

49. The Secret World of the Knights of the Cross

Prague 1 (Staré Město), the Charles Bridge Museum (Muzeum Karlova Mostu) at Křižovnické náměstí 3
Metro A to Staroměstská; Tram 17, 18 along eastern riverbank

In 1212 the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (1194–1250) issued a formal edict, known as a Golden Bull (the latin *bull*a being the monarch's personal seal), bestowing the hereditary crown of Bohemia upon the Přemyslid Duke Otakar I (1197–1230). Despite such an historic accolade, the first King of Bohemia's daughter Agnes (1211–82) chose not to become the wife of a European monarch but instead to become a nun. She accepted the rule of St. Claire of Assisi (1194–1253), an early follower of St. Francis (1182–1226), and in 1231 founded a convent of Poor Claires with herself as abbess at U Milosrdných 17 in Prague's Old Town (Staré Město) (see no. 39).

In the grounds of what is now known as the Convent of St. Agnes of Bohemia (klášter sv. Anežky České) a Hospital of St. Francis was also founded. The hospital was not only a place where the ill were catered for but also *hospes* (Latin for guests and travellers). Lay brothers ran the hospital, inspired by other hospital orders such as the Knights of St. John. In 1237, at Agnes's own instigation, Pope Gregory IX promoted the brothers to a distinct order – the so-called Order of the Cross with the Red Star; they remain the only holy order of Czech origin and the only male order to be founded by a woman.

In 1252 the Order of the Cross with the Red Star, from whose ranks would later come many of Prague's bishops, built themselves a new church and hospital near the end of what is now



The ruins of the Judith Bridge (Juditin most) lie directly beneath the Charles Bridge Museum (Muzeum Karlova Mostu)

Charles Bridge (Karlův most). At that time the Romanesque predecessor to the bridge, the Judith Bridge (Juditin most), stood here and the brothers acted as gatekeepers with the right to collect tolls (see no. 2). Today, nothing of this older bridge, nor of the Order's original church and hospital, can be seen above ground. However, first impressions can be deceiving and there is a surprise in store for those visiting the Charles Bridge Museum (Muzeum Karlova Mostu) at Křižovnické náměstí 3. In a small room at the far end of the museum there is a metal staircase leading down to where excavated fragments of the Judith Bridge can still be seen. From the late 13th century the ground level hereabouts had been raised artificially in an attempt to avoid repeated flood damage by the Vltava (the bridge itself was destroyed by a flood in 1342). As a result, many 12th century Romanesque structures, including the remains of the Judith Bridge, now lie hidden below today's pavement level (see no. 51). Fragments of the Judith Bridge are also visible on the west bank in the foyer of the Hotel Residence Lundborg at U Lužického semináře 3.

Off the entrance hall to the museum can be found a doorway that leads to the cellar of the adjacent green-domed Baroque Church of St. Francis (kostel sv. Františka), built for the Order in 1679–85 to a design by French architect Jean-Baptiste Mathey. Here lie the walls of the Order's original church, now concealed deep underground, which were re-used as the foundations for the Baroque church directly overhead. Around the time the new church was constructed the remains of the old church were converted into a curious subterranean chapel-cum-grotto, bristling with artificial stalactites and stalagmites made from a mixture of crushed eggshells and dust.



A curious grotto is hidden beneath the Church of St. Francis (kostel sv. Františka)

Other places of interest nearby: 42, 47, 48, 50, 51