



The Charles Bridge in Prague: A Podium for Ceremony

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The Charles Bridge (A view from the Kampa Island). Foto: J. Gajdosova

The Charles Bridge and its Old Town Bridge Tower are today the most iconic sights in Prague, and this was no different during the Middle Ages. The 14th century stone bridge, built during the reign of the Emperor Charles IV, and its sixteen arches have fascinated scholars, travelers and artists throughout the centuries; while the Old Town Bridge Tower and its rich sculptural program have captured the attention of numerous art historians, who attempted to decipher the message that was communicated through the iconography here. My research attempts to do the same, as it looks at the Charles Bridge as an urban phenomenon which was not only built for practical purposes but also for ceremonial ones.



The east facade of the Old Town Bridge Tower. Foto: J. Gajdosova

This all began with the collapse of the Judith Bridge in 1342, which I argue presented itself as an opportunity for Charles IV to build a new bridge- one that would proudly display his legacy and help shape the vision for his new capital. This vision was highlighted not only by the bridge itself but also by the sculptural program of the Old Town Bridge Tower, which displayed the aging emperor next to his young son as the central focus of the east façade. The patron saints of Prague – St. Vitus in the center and Sts. Adalbert and Sigismund above – were almost certainly also complemented by a large column with a figure of St. Wenceslaus which once stood in front of the Bridge Tower façade. The sculpted corbels on the corners, the pain-

ted net vault below and the large statue of a peasant inside the attic of the tower, all add to the complexity of this iconography.

To make sense of the iconography of this sculptural program, it is important to first understand the function of medieval city bridges which was not as straightforward as we imagine today. As Marjorie Boyer pointed out in her book, *Medieval French Bridges: A History*, “at various times and places in the Middle Ages it was possible to be born on a [...] bridge, to attend scholarly lectures on a bridge, to earn one’s living and to purchase one’s supplies on the bridge, to attend services and receive sacraments there, and to spend one’s old age in a hospital for the aged.”^[1] Charles IV was surely familiar with some of the most remarkable bridges in medieval Europe and their powerful roles, such as the bridges in Paris which were overcrowded with countless homes, the Regensburg Bridge with its three decorated towers, the bridge in Pisa with its Gothic church of Santa Maria de Pontenovo, and the bridge in Avignon with its Chapel of St. Nicholas.



The net vault of the Old Town Bridge Tower.

Foto: J. Gajdosova

Nonetheless, the Charles Bridge was never covered with buildings in the way that the bridges in Paris or London were, nor did it have a chapel like the one on the bridge in Avignon. It was, however, a part of many medieval rituals as it was situated in the heart of Prague, connecting the market square with the castle/cathedral complex, and as it was the only means to cross the River Vltava until the 19th century. The ceremony that is most often connected with the Charles Bridge in scholarly research is the pre-coronation procession, which was a part of the *Ordo ad Coronandum Regem Boemorum*, written probably by Charles IV in the 14th century. In my thesis, I explore this procession as a kind of topographical genealogy, with the image of Charles IV on the Old Town Bridge Tower as its principle. This *portrait* of the emperor as well as the rest of the sculptural program on the east façade underline the kind of legacy that Charles IV wanted to leave behind- a legacy that highlights his accomplishments but still presents him in an authentic and realistic way. It is interesting to speculate whether these very realistic portraits, which Charles IV left behind, were meant not only to underline his authority but also to act in his place. On the Old Town Bridge Tower, this may have occurred during judicial events, which I argue may have been very closely connected to this stone bridge. Accordingly, it is the display of punishment that likely absorbed the quotidian function of the Charles Bridge and its imagery was likely created to participate. This diver-

sity of roles that the Charles Bridge and its Old Town Bridge Tower played in Prague stresses not only its complexity but also attempts to highlight the very unique type of structures that bridges were in the Middle Ages. Thus, this thesis hopes to redefine not only the role of the Charles Bridge, which was one of the largest projects undertaken by Charles IV, but of medieval city bridges in Europe, and underline their roles as multifunctional buildings in the heart of a medieval city.

The first publication connected to this topic: [J. Gajdošová, Imperial Memory and the Charles Bridge: Establishing Royal Ceremony for future Kings, in: Kunsttexte.de/ostblick, 3/2012 – 1](#)

[1] Marjorie Boyer, *Medieval French Bridges : a History* (Cambridge Mass.: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1976), 168–9.