

# RECLAMATION | ALTENBERG MONASTERY LANDSCAPE TRAIL

## Reclamation

In their founding legends, the Cistercians emphasised that they cleared the wilderness they found in order to create the conditions for founding their monasteries. Abandoned, wild places far from civilisation are said to have been where the monks ventured.

In the meantime, however, research has been able to prove that the Order mainly found landscapes that had already been developed and made use of them. In some cases, the local lands were even already settled, including the Altenberg monastery landscape, which had already been cultivated before the monks arrived. In the area around Berge Castle, the seat of the Counts of Berg, there were agricultural areas, paths, farms and woodland that dated back to well before the time when the monastery was founded in the Dhünn valley. The Cistercian Order, however, was distinguished by a special craftsmanship that allowed the optimisation of existing resources. The friars knew how to use the innovations of their time in agriculture and animal husbandry for their own benefit and thus significantly increase yields. Their hydraulic engineering improved the water supply and also provided energy for the operation of the monastery's own mills. In addition, the abbey – by no means the rule in the Middle Ages – had facilities for stockpiling. Surpluses could be capitalised on in the markets of the surrounding towns. The resulting profit, as well as the ascetic lifestyle of the friars with little consumption, made it possible to invest in equipment and infrastructure.

## Hereditas Mountains

In 1133, Count Adolf von Berg gave the Cistercian Order not only the abandoned Berge Castle on the Bülsberg, but also extensive lands in the Dhünn valley. These are now known as the Hereditas Mountains (from the Latin *hereditas* – inheritance, legacy, inheritance). It seems to have been a closed estate that surrounded the monastery district and the former Berge Castle and remained in the possession of Altenberg Abbey until the secularisation in 1803. In addition, there were numerous donations from ecclesiastical and secular lords over the centuries.

The Hereditas Berge comprised a section of the Dhünn valley as well as the adjacent, predominantly forested valley flanks. The outer boundaries of the area ran for long stretches along watercourses and were marked by a rampart in the remaining areas. This served on the one hand to mark the property of the monastery, and on the other hand to prevent foreign cattle from entering the monastery forests. An approximately 1.2 km long section of this rampart has been preserved to the south-east of Altenberg, densely overgrown with trees and bushes, it is difficult to recognise in the terrain today.

## **End of a monastery**

With the advance of French troops into the Rhineland at the end of the 18th century, Altenberg Abbey had already lost two-thirds of its lands. In the course of the following secularisation, the Altenberg convent was dissolved in 1803. In November of that year, the last Cistercian monks left the monastery, with their Abbot Josef Greef following on 1 December. Shortly afterwards, the Bavarian King Maximilian Joseph sold the monastery grounds to the Cologne wine merchant Johann Heinrich Pleunissen.

A severe fire destroyed large parts of the former monastery and the roof of the church in November 1815. In the following years, the abbey deteriorated more and more, further parts of the buildings collapsed and the ruins of the cathedral were mercilessly exposed to the weather.