

# Basel Cathedral

A Guide to the Stories  
behind the Stones

Oswald Inglin



Christoph Merian Verlag



Basel Cathedral

A Guide to the Stories  
behind the Stones



Cathedral scholar with book, sculptural detail on bishop's throne, south transept, c. 1381.

Oswald Inglin

# Basel Cathedral

A Guide to the Stories  
behind the Stones

Christoph Merian Verlag

## Foreword

There have already been many books written about Basel Cathedral, but none like this one. This is because I turn my attention to the many figurative representations and surprising architectural details in and around the cathedral. It is their stories that convey this Basel landmark's peculiarities in a new way here.

What is the significance of the strange elephants on the outer facade of Basel Cathedral's choir? Why are there white stones all over the red facade? What used to be in the empty niche between the two doors of the main entrance? For what reason did the man who made the pulpit conceal a little dog with a bone in its mouth among the stone ornamentation?

This book provides answers to these and many other questions. In 25 sections, it tells surprising, amusing and informative tales pertaining to the cathedral and its features. Some are about historical persons and events, some are about biblical figures, some are about the artists who have enriched the building with their works over the centuries, and others come from the treasure trove of myths and legends. The longer you listen, the more familiar you will become with this extraordinary edifice.

I invite you to engage in this dialogue. Perhaps you will then feel as I do: I sit inside this wonderful space and it 'speaks' to me. For me personally, in the course of my work, the cathedral has become a real 'place of power' – to which I always like to return.

You can complete the tour of the exterior and interior in the sequential order of the 25 sections. Alternatively though, you can also just pick out individual sections. Each section speaks for itself and does not have to be read in context. Cross-references enable the reader to discover the many links between the individual sections. The pictures of all the details discussed continue throughout and make it possible to read the book at home as well, without necessarily visiting the building.

I wish you an enjoyable read and an enlightening cathedral experience!

Oswald Inglin, spring 2023



## Introduction: A very special place

High above the Rhine in Basel, Münsterhügel ('Cathedral Hill') has forever been a special place. As settlements developed around it, their most important buildings were always situated here.

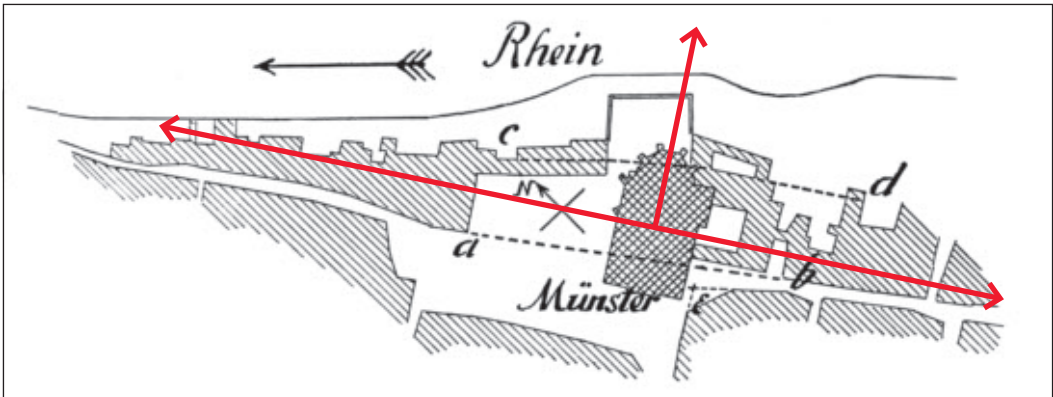
The cathedral forms a unit with an expansive square, which contrasts the open urban space with the relative steadfastness of the edifice. Relative – because the cathedral building that stands here today is already the fourth! It bears countless traces of the three structures that preceded it, as we will keep discovering in the course of this tour.

The first cathedral was built by a confidant of Emperor Charlemagne, a man named Haito. He was the Abbot of Reichenau Abbey, on the island of the same name in Lake Constance, and Bishop of Basel from 805 to 823. During this time, he laid the cathedral's foundation stone. However, Haito's Carolingian cathedral was comprehensively renovated just two centuries later. The second, known as Henry's cathedral (Heinrichs-Münster), was built on its foundations. This was consecrated by Emperor Henry II in 1019. The late-Romanesque third cathedral followed, construction of which began around 1170 and ended in 1230. Its five towers were destroyed in 1356 by a great earthquake. Just two of these towers were later rebuilt and completed, namely St George's tower (left) in 1429 and St Martin's tower (right) in 1500. The completion of St Martin's tower is also considered to be the final point in the construction of the late-Gothic fourth cathedral, which in terms of the





main features, is basically the present-day structure. Additional major alterations, both inside and out, were brought about by the Reformation in the 16th century and, three hundred years later, a 19th-century interior renovation. Perhaps what makes Münsterhügel so appealing is its dominating height, but there might be other reasons as well. Here at the bend in the Rhine, the cathedral is not at right angles to the river, which would actually be logical, but to the axis between two mountains in the more distant surroundings: the Swiss Belchen, and the Little Belchen in the



The cathedral was not built at right angles to the Rhine, giving rise to all kinds of speculation. Illustration from: *Baugeschichte des Basler Münsters*, Basel 1895.

Vosges mountain range. As a result of this orientation, around the summer solstice on the 24th of June (St John's Day), the first ray of sunlight comes through the east crypt's central choir window at half past five in the morning and causes a bright spot of light to appear on the opposite wall. Coincidence? The orientation of the cathedral, and indeed

of preceding structures from Celtic and Roman times, is possibly part of an astronomical solar calendar that was based on three similarly named peaks: the Belchen mountains in France (the Alsatian Belchen), Germany and Switzerland. Whether the cathedral and Münsterhügel can thus be seen as a ‘place of power’ is something each visitor can decide for themselves.

About the naming: In German, Basel Cathedral is called Basler Münster. The German term *Münster* comes from the Latin *monasterium* (monastery). Although Basel Cathedral is not actually a monastic church, the chapter (a group of canons serving as the governing body of the episcopal church) did originally live in a monastery-like community. That is why the cathedral also has cloisters, as generally only seen in monastic churches. The term ‘cathedral’ (which also appears in the church’s French name, Cathédrale de Bâle) comes from the Latin *cathedra* (seat). It refers to the bishop’s seat or episcopal see, meaning that this is a bishop’s church.

Behind the cathedral, high above the Rhine, there is the so-called ‘Pfalz’. This term comes from the Latin *palatium*, meaning palace. The terrace behind the cathedral bears this name because it is in the immediate vicinity of what was once the bishop’s residence: Bischofshof (‘Bishop’s Court’), which today, together with neighbouring Münsterhof (‘Cathedral Court’), constitutes the seat of the church administration and the foundation Basler Münsterbauhütte (‘Basel Cathedral Works’).











Explore the cathedral  
from outside



# The holy imperial couple and missing treasure

1

The tour begins, as is to be expected, at the main portal on the west facade. Dignified statues of a man and a woman stand prominently to the left of the portal, separated from each other by a window. Details, such as a crown and sceptre, reveal them to be rulers. The man also carries a model church in his hand, while his female counterpart virtuously clasps a cross. What are these secular dignitaries doing on a church facade?





They are none other than the founding patrons of the cathedral, the founding father and mother of this place of worship, so to speak: the German Emperor Henry II and his wife, Empress Cunigunde of Luxembourg. The model church in Henry's hand is an (idealised) model of the cathedral – the church behind him in miniature, as it were.

When the cathedral was consecrated on the 11th of October 1019, the imperial couple may have been present in person. In any case, they are said to have brought valuable gifts to Basel at that time, the so-called 'Gifts of Henry'. These included a magnificent golden panel, a reliquary cross (the so-called 'Henry's Cross' seen here in the hands of Empress Cunigunde), a chasuble (the so-called 'imperial cloak'), a chandelier, a throne, a book of gospels and a censer. The Gifts of Henry became the basis of the local church treasury. Like other important churches, the cathedral also had a treasure chamber, which kept filling up with further donations in the centuries after Henry founded it. This is because every wealthy person whose salvation was as important to them as their standing in this world could distinguish themselves by giving to the church. Over time, the cathedral's treasure also became a municipal treasure; in the decades before the Reformation, every oath undertaken by the Basel City Council was sworn on two objects from the Gifts of Henry.

Some pieces of the cathedral's treasure, such as the Golden Altar Frontal, have survived to the present day, but many of

these are not in Basel. Others decayed, disappeared, or were sold, stolen, melted down or destroyed. Unlike other churches, for instance in Aachen, Basel Cathedral no longer has a treasure chamber. What remains of the cathedral's treasure in Basel, or what has been bought back, is now on display in the Basel Historical Museum ([www.hmb.ch](http://www.hmb.ch)).

Emperor Henry II, as sponsor of the cathedral, established the material and symbolic wealth of this episcopal church with his truly imperial gifts. However, he did not actively participate in the financing of its construction. He did so indirectly, by giving the prince-bishop of Basel rights and property that generated sufficient income to help build a church.

Henry became a figure who would have a shaping influence on Basel. He was canonised in 1146, followed by Cunigunde in 1200. One factor contributing to the canonisation of the imperial couple was that the two were said to have had a chaste marriage, a so-called 'Josephite' marriage, and thus remained childless. To some extent, this chastity is indeed also conveyed by the shy reserve in the posture of the statue of Cunigunde on the cathedral's facade, even though her cross was only added at the end of the 19th century.

These canonisations increased the importance of Basel Cathedral, because now the patrons were not only an imperial couple, but indeed a holy imperial couple. In 1347, Basel received relics: fragments of the pair's mortal remains from the imperial tomb in Bamberg. In the same year, Henry became the city's patron saint. On his name day, so-called 'Henry's Day' on the 13th of July, Basel would celebrate its patron saint every year – with a procession of all its dignitaries through the city and by displaying the valuable gifts that had enriched the cathedral's treasury. Basel's accession to the Swiss Confederation also took place on Henry's Day, in the year 1501.



These two wooden busts of Heinrich and Cunigunde, (which used to contain relics – a small opening for this purpose can still be seen below the folded hands) from Diocesan Museum Paderborn convey pious devotion and a stately presence. They were made in the first quarter of the 15th century.



The fact that Henry and Cunigunde are depicted once again on the cathedral's west facade, namely right up on the gable, beneath the enthroned figure of Mary, underlines the ruling couple's special importance to this place of worship.



Henry's Cross from the Basel Cathedral treasury, first quarter of the 11th century, today in the Berlin Museum of Decorative Arts.

# “... and lead us not into temptation”

## 2

Opposite Henry and Cunigunde, on the right-hand side of the main portal, another man and woman stand to the left and right of an ogival window. The man wears a crown on his gracefully wavy hair and is extending his right index finger towards the woman. He smiles in a friendly and perhaps slightly derisive manner. The woman looks over at the man, enraptured. She is turning towards him and throwing her head back a little, as if in flirtation. She has slightly opened her dress above her left breast, thus indicating that she could go even further. Who are these two, shown to us here at the church's entrance portal?

The man is the Tempter (Prince of this World) presented in the Gospel of John (John 12:31). He is the seducer, or simply an embodiment of the Devil. The back of the statue reveals his true nature: two snakes and three toads... evil character! The negative connotations of snakes and toads have survived to this day in slurs. The serpent is also the epitome of deception, tempting Adam and Eve to fall into sin and destroying the idyll of Paradise. The purgatorial fire is already flickering at the feet of this depraved ruler, symbolised by a fire-breathing dragon. The woman is a foolish virgin who allows herself to be seduced by the Prince of this World. This figure harks back to a parable from the Gospel of Matthew, about ten virgins who, in keeping with a tradition, went out to meet a bridegroom and escort him to his wedding. Let us hear the Bible passage itself though (Matthew 25:1-13): “Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise ones took oil in their vessels with their lamps. But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight a cry was heard: ‘Behold, the bridegroom is





coming; go out to meet him!’ Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise answered, saying, ‘No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.’ And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us!’ But he answered and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.”

The blatantly moralising theme of the Wise and Foolish Virgins was depicted on various cathedral portals in France and Germany during the Gothic period. One figure resembling our Foolish Virgin can be found, for example, at Strasbourg Cathedral. We will come across this story again, at the St Gall Doorway. Here at the main portal, the Tempter and the



Covered with snakes and toads: rear view of the Tempter, in a plaster cast by the Basel Cathedral Works (depot, Museum Kleines Klingental, Basel).



Foolish Virgin are presented to us as a negative counterpart to the idealised chaste couple Henry and Cunigunde on the portal's other side. This deliberate juxtaposition is reinforced by the fact that the Prince of this World's clothes and hairstyle are very similar to those of the 'real prince' Henry. At any rate, the courtly Cunigunde is the pure opposite of the pert Foolish Virgin!

The pairs of figures showing Henry with Cunigunde and the Tempter with the Foolish Virgin are remnants of a much more comprehensive medieval cycle of statues that used to adorn an entrance hall in front of the main portal. The hall was probably damaged in the great [earthquake of 1356](#) and later abandoned. This reconstruction shows that the imperial couple stood outside at its front, to the left and right. The inner walls of the entrance hall featured statues on both sides, depicting five Wise and five Foolish Virgins, together with other figures. Beside the entrance, the statue of the Tempter was combined with a statue of Christ. As the Tempter's statue was at about eye level back then, the rear could be easily seen, which is not the case today.

