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Masterpiece

The Chapel of St. James (c.11th-12th century) in Urschalling, Germany

“A Gem Too Often Neglected”

The chapel's extraordinary murals set it apart

by H. George Fletcher

Travelers in the alpine foothills of Upper Bavaria south of Munich encounter a countryside dotted with onion-domed churches. Many of them are of considerable antiquity, though their interiors, along with the onion domes themselves, are often the result of early 18th-century Baroque changes. Those interior alterations raised wedding-cake plaster exuberances to a dominant architectural theme, covering and obscuring much more austere original structures. (The concussive shockwaves of Allied bombing during World War II regularly dislodged these florid plaster accretions, uncovering Romanesque originals. Not everyone found this collateral damage unfortunate.)

One of the smallest of these churches, St. James in Urschalling, near Prien am Chiemsee, is a noteworthy exception to the normal white-and-gold fulsomeness of these churches. It constitutes a treasure chest of medieval frescoes, among the best-preserved in all of southern Germany. Lake Chiem itself is the major geological feature of the region, lying roughly midway between Munich and Salzburg, and the hamlet of Urschalling is to be found on only the most detailed maps. Urschalling is believed to have begun life as a small agricultural community centered on a church, in the ninth or 10th century.



A treasure chest of medieval frescoes Priener Tourismus GmbH/Christina Senega

Restored and currently serving as a parish church, the chapel of St. James, the *Jakobuskirchlein*, was founded by Udalschalk, an abbot who died in the early 12th century. He was a member of the family of the counts of Falkenstein, whose patron saint was St. James, and whose principal fortress-residence was in Flintsbach am Inn. They built a subsidiary regional fortification at Urschalling between 1160 and 1200, north of the church, so St. James predates the small fortress, all traces of which are long gone, with the possible exception of the nave.

A niche in the western wall of the nave, holding a carved statue of St. James, was the entryway from the fortress. The doorway in the southern wall toward the western end of the structure provides access to the building. The apse, in the conventional eastern end, is raised well above the floor of the nave, and may have been the sole original religious structure. The nave's suggested origin as a corner defensive tower of the fortress may explain its much lower level.

The chapel has experienced long stretches of both use and abandonment, with periodic attempts at renovation and restoration. Its onion-dome tower dates to 1711, and its current exterior, gleaming white-painted stucco over stone walls, is typical of churches in Upper Bavaria. The extraordinary murals gracing its interior, however, set it apart.

The most recent cycle of archaeological investigations began in the 1960s, and my first view of the chapel took place in November 1966. Former colleagues in the Medieval Latin Seminar at the University of Munich had heard of recent discoveries, and invited me to join their expedition. Our visit fell on a memorably gloomy afternoon, the autumnal atmosphere matching the ancient stone construction. The deconsecrated chapel sat forlorn in a field, and an elderly couple at a neighboring farm kept the key. Our inspection, conducted by candle and flashlight, was revelatory if frustrating. The floor of the nave had been raised long before, to bring it level with the apse. This earthen infill had been mostly removed, revealing wondrous if fragmentary wall paintings, along with a peculiar object on a pedestal in the middle of the nave. The upper walls had been painted over with whitewash on numerous occasions, beginning as early as 1500, so we saw fragments of polychrome figures from about the knees down. Even the unpracticed eye knew instinctively that the images were of considerable antiquity.

The peculiar object in the nave, which continues to stand in what is now the central aisle, consists of a stone pedestal bearing at about waist height a wider dishlike top of stone that is noteworthy for its seven hollowed-out indentations. Its original purpose has never been identified to anyone's satisfaction, although one proposal dates it to a period in which it served some unfathomable secular purpose. This "dish" is the very image of the cast-iron pans used to cook *aebleskiver* (Danish pancake popovers).

The restored paintings on walls and ceiling constitute an extended biblical cycle of people and events in Judeo-Christian history. Except for certain areas of loss, the murals have been recovered and restored, and have been dated to the 12th and 14th centuries. Adam and Eve cower after the Fall; Christ kneels during the Agony in the Garden and stands in the Hellsmouth to comfort the dead. Mariological themes include the Angel Gabriel of the Annunciation and the Assumption of the Virgin. "Painted prayers" offer standard Medieval elements of fear of damnation and hope for salvation. A mandorla of Christ in Majesty looms over the apse, the curved rear wall of which is filled with Apostles and their attributes.

The single outstanding feature is described as a depiction of the Trinity, the triune rendition of one God in three divine persons, a depiction reportedly unique in art history, conforming to neither Eastern nor Western Christian iconography. In a diminishing triangular segment on the north side of the interior dome of the apse, between two ribs of the arches, three figures stand side by side, initially distinct and in seeming equivalence. The bodies of the figures begin to combine as they fill the long shield-shaped section that ends in a point, finally merging. The Trinity is conventionally shown as a seated God the Father, holding the crucified Christ, with the dove of the Holy Spirit hovering above. Here, there is a white-robed, white-bearded elderly man to the viewer's right, a white-robed, dark-bearded younger man to the left, and between them, a brown-robed, smooth-faced figure with long, flowing brown locks framing the face. Each is distinguished with a nimbus.

Its importance and fame notwithstanding, there is a considerable problem in identifying this depiction as the Trinity, because it is not the Trinity at all, but rather the reception of the Virgin in Paradise. Mary is welcomed and flanked by God the Father and God the Son, her own son, their respective outside arms embracing her protectively. It is entirely logical to find this above the altar, continuing the Mariology of other murals. The directly opposite southern section of the dome contains the Madonna and Child. An erroneous conclusion at an earlier date has been perpetuated, and this proof by progressive assertion, as a mentor of mine used to say, has canonized the "Trinity" painting as the most significant of the murals. It ought not to remain misidentified. It can stand on its own terms as an early and important vision of the female—indeed, of *the* female—in Christian iconography.

Despite its historical importance, St. James, Urschalling seems to have garnered only German-language attention and study. It greatly deserves to be far more widely known and visited.

—Mr. Fletcher is a writer in New York.