



WORLD
HERITAGE

A photograph of St. Michael's Church in Hildesheim, Germany. The church is a prime example of Ottonian Romanesque architecture, featuring a massive square tower with a green copper roof and a smaller square tower with a similar roof. The walls are made of light-colored stone. The church is set against a blue sky with light clouds. In the foreground, there are bare trees and a red-tiled roof.

St. Michael's Church Hildesheim

Welcome to St. Michael's Church

The Evangelical-Lutheran Parish of St. Michael's welcomes you. We appreciate your interest in our wonderful church. Hopefully, you will find what you are looking for – and perhaps even more. Take your time, have a look around, enjoy the unusual atmosphere and be prepared to make extraordinary experiences.

In the course of 1000 years the prayers of the monks and all believers have filled St. Michael's. To this day the church has given people the chance to express gratitude and grief, requests and hope for themselves and others. We ask that you respect the sanctity of the building and allow the silence of the church to speak for itself. May your visit be rewarding.

On behalf of the wardens, the pastor and the parish of St. Michael's, Hildesheim

Historical background

From 993 to 1022 Bernward was bishop of Hildesheim. He founded a Benedictine monastery on Michael's Hill in 996. Emperor Otto III, whose tutor Bernward had been, presented him with a splinter from the Cross of Christ on the occasion of his consecration. In 1010 the foundations of St. Michael's Church were laid, in 1022 Bernward consecrated the church "in honour of our Lord and Redeemer Jesus Christ and our most holy Mother, the eternal Virgin Mary, and the beneficial wood from the venerable and life-giving Cross, under the special protection of the holy Archangel Michael and all the Celestial Hosts." The centre was the Altar of the Holy Cross and its so-called Bernward-Cross, which contained the so-called Relic of the True Cross (now in the museum of the Catholic Cathedral). After his death in 1022 Bernward was interred in the crypt. In the middle of the 12th century, even before his canonization in 1192, extensive work began in order to redecorate the church (choir of angels screens, stucco figures, replacement of older capitals, painted wooden ceiling). In 1542 St. Michael's became a Protestant parish church. The Benedictine monastery, however, remained. The monks continued their horary prayers in the crypt, which

remains Catholic to this day. Thus St. Michael's is one of 64 so-called 'simultaneous' churches, with Protestants and Catholics sharing one church.

In the course of secularization the monastery was dissolved in 1803. The church was closed and amongst other things served as a store for hay and straw, later as a skittle alley and a foyer for the patients of the neighbouring mental institution, installed in the former monastery in 1827. In 1844 the church was returned to the Protestant parish; however the building was in a poor state and kept deteriorating. In the years 1855 to 1857 and 1907 to 1910 comprehensive renovations saved St. Michael's from being demolished completely.

In 1943 a training corps of the SS moved into the monastery, after 470 patients had been transported to various extermination camps and murdered there. During the devastating bombing raid on Hildesheim (March 22, 1945) the church burnt down completely.

Between 1942 and 1943 the wooden ceiling had been dismantled and moved out of town and the one remaining choir of angels screen had been walled in. As early as 1945 the reconstruction was begun and completed in 1960. It closely followed the original design of Bishop Bernward.

The exterior

St. Michael's is a basilica, the pattern being two transepts forming a (double)cross each, with a choir (east and west) each. Two massive towers crown the intersections, where nave and transepts intersect. The transepts end in four round towers (with stairs). The west choir covering the crypt protrudes further than the east choir.

The interior

It is significant that the ground plan for St. Michael's is based on 3x3 squares (three each for the nave and the two transepts). The number three stands for the Holy Trinity. During the Middle Ages the number nine was used to represent the number of the hierarchical order of angels. The eight choirs, situated at the end of each transept, contained altars devoted to angels; a ninth altar (for the archangel Michael) was situated on the ambulatory in the

west. The number of pillars (twelve) in the nave alludes to the twelve apostles as the supporting pillars of the parish. Further use of numbers as symbols can be found in many details.

The crypt

Bernward's tomb is located in the western crypt with its barrel-vaulted ceiling. The original plain stone coffin is covered with a lid richly decorated with sculptures (nine angels among flames). Above the tomb there is a slab, used as the altar today, with a cross and symbolic presentations (lamb of God, symbols of the Evangelists). The portals connecting the Protestant church with the Catholic crypt were closed during the course the Reformation. It was in 1978 that first the southern and in 2006 that also the northern door was reopened so that church and crypt can be experienced as a whole once again.

The painted wooden ceiling

The most significant work of art in St. Michael's Church is the picture on the ceiling (dating back to the first half of the 13th century). It shows the genealogical tree of Christ (Jesseboom – tree of Jesse – Isaiah, father of King David). The main panels as viewed from west to east show: Adam and Eve (Paradise), Jesse, Kings David, Solomon, Ezekiel and Joshua, with Mary and Christ on the throne making up the finale. The rectangles depict prophets, the round fields show Jesus' ancestors. The first panel also shows symbolic representations of the rivers of paradise. The Archangels relate to the picture of Christ. The four Evangelists and their symbols can be seen in the corner fields.

The cloister

The only remaining wing of the ambulatory dating from the 13th century can only be seen from the outside (to be entered from the east of the church via the inner court).

Points of special interest: the artefacts

- 1 Foundation stone dating from 1010
- 2 Memorial plaque for B.R. Armour (USA), Jewish sponsor of the reconstruction
- 3 Epitaph of the von Bothmer family, 1625
- 4 Choir of angels screen, northern side, c.1200
- 5 Tomb slab of Bernward's grave, 14th century
- 6 Late Gothic altar dedicated to Mary, c.1520
- 7 Leaden glass window with angel motifs, 1965 (Charles Crodel)
- 8 Choir of angels screen, southern side c.1200
- 9 Organ (Gerald Woehl), 1999
- 10 Two Ottonian capitals, early 11th century
- 11 Late Romanesque capitals, c. 1200
- 12 Rough capitals dating from the 1950s reconstruction
- 13 Wooden ceiling, early 13th century
- 14 Baptismal font, bronze, 1618, (Dietrich Mente)
- 15 Concrete and glass windows: baptism motifs, 1971 (Gerhard Hausmann)
- 16 Bernward bust, late 12th century (originally on the wall outside the western chancel)
- 17 Sandstone plaque, c. 1200 (originally on the wall outside the west chancel)
- 18 Concrete and glass windows, holy communion motifs, 1971 (Gerhard Hausmann)
- 19 Concrete and glass windows, celestial Jerusalem motifs, 1966 (Gerhard Hausmann)
- 20 Sculpture, altar, pulpit and lectern. Iron, 2008 (Thomas Duttenhoefer)
- 21 Beatitudes (stucco figures) c. 1200

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