A WINTER’S TALE:
THE “WINTER KING” AND THE COURT AT PRAGUE

It is important to recognize the role of dynastic ambitions in contextualizing many of the political events of early modern Europe, and certainly the Thirty Years’ War is one of those events.\(^1\) The internal dynastic rivalry between the Bavarian and Palatine branches of the Wittelsbach dynasty had stoked confessional divisions, culminating in Frederick V of the Palatinate as head of the Protestant Union and Maximilian I as the head of the Catholic League.\(^2\) However, like many other dynastic rulers, Frederick and Maximilian were themselves both patrons and products of a notion of rulership shaped by the confessionalization of Renaissance humanism.\(^3\) In this sense, dynastic ambition could easily lead to situations similar to the “Sun King” Louis XIV, whose grandiose sense of self was not just inherent egotism, but also a product of his educational upbringing.\(^4\)

In the case of Frederick, there was also a kaleidoscope of competing confessionalized visions of rulership rooted in the late Middle Ages that became connected with him through the confessionalization of Renaissance humanism. They only increased in intensity when he accepted the Bohemian crown. Frederick was not able to satisfy the competing demands of these diverse conceptions of rulership. These included the expectations that he become the reincarnation of his brother-in-law as the leader of English Protestant chivalry,

\(^3\) See ch. 1.
alchemists’ anticipated prophet Elias, an equally eschatologically expected Protestant lion, a Calvinist Josiah, a two-eyed embodiment of a one-eyed Hussite warlord, as well as a Protestant version of the Emperor and King of Bohemia, Charles IV. All of these identities had medieval roots and contributed not only to Frederick’s ability to obtain the Bohemian crown, but also to lose it.

As the historian Norman Housley notes, an important factor in facilitating the turning of religious differences into religious wars in the early modern era has to do with their late medieval inheritance:

The European Wars of Religion did not simply develop from the accentuation of the confessional divide or even from the crystallization of the various groups into ‘faith communities’ nourishing separate and irreconcilable histories, identities, and agendas. They resulted from the fact that these communities could draw, organically and with comparatively little effort, on a range of ideas, interpretations, leadership roles, and patterns of group behaviour which had evolved seamlessly from the late Middle Ages.5

This chapter will discuss how this medieval inheritance affected Frederick V’s rule in Bohemia by examining Wittelsbach dynastic ambitions in their confessional setting, and the attempt by the Bohemian Estates, as well as others, to use religion as a source of legitimacy for Frederick and Elizabeth as a non-indigenous dynasty in Bohemia.

Frederick’s behavior in Bohemia was consistent with the concept of confessionalization because his sense of dynastic legitimacy was predicated on the notion that he was a defender of the ‘true faith,’ just as it was for his Wittelsbach cousin Maximilian I and the Emperor Ferdinand II. As discussed in chapter one, the Peace of Augsburg revived the Wittelsbach roles as defenders of the faith that their medieval ancestors had played as emperors and kings in the late Middle Ages.6 For Frederick this evolved into the ‘Palatine Myth’ which meant an inherited commitment to defend his territories against Habsburg Catholic ‘tyranny.’7 Thus, despite common goals of harnessing religion

6 See ch. 1.