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# Physical Appearance of Charles IV

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By Jan Royt (edited)

The following information on the physical appearance of Charles IV is taken from the chronicles of the Florentine annalist Mateo Villani:

*“As we can learn from those who have met the emperor, he was of middle height, rather small in the eyes of the Germans, hunched, with his neck and cheeks slightly pushed forward, with black hair, placid look, big eyes and full cheeks, black beard and bald forehead. He wore discreet attire, always closed, knee-length, with no decorations or accessories. During audiences, he would usually hold a willow twig and a small knife and carve something with it carefully, just for pleasure. People were kneeling before him, stating their claims and requests, and he would overlook them in a way that they felt he didn't pay much attention to what they said. Yet he did pay attention, was a keen listener, and answered wisely, in a few well-chosen words, accurately responding to the wishes of the audience, according to his own will, without wasting time on reflections and consultations. At the same time, he performed three actions at once, yet it didn't affect his judgment: darting view, work of hands, and careful listening and answering. It was an extraordinary feat, not something we can see on one man.”*

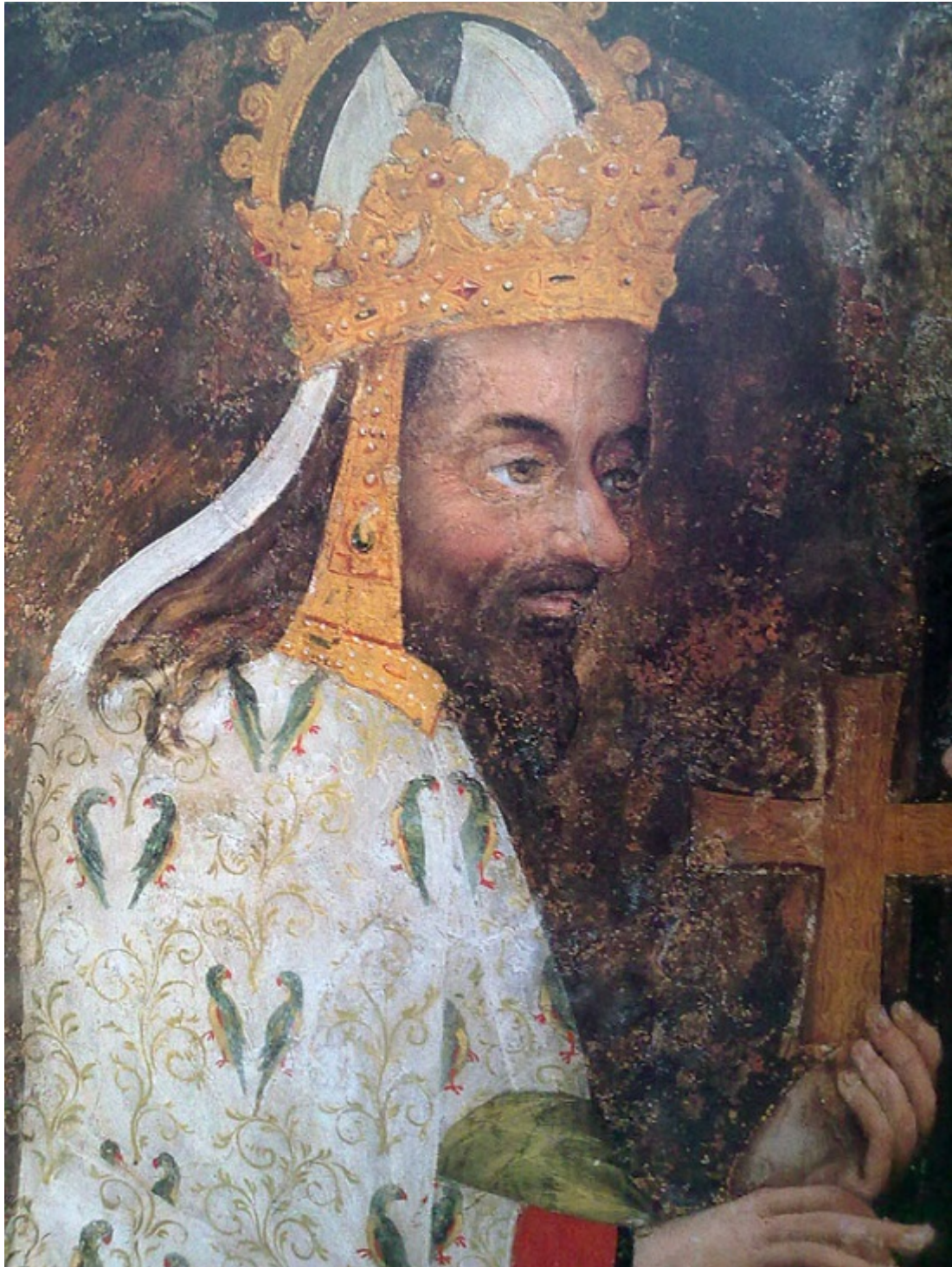


However, this historical description must be corrected based on the anthropological surveys made by Professor Emanuel Vlček before the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Charles's birth. Having studied the emperor's well-preserved skeleton, Professor Vlček assumed that Charles was a man of athletic posture, with strong bones, formed by frequent exercises and horse riding. He was 172.5 to 173.5 cm tall – his actual height was considerably distorted by bent, forward-tilted back, which was caused by the kyphosis of the thoracic spine. The state of Charles's vertebrae also indicates scoliosis (i.e. three-dimensional deviation of the spine). The deviation was over a centimeter from the axis. The curvature backwards indicates that Charles's original height was about 3-4 cm more before the spine injury. Therefore, Charles was really about 173 cm tall (above average in his days), but he looked like 169 or 170 cm.

As a young man, he was very active, never missing any opportunity to take part in a duel or a tournament. Sometimes he fought under a different name and coat of arms, such as in 1347 in městě Rothenburg ob der Tauber. He was also fond of eccentric fashion, and wooed very ostentatiously to burgher ladies during balls and dances. News of his misdemeanors reached Avignon, and Pope Clement VI was very strict with his mentee and friend: *“We heard from many people that some German noblemen, showing pure love for your honor, complain about your dress, way too short and tight, that defies the earnestness required by the imperial majesty; you also defy your dignity by taking part in fights and tournaments. We, who only want to strengthen your power out of fatherly love, were very confused about that, and we strongly suggest Your Highness to wear appropriately long and loose clothes to show your maturity, to refrain from fights and tournaments, and to show appropriate earnestness in your actions and conduct, so nothing can be observed on you that would be inappropriate and require reprehension; instead, you should fill your majesty with high morals and virtuous deeds.”*

Professor Vlček discovered numerous unhealed injuries on Charles's bones. Apparently the most serious one was the injury of a cervical spine, a result of a duel at a tournament. After a strong blunt strike with a lance to the left side of his neck, he fell off his horse in full armor, broke his jaw, and injured his cervical vertebrae. The results of the injury were apparently clearly visible even fully healed. That's why the Emperor's never depicted Charles's appearance in full; instead, they portray the sovereign in an idealized form. The most authentic is perhaps Charles's depiction on the murals in the Virgin Mary Church at Karlštejn Castle (the relics scene). Here, the sovereign is displayed in a side view, with a

strong and irregular nose, slashed at the root. The left cheek is hidden. Other pictures aren't that obvious; for example, the emperor's bust in the triforium of the St. Vitus's Cathedral, arguably the most famous one, shows no injuries at all.



In his later years, Charles suffered from gout. A heavy strike of this disease hit him during his journey to France in 1378. Pierre d'Orgemon, Chancellor of the King of France, described it as follows: *"He spent a part of the journey in the chariot, other times he was carried on stretchers between two mules, or it was porters who carried the stretchers. In the palace of the French King, he was carried in a chair, or in someone's arms on the stairs when he wanted to see the holy relics in the temple chapel. Never mind the pain, he entered Paris on horseback side by side with the French king – he was, after all, the emperor."* The development of the disease was also accelerated by the emperor's diet – from what we know, his table always brimmed with good drinks and roasted venison. Physicians kept telling him to abandon sour domestic drinks and switch to good foreign quality wines (Mosel and Rhine). His disease gives us better understanding why Charles founded Carlsbad, as the hot springs helped him ease his problems. The emperor's last injury was fractured femur collum. He had to resort to a bed as a result, developed pneumonia and died.

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