

# CHARLES BRIDGE

## LEGENDS AND STORIES





Magdalena Wagnerová

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Prague, 2025

NAKLADATELSTVÍ  
**PRO**

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## IN THE BEGINNING WAS...

Judith Bridge was situated a little further north than the present Charles Bridge. It was named after Judith of Thuringia, the second wife of King Vladislaus II of Bohemia and from 1158 also the second Czech queen. It was essentially the predecessor, albeit not the model, of today's Charles Bridge.

"This coincided closely with the greatest expansion of the second Czech king Vladislaus as well as with extensive and progressive construction activities in all parts of Romanesque Prague," according to a 1947 publication on Charles Bridge by Kamil Novotný and Emanuel Poche. "Coincidentally, a number of bridges were also completed in the neighboring Germany at that time, using stone as a building material for all or part of the construction. If we take into account the close political and cultural relationship that Bohemia maintained with Germany under this ruler, and considering Vladislaus' scope of knowledge and great ambition, as reflected in his copious construction endeavors, we can easily understand why the new Prague bridge could not in any way lag behind the style of bridge building adopted in Germany at that time. It was under these circumstances that the new Judith Bridge came into being in honor of Vladislaus' wife, who financed and oversaw the construction."

**Judith Bridge** was built between 1158 and 1172 to become the oldest stone bridge in Bohemia. On the Lesser Quarter's side, the builders made use of towers dating back to earlier fortifications, and in the 2nd half of the 13th century, another tower was added in the Old Town on the opposite bank of the

Vltava River. However, all that remains of Judith Bridge today are the submerged pillar foundations, scant fragments kept in three houses in the Lesser Quarter and an arch below the garden in front of the Crusader Generalate. Made of yellow sandstone, the bridge was an impressive engineering feat for its time. Only very few bridges in Central Europe compared to it in this period. There was one stone bridge spanning the Elbe in Dresden and another across the Danube in Reich. Most likely designed based on the bridge in Reich, Prague's Romanesque bridge boasted a span of 514 meters and a width of 6.8 meters. Paved with quartzite blocks, its features included ice guards and massive stone curbing. The foundations were embedded in pits made of piles driven into the ground, forming a cofferdam, while water was pumped out of the pits using treadwheels. The stone blocks of the bridge pier were placed on wooden grating reinforced with clay. The Judith Bridge had faithfully served Prague's citizens and visitors alike for a hundred and seventy years before a great flood hit Prague on February 3, 1342, destroying all in its path. Judith Bridge was not to be spared either and hardly anything was left of it in the flood's wake, except for...

Not far from the Old Town Bridge Tower, **Bradáč** (the bearded man) looks out over the waves of the Vltava. It is a stone-carved bas-relief of a bearded man's head used for centuries as a reliable water level indicator, especially during floods. Whenever floodwaters reached the bottom of the beard, the Vltava was soon likely to spill over its banks, forcing the inhabitants of the riverside houses to move to higher ground. They knew that if the water reached Bradáč's mouth, the river would flood the Old Town's streets, and if it covered his bald spot, it



would inevitably advance as far as the Old Town Square, making boats the only means of getting around the city.

Originally, the low relief could be found on the Old Town waterfront pillar of the former Judith Bridge. As the first arch of the bridge was obstructed during the reconstruction of today's Crusader Square in 1848, Bradáč's head was relocated to the square's riverbank wall. Sometime later, a replica was made and formally installed on the original bridge arch. The new relief of Bradáč can be reached through the passage between the building of the Order of the Crusaders of the Red Star and the square wall, to the right of the wooden stairway down to the pier where sightseeing boats depart from the local boathouse.

# CHARLES IV, FATHER OF THE NATION

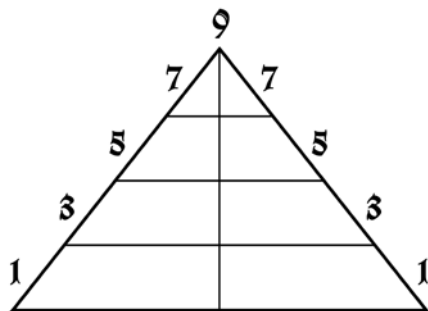
**B**orn as Wenceslaus in the wedlock of **John of Luxembourg** and **Elizabeth of Bohemia** on May 14, 1316 in Prague, where he also died on November 29, 1378. Later in life, he was also called “**Father of the Nation**”, a nickname he lived up to throughout his reign as the 11th Bohemian king. His baptismal name Wenceslaus remained unknown to many.

He was an extraordinary ruler and an exceptional statesman who had succeeded in uniting the Bohemian throne with the imperial throne of the Roman Empire. He would never have achieved this if he had not been a skilled politician in the first place. We must not forget that he lived at a time when many a ruler could barely sign their name. Charles was educated and always eager to support or directly initiate new construction and artistic pursuits. He penned a comprehensive autobiography entitled **Vita Caroli**, in which he sought both to explain his lifelong endeavors and to outline a model for a ruler seeking to shoulder his political, social and cultural responsibilities for the common good. This is what he had to say about his beginnings in Bohemia: “And as we came to Bohemia, we found neither father, nor mother, nor brother, nor sister, nor anyone we knew. Moreover, we remembered nothing of the local language. But we learned it again and soon spoke and understood it like any other Czech. By God’s grace we could speak, write, and read not only Czech, but also French, Italian, German, and

Latin, so that we had command over one language in equality to all the others.”

Charles IV found Bohemian lands in a deplorable state and had literally no place to lay his head. In his biography, he writes of the disconsolate state of affairs in a not very flattering way, describing a land laid to waste, with no single sovereign castle that has not been seized along with its royal estates. The Prague Castle had long been abandoned and damaged, leaving no choice but to build a new one in its place. However, Charles IV never gave up, and throughout his reign he purposefully and systematically transformed Prague into a strong center of power for both the Kingdom of Bohemia and the entire Holy Roman Empire. Under his stewardship, Prague was to become a magnificent imperial center that could proudly welcome guests of any status or origin. This marked the beginning of extensive reconstruction with no expense spared on individual building projects, most of which still adorn the city today. Many of these had the name of **Peter Parler** associated with them.

The ingenious master builder arrived in Prague as a twenty-three-year-old youth with no recommendations from any prominent European figures of the time and he had yet to complete any significant work to prove himself. Nevertheless, Charles IV recognized his extraordinary talent and entrusted him with major commissions. Time certainly proved the king’s intuition right, as Peter Parler demonstrated on numerous occasions that the ruler’s faith in him was well deserved. Following the death of Matthias of Arras in 1351, he took over the construction of St. Vitus Cathedral at Prague Castle and successfully headed the construction of the stone bridge over the Vltava River.



On July 9, 1357, as the stars aligned for this remarkable engineering feat, Charles IV laid the cornerstone for a new bridge that was to withstand the forces of wind and unforeseen torrents of water and resist the onslaught of local skirmishes and battles, a bridge that would honor and further the fame of its founder. A bridge as such would have to be very robust. Originally called Prague Bridge or Stone Bridge, it has been referred to as Charles Bridge since 1870.

A well-known legend has it that Charles IV thought long and hard about ensuring the immortality of the future bridge. One day, the master builder came up with the idea of adding eggs to the lime to make the mortar as hard as a rock. The ruler was impressed by this novel idea and ordered eggs to be brought from all over Prague. Despite the influx of egg-laden carts from all over Prague and every hen owner contributing their little batch of eggs, it was still not enough. The king therefore decreed that everyone in possession of at least one hen must surrender all their eggs. The councilors in Velvary worried so much that the eggs for the construction of the new bridge would arrive safely in Prague

that they had them hard-boiled. The saying that the visitors from Velvary can be a bit blockheaded originated from this incident.

Charles Bridge is undeniably a phenomenon. For instance, the French sculptor Antoine Bourdelle viewed it as a centaur or a whole composed of two parts – a man on top, a horse on the bottom. A sweeping horizontal mass from which numerous sanctified heads rise to the sky, imbuing the bridge with immortality. Although nowadays the spiritual significance of the artwork is probably waning, there remains an undeniable aesthetic value, which is truly extraordinary and unparalleled in the world.

Charles Bridge has weathered countless floods and survived two world wars to become an enduring feature of the panorama of old Prague. While it provides an important link between the Old Town and the Lesser Quarter, it also continues to be a major tourist attraction. In times long past, however, the bridge also served as an important strategic point, drawing attention during all the major battles for Prague, and was even included in the Counter-Reformation propaganda of the Church as one of its legends.

Charles IV watched over Bohemia until the age of sixty-two. However, all of the building initiatives were only part of his contribution to the development of Prague. He brought seven new religious orders to the capital, all of which, for obvious reasons, wanted to make their presence known – and perhaps this is where the origins of the well-known nickname “The City of a Hundred spires” lie. At the beginning of the 1500s, Prague was home to an incredible one hundred and four churches, cathedrals and chapels. The Old Town Bridge Tower offers the best view of Prague’s towers and spires in all their splendor...

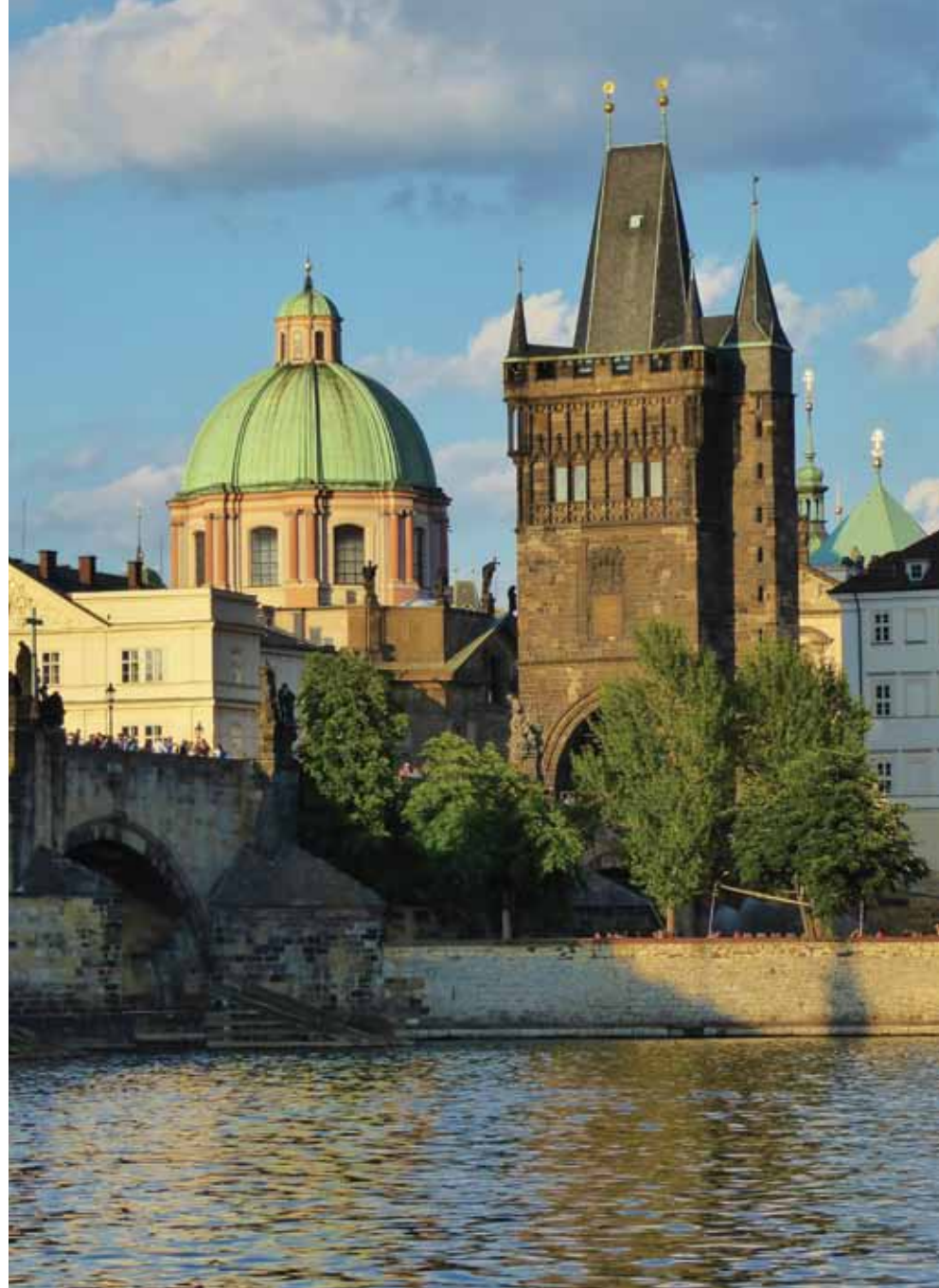


# CHARLES BRIDGE TOWERS

Three towers on one bridge, each one different. Dating back to antiquity, they remain some of the most visited historical monuments in the Czech capital. These stone beauties silently look down upon the tourists as they beleague Charles Bridge with tireless persistence all year round. All graceful but each different in style, age, height and character, making one wonder at the length of time they have stood here in harmonious unity. No true artist or romantic can remain unmoved in their imposing presence. As the famous Czech poet Jaroslav Seifert once wrote: Time, river, youth, what else? / Perhaps the Fragrance of rain in May / and laughter in light-footed wind. I walked across the bridge, my heart to a gate, I had to say farewell at one gate, and at the other, I had to bid farewell again.

On the right bank of the Vltava River, the Old Town tower rises to the sky, while on the left bank, the two towers of the Lesser Quarter, connected by a gate, form an imposing complex that serves both as a grand entrance to the Lesser Quarter and a dignified farewell to the Charles Bridge. The arch of the entrance gate spans two Gothic arcades, adorned with crenelated battlements. Built on the site of an earlier Romanesque structure, it dates back to 1411 and is complemented by the coats of arms of the lands of Wenceslaus IV, as well as the emblems of the Old and Lesser Town of Prague. The gate that once stood here has long been lost in the passage of time.

The tower dominating the Old Town side of Charles Bridge offers an exceptional view towards both Prague Castle and the





Old Town. Resting on the second pier of Charles Bridge, it dates back to the late 14th century. The tower was designed by Peter Parler and completed by his crew involved in the construction of St. Vitus Cathedral. It is said to be the most beautiful medieval tower in Europe, renowned for its intricate sculptures that enhance its prominence, ranging from a kingfisher to significant figures in Czech history. Notably, above the archway, there are emblems of the lands constituting Emperor Charles IV's realm and a veiled kingfisher symbolizing his son Wenceslaus IV. Above these, three statues are positioned: St. Vitus in the center as the patron saint of the bridge, flanked by Emperor Charles IV on the left and King Wenceslaus IV on the right as the builders of the tower. Higher up, near the tower's apex, stand statues of Saint Sigismund and Saint Adalbert, patrons of the Czech lands, requiring a significant upward gaze to appreciate their placement. While the statues adorning the upper sections of the Old Town Bridge Tower are indeed masterpieces of medieval sculpture, their elevated positions can make detailed viewing challenging. Therefore, it's worthwhile to direct your attention to the base of the tower, particularly the pedestal located at the left corner where observant visitors can find two human figures, a man dressed as a knight and a woman lifting her skirt. Since medieval times, people believed that this is a depiction of Martin Luther, married to the nun Katherine of Bor. Another legend claims that the sculptures depict a monk attempting to seduce a nun. Some theories suggest that the creator of the sculptures may have drawn inspiration from Jan Žižka of Trocnov, a celebrated Hussite military leader who supposedly had a sister in a convent. According to some



accounts, a monk seduced Jan Žižka's sister, which purportedly led to Žižka's merciless attitude towards monks.

However, there's no need to stay "grounded"; the Old Town Bridge Tower is open to the public. As visitors ascend the Old Town Bridge Tower, they encounter an intriguing figure. The sign below it says: "This peculiar sculpture is believed to represent either a tower warden or some form of guardian. "Created in the first half of the 15th century, it is considered the most unusual statue in the entire tower. The statue's pedestal is formed by an inverted Romanesque column capital. The figure itself does not appear dignified; on the contrary, it has a rather strange and undignified appearance. We see an elderly, seemingly intoxicated individual dressed in a peculiar cloak and boots, with a knife and

key hanging from his belt. The figure is depicted lifting his cloak, which has led to various interpretations regarding his intent. Is he preparing to relieve himself, or is he making an obscene gesture towards the grandeur and audience below? Regarding the creature perched on the figure's back; is it a demon-tempter, a goblin, or even a monkey symbolizing debauchery, an evil influence whispering into the figure's ear? So what is the true meaning of this figure? Some believe that it may symbolize mockery towards those who laboriously climb to the top of the tower.

In the immediate vicinity of the Old Town Bridge Tower stands another landmark bearing the name of the enlightened ruler Charles IV: Karlovy Lázně, best viewed from the upper gallery of the Old Town Bridge Tower. In the public's mind, the structure is most commonly associated with the well-known story of the bathmaid Zuzana, who saved King Wenceslaus





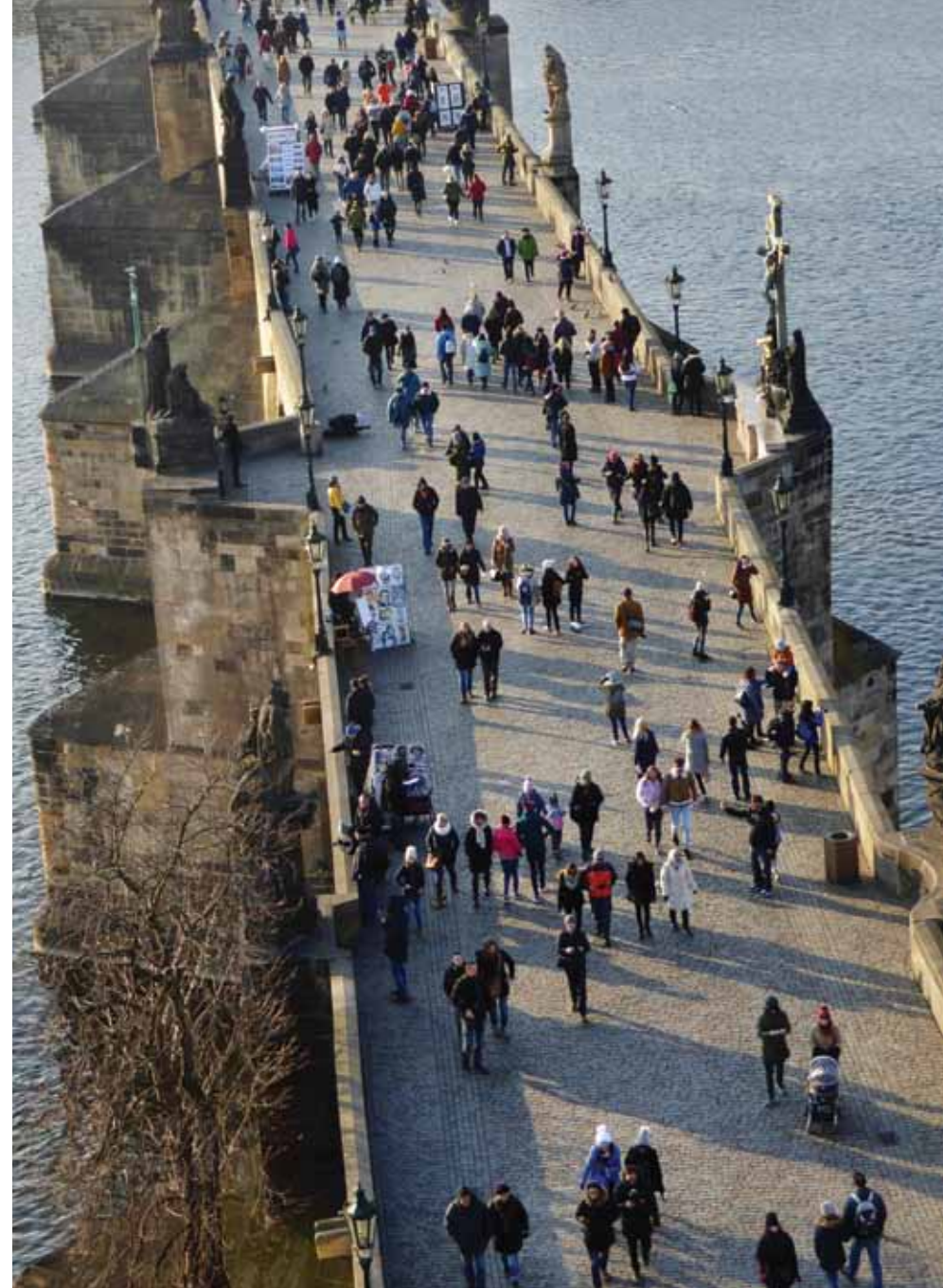
IV. The beautiful bathmaid made her mark on history in 1543 through the chronicler Václav Hájek of Libočany and may have had a real-life model among the many women who kept the king company. The girl depicted on the inner side of the arch of the Old Town Bridge Tower is said to be the bathmaid Zuzana.

On the left bank of the Vltava River, the bridge is flanked by two towers connected by a Gothic gate. The lower Romanesque tower, known as the Judith Tower, reaches nearly 30 meters in height. It was constructed in the second half of the 12th century, predating the Charles Bridge, using ashlar masonry. Between the 16th and 17th centuries, the tower underwent partial Renaissance modifications, including the addition of sgraffito decorations and new windows. Originally, the Judith Tower was part of the fortifications on the left bank of the Vltava River, as a wooden bridge at that location allowed access to various travelers. Later, this opuka (marlstone) tower was incorporated into the Judith Bridge complex and eventually became part of the new Charles Bridge. The tower comprises a ground floor and three upper levels and has served various purposes throughout history, including as a prison for serious criminals. In 1517, the head of the robber knight Jindřich of Bohnice, known as “Bohnička,” was severed on this tower, giving rise to numerous charming legends featuring equally charming apparitions and ghosts.

A second Romanesque tower stood next to the Judith tower, but during the Gothic period, a new tower, much taller and therefore visible from far and wide, was built in its place. Its foundations were likely laid by the Parler company at the beginning of the 15th century, with construction commencing in 1464 during the reign of King George of Poděbrady.



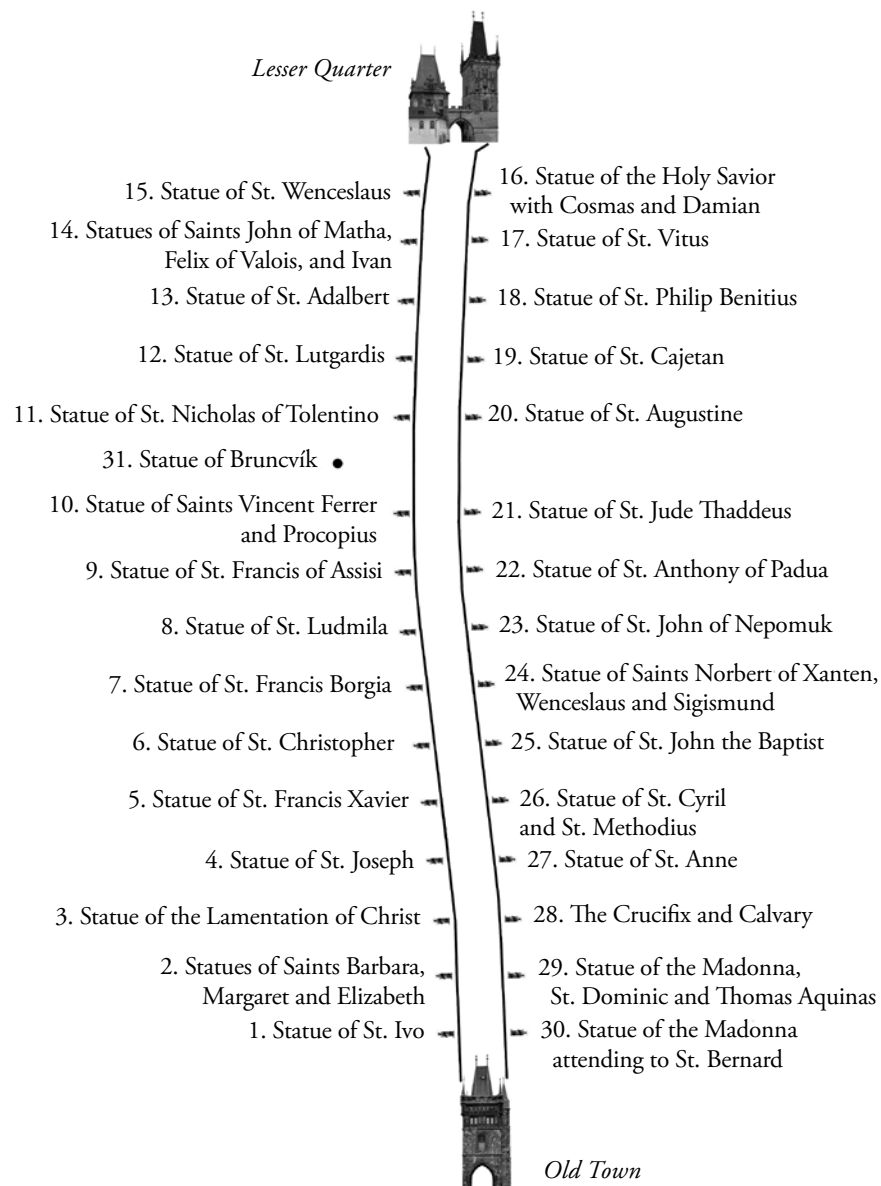
During the Hussite wars, the country faced significant challenges, and the construction of the Lesser Town Bridge Tower was not a priority. Intended as a counterpart to the Old Town Bridge Tower, it is noticeably plainer and less ornate. The identity of its builder remains unknown, but someone took the effort to create a series of niches on its facade, which have remained empty to this day. In the late 19th century, the renowned Prague architect Josef Mocker oversaw the restoration of the Lesser Town Bridge Tower. Despite plans for extensive ornamentation, the tower never received its intended elaborate decorations. Being the youngest of the three towers of Charles Bridge, it bears its fate with resilience. The Lesser Town Bridge Tower stands at a height of 45 meters and contains a relatively accessible staircase. It is open to the public and, like its counterpart on the opposite bank, offers remarkable views from its gallery situated 26 meters above ground. Historically, this sandstone block tower has served various purposes beyond offering panoramic views of old Prague, including as a storage facility and a fire watchtower.







*The statues and sculptural groups on Charles Bridge are numbered in the order they are passed on the left, the south side, when crossing the bridge from the Old Town to the Lesser Quarter, and then back on the right, the north side, in the opposite direction from the Lesser Quarter to the Old Town. The final sculpture, numbered 31, depicts the legendary Czech knight Bruncvík. Unlike other statues on Charles Bridge, it is situated below the bridge's level on the southern side near Kampa Island, close to the sculptural group of St. Vincent Ferrer and St. Procopius.*





# CHARLES BRIDGE STATUES

Charles Bridge, constructed from sandstone blocks, measures approximately 520 meters in length and 10 meters in width. It is supported by sixteen arches. Between 1834 and 1835, sidewalks were added to the bridge to accommodate pedestrian traffic, but were later removed. In 1707, right-hand traffic was introduced on the bridge, and in 1723, oil lamps were installed to illuminate the path. These were replaced by gas lighting in 1866. The bridge has been known as Charles Bridge since 1870. Even in ancient times, it was considered a place of distinction. The 1579 legal code *Práva městská království České* (Municipal Laws of the Kingdom of Bohemia) included specific provisions imposing higher fines for injuries inflicted on the Prague Bridge compared to other locations.

The bridge balustrade was not neglected either. It was gradually adorned with statues and sculptural groups of saints and their attributes, introducing powerful symbolism to the bridge. These works, crafted by the finest sculptors of their time, communicated profound messages to every passerby willing to observe and reflect. Even today, at the right time and under the right circumstances, one can still listen and reflect on Charles Bridge. The stone-carved holy men and women from ages long past – patrons, apostles, martyrs, princes, knights, nobles, theologians, nuns, preachers, famous fathers, sons, daughters, mothers, and grandmothers – gaze upon the happenings below with the benevolence of true saints, selflessly extending a helping hand to those interested in their extraordinary stories and profound messages.

# 1. STATUE OF ST. IVO

In 1662, General Johann von Sporck of the Austrian cavalry purchased a small settlement in eastern Bohemia, near which healing mineral springs had been discovered. After the general's death, the estate was inherited by his son, **Franz Anton von Sporck**, an enlightened man in many respects. In 1695, he sent water samples from the springs to the university in Prague for analysis. The following year, he received a response, marking the beginning of the history of the **Kuks – a phenomenon of Czech Baroque**. The thoughtful Count Sporck is noted for having come to the conclusion around the early 18th century that the essence of Christianity was being distorted by bad human qualities, as well as by the undesirable influence of parents, the church, and the authorities. He thus began seeking reform, advocating for a deepening of faith and Christian virtues. Count Sporck stood out in every way possible, including with respect to the Kuks in northeastern Bohemia, which was an extraordinary, truly exceptional architectural undertaking encompassing a castle, spa, hospital, racetrack defined by two obelisks and statues of forty Callot-style grotesque dwarfs, a house of philosophers equipped with a library, a summer palace, a great dovecote, several guest houses, farm buildings, an inn, administrative buildings, a laundry, and quarters for servants. All the structures were subordinated to a unified architectural plan, characterized by strict symmetry and balanced lines. The Elbe River divided the complex into secular and ecclesiastical components, linked by a stone bridge. Each bank proudly featured a dominant landmark. The left bank boasted a two-story castle

building, while the right bank was defined primarily by the hospital, its church, and the count's tomb. The castle and spa were renowned for their comfort and luxurious furnishings; however, it was primarily the hospital complex on the opposite bank, with its unique sculptural decorations, that made Kuks a unique site. Count Spork's decision to commission Matthias Bernard Braun to decorate the grounds was a fortunate one. The sculpture of St. Ivo on Charles Bridge was the second commission of this renowned Baroque sculptor in Prague.

Sculptor and carver **Matthias Bernard Braun**, born as Matthias Bernhard, one of many sons of a humble blacksmith somewhere in the Alps, died on February 15, 1738, in Prague, where he had been active since the age of twenty-six. He established his own workshop in the city, where he trained numerous followers, married, and essentially made his home in Bohemia. Although Austrian by origin, he became one of the most significant figures of Czech Baroque sculpture. While the pinnacle of his work is undoubtedly the sculptures of the Virtues and Vices in Kuks, complemented by the Bethlehem statues in the nearby forest, Braun also left an indelible and everlasting mark on the appearance of Prague, including the statue of Saint Ivo on Charles Bridge.

**Saint Ivo** was a Breton priest renowned for his selfless concern for the poor and destitute, assisting them principally in legal matters. He therefore became the patron saint of judges, lawyers, and notaries. In light of this, it is only fitting that the statue of Saint Ivo on Charles Bridge was commissioned at the expense of the Prague **Faculty of Law**. The chronogram in the inscription indicates that the work was created in 1711. The patron of lawyers is depicted here as a protector of the poor.





*Lady Justice*

With a gentle gesture, he reaches out to widows, orphans, and a pleading old man, while at his side stands an allegory of Justice. His expression is extraordinarily vivid, as is the eloquent gesture of his outstretched left hand and the kind expression on his face, reflecting genuine compassion.

## 2. STATUES OF SAINTS BARBARA, MARGARET AND ELIZABETH

Both St. Ludmila and Agnes of Bohemia were women whose lives were closely connected to the Czech lands, particularly Prague. However, most of the well-known female saints who have a permanent place in our hearts and minds have visited these regions only indirectly, carved in stone or concealed in the name of some of the cathedrals, churches, or monasteries dedicated to these extraordinary historical figures. **Saint Margaret of Antioch** is one such figure. She was an early Christian martyr, believed to have come from Antioch in Pisidia, an ancient city located in what is now modern-day Turkish Anatolia. Born in the 3rd century to a pagan priest, she converted to Christianity and was known for her exceptional beauty, attracting many suitors. Among these was Olybrius, a local prefect, who proposed marriage to Margaret. When she refused, wishing to dedicate her life to Jesus Christ, he reported Margaret for being a Christian to the authorities, fully aware of the persecution she would face. According to legend, while imprisoned, the devil appeared to Margaret in the form of a dragon and swallowed her up. However, the cross she held irritated the dragon's innards, causing it to burst open, allowing Margaret to emerge unharmed. It would seem that the story would have a happy ending; however, despite having endured the torture as well as the battle with the dragon, she did not receive mercy, and her captors had her beheaded.

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## **Charles Bridge**

### **Legends And Stories**

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