personal *fama*. Regardless of the item's efficacy or originality, it "redounded the credit of the ruler and his territory."[34]

It was not just its spiritually edifying and intellectually empowering effects which made alchemy a desired pursuit of the Habsburg court; its practical utility with regards to

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[28] Noah J. Efron, "Maharal of Prague," in *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, ed. Paul F. Grendler (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1999), 24.
[29] Evans, *Rudolf II and His World*, 241.
[30] Dóra Bobory and Jennifer Rampling, "Introduction. Alchemy on the Fringes: Communication and Practice at the Peripheries of Early Modern Europe," *Early Science and Medicine* 17, no. 5 (2012): 469, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41723213.
[31] Bobory and Rampling, "Introduction," 469.
[32] M. C. Jacobs, *Strangers Nowhere in the World: The Rise of Cosmopolitanism in Early Modern Europe*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 65.
[33] Rafał T. Prinke and Mike A. Zuber, "Alchemical Patronage and the Making of an Adept: Letters of Michael Sendivogius to Emperor Rudolf II and His Chamberlain Hans Popp," *Ambix* 65, no. 4 (2018): 334, https://doi.org/10.1080/00026980.2018.1512776.
[34] Smith, "Alchemy as a Language of Mediation," 4.

metallurgy was also an important factor. Tara Nummedal focuses on how fiscal issues were at the forefront of the empire's agenda during the close of the sixteenth century and how individual princes consulted alchemists to solve the mining crises that afflicted their territories.[35] Inauspiciously, the steady decline in productivity of Central European mines coincided with the explosive introduction of New World silver. By the early 1600s, it has been estimated that around two million silver pesos annually flooded into the European market via the Potosí-Japan trade cycle, causing the price of continental silver to plummet.[36] In order to compete with this influx of specie, princes and nobles approached alchemists and other technological engineers to improve the yield and value of these metallic ores. For example, in 1574, Lazarus Ecker (1528-1594) produced a treatise on smelting and assaying methods for Vilém Rožmberk, who operated laboratories in the rich mining territory of Silesia.[37]

Some alchemists went further than offering mineralogical advice, however, and claimed that they could transmute worthless compounds into refined precious material with the legendary philosophers' stone capable of such miraculous transformations. One such practitioner was Georg Honauer, who assured Friedrich I of Württemberg that he could produce "100 pounds of gold per week" from the duke's iron-rich territory of Mömpelgard.[38] In conjunction with the empire's reduced mining output, the numerous Habsburg-Ottoman conflicts that intermittently broke out throughout the early modern period significantly eroded any remaining resources. It was this urgent need for funding, precipitated by further Ottoman expansion into Royal Hungary and the near incessant pressure of the Balkan Military Frontier (*Militärgrenze*), that alchemy was seen as a fiscal panacea.[39] Even when alchemical processes failed to produce large quantities of gold (which was often the case), the adept's specialized metallurgical knowledge was still thought indispensable by governments hoping to increase their income.[40] The minting of currency itself was a useful vehicle for the sovereign to spread his royal image and the quality of his coin reflected his personal preeminence.

On a more personal level than the empire's financial woes and internal religious friction, alchemy was inherently acknowledged as being a physically restorative practice. In this sense, many ailing members of Rudolf II's court engaged with alchemy in order to combat ill-health. This medicinal strand of alchemy emerged from Paracelsian iatrochemistry, whose foremost practitioner was the German physician Oswald Croll.[41] Croll visited several princely courts in the southern German lands during the 1580s before ending up at Prague's Hradčany in 1597. During his tenure under Rudolf II, he

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[35] Tara E. Nummedal, "Practical Alchemy and Commercial Exchange in the Holy Roman Empire," in *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe,* eds. Pamela Smith and Paula Findlen (Hove: Psychology Press, 2002), 210.
[36] Dennis O'Flynn and Arturo Gíraldez, "Cycles of Silver: Global Economic Unity through the Mid-Eighteenth Century," *Journal of World History* 13, no. 2 (2002): 414, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20078977.
[37] Evans, *Rudolf II and His World*, 215-216.
[38] Nummedal, "Practical Alchemy and Commercial Exchange," 211.
[39] See William O'Reilly, "Border, Buffer and Bulwark: The Historiography of the Military Frontier, 1521-1881," in *Frontiers and the Writing of History, 1500-1850*, eds. Steven G. Ellis and Raingard Eßer (Wehrhahn: Hanover, 2006), 229-244, for a good overview on the history and historiography of the *Militärgrenze*.
[40] Smith, 'Alchemy as a Language of Mediation', 4.
[41] Bruce T. Moran, *The Alchemical World of the German Court: Occult Philosophy and Chemical Medicine in the Circle of Moritz of Hessen (1572-1632)* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner Verlag, 1991), 55.

perfected complex remedies, which were recorded in his *Basilica chymica* (1609) and dedicated to the emperor.[42] As well as Croll's collection of cures, Martin Ruland the Younger, a Bavarian practitioner, issued the *Lapidis Philosophici Vera Conficiendi Ratio* (1606). This tract provided further alchemical treatments that were grafted from both classical and modern sources.[43] Within these two works, we again witness the underlying themes of harmony and coalescence associated with early modern alchemy. In both, various intellectual sources are combined to produce a powerful treatment. It was this admixture of wide-ranging ingredients that gave alchemical medicine its cultural potency. The plague, which had never completely disappeared since its arrival in the fifteenth century, added a sense of urgency and expedited the preparation of medicines and hastened the call for a universal cure.[44] The III H manuscript, stored at Prague's National Museum Library, contains several alchemical works from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, many of which mention recipes for *aqua vitae*.[45] Alisha Rankin's study of Anna of Saxony reveals how nobles who engaged in the production of such remedies became revered within aristocratic and intellectual circles, attracting their own cultish following across the continent.[46]

Although alchemy constituted an irenic exercise, both in theory and in practice, throughout the princely courts of the Holy Roman Empire, it was by definition an exclusive pursuit. Nature's secret code was not accessible to any common scholar, and alchemists believed that complete immersion within various forms of esoteric knowledge was required to acquire "universal" understanding. The physical setting of the emperor's workshops contributed to this perception. Located in the castle complex perched above the city, these workshops commanded a dramatic view over Old Town across the river and the Malá Strana district directly below.[47] It was from this vantage point that the philosophically astute could as Paracelsus once advised "make visible" the "virtue inhabiting each material thing."[48] Working above the city and its everyday hustle and bustle, the castles' alchemists were able to "read" the outward signs inscribed within nature and thus compose a more holistic view of God's creation and the secrets

[42] Paula Findlen, "Commerce, Art. and Science in the Early Modern Cabinet of Curiosities," in *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe,* eds. Pamela Smith and Paula Findlen (Hove: Pyschology Books, 2002), 214.
[43] Evans, *Rudolf II and His World*, 204.
[44] Vladimír Karpenko, "A Path to the Rudolfine World," in *Alchemy and Rudolf II: Exploring the Secrets of Nature in Central Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries,* eds. Ivo Purš and Vladímir Karpenko (Prague: Artefactum, 2016), 38.
[45] Ivo Purš and Vladimír Karpenko, "Alchemy at the Aristocratic Courts of the Lands of the Bohemian Crown," in *Alchemy and Rudolf II: Exploring the Secrets of Nature in Central Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries,* eds. Ivo Purš and Vladímir Karpenko (Prague: Artefactum, 2016), 54-56.
[46] Alisha Rankin, "Becoming an Expert Practitioner: Court Experimentalism and the Medical Skills of Anna of Saxony (1532–1585)," *Isis* 98, no. 1 (2007): 23-53, https://doi.org/10.1086/512830.
[47] Pierre Bergeron, "Description of Prague During the Time of Rudolph II (1585-1638)," in in *The Czech Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, eds. Jan Bažant, Nina Bazantová and Frances Starn (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 77. Here, Bergeron describes the Hradčany castle complex in great detail, especially its elevation, writing that the 'imperial palace… looms high above the city.'
[48] Paracelsus, *Astronomia Magna* (1537), 173, quoted in James Joseph Bono, *The World of God and the Languages of Man: Interpreting Nature in Early Modern Science and Medicine,* vol. 1, *Ficino to Descartes* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 135-136.

lying therein.[49] The site of these laboratories was itself a statement of the emperor's power and a way to display the "mystique of his majesty" to the surrounding city.[50]

Rudolf's seclusion within the fortress walls was not completely born out of mercurial melancholy but was a contrived absence befitting an individual engrossed by such esoteric pursuits.[51] We can interpret Rudolf's mysterious palace as the emperor's "front stage," the outward portrayal of his occult agenda.[52] He believed that he and his "magical" coterie had a more powerful perspective on the natural world, one that transcended mere ocular sight. Thus, the emperor hoped to keep his learned inner sanctum free from the quackery and malpractice so rife within European esotericism. Like Dora Thornton's assessment of the Renaissance Italian *studiolo*, the princely study carried connotations of "intimacy, privacy, and secrecy" far removed from Prague's burgeoning burgher community.[53]

For Rudolf II and those adepts who enjoyed his patronage, the Prague castle was a beacon of learning. Here scholars focused on uncovering the pansophic relationship between the earthly ephemera over which it was raised. This imperial residence represented a "town above a town," whose select citizens strove to reveal the divine essence of the natural world through alchemical and astrological observation.[54] Thus, its topography perfectly suited the purpose of its internal projects. It is no wonder, then, that the Hradčany captivated Franz Kafka's imagination, inspiring his 1926 novel *The Castle*. Even in the industrialised twentieth century, the castle remained "clearly defined within the glittering air," the distinct legacy of an emperor obsessed with the attainment of divine knowledge.[55]

Rudolf II's obsession with Neoplatonic order and symmetry, those same principles targeted by alchemical investigation, was reflected in the modelling of his palace gardens. Hans Puechfeldner's 1593 garden books reveal the intricate designs of the Hradčany's green plots, presenting a useful primary source with which to approach the emperor's relationship to art and nature.[56] Continuing the theme of scholarly solitude, Puechfeldner suggested in his notes that the gardens should be walled, thus forming a shielded oasis conducive to contemplation and consolation. Furthermore, the plans also

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[49] William O'Reilly, *Wolfgang Lazius, the Scientific Revolution and the Rise of the Expert Observer of Nature* (manuscript), 13-14.
[50] Robert Grudin, "Rudolf II of Prague and Cornelis Drebbel: Shakespearean Archetypes?," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (1991): 183, doi:10.2307/3817706.
[51] Peter Marshall, *The Mercurial Emperor: The Magic Circle of Rudolf II in Renaissance Prague* (London: Pimlico, 2007), 44.
[52] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1956); see also Evans, *Rudolf II and His Study*, 229, for a mentioning of this "Bohemian stage" in a continued, dramaturgical metaphor for the displaying of alchemical practice.
[53] Dora Thornton, *The Scholar in His Study: Ownership and Experience in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 132.
[54] Ivo Purš, "Rudolf II's Patronage of Alchemy and the Natural Sciences," in *Alchemy and Rudolf II: Exploring the Secrets of Nature in Central Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries,* eds. Ivo Purš and Vladímir Karpenko (Prague: Artefactum, 2016), 166.
[55] Franz Kafka, *The Castle* (Original 1926), trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir (London: Vintage Classics, 2005), 15.
[56] Erik A. De Jong, "A Garden Book Made for Emperor Rudolf II in 1593: Hans Puechfeldner's "Nützliches Khünstbüech der Gartnereij," *Studies in the History of Art* 69 (2008): 191, http://www.jstor.org/stable/42622438.

demonstrate the array of "rare trees, flowers, and herbs" that occupied these plantations; without doubt, they truly possessed a kaleidoscopic collection of *flora*.[57] This description is corroborated by Pierre Bergeron, an assistant to the French ambassador, who observed the "fruit trees," "orchards," and "figs" present within these gardens during his 1603 visit.[58] Indeed, Giuseppe Arcimboldo's portrait of Rudolf as *Vertumnus* (1591) (Figure 2) truly reflected the emperor's innate desire to unite all aspects of nature, hoping that by condensing this diversity into one microcosmic space he may achieve a fuller understanding of the temporal sphere.[59]

Figure 2: Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Vertumnus*, 1591

Paula Findlen has argued that nature was collected also for more traditional scientific purposes. A menagerie, complete with an extensive deer park and aviary, were part of

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[57] De Jong, "A Garden Book Made for Emperor Rudolf II in 1593," 194.
[58] Bergeron, "Description of Prague During the Time of Rudolph II (1585-1638)," 78.
[59] Trevor-Roper, *Princes and Artists*, 88. Michal Preusz, Kateřina Kodýdková, Petr Kočár, and Zdeněk Vaněček, "Exotic Spices in Flux: Archaeobotanical Material from Medieval and Early Modern Sites of the Czech Lands (Czech Republic)," *Interdisciplinaria Archaeologica: Natural Sciences in Archaeology* 6, no. 2 (2015): 223-236.

the royal grounds.[60] These landscape designs and animal parks were more than simply a means to observe nature. Puechfeldner created a "geometrical and architectonic garden space," which imposed order and control, physically and optically, onto nature.[61] These labyrinthine parterres were a visual representation of the emperor's power over nature (Figure 3).

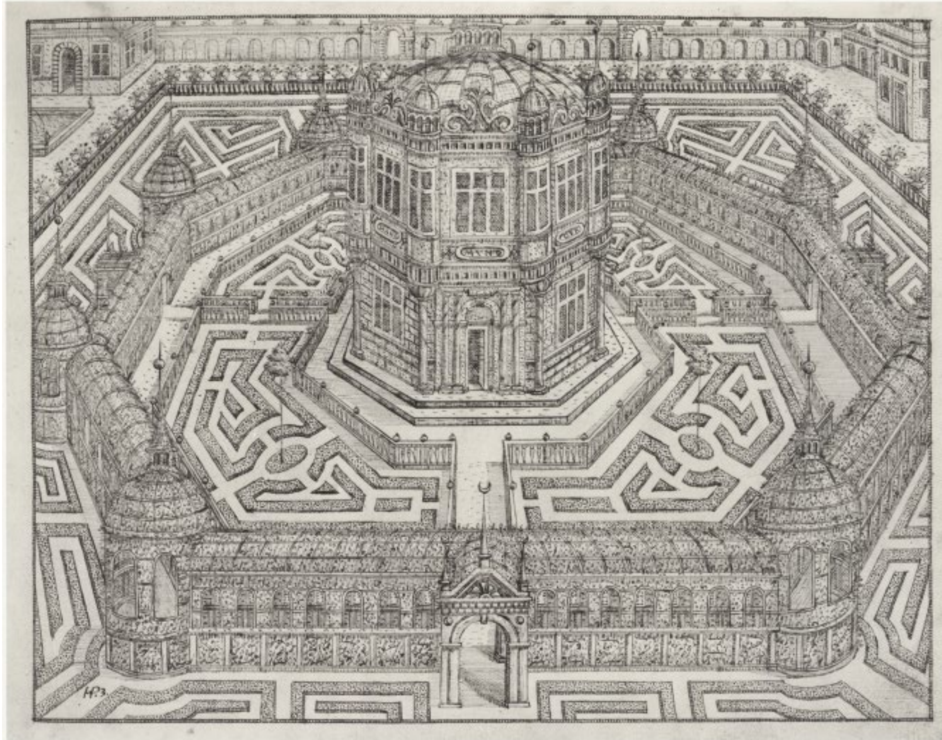

Figure 3: Folio 5 from Hans Puechfeldner *Nützliches Khünstbüech der Gartnereij*, 1593

Similar to this shaping of outdoor space to accommodate Rudolf's philosophical ambition, the interior of the imperial palace itself was restructured to house a personal museum of *naturalia* and *artificalia*.[62] This was, as both Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann and Peter Marshall propose, a "theatre of the world."[63] Moreover, the emperor hoped to appear as a "new Maecenas," imparting common benefit to his realm from his patronage of art and funding of scientific discovery.[64] On this point, it is important to look beyond the image of the *Kunstkammer* merely as an eclectic collection of objects appealing to the emperor and challenge the viewpoint that this space amounted to no more than a "melancholic solitarium" for a troubled soul.[65] Instead, one should view its "cabinets of curiosities" and art collections as an extension of the emperor's alchemical and

[60] Findlen, "Commerce, Art, and Science," 213.
[61] De Jong, "A Garden Book Made for Emperor Rudolf II in 1593," 195.
[62] Eliska Fucíková, 'The Collection of Rudolf II at Prague: Cabinet of Curiosities or Scientific Museum?," in *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe,* eds. Arthur Macgregor and Oliver R. Impey (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 65.
[63] Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, "Remarks on the Collections of Rudolf II: The Kunstkammer as a Form of Representatio," *Art Journal* 38, no. 1 (1978): 25, doi:10.2307/776251.
[64] Findlen, "Commerce, Art, and Science," 210.
[65] Frances Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 1972), 45.

intellectual interests. This was an arena of analysis in which the "material-spiritual substance" of the universe could be identified.[66]

The "collecting mania of the period was thus not idle curiosity," but an attempt to curate such diverse objects in a way that "would reflect their original disposition, their place in the chain of creation."[67] Here the work of Rudolf's artists should also be considered. In the 1590s, Rudolf had lured the acclaimed German artist Hans von Aachen from Augsburg to Prague. He brought other Mannerist artists to his court including the goldsmith Wenzel Jamnitzer.[68] The antechamber that led directly into his *Kunstkammer* was adorned with a ceiling fresco that depicted Jupiter "supervising" the seasons: this allegorical imagery reflected the emperor's fixation on the mastery of the world.[69] Jamnitzer's fountain, which stood in the middle of the room, depicted an imperial crown resting upon the anthropomorphized four elements. A closer survey of items of the imperial collection demonstrates Rudolf's universal inclinations. There were not only Turkish dictionaries and Arabic bibles held in Prague Castle but also an Ottoman sword embellished with the inscription: "Where hatred reigns, justice is blind."[70]

If the Habsburg Monarchy was indeed a "mildly centripetal agglutination of bewilderingly heterogeneous elements," then Rudolf II certainly saw alchemy as a means to find order within his own personal world.[71] Whilst sectarian strife simmered throughout his Bohemian lands and unsettled the realm's stability, the emperor sought to focus on various strands of natural philosophy that he hoped would increase his control. However, Rudolf's obsession with alchemy was not one merely focused on ideals but one that also considered the practical benefits and material wealth that could accompany successful investigations. Like Johannes Kepler's heliocentric system, the emperor made the imperial court the center of Europe's alchemical constellation. Alchemy was indeed a language of mediation within the Habsburg court at Prague, but it simultaneously was a language of power, order, and wealth for those adepts who knew how to manipulate their social standing, and the environment in which they operated.

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[66] Vladmír Karpenko, "A Path to the Rudolfine World," in *Alchemy and Rudolf II: Exploring the Secrets of Nature in Central Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries,* eds. Ivo Purš and Vladímir Karpenko (Prague: Artefactum, 2016), 29.
[67] Evans, *Rudolf II and His World*, 247.
[68] Trevor-Roper, *Princes and Artists*, 105; DaCosta Kaufmann, "Remarks on the Collections of Rudolf II," 26.
[69] Findlen, "Commerce, Art, and Science," 210.
[70] Findlen, "Commerce, Art, and Science," 211.
[71] Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy 1550-1700* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 447.