

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 34 (2007)
Heft: 6

Artikel: Einsiedeln monastery : a monastery in the 21st century
Autor: Wey, Alain
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907573>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

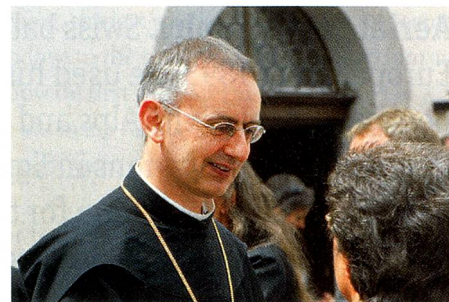
Download PDF: 31.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

A monastery in the 21st century. The Benedictine abbey of Einsiedeln (SZ), a famous place of pilgrimage, lives in harmony with the 21st century without losing sight of its traditions. The monastery is a hive of activity, with a variety of workshops, schools and Europe's oldest stud farm within its walls. The door opens and we step inside to meet the monks. By Alain Wey

The Benedictine Abbey of Our Lady of the Hermits proudly occupies a spot near the Sihlsee south of Lake Zurich. The monastery's impressive and evocative two bell towers almost root visitors to the spot in contemplative observation. Mystery lies in the air, and charades of spirits conjure up medieval heroic myths. A thousand years. I'm sorry? This place is older than the Swiss confederation! Every year, almost a million pilgrims visit Einsiedeln monastery, founded in 934. And yet the pilgrimages are only the visible tip of the iceberg, for the abbey has many surprises up its sleeve: schools, workshops and the oldest stud farm in Europe. Indeed a mini universe exists behind the walls of the monastery. Abbot Martin Werlen and Fathers Alois Kurmann and Lorenz Moser take us on a tour of the abbey.

"How would the area have looked prior to the 10th century?" I ask. It was all dense forest, they tell me. The Sihlsee, Switzerland's largest artificial lake, has only existed since 1937. "In 835, a Benedictine monk called Meinrad left the island of Reichenau on Lake Constance and withdrew to the 'dark forest' south of Lake Zurich, where he settled," the abbot tells us. "He was slain in 861." The perpetrators, two robbers whom the hermit had invited in, were followed all the way to Zurich by Meinrad's two ravens, where the men were recognised and convicted. This is why the abbey's crest shows two ravens on a yellow background. Seventy years later, a monastery was built on the former site of Meinrad's hermitage. Although he lived as a hermit and dedicated his entire life to God, many people came to Meinrad seeking his advice. The memory of



Abbot Martin Werlen

this outlived him and remained fresh in people's minds long after the monastery was founded. Even the name Einsiedeln is derived from the German word for hermits.

Forty-five-year-old Martin Werlen, Switzerland's youngest abbot, has led the abbey since 2001. He is the 58th abbot of Einsiedeln, and responsible for not only the 80 monks of Einsiedeln but also 28 nuns living at the convent in Fahr. "My job is to uphold and renew the basic tenets of the abbey, namely that it should be a place in which to encounter God, people and Creation, a place where one can encounter oneself. It is a very exciting challenge to put these principles into practice and anchor them in the beginning of the 21st century." The monks' primary task is to serve God. They gather to pray six times a day, and spend a lot of their time looking after pilgrims.



Einsiedeln Monastery was founded in 934



Monks at prayer



A manuscript from the library



The monastery is self-sufficient

FACTS AND FIGURES

■ There are 80 monks in Einsiedeln Abbey and 28 nuns at Fahr Convent (founded 1130) near Zurich. Einsiedeln is the only Benedictine monastery whose abbot heads religious communities for both men and women. The oldest monk is 88 years old, the youngest – a novice – is 22.

■ Pilgrims: The local tourist board estimates

that a million pilgrims a year pass through Einsiedeln. In addition, the abbey accommodates some 800 people a year in its 35 guest rooms, and these visitors spend anything from two days to a week at the monastery.

■ Benedictine monks from Einsiedeln have gone on to found monasteries in north and south America.

■ The abbey's library contains 1230 manu-

scripts (more than 500 of which were produced before 1500), 1100 incunabula and first editions (until 1520) and 230,000 printed volumes (from the 16th century to the present day).

■ The abbey has about a thousand hectares of woodland managed by a team of seven to eight foresters.

www.kloster-einsiedeln.ch

In many respects, today's abbey is like a medium-sized company. "In addition to the monks, some 180 lay brothers live in the monastery," the abbot explains. "There are carpenters, painters, printers, bookbinders, roofers, plumbers, electricians, gardeners, stable hands and vintners."

"It's hard to imagine how big the monastery really is," adds Reto Krismer, the monastery's administrative director. "It's a reli-

gious community, a place of pilgrimage, a cultural centre through its library, an educational establishment, entrepreneurial undertaking and producer of wine and wood, landowner (leasing out farms), hotelier and horse-breeder. This diversification is unique and fascinating."

The abbey has always been a cultural stronghold. While walking through the wide, light corridors, 64-year-old Father

Alois tells us about the monastery's dynamism. The Latin teacher unlocks door after door using an ancient bunch of keys. The abbey maintains no fewer than three schools: a mixed-sex 340-pupil grammar school specialising in classics and founded in 1839, a seminary (1620) and an agricultural college for women at Fahr Convent (1944). Through the windows you can see the grammar school's sports grounds, which



The sight pilgrims come to see: Einsiedeln's black Madonna in the baroque church

will soon undergo extensive renovation. In the abbey's music library, Father Lukas Helg shows us a priceless gem: a musical score hand-written by Mozart in Paris. The library contains more than 6000 musical works and houses a collection of pieces by 19th-century Swiss composers. The splendid baroque rococo-style hall of the library is used to store manuscripts, some of which are as old as the abbey itself.

A few steps inside the entrance of the baroque church erected in 1735, the Chapel of Our Lady (or Chapel of the Black Madonna) occupies the spot where St. Meinrad's altar once stood. "The statue of the

Virgin Mary wasn't always black," the abbot says. "The first chapel was very small, so the soot from the candles gradually blackened the statue over the centuries. In order to prevent it being damaged during the French Revolution, the statue was smuggled to Austria, where it was restored and cleaned. But when the people spied the pristine Madonna figure again, they were disappointed because the black had gone. So she was simply painted black!" The abbey's cellars contain 35,000 bottles of wine, most of which stems from the abbey's own vineyards in Pfäffikon. Wine has been produced on the shores of Lake Zurich since

the 17th century. The cellars were added in 1704 when the baroque abbey was built. "We are constantly renovating and restoring the different parts of the abbey," Abbot Martin says. "That's why it's crucial that we have the original plans. Luckily, our archives go right back to the 10th century."

Just like in the French town of Lourdes, miracles are said to have happened in Einsiedeln. What does the abbot think about this? "Many miracles occur here, though the greatest aren't necessarily the most spectacular, but rather take place when people rediscover a purpose in their life and renewed hope."

A THOUSAND-YEAR-OLD STUD FARM

■ The stables of Einsiedeln Abbey, established in 934, are considered the oldest and best preserved stud farm in Europe. In the first century of its existence, the monks were mainly noblemen; knights who brought their riding horses with them. The abbey's horses were once known as "cavalli della Madonna" (horses of Our Lady). Today they are simply called Einsiedler horses. "Whenever the abbot travelled to Rome or Trieste in the 16th century, the Italians were always very surprised and impressed by the cavalli della Madonna," Abbot Martin says. But the stud farm doesn't only breed horses.

It also offers stables and has a riding school with its own ultra-modern riding hall built in 2004. Thirty-five horses are currently housed in the stables, 18 Einsiedlers and 17 boarders. "The Einsiedler is a Warmblood horse in terms of its temperament and morphology," explains Father Lorenz Moser, the monastery's stable-master. "It is a medium-sized horse standing about 16 hands (165 cm) to the withers, with a life expectancy of about 20 years." Two foals are born on the farm each year. "We don't want any more than that because we need the mares for riding," he adds. The old stables from 1768 are currently undergoing

complete renovation, so the carpenters, locksmiths, bricklayers, painters and other craftsmen at the monastery's workshops have plenty to do. The renovation is due to be finished in 2008. The stud farm is run by an experienced horse-breeder and her four stable hands, who look after the horses and give riding lessons. A vet visits the animals several times a week. Over the course of its thousand-year history, the Einsiedler has been crossed with various other breeds, though the sporty character of this wonderful horse, whose historic roots stretch all the way back to the 10th century, has always shone through.



The monastery's stud farm is considered the oldest in Europe