Archduke Ferdinand II of Tyrol (1529-1595), a younger son of Emperor Ferdinand I and uncle to Emperor Rudolf II, was like his more famous nephew an avid collector. Concomitant to his ‘Kunst- und Wunderkammer’ and collection of weapons and armour, still to be seen, in part, in its original location at Ambras Castle near Innsbruck, Ferdinand owned a major library. After service as governor of Bohemia (1547-1567) his collections were transported from Prague Castle to Ambras Castle. The majority of the books and manuscripts entered the library from 1567 onwards, when Ferdinand was ruling Tyrol and Further Austria from his official court in Innsbruck and his preferred residence Ambras Castle. Unfortunately, the library is not there anymore. The only early modern sources for its contents are an inventory made up a year after Ferdinand’s death at the behest of Emperor Rudolf II, and a long list of manuscripts taken from Ambras Castle to the Imperial Library in Vienna by Peter Lambeck, Court Librarian to Emperor Leopold I, in 1665. In all, the library at
Ambras Castle may have contained a couple of thousand printed books alongside hundreds of manuscripts. On the basis of these two sources which are complemented with modern bibliographies and data collections, many of them digitized, a reconstruction has now been produced in a catalogue comprising 1231 titles stemming from the rooms of the library proper, 186 titles from the book collection in the ‘Kunstkammer’, and 10 titles from the Court Chapel (‘Hofkapelle’).

It is safe to conclude from the original thematic subdivisions of its contents that the library must have been a general or even universal collection, made up of theology, law, sciences including medicine, mathematics, geometry, astronomy and astrology, as well as classical literature, philosophy, history, geography, architecture, and military literature. Its core consisted of his father’s books which the Archduke eventually took to Ambras Castle. In the seventies and eighties Ferdinand bought books on a grand scale and accepted numerous presents from noble collectors such as his courtier Count Wilhelm von Zimmern. The library would not only have served the practical needs and intellectual interests of the Archduke and his family, but also of the members of his court. Ferdinand had the medieval Ambras Castle modernized to meet the requirements of his household and court, while the collections and the library were housed in especially constructed new buildings nearby, most of which still exist.

The catalogue volume is set up in such a comprehensive format that it is perfectly possible to make good use of it if one does not know Czech. At the head of each entry one finds a reference to the relevant thematic subdivision, the page in the sixteenth-century inventory and the catalogue number of the entry. The entry itself, in its most complete form, consists of the—often deficient—title as given in the inventory, the author’s name, the full book title, the impressum, the language, a modern thematic classification, an explanatory comment, a reference to modern scholarship wherever appropriate, and a remark on the dedication if any, as well as information about the provenance and the binding. In case a particular copy from Ferdinand’s library has been reliably identified in a modern library, the shelf mark is given. The authors of the catalogue have taken great pains to determine whether such a book or manuscript has in fact belonged to Ferdinand’s library. Last but not least, a field number refers to indications whether the author, the title, the impressum, or the original library copy were identified.

The company volume to the catalogue holds fifteen contributions by a variety of authors. Václav Bůžek provides an introduction to the political importance of Ferdinand II of Tyrol and his notion of self-representation. Alfred Auer throws light on the origins and development of the library as well as on