

Short Chronological History

Niederaltaich – Bavaria´s Gateway to the East

Name, Year of
Establishment
741
Altaich

The **Bavarian Duke Odilo** of the Agilofinger family founded his own "Eigenkloster", a monastery on a slow moving side arm of the Danube river. According to local tradition this took place in 731 AD. Modern research, however, dates the foundation of the monastery to 741 AD. Mauritius, the Patron Saint of the monastery indicates Duke Odilo`s close contact with Burgundy. The first monks came from the famous Island Monastery of **Reichenau**. They were considered experts at preparing swampy ground for cultivation. This was necessary because the site of Altaich on the banks of the Danube was difficult for agriculture. Severe flooding throughout the centuries was also always a problem for the Monastery. At the same time the area offered excellent fishing grounds and good traffic routes by water.

Charlemagne
788

After the Agilofingers were deprived of their power, **Charlemagne** took over Niederaltaich as an Empirical Monastery in **788**. During the middle of the 9th c. Altaich reached the peak of its worldly power. In the early part of the 10th c. the Monastery was ransacked and destroyed several times. Clerics who lived according to canon, or rule, replaced the monks and took care of the ducal grave of the Luitpold lineage.

Saint Gotthard /
Saint Gunther
990

After **990** the Benedictines moved back to Altaich. It was **Saint Gotthard (Godehard)** who guided the Monastery Altaich into a new period of development during the time of Emperor Heinrich II. St.Gotthard`s shoe and cloak have been saved in the Abbey Church and are considered very precious items. His Abbot`s staff is still used today to consecrate the new Abbot, most recently in the fall of 2001. At the same that St. Gotthard was Abbot, **St. Gunther** was also involved with the Monastery. Gunther was related to the Royal Otto Family as well as with the Hungarian Arpades. This Duke of Thuringia from East Germany came to the Bohemian Forest and helped to bring civilization to the region by clearing the forests and planting fields. He died as a hermit in Gutwasser (Dobra Voda) in what is now the Czech Republic. Also in diplomatic mission, Gunther brought peace to the Germans and Hungarians, as well as to the inhabitants of Bohemia (Czech Republic).



**Spiritual Influence
11th c.AD.**

The spiritual influence of Altaich in the 11th c. is proof of the further activities of the Hermit Wilhelm and the Catholic Nuns named Alruna, Salome and Judith. Many Monks from the Convent took over other monasteries as "Reform Abbots". St. Alram of Kremsmünster was one of these as was also St. Richer, Abbot of the famous Montecassino. The **Annals of Altaich** are an important source for the history of the Otto and Salier Periods. Around 1100 AD. the Dukes of Bogen founded their own Monastery, "Altach", about 40 kilometers from Altaich upriver on the Danube which was soon called "Oberen Altaich" (Upper Altaich), while the older Altaich only gradually took on the name of "Niederaltaich" (Lower Altaich).

**Emperor Friedrich
1152**

In 1152, **Friedrich I. Barbarossa** ended direct rule of the Monastery by the Emperor. In appreciation for the support in his election as King, Barbarossa gave Niederaltaich to **Bishop Eberhard II** of Bamberg as a fiefdom. However, the real Lords of Na. from the second half of the 12th c. were the powerful Dukes of Bogen who tried to take over as bailiffs of the Monastery.

**Wittelsbach Dynasty
1242**

In **1242** the Wittelsbach family inherited the Bailwick of Niederaltaich from the Dukes of Bogen. As a result, the Bavarian Archduchy received sovereignty over the Monastery. The Wittelsbachers showed privilege to the Abbey by raising its status to royal level.

**Gothic Church
Construction
1260**

Only the 1241 confirmation of the pontifical Abbots remained as a Bamberg fiefdom until secularisation; They were also canons in Bamberg. Gothic-style construction of the Abbey began very early. Abbot Hermann, also a famous historian, and five of his successors, built the new Monastery Church from 1260 to 1326. At that time it was one of the largest buildings in the entire Danube region.

**Clearance of the
Bohemian Forest
14. th c**

The present-day village church is also a symbol for the very unusual flowering of Benedictine life in the 14th c. The energy of the Abbey is documented through the clearance of the Bohemian Forest region. The Very Holy Hermits, Hermann, Otto and Degenhard , followed the example set by St. Gunther , and continued his work in the region.

**Decline and Rise
15 th c**

In contrast to the other Bavarian Benedictine Abbeys, Niederaltaich experienced a phase of spiritual decline in the 15th century. However, the Abbey withstood the later Reformation with relatively few monks leaving to join the new religion. In the spirit of the Late Renaissance, an active period of cultural and scientific awakening dominated life in Niederaltaich.



**Thirty Yeará War
1634**

Niederaltaich went through a period of serious decline during the Thirty Years' War when, despite its heavy defence walls, Swedish troops completely destroyed it in 1634, 1641, 1647 and 1648. Fire catastrophes followed in 1671 and 1685 and destroyed the humble beginnings which had begun after the end of the Thirty Years' War.

**Baroque Period
1700**

Abbot Joscio Hamberger (Abbot from 1700 – 1739) played an important role in Niederaltaich during the Baroque periode of history. Almost all of the monastery buildings which remain today were constructed under his term of leadership. Additionally, there is the Baroque interior of the early-Gothic Abbey Church which was completed in 1727. Particularly noteworthy is the redecoration of the sanctuary by Johann Michael Fischer when he was still a young man, and also the more then 200 individual frescos by Andreas Heindl.

**Economic Highpoint
18 th c.**

In the late 18th c, Niederaltaich was considered the most wealthy Monastery of the Benedictine Order in the Principality of Bavaria. Its agricultural property, including forests, was about 50. 000 "Tagwerk", i.e. about 170 square kilometers. This included the vineyards in Wachau, Austria which had been successfully producing wine since the Carolingian period. Since 1334, the Monastery's ships on the Danube had not had to pay duties or taxes. The Abbot became Lord of the Market Town, Hengersberg, as well as Lord over the villages of Niederaltaich and Arnbruck. Added to this were hundreds of estates which belonged to the principality's county courts. Two other Chapter Monasteries in the Bohemian Forest region, Rinchnach and St. Oswald (since 1567), belonged to Niederaltaich as well as Spitz in Wachau (present-day Austria). At the same time, Paters from the Convent served in eight parishes in Lower Bavaria and in the Parish of Aggsbach in Lower Austria. Niederaltaich owned the Right of Recommendation in 21 other Parish Churches.

**Secularisation
1803**

The annulment of the Abbey began in November **1802** when the Monastery was taken over by Monastery Civil Servants working for the Prince. The wealth of the Monastery was administered by the State. The actual secularisation began in Niederaltaich on **21 March 1803**, the Day of St. Benedict. The Abbot and some of the 43 Members of the Convent lived in the Monastery until 1806. Most of the Paters took over pastoral care positions. As with other Monasteries, the Convent Church was used as a Parish Church. The original parish church was torn down. Part of the building was used as a state storehouse for grain, another part was used for a school. The rest was sold to private individuals. In 1813 the area around the church was damaged by lightning and most of the other structures were torn down in the following years.



**Resettlement
Priorate / Abbey
1918**

In **1918** the Niederaltaich Monastery was reorganized as a Priorate of Metten Benedictine Abbey. It was raised to the level of Abby in **1930**. Since 1931, the Abbey Church has had the honorary title as a papal "**Basilica Minor**".

**Ecumenical Affairs as
Main Point of
Spititual Interest
1930**

As early as the 1930s, Niederaltaich showed great interest in ecumenical affairs. Since **1965** the Ecumenical Institute has had its own research and conference centre. A group from the Convent has been celebrating church services according to Byzantine ritual for the last 50 years.

**Bayzantine church of
St. Nikolaus
1986**

In **1986** the rooms of the former Monastery Brewery were redesigned and a worship room for Byzantine liturgical services was built.

Educational Services

Since **1948**, the Niederaltaich Benedictines have run St. Gotthard Gymnasium (middle and secondary school) which offers tracks in both modern-language and music instruction. In **1959** the Catholic St. Gunter Landvolkshochschule was built, a Centre of Adult Education for the Dioceses of Passau and Regensburg. In **2001** the newly-built Conference Centre and Guest House, **St. Pirmin**, began operation. Since 1962, the Abbey Niederaltaich has offered the possibility of private retreats which welcomes retreatants to spend time in an atmosphere of Benedictine prayer, silence and community. Other Monasteries have since followed the example set by Niederaltaich and also offer such Retreats. Not far from the Abbey is the **Ursuline Cloister** which was built in 1979.

**The Community of
Niederalteich**

The village of Niederalteich experienced fundamental social change during the second half of the 20th century. The local economy had been based on small farms and local crafts and trade. Today Niederalteich is a wonderful place to live with about **1,930** inhabitants although it also provides 250 jobs in trade, crafts and business. The area of the village encompasses 10 square kilomters on both sides of the Danube. One of the most important bird protection regions in Lower Bavaria is in **Gundlau**, an area belonging to the village. On the other side of the Danube are important wetlands at the mouth of the Isar River where it flows into the Danube. This is a European nature-sanctuary.



Excerpts from: "Niederalteich, Bavaria´s Gateway to the East",
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