

Abbey and Altenmünster of Lorsch

The Imperial Abbey of Lorsch (German: Reichsabtei Lorsch; Latin: Laureshamense Monasterium, called also Laurissa and Lauresham), in Lorsch, about 10 km (6 miles) east of Worms, was one of the most renowned monasteries of the Carolingian Empire. Even in its ruined state, its remains are among the most important pre-Romanesque buildings in Germany. In 1991 the ruined abbey was enlisted as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The abbey was founded in 764 by the Frankish Count Cancor and his widowed mother Williswinda as a proprietary church (Eigenkirche) and monastery on their estate, Laurissa. They entrusted its government to Cancor's nephew Chrodegang, Archbishop of Metz, who dedicated the church and monastery to Saint Peter and became its first abbot. The pious founders enriched the new abbey by further donations. In 766 Chrodegang resigned the office of abbot owing to his other important duties as Archbishop of Metz. He then sent his brother Gundeland to Lorsch as his successor, with fourteen Benedictine monks. To make the abbey popular as a shrine and a place of pilgrimage, Chrodegang obtained from Pope Paul I the body of Saint Nazarius, martyred at Rome with three companions under Diocletian. On 11 July 765, the sacred relics arrived, and were with great solemnity deposited in the basilica of the monastery. The abbey and basilica were then renamed in honour of Saint Nazarius.

The main church of Sts Peter, Paul, and Nazarius was consecrated by the Archbishop of Mainz in 774, in the presence of Charlemagne. Many miracles were said to be wrought through the intercession of Saint Nazarius at Lorsch, and from all parts of Europe pilgrims in large numbers came to visit the shrine. In the course of the ninth century the library and scriptorium of Lorsch made it one of the cultural centres of Germany; its four surviving ninth-century catalogues show that it was rich in both Classical and Christian texts. Popes and emperors repeatedly favoured the abbey with privileges and estates ranging from the Alps to the North Sea, so that in a short time it became not only immensely rich, but also a seat of political influence. It was declared a Reichsabtei (a sovereign principality in its own right, subject directly and solely to the emperor. The abbey's position is highlighted by the fact that two Carolingian kings, Louis the German and Louis the Younger, were intombed there.

The abbey, enjoying state rights, became implicated in several local feuds and in a number of wars. In 1248 Premonstratensian monks were given charge of the monastery with the sanction of Pope Celestine IV, and they remained there till 1556, when Lorsch and the surrounding country passed into the hands of Lutheran and Calvinist princes. During the Thirty Years' War Lorsch and its neighbourhood suffered greatly. In 1621 most of the buildings at Lorsch were pulled down. After the Archbishopric of Mainz regained possession of it, the region was returned to the Catholic faith. The most dreary period for Lorsch was during the wars of Louis XIV of France, 1679 – 1697. Whole villages were laid in ruins, the homes of the peasantry were destroyed by fire, and the French soldiers burned the old abbey buildings. One portion, which was left intact, served as a tobacco warehouse in the years before World War I. The ancient entrance hall, the Königshalle (illustration, above), built in the ninth century by Emperor Louis III, is the oldest and probably the most beautiful monument of Franconian architecture.

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