

The mendicant dual cloister in Northern Germany

Summary: The design of medieval monasteries of the mendicant convents in Northern German towns is remarkably different from other monastic orders. It consists of two adjacent cloisters, one belonging to the monastic clausura, the other serving as a „public“ cloister for civic convents and burials. Few monasteries of this type survived, but hitherto rather unknown, many others are more or less deducible from excavations and written sources. These architectures provide unexpected new insights into the interrelation between citizens and mendicant orders in the 13th to 15th centuries.

In Northern German the Franciscans of the province of Saxonia chose an unusual way of building their monasteries as early as the 13th century. These monasteries contained two cloisters, one of which was open to the public, the other reserved for the convent. This constitutes a new point of view since the four partially preserved monuments were never adequately interpreted or were seen as exceptions to the rule, leaving any archaeological findings sketchy. Only a new, complete compilation of all excavations and historical blueprints has shown clearly the popularity of this type of monastery with two cloisters.

Up until now, monastic architecture of the Franciscans has never been a field of research in most regions. In the reference books their cloister buildings are introduced only very briefly. The order itself promoted its image of Franciscans not living in monasteries performing services like traditional monks, but spending the better part of the day outside the monastery – preaching, caring for the people and, last but not least, being mendicants. No one has ever seriously questioned why the Franciscan monks erected large sanctuaries in their monasteries, with choir stalls separated strictly from the public by means of rood screens. In fact, the eastern part of the church was given first priority among the construction projects, like it was with the traditional orders. Even for the monasteries I can only present archaeological, architectural, and archival data. Discussion with theologians and ecclesiastical historians has been slow and is still awaiting results.

An early legend has left its mark on research. When the Franciscans came to the city of Erfurt in 1227, the citizenry wanted to build a monastery for them and asked what it should look like. The Guardian replied, “We don’t know what a monastery is. Build us a house near the water, so we can wash our feet in the river.” Indeed the Franciscan monastery at Erfurt later consisted of a large church and, paralleling it, a so-called Long House erected on the riverside, containing the cells and common rooms. An important detail shows, however, that after only a few years – if not from the very beginning – monastic architecture meant a lot more to the Erfurt monks than this legend implies. When the church was rebuilt and expanded in 1260, the cloister was not reduced, but had its southern wing overbuilt by the church aisle instead. This, too, is a theme frequently found in Franciscan architecture in northern Germany and indicates how important the monastery and the cloister were to the friars.

There are partial excavations at the Wismar monastery; a historic blueprint (fig. 1) provides the disposition, and several texts of the late Middle Ages attest to the buildings’ utilization. Adjoining

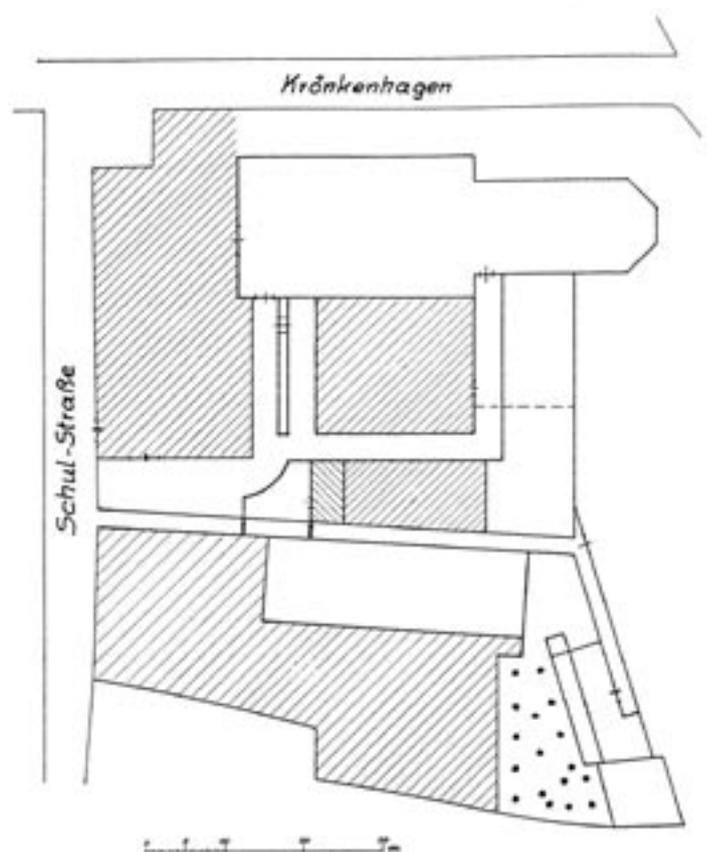


fig. 1: Wismar

the church to the south was a four-sided cloister. It could be accessed from the outside in the west; like the Erfurt cloister, its northern wing ran through the church aisle where it was topped by a gallery with altars. A disposition like this can still be observed today in the Franciscan church at Torun, Poland: the cloister wall with its baroque breaches at the bottom, above it the gallery with its late Gothic wooden parapets (fig. 2). In Erfurt the cloister was adjoined to the east by the so-called dormitory whose ground floor contained the large sacristy and an assembly hall, the floor above it the monks' cells. Surprisingly, the actual gate to the enclosure was found in the south-western part of the cloister where it opened onto a second, irregularly shaped cloister garth which was flanked by arcaded walkways on only two sides. A second dormitory adjoined it, as did the heated refectory and the walkway to the latrine. The ground floor of this area constituted the actual Franciscan enclosure, which didn't contain the cloister to the north, just the dormitory on the upper floor. The greater cloister was "semi-public."

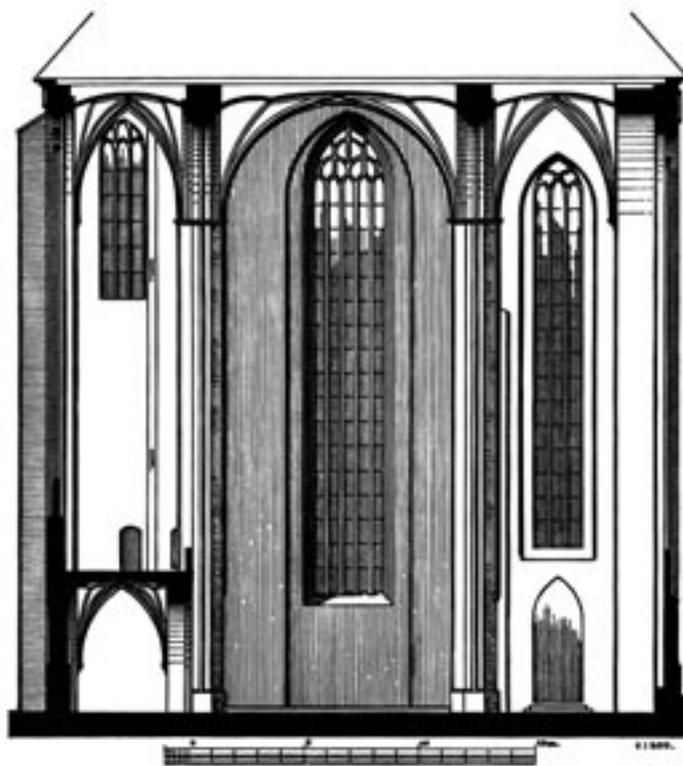


fig. 2: Torun, cloister walk in the northern aisle

This disposition is very plausible on the one hand, but also surprising on the other: it has been known for a while now that the mendicant monasteries were used by the citizenries in many different ways; not only as a place to bury their dead, but also to administer the law, or to assemble the guilds or even councils in. According to records and chronicles these assemblies often took place "in the cloister" or "in the refectory." Research has long believed that this meant the mendicant orders didn't have a strict enclosure, that it was only comprised of the brethren's cells, their living space. The Wismar disposition shows otherwise: the monastery is divided into two parts; one public, consisting of the cloister, the sacristy, and an assembly hall which was probably referred to as refectory but wasn't the dining hall of the brethren. Adjoining it, but separated by a gateway, was the actual monastery, the enclosure, with the secluded rooms of the friars, including in particular the kitchen and the heated refectory.

The disposition of north German Franciscan monasteries is not at all standardized. One has hence dismissed earlier and more recent observations on these dual cloisters, but regarded the latter as individual solutions – and that is precisely what they aren't.

I'd like to give a short survey over excavation findings and preserved monuments which show that the Saxonia monasteries with dual cloister constitute an actual building type, in fact the most common type used in erecting Franciscan monasteries in this region.

The shape and building history of one such instance of dual cloisters were archaeologically clarified in Neubrandenburg a few years ago. The monastery's church and part of its buildings were preserved. Excavations surprisingly showed that the large cloister garth was divided by a traversing cloister wing. Once again the cloister closest to the church was four-sided and complete; the outer one consisted of separate walkways. Since no written documents exist in Neubrandenburg the excavator

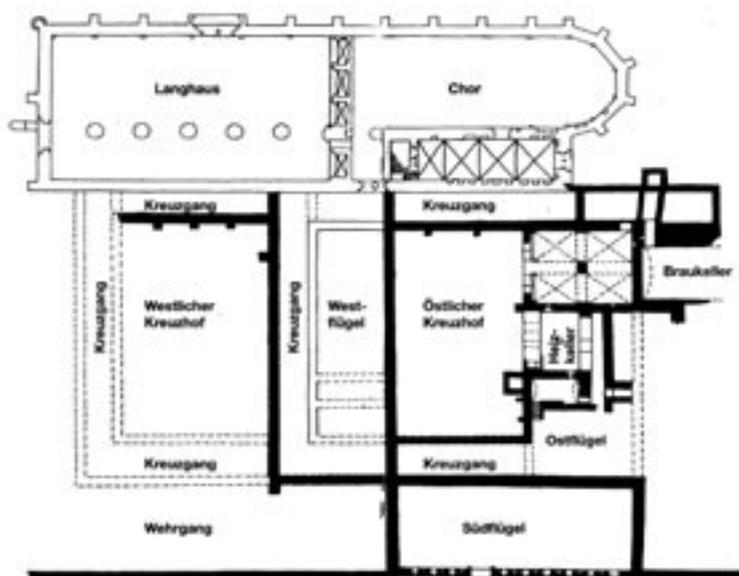


fig. 3: Angermünde

was unable to interpret the facility individually.

The near-complete excavation of the Franciscan monastery at Angermünde in 1933/39 went largely unnoticed (fig. 3). Due to the proximity of the city wall both cloisters there were positioned laterally to the church: the complete one in the west, adjoining it the dormitory which had already been anticipated by the oldest, granite-build church; finally a second cloister with only three ambulatories.

The partial excavation in Greifswald, as was the case in Wismar, could only be interpreted when compared to historical blueprints. Once again there was a complete cloister next to the church, and an irregularly shaped area adjoining it towards the city wall.

In other places there is, for now, only indirect evidence of dual cloisters. In Chemnitz an uncommonly narrow, rectangular cloister was excavated next to the church, even though the area had left enough room for a larger monastery. A possible interpretation is provided by the monastery at Bautzen.

four-sided, narrow cloister has been partially preserved there, and excavated where it hasn't. Incidentally, it was once again integrated into the southern aisle of the church. Furthermore, it contains structural designs of the mid-13th century. It follows that the Bautzen cloister, too, was built during the founding time of the Franciscan settlement. Historical blueprints show that the monks' dormitory was situated at quite a distance to the south. The smaller cloister was adjoined to the south by an assembly hall, to the east apparently by the sacristy. Towards the dormitory there must have been a second cloister garth, which was overbuilt after the dissolution.

The four preserved Franciscan monasteries with dual cloisters endorse these excavation data. Due to a lack of written documents earlier research has been unable to interpret the facilities. Architectural surveys and excavations were conducted only at the Franciscan monastery in Rostock (fig. 4). A large, four-sided cloister adjoins the church. On the eastern side are located the sacristy as well as an extension to the cloister which was probably used for assemblies. There is another assembly hall above the western wing. The second, northern cloister features only two narrow wings, the southern of which runs parallel to the larger cloister, separated from it by a mere wall. There are multiple passageways there today, although originally there was only one: the entrance to the enclosure, as we now know. The inconspicuous rooms at the northern cloister are less well-documented. A surprisingly early dendrochronological dating shows, however, that this part of the monastery, once again probably the enclosure, was one of the earliest construction projects after the founding.

The monastery at Stralsund has been in use as the city's archive for some time now. In a very unusual move the noble founders had a chapter house erected here during the mid-13th century, which later on fell into disuse. The other monasteries in Saxonia don't have chapter houses, and even in Stralsund it was subsequently replaced by a large sacristy. The late Gothic main cloister is adjoined towards the city wall by a second cloister garth with remarkably narrow walkways. Among the rooms the large refectory of the monks can be identified, whose windows have been integrated into the city wall; furthermore two dormitories at the northern and southern end. A small pulpit from the early days may be noted, which could be used by the Franciscans to preach to the people in the port area outside the city wall.

The most well-preserved facility with dual cloisters, the late Gothic monastery of Zerbst, which has been

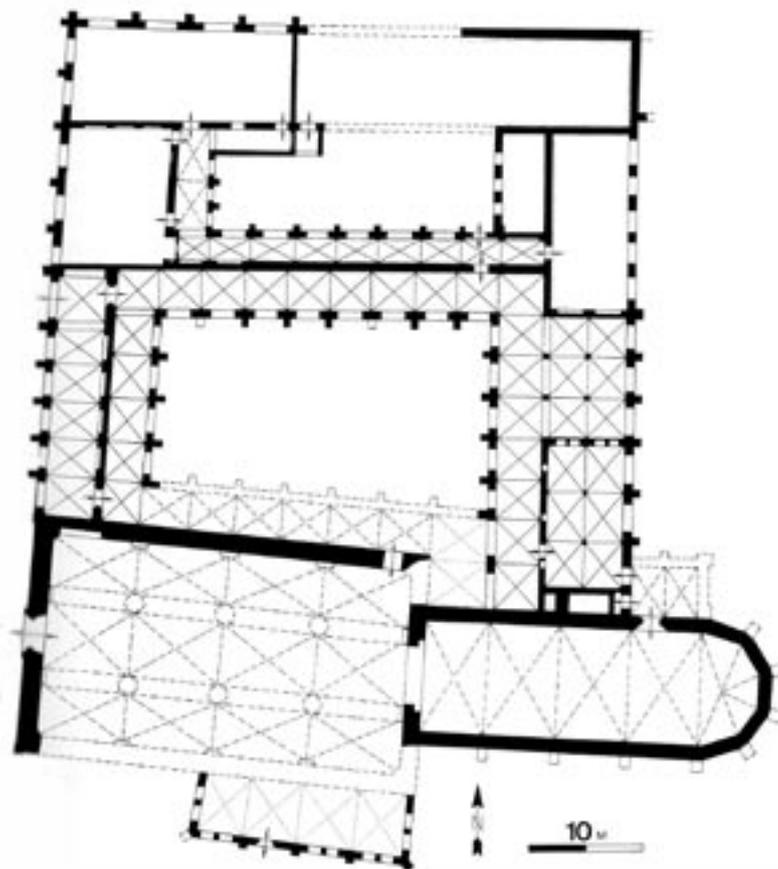


fig. 4: Rostock

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used as a school since the Reformation and also serves as a museum today, highlights the state of research on Franciscan monasteries in Germany. Not only has there been no research done on it, there have been practically no publications at all. Even though it was built this late, the monastery featured a prominent cloister, four-sided, with a regular shape, while the second, smaller one was of irregular shape and had narrow walkways. Number and size of the adjoining rooms show plainly that once again, the larger cloister appears to have been the public one while the smaller one constituted the brethren's enclosure.

The collection of historical blueprints of Franciscan monasteries, which were frequently only demolished as late as the 19th century, makes it clear that dual cloisters in the Saxonia province were more of a rule than an exception. I'm just showing blueprints of Brandenburg here, with a large dormitory near the river, as well as one of Hamburg, with two cloisters and, once again, a huge main building on the riverside.

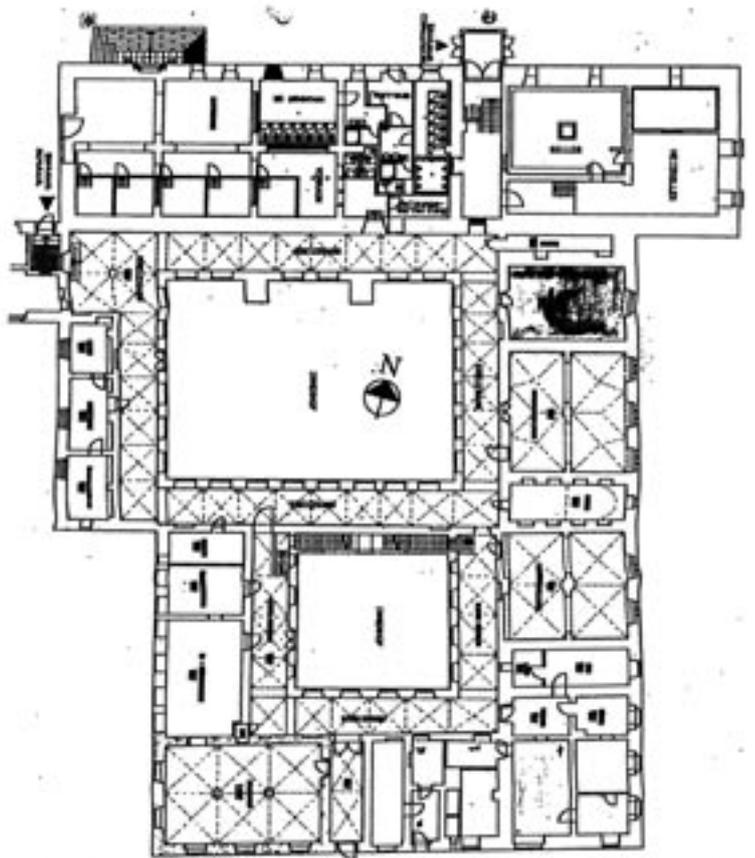


fig. 5: Zerbst

The legend of the Franciscan Guardian of Erfurt, who claimed not to know what a monastery was, was more than likely an exaggeration.

Even the oldest known Franciscan monasteries in the Saxonia province feature prestigious cloisters with arcades and vaults, with sculpture executed more simply than in those of other orders, but generously laid out and – shown by their integration into the church – highly important to the self-conception of the order. This peculiar design featuring dual cloisters which has been documented since the mid-13th century warrants an explanation. I suspect the Franciscans of having to serve two interests: the public expected a proper, traditional cloister as a suitable frame for their use of the monastery as a place for burial and assembly. It follows that the public cloisters are large, spacious, and equipped with circumferential ambulatories. The order itself, however, has been trying continuously to defend itself against these expectations, as was shown by the Erfurt episode. Therefore, the cloister of the enclosure is frequently not a proper cloister at all, and the number of its ambulatories restricted to the bare necessities. Their width remains narrow since, unlike in monasteries of other orders, they aren't used for processions but simply for interconnection of the rooms in the enclosure. Within these enclosure cloisters the Franciscans are reminded daily of why they don't know, don't want to know what a monastery is. Reduction of typology here serves as an element of monastic asceticism.

An important point of consideration would be the situation with the other mendicant orders, and in other regions of Europe. Our project is still in the process of setting out in this direction. In the Saxonia area at least the Dominicans, too, had dual cloisters, namely well-preserved ones at Stralsund. Furthermore, there are others found in Franciscan as well as Dominican monasteries at Landshut and Regensburg in Bavaria.

Since, even in north Germany, this building type was recognized only in 2006 after extensive research into excavations and archive materials, it should be obvious that more work needs to be done accordingly in other regions. The intent of this presentation is to suggest taking peculiar excavation structures and seemingly unintelligible or nonsensical written sources very seriously. Following these observations in north Germany there should be more discoveries just waiting to be made in other places. It might help us reform our way of looking at the relations between medieval towns and the mendicant orders.