

# **THE CHARLES BRIDGE AND CZECH IDENTITY**

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## **Abstract**

The century after the battle of White Mountain (1620) has been known as an age of darkness in Bohemia, a time of repressive Habsburg rule and forcible re-imposition of Catholicism on the Bohemian kingdom. This project, in contrast to the most common views of this period, identifies the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a critical time for the formation of a Czech cultural identity. This paper offers a case study of this process by discussing the cultural significance the Charles Bridge in Prague.

## Introduction

My project investigates the creation of a cultural identity in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Bohemia. This undertaking is significant for a number of reasons. Most scholars who have considered the creation of national identities in central and eastern Europe have focused almost exclusively on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the Czech context, the century after the pivotal battle of White Mountain (1620) has been popularly known as the age of *temno* (darkness). Few would search for the origins of a modern Czech identity in this period. Most specialists would have us believe that this epoch was the nadir of the Bohemian nation, when native liberties were suppressed by a repressive Habsburg regime.

The issue of religion is also problematic, as many Czech historians have contended that Catholicism was an alien faith forcibly re-imposed on the kingdom after 1620. Before White Mountain, Bohemia's Catholic community was approximately ten to fifteen percent of the populace. After the Habsburg victory all non-Catholics were expelled from this region. At first glance then, this undertaking may seem like "squaring the circle," as I argue that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were in many respects a critical period of identity formation in the Czech lands.

One of the best sources to understand the changing nature of Czech identity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is architecture. The many buildings that were erected after the devastating Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), both secular and ecclesiastical, reflected a new sense of confidence of Bohemia's rulers. The confessional struggles that had plagued the kingdom since the time of Hus had at long last been mastered.

Of all the structures that were built in this period, none may be more representative and insightful than the famous Charles Bridge and its flanking rows of statuary. The aesthetic strands of an emerging Czech identity that were first articulated in the early seventeenth century would come together and reach a high point in what may be the most recognizable of Bohemia's landmarks. Twenty four of the original twenty eight statues that stood on the bridge were erected in a frenetic flurry of activity between 1706 and 1714. Though the bridge would become the showplace of Bohemia's most famous baroque sculptors,

Ferdinand Brokoff and Matthias Braun, the work of at least seven other craftsmen from this period was represented as well. In terms of collaborative effort, there is no other baroque monument in the Czech kingdom that can match the Charles Bridge. To understand its significance, however, we need to briefly survey its history, for the entire character of the bridge was transformed in the late seventeenth century.

The bridge itself, which did not acquire the name of its builder until the nineteenth century, had been constructed by Charles IV to replace an older structure, which had been destroyed by floods in 1342. The new bridge quickly developed a rather dubious reputation. Even before its completion, local felons, often in the hire of a third party, found it a useful place to do away with their enemies. In the late fourteenth century three important church officials, including a future saint, were hurled from its ramparts.

The fate of its first monuments also reflected the turbulent nature of this period. Though the stone bridge remained relatively free of decoration in these early centuries, a crucifix had been erected in 1361 to mark the spot where Martin Cink, a priest of the cathedral, had been flung into the river. The cross, which became an informal center of devotion, would first be destroyed by the Hussites in 1419. Replaced in the second half of the fifteenth century, it would be derided by Elizabeth Stuart, wife of the Winter King, and tossed in the river by one of her supporters. It would reappear for a third time in 1629 only to be shot down by the Swedes in 1648.

The bridge acquired other unsavory connotations over time. In its early days it had been used as an official place of execution. Across from the crucifix, a headsman had dispatched local felons where a column of Justice had stood. Though this practice seems to have stopped by the period of the study of this paper, the heads of the twelve rebels that had been affixed to spikes on Old Town Bridge Tower after the famous 1621 execution surely reawakened some of these older memories. When the Swedes finally withdrew from the city in 1648 after a long and draining siege, many must have wondered what new tragedy would next unfold on this structure, which had most recently served as the frontline in this last battle for Prague. For Bohemia's Catholics, the Charles Bridge was an apt symbol of a faith that had been under attack for nearly three centuries.

Despite its singular nature, the Charles Bridge has attracted very little scholarly attention. What work has appeared is primarily art historical or antiquarian in nature. Surprisingly, there has been no historical monograph that has used this structure and its statuary as a window into the Catholic culture of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Bohemia. It was the *Ponte dei Angeli* in Rome that originally inspired the decoration of Prague's stone bridge. But this relatively modest set of angels over the Tiber would soon be surpassed by a virtual army of saints that quickly appeared on the span across the Moldau.

The first monument to go up was the crucifix that had been shot down by the Swedes. In 1657 The Bohemian court chancellery decided that a more permanent and dignified memorial should stand in the place of the old wooden cross. They sent the painter Karel Škréta, along with a goldsmith, to Dresden, where they purchased a large bronze replacement from the workshop of Hans Hillger. The first of the statues, John Nepomuk, was raised in 1683. Though two more would appear in the 1690s, it was not until the first decade of the eighteenth century that the saints began arriving in significant numbers.

Between 1706 and 1714 the orders came in so quickly the workshops had difficulty meeting the demand. Though we have already noted that a significant number of artists were active on this project, what is even more important from our perspective is the range of the patrons. No single individual, institution or religious order dominated this phase of construction. Of the 28 monuments raised between 1659 and 1714, thirteen were sponsored by individuals, nine by religious orders and six by other institutions. Participation among the orders was particularly wide. The Cistercians, Dominicans, Jesuits, Premonstratensians, Augustinians, Theatines and Servites were all patrons.

These numbers are significant for a number of reasons. In the first place, they reflect a slow but general shift in patronage patterns that had been occurring over the seventeenth century. Bohemia's towns had been a dynamic center of cultural energy before White Mountain. The deprivations of war and the religious policies of the Habsburgs precipitated their sharp decline, a trend that would only be reversed in the nineteenth century. The gap they left was quickly filled by the church and nobility, which between them redirected the confessional and cultural orientation of the kingdom. The Charles Bridge

and its many saints may be the clearest expression of a new aristocratic and ecclesiastical model that was being replicated across the kingdom.

Equally important to note is the broad representation of the church. There was no master plan for the bridge, no centralized design of the archdiocese, no secret scheme of the Jesuits. In fact quite the opposite occurred. Though the city council exercised some regulatory power, there was a certain entrepreneurial spirit to the entire enterprise. The Society of Jesus actually joined the building phase at a rather late stage. In 1709 one of their members described the order's reluctance to sponsor a monument as a matter of "shameful neglect". Patrons, in the end, competed with each other, as reflected in the statues. The later works on the bridge, the 1711 commissions of Loyola and Xavier, the massive 1712 monument of Vincent Ferrer and Procopius, and the riotous 1714 celebration of the Trinitarian order, were increasingly expensive and correspondingly more extravagant. When we consider more generally the development of a Catholic culture in Bohemia especially in the realm of aesthetics, we should not underestimate the importance of rivalry and competition as an engine of growth and expansion.

Now let us move our focus from patron to audience and consider the nature of the statues and the reactions they were designed to elicit. The Jesuits were keenly attuned to the issue of audience and noted in 1709 that though most passersby stared with curiosity at the statues around them, it was only Nepomuk and the crucifix that consistently drew forth a pious response from the viewer. The design of specific monuments thus became a matter of considerable importance to the Jesuits and others active on the bridge.

Contemporary reports indicate that over time their efforts were successful. The bridge would become an important center of popular devotion. In the late eighteenth century a certain Englishman visiting Prague would note concerning the structure:

In every part of the city people are seen kneeling before statues, but especially on the big bridge across the Moldau where there is the greatest crowd of passersby. This bridge is richly decorated by statues of saints, so that the walker must pass them on both sides like two rows of musketeers. Travelers, especially those coming straight from Berlin, will marvel at the piety of the people here, specifically at the burning passion they display before the saints of the bridge.

The young Arthur Schopenhauer would remark several years later that “the bigoted inhabitants of Prague would consider it the worst sin to cross the bridge without at least doffing their hats.”

Though it seems self-evident that the statuary of the bridge was designed for public consumption, we need once more to place these developments in a wider chronological context. Only a century earlier, the most important locus of artistic activity in Bohemia, the imperial court, was private, and access was limited. From a more general perspective, it is clear that the social function of art changed substantially in the years after White Mountain. Like other types of cultural activity, sculpture and painting underwent a form of confessionalization.

More significantly, many of the models on Charles Bridge would be replicated across the region. Jan Mayer’s 1708 statue of the apostle Jude leaning on his cudgel helped initiate this saint’s cult in Bohemia and set the pattern for many churches outside Prague. In his dramatic portrayal of the Cistercian nun, St. Luitgard Matthias Braun evidently drew his inspiration from the graphic work of J. K. Liška in the monastery of Plasy in western Bohemia. The same theme would be repeated by Peter Brandl for the Sedlec cloister in the eastern half of the kingdom. The most famous of these examples is the statue of Bohemia’s native saint, John Nepomuk. Brokoff’s saint with hands clasping a crucifix to his chest, head slightly askew and eyes clearly fixed on the hereafter became the prototype for the hundreds of Nepomuks that would appear in nearly every Bohemian village.

The originality or novelty of the bridge’s statuary was a matter of secondary importance. Patrons and artists were more concerned with producing effective and compelling models that could be replicated in other settings as aids to devotion. The Jesuits, in particular, saw the bridge’s battery of saints as a type of outdoor theater. An interesting discussion occurred within the order concerning the design of the Francis Xavier statue. In the creation of this towering memorial with multiple levels and figures, the sources illustrate that the Jesuits utilized their experience with school theater to help compose a design that from their perspective would prompt the appropriately pious response from the viewer.

The most dramatic statement concerning the nature of this religious art came from the sculptor Jan Brokoff. Brokoff, the father of the more famous Ferdinand Maximilian, came to Prague from upper



Hungary as an ardent Lutheran. By his own admission he was frequently involved in heated theological arguments with his Catholic colleagues. A turning point came in the early 1680s when he began working on a small statue of St. John Nepomuk that would serve as the model for the Charles Bridge statue. As Brokoff relates, it was through the many hours he spent carving the saint that “the grace of the Holy Spirit shone on me”. He converted in 1682. Whether or not we accept the sincerity of Brokoff’s testimony, it tells us a great deal about Bohemia’s Catholic culture. This was a society where religious images were imbued with tremendous spiritual energy. They had the power not only to stir the viewer to contrition but to bring the very artist himself to conversion.

As work on the statuary drew to a close, the printers took over where the sculptors left off. More than half a dozen books on the new landmark quickly appeared, most of them with a practical religious agenda. Joachim Kamenitzky’s *Eigentlicher Entwurf und Vorbildung der vortrefflichen kostbaren und Welt-berühmten Prager Brucken* (Prague, 1716) was a detailed guide to the structure with a decidedly spiritual orientation. Each chapter contained an edifying biography of the specific saint or saints along with a prayer “so that the eye of the viewer will encourage the spirit to devotion.”

Joannes Müller’s *Triginta devotiones ad Christum et Sanctos eius* (Prague, 1712) was an aid to quiet meditation and worship across the bridge, an informal type of pilgrimage that could be performed during the bustle of everyday life. Augustin Neürautter’s magnificent *Statuae Pontis Pragensis* (Prague, 1714) had no text at all, though his handsome quarto-size illustrations were certainly intended for devotional purposes. Even in the early eighteenth century, this literature retained its pious character. W. F. Welleba’s *Die beruehmte Prager Brueck und ihre Statuen* (Prague, 1827) helped the passerby decode the often complicated iconography of the statuary.

The iconography of the stone bridge reflected many of the general themes of the Catholic Reformation at high tide. Not unexpectedly, the Virgin was well represented. Apart from three statues of Mary herself, the first two monuments on the Old Town side of the bridge aggressively promoted her cult. In 1709 the Cistercians commissioned Matthias Jäckel to depict Bernard genuflecting before the Virgin. Jäckel cast the scene as a reversal of the Annunciation where a triumphant Mary greets the saint, who

assuming the position of Gabriel will announce her status as Queen of Heaven. The previous year the Dominicans had funded a similar work, featuring Dominic and Aquinas as her disciples.

The adoration of the host was another theme that was attended to. Vít Seipl, the abbot of Prague's Strahov monastery, sponsored a statue of St. Norbert defending the sacrament from the blasphemous Tanchelm, while immediately opposite, Francis Borgia piously directs the viewer's attention to a monstrance and host held by an angel. Catholic martyrs, a subject we will return to shortly, were scattered across the span, highlighted of course by both the statue of Nepomuk and a plaque that marked the actual spot where he was thrown into the river.

The bridge's decoration also complemented civic and confraternal activities. The imperial counselor Jan Václav Obytecký charged Ferdinand Brokoff with the creation of a trio of saints – Elizabeth, Margaret and Barbara. Barbara, the central figure of the group and the patron saint of the dying, is holding the last sacrament, a scene that would have surely resonated with so many of Prague's confraternities that were concerned with the "good death". To her left was Elizabeth giving alms to a poor beggar. This theme of Christian charity, which was reflected in a number of the monuments, is the most obvious example of the performative nature of the bridge. A society organized by Prague's many servants would shortly develop around Brokoff's *Pietà*, where individuals would contribute to the maintenance of the widows of their community.

Finally, there is the decidedly affective nature of the statuary. The religious art of this period was intended to stir the senses leading the viewer to a heightened spiritual state. This strain of Catholic mysticism, which is clearly evident in the figures of Bernard and Francis, reaches a climax in Matthias Braun's magnificent figure of St. Luitgard. Bohemia's answer to Bernini's St. Theresa, the blind saint lost in ecstasy is gently pulled to drink from the wounded side of the crucified Christ.

On the Charles Bridge, general concerns of the Catholic Reformation were balanced with more local themes specific to the Czech context. Shortly after the Prague siege of 1648, a memorial panel was raised on the Old Town Bridge Tower that urged the traveler to wander slowly across the bridge remembering the patriotic citizens who fought with "fire and sword" against the Swedish invader. This

historical moment became indelibly etched into the public memory of the bridge. Kamenitzky's guide recounts in obsessive detail the events of the fourteen-week siege. During this period the Swedes launched six separate attacks on the bridge, fired 186 shells and spent 12,587 rounds of ammunition in their vain attempts to reach the river's eastern bank.

One of the most important features of the siege was the melding of patriotic concerns with religious sentiment. Key to the city's defense was the leadership of Jesuit Jiří Plachy. On the night of July 26, when the Swedes stole down from Castle Hill, it was Plachy who rallied a few citizens to man the barricades and hold the bridge until morning and the arrival of reinforcements. The Jesuits assumed critical positions both militarily and spiritually during the siege. When they were not coordinating student militias, they were calling the city to repentance. They instituted fasts, led prayer services and even organized processions of flagellants. They also helped sacralize the events of the war endowing the bridge with a greater sense of sanctity. When a Swedish sharpshooter leveled the crucifix, it was they who took Christ's intact head to the Clementinum where it remained for many years as a treasured relic.

There were other reminders of the heroic defense of the bridge. The iconography of the St. Vitus statue is particularly interesting. The kingdom's patron saint stands undaunted before three lions cowering before him, not unlikely a reference to the valor of the Catholic Czechs before the Protestant lion of the north. The figure was funded by Matěj Vojtěch Macht, dean of the chapter of Vyšehrad. His father had been one of the students on the barricades, and for his service the emperor had granted the family the title *Löwenmacht*.

Art historians have noted that the bridge and its statuary represent an important stylistic fusion of international trends with a more local tradition. What is true in terms of aesthetics is also a significant feature of its content. There are a number of monuments, in fact, that feature some rather strange pairings between a local saint and a figure of more international significance. Ferdinand Brokoff coupled the great missionary Vincent Ferrer with Bohemia's St. Procopius, the founder of the monastic community of Sázava. Slightly more jarring is the statue celebrating the Trinitarian order that had been founded in 1198

to redeem Christian captives from the Muslims. Standing next to its founders, John of Matha and Felix of Valois, is the kingdom's most rustic of saints, the hermit Ivan.

Though these juxtapositions of figures might strike our eye as odd today, they served an important function when they were erected. The statues of the stone bridge were, in many respects, an attempt to reintegrate Bohemia's problematic past into a broader ecclesiastical narrative of the church triumphant. It is significant that, with both Vincent and the Trinitarians, their Bohemian partner was a saint who predated them by nearly three centuries, perhaps a way to remind the kingdom's believers that they too shared an old and distinguished Catholic heritage. The bridge's martyrs mirror the same theme. Nepomuk and Wenceslas are balanced by Jude and the Jesuit martyrs of Nagasaki. By focusing on the victories of an earlier period, the designers of the stone bridge were trying to reach past the relatively recent troubles of the Hussite and Reformation era and reconnect Bohemia both to its earlier cultural traditions and the wider Catholic world.

If there is a characteristic common to all these statues, it is victory and celebration. As we observed at the outset, the Charles Bridge had a rather ambiguous past. Its history had been marred by the assassinations of priests, the machinations of Protestant queens and the assaults of Swedish soldiers. But the political and religious climate was changing, and these changes would be made manifest on the bridge. 1648 was of course one important turning point for Bohemia. Another moment would come in the early 1680s, when a bloody peasant revolt was suppressed, and the Turks were turned back at Vienna. The crisis of the early seventeenth century was passing and giving way to a new period of stability.

From the Catholic perspective, the church had been tried and had emerged triumphant. A number of the statues were built specifically to celebrate noteworthy events. Brokoff's Nepomuk commemorated the 300th anniversary of the saint's martyrdom. The Trinitarian memorial of 1714 marked John of Matha's death five centuries years earlier. And then there were the statues themselves. Two of the tallest monuments on the bridge, the twin towers of Ignatius and Loyola, are perhaps the best examples of this new sense of confidence. A theatrical Ignatius is perched on a laurel wreath that symbolizes the victory of the Catholic cause. The wreath itself is resting on a globe, which in turn is supported by allegorical

representations of the four continents. Scattered across the structure are emblems and inscriptions that announce the valiant work of the Jesuits in turning back heresy and reestablishing the true faith.

The equally massive Xavier has a slightly different orientation. Gesturing to a cross that he holds in his left hand, the tireless missionary is proclaiming the gospel to a savage who is bowing at his feet while an engraving to his right informs us that the saint has baptized 1.2 million new believers.

The theme of conversion introduced here by Xavier is significant and one that we will use to conclude our discussion, as it illustrates to what extent the bridge had become an identity marker for Bohemia's Catholics. Conversion is a process of interaction, a dialogue between two parties. In one respect, it points to the ultimate triumph of one's own faith. Apart from Ignatius and Xavier the bridge was filled with missionary saints. There was Norbert, bringing the gospel to central Europe, Dominic, combating the Albigensians, Vincent Ferrer, working among the Turks and Jews, and even the usually mild Anthony of Padua known in some quarters as the "hammer of heretics". All these figures reminded Czech believers on what side they stood.

But conversion also points to the faith of the other, and it is this side of the dialogue that is often more important in the formation of identities. Conversion reminds us of whom we are not. It distinguishes our enemies and exposes their weaknesses. This dual dynamic of highlighting one's friends while recognizing one's foes may have been the most important social function of the bridge.

Czech Catholics would recognize three sets of confessional opponents scattered across the structure. The Muslims, described as Turks, Saracens or more vaguely as Moors, were well represented. Kamenitzky identified the four individuals supporting the Xavier monument as Muslims. Thematically, they play a more central role in the statues of the Trinitarians and Vincent Ferrer. The Trinitarian group depicts the liberation of Christians held captive by the Muslims. At the base of this structure is a prison where a seemingly bored Turkish jailor is guarding a group of believers who are beseeching God for deliverance. Vincent Ferrer, in contrast, is represented as an apostle to the heretics. Below him is a turbaned figure of a new Saracen Christian who bears an inscription celebrating the saint's conversion of eight thousand Muslims.

More interesting are the multiple references to the only non-Catholic community that existed in late seventeenth-century Prague, the Jews. Next to the Muslim convert on the Ferrer monument is a rabbi who, with hand across his chest, is admitting the errors of his faith. Evidently, Ferrer had greater success with the Jews for the engraving below the rabbi informs us that he succeeded in bringing 25,000 to the Catholic faith. There is a more subtle allusion on the statue of the Dominicans. Originally below Dominic was an inscription from I Corinthians: "We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block."

This reference takes on special meaning when we consider the monument immediately to its right, the famous crucifix. In the mid-1690s a Jew had crossed the bridge and as a gesture of mock adoration had bowed backwards to the cross. For this blasphemous behavior, the Jewish community had been compelled to erect, at their own expense, a gilded inscription proclaiming Christ's sanctity in Hebrew. At the bottom of the cross, three plaques were installed that described in Czech, Latin and German the crime of the Jew.

The last of these confessional enemies were the Protestants. How the stone bridge came to include these heretics is an intriguing story that reflects the extent to which this structure had become an identity marker for Bohemian Catholics. The supporters of neither Luther nor Calvin were officially represented in the bridge's statuary. By the early eighteenth century, however, there was a popular legend concerning two figures that decorated the corner of Old Town Bridge Tower. A man with a lascivious smile has slipped his hand under the dress of a woman. The tale that circulated and was told to foreign travelers identified this indecorous couple as an earthy Luther and his lusty wife, the former nun Katherine von Bora. When all these examples are considered together, the Charles Bridge indeed stands out as one of the most expressive statements of a new cultural identity that was taking shape in Bohemia in the decades after the Thirty Years' War.