

My Favourite History Place

Elisabeth Davies introduces us to Magdeburg's Altstadt, a German city which still venerates the memory of an Anglo-Saxon princess.



Magdeburg Cathedral from the River Elbe



Aedgyth's sarcophagus



13th century statue of the royal couple

The Landeshauptstadt Magdeburg is gratefully acknowledged as the source of the images.

Magdeburg, the 1,200-year-old city of surprises ('Magdeburg überascht') is situated on the banks of the River Elbe in the state of Sachsen-Anhalt, Germany. First mentioned by Charlemagne in 805, Magdeburg today attracts much attention by being a major historic venue on the *Straße der Romanik* or Romanesque Route that has opened up a large number of medieval monasteries, cathedrals, churches and castles to thousands of inquisitive visitors. It was through my research on Aedgyth, the granddaughter of England's King Alfred the Great, that I travelled this fascinating route to Magdeburg.

My first impression on approaching Magdeburg was the silhouette of the magnificent Gothic cathedral, the 'Symbol of Magdeburg' that dominates the skyline of the old centre or *Altstadt*. Located in the centre of Magdeburg the once heavily-fortified *Altstadt* nestles between the lovely River Elbe on the eastern side and the tracks of the mainline railway station to the west. In my favourite quarter of the *Altstadt* a wealth of medieval culture can be explored on foot within easy reach of its surrounding roads, the *Schleiufer*, *Ernst-Reuter Allee* and *Breiter Weg*.

Just a stroll from the *Schleiufer* is Magdeburg's stunning cathedral that dates back to 955 and, built by King Otto, holds the reputation of being the first basilica in Gothic style in Germany. Beneath the cathedral lies the Romanesque church of St Mauritius' monastery that was founded by Queen Aedgyth and her husband King Otto in 937. Its precious remains can be viewed via access from the cathedral cloister. Aedgyth played a major role in the monastery's foundation since the town of Magdeburg was her dowry (*Morgengabe*) when she married Otto in 929. It was here on Aedgyth's property that the royal couple established their splendid palace and, driven by his ambitious intention of creating 'a third Rome' here, King Otto moved his centre of power from Quedlinburg to Magdeburg. The presumed site of this grand palatium or *Kaiserpfalz* can be seen, outlined in bronze, adjacent to the cathedral in the corner of the *Domplatz*.

When Queen Aedgyth died in 946 she was first buried in the Romanesque church and eventually laid to rest in 1510 in the Gothic cathedral where her ornate sandstone sarcophagus can be viewed today in the *Scheitelkapelle*. There the 'first lady of Magdeburg' lay undisturbed and forgotten. Magdeburg Cathedral was to hold the secret of the whereabouts of its precious Anglo-Saxon queen for 500 years. Early in the new millennium, however (2008), Magdeburg awoke to the amazing discovery during excavation work of a silk-clad skeleton that was scientifically identified as that of its beloved lost Queen Aedgyth. Ceremoniously, on 22 October 2010, the elegant titanium and silver coffin bearing the remains of Aedgyth, 'one of the oldest members of the English royal family' was

re-interred under the heavy stone lid of the sixteenth-century sarcophagus. This important event in Magdeburg was recorded by the international press and attended by the German Minister for Culture, a representative of the Queen of England and the highest officials and citizens of the city.

But the memory of Ædgyth lives on in Magdeburg, as does the memory of her husband King Otto, and their vital presence fascinates as one wanders around the *Altstadt*. From the cathedral, a short walk by the river along the Schleinufer and Fürstenwallstraße in the direction of Große Klösterstraße brings into view the twin towers of the oldest Romanesque building extant in Magdeburg, the monastery of Unser Lieben Frauen. This beautiful example of Romanesque architecture now functions as an art museum, providing a delightful romantic setting for sculpture, art exhibitions and concerts. The sacredness of the crypt that remains tranquil and holy is an experience not to be missed. Continuing in a northerly direction across Ernst-Reuter Allee the visitor reaches the Alter Markt, famous for Magdeburg's old Town Hall and

the golden Magdeburger Reiter. Claimed to be Kaiser Otto, the original thirteenth-century figure, probably the first equestrian sculpture north of the Alps, stands proudly in the Kulturhistorisches Museum in Otto-von-Guericke Straße. But Magdeburg takes greatest pride in guarding the remains of the bona fide Kaiser Otto, the first Emperor of Germany (d.973), whose simple white marble tomb stands close to Ædgyth's in Otto's impressive Gothic cathedral in the centre of my favourite history place.

Elisabeth Davies is an amateur historian and a member of the Cambridge branch of the HA and the International Society of Anglo-Saxonists. She is currently writing a book on Aedgyth, the Anglo-Saxon Queen of Germany.

If you would like to tell us about your history place in a future edition of *The Historian*, in about 700 words, please email: alf.wilkinson@history.org.uk

Mary Seacole, nurse and campaigner, in ten tweets

Why Mary Seacole? As most of this issue is about white men in the medieval period, I thought, Let's have something completely different. And October is Black History Month.



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Summarising an event or person using ten statements of only 140 characters (including spaces!). Compiled by Paula Kitching

-  Seacole was born Mary Jane Grant in Kingston, Jamaica in 1805. Her father was a Scottish soldier, and her mother a Jamaican.
-  Mary was of mixed race and therefore 'free', but as slavery wasn't abolished until 1838 her family had few civil rights.
-  Mary's mother taught her daughter nursing in their home, which was a boarding house for invalid soldiers.
-  1836: Mary married Edwin Seacole, who died in 1844. After that she pursued her interest in travel, a passion from before her marriage.
-  1854: Seacole travelled to England to ask the War Office to go as an army nurse to the Crimea war – she was turned down.
-  Undeterred set up the British Hotel nr Balaclava to provide 'a mess-table and comfortable quarters for sick and convalescent officers'.
-  She became known as 'Mother Seacole' by the troops. Her reputation then and now rivalled the nurse Florence Nightingale.
-  She returned to Britain after the war bankrupt. Some of those she had helped and the British press raised money on her behalf.
-  She died in London on 14 May 1881. In 2004 she was voted the greatest black Briton.
-  Her autobiography, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857), is one of the earliest autobiographies of a mixed-race woman

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