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Budweiser Beer in the History of the Czech Lands and the United States

Beer enjoys an exceptional status in the Czech lands. It is not only a commodity of great economic importance, but above all a product which is often associated with the Czech Republic—both nationally and internationally.

My project will, through its focus on this central commodity, explore the ways in which historical developments in the fields of technology, culture or politics have influenced material culture and how they in turn have been shaped by the sphere of production and consumption. The history of Czech breweries will be used as a mirror in which political developments, technological innovations, and social conflicts are reflected. At the same time it will be argued that these businesses themselves are historical actors who have actively influenced economic and technological developments as well as shaped cultural perceptions and values.

This dual role of the breweries can be clearly observed in the field of environmental history. Breweries are businesses which have, on the one hand, been heavily dependent on their natural settings throughout history, but on the other hand have shaped their environment actively through land use and agricultural policy. Apart from that, their policy of presenting their products as natural and quintessentially local (while in fact they are manufactured through a highly industrialized process from resources often transported over long distances), offers an opportunity to explore the questions of human perception of the relationship between nature and technological development and between tradition and modernity over time.

This project will use two breweries still in existence today, as case studies on which the complex merging of their history and the history of the Czech lands can be demonstrated: the Bürgerliches Brauhaus, founded in 1795, and the Český akciový pivovar which was founded in 1895, both in the town of Budweis in Southern Bohemia. Both breweries had great economic importance, were subjected to the technological innovation of the 19th century, were instrumentalised by the nationalist movements at the end of the 19th century, and played a major role in the formation of their local environment.

The thesis that beer and breweries, as parts of material culture, can by no means be placed outside history, but rather are influenced by complex interactions of cultural, social, economic, and environmental factors, will be illustrated by a comparison with the history of the American brewery Anheuser-Busch, whose co-founder Adolphus Busch sought to brew an equivalent to Budweiser beer. The goal of probing the history of the Czech breweries simultaneously with an American example is to explore connections between material culture and historical developments.