

ENGLISH SUMMARY

THE IMPERIAL ROOMS – „KAISERZIMMER“ – IN THE BAROQUE MONASTERIES OF LOWER- AND UPPER AUSTRIA

The „Kaiserzimmer“ in the baroque monasteries of lower- and upper Austria were rooms reserved for the Emperor and members of his family in case they would pay a visit. Since the middle ages, the monasteries in the Holy Roman Empire were obliged to offer accomodation to the emperor when he was travelling through his territory. As the Hapsburg monarchs traditionally were not only Emperors, but also sovereigns of various countries, they had to travel a lot: The election and coronation of the Emperor took place in Frankfurt am Main, the coronation of the king and queen of Bohemia in Prague, and the coronation of the king and queen of Hungary in Bratislava (Preßburg). Apart from that, the ceremonies of the different Hapsburg provinces paying tribute to the monarch after he took over the reign, took place each in the respective province. In addition to these official journeys, the imperial court frequently went on hunting excursions and pilgrimages and sometimes travelled to a spa when a member of the imperial family had to go for a cure. In any case the imperial family was accompanied by a large number of courtiers as well as household staff including doctors, confessors, servants, cooks, people for washing the dishes, etc. etc., as a numerous and splendid court was one possibility for the absolute monarch to display his power.

In consequence, it was not always easy to find places for a rest and especially overnight accomodations for several hundred people. Apart from towns and castles belonging to the aristocracy, monasteries were often used in the 17th and 18th century to accomodate the travelling emperor and his household. They were able to offer enough space, because from the second half of the 17th century onwards, practically all of the monasteries in lower- and upper Austria had started enormous building projects, involving the greatest artists of the baroque period in Austria. With the palacelike buildings constructed at that time, the orders demonstrated their powerful position in the country, a position which finally was strong again after religious struggles throughout the 16th century. The prelates of the great monasteries were linked to the monarch in various ways: 1) The sovereign was set above the monastery and had to confirm the position of a newly elected prelate. 2) As representatives of the State Parliament the prelates were involved in politics. 3) As wealthy landowners the monasteries of lower- and upper Austria represented an economic power, which was not to be underestimated. When the sovereign was in need of money, especially in times of war, he often turned to the prelates for financial support. 4) In consequence of their political function,

the prelates had to be present at court, and sometimes they became confidants of the imperial family. They advised their members – not only in religious, but also in political and personal matters – , and played an important role in the religious ceremonies held for birthdays, name-days, deaths, or when a battle was won.

In fact, the links between the church and the country, represented by the Hapsburgs, had become so close in the first half of the 18th century, that some historians use the term of „Staatskirchentum“ to define the internal situation in Austria. It was at that time – under the reign of Charles VI. (*1685, +1740) – that the rooms for the Emperor were given a prominent place in the complex of the newly built monasteries. In some monasteries of lower- and upper Austria, like Göttweig and St. Florian, the imperial wing is equal to the church, the convent and the Prelate’s rooms. Klosterneuburg represents the peak as well as the end of this development, as Charles VI. was planning in the 1730s to turn a part of this monastery into an imperial residence. The idea of combining a monastery with a residence, the emperor most probably imported to Austria from the Escorial in Spain, which had been built in the second half of the 16th century. Charles VI. himself used to rule in Spain for some years as King Charles III., before coming back to Austria to succeed his brother Emperor Joseph I., and before the Hapsburgs lost Spain to the French Bourbons in the war of the Spanish succession (1700-1713). Charles VI. very strongly believed in the idea of the divine right of sovereigns and, in the tradition of the Austrian as well as the Spanish Hapsburgs, understood himself as a kind of mediator between God and his subjects. Apart from the monasteries built under his reign, the Karlskirche in Vienna – dedicated to the saint Charles Borromäus after the defeat of the plague, but at the same time glorifying Charles VI. – is a fine example for this attitude expressed in architecture. Although the enormous residence building project in Klosterneuburg practically came to an stillstand when the Emperor died in 1740, and was never finished as intended, the existing parts (as the two cupolas crowned by the imperial crown and the hat of the Austrian archdukes), bear witness to the outstanding role the monarch played in this monastery. This role is especially obvious in the monasteries of the Benedictine and the Augustine order, but the Hapsburgs were also present in the houses of other orders, even of the severe Carthusians. In the Carthusian monastery in Mauerbach e.g., there were „Kaiserzimmer“ since the 17th century, and Charles VI. as well as Maria Theresia (*1717, +1780) payed visit to the monastery and had lunch there after riding and hunting in the surroundings of Mauerbach.

It has to be mentioned, that the costs for building, decorating and furnishing the „Kaiserzimmer“ had to be entirely payed by the monasteries, there was no cost sharing between them and the court, not even in Klosterneuburg. The prelates who had the „Kaiserzimmer“ built, understood them as a way to pay homage to their sovereign, on whose grace and protection they were dependent in the end.

One way to pay tribute to the Emperor was the decoration of a „Kaisersaal“, a banqueting hall in which the portraits of the Hapsburg Emperors were hung, from the first – Rudolph I. – to the one in power at the time. The purpose of representing the unbroken line of Hapsburg Emperors since the 13th century, was to make clear to the viewer that only this family was qualified to hold the title of the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. As the title was not inheritable, it was especially important for the Hapsburgs to substantiate their claim to it by pointing out the exeptional virtues of their family. In recognition of this claim, many aristocrats of the Holy Roman Empire, who were attached to the Hapsburg family, decorated a „Kaisersaal“ in their castles, and prelates did the same thing in their monasteries during the 17th and 18th century. The „Kaisersaal“ of the Benedictine abbey in Kremsmünster, where the portraits of fifteen emperors, including Charles VI., were painted in 1719, is one preserved example. The „Kaisersaal“ of Zwettl, which was already decorated in the 1670s, and the one of Heiligenkreuz (both houses of the Cistercian order), dating from the 1690s, do not exist anymore. Apart from a „Kaisersaal“, these monasteries had guest-bedrooms reserved for important guests, which could be used by the imperial court, but these rooms usually were not decorated with imperial emblems.

From the 1720s onwards, some monasteries in lower- and upper Austria started constructing an imperial wing (as already mentioned above), in which the iconography of the frescoes, the stucco decoration, the fire-places and sometimes even pieces of furniture were devoted to the virtues of the house of Hapsburg and the glory of Charles VI.. These imperial wings were built in a very similar way to the palaces of the period, like them they had to have a great and splendid staircase as well as a marble hall. In Melk, the virtues of constancy and strenght, forming the personal motto of Charles VI. – „Constantia et fortitudine“ –, are represented as statues and placed at the first flight of the staircase leading to the imperial rooms, while the ceiling is decorated with the imperial eagle. In Göttweig, the mythological sun-god Helios-Apoll, who beares the features of Charles VI., triumphantly glides over the ceiling of the „Kaiserstiege“. The ceiling fresco of the marble hall in St. Florian is dedicated to the emperor and his glorious victory over the Ottoman Empire, while in Klosterneuburg the ceiling fresco

of the marble hall pays tribute to the glory of the House of Hapsburg, succeeding the Babenberg family as sovereigns of Austria.

The most complete iconographic programs can be found in the imperial wings of St. Florian and Klosterneuburg. There, nearly every part of the interior refers to Charles VI. and his wife Elisabeth Christine. The personal motto („through constancy and strength“) as well as other virtues attributed to the Emperor are represented in various ways, and important political topics of his reign are visualized in ceiling frescoes and stucco decoration: In St. Florian Charles VI. is not only praised for his victory over the Turks, but repeated prayers for a male heir (on the ceiling of the bedroom of the Emperor, the bedroom of the Emperess, as well as in the audience chamber) express the country's concern for the succession to the throne. Noticeable is the general lack of religious subjects in the decoration of the „Kaiserzimmer“ in lower- and upper Austrian monasteries, a fact which seems strange, considering not only the surroundings, but also the personal piety of Charles VI. When biblical figures are represented in the imperial rooms, usually they are taken from the Old Testament and they refer to the monarch and his qualities: Samson (represented in Altenburg as well as in St. Florian), like the mythological figure of Hercules, stands for strength; Salomon (represented in Klosterneuburg) is a symbol for the wise and just monarch; the Egyptian Joseph (represented in Klosterneuburg) refers to St. Joseph of the New Testament and therewith to the patron of Austria.

The „Kaiserzimmer“ were a secular sphere in the complex of monastery buildings, set apart from the enclosure. The distribution of the rooms, like the decoration, followed the same principles applied to the palaces of the time. – In the the 17th century and 18th century, persons of high rank had to have several rooms to their disposal. The apartment of a prince or princess usually consisted of an audience chamber, one or more antechambers, a bedroom, a „Retirade“ (a private room), and sometimes a dining-room. The imperial apartments in the residences, i.e. the Hofburg and the Favorita (and Schönbrunn castle under the reign of Maria Theresia), followed these principles. At court, there were strict rules concerning the admission of visitors to the rooms of a member of the imperial family – persons of lower rank were only allowed to enter the antechambers, persons of higher rank were admitted to the more private rooms. The „Kaiserzimmer“ in the monasteries were laid out according to these rules, and similar rules were effective at almost every court throughout Europe. In St. Florian the imperial apartments consist of sixteen rooms, in Klosterneuburg of ten rooms. In accordance with the floorplans of palaces built at the same time, these rooms were lined up in a row or „enfilade“, and were divided in the apartment of the Emperor and the apartment of the

Emperess. In case the court came to visit, the „Kaiserzimmer“ served as a stage for the ceremonial: The prelate of the respective monastery was usually waiting for the Emperor to arrive at the foot of the grand staircase, welcoming him with a speech and the handing-over of the keys to his monastery as a sign of submission. This ceremony was not only watched by the friars of the monastery and invited guests – other prelates and aristocrats of the neighbourhood – , but naturally it attracted a crowd of spectators, consisting of townspeople and peasants. There was music and gun-salutes. After answering to the prelate’s speech and handing him back his keys, the imperial guest was either escorted to his rooms immediately, or he went to say a prayer in the monastic church before. Sometimes, the Emperor received the friars, prelates of other monasteries, and aristocrats in the audience chamber afterwards, where they were admitted to kiss his hand. The most important part of an imperial visit always was the dinner. At public dinners, the members of the imperial family were seated at the table with the prelate, courtiers and invited guests, while everybody was allowed to enter the room to watch them eat. In Melk, the marble hall often was used for these feasts. As banquets used to be very opulent in the 17th and 18th century, they needed careful preparation. Some days before the court came to visit, lists were sent to the monastery with the number of people to expect and the victuals required for feeding them. The monastery had to pay for the victuals, but the court usually sent his own cooks to prepare the dinner. In case the imperial guests stayed overnight, there usually was a concert or a musical play performed after dinner. The farewell ceremony was similar to the welcome ceremony, the prelate used to thank the Emperor for paying visit and recommended his monastery to his favour and protection.

In the archives of the monasteries many reports on imperial visits are preserved, most of them of the time of Maria Theresia. Most of the „Kaiserzimmer“ in the monasteries of lower- and upper Austria were built and decorated under the reign of Charles VI., in the first place to pay homage to his person, while under the reign of his daughter, who showed no great interest in the continuation of the monastic building projects, these rooms were used more often.

Regarding the frequency of imperial visits, the completeness or splendour of the rooms beeing at the monarchs disposal were not decisive. – As already mentioned, St. Florian and Klosterneuburg (both houses of the Augustine order) have the most complete „Kaiserzimmer“, but neither Charles VI. nor Maria Theresia spent one single night there, while in Klosterneuburg Charles VI. inhabited his apartment only once after their completion in the year before his death. The Benedictine abbey of Lambach, on the other hand, did not have an imperial wing, and members of the imperial family had to be accomodated in the

prelate's apartment in case of an overnight stay, but it was frequently used by the court because of its geographical location near the main road leading to the west.

Melk was geographically especially well situated when the court had to travel westward, e.g. to Frankfurt am Main, to the coronation of the Emperor. The Benedictine abbey there could be reached within a day in the 18th century, by travelling on the roads or the river Danube. In addition to this advantage, the abbey had suitable „Kaiserzimmer“, and its prelates were on friendly terms with the imperial family. Due to these facts, the court stayed in Melk more often than in any other Austrian monastery. Several visits in the abbey took place under the reign of Maria Theresia, – the last important ones in 1765, when Maria Theresia's son and heir to the throne, Joseph, received there his wife to be, the bavarian princess Maria Josepha, who came from Munich, and in 1770, when Joseph's sister Marie Antoinette spent a night in the „Kaiserzimmer“ on her way to France, where she was married to the Dauphin. (Both princesses also spent one night in the abbey of Lambach on their journeys.)

Under the reign of Joseph II. (*1741, +1790), who was strongly influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment, the relationship between the monarch and the monasteries deteriorated. Although there can be no doubt about the emperor's personal devoutness, Joseph II. dissolved some orders (contemplative orders like the Carthusians), and the imperial rooms in the monasteries of lower- and upper Austria lost their significance as accomodation for the court.

Today, it is possible to visit the „Kaiserzimmer“ with a guided tour in most of the lower- and upper Austrian monasteries. In Altenburg, the imperial wing was never furnished, but the rich fresco painting and the stucco decoration is preserved. In Melk, not much of the original decoration is left in the imperial wing, except in the staircase, the marble hall and the „Dietmayrsaal“. In Göttweig as well as in Klosterneuburg, the decoration of the rooms is preserved, but most of the original 18th century furnishings are lost. The most impressive example for the splendour of baroque interiors is the „enfilade“ of the imperial rooms in St. Florian, more or less untouched since the mid 18th century. There, most of the furniture, dating from the first half of the 18th century, is still standing in its original place. Every part of the interior decoration, made to immortalize the glory of the emperor, bears witness of the skill of the cooperating artisans: fresco painters, sculptors, cabinet-makers, stove-fitters, upholsterers, and various others.