

Concluding remarks

This publication marks the preliminary conclusion of the archaeological and historical research that accompanied the exploration of the Abbey of Corvey on the River Weser in the decades since the Second World War. The volume was compiled in preparation for the proposal of the nomination of the abbey complex and its immediate surroundings as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Based on all the historical and archaeological studies carried out to date, it intends to paint a differentiated and comprehensive picture of the monastic complex with particular emphasis on the church. Although the main excavator Prof. Dr. Uwe Lobbedey was no longer available to oversee the project, the Regional Association of Westphalia-Lippe was able to compile a team of authors to deal with the subjects of history, archaeology, finds analysis and the study of the skeletal remains.

It is a basic principle of any piece of research not to view the results presented at the end of the process as final but as an open window for further in-depth research, subsequent clarification and future discoveries. In any case, it makes sense at this stage to present these interim results thus paving the way for further discussion and developments, particularly in view of the planned publication on the upstanding remains which will provide suggestions with regard to the interpretation of the entire building history.

The extraordinary importance of the Benedictine Abbey of Corvey has been known at least since scientific research began in the late 19th century: it was a filiation of the French Abbey of Corbie, enjoyed royal support, from an historical point of view it was the first important abbey in the region of Saxony and it was used as a temporary residence by numerous kings during the Early and High Middle Ages. From a religious point of view it was one of the earliest Christian centres in Saxony, from the point of view of architecture it is in fact the only large Carolingian west-work still surviving. The rest of the Carolingian building is known from sketches which were made before it was rebuilt and altered in the Baroque period, and finally it was also an early centre for arts north of the Alps.

Both the foundation and the Carolingian-Ottonian history of the Imperial Abbey of Corvey are relatively well documented (Chap. II). After a failed initial founding elsewhere in 816, the monks moved to the new location on a bend in the River Weser in 822, thanks in no small measure to the support of Louis the Pious who presented them with the relics of Saint Stephen. The fact that the remains of Saint Vitus of Saint-Denis were transferred to Corvey in 836 further strengthened the Abbey in its early years. The consecration of a church dedicated to Saint Stephen was recorded in 844. The choir of this church was extended in the 870s and the foundation stone of the “triple-towered” west-work, whose core is still intact, was laid in 873. The completed west-work was consecrated in 885. Numerous visits by kings illustrate how important the Abbey was in terms of imperial politics until Salian times. Extensive building work carried out in 1148/49 included the construction of the abbot’s residence in the area of the atrium and a chapel dedicated to Saint Remaclus, whose exact location is no longer known. Flooding and conflagrations, stabilising work and new constructions carried out in the 16th century were followed by the demolition of the atrium in 1616/24 which heralded a phase of structural reduction. According to several inventories the church was in such a state of disrepair after the Thirty Years War that it was demolished in 1665 and replaced by a new

building between 1667 and 1674, which still stands today. The west-work was the only component that was not demolished at the time.

Numerous written records mention furnishings, none of which have survived. Glass oil lamps, for instance, were recorded as early as 836/37. The sources also talk about six bronze pillars, some of which were inscribed, and which dated from the period around 1000 or earlier. They were said to have stood in the arcades of the nave, and this allows us to draw conclusions with regard to the interior design of the church. A gilded hoop of copper to which wax candles could be affixed, is commonly associated with Abbot Thietmar, while the “Cantabona” bell was commissioned by Abbot Druthmar in the first half of the 11th century (preserved in a recast version dating from 1584). A list of destructions dated 1102/03 gives an insight into the former splendour of the furnishings: gold and silver, cloaks, vestments, surplices, sashes, pallia, hangings, chalices, candlesticks, censers, incense, candles, roof cladding, panelling and windows are mentioned. Repairs were carried out on wall hangings and (glass) windows in 1299. The much-mentioned relics were, however, the greatest treasure of the church.

Besides a detailed chapter on the history of the Abbey of Corvey and a list of all the written sources, this volume gives an account of the archaeological finds and features (Chap. III, IV and V) and the reconstruction and interpretation of the Abbey and its sequence of phases (Chap. VI) based mainly on the results obtained from the archaeological investigations. The excavations, which began in the 1950s with archaeological test trenches both in the exterior and interior areas, consisted of a systematic examination of the entire church interior in the 1970s and of the exterior area in the 1990s. They provided more detailed information in addition to the preserved plan sketches dating from before 1590 and 1663 as well as helping to define an additional earlier and several later building phases. It was thus possible to highlight the important stages in the construction history of the Abbey since its founding and to retrace the main phases of the development of the monastery and abbey church until the Baroque period, when the church was demolished and replaced with a new building.

As shown by the investigations, the founding building constructed between 822 and 844 was a three-aisled basilica with narrow side aisles. A slightly transverse rectangular choir was added to the east with an ambulatory crypt inside it, which was built at the same time as the choir and only lay 0.2 to 0.44 metres lower than the nave. An axial *confessio* may have been destroyed when burials were dug during subsequent phases. A small two-storey hall with an eastern apse was built onto the central section of the east wall. The function of foundation blocks discovered on both sides of the choir could not be ascertained, nor was it possible to answer the question whether a north annex built quite soon after the choir may be interpreted as a transept annex or similar building. This earliest church already had an atrium on its western side, which exceeded the length of the church ground plan and had some kind of gate construction also on its western side.

Immediately prior to the construction of the west-work the choir complex was renewed in the 870s based on a completely changed concept. The result was a choir with a semicircular apse and ambulatory crypt, with the addition in the east of a cruciform axial

chapel with adjoining rooms on either side. The existence of longitudinal transverse arms which would point to the presence of an east transept as early as the Carolingian period could not be ascertained and is in fact difficult to prove archaeologically. While both arms had east apses according to the 1590 sketch, the 1663 sketch only showed one apse on the northern arm. Moreover, their height and connection to the main room remains unclear.

A room in front of the crucifixion altar in line with the church axis in the eastern section was dug out of the ground in 1100 for the tombs of the venerated Abbots Liudolph and Druthmar. Numerous later graves disturbed the earlier features throughout the church interior and particularly in the nave.

The imposing west-work was erected some time after 873 and was slightly wider than the church building and formed a western terminal with three towers. This building component consists of the old Carolingian fabric and extensive alterations that took place initially during the Romanesque period and again under Abbot Theodor von Beringhausen in the late 16th century. Today its façade has two towers. The excavations carried out in the hall on the ground floor of the preserved west-work uncovered the foundations of the structure as well as features associated with the first atrium (see above), constructional features pertaining to post-Carolingian alterations – such as the addition of vaults, the construction of galleries and the insertion of a presumed chapel in the north side aisle – and graves from the Baroque period. A second atrium of unknown length, which lay adjacent to the west-work but cannot be found on the 16th and 17th century ground plan sketches, was part of this third Carolingian phase. Standing two storeys high, as had been the case in the earlier atrium, it had two interior fountains arranged in a symmetrical design. The area yielded a lot of evidence of building work such as four mortar troughs which would have been used in the construction of the west-work. Alteration work was carried out on the north end of this atrium in the mid 12th century under Abbot Wibald von Stablo. The excavations uncovered the remains of the abbot's residence. The chapel dedicated to Saint Remaclus, known from written sources, could not, however, be traced archaeologically.

¹ Effmann 1929.

² Esterhues 1953 and Esterhues 1957.

Earlier interpretations based on the theories proposed by Wilhelm Effmann¹ despite the lack of archaeological investigations, and on inadequate excavation results obtained by Friedrich Esterhues² from test trenches that had been far too small, have now been conclusively disproved. There was not just one Carolingian phase, but in fact three distinct phases covering a considerable period of time (from 822 to 885). Moreover, the archaeological features provided irrefutable evidence regarding the ground plans and designs of individual building components within the church including the church interior, the chapels and also structures associated with various phases that may be interpreted as *sacraria*.

The excavations carried out in the forecourt of the church not only uncovered the foundations of an atrium in the forecourt area to the west of the church, which until 1995 had only been assumed to have existed, but also provided evidence of two tangible building phases: an earlier atrium possibly with a tower-like structure in front of it

predating the first Carolingian church, followed by a second and later atrium which was altered and extended to the west when the imposing west-work was erected.

Several consecutive phases were also detected in the area of the cloister. Here, the excavations revealed traces of a Carolingian cloister, which was contemporary with the earlier church and predated the construction of the west-work. The investigations also uncovered several consecutive phases of a south wing in the cloister, which was not continued in the Baroque building newly constructed in the early 18th century.

Test excavations carried out to the south of the church with the intention of confirming or disproving the existence of a southern transverse arm actually raised new questions, which meant that the dimensions and, more importantly, the chronological sequence of an east transept could not be clarified.

Given the extent of the excavations, the finds recovered (Chap. IV) were not very plentiful. Clay fragments and artefacts attest to the settlement of the area long before the Abbey was founded in 822. Some of the architectural fragments found among demolition rubble in the area of the former atrium had been used as spolia in the upstanding components and tile fragments attest to the existence of tiled roofs. Wall and floor tiles made of stone and glass give a tentative insight into the magnificent interior design of the Carolingian church, some of which was retained despite subsequent alterations. Stove tiles dating from the High Middle Ages give an indication of the high standard of living that was already enjoyed throughout the monastic complex in those early stages.

Some of the artefacts that bear witness to the everyday lives of the inhabitants of, and visitors to, the Abbey are remarkable. The finds include three brooches probably from northern France which may even predate the time of the founding in 822, as well as the remnants of a high medieval jet arm ring, probably of English origin. A fragment of a crozier knob dating from the second half of the 9th century and numerous reliquaries and book covers, which were made in Corvey workshops, can be associated with a liturgical context in the wider sense. Many of the book covers, which date from as early as the 10th century, were already made using the so-called *email brun* technique. The graves of the clerics and monks from the Baroque period contained textile remains and coffin fittings which allowed us to date the graves more precisely thanks to their characteristic early modern or Baroque forms.

Besides providing information on the sexes, the anthropological study of the skeletal remains from two groups of burials also gave certain indications with regard to the social status of the deceased. One group included women and children from the period of the foundation of the Abbey which were found in the south wing of the earlier atrium, the other consisted of a series of post-medieval monks' burials in the northern side aisle of the west-work. Both groups of people were strikingly tall, much taller on average than their contemporaries, which means that we may count the deceased as having belonged to the social upper classes.

It was the aim of this publication to use the archaeological findings to paint as comprehensive a picture as possible of the Abbey of Corvey – and its heyday in particular. The emphasis of the study was undoubtedly placed on the building and its formal

architectural characteristics which make it particularly noteworthy – and even unique in terms of its western building component – within the history of Carolingian architecture.

Much has been written and discussed about the monument over the past 40 years of research and analysis. The detailed and comprehensive contributions by Uwe Lobbedey warrant a mention here. They deal with the phases of the Carolingian foundation and give an in-depth account of the architectural characteristics of the west-work, its form, development and function.³ To date, the Carolingian period was always at the centre of the research.

³ Cf. particularly Lobbedey 1999a; Lobbedey 2002; Lobbedey 2002c.

The analysis of the monument's entire history has now directed the focus onto later construction periods which had not received much attention previously. Although the archaeological results were scarce and fragmentary with regard to the post-Carolingian phases, a number of features and numerous traces still visible on the building allow us to presume that several further structural interventions took place during the subsequent centuries, both on the church and the overall monastic complex.

New results and also certain clarifications of previous findings appear to pertain to the Romanesque, Renaissance and early Baroque phases in particular. Many areas of the upstanding structures and a number of previously little-noted features on one hand and the analysis of certain hitherto practically ignored excavations on the other have allowed us to define concrete phases of alteration and intrusion while developing theories pertaining to the precise positioning of many of the features.

The size of this volume should not belie the fact that many areas of activity still exist for archaeologists at the Abbey of Corvey. The western extension of the atrium is only one of many elements that to date remain unknown. Apart from only a few observations made below ground to the north of the church (in 2000) and to the south, in the area of the monastic complex (in 2008), very little coherent insight has been gained so far on the doubtlessly vast, repeatedly altered, extended and 'modernised' monastic building of the monks. The same applies to the once undoubtedly extensive and also repeatedly altered and extended farmyard of the Abbey. Another component is the settlement of Corvey, today a deserted village which was once located within the bend of the River Weser mainly to the south and west of the Abbey. While more and more insight is gained in this area, an intensive and comprehensive archaeological investigation is still pending.

This volume on the archaeological research carried out in the monastic complex of Corvey is the first necessary step towards a detailed presentation of the constructional history of the Abbey, and is intended to provide new topics for discussion.

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