A Remote Mirror

We should admit straight away that Vladislaus Henry became famous mainly as a brother of the third king of Bohemia, Přemysl Otakar I, which is after all too little to fill an entire book. But not only that. The modest collection of period accounts has been dominated for centuries by a remark of Abbot of Milevsko (Mühlhausen) Gerlach, who in his annals mentioned for 6 December 1197 that Vladislaus Henry, despite general support, left the ducal throne ‘for the sake of peace and out of brotherly love’ (*propter bonum pacis, inde propter affectum germanitatis*) to his older brother Přemysl, under the condition that they would rule simultaneously, one in Bohemia and the other in Moravia, and that the two of them would have ‘one will and one principality’ (*ille in Moravia, iste in Boemia principarentur et esset ambobus, sicut unus spiritus, ita et unus principatus*).¹

The record, already legendary now, was made during the life of both Přemyslids involved, and although it evidently captured well the arrangement of hereditary Přemyslid possessions in the early 13th century, more attention has been paid to the document from 26 July 1216, in which Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II took into account that the Czech leaders had chosen Přemysl’s son Wenceslas as the new king.² And since the gathered people were led by no one less than Vladislaus Henry, the margrave received the reputation of an understanding sibling, who always yielded in everything to the interests of the older Přemysl. This is how Vladislaus Henry was dealt with immediately by two influential historians who essentially influenced the interpretation of earlier Czech history. First, the father of Czech historiography, František Palacký, referred to the margrave with magnificent phrases when he acknowledged not only the ‘beauty of his soul’ and the perfect loyalty to his brother and ‘his lord’ but also Vladislaus’ ‘love for the land’ and common political sense;³ similar ideas were found in the work of Václav Novotný, who reached the conclusion that the margrave willingly yielded to the ‘mental superiority’ of his older brother.⁴ It is thus no wonder that the already slightly moth-eaten idea of Vladislaus'
understanding relationship to Přemysl has been firmly anchored in more recent literature, in particular on the pages of Žemlička's work.⁵

The fact that Vladislaus' share in the administration of public affairs might have had a different, much more self-confident dimension is implied by the tympanum above the entrance to the basilica of the Mariazell monastery in Styria, whose decoration reveals important chapters in the life of the Benedictine community there. The unknown master who undertook the commission shortly before 1438 selected from the monastery's past the legend of a margrave of Moravia, troubled by the gout, and his wife, who, having been advised to do so by Saint Wenceslas, sought help from the brethren in the monastery.⁶ Unfortunately, the complementary inscription does not mention who that wretched ruler was supposed to be, but the late medieval tradition connects the miraculous cure with the construction of the church around 1200, which would mean that the pious donor was precisely Vladislaus Henry.⁷

The story, unknown from anywhere else, entirely avoided medieval scriptoria. There is hardly anything certain about it—only that it was passed on around Mariazell before the middle of the 15th century⁸ and that the Benedictines commemorated their generous supporter not only by the portal but also by the statue that was made and placed in front of the façade of the church by Balthasar Moll in 1757.⁹ At that time, however, the margrave was only a feeble memory from the mythical origins of the famous pilgrimage site, which enjoyed the noble title Magna Mater Austriae. The abyss of time hence buried both the name of the first great supporter and his real relationship to Mariazell. Nevertheless, we should not reproach the local fraternity for negligence. Even if they had attempted to consult chronicles and annals, they would not have found more than variously scattered marginal notes and glosses.

It might have been of some assistance if Gerlach's annals known today had not ended in 1198¹⁰ and if the chroniclers of the 13th century had expressed a more sincere interest in Vladislaus' life. Regrettably, this did not happen. The Second Continuation of Cosmas¹¹ and the simultaneous records by Henry

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⁸ Wonisch 1947.
⁹ Wonisch 1957, 13; Fell 2003, 54–60.
¹⁰ The interpretation accepted today supposes that Gerlach made his records in 1214–1222, but his notes seem not to have gone beyond 1200. For more information, see Bláhová 1993, 35–48; Kernbach 2010, 30–45.