

CLOCKMAKERS IN BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA IN THE GOTHIC AND RENAISSANCE ERAS

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Not only manual skill but also knowledge of astronomical reckoning was needed for the construction of clocks in the Gothic and Renaissance periods. The art of clockmaking appears to have been established in Prague by Emperor Charles IV, for the first local clockmaker can be discovered in the second half of the 14th century.

The existence of four mechanical striking-clocks in the Prague of the 14th century can be established: in the Castle, the Episcopal court, the Municipal Hall of the Old Town, and the Carolinum. But such clocks can be found in this century not only in the capital but in other parts of Bohemia as well.

In the 15th century there were a number of clockmakers in Prague at one and the same time. Old municipal books, court records and chronicles show that in the 15th century, there were at least twenty Bohemian towns which possessed striking-clocks. Since mechanical clocks were still a costly affair, they can be found only seldom in private hands.

The builder of the clock in the municipal hall of the Old Town of Prague cannot be identified with absolute certainty, but in all probability it was Nikolaus von Kaaden (c. 1400). The astronomical clock in Olmütz was constructed by an itinerant clockmaker named A. Pohl in the year 1422. It was difficult to find qualified caretakers for these mechanical clocks, the resulting lack of the necessary knowledge causing frequent breakdowns.

The first mechanical clocks divided the day into 24 hours; they were called „Bohemian“ clocks, to distinguish them from the „German“ clocks, which counted twice 12 hours. As the first hour of the „Bohemian“ day coincided with sunrise, this hour and thus all subsequent ones were constantly changing.

In the 16th century, the clocks became an object of daily use for the upper strata; from 1500 on, therefore, both builders of large clocks as well as small-clock makers were to be found in Bohemia. Strengthened by the addition of immigrants from southern Germany, the majority of clockmakers in Prague were of German nationality. This coupled with the better workmanship of the immigrated masters led to protracted conflicts within the guilds.

Despite the large number of Bohemian clockmakers, the demand could not be covered by local production alone. Relatively little data is available on clockmaking in the various country towns. It is, however, evident that the clocks built in other Bohemian towns in the 16th century did not match the standards of the Prague clocks.