

An Introduction to the Church of Our Lady

A national monument of the evangelical ecclesiastic province of Saxony (Magdeburg), Propstei Altmark



Ecclesiastic and spiritual centre of the town

The Parish Church of St Mary in the "Alte Stadt" Salzwedel

The silhouette of the old hanseatic town of Salzwedel can be recognised from far away by its tall, slim, leaning tower. It belongs to the main church of the Old Town, known as St Mary's church at the time that the representative of the Verden Bishops was officiated as provost.

The building history in context with urban development

In 1134 the Ascanian, Albert the Bear, was entrusted by King Lothar and the Nordmark to support the Christian mission against the insurgent Slavs from here to beyond the river Elbe and to win back the regions lost to the heathland.

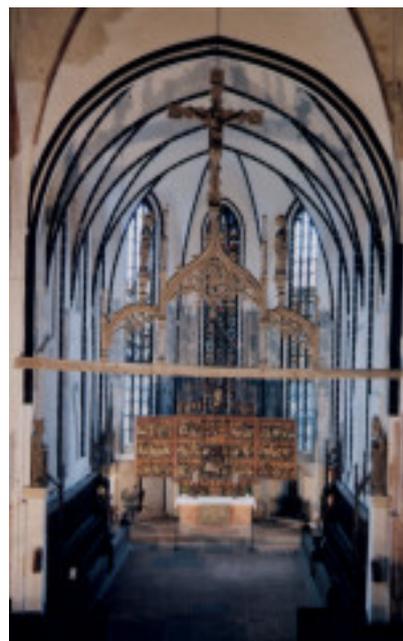
Albert – and later the family of the Margrave – sometimes resided at the already vacant castle of Salzwedel. Albert the Bear, who was from the Harz area, settled farmers here from his homeland. The area, already weakly populated, became even more depopulated owing to warlike

events, but then settlers from the Rhine region and the Low Countries replenished the area. So it came to be that the settlers who previously lived in the Northern Harz region built the church in their way, hall-like and made of stone, and adopted as a model the western church with the single tower which offered protection.

In the protection of the castle a trading and artisan community had already been formed. In 1150, the Church of Our Lady was founded on a sandy knoll in marshy surroundings, a hall-like church made of stone and with a quadrate built-in sanctuary.

Some time after 1200 when a church-building mission had begun in most of the villages, the stone church was dismantled and a brick basilica was built in its place.

One 2.7 metre high tower remained. The rectangular shape of the hall-like church gave the dimensions for the nave. A choir was removed from the original axis and a transept was added so that it gave the shape of a cross. An arch, originally circa 10 metres wide, was built over the central nave. Alternating columns and pillars support the arch with impost platforms.



View into the sanctuary

Light falls from the clerestory onto the interior, which has an

aisle on each side. It was built quickly and carefully. Friezes and interior wall mounts have been partially preserved.

It was a construction worthy of its old town, which, in the meantime, had become a civitas (initially recorded in 1233) and significant as the domicile of the provost. In 1247 the two ruling Margraves, John and Otto, founded the new town, Salzwedel, with the Church of Catherine as an autonomous community.



The tower as Salzwedel's landmark

In 1263, the officials of the Altmark town led the official customs duty of the goods produced in Salzwedel and the surrounding areas (e.g. linen, wool, "Soltmann" beer and artisan products) to a trade mission in Lübeck and in Visby-on-Gotland under the auspices of the Hanseatic League. The Dumme river, which about 100 years earlier had started to flow into the Jeetze river, not only provided the citizens with substantial water but also made the small Jeetze river useful as a waterway into the river Elbe for barges.

Economic growth also made possible the development of the Roman church to a gothic basilica. This process began in the middle of the 14th century and, bit by bit over 200 years, gave the Church of Our Lady its present-day character.

The modifications leading to today's structure

Some time after 1300 the **upper choir** was protruded by two case bays with a 3/8 end and high windows. A further nave of the same width as the transept was added.

In order to connect the two aisles which both led out over the tower a **west extension** was erected at the height of the nave. This connection made it possible for processions to take place past the 28 side altars with their endowments from esteemed families and guilds.

A two-level extension of the **sacristy** in the south and a **library construction** in the north with an ingress in the west reconstruction complete the picture. Chapels in the south and north extended the liturgical possibilities and areas of worship. The special thing about the building is its careful, barely detectable development.

Since the middle of the 16th century the structure has remained unchanged. This is also true for the original floor covering with its monastic design. It gives the impression of being one of the preserved bourgeois churches of the late middle ages.

In the **tower**, one above the other, are: the round, stone base from 1150, the cemented, octagonal Roman tower with its tower windows and friezes and the gothic leaning roof visible from a long distance, which stands with its golden crown at 47 metres high on top of the 40 metres high tower base.

The structural furnishing

Even in the re-furnishing of the building's structure you can see how the old furnishings were protected and new ones only modestly added. These two approaches both led to a great concentration of antiquities.

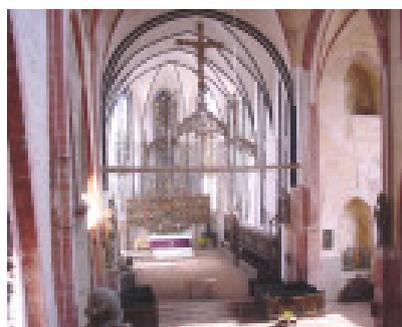


The upper altar and stained glass window in the choral polygon

A window of Christ in the style of the "Stem of Jesse" order closes off the gothic choir in the apex. Fruitful vine tendrils frame the pictorial medallions:

- on the left panel, the nativity and two rare scenes:
Jesus' first school day and the legend of Jesus of the clay jugs hanging from rays of sunlight,
- on the middle panel, the "antecessors" of the Messiah,
- on the right-hand panel the passion and the resurrection.

The high quality workmanship has been dated back to the 14th century.



View of the altar

The northern axel window displays a compilation of the glass remaining from the late middle ages, depicting stories from the Old Testament. In the southern axel window there are panes showing coats of arms of Salzwedel families dating back to the time following the Reformation.

Between these windows of the polygon choir, the ascending stonework is decorated by oversize mural paintings. From the third quarter of the 14th century onwards, they will have been related to the previous altar.

The rear pews of the choir belong to the original furnishing of the upper choir... (From the front pews, only a small area of the Schulenburg gallery under the organ has been preserved.) This old choral area, with its high, broken-through window-like features (in Rhenish tradition) and its relief (of Westphalian origin) under seat height in the same broken-through panel, is said to be one of the last of the choral

sculpture-type deriving from Cologne Cathedral.

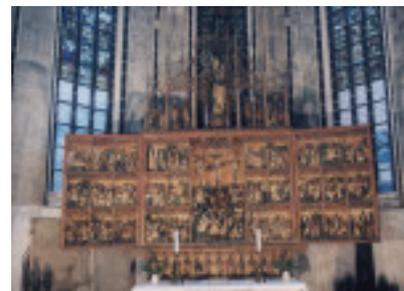
The north and south rows are equipped with 16 folding seats, each of which without *misericordias*. The relief of the northern rows depicts Goliath in the most easterly panel. His armour means it could possibly be dated back to around 1360.

The furnishings of the Upper Choir also include the **Levite chair**, a tri-seat from the time of construction of the gothic choir.

A **triumphal cross group** in a rarely so well preserved original construction dominates the entrance to the upper choir. The four segments of a type of dome divided by staggered bricks leading to the summit include a rich tracery, and end in the arbour vitae, on which the crucified hangs as sufferer. This triumphal cross with its foundations laid on the strong crossbar is made complete by the John and Mary supporting figures on the four arches leading to the group of worship.

In the nave, life-size stone figures are positioned on the impost platforms of the former Roman basilica, dated 1240 A.D.

In the upper choir dated 1510 the triple-row, triple-winged carved altar attracts all the attention.



The upper altar, a three-winged carved piece of 1510

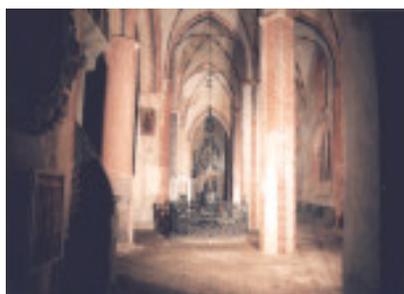
Various different carvings can be attributed to it, some completed before 1480, as in the upper row, and some that transferred to wood the master illustrations of the Schongauer copper-engraving passion in various artisanal styles, as can be seen in the middle and lower rows. The large relief in the

middle – the 31st of the panels – depicts Calvary with a highly erected crucifix and with characteristic features.

The alterations, which the crucified donates to the Salvation, are expressed in the partly portrait-like depictions of those involved and of their actions: Reconciliation be to us!

Shortly before the baronial introduction of the Reformation – around 1520/22 – came the completely preserved, bronze **baptistry** complete with baptismal font, crown, a hoistable baptismal hood and conclusus. In 1542, the Reformation was officially introduced in Salzwedel by a visitation. There were no instances of revolutionary discomposure. Thus, no liturgical specimens or furnishings were pilfered or destroyed!

This Renaissance work from Nuremberg with its abundance of ornaments between the baluster pillars, which carry the hood and the crown, is surmounted by the corona of the Madonna. The baptismal tank in the shape of a splendid goblet set on lion's feet is heated by a brazier with charcoal.



Southern side aisle of the hall with baptismal font

In 1581, a **sandstone pulpit** was erected. The “horned” Moses carries the pulpit. In 1604, the stone pulpit steps and balustrade were added. An extension of the pulpit hood with lanterns accommodates the depiction of the Trinity. On the pulpit hood, there are symbolic figures of the Cardinal virtues and ornamental decoration.

The significance of the sermon in a church service made it necessary

to install a **gallery** opposite the pulpit. The balustrade was later decorated with panels painted with biblical scenes.



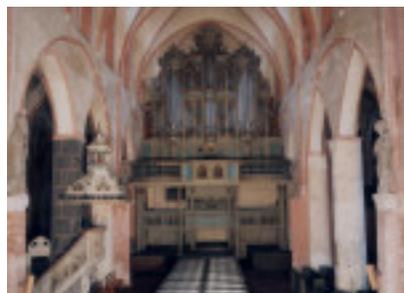
View of the pulpit

The curved steps leading upwards with their baroque banister fit in well in the northern wall of the side aisle and connect the entrance to the transept with the side aisle under the gallery, which was broken up by the installation of small chapels (end of the 17th century).



The northern gallery

The great **handcraft of the organ** was begun by Joachim Wagner in 1747 in place of the Botjenter organ that had been damaged by lightning. Of that organ, only the baroque prospect has been preserved. Together with the organ gallery, it impressively rounds off the west nave.



Organ and pulpit in the nave

In 1913, a romantic “taschenladen” organ with pneumatic sectioning for 62 registers was set up by Furtwängler & Hammer behind the organ prospect. The reason for

this was the need to replace the Wagner organ with a modern organ as it had also been damaged twice by lightning, as was common in the Romanticism period.

The new Furtwängler & Hammer organ now requires restoration, as, owing to humidity and external factors, it is no longer playable. A renovation has been scheduled in the framework of the total ongoing restoration.

A further piece of work from the 19th century contains a theme from the late middle ages: the **stained glass window over the bridal gate**.



The window over the bridal gate

Under one of the elaborately decorated double arcades hanging from the arch Maria, magnificently dressed, is sitting and receiving the message from the Angel Gabriel – as reflected in the writing underneath: Fear not Mary, God hath mercy on you.

When this monumental image was installed in the Church of Our Lady and where it came from, requires further examination. Currently the window with the curtain-like stained glass is in the process of being restored.

In the 1980, the upper level of the sacristy annex, previously a chapel, was converted into a **winter church** with underfloor heating.



The Shalom bell, re-cast in 2003

In 2003 the parish community was able to complete and extend the “Shalom” **six-bell belfry**, which has been around for centuries by casting an as'-2 bell and by repairing the damage from both wars. This completed several years of extensive reconstruction of the tower's woodwork and roofing



The tower roof following restoration

Current restoration measures

The current restoration workings include:

- the renewal of the entire roof area (structure and roofing),
- the glazing of all windows following the repair of the window vestures,
- the integration of an isolation into the walls to maintain the building fabric and to ensure interior temperatures above freezing,
- the protection of the arches,
- the renewal of the indoor paint,
- the extensive reconstruction of the 1913 Furtwängler & Hammer organ, including its prospect, gallery, and staircase,
- the protection of the gallery opposite the pulpit,
- the protection of the structural furnishings, and
- the restoration of the pulpit.

According to calculations made by the construction coordinators and accompanying engineering bureau Planungsring Altmark, the total cost amounts to 4.63 million Euro (January 2004).

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