

# THE LIFE OF THE MONKS |

## MONASTERY LANDSCAPE TRAIL ALTENBERG

### Itinerary

The life of the Cistercian monks in Altenberg Monastery was highly regimented and followed a strict daily routine: *ora et labora* – pray and work – was the abbey's supreme rule.

During Lent in February, for example, there was a wake-up call at 1.25 a.m. and night service, which lasted until 2.50 a.m., followed in the morning by *Laudes* (morning prayer) and the Eucharist. From 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. the monks went about their work, and at 4 p.m. they gathered for *Vesper* (evening prayer). Dinner was taken at 4:40 p.m., and after *Komplet* (night prayer) at about 5:30 p.m., it was already time for curfew.

The monastic community functioned according to a strict hierarchy, headed by the abbot. The latter took the "place of Christ" in the monastery and was to preside over the brothers as teacher and shepherd.

The monks of the order were obliged to obey him, and transgressions and rule-breaking were sanctioned with sometimes severe punishments.

The regulations to which Cistercian monastic communities were subject were fundamentally laid down in the *Carta Caritatis*. The document, which dates from the 12th century, is a kind of constitution of the Cistercian order and has been preserved in several versions to this day. With its detailed rights and duties, the Cistercians explicitly oriented themselves to the *Regula Benedicti* (Benedict's Rule) from the early Middle Ages, which determined the life of the brothers in 73 chapters. The *Carta Caritatis* was supplemented by a collection of resolutions of the General Chapter, the annual assembly of all abbots of the Cistercian Order.

### Food rules

The monks of the Cistercian Order also had to adhere to certain dietary regulations. For example, the daily rations of food for the monks were fixed, as was the time of each meal. The communal meals and the readings and prayers that went with them were important elements in the life of the monastic community. Wine was also available to the friars, but it was to be consumed in moderation.

The menu of the Cistercians was also regulated; a resolution of the General Chapter, for example, states: "Food in the monastery should always and everywhere be meatless and fatless, except for the seriously ill and herculean craftsmen." Because of their renunciation of meat, fish became a valued supplement to the diet of the friars. Since fish were also considered a river vegetable, they were a permitted food even during Lent. This further increased their importance in the Cistercian diet.

## **Fish farming**

In the Middle Ages, the Bergisches Land had abundant and high-quality water, so that the nearby Dhünn provided the monks with fish such as salmon and trout as well as numerous crayfish.

In addition, the friars bred carp in large fish ponds specially built for the purpose. The number of ponds varied in the course of time; on the copperplate engraving made by Johann Jakob Sartor in 1707, for example, four ponds can be seen, whereas the French and Prussian maps of the early 19th century already show seven ponds. Of the originally much larger pond complex outside the monastery walls, only these five ponds in the valley of the Pfengstbach are visible today.

Within the monastery walls was another pond for fish farming. This pond, later called the Kahnweiher, existed until the 1930s before it was filled in. Today, the park and the sports field of Haus Altenberg are located in its place.

The extensive construction of ponds for fish farming is not unique to the Altenberg monastery landscape; rather, all Cistercian monasteries had corresponding fish ponds, the remains of which today form a typical landscape.