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Bédard, Jean-François, "Vierzehnheiligen (1742-1744)" (2017). *School of Architecture - All Scholarship*. 247.

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VIERZEHNHEILIGEN (1742–1744)

Jean-François Bédard

In 1445 and 1446 a shepherd witnessed a series of supernatural apparitions in a field belonging to the Cistercian monastery of Langheim, in Franconia: a crying child, alone at first, then accompanied by 13 others, informed the shepherd that they were the Fourteen Holy Helpers (the *vierzehn Heiligen*), a group of saints fervently venerated in Southern Germany after the Great Plague. During his last vision the shepherd saw two lit candles descending from the sky; on that spot the Holy Helpers ordered a chapel to be erected.

Miraculous healings soon brought large numbers of pilgrims to the shrine. In 1735 the new abbot of Langheim, Stefan Möisinger, requested permission from the prince-bishop of Bamberg and Würzburg, Friedrich Karl von Schönborn, to build a larger, more splendid church. The abbot and prince-bishop immediately became entangled in a dispute that lasted for years. In 1739, defying Schönborn's authority, Möisinger hired Gottfried Heinrich Krohne—a Protestant Saxon architect who had worked for Duke Ernst August von Sachsen-Weimar—to expand the monastery and produce designs for the church of Vierzehnheiligen. Countering the abbot's initiative, the bishop chose Balthasar Neumann, the architect at the Würzburg court since 1719, to design the new pilgrimage church. In addition to Krohne and Neumann, other designers contributed schemes. Among them were the Würzburg architects Maximilian von Welsch and his assistant Johann Jakob Michael Küchel, who became Neumann's assistant after 1735.

Krohne's scheme¹ featured a central domed space inscribed within a square plan with chamfered corners. A square porch at the middle of the square's west side matched two square towers on the south and north sides in plan and location. A large, domed choir protruded from the east. Krohne articulated the church

façade with colossal Corinthian pilasters and decorated it with delicate Rococo ornament. He topped the church with a large bell-shaped roof flanked by two elegant onion-domed bell towers.

Neumann responded to Krohne's centralized scheme with variations on a Latin cross plan. A site plan² conveniently summarizes the evolution of Neumann's thinking. The plan shows two stages in the church's siting. Onto the outline of the medieval chapel, Neumann superimposed an initial proposal, dating from 1742, in which he shifted the church's axis 32° south-west from the customary east-west orientation. He apparently wished to forgo tradition and align the new altar at *Vierzehnheiligen* with the distant silhouette of Langheim's main competitor, the Benedictine monastery at Banz, across the Main valley. In 1744 Neumann superimposed a second version of his design on the same sheet. In this proposal he enlarged the church by expanding the choir to the south-east. He had been obliged to revise his original design after a visit in December 1743 revealed that the foundation of the choir had been mistakenly located farther uphill due to negligence on the part of Krohne, the site architect. Paramount to all schemes, of course, was the location of a central altar marking the spot where the apparitions had occurred. To preserve the parts of the choir that had already been built, Neumann thus had to reconfigure his plan.

His 1744 redesign provided an opportunity to explore more daring planimetric solutions than those approved by the prince-bishop two years earlier. Neumann had submitted three different schemes in 1742. The most conventional³ featured a nave separated from side aisles by engaged columns supporting balconies. The church's crossing was marked with a circular pendentive dome borne by four pairs of columns. A variant of that scheme⁴ removed the balconies and disengaged the nave colonnade. A third version⁵ came closer to the final design. The round dome over the crossing and the paired column supports were kept, but the rectangular nave was replaced by an oval supported by six engaged and two freestanding columns. Another oval, disposed transversely, shaped the choir, and partial ovals flanked by four engaged columns served as transepts.

Neumann experimented with two different schemes in his 1744 redesign. In the first,⁶ he made the nave wider but shorter. Piers, not columns, separated the nave from the aisles, and piers with niches replaced the paired columns supporting the circular dome at the crossing. Neumann redesigned the choir and the transepts along two axes of symmetry and shaped the exterior walls as partial octagons. In this scheme he also terminated the nave in a half circle, resulting in a convex west façade, as on Figure 1.⁷ The final scheme preserved the external outline of the first, although it extended the nave by one bay.⁸ The most dramatic changes, however, had to do with the arrangement of the interior vaulting and the structural articulation of the church. Forgoing conventional solutions, Neumann covered the nave and choir with three oval vaults, the largest centered over the pilgrimage altar. Unlike all his previous schemes, this one de-emphasized the crossing by locating

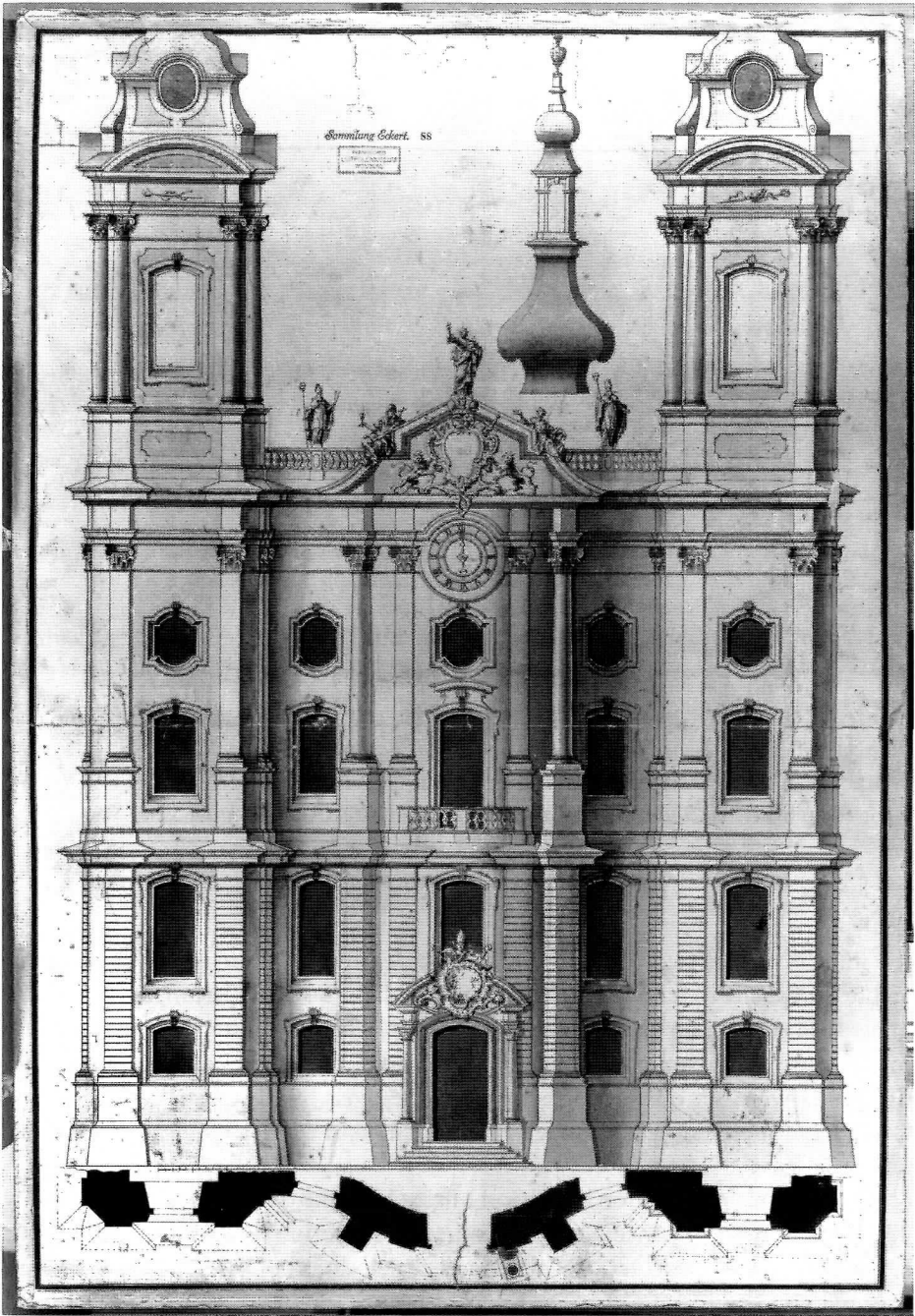


Figure 1 Balthasar Neumann (1687–1753), architect and draftsman. *Elevation for a project, Vierzehnheiligen Pilgrimage Church, Bad Staffelstein, Bavaria, Germany. 1744.* Würzburg, Mainfränkisches Museum, Sammlung Eckert 88; Artistic Heritage Publishing, wzbhg/Gerchsheim. Credit: Eberhard Zwicker, kunstSCHAETZEverlag.

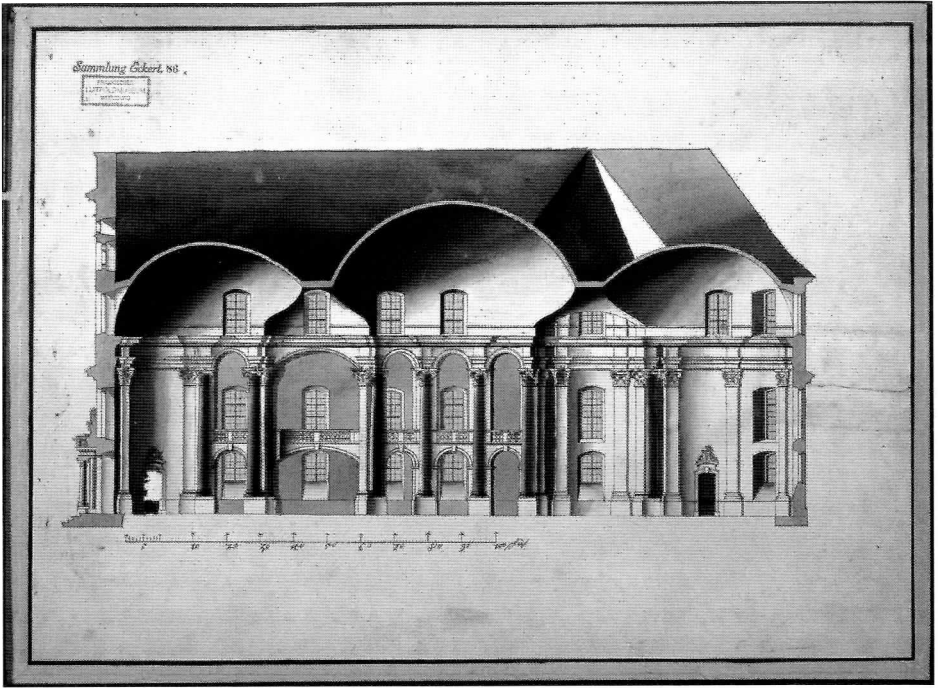


Figure 2 Balthasar Neumann (1687–1753), architect and draftsman. *Longitudinal section, Vierzehnheiligen Pilgrimage Church, Bad Staffelstein, Bavaria, Germany. 1744.* Würzburg, Mainfränkisches Museum, Sammlung Eckert 86; Artistic Heritage Publishing, wzbj/Gerchsheim. Credit: Eberhard Zwicker, kunstSCHAETZEverlag.

the intersection of two of the three oval vaults there. Whereas more traditional architects usually signaled the crossing with a tall dome over a drum, as did Welsch in his 1744 scheme for the church,⁹ Neumann placed the vaulting's lowest point at the crossing, as shown in Figure 2.¹⁰ Furthermore, the supports necessary to carry the vaults were set on the edges of the three ovals. This unusual configuration framed the freestanding pilgrimage altar with a quasi-centralized figure at the center of the nave.

Elegant stucco decoration by Johann Michael Feichtmayr and ceiling frescoes by Giuseppe Appiani enhance Neumann's dramatic interior, as do four monumental altars, the most spectacular of which marks the location of the sacred apparitions. Designed by Neumann's assistant Küchel, this exuberant composition culminates in a chaise-shaped baldachin. Statues of the 14 saints to whose glory Neumann and his assistants erected this masterful building are disposed on the swirling, at once crustaceous and vegetal, substructure supporting a baldachin, the baldachin's roof, and four pedestals distributed among a marble balustrade.

Notes

1. Documented in six drawings kept at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg (HB. 23 576b).
2. Kept in the Eckert collection of the Mainfränkischen Museum in Würzburg (SE 72).
3. Plans SE 77 and SE 76, north half of the drawing, and sections SE 80 and SE 89.
4. Plan SE 73, north half, plan SE 76, south half, and section SE 79.
5. Plan SE 73, south half, and plan SE 75.
6. Plan SE 82.
7. Elevation SE 88.
8. Plans SE 83 and SE 87, longitudinal section SE 86, west façade SE 84, north façade SE 85, and a wooden model in the collection of the Bamberg Historical Society.
9. Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, HB. 23 576a.
10. As shown in SE 86.

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