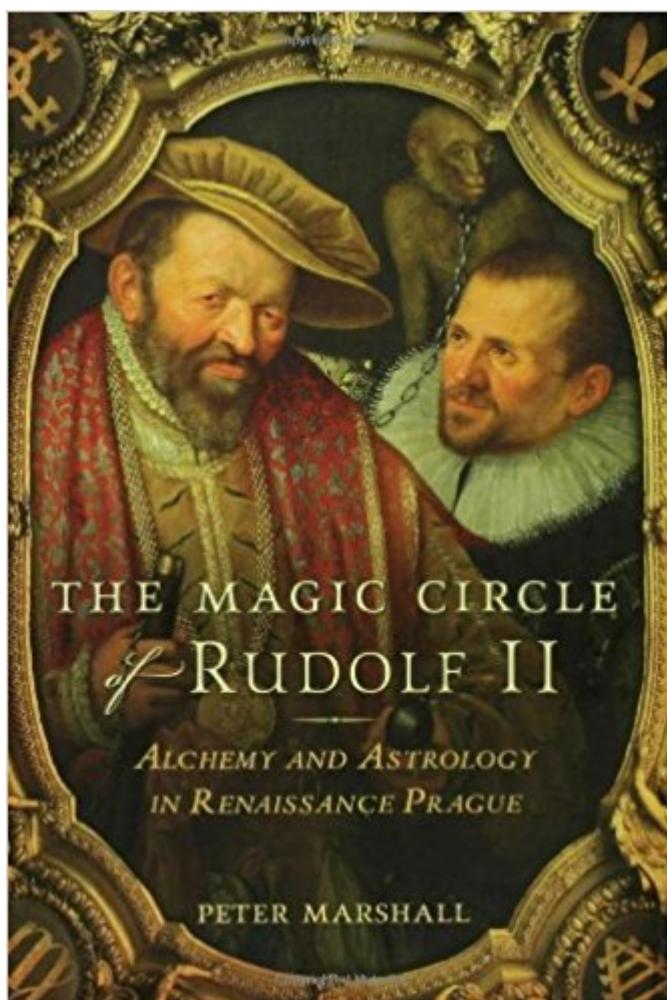


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The Magic Circle Of Rudolf II: Alchemy And Astrology In Renaissance Prague



Synopsis

Rudolf II, the Habsburg heir, Holy Roman Emperor, king of Hungary, Germany, and the Romans, is one of history's great characters, and yet he remains largely an unknown figure. His reign (1576–1612) roughly mirrored that of Queen Elizabeth I of England, and while her famous court is widely recognized as a sixteenth century Who's Who, Rudolf's collection of mathematicians, alchemists, artists, philosophers and astronomers, among them the greatest and most subversive minds of the time, was no less prestigious and perhaps even more influential. Driven to understand the deepest secrets of nature and the riddle of existence, Rudolf invited to his court an endless stream of genius, Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, German mathematician Johannes Kepler, English magus John Dee, Francis Bacon, and mannerist painter Giuseppe Archimboldo among many others. Prague became the artistic and scientific center of the known world, an island of intellectual tolerance between Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam. Combining the wonders and architectural beauty of sixteenth century Prague with the larger than-life characters of Rudolf's court, Peter Marshall provides an exciting new perspective on the pivotal moment of transition between medieval and modern, when the foundation was laid for the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment.

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Customer Reviews

When Rudolf II was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 1576, he quickly filled his castle with artistic and scientific treasures. Marshall returns repeatedly to Rudolf's attempt to create a "theatre of the world" in Prague Castle and how it transformed the city into the last great cultural center of the

Renaissance. Rudolf himself is relegated to the sidelines for much of the book's middle section, as the focus turns to the brilliant minds attracted to Prague's climate of intellectual openness. The emperor, says Marshall, had a sincere but undiscriminating thirst for knowledge, open to both "fact and fantasy

Rudolf II of the mighty Hapsburg dynasty ruled the Holy Roman Empire (1583-1612) not from the empire's traditional capital, Vienna, but from a satellite one, Prague. Rudolf was a collector at heart and reclusive by nature, but by the quirks of his personality--"directed towards the cultivation of art and the discovery of knowledge"--and by virtue of his powerful position and facility for patronage, he rendered Prague the major cultural center of learning of the Europe of his day. With considerable yet arresting detail, Marshall gives concrete evidence of the eccentricity--and cultural significance--of this odd royal figure, at the same time individualizing the peculiarities and contributions to art and science of the men Rudolf drew into his circle. The emperor's collection of art ranked as superb, but he was not content with that; his gathering of books and "rare and exotic items" also fed his need to understand the universe. As a politic ruler, he was inadequate, but the virtual recluse of Prague Castle made his mark in his own fashion. Brad Hooper
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Rudolf II (1552-1612) was the Holy Roman Emperor, ruler of most of central Europe, in the late Renaissance, contemporary with Elizabeth I in England. It would have been an unenviable position for even a strong ruler in a time when disagreements between Catholics and Protestants threatened to tear the kingdom apart and the Turks forever loomed on its eastern border, looking for a chance to invade. Rudolf was not a strong ruler; indeed, he avoided ruling at all whenever he could manage it. He had grandiose designs for bringing peace and unity to Europe and a rare degree of religious tolerance, but he took few steps to turn his dreams into reality. (Marshall makes the point, however, that, odd as it seems, Rudolf's very inaction probably helped to preserve an uneasy peace during most of his lifetime.) Politics did not interest Rudolf; instead, he wanted to know the deepest secrets of nature and art. In pursuit of this goal, he filled his court in Prague with men whose names still echo, presiding over the transition from medieval magic to modern science. They included the Italian Giordano Bruno, later burned at the stake partly for espousing Copernicus's claim that the Earth moved around the Sun; English magus John Dee; Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe; and Brahe's pupil, Johannes Kepler. Equally remarkable was Rudolf's Kunstkammer (art room), intended, Marshall

writes, to be a “theater of the world,” or encyclopedia of nature (which included objects made by humans): “Contemporary engravings show cabinets reaching halfway up the walls covered in antique bronzes, shells, metals, and amulets. Paintings are piled up as high as the ceiling. Skeletons hang from strings like strange marionettes. Keeping guard are pieces of armor from famous knights.” Marshall does a good job of portraying Rudolf, crippled all his life by his “melancholy” nature (though Marshall argues that Rudolf never descended completely into insanity, unlike some of his inbred Habsburg relatives and one of his own illegitimate sons) and obsessively seeking to enlarge his collection of natural and artistic wonders and people who, like himself, sought to reveal the mysteries behind them. (Diplomats might wait for weeks or months for an audience with the Emperor, but anyone professing a knowledge of astrology or alchemy was likely to be admitted at once.) He also gives substantial biographical sketches of the most important scientists and artists at Rudolf’s court, as well as describing the political and religious disputes that eventually overwhelmed the unfortunate monarch, leading him to be deposed in favor of his younger brother Matthias in 1611. The book is not a thrilling read, and, as some other reviewers have mentioned, it is a little repetitive in places, as though some of the chapters (especially the early ones) were originally separate essays. However, I recommend it for anyone who is interested in the history of science. As Marshall sums up in his epilogue, “Rather than being the first of the moderns, the alchemists, astrologers, and thinkers who gathered in Prague during Rudolf’s reign were in many important ways the last of the ancients. On the cusp of modernity, they were the products of the medieval and ancient world view which, ironically, is being recovered at the cutting edge of physics and ecology today.”

This is not a history book in the traditional sense. The political aspect of Rudolf’s reign is discussed only in the last few chapters. Most of the book is dedicated to what really interested Rudolf: mainly art, magic and science. The principle characteristic of this book is that each of these topics is discussed separately in one or more chapters for each subject. Since Rudolf had little interest for politics it was natural that it would come only at the end of the book. But personally I would have preferred if Rudolf’s life had been recounted chronologically with all the various subjects treated sequentially as everything unfolded in time. Rudolf had many interests and Peter Marshall did not neglect any of them. But not a single one is studied in any depth. Ultimately that is the reason why I did not find this book very satisfying. Historians, students of the occult, art specialists and historians of science will likely all be equally disappointed by this book. I certainly was.

This book is a thorough, but entertaining portrait of Prague in the Renaissance, including art, culture, alchemy, the evolution of science and astronomy. It has vivid portraits of Rudolph and the people who surrounded his court, giants of the age and times. Well researched. The style allows the reader to pause and dig deeper if need be without losing the overall themes. Great read.

How do you judge a ruler? Henry VIII and Louis XIV are judged Great, but did they manage to create a period of relative peace, religious tolerance, rich artistic production, world changing scientific breakthroughs and a safe place for heretics and those outside the mind set of the dominant culture? Rudolf II, Holy Roman Emperor, did and has been largely forgotten. You can read this book and learn more about the transition from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment than in most traditional histories. You can read it and learn indirectly about the impact of ideological warfare on societies and learning. But what I learned was the value to a society and to a culture of a ruler without concern to grow his power, without concern to assert his authority, the value of ruler whose only concern was to have beautiful things and intelligent, creative people around him. Marshall writes more about the intelligent, creative people and their prodigious contributions to a new and exciting era in European history than he does about Rudolph, but by doing so, he shows the value of the man with all his weaknesses to the history of Western civilization.

If you seek original scholarship the book disappoints. It is replete with colorful characters. John Dee. Oswald Croll. Giordano Bruno. Rudolf himself (naturally) and his many hothouse relatives. One receives a view into the Hapsburg mindset, there is more than passing reference both to reformation and counterreformation, but there is neither original scholarship, nor original thinking. This is unfortunate. At times it appears that Marshall contents himself with summarizing those historians that preceded him. Yates. Bossy. Marshall. For which, why turn to him, rather than them? There is little evidence of the author consulting original sources, there are a few infelicities of latin translation (which is surprising!) and what the reader wants - the true mindset of Rudolf's court, the reasons both historical and social that witnessed this sudden flowering of alchemical activity, is completely lacking. What drove those in power to spend their gold thusly? How had the economics of Europe changed over the decades precedent that would so permit this? Instead, far too often we get Sunday profiles of the astrologers who captivated Rudolf, an overly detailed picture of his castle, and other pastiches that leave at least this reader wondering why read this, rather than Time magazine.

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