

Aachen Cathedral

The Aachen Cathedral, frequently referred to as the "Imperial Cathedral" (in German: Kaiserdom) is a Roman Catholic church in Aachen, western Germany. The church is the oldest cathedral in northern Europe and was known as the "Royal Church of St. Mary at Aachen" during the middle ages. It was the site of some Carolingian royal and imperial coronations. For 600 years, from 936 to 1531, the Aachen chapel was the church of coronation for 30 German kings and 12 queens. The church became an episcopal seat in 1802 and remained so until 1825. In 1930 the diocese was reestablished.

Charlemagne began the construction of the Palatine Chapel around 792, along with the building of the rest of the palace structures. It was consecrated in 805 by Pope Leo III in honor of the Virgin Mary. The core of the Aachen cathedral is the Palatine Chapel which is surprisingly small in comparison to the later additions.

In order to sustain the enormous flow of pilgrims in the Gothic period a choir hall was built: a two-part Capella vitrea (glass chapel) which was consecrated on the 600th anniversary of Charlemagne's death. In 1978, it was one of the first 12 items to make the entry into the UNESCO list of world heritage sites, as the first German and one of the first three European historical ensembles. The Aachen cathedral treasury displays sacral masterpieces of the late Classical, Carolingian, Ottonian and Staufian period - among them there are some unique exhibits like the "Cross of Lothair" the "Bust of Charlemagne" and the "Persephone sarcophagus". The Cathedral Treasury in Aachen is regarded as one of the most important ecclesiastical treasuries in northern Europe. When he died in 814, he was buried in a vault in the cathedral.

In 1000, Otto III had Charlemagne's vault opened. Otto of Lomello, one of the courtiers who accompanied him, recorded the event, which is reported in the Chronicle of Novalesia, written about 1026.

The account reads:

So we went in to Charles. He did not lie, as the dead otherwise do, but sat as if he were living. He was crowned with a golden crown and held in his gloved hands a sceptre; the fingernails had penetrated through the gloves and stuck out. Above him was a canopy of limestone and marble. Entering, we broke through this. Upon our entrance, a strong smell struck us. Kneeling, we gave Emperor Charles our homage, and put in order the damage that had been done. Emperor Charles had not lost any of his members to decay, except only the tip of his nose. Emperor Otto replaced this with gold, took a tooth from Charles's mouth, walled up the entrance to the chamber, and withdrew again.

A large picture representing Otto and his nobles gazing on the dead Emperor was painted on the wall of the great room in the Town Hall.

The Shrine of St Mary rests in the choir of the church and dates from 1220-1239. Adorned with the figures of Christ, Mary, Charlemagne, Pope Leo III and the Twelve Apostles, the shrine contains the four great Aachen relics: St. Mary's cloak, Christ's swaddling clothes, St. John the Baptist's beheading cloth and Christ's loincloth. Following a custom begun in 1349, every seven years the relics are taken out of the shrine and put on display during the Great Aachen Pilgrimage. This pilgrimage most recently took place during June 2007.

Source: -- Wikipedia [<http://www.wikipedia.org>]