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Charles IV and the New Town of Prague

The largest building project of the Middle Ages

by Dagmar Šmrhová

Prague is famous for its grand monuments: Prague Castle and St. Vitus Cathedral, the Charles Bridge with its imposing towers, the Old Town Hall and its Astronomical Clock, *Orloj*, the Gothic Church of Our Lady before Týn, and not least the beer at the *U Fleků* pub. However, a discerning visitor will find a number of other historic buildings and attractions often neglected by the tourists who favour the well-known sites and the well-trodden paths. Head for the New Town of Prague and you will encounter a great many surprises and historic sites well worth exploring.



The Emperor Charles IV

by the Circle of Master Theodorik 1320-1380

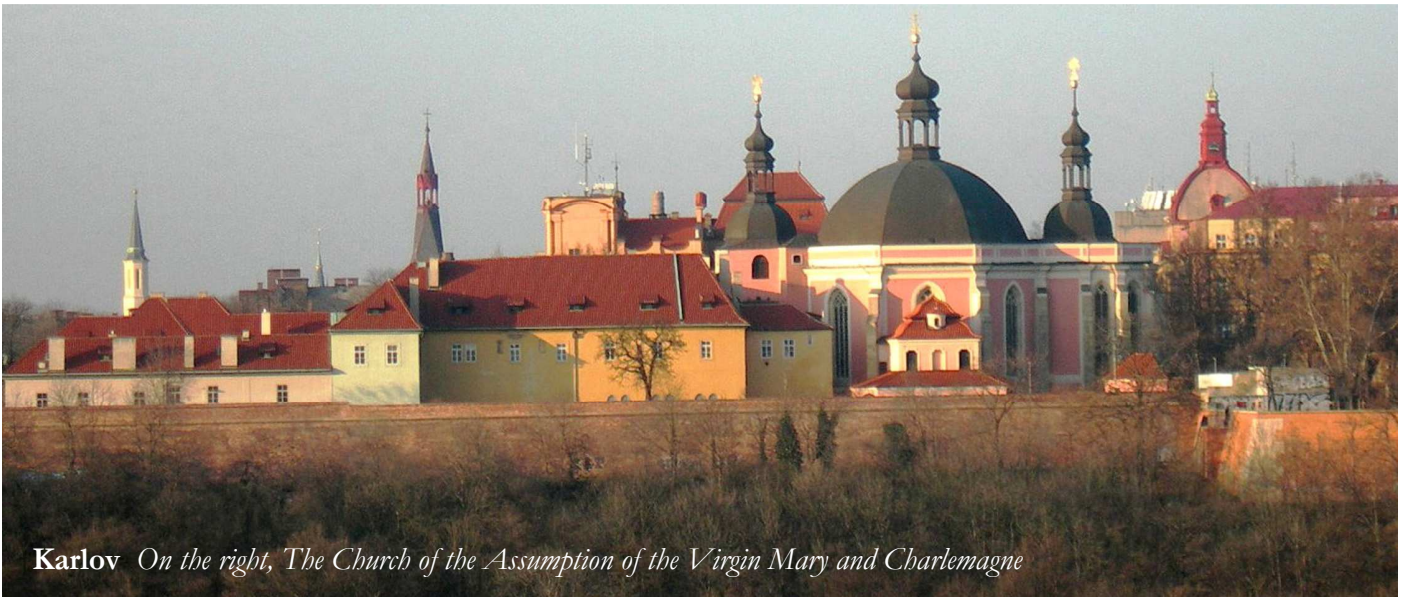
The New Town, *Nové Město*, was founded in the 14th century as a grandiose building project by Charles IV (of the Luxembourg dynasty), King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor, *above*, who chose Prague as his residence. Born in Prague but educated in Paris from the age of 11, he returned to his birthplace upon inheriting the Czech Crown in 1333 only to find the city neglected and dilapidated. He had nowhere to live; “Kings lived like commoners”, he remarked. Taking Paris as his model, Charles rebuilt

the Castle and set out to turn Prague into a modern city, a new capital of central Europe. The size and scale of the new quarter that Charles had designed and built for Prague has no equivalent through the entire span of the Middle Ages. Indeed, it could be said that it brought the period to an end. Fascinated by ceremony, Charles had designed the New Town on a colossal scale with a sense of civic decorum, squares of epic proportions, numerous vantage points and a processional highway to Vyšehrad for the celebration of religious festivals. His liturgical approach to town planning combines spiritual and civic values making the New Town a centre for religious festivals as well as for royal coronations and funerals.

The meticulous layout of the New Town with its unprecedented 360 hectares of building land, included parts of Prague that had previously been outside the city walls, as well as Vyšehrad, the other Prague castle. A Romanesque collegiate church, Vyšehrad was founded by the Bohemian king Vratislav, a contemporary of William the Conqueror. The Hussites destroyed it in 1420, then it was rebuilt in the Baroque style in the 18th century, and what we see today is a late 19th century reconstruction. The New Town was also intended as the counterpart to the Old Town on the other bank of the river Vltava - the Old Town as the historic heart of the city, a witness to the distant past, dignified and conservative, while in contrast the New Town signifies progress with a grand plan of wide streets, squares, monasteries and churches, each occupying its own special place within the overall design. At the time it represented a unique urban complex unparalleled in mediaeval Europe and Western Christianity. Prague, after Rome and Constantinople, belonged among the most important cities of Europe.

The charter of the New Town of Prague was officially signed on 28 March 1348. Work started with the construction of the city walls (1348-50) with four towers (none surviving today), five gates, some 1,450 new houses, five new monasteries, four churches, two hospitals, three large squares, the town hall and a market place. One of the three enormous squares, the Cattle Market, today known as *Karlovo náměstí* (Charles Square) is 80,550 square meters in size, and was one of the largest squares of the Middle Ages. In all of Europe there was no city with a greater area of buildings under construction.

The entire area of the New Town leads into three terraced squares, with the highest point dominated by



Karlov On the right, *The Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary and Charlemagne*

the church dedicated to Charlemagne, the restorer of the Holy Roman Empire. Together with the other four churches, it forms the shape of a regular cross when looking down from above in a bird's eye view: (East-West – the Church of the Emmaus Monastery *Na Slovanech* (1347) and *Karlov* (1352); North-South – the Church of St. Mary of the Meadows (*Na trávníčku* - 1360) and St. Catherine (1356). The intersection is the Church of St. Apollinaris (1362). In the Middle Ages buildings laid out in the form of a cross symbolised a special blessing for the city.

The Emperor's vision was to maintain good relations between the different nations of Central Europe. Charles sought to include and engage Bohemia within the Western European world of Christianity and education, establishing the University in Prague (1347). At the same time he was also trying to reconnect with the Eastern tradition of Christianity represented by Cyril and Methodius and founded new monasteries, inviting various religious orders from Europe to Prague, a city symbolic of a united Europe.

Even before building work began on the New Town, the foundation stone of the **Church of the Virgin Mary of the Snows** had been laid. Designed and intended for royal coronations, this masterpiece of the High Gothic was to be the largest sacred building in Prague and in the whole of Bohemia. Inspired by the buildings of the Rhineland, it measured some 100 metres in length. However, the church was never finished and only the chancel is complete, with vaults higher than those of St. Vitus Cathedral. During the Hussite wars the building suffered serious damage. The tall tower that collapsed in 1454 was never rebuilt and later the Gothic vaults were also damaged. The church was originally part of the Monastery of

the Barefoot Carmelites who came from the Rhineland. In 1606 it was taken over by the Franciscans, who repaired the buildings, added the Baroque convent and adorned the interior with a mighty Baroque altar of 1651. Next to the church is a Franciscan garden founded by the Carmelites in the 14th century as a kitchen/market garden and later redesigned in the style of French Baroque. Today it forms a natural oasis in the very centre of the city and is open to the public throughout the year.

At the same time, in 1347, the **Monastery Na Slovanech and the Church of the Virgin Mary and Slavonic Patrons**, also called the **Emmaus Abbey**, was founded. The church is dedicated to the Slavonic patrons – the Czech saints Vojtěch (Adalbert) and Prokopius, and the Slav Christian missionaries, Cyril and Methodius, as well as St. Jerome. The monastery was consecrated in the presence of the Emperor himself on Easter Monday, 29 March 1372. The Emperor summoned Croatian Benedictines to the new monastery in Prague with



Monastery Na Slovanech in the early 20th century

the aim of serving the Catholic mass and Roman liturgies in Old Slavonic, clearly striving for unity and attempting to bridge the split between the Western church and Eastern Christianity.

The church has a nave and two aisles divided by pillars and with ceilings of the same height, a basilica-style design that evolved from 9th century Mediterranean buildings, especially in south western France. The interior is sober in appearance, the space in harmony with the simple architectural design as opposed to the intricate and more florid elements of the High Gothic style. Both the church and the monastery have suffered great damage during their long history, the worst of which occurred on 14 February 1945 when both Baroque towers were hit and demolished by Allied bombers. The towers were replaced in 1966-9 by modern concrete 'wings' - reinforced concrete shells, narrowing to a point and covered in gold, to a design by F.M. Černý, see photograph below.



Monastery Na Slovanech as it appears today

The most precious monument in the monastery is a definitive cycle of mural paintings, which are contemporary with the building of the church and some of which are partially preserved in their original colours and designs. These murals decorated all four walls of the cloister and depicted 85 scenes from the Old and New Testaments. Although the remaining paintings are fragmentary, what is left represents the

largest and artistically most valuable mural cycle north of the Alps. The monastery was returned to the order in 1990 and the church was reconsecrated on Easter Monday, 2003.

The Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary and Charlemagne is an octagonal building, most likely inspired by the Palatine Chapel in Aachen and wholly unusual in Bohemia. It was founded by Charles IV in 1350 on the highest point of the New Town, *Mons Caroli*, as part of the Monastery of French Augustinians, later the Lutheran Canons. The beautiful star-shaped vault dates back to 1575 and is by Bonifac Wohlmut who also finished Queen Anne's Belvedere at Prague Castle. The rich Baroque ornamentation of the interior is in the style of Ferdinand Maximilian Kaňka from 1735. Life-size statues are placed on the balconies.

The North-South arm of our imaginary bird's eye cross is marked by two smaller churches. **The Church of St. Catherine** was founded by Charles as an **Augustinian Monastery** in gratitude for his good fortune in the dangerous battle of San Felice in Northern Italy in 1332. Only the slender octagonal tower remains from the original Gothic building, the Baroque church having been added at a later stage. The interior of the church is decorated with magnificent murals by an important Czech painter of the High Baroque, Václav Vavřinec Reiner (1741).

The Church of the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, also called St. Mary of the Meadows (*Na trávníčku*) was founded in 1360 as a part of the Monastery of the Servite Order of Florence, later abolished by the Emperor Joseph II (1741-1790), a great reformer of the European Enlightenment. It is the smaller of the two churches, with a slim tower which is octagon-shaped at the top. The church was damaged by the Hussites who placed a canon within its interior to fire at the city. A new vaulted ceiling over the square nave of the church was constructed in 1480. It is supported by a single column more reminiscent of a chapel than a church.

The Church of St. Apollinaris is set at the centre, or the imaginary intersection, of the lines connecting the above churches (with the exception of the Church of Our Lady of the Snows). It is a simple building with an impressively broad and simple nave and a Baroque interior. Original wall paintings from 1390 depicting Jesus Christ and the apostles, St. Mary and other saints are preserved.

Immediately after the foundation of the New Town, two New Town parish churches were built – the

KEY

A red numeral indicates that a site is mentioned in the text of the article

1 Vyšehrad

2 Charles Square *Karlovo*

Náměstí, formerly the Cattle Market

3 Monastery Na Slovanech and the Church of the Virgin Mary and Slavonic Patrons also called the Emmaus Abbey

4 The Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary and Charlemagne also called *Karlovo*

5 The Church of the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary also called St Mary of the Meadows (*Na trávníčku*)

6 The Church of St Catherine

7 St Apollinaris

8 Church of the Virgin Mary of the Snows (*Panny Marie Sněžné*)

9 Site of the Chapel of Corpus Christi

10 The Church of St Henry

11 The Church of St Stephen

12 Site of the Monastery of Zderaz

13 The Church of St. Wenceslas at Zderaz

Other Churches and Landmarks

14 The Church of St Vojtěch

15 Jesuit Church of St. Ignatius

16 The Church of St. John

Nepomuk (na Skalce)

17 The Church of the Most

Holy Trinity (Podskalí)

18 The Orthodox Cathedral of Saints Cyril and Methodius

formerly the Church of St Charles Borromeo. In 1942 the cathedral was the scene of the last stand of a number of Czech and Slovak patriots who had assassinated Reinhard Heydrich, the Nazi SS Obergruppenführer.

19 The Church of St Joseph

20 The Church of St Clement

21 The Rotunda of St Longinus

22 The Church of St Michael

V Jirchářích

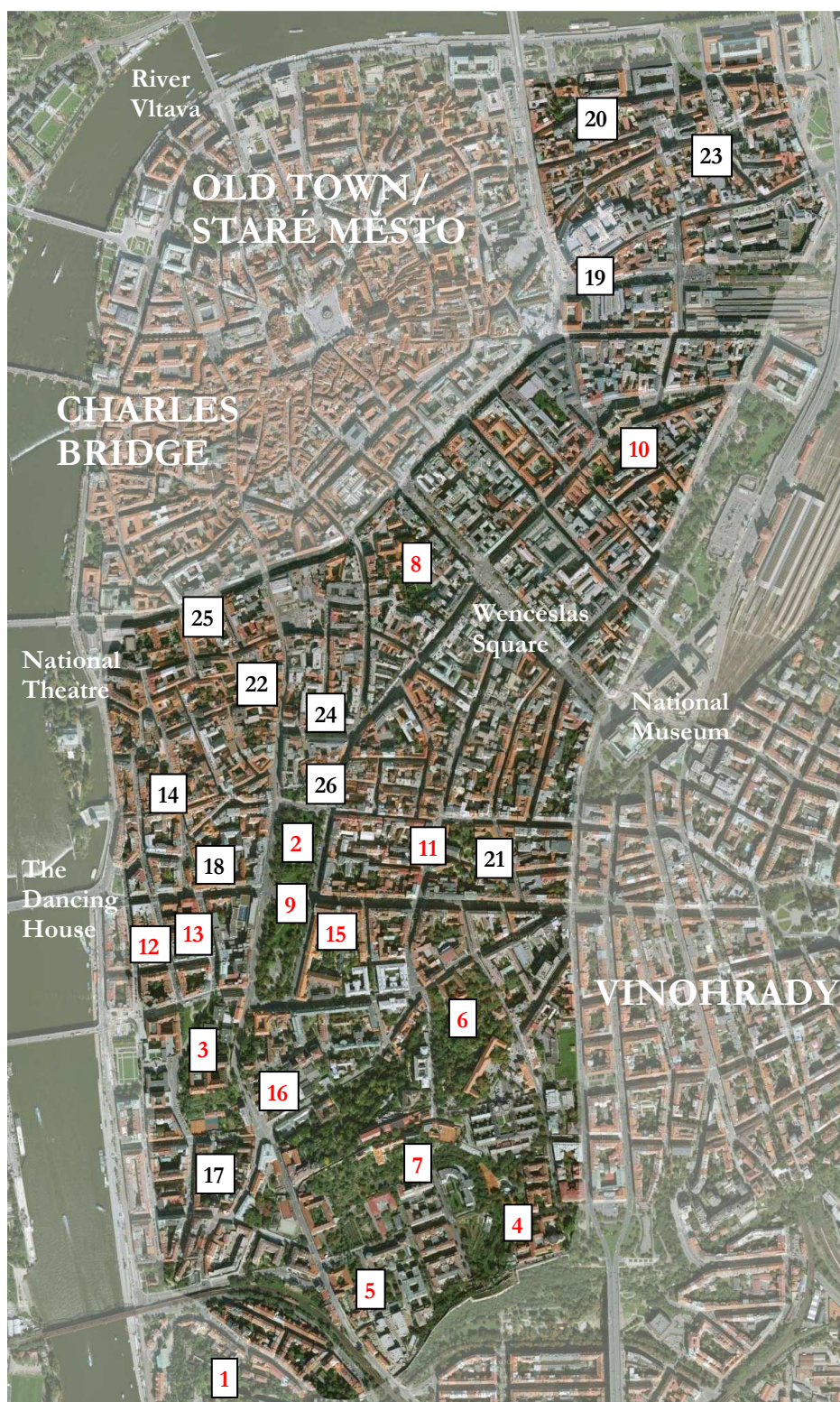
23 The Church of St. Peter

Na Poříčí

24 Holy Trinity

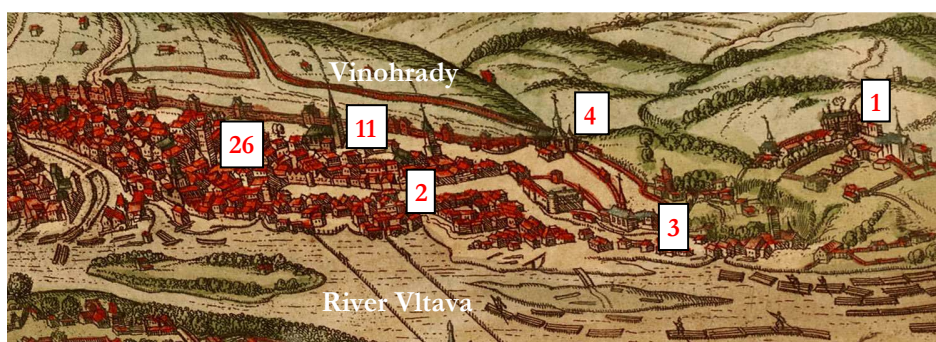
25 The Church of St Ursula

26 The New Town Hall



Above Modern satellite view of the New Town

Below Braun and Hogenburg view looking eastwards over the Vltava towards the New Town, 1617. The curving moat on the far left forms the modern Národní třída





Prague: The New Town *Nové Město*

Clockwise from above The Church of St Catherine, The Bell Tower of St Henry's Church, The Church of St. John Nepomuk *na Skalce*, The Church of St Mary of the Meadows *Na trávníčku*



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Church of St. Henry (*Jindřich*) and the Church of St. Stephen (*Štěpán*), the former dedicated to Henry, the last Ottonian Emperor. In both of them, visitors can see the paintings of the Baroque painter Karel Škréta. The clock on the tower of St. Stephen's Church dates from 1577.

Not all the buildings from this period have survived. The Corpus Christi Chapel in the middle of the Cattle Market has disappeared completely. The Monastery of Zderaz (*na Zderaze*) has also vanished even though the small Romanesque/early Gothic Church of St. Wenceslas at Zderaz survives on the site and there are still some wall paintings in the chancel. Originally the



Above, building in centre, Corpus Christi Chapel, demolished circa 1790. Engraving by Sadeler, 1606

Below, The Jesuit Church of St. Ignatius, Charles Square



church was part of the Monastery of Slav Benedictines. Later, in the 17-18th centuries, it became the Monastery of the Barefoot Augustines, until closed by Joseph II in 1775 to be transformed, together with the church, into a military storehouse, before eventually disappearing altogether. In 1927 the church was taken over by the Czechoslovak Hussite Church in whose hands it remains. The interior was designed by František Bílek (1872-1941), an important Czech architect and sculptor.

The original design of the New Town saw some changes over the following centuries and its appearance today has benefited from some splendid additions. Charles Square is dominated by the magnificent facade of the Jesuit Church of St. Ignatius, on top of which is a shining figure of the founder of the order, crowned with a golden aura. The monumental interior is richly decorated in the Baroque style. The Baroque Church of St. John Nepomuk *na Skalkce*, the work of Kilian Ignac Dienzenhofer, demonstrates the outstanding skill of the artist in siting the church on such difficult terrain. Modern buildings such as the National Theatre and the National Museum should also be mentioned in this context, as well as the *Tančící dům*, The Dancing House, nicknamed 'Fred and Ginger', designed by Frank Gehry and Vlado Milunić (1996).

The construction of the New Town of Prague was the lifework of Charles IV and it influenced the development of the city in such a way that even the Baroque could not cover up the Gothic Prague of his time. Construction was basically completed within two decades and from then continued in harmony with the original concept right up to the 19th century, when the rapid growth of the whole city of Prague changed some of its elements.

Charles's idea of a modern city, a united Europe, and his effort to achieve it were far ahead of his time.

Dagmar Šmrhová is retired and lives in Jihlava, South Moravia