
New Town of Prague: Churches Founded by Charles IV

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On Saturday 14th May 2016 it was exactly 700 years since the birth of Charles IV, the Bohemian king and Roman emperor, who founded Charles University in Prague on 7th April 1348. In the spring of the same year, Charles IV also published the foundation charter (8th March 1348) and laid the first stone of the walls of the new city of Prague (26th March 1348). This new settlement, which until today is known as the New Town of Prague, was established alongside Vltava River's right bank between Vyšehrad and the Old Town of Prague and further alongside the city wall of the Old Town of Prague where the Old Town occupied the river bank. The locations closer to the walls of the Old Town had already been inhabited, and other locations by the newly laid settlement previously had only sparse populations. After the foundation of the New Town these were partly used as meadows and vineyards.

The New Town of Prague was planned to inhabit approximately 50,000 people who were supposed to live in around 5,000 houses at the area of about 250 hectares (620 acres); this area was more than double the size of the Old Town. The richest houses were supposed to be built in the prominent positions along the squares of the new settlement (in particular the two largest squares, known today as Wenceslas Square/Václavské náměstí and Charles Square/Karlovo náměstí; in the past they were called Horse Market and Cattle Market respectively). In just two years the whole area was surrounded by city walls 3.5 km long, which were 6-10 meters high, 3-5 meters wide and had 21 towers and 4 gates. Unlike the Old Town, no wall was erected along the Vltava River, since free access to the river had to be ensured. Most of the walls were demolished in late 19th century, but remains can be found in the valley between Karlov and Vyšehrad. Interestingly enough, the New Town was not entirely finished until the 19th century – Charles IV's ideas and concepts had been extremely ambitious!

In the Middle Ages church and monastery foundations were necessary parts of each new settlement. This was also the case with the New Town of Prague. Charles IV founded several churches and monasteries in the area, the consecrations of which followed his aspirations and general political concept. The largest of the new churches was supposed to be the church of Our Lady of the Snows, part of the adjoined monastery which was the first establishment of the Carmelite monks in Bohemia. The church had never been finished and it is now known by its completed presbytery only. By its consecration, the church was connected to Rome's most ancient Marian basilica, Santa Maria Maggiore. The monks were donated wood from the podium on which king Charles' coronation banquet took place in 1347 for the construction of the church.

While the church of Our Lady of the Snows was reminiscent of Rome, the ideal centre of the Holy Roman Empire, the octagonal church of the Assumption of Our Lady and St. Charles the Great (Charlemagne) in Karlov, just next to today's Nusle Bridge, was intended to reflect Charles's coronation as King of the Romans in Aachen (today's Western Germany) in July 1349. Prague is one of the few places alongside Aachen and Frankfurt am Main which consider Charlemagne a saint.

Another important church was founded by Charles IV in Vyšehrad, the Basilica of St. Peter and St. Paul. It was built in a place of an older, Romanesque style church. Based on Charles's Coronation Order, each new king of Bohemia was supposed to spend his last night before the coronation in St. Vitus Cathedral at Prague Castle in Vyšehrad, where, based on legends, the first Bohemian dukes resided and which also was a seat of an ancient collegiate chapter. The church was rebuilt in Baroque era and once again in 1885-1905 in neo-Gothic style.

The Emmaus Monastery located close to today's Charles Square served to underline the heirloom of Great Moravia, the early medieval state which had preceded the Kingdom of Bohemia and existed until 906. The Benedictine monks in Emmaus were of Slavic rite which had first been introduced in Great Moravia and was later adopted in Balkan countries. The cloister of the monastery was adorned with 85 Gothic wall paintings with parallels from the Old and New Testament in 1360s, many of which have luckily survived until today.

Charles IV also founded another two new parish churches in the New Town of Prague. One was consecrated to St. Stephen, one of the first Christian martyrs who was greatly admired by Charles IV. The other is known as St. Henry and Cunigunde Church; the two saints were emperor and empress of the Holy Roman Empire short after the year 1000.

Another church Charles IV founded in the area of the New Town of Prague was dedicated to St. Catherine of Alexandria, the king's and emperor's favourite saint. Charles IV believed St. Catherine ensured his victory in the battle below the castle San Felice in today's Italy in 1332. The church was originally a part of a convent of Augustinian Hermitesses and

nowadays is hidden in the park surrounding the Neurological and Psychiatric Clinics of the First Faculty of Medicine of CU. It had served the Orthodox Church for several years now but it had previously been used as a museum depository. While the Church of St. Catherine had been rebuilt in the Baroque time and the last reminder of its medieval origins is now its tower, the nearby St. Apollinaris Church, once a seat of the collegiate chapter of St. Apollinaris, has preserved much of its medieval spirit until today thanks to the well maintained medieval frescos rediscovered in the late 19th century. The church's design reflects of the city of Ravenna, which had once been seat of the Roman Emperors. St. Apollinaris was the first bishop in Ravenna. The main church in Ravenna, the Basilica of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, was consecrated to him.

The last of Charles's preserved church foundations in the area of the New Town of Prague is the church of the Annunciation of Our Lady on the Lawn, known also as Our Lady in Slupy (Slupy is the name of the area, which might have originated from the single column, "sloup" in Czech, to which the church was vaulted). The church was part of the first Servite monastery in Bohemia. The Servites, also called Servants of Mary, were tasked with spreading out the honour of Mary, the Mother of God. Similarly to St. Catherine's, this church is also used today by the Orthodox Church; the rest of the aforementioned churches belong to the Catholic Church.

During the weekend 14th-15th May 2016, these churches were all open to the public by the occasion of the 700th anniversary of birth of their founder, Charles IV, in cooperation with Charles University in Prague, the Archbishopric of Prague and the Town Hall of Prague 2. On each hour (excluding time for religious services) a guided tour was offered to pre-registered visitors, or even (if there were free places) interested passers-by, by the students of the History of Christian Art at the Catholic Theological Faculty of Charles University in Prague, attracting around 20 visitors for each tour in all 9 participating churches, most of which are otherwise closed to the public except for religious services. Judging by the reactions of the visitors I was able to speak to, the event was well received and much valued. Indeed, a worthy gift for Charles IV's anniversary to both the king and emperor himself as well as the current inhabitants of his residential city Prague!

Will Chamberlain studies BA History at the University of Essex, UK, and is currently studying History in the Faculty of Arts at Charles University for an academic year. Originally from London, he enjoys travel, sport, history, and experiencing new cultures. As well as this, he enjoys writing and photography which led to his interest in journalism and blogging. He was keen to write for iForum to gain experience and improve his skills in journalism, as well as meet other aspiring writers.