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A History of Prague

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Introduction

Prague, often called the "Golden City of a Hundred Spires," stands as a testament to the enduring power of culture, resilience, and the steady flow of history through the heart of Europe. Nestled along the banks of the Vltava River, this capital of the Czech Republic has grown from its legendary foundations into a vibrant and sophisticated metropolis, cherished for its stunning architecture, artistic achievements, and transformative political history. Over the course of more than a thousand years, Prague has inspired monarchs, artists, revolutionaries, and ordinary people alike with its unique blend of myth, beauty, and resilience.

From its earliest days, the story of Prague has been shaped by both legend and fact. The city's supposed prophetic founding by Libuše, the wise princess of Bohemian myth, set the stage for its destiny as a crossroads and center of power. Archaeological discoveries in the Vltava valley reveal millennia of continuous settlement, as Celts, Germanic tribes, Slavs, and eventually medieval dynasties each left their indelible mark upon the land. The early emergence of Prague Castle and Vyšehrad as fortified strongholds established the city as a symbol of authority and the nucleus from which greater Prague would expand.

Medieval Prague blossomed under the influence of both visionary rulers and spiritual seekers. Charles IV, the most illustrious of Bohemian kings, transformed Prague into an imperial capital—a stage upon which scholars, artists, merchants, and theologians mingled in a flourish of learning, commerce, and culture. It was here that reformers like Jan Hus ignited a revolution of faith and conscience, initiating centuries of religious strife that would reverberate across Europe. Time and again, the city would find itself at the epicenter of conflict and creativity, a place where new ideas transcended old boundaries, and where turmoil gave rise to renewal.

The city's fortunes rose and fell alongside vast empires and shifting allegiances. As seat of Habsburg monarchs and later the heartbeat of the Czech national revival, Prague navigated the complexities of renaissance, revolution, war, and peace. Each era left its architectural imprint—from the Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals to majestic Baroque palaces and the radical innovations of Art Nouveau and Cubism. Its Jewish Quarter, surviving centuries of persecution and destruction, stands as a testament to the city's cosmopolitan character and its struggle with intolerance and tragedy.

Twentieth-century Prague witnessed the traumas of world war, occupation, and totalitarianism, followed by a remarkable renaissance of society and spirit. The Velvet Revolution of 1989 restored democracy with a remarkable display of peaceful

resilience, cementing Prague's reputation as both a symbol of hope and a guardian of historical memory. In the decades that followed, the city found new life as a European capital, embracing an era of openness, prosperity, and cultural resurgence.

Today, Prague is cherished by millions—residents and visitors alike—for its enchanting skyline, rich cultural life, and irrepressible spirit. To walk its winding streets is to trace the path of empires and rebels, poets and saints, all mingling in a city that both endures and continually reinvents itself. This book invites readers on a journey through Prague's story, from the echo of ancient legends to the lively rhythm of the present day, revealing how this city has shaped, and been shaped by, the currents of European history.

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CHAPTER ONE: Myth and Legend: The Founding of Prague

Every great city carries within its stones and shadows the whispers of its origins, stories that explain not just *how* it began, but *why* it was destined for greatness. For Prague, the narrative reaches back beyond written records, into the realm of legend, a tapestry woven with prophecy, destiny, and the foundational figures of the Czech nation. This is the realm of Princess Libuše and the humble ploughman Přemysl, a tale that has echoed through the Vltava valley for centuries, granting Prague a birthright steeped in magic and purpose.

Long before the solid stone of the castle or the sturdy arches of the bridge defined the skyline, the land around the Vltava River was home to the Slavic tribes, living in harmony with the rhythms of nature. They settled in scattered clearings, built simple wooden dwellings, and looked to their leaders for guidance and protection. Among these early figures, history blurs into myth, but the tales speak of a chieftain named Čech, who led his people to this promised land, ascending Říp Mountain to survey their future home. After Čech came his descendant, Krok, a wise ruler whose legacy would be carried on by his remarkable daughters.

Krok had three daughters, each renowned for a different gift. Kazi was skilled in the healing arts, tending to the sick and injured with her knowledge of herbs and ancient remedies. Teta was a priestess, guarding the old ways and the spiritual connection of the people to the land and the cosmos. But it was Libuše, the youngest, who possessed a singular gift – the power of prophecy and an innate wisdom that surpassed even her father's. When Krok eventually passed from the world, it was Libuše whom the people looked to for leadership, recognizing the extraordinary vision she held for their future.

Libuše ruled from her seat, traditionally located at either Vyšehrad, the imposing rock promontory overlooking the Vltava, or at a place called Libušín, according to other tellings. The exact location matters less than the symbolism: a high place, connected to the earth, offering a commanding view of the river valley, a place where the veil between the mundane and the mystical was thin. It was from such a vantage point, surrounded by her people and feeling the weight of their destiny, that Libuše fell into a prophetic trance, her voice ringing out with a vision of the future.

Her words described a city whose glory would be immense, reaching up to the very stars. She spoke of a place uniquely situated, favored by fortune, a centre of power and culture. The people listened intently, eager to hear where this promised city would

rise. Libuše instructed them to follow the Vltava, to seek out a man who, guided by an inner drive, was in the process of building. They would find him in the wilderness, laboring diligently, cutting a *prah* – a threshold – for his new dwelling.

This threshold was the key, the specific signifier in Libuše's vision. A threshold, that liminal space between inside and outside, between the known world of the home and the untamed wild, between past and future. It is a place of transition, of beginning. And it was at this point of beginning, marked by this simple, yet profound, act of creation, that the great city foretold would be built. Libuše declared that the castle and the surrounding settlement should be called "Praha," derived from this very word, *prah*.

But Libuše's prophecy extended beyond the mere location and name of the city. She also foresaw the need for a strong ruler, a partner to share the burden of leading the emerging nation and founding this magnificent city. Though a wise and respected judge, the people sometimes found it difficult to accept the rule of a woman alone, preferring a male leader in their traditional societal structure. Libuše, understanding this need and guided by her vision, spoke of the man she would marry.

He was not a prince or a nobleman, but a simple farmer working the land. His name was Přemysl. He was found by emissaries sent forth according to Libuše's instructions, located precisely where she had described, in a field, guiding his oxen, his hands calloused from honest labor. He embodied the connection to the earth, the strength and resilience of the common people – qualities essential for the foundation of a lasting kingdom.

When the emissaries arrived, they found Přemysl exactly as foretold, pausing his ploughing to cut a threshold beam. He received them with simple grace, offering them food and drink from his humble stores. The legend says he struck his staff into the ground, and three shoots sprouted, one of which withered quickly, while the other two flourished – interpreted as a sign that only two of his three sons would have lasting descendants, a subtle hint of the complex lineage to come.

Summoned by Libuše, Přemysl reportedly put on his simple farmer's clothes, said goodbye to his field, and followed the emissaries to Libuše's court. He brought with him his ploughman's shoes, made of bark, a symbol of his origins which were supposedly kept by later Přemyslid rulers to remind them of the dynasty's humble beginnings. His arrival, guided by prophecy, legitimized his claim to leadership and his union with the wise princess.

Their marriage united the spiritual authority and visionary leadership of Libuše with the grounded strength and connection to the land embodied by Přemysl. Together, they established the Přemyslid dynasty, the lineage that would rule Bohemia for centuries, guiding the nascent state through its formative years. The site identified by

Libuše's prophecy, where the threshold was being cut, was where the first fortifications, the precursors to Prague Castle, would eventually rise, overlooking the Vltava, precisely as foretold.

The legend of Libuše and Přemysl is more than just a charming fairy tale; it is a foundational myth that served crucial purposes for the early Bohemian state and the city of Prague. It provided a divine or semi-divine justification for the rule of the Přemyslid dynasty, grounding their authority not just in conquest or strength, but in prophecy and destiny. It linked the origin of their power directly to the land and the people, through the figure of the farmer-king.

Furthermore, the myth imbued the very location of Prague with a sense of predestination and inherent greatness. The city wasn't founded by accident or mere strategic convenience, but as the fulfillment of a wise seer's vision. This narrative of a prophesied, glorious future became a core part of Prague's identity, a source of pride and aspiration throughout its history, invoked in times of prosperity and resilience in times of hardship.

The symbolism of the threshold itself is rich. It represents the beginning of a new era, the creation of a structured human space within the natural world, and the link between the past (Přemysl's simple life) and the future (the grand city). It suggests that the city's strength comes not just from its rulers, but from the fundamental act of building and settling, connected to the very foundation of human dwelling.

While historians and archaeologists look for factual evidence of early settlements, fortifications, and the slow coalescence of communities on the banks of the Vltava, the myth provides the *cultural* truth of Prague's beginning. It speaks to the values the early Czech people cherished: wisdom and foresight (Libuše), hard work and connection to the earth (Přemysl), and a belief in a grand future ordained by forces greater than themselves.

The legend continues to resonate today. Statues and artistic depictions of Libuše and Přemysl can be found throughout the Czech Republic, and their story is taught to schoolchildren. It provides a powerful, enduring link to the deep past, a reminder that before Prague was a stone metropolis, a political capital, or a bustling economic hub, it was a prophecy, a vision whispered on the wind over the Vltava valley, waiting for its destiny to unfold.

The specific details of the legend, passed down orally for generations before being recorded by chroniclers like Cosmas of Prague in the 12th century, might vary slightly, but the core elements remain constant: the wise Libuše, the prophecy of a great city, the threshold, the discovery of Přemysl, and the fated union that founded both the city named Praha and the dynasty that would rule from it. It is a tale that sets the stage for the more tangible history to come, imbuing the future narrative with a sense of

purpose that begins not with bricks and mortar, but with a visionary dream.

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