

The history of the Malbork Castle

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The Teutonic era

On September 14th 1309, Grand Master Siegfried von Feuchtwangen moved his office to Malbork. The castle was promoted to the status of being the capital of one of the most powerful states on the southern coast of the Baltic. It soon became apparent that it could not fulfil its new functions in its current form.

The nearly forty-year-long expansion transformed a convent house into a strongly fortified High Castle. Surrounded by deep moats and several rings of defensive walls, it housed several representative rooms. Among these are: the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, enlarged by a new chancel, and St. Ann's chapel beneath it – the burial site for the Grand Masters. The old settlement outside the outer walls was also expanded, becoming a spacious and functional Middle Castle available to knights – guests from Western Europe.

Apart from living quarters, the Grand Refectory – the largest hall in the castle – was also located here. It was topped with a beautiful fan vault. There was also an Infirmary for the older and sicker brothers, as well as the Palace of the Grand Masters.

In the 14th and first half of the 15th century, a third part of the stronghold was established and expanded respectively – the Low Castle, known later as the Outer Castle. Among other buildings, the Karwan – a large armoury for cannons and war carts, a granary on the shore of the Nogat river, as well as a number of outbuildings (a founder's workshop, the stables, brewery, etc.) were all located there. St. Lawrence's chapel, intended for the castle's servants, is located next to one of them. The whole complex was surrounded by moats and defensive walls with countless towers, connected with the fortifications of the city of Malbork.

The Polish era

During the Thirteen-year War, in June 1457, Malbork castle was captured by Polish forces. The managing of the castle fell to the royal starost and a burgrabius under his authority. The numerous 16th-18th century illustrations of the building made by court officials, show that the roles of some of its parts were changed. The High Castle was no longer a monastery, and instead was turned into the storage base for the whole stronghold. Tar, salt, beer, hops and other food products were stored here. Both the military crew and the clerical staff were housed in the Middle Castle. The Outer Castle was adapted for strictly military purposes. The Karwan (Armoury) housed cannons, cannon balls and firearms. Barrels with gun powder and saltpeter were kept in the towers.

The Castle complex, built and expanded by the Teutonic knights was neglected under Polish rule. Keeping such a huge defensive structure in good condition was connected with tremendous costs, the covering of which was always a struggle. The aforementioned illustrations remind us of this fact. One of the first ones (1565) shows cracks on one of the walls of the Grand Refectory. This defect was the beginning of a bigger problem, the solving of which was finally completed in our time.

At the beginning of the 17th century, some of the rooms in the Palace of the Grand Masters were turned into royal apartments. The Swedish Wars did not cause major damage within the stronghold. What did do considerable damage, however, was the accidental roof fire at the High Castle in May 1644. The medieval galleries were also destroyed at that time, though these were swiftly rebuilt, albeit in entirely different, baroque forms.

In 1647 the new roof over the church was installed. The renovation of the remaining segments dragged out for a very long time. This led to the collapsing of the vaults in the south wing and the Chapter House in 1675. It was not before the 18th century, that new roofs were laid at the High Castle by order of King Augustus II. The main tower, however, was crowned with helmet bearing a lighthouse.

In the years 1756-67, a huge Jesuit college building was erected between the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Middle Castle, on the spot of the old Klesza Tower (from Klecha – a term loosely meaning a clerical servant – the tower is where they used to live). The Jesuit order took care of the castle between 1652 and 1772. Construction work at the Middle Castle between the 17th and 18th century was limited only to the necessary renovation of the rooms in the north wing – needed by the offices of the starost – and the east wing, needed for the economy of Malbork.

The Prussian era

In September 1772 Malbork was captured by Prussian troops. They took up residence in the High Castle within the barracks which had been set up there by a Polish infantry regiment in 1737-44. However, this accommodation proved too small and before long work on extending it began. The cloisters were bricked up and a gate leading out towards the town was added to the south wing. The Great Refectory in the Middle Castle was converted into an arena for equestrian drill: the main entrance was enlarged, the tiled floor dismantled and some of the windows bricked up. During the

1780s a cotton spinning workshop was installed in the Grand Masters' Palace as were living quarters for riverboat captains.

This period marked the beginning of nearly twenty years of building and deconstruction work at the castle. This work continued despite the fact that in 1799 an album showing various views of Malbork was published. It was compiled by three Friedrichs: Gilly (illustrations), Frick (engravings) and Rabe (maps), the historical introduction to this volume having been written by Konrad Levezow. The book's authors wanted to make the general public aware of the beauty of the historic castle and persuade the relevant authorities to put an end to its being demolished. Despite these efforts, in the very same year a decree came from King Friedrich Wilhelm III recommending that the High Castle be turned into military stores. Work started in 1801 dramatically changed the outside appearance of the fortress. All of the medieval windows (except those of the church) were bricked up and new ones put in, their positions dictated by new interior divisions. The exterior elevations were rendered and the entire building received a new, low roof. The remains of any medieval vaulting and interior walls were dismantled and replaced with wooden ceilings. The Middle Castle was subjected to similar treatment, the east wing being converted into a granary, which required the demolition of St. Bartholomew's Chapel, as it stood on this.

A breakthrough for the castle at that time was the article written by Max von Schenkendorf, a royal student, which was published in a Berlin newspaper in 1803. The author, a young romantic poet, strongly protested against the destruction of the medieval monument. In consequence to this appeal, a new cabinet order was prepared, which halted the further destruction of the castle.

The Great Reconstruction

Immediately after the withdrawal of Napoleon's troops from the city, plans for the rebuilding of the castle started being drawn up. In 1816 a Board for the Rebuilding of Malbork Castle (Schloßbauverwaltung Marienburg) was appointed. Work was initiated a year later with the partial reconstruction of the eastern elevation of the Palace of the Grand Masters. During this project, the 17th-century staircase was demolished and the palace chapel of St. Catherine was reconstructed. In the years 1819-50, architect August Gersdorff was the project manager. It was under his supervision that the western part of the Middle Castle was reconstructed with the help of such people as: known painter and architect, Friedrich von Schinkel, historian, Johannes Voigt, and a Malbork pastor and enthusiast of the history of the Teutonic Order, Ludwig Haebler.

After removing traces of weaving workshops from the Palace, new ceramic flooring was laid, and the entrances were fitted with doors. In both the Summer and Winter Refectories, new stained-glass windows depicting scenes from the history of the Order were fitted. At the High Castle, work was limited to changing the roofs, and, in 1842, to building a new neo-gothic finial of the main tower.

A move which caused substantial controversy among contemporary art historians was the construction of the new gable above the Grand Commandry House at the Middle Castle, in 1850. As Gersdorff explained it, the decoration was to correspond with the medieval gable of the Infirmary. The aforementioned criticism did not concern only

this final project, but all the work undertaken during the first half of the century. Alexander Ferdinand von Quast, the first monument conservator in Prussia, in office from 1848, spoke unfavourably about it in the years 1849-50. He took over the management of the work, and stayed in office until around 1876. It was his idea to use iron engineering bolts to secure the subsiding western wall of the Grand Refectory, as well as to fill the gaps in the mosaic figure of the Madonna with Child on the eastern elevation of the castle church. This last project was undertaken by masters from Venice. Five centuries earlier, masters from that exact city laid the original mosaic onto the sculpture!

In the years 1868-69, the castle was examined by secret building advisor, Hermann Blankenstein. His work, as well as the celebrations which took place in Malbork in September 1872 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the return of West Prussia into the Kingdom of Prussia, caused a new wave of interest in the old capital of the Teutonic Order among historians in Germany.

In 1881, thanks to the high activity of MPs from East and West Prussia, the government decided to start rebuilding the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary at the High Castle. A year later, the minister for religious denominations set up a special commission whose job it was to supervise the work of the Board of Rebuilding Malbork Castle. It was with a unanimous decision that they charged a young talented architect named Conrad Emmanuel Steinbrecht (1849-1923) with managing the project. As it turned out, he was one of the most important figures in the modern history of the former capital of the Grand Masters. He had already had archaeological experience in Greece (1877). He also conducted studies on the architecture of the monastic state, proved in the interesting monograph, entitled Thorn in Mittelalter (1881).

His work methods can be summed up in several points:

- ▶ A precise assessment of the actual state of preservation
- ▶ Archaeological studies
- ▶ Research travels
- ▶ Studying archival sources
- ▶ Reintroducing former building methods

The rule of thumb he always upheld was that: no step can be taken, unless it follows the spirit of history. The prime example of such actions is the way the vault of the Chapter House was rebuilt. After careful study and inventorying, medieval details found in rubble were flawlessly matched with their original placement inside the hall.

The large scale construction and conservation work, carried with extraordinary conscientiousness, was financed chiefly from the Prussian budget. The rebuilding of Malbork castle also raised considerable interest among the Imperial family. Wilhelm II Hohenzollern inspected it over thirty times during his reign. Financial backing also came from the Society of Rebuilding and Beautifying Malbork. It was established on March 3rd 1884, on the initiative of several high ranking Prussian officials, among them the Oberpraesidents of East and West Prussia, as well as the Burgomaster of Gdańsk. Its origins, however, go as far back as 1872, when, during the aforementioned anniversary celebrations, the Committee for the Rebuilding of the High Castle was set up.

The Society was a public body enjoying an honorary Imperial protectorate. The first article of its statute stated that it was set up “to collect financial means for the dignified rebuilding of the castle in Malbork, and to spend those means with the approval of the national government” – which was represented by the Board of the Rebuilding of Malbork Castle. The money came mainly from lotteries organised from 1886. The idea for such funding was first born in 1881 and was modelled on the lottery which supported the rebuilding of the cathedral in Cologne. The funds accumulated by the Society made it possible to conserve the old wall paintings as well as produce new ones, buy pieces of militaria, archival documents and books, paintings and architectural details.

The fundamental work at the High Castle was completed by 1900. Several of the key interiors – the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Ann’s Chapel, the Chapterhouse, Kitchen, Dining Room and Convent Common Room – were all rebuilt. Work at the Middle Castle went on until 1918 and brought effects in the shape of the restoration of the east wing with St. Bartholomew’s chapel, the Grand Commandry House, the Infirmary, as well as the west wing with the Grand Refectory. The exception was the interior of the Palace of the Grand Masters, which remained the way it was reconstructed in the first half of the 19th century.

By the end of June 1922, after some forty years of work in Malbork, Conrad Steinbrecht retired. He was succeeded by the Regierungsbezirk master builder, Bernhard Schmid (1872-1947), who was also the monument conservator of West Prussia. It was under his supervision that the castle gained its final shape.

In 1922, the rebuilding of St. Catherine’s Chapel was completed. Four years later, the walls and towers of the Plauen bastion were reconstructed, and in 1931, work at the New Gate, also known as the Hindenburg Gate, were brought to an end.

The rebuilt building, fitted with a number of neo-gothic pieces of furniture, was used as an interior museum during the interwar period. It gave its visitors an idea of how a medieval monastery functioned, and familiarised them with the way of life of monks. To this end, the layout of the individual interiors was used, among them: The Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Chapterhouse, the chambers in the west wing of the High Castle, the convent kitchen, the Grand Refectory, etc.

Such a way of using the gothic structure was met with general social approval. The citizens of Malbork and the surrounding area were proud of having the only reconstructed, and so richly furnished, castle-monastery in Prussia.

The military collection, the majority of which was purchased in 1896 from a well known East-Prussian collector, Theodor von Blell, was among the most valuable. In it were artefacts from both the times of the Roman Empire, as well as the end of the 19th century; Celtic and east-Asian weapons. Another collection, coins collected by secret advisor, dr. Max Jaquet, and passed on to the castle, amounted to some 10,000 pieces. Of the many examples of gothic sculpture, three winged altars are worthy of mention: The Grudziąc polyptych from 1370-80, the so-called Hamburg altar and the Tenkitten altar from 1504. The archive of the Klesza tower stored a number of valuable documents, among them Polish Royal Privileges for the city, guild records,

etc. The archaeological collections, the core of which were relic architectural details from the former monastic state, were most impressive. A set of decorative glazed roof-tiles from the Imperial Palace in Beijing, as well as several bricks from the Great Wall, were interesting side notes. In one of the buildings of the renovated Outer Castle, a so-called Heimatmuseum was set up – a kind of regional house accumulating material culture artefacts of the inhabitants of Żuławy and the city of Malbork.

The Third Reich

The political situation in Germany in the 1930s also reflected on the everyday life of the castle. On May 1st 1933, a flag of the Third Reich was planted atop the main tower. The building also became the place of numerous celebrations with high ranking members of the Nazi party in attendance. In connection with similar events, a project was set up in 1934 (luckily unfulfilled) to build a huge amphitheatre on the eastern side of the of the castle. On September 1st 1939, in the Grand Refectory, Gauleiter Forster ceremoniously announced the return of the land on the left bank of the lower Vistula to Germany, and thus the recreation of the province of West Prussia within its former borders.

In the same hall, in 1940, the Banderia Prutenorum – copies of the Teutonic banners taken from Wawel in Kraków - were welcomed. During the years of the Second World War, the hall bore witness to the pledges of youths entering the Hitler Youth, as well as the military vows of the soldiers heading out to the eastern front. In 1941, preparations began to secure the building against bombing. Among other things, a plaster cast of the Madonna from the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary was made in September 1944. Another precaution saw the stained-glass windows from the same temple being dismantled.

The city and castle suffered terribly during the military operations of 1945. As a result of heavy fighting of the Marienburg Combat Group with units of the 2nd Russian Offensive Army, almost 80 percent of the buildings in the Old Town were destroyed. The eastern parts of the Castle complex were also seriously damaged – the chancel of the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary with the mosaic figure of the Madonna with Child, the main tower, the east wing of the Middle Castle, the buildings of the Outer Castle. On March 8th, retreating German units destroyed the bridges on the Nogat river.

After the Second World War

Polish civil administration arrived in the city as soon as April 1945, whereas the final organised party of departing Germans left in 1957. The end of the 1940s is a time where the remains of the Old Town were systematically demolished.

During the first post-war years, the ruined stronghold was left under the supervision of the Museum of the Polish Army in Warsaw. There were plans to open a branch of the Warsaw institution there. To this end, the first strengthening and cleaning work was begun, the castle grounds were demined and the gates were fixed. A very important enterprise at the time was the repairing of the large areas of damaged roofs, which protected the monument against the damaging effects of the weather until the planned rebuilding. During the next decade, the Polish Tourist Society looked after the castle. The ever-increasing number of tourists caused the undertaking of further

cleaning and renovation work. It was only makeshift, however, and was carried out without detailed documentation. By the end of the 1950s, the initiator of actions aimed at protecting and cleaning the monument, was the Public Committee for the Rebuilding of Malbork Castle – set up by local cultural activists. The work gained considerable momentum, and the Committee also strove to turn the castle into a separate museum.

History of the Museum

Starting with the 1st of January 1961, the newly created Castle Museum, a central institution answering only to the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage in Warsaw, became the host of the monument. It is a multi-departmental museum of a historical-artistic nature, the organisation of which was subordinated chiefly to the matters of reconstruction, conservation and correct management of the castle. Parallel to these activities, the Museum also conducts archaeological activities in Lower Powiśle, as well as researching the history, art and culture of Royal Prussia, mainly based on collections in its possession. The accumulation, conservation, scientific description and making available of both modern and old art, are the other tasks of the Malbork institution.

At the threshold of its activity, the Museum had at its disposal merely the relics which had survived the war and the looting after 1945. Apart from the architectural details, there were sparse examples of medieval sculpture and pseudo-gothic furniture from the late 19th century. Currently, the 40 thousand museum items include such valuable collections as one of Europe's largest collection of medieval architectural elements, a collection of artistic amber wares – unique worldwide, an effective set of old weapons and military equipment, or the extensive coin collection, relating to the historic mints in Malbork. The result of including the Museum in the mainstream of European cultural life, were the International Biennale of Contemporary Bookplates, organised since the 1960s, which bring the castle into the orbit of world class high ranking artistic work. Continued till this day, it has become the largest cyclic artistic event in Poland and the most serious manifestation of this graphic art form in the world. What gives the Museum wide-reaching publicity, are the numerous exhibitions of amber masterpieces in other countries. In the last few years, they were exhibited in the leading museums in Germany, Great Britain, Finland, Sweden, the USA and Japan.



The High Castle

Witold Cell

The Archaeological Exhibition

Corner Room – Stained-Glass Exhibition

Convent Kitchen

Chapter House

The Chambers of Dignitaries

Gdanisko

Dormitory 1 – Sculpture Exhibition

Dormitory 2 and 3 – Exhibition of the decor and furnishing of the Castle Church

The Blessed Virgin Mary Church

Convent Chamber

Convent Refectory

Monastic Granary – Temporary Exhibitions' Hall

St. Anne's Chapel



The Middle Castle

The Grand Refectory

Kitchen

The Medieval System of Heating

Halebard Hall

Cellars

Passage with the Apocalypse

St. Bartholomew's Chapel

Infirmary



Grand Master's Palace

Office

Low Vestibule and Entrance Hall

Królewiec Hall

Winter Refectory

Summer Refectory

High Vestibule

Bedroom

Grand Masters' Chapel

Other

Northern terrace – Lapidarium

Eastern Terrace – Cemetery

Southern Terrace – Garden

Western Terrace – Mill

Karwan

Collections

The Amber Collection

The Ceramics Collection

The Architectural Details Collection

The Historic Documentation

Albums of the Reconstruction of the Castle

The Exlibris Collection

The Tiled Stoves and Tiles Collection

The Paintings Collection

Malboriana
The Furniture Collection
The Antique Metals Collection
The Militaria Collection
Numismatics Room
Tombstones and Monuments
The Sculpture Collection
The Etchings Room
The Glass Art and Funcional Glass Collection
Technological Relics
The Textile Collection
The Stained-Glass Collection
The Archeological Laboratory