

CATTLE BREEDING | ALTENBERG MONASTERY LANDSCAPE TRAIL

Wet meadows

Areas that were unfavourable for agriculture, such as the damp soils in the floodplain of the Dhünn, were particularly suitable for grazing the cattle kept by the Cistercians. Since the terrain of the Altenberg monastery landscape is very rich in water in its valley location and has a high groundwater level, wet meadows developed here over time, which in the Rhineland were known as "Benden", but also as "Sumpfwiesen" or "Brühl". These developed primarily through the agricultural production of fodder and later also litter for livestock and were much more widespread than today until the 18th century, making them a typical feature of Central European cultivated landscapes. As open areas, they remained correspondingly light in vegetation and developed into very species-rich biotopes.

Today, wet meadows are generally no longer profitable for agriculture, but with their heavy growth of various grasses, flowers and other plants, they offer a high landscape aesthetic value. In addition, they are habitats for numerous native

animal and plant species and are therefore considered biotopes worthy of special protection.

Forest pastures

In addition to the wet meadows around the riverbanks, the Altenberg monks also used the existing forest areas as grazing areas for their livestock. Large livestock such as horses and cows were seasonally driven to the forest pastures as part of three-field farming, whereas pigs in particular found fodder there all year round and could be fattened (so-called forest fattening).

Acorns and beechnuts, but also wild fruit and mushrooms, and especially the growth of young trees were suitable as food for the cattle. The regular grazing of shoots and buds of regrowing plants by the fattening animals led to a reduced natural regeneration of the forest trees, but provided more light for the old tree population. The ground vegetation also changed as a result of grazing, as the non-grazing herbaceous vegetation was pushed back in favour of light-loving species. This resulted in sparse, almost open forests with little undergrowth and old, large-crown trees as a typical manifestation of Central European forest pastures, also known as Silvopasture. However, forests of this type hardly exist today; as a rule, they have been displaced by modern forestry. The few remnants of Silvopasture that still exist are mostly under nature conservation and bear witness to this human-directed historical forest use, which extended from the Neolithic period to the early modern era.

Livestock breeding

The Cistercian monks of Altenberg Abbey practised both agriculture and animal husbandry in the monastery landscape surrounding them. They mainly kept cattle – often grouped together under the collective term oxen – as well as pigs, sheep and goats, geese and chickens.

Although the friars refrained from eating meat, animal husbandry ensured various other resources, such as the use of hides and leather for clothing and shoes. The pigs kept were usually destined for sale in the nearby towns, whereas oxen served the monks as draught animals, especially in agriculture. Overall, the farm animals were once considerably smaller than today's breeds; for example, the height at the withers of cows was only about one metre, of pigs about 70 cm.