

ORCHARD | ALTENBERG MONASTERY LANDSCAPE TRAIL

Field cultivation

In the Middle Ages and well into modern times, agriculture was the most important source of food for the people.

The innovations in field cultivation through the development and spread of three-field farming and wheel ploughing – driven forward by the Cistercian monks, among others – led to a significant increase in yields and strong population growth in Europe from the 11th century onwards. This was only interrupted by the great plague waves of the 14th century.

Decisive for the size and form of agricultural land at that time was the right of inheritance, which provided for a field either to be bequeathed in equal parts to all those entitled to it (real division) or to be passed on as a whole area to a single heir (right of inheritance). For agriculture, real division in particular, which was primarily applied, meant over time a fragmentation of the available farmland into small parts. After only a few generations, the fields that were repeatedly divided up were too small to provide a livelihood. A multitude of small fields developed, often in the form of narrow strips, some of which can still be seen in the landscape today.

In the case of arable land belonging to monasteries, on the other hand, this form of succession did not apply – the order retained its land, as was the case in the Altenberg monastery landscape, where arable land could be cultivated constantly for centuries. In addition, the brothers usually remained loyal to their abbey for life and pledged this *stabilitas loci* (permanence of place) at their profession.

The permanent commitment of the monks to their monastery enabled planning security, reliability and sustainability over generations, as the agricultural development of usable land often required time planning far beyond their own lifetime. Within their own biography, for example, the friars carried out clearing and initial building work, the completion of which was then the responsibility of the following generation. This, in turn, optimised the system until the members of the order who followed them eventually benefited from it.

Orchards

In addition to arable farming, orchards played an important role in the Altenberg monastery landscape for supplying the abbey with healthy food. In times when fruit was not yet common and available at any time of the year, the stored, dried or boiled yields from the orchards provided an important source of vitamins and sugar in the winter months. The Cistercian monks also distinguished themselves in this field by applying advanced cultivation methods and by selecting and refining individual fruit varieties. The friars attached great importance to quality and sustainability by carefully tending the trees and ensuring that they received sufficient sunlight and water. They also carried out regular pruning to maintain the health of the trees and ensure optimal fruiting.

The cultivation and breeding of various fruit trees brought the monks extensive yields, which were intended both for the monastery community's own needs and for sale. The friars developed innovative methods for processing and storing fruit and experimented with the production of jams, compotes and fruit juices to extend the shelf life of the harvest.

Orchards

The magnificent view of the Altenberg monastery complex by Johann Jakob Sartor from 1707 shows the abbey surrounded by numerous gardens. Some of these are recorded by name: Immediately next to the cellar (6) was the associated "tree garden" (13), as was the convent's "tree garden" (20) to the south of the monastery complex. These were probably mainly fruit trees cultivated by the Cistercian monks.

Next to the refectory (3) was the "kitchen garden" (18), and to the south of the cellar and stables (19) the "cellar garden" (21), which was probably a kind of herb garden. In the various beds visible on the plan, the brothers cultivated herbs and vegetables, especially for their own use in the farm buildings of the monastery complex.