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# Carolinum Open Day

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## Carolinum Open Day

This weekend the most ancient part of the oldest university in Central Europe was open to the public again for the first time in five years. The Carolinum, the central building of Charles University, has stood on the grounds since the fourteenth century. This weekend's Open Day offered the chance for the general public to tour one of the most important buildings of Czech national and cultural history. Attracted to the day were people of all ages – despite the cold weather and lengthy queue!



The tour started with an exhibition of the mace collection of the university. The maces are an important part of the university's medieval and modern history. Almost each faculty has its own mace (with the exception of the individual faculties of medicine – who all share one mace – and the Faculty of Social Sciences and Faculty of Education which also use one common mace). A sign of the importance of splendour and symbolism in the Middle Ages, the maces represent the long-held traditions of Charles University. However, the maces on display are not the medieval or Early Modern time originals. After the split of the university into Czech and German parts in 1882, duplicate maces were created in 1883 (Rector's mace; maces of Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Law and Faculty of Medicine) and 1891 (mace of the later divided Faculty of Theology) for the Czech half; the German half taking the older originals. Unfortunately, after the loss of World War Two on the German side, the most important and valuable artefacts, as well as a large part of the university archives, were seized from the German university and have since been lost somewhere in Europe.

Therefore, the oldest maces on display for the now whole university are the Czech University's 1883 versions. The rest of the maces were created in the twentieth century.



Despite their shorter history, the mace collection attracted the most crowds during the Open Day. Visitors patiently queued to look in close detail at the maces. Gold and lavish, the maces each have their own specific symbol of their faculty. The Faculty of Arts has an owl perched on a globe topped by a sun, the Faculty of Law has a set of balancing scales, crossed fasces and a sword, and the Faculties of Medicine have a snake wrapped around the staff of Aesculapius. The most Prague centric mace is the Faculty of Sciences', which has a picture of the Prague Castle on it in front of which the personification of Nature sits, leaning on a globe.



After the view of the maces on the ground floor, the tour went down into the Romanesque-Gothic basement of the Carolinum. Although not part of the 'official' exhibition on display in the archive, the architectural structure – the medieval arches, doorframes, lost staircases in the walls – gave a real sense of just how well preserved the Carolinum is. There is also a Romanesque well hidden in the basement of the Carolinum with a small collection of medieval and Early Modern time pottery drinking vases and bowls on show nearby.



The basement also displayed the hidden historical archive of Charles University. First on display were the copies of charters of the founding of the university, and important manuscripts proclaiming decrees of the King, all complete with rubber seals and mostly written in Latin by hand. One of the most noteworthy manuscripts is one from the Pope, which instead of a rubber seal uses one made from lead. Also in the Carolinum's archive are important documents from Czech national history. For example, the Nazi decree to close all Czech universities during the occupation in 1939. Later the exhibition focuses on the history of teaching at Charles University, with documents on the first women graduates and professors, medieval medical handbooks, and the signature of Albert Einstein, as the supervising professor on one student's thesis proposal. Important events of twentieth century at Charles University are also represented in the documents remembering Jan Opletal who was killed at an anti-Nazi demonstration in 1939, and Jan Palach who committed suicide by self-immolation in protest against the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1969. Then finally posters and documents from the Velvet Revolution era, including handmade posters by Charles University students protesting the Communist regime in 1989.



The tour ended with the more modern and renovated rooms of the first floor of the Carolinum. Visitors were able to view the Imperial Hall and the Patriotic Hall, two grand rooms with large paintings of biblical and academic topics. Then at last they were able to walk in the steps of the graduates of Charles University. First with a very exclusive view of the dressing room of the academics, complete with a display of the grand robes the rector, the dean, and the professors wear during important ceremonies. Then at last, a view of the Great Aula, the large ceremonial hall, in which all of Charles University's faculties' graduation ceremonies take place. Graduates swear their loyalty to the university on the maces we have seen earlier during our tour and receive their diploma in front of a tremendous tapestry of Charles IV presenting the university founding charter to Saint Wenceslas, at the front of the hall. The Open Day gave a unique opportunity to see the medieval historical roots of Charles University, something that when sitting in modern lecture rooms using new technology, can often be forgotten.