

## FARMING |

# ALTENBERG MONASTERY LANDSCAPE TRAIL

### Arable farming

The monks of the Cistercian order lived according to the ideals of seclusion, asceticism, poverty and self-sufficiency. A simple life according to the guiding principle *ora et labora* (pray and work) was the basic idea of the order. Hence why the brothers themselves also worked in the fields surrounding the monastery complex, especially during harvest time. Despite the ideal of being able to live from one's own labour and being independent of all worldly goods, the Cistercian monks usually outsourced hard work to what were known as converted monks. As lay brothers, they did not receive ordination, but nevertheless lived in the monastery complex, albeit very much separated from the ordained brothers. Towards the end of the 12th century, there were already 138 converted monks living and working in Altenberg Monastery, compared to only 107 ordained monks.

In the course of time, the European monastery complexes of the Cistercians developed into large agricultural enterprises which – despite the ideal of renunciation and modesty – produced far more than they needed for their own needs and had facilities for storage and stockpiling. The order sold its surplus in the nearby towns, which caused the prosperity of the medieval monastery complexes to grow rapidly.

### Three-field farming

For a long time it was assumed that after the foundation of Altenberg Abbey, the Cistercian monks first began to make use of the surrounding land in order to be able to cultivate it. In the immediate vicinity of the monastery, for example, large areas of forest were cleared to gain arable land for the cultivation of grain and other crops. In the meantime, however, it is known that local farmers had already begun cultivating the land long before the Cistercians, so that the monks could fall back on already existing structures.

To this day, the monks are also said to have been particularly skilled in agriculture, which enabled them to increase the yields of their farmland many times over. The Cistercian monks are also said to have made a decisive contribution towards the spread of three-field farming in the Middle Ages. In this form of cultivation, the entire cultivated area was divided into three parts – a winter field, a summer field and one left fallow. Within a three-year cycle, the land was cultivated in rotation: In autumn the field was ploughed and a winter cereal such as rye or wheat was sown, which was harvested in late summer. In the following spring, a summer cereal, such as oats or barley, was sown and harvested again in late summer. The area then lay fallow for a year so that the soil could recover, and was ploughed again the next autumn.

## **Wheeled plough**

The use of the wheeled plough also significantly increased agricultural yields. From around the 10th century, this replaced the wooden hook plough, which could only be operated with enormous effort on the part of the farmer.

The heavy wheeled plough, on the other hand, which was pulled by oxen and later also by horses, was characterised in particular by an iron cutting edge that could penetrate deep into the soil and lift whole clods. The mouldboard mounted immediately behind it turned over the lifted soil, which made it possible to loosen the arable soil much more and prepare it for sowing like before.