

Gateway to the Middle Ages

Live town history - archaeological diggings at the Old Market in Dresden.

History is alive and fascinating. This fact is being demonstrated in Dresden, where archaeological excavations have been in progress at the Old Market since 1994. They are not just digging for old walls and fragments of pottery, but rather to gain knowledge of the early beginnings of the city. One of the willing helpers at the scene: a Mobilair Compressor.



Cellars dating from the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries were excavated on the grounds of Schreibergasse 10.

The really interesting topics in our historical past are not found in old chronicles or documents but under our feet! In Dresden they are in the process of digging up such an 'Underground City Archive'. Archaeological excavation started there about two years ago. This whole area was densely built until 1945 when Dresden was destroyed by the bombing in World War II. Just as the famous Frauenkirche in Berlin (see KAESER Report 1/95), it was not rebuilt. This is now going to happen, but before the new buildings start to rise archaeological excavations will track down those witnesses of history that are still underground and 'rescue' their message for future generations. The professional administration of the project lies in the hands of the Saxonian State Archaeological Office. Altogether, a total area of 20 000 m² is to be excavated. More than 80 people are working on the project, which is split up into three sections. This has the advantage that building can commence during the period of excavation.

A trip through lime to the city's origins

The goal of the project, which lasted to the end of summer last year, is to reconstruct the city's earlier periods more precisely with the help of archaeological finds. At the same time it is hoped that further knowledge is gained on the European effect on the town's development after the 12th century. The area south of Dresden's old market was of great importance at that time. It is highly probable that merchants settled there quite early. This is evidenced by the neighbouring Church of the Cross. Up to 1388 it was called Church of St. Nicholas.

St. Nicholas was the Patron Saint of merchants and traders. Early merchant settlement is also indicated by the fact that merchants never joined an existing church or parish but, as an independent social group, they built their own church. The merchant settlement at the Old Market probably gave a large impulse to the growth rate of mediaeval Dresden. Also, other evidence from written sources shows that clerics settled opposite the Church of the Cross and that the Church of St. Nicholas of those days developed into an important place pilgrimage. The objective of the pilgrims was a splinter from the Holy Cross, kept as a holy relict in an adjoining chapel.

Painstaking detailed work

In their search for the beginnings of city development the archaeologists were especially interested in when the land south of the Old Market was divided into plots and when the Old Market became a public area. The framework of plots that

had developed since the 13th century was the basis of Dresden's city planning and building right up to its destruction in 1945. It is thus a 'historical commemoration' to the old town. One of the main aims of the excavations is, therefore, the examination of the structure of mediaeval cellars. At first, the remains of the buildings over the cellars that stood until 1945 were removed stone by stone. The fine work was done manually by the archaeologists and their assistants. The 'heavy' work was done with the aid of pneumatic tools driven by a Mobilair portable construction compressor.



A fragment of a pencil as used by the merchants in the middle ages was among the important finds. The point (thin end) was used to write on wax tablets by scratching. The arrowshaped end of the pencil was used to smooth out the tablet, which could then be used again (above left).

A birds-eye view of the excavation area at the Old Market in Dresden: Important witnesses of the early beginnings of the city have been preserved only a few metres under the asphalt (right).

Revealing finds

Underneath the more modern layers, cellars from the 13th and 14th century appeared. A late Gothic cellar with sandstone portals was found below. The backyards were then excavated. It is here that mediaeval property walls and storage buildings have been preserved. It is interesting that the mediaeval division of the plots of land can be reconstructed with the results of these diggings. One of the more interesting finds was a pencil (stylus) made of bone. This is proof of the existence of the mediaeval merchant quarter around the earlier Church of St. Nicholas. Fragments of mediaeval household clay goods, mediaeval tools and a comb also point to early settlement of the area. It is hoped that further excavations will provide evidence on the age and form of Dresden's earliest town defences.