

# Discovery of a Time Capsule in the 700-Year-Old St. John the Baptist Church in Weissbriach: Unique Gem in the Austrian Alpine Spa Served by Europe's Oldest Altar Boy (88)

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**How to cite this paper:** Missinne, S. (2026). Discovery of a Time Capsule in the 700-Year-Old St. John the Baptist Church in Weissbriach: Unique Gem in the Austrian Alpine Spa Served by Europe's Oldest Altar Boy (88). *Advances in Historical Studies*, 15, 38-112.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ahs.2026.151003>

**Received:** October 25, 2025

**Accepted:** March 28, 2026

**Published:** March 31, 2026

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## Abstract

The St. John the Baptist Parish Church in the village of Weissbriach in the Austrian Alps dates from the early 14th century. During a Spa stay in the mountain village, a chance discovery of the iconography of the Renaissance frescoes of the medieval church was made. Thanks to excellent collaborations with the local representatives of the church and numerous academics it was possible to make an interdisciplinary study of the art historic content of this gem. It was like the opening of a more than 500-year-old time capsule. The Gitsch Valley was a prosperous gold mining area in the 16th century; this economic prosperity showed up in the richness of the restored frescoes of the enlarged church. Due to the lack of written sources, the extant silent witnesses of the rich past of the church are analysed with a detective eye. The article describes in detail the architectural and artistic intricacies that reveal the layered history of the building. What drew my attention the most were the ornamental Renaissance features in the church. Why were these so different? Why were there several contrasting dates: 1520 just below the nave, but frescoes with dates from the early 17th century. Something did not match, and apparently nobody had wondered why. The iconographic aspects of the content of the church appear to have been waiting for more than 500 years for some attention. There are many unique and interesting features to be discovered in the building and in its frescoes: the decoration of the vault, the symbolism in the frescoes, the variety of the repeating Mannerist patterns, a pun in the enlarged dice with the year 1530 as a date of the creation of the frescoes and a self-portrait of the talented artist. With its marvelous light, this church depicts the biblical story of God's creation at the

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beginning of the age of discovery of the New World, with an incredible wealth of colours, lasting impressions, and a longing for the discovery of rich mines of gold and silver. The virtuoso artist plays with proportions and perspective, and leaves clues scattered throughout his work as to its meanings and date of origin. A tentative test to identify the so-called DNA of the small medieval church, with its characteristic inclined tower, contained in its heraldic weapons was applied but will need further research. This parish church is the host of the oldest (88) altar boy in Europe. He has served for many decades in front of the fresco, with a painted over plaque, of the founders that commemorates the descendants of Christoph Khevenhueller, dressed in the miner's symbols of the hammer and pickaxe, source of the foregone wealth of Weissbriach, an enigmatic village nestled in the mountains of Carinthia in the South of Austria.

### Keywords

Austria, St. John the Baptist Church, Weissbriach, Renaissance Pun, Dice, Choir Boy, Khevenhüller, Carinthia, Gitsch Valley, Time Capsule, Gold Mining, History of Art

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## 1. Introduction

During a long and healthy stay at the OptimaMed Spa Resort in the remote alpine valley of the River Gitsch (Gitsch Valley) in Carinthia in the summer of 2025 (**Figure 1**), I visited the local Roman Catholic listed ([Austria-Forum, n.d.](#)) medieval parish church. It turned out to be an unforgettable moment that changed the course of my stay. The unexpected and overwhelming encounter with Renaissance frescoes (fresco-secco) exposed in 1963 and the fruitless search for a detailed description of the iconography led to this research.

Articles about Fresco discoveries are uncommon, with only six documented in the author index over a period of 77 years in the *Austrian Journal of Art and Monument Preservation* 1947-2024 ([BDA, 2024](#)). In contrast to the well-documented description of the frescoes in the Church of St. Rupert in Weissbriach in the state of Salzburg, which were dated back to around 1100 AD after being discovered and uncovered in the 1930s and 1940s ([Demus-Witternigg, 1948](#); [Enzinger, 1988](#)), this art-historical aspect has apparently not yet been sufficiently taken into account in Weissbriach in Carinthia. This medieval church, apparently not yet classified as a historic Austrian monument, as you can see in what follows, turned out to possess many undiscovered iconographic treasures including Renaissance iconography and a rather unusual and not fully documented Mannerist fresco discovery. The Roman Catholic parish church of Weissbriach in the Gitsch Valley is dedicated to St. John the Baptist (24 June) and faces east.

A few words about the methodology used for this research before we go any further. Over a period of three weeks, I was able to intensively study this church, its frescoes, and its surroundings. Several interviews were conducted with person-

alities, including local residents and artisans, in the Gitsch Valley. Several research tours were conducted. For a comparative analysis, numerous churches and chapels in the Gail Valley, Drau Valley, and Möll Valley were visited. Historical maps are consulted in this work. Several experts in Vienna, Carinthia, Salzburg, and Tyrol were contacted for this research. Foreign experts in specific fields, including those in Belgium, Italy, and Germany, were consulted.

This article begins with an introduction to Weissbriach and several surprising discoveries of silent witnesses to its rich past. It is the first tentative approach to this complex theme. Aspects such as the cartographic name, the Romanesque windows in the medieval tower, the choice of location for the tower, the remains of the Gothic portal, 15th-century coin hoards, 15th-century relics built into the altar, a rare Gothic wrought-iron sacramental grille from the 15th century, a sundial, the proportions of the church, the *Ostung*, the 700-year-old bell(s), the lancet window with hand-blown glass and the 14th-century octagonal baptismal font are considered. After this prelude, I delve deeper into the ornamental Renaissance aspects of the Catholic Miner's Church of Saint John the Baptist in Weissbriach and try to identify further silent witnesses from the past.

With the help of historic photographs, I try to imagine the condition of the interior of the church before the frescoes in the shield arches were discovered. It is as if one were opening a window onto a hidden chapter in the history of this church. An "aha" moment, not as spectacular as the opening of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922, but still a special event in the art history of Carinthia and Austria in general. The surprisingly limited literature on the iconographic significance of the uncovered frescoes, with a few exceptions (Mayer, 1956), is compared with the research I conducted during my three-week stay on site in August 2025.

Subsequently, my attention is drawn to the peculiar ornamental Renaissance window frames and the capitals decorated with coats of arms at the beginning of the vault ribs. Other themes covered are the self-portrait of the artist and the bright colours used. To better assess the church, I analyse a concise chronology of the discoveries and restoration measures in the 20th and 21st centuries. This chronology offers some fascinating points of reference. Weissbriach is 95% Protestant. But this is a Catholic consecrated church. These complex aspects are also discussed. The following section examines various aspects of the iconographic content of the church interior.

What is the significance of the many cherubim and seraphim? Why are there sun, moon and fixed stars on the heavenly ceiling of the presbytery and the nave? Could there be a connection between the date in Gothic numbers 1520, inscribed on the large open arch, at the time of the discoveries of the New World, and the frescoes in this small mountain village in the remote Gitsch Valley? What is the meaning of the exotic palm trees and pomegranates, the apples, pears, grapes, nuts, and grains, the scrollwork, the various natural and floral elements, the fantastic fish motif, the luxurious elements with pearls, jewellery, and crystals?

Are the frescoes in the Saint Nicholas Chapel of Hochosterwitz Castle, home of

the mighty Carinthian Khevenhüller family, comparable? Why are the colours of the Khevenhüller—yellow, black, red and white—in the interior of the church so dominant? The next section deals with heraldic weapons: traces of the “DNA” of the church. It is not an easy topic, but apparently not without unexpected surprises. Would it be possible to identify the families who built and decorated this remarkable little church, or not?

In what follows, I will first examine in detail the cycle of frescoes in the shield arches depicting John the Baptist, beginning with the impressive, uncovered mural of Salome dancing at the Feast of Herod. My attention was drawn to the four musicians on the balcony, the richly laden table with its beautiful golden goblets, the Renaissance clothing, the various typical Alpine furnishings, the fabrics, the food, the facial expressions, the remarkably long fingers of some of the table companions, the head of John the Baptist, and Salome dancing with her skirt raised. The multitude of details is remarkable. The first questions arose regarding the content of the German text, perhaps a biblical verse, painted at the bottom of the fresco and the faces and names of the relatives of the founder (sponsor) of this scene, and possibly the other scenes and the decoration of the church.

Something did not add up, however. The wall says 1520, above it is marked 1530—a period of economic prosperity in the Gitsch Valley—and the paintings have dates from one century later? What do the interior of the church, that text, and the different dates tell me? A difficult puzzling solution requiring detective work lay before me. Was something hidden? What, where, and why? What did I, and everyone else who analysed this, overlook? The frescoes are attributed to Jakob Kazner and his school, but is this the case? Next, I present an uncovering of the unique mural painting of the instruments of Jesus’ crucifixion and its secretive dating. The oversized dice at the foot of the torture on the Arma Christi cross have been overlooked. I offer the solution to the puzzle in the valuable confirmation of the dating, with the irrefutable evidence that the inscription on the frescoes is from a later date. This is succeeded by the description of other paintings in the church of Weissbriach, including the Baptism of Christ and the oil painting of the Coronation of the Holy Mary.

Finally, I present Europe’s oldest altar boy at Weissbriach in Austria turning 88 years of age in 2026.

## **2. Weissbriach and the Surprising Discovery of Silent Witnesses of Its Rich Past**

When visiting Carinthia, one is quickly confronted with the excellent collection of medieval murals, winged altars, and wood carvings. The frescoes in this part of Austria are a particular treasure. Judging by the new discoveries made each year, most of the nearly one thousand churches from the Romanesque or Gothic period in the region must have been painted with frescoes. Between 1960 and 1970 alone, almost as many murals were discovered in Carinthia as in the rest of Austria (Hartwagner, 1970; Henning, 1991). In the whole of Austria there are 9426 Cath-

olic churches and chapels (ORF, 2025). It would therefore be logical that, given this quantity and the limited public resources available, the intensive attention paid to the frescoes, amongst others in the shield arches in Weissbriach and their iconographic content may have been, so it appears, neglected as a result. The name of the church, St. John the Baptist, points to the early Christianisation of Weissbriach, perhaps in the 9th century.

Weissbriach, or as it is spelled on Wolfgang Lazius' 1573 map of Carinthia, Weißpriach, is a small roadside village situated on the north-south axis at the northern end of the Gitsch Valley in the administrative district of Hermagor in Carinthia. Hermagor is at the nucleus of a vibrant economic area in the heart of the Carnic region with a focus on renewable energy, lumber and timber industries with close to 1.8 million overnight stays (Carinthia Regionmarketing, 2025).

In terms of its orientation, it is located south of the Austrian Province of Salzburg in the bordering region of Carinthia with East Tirol. It is therefore special because it may have been something of a *cul de sac*, i.e. meaning a dead end, for many and a hard-to-reach mountain village after crossing the Alpine mountain wall between the north and south for others.



Source: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

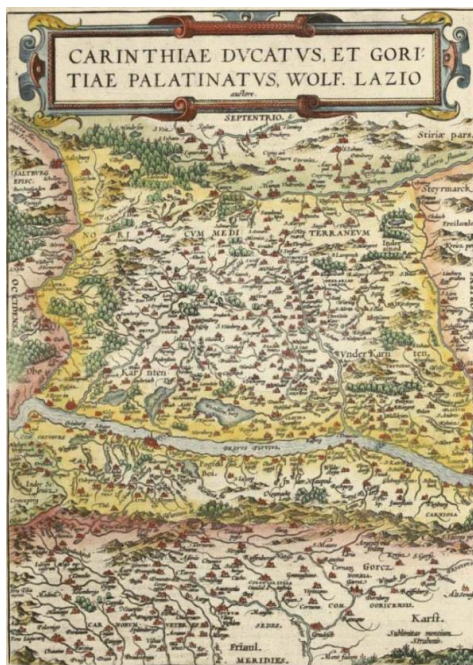
**Figure 1.** Room with a view: looking from the health spa resort Hotel OptimaMed Weissbriach towards the parish church of Weissbriach in August 2025.

Between 1945 and 1955, after the Second World War, Carinthia was part of the British occupation zone in Austria. There is a certain analogy between the deliberately chosen location of St. Rupert Church in Lungau and that of St. John the Baptist Church in Weißbriach.

Both are strategically located for goods and people travelling through the Alps. One is on the former main road over the Tauern Mountains, which once led from Weißpriach, at the end of the Gitsch Valley to Forstau-Radstadt or via the Znach-sattel to Schladming, and the other is on the connection using a mountain pass between Hermagor, via the Gitsch Valley northwards to the Drau Valley over the

Kreuzberg (**Figure 2**).

This historic village in Carinthia is of interest for many reasons, including the Romans using the impregnable mountain pass via the Gitsch Valley (**Ronacher, 1998**), now better known as the Kreuzberg. The contrast between this quiet, lush wide Gitsch Valley and the sultry and overgrown nearby valley with the Weisensee could not be greater.



**Figure 2.** Abraham Ortelius. Map of *Carinthiae Ducatus, et Goritiae Palatinatus* by Wolfgang Lazius. *Auctore Histriae Tabula a Petro Coppo Descr. [and] Zarae, et Sebenici Descriptio*. Printed in Antwerp, 1573–1588. Source: Clive A. Burden LTD. Rare Maps, Antique Atlases, Books and Decorative Prints.

The above shows a map of Carinthia derived from the cartography of Viennese cartographer Wolfgang Lazius. It depicts the area around the Drau River, with Villach at its centre, between Austria (Carinthia and the southern part of the province of Salzburg) in the north and Slovenia.

The village of Weissbriach (Weißpriach/Weizpriach) is the first one to be mentioned in the Gitsch Valley, namely as early as 1331 (**Austria-Forum, 2025**). I particularly wish to thank Emir. Univ. Prof. Dr. Heinz-Dieter Pohl for his explanatory e-mails dating from 17 and 25 August 2025. The mention is in a land register, the *Urbar* (= register of income) of the parish of St. Hermagor, compiled by the parish priest (*plebanus*) Berthold for the purpose of control. This document is kept in the *Allgemeine Hand Schriftenreihe*, Nr. 2562, accessible via the web portal *Monasterium*, of the KLA, known as the Carinthian Provincial Archives (**Moro, 1956; Schroll, 2001**). Thanks to Univ. Prof. Dr. C. Märkl in correspondence dating from 13 December, it was possible for the first time to transcribe and translate this Latin text.

*Anno domini M° CCC° XXX° I° ego Perchtoldus plebanus sancti Hermachore iuxta Gylam scripsi proventus et reditus ecclesie supradicte vice sacramenti duorum testium, videlicet Iacobi ecclesiastici et Artusii de Rednich officialis dicte ecclesie.*

*Item in Weispriach de novalibus mensuras VII et sol. XII [List of dotes = church property]*

*Item in Weispriach avene ydrias XX:*

In the year of our Lord 1331, I, *Perchtoldus* (Berthold), parish priest of St. Hermagor an der Gail, recorded the yields and revenues of the aforementioned church with the help of the oath of two witnesses, the serf Jakob and Artusius von Rednich, official of the aforementioned church.

Item in Weisspriach: from the tithes of the newly cleared fields 7 measures and 12 shillings. Item in Weisspriach: 20 sacks of oats.

The name Weissbriach was first formally registered in 1331. Since the priest Berthold makes no written mention of this parish in Weissbriach belonging to a monastery, it is very likely that in 1331 it was not part of a religious order. Its large tower had perhaps been a branch of the church of the Benedictine monastery founded in Arnoldstein in 1106 that had already been in existence for some time (*Evangelisches Pfarramt A.B. Weissbriach, 1982*). The Romanesque bifora windows (**Figure 3**) in the fortified tower (**Figure 4(B)**) are an important witness to the time of the construction of the medieval tower. Another church dedicated to St. John the Baptist, which may date back to the time when the tower of the church in Weissbriach was built, is St.

Johann in Prad am Stilfser Joch, with its remarkable altar area, apse with frescoes, and tall, imposing square tower. St. Johann is a church on the outskirts of Prad am Stilfser Joch. It was built at the end of the 13th century by the Counts of Tschengelsberg in a Romanesque style with a separate round apse and a flat ceiling in the nave and is under the patronage of the evangelist John and John the Baptist. Remains of Romanesque frescoes can be seen on the north wall of the nave, and paintings from the Vinschgau School of Painting from around 1420 can be seen in the apse (*Wikimedia, 2025*).



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 3.** Romanesque bifora window in the clock tower of Weissbriach.

But a church that it unmistakably reminds us of is shown in the figure to the left: St. Rupert's Church (**Figure 4(A)**), the oldest surviving church in the city of Vienna (**Wolf & Maurer, 2024**). It has Romanesque bifora windows. The nave and the lower floors of the tower date to the first half of the 12th century. The stout and plain 15-metre-high tower (c. 1140) of this church is the oldest Christian monument in Vienna (**GeschichteWiki Wien, n.d.b; Wolf & Maurer, 2024**).

In comparison **Figure 4(B)** to the right is the stout and plain 24-metre-high tower of the parish church of Weissbriach with the Romanesque bifora window and windowless loopholes. Both have a similar pyramidal roof, but neither one has an outside clock. This tower of Weissbriach was included in the list of notable church towers of Carinthia, Slovenia and Friaul in 2022 (**Pressestelle der Diözese Gurk, 2022**).



(A)

(B)

Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

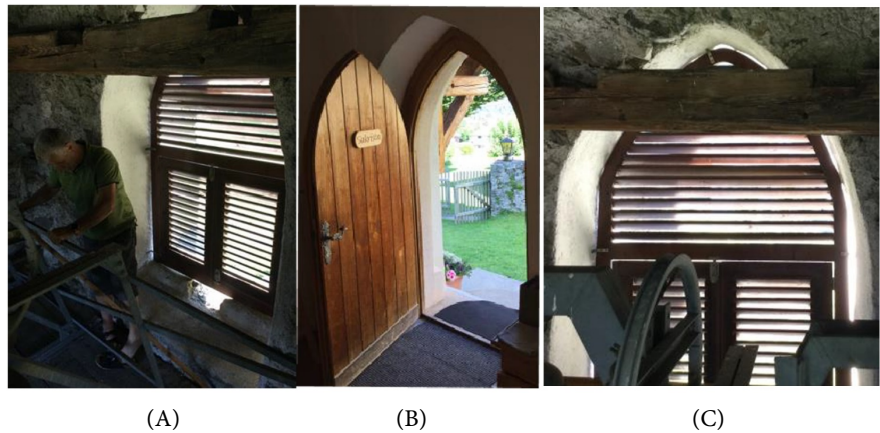
**Figure 4.** (A): St. Rupert's Church, the oldest surviving church in the city of Vienna. Notice the Romanesque bifora windows in the three-storey tower. The nave and the lower floors of the tower date to the first half of the 12th century. Picture: Stefaan Missinne 2026. (B) The three-storey tower of the parish church of Weissbriach with a pyramidal roof with a frieze on the battlements, and Romanesque adapted bifora window.

Although there are similarities, there are also many differences such as in the location of the tower, the number of windows, the height, the colour, and the accessibility (**Figure 5**).

**Figure 6** shows an open windowless loophole in the fortified tower of the parish church of Weissbriach for long-range weapons. It is narrow and high to provide maximum protection.

One loophole is directed towards the north and two are directed towards the east, from which eminent danger might have originated. None are on the west and south side. It is reminiscent of the fortified subsidiary Church of Saint Giles in

## Lading near Wolfsberg.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 5.** (A): Visual evidence of Romanesque bifora window at the bottom. Perhaps the middle pillar was removed to allow for the transport, mounting and removal of the 68 cm and 53 cm. 13th century clocks. (B): Bottom with the Gothic door opening of the sacristy. (C): Evidence of the Gothic creation of the window based on the Romanesque one.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 6.** Narrow and high windowless loophole in the fortified tower of the parish church of Weissbriach.

The church appeared in a travel journal of a certain Italian Paolo Santonino (before 1469-1507). This Italian secretary mentioned the consecration of two altars on October 26, 1485, in the Catholic church of Weissbriach. His journal is interesting because, accompanied by the Bishop of Caorle from the patriarchate of Aquileia (**Figure 7**), he visited several churches in this remote region, providing detailed insights into the culinary highs (and lows) of the hosts' tables (*Evangelisches Pfarramt A.B. Weissbriach*, 1982). It is relevant to mention that the Gitsch Valley and its parishes were governed by the ecclesiastical instances from the Patriarchate Aquileia in northern Italy (*Höfler*, 2021). However, it is important to distinguish that only the southern strip, south of the Drau River, belonged to the Diocese of Aquileia in the Middle Ages, and not

politically. The rest of Carinthia belongs to the Archdiocese of Salzburg. Politically, Carinthia belonged to the Habsburgs from 1335 onwards. I thank Dr. M. Göbl for his clarifying email dating 8 December 2025.



**Figure 7.** Map depicting the Patriarchal State of Aquileia (Aquileia) north-north-east of the Republic of Venice in c. 1350. Detail of a map of the southeastern region of the Holy Roman Empire by Prof. Gustav Droysen (1838-1908), *Allgemeiner Historischer Handatlas*, Velhagen & Klasing, Bielefeld and Leipzig, printed in 1886. Public domain.

Weißpriach (also Weissbriach/Weißbriach vgl. Wisperndorf bzw. Weissberg/Wispriach seit 1169) is also the name of a noble family from Weißpriach in the district of Tamsweg (Lungau) in Salzburg that belongs to the Austrian ancient nobility. This noble family first appears in documents in 1327 and thus predates the above mentioned 1331 by only a few years (Schitter, 1979). In both cases, so it seems, the place name refers to geographical features, in particular to *auf der Anhöhe* (on the hill), in Slovenian *Višprijе*. According to Dehio (Schroll, 2001), the parish church of St. John the Baptist in the west of the village with a 24-metre-high square north tower was part of this early documentation. The spelling leads to general confusion between Weißbriach in Lungau (now Weisspriach or Weißpriach) and Weissbriach in the Gitsch Valley in Carinthia. The following quote is an example:

For the Salzburg knightly family, which had once been based in Weißbriach in Lungau, not only enjoyed a certain reputation among the archbishops of Salzburg, but also had the favour of the Habsburg princes, especially Emperor Frederick III. Their extensive estates in Salzburg, Styria, Carniola, Hungary, Tyrol, and above all Carinthia soon made the former ministerials of the archbishopric, who never belonged to the Carinthian nobility but undoubtedly occupied the highest position among the knights, one of the richest families in the country. In addition, there were a number of mines, some of which—having only just been developed (Ramingstein, Schellgaden)—promised good yields, as well as very brisk trade, which meant that the Weißbriach family's wealth grew rapidly and enabled them

to frequently help the sovereign, who was always in need of money, out of financial difficulties. Due to a lack of reliable information, we know nothing specific about the family's origins and age (Strnad, 1966).

The reason why the strategic western side of the village was chosen for this church was based on concern for the safety of the population and to provide an early warning system in case of attacks. The pyramid-shaped spire sits atop the inclining tower adjacent to the body of the church as can be seen in **Figure 8**. In contrast, the impressive Protestant neo-Gothic church in Weissbriach (1882-1886) stands on the eastern edge of the village. This simple and light construction on top of this fortified tower looks somewhat like a foreign body in the landscape of varied spires that characterise this part of Carinthia.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 8.** Reclining Parish church tower in Weissbriach. Notice the adapted Romanesque bifora window.

On a map of 1573 the village was spelled Weißpriach (**Figure 9**).



**Figure 9.** Detail of Wolfgang Lazius' 1573 map of Carinthia with the title: *Carinthiae Ducatus, Et Goritiae Palatinatus, Wolf. Lazio [with] Histriae tabua a Petro Copolo deferi. [with] Zarae, et Sebenici Descriptio*. The county of Carinthia and the Palatine of Goritia by Wolfgang Lazius. Notice Weißpriach (for Weissbriach) in the upper left corner below the mighty Drau River. Other prominent place names are: Machari, Grunburg, Dresnick, Rakldorf, Dropach, Weyßensee, Maidnpach fl., Gastricz flu., Lind, COM. ORTNBVRG and Inder Se:|lenicz. Just south of Weißbriach village is Goldberg (Gold Mountain). Public domain.

As to the timing and by way of comparison, in 1337 the Bishopric of Passau founded St. Stephan in the heart of Vienna. It can therefore be assumed that in the first half of the 14th century, there was already a Gothic church (or chapel) in Weissbriach. When climbing the church tower on 18 August, the restorer of the interior of the church, Mag. Herwig Hubmann, pointed out the Romanesque bifora windows on three sides of the church. Only on the west side, had this Romanesque window been converted into an open Gothic window, perhaps to accommodate a bell that was too large for the opening of the bifora window. It can be assumed that small bells (c. 53 cm), unlike large bells, were not cast locally, but may have come from bell foundries in Italy. I thank the representative of the Perner Glocken und Uhren Company for the verbal communication dating from 27 November 2025.

The claim in the brochure that “the church in Weissbriach has two-pointed arches and two bifora sound windows in its bell tower, which were probably taken from an older building” can be refuted. These three Romanesque windows also refute the claim that “The northern tower, which is slightly leaning, dates from the first half of the 16th century, except for the sacristy extension and the western bay (**Figure 5(B)**). The date 1520 above the triumphal arch of the church also applies largely to the tower” (*Pressestelle der Diözese Gurk, 2022*).

This construction measure and the change from a Romanesque to a Gothic window (**Figure 5(A)** and **Figure 5(C)**) show that this fortified tower was built possibly in the 12th century, before the invasions of the Turks and Hungarians in Carinthia (*von Wartenhorst & Wiessner, 1898*) and in the Gail Valley. Romanesque double windows, like those in Vienna’s oldest church, St. Rupert’s Church, date from around 1200. They are two closely spaced window openings united under a common round arch, also known as a gable.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 10.** View from the small cemetery around the parish church towards the distant Hermagor, and further to the east to the benedictine monastery of Arnoldstein. This was also the direction from where the potential danger from invaders was expected to come. Notice the inclined fortified tower on the right side.

In order to conduct a comparative study, I visited several churches in August

2025, including Großkirchheim, located in the middle of the upper Mölltal Valley on the road to Salzburg. It is part of the small but beautiful former gold mining village of Döllach. There stands the Andreas Church, which had already been mentioned in documents by 1389.

From a distance (**Figure 10**), the seven-storey high church tower with its renovated dome, which is rather distracting, is striking. A pointed arch entrance and the lower parts of the tower date from the 15th century (*Pressestelle der Diözese Gurk, 2022*). In the first half of the 16th century, apparently analogous to Weissbriach, the existing church was completed.

Several large Gothic church portal sections from the mid-15th century were discovered and uncovered during renovation work on the cemetery wall in 1995. These mighty gate wall stones, porous (perhaps tuff), whose original reddish paint is still partially preserved (**Figure 11**), are triple-ribbed.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 11.** Gothic church portal section from the mid-15th century. Notice the reddish/yellow paint.



Source: Picture: Google Earth, 2025.

**Figure 12.** The walled cemetery of Weissbriach with the few graves and the renewed large cross in front of the entrance. Notice the whitish traces of a small building, possibly a stone foundation of a former wooden construction, towards the southwest of the existing church.

The aerial Google Earth view suggests that a building with traces of a floor plan may have existed (**Figure 12**). I communicated this chance finding on 24 November 2025 to Dr. Astrid Steinegger from the Austrian Federal Monument Office in Klagenfurt. The response in writing dated 17 December 2025 was a surprise.

The Light Detection and Ranging (LIDAR) images (KAGIS [Carinthian Geographic Information System] Orientation and Cadastre) hidden as “terrain (ALS)” in the background data clearly show a ground disturbance in the form of a slight depression measuring around 13 m in diameter around their anomaly.

Since Weissbriach was first mentioned in documents in 1331, it can be assumed that the late Gothic Church of St. John the Baptist, as it appears today, was built on the site of a Romanesque predecessor that was either demolished or partially integrated into the existing structure (nave walls?). Considering that it was founded by the Benedictine Abbey of Arnoldstein, a predecessor building from the High Middle Ages (12th/13th century) can be assumed.

However, the cruciform floor plan you postulate would be very unusual for a Romanesque branch church or smaller parish church in the south-eastern Alpine region. One would expect a hall with an apse or rectangular presbytery. In St. Daniel im Gailtal, four differently designed predecessor buildings were found under the Gothic structure, including some with the above-mentioned floor plans dating from around 950-1250. As a rule, the location of the church is also retained, with slight shifts and differing orientations where necessary. I thank Dr. Gorazd Živkovič, Provincial Conservator for Carinthia for his letter dating from 17 December 2025 and author of an article on early church architecture in Carinthia (**Živkovič, 2017**).

In a personal meeting with Univ. Prof. Dr. Fritz Koreny on 20 December 2025 in Vienna, he suggested because of its small round layout it might have been a charnel chapel for funerary services. In an e-mail dating from 15 January 2026, Mag. Herwig Hubmann assessed it might have been the circular remains of an old lime kiln and burnt lime, according to the old tradition, for the production of quicklime.

Details of the cadastral maps as shown in **Figures 13-15** refrain from showing any traces of any buildings on this site in the 19th century.

The above recently visually confirmed archaeological remains may lead to a geophysical investigation of possible previous structures at this location, after receiving a permission of the landlord and the Austrian Federal Monuments Office in Klagenfurt. But it would not be the first time; the initiative for this has been long in coming, as in the case of Maria Wörth.

Around 1477, the Turks caused turmoil in this valley (**Evangelisches Pfarramt A.B. Weissbriach, 1982**), and so the fortified tower that was already built next to the Gothic church to maintain visual contact with neighbouring villages to the east, at approximately 5 km, served the villagers as a warning post. The walls of the tower are c. 1.50 m thick. The parish church can therefore be described as a fortified church. The name of the church of Weissbriach, St. John the Baptist, re-

fers to an earlier Christianisation, possibly as early as the 9th century (Evangelisches Pfarramt A.B. Weissbriach, 1982).



**Figure 13.** Cadastral map of Weißbriach dating from 1826. Notice the name of Oberdorf.

In the middle where the church is located. Weissbriach (Gitschtal) is also a ski resort, part of the Nassfeld-Presssegger. See region: Carinthia, Austria. Public domain.



**Figure 14.** Detail of the cadastral map showing the layout of the church with the surrounding buildings, some of which including the old sacristan house to the right that were demolished in the second half of the 20th century. Public domain.

Weissbriach was first mentioned in 1331 in a land register of the nearby Hermagor. This special church of Weißbriach had already existed for some time, so one can assume even decades, if not a few hundred years, before the above-mentioned date.

The hypothesis that the raids by the Turks around 1477, among others, gave rise to the custom of building churches with visible connections in the case of the Gitsch Valley can therefore, based on the building measures in the window of the tower of the Catholic church of Weissbriach, be rejected.

The parish of Hermagor was first mentioned in documents in 1169. Its patron saint refers to its foundation by the Diocese of Aquileia. In 1288, the street market of Hermagor at the crossroads to the Gitsch Valley via the Kreuzberg was men-

tioned. It developed into the main town of the Gailtal valley with its own market castle and was in the district court of Grünburg as registered in the AT-KLA 95 of the Carinthian Provincial Archives. The 15th century brought controversies with the Counts of Gorizia over the large parish of Hermagor and, in the last quarter of that century, several Turkish invasions (1476, 1478) (Berger, 1962) based on information in AT-KLA 445 at the *Kärntner Landesarchiv*, which is the Archive of the State of Carinthia.



**Figure 15.** Detail of a map of Weissbriach. Franziszeische Landesaufnahme. Weissbriach (Grünburg-Weissbriach); KTN 79-VI 256 (1823-1844). To the left, the location of the church marked with a red cross is identified (Arcanum Maps, 2025).

The coins are mostly of Hungarian origin but there is also one Italian specimen. Origin and identification (Jaksch, 1902; Numismatische Kommission, 2025):

Cologne. Archbishop Theoderich III (1439-1456): one gold guilder. This should be corrected in: Dietrich II. von Mörs, 1414-1463, Archbishop of Cologne. I thank emir. Univ.-Prof. Dr. Hubert Emmerig for his email dating from 5 September 2025.

Hamburg: Emperor Sigismund (1410-1437): one gold guilder.

Nuremberg: Viscount Albrecht III Achilles Elector of Brandenburg (1471-1486): one Schwabacher gold guilder. Palatinate-Baden: Count Palatine Frederic I (1449-1476): two Heidelberg gold guilders.

Hungary: King Ladislaus (1452-1457): two gold guilders.

Venice: Francesco Foscari (1423-1457): one gold sequin (zecchino).

These eight gold coins date from between 1410 and 1486 (Evangelisches Pfarramt A.B. Weissbriach, 1982).

During my research, I discovered that a treasure trove of gold, perhaps hidden from the Turks in the wall of a house (Stoffelbauernhaus near to the: Moselbach) opposite the historic Old Post Inn, the family residence of Karl Memmer, was found by chance in 1902. So it appears that the homeowner or resident must have kept part of his fortune safely stored here. And then he never got around to taking it out again. So he obviously owned more than he needed for his lifetime. Gold coins have always been internationally circulated, and those in Weissbriach came from half of Europe: Cologne, Nuremberg, Heidelberg, Hungary, and Venice—as can be seen in more detail below. But this composition is perhaps a little surprising.

In the 15th century, Hungarian gold coins were generally used in Austria, though Italian coins would also have been possible in the south including in Carinthia (Merz, 2019). Five coins were found between two stones, and three more were found in the rubble of the demolished wall. I thank emir. Univ.-Prof. Dr. Hubert Emmerig for his explanatory via email dating from 23 August 2025.

It was not the only numismatic trace from the past. A very rare jeton a *Rechenpfennig* (Figure 16), a counter for use in calculation on a counting board, was discovered in the parental house of the spouse of Harald Brenndörfer. This rare *Rechenpfennig* that resembles coinage was found in construction waste in 1996. Venus stands on the obverse. The inscription reads: VENVS AN NO M D 7Z (Z for 2), thus dated 1572. On the reverse side is a four-field coat of arms, lily/crown, or crown/lily. The inscription is a false inscription with illegible repetitions of meaningless letter combinations. This rare piece is attributed to Damian Krauwinkel, a Nuremberg-based abacus maker who worked between 1543 and 1581 (Groenendijk, 2015).



Source: Picture: Harald Brenndörfer 2025.

**Figure 16.** Jeton (*Rechenpfennig*), so called Venus-Pfennig, discovered in Weissbriach in 1996. Notice Venus with a loincloth and a chanterelle that does not produce water. Arms divided by a lily cross with a lily in the first and fourth quarters and a crown in the second and third quarters.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 17.** Altar with the crosses indicating the location where the relics were walled in. Five locations were found during the inspection in August 2025. Notice the Gothic grille on the back on the side of the altar.

As mentioned, 1485 was the year in which a historian reported on the consecration of two altars in the church of Weissbriach and the subsequent banquet. In the late 20th century, a relic dated 1485 was discovered hidden in the altar of the church (**Figure 17**). The brief description of the church in Weissbriach from 2001 is informative but misses the mark.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 18.** Gothic Wrought-iron sacramental grille likely from the 15th century on the south wall of the parish church of Weissbriach.

A witness of these events is most likely the impressive black iron sacramental grille of the church. The sacristy Gothic portal (**Figure 18**) with pointed arch is located on the north side in the front bay, next to it is a tabernacle with a marvelous, original grille.

According to written communication from Laura Müller of the scientific department of the Schell Collection in Graz dated August 27, 2025, based on the assessment of the shape of the wrought-iron lock on the sacramental grille on the south wall of the church of Weissbriach, it is not Renaissance but Gothic (**Figure 18**). It predates 1520 and likely dates from the 15th century. All Gothic locks in the Alpine region show very similar properties and share the same formal characteristics. The lock and grille may have been forged locally in the Gitsch Valley by a local blacksmith. If only this grille could speak. A large round public stone fountain or cistern for pilgrims, among others, such as the one next to the late Romanesque St. Athanasius branch church in Berg in the Drau Valley, is missing in Weißbriach. However, there were apparently wooden pipes from a nearby mountain well that supplied the necessary water, including for the nearby 18th-century vicarage, which was recently completely restored. What was lacking in Berg im Drautal, as well as in other churches such as the branch church St. Margaretha in Dölsch and the Andreas Church in Döllach, which I visited during my research stay, were graveyards with historical gravestones around the church. There could be many reasons for this: lack of space, difficulties with maintenance, or the consequences of the long-standing historical conflict between Protestants and Cath-

olics. In any case, this valuable historical source was lost to this research.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 19.** Sundial on the southeast facade of the parish church in Weissbriach.

Another silent but centuries-old witness to the history of this remarkable church, in addition to the lock of the wrought iron sacramental grille, is a sundial. Painted on the south-eastern wall of the original Romanesque church, this sundial can be seen in **Figure 19**. There are no inscriptions except for the Roman Numeral figures. Apart from minor inaccuracies, the sundial (*Gnomonicae Societas Austriaca, n.d.*) without date lines but with a wrought-iron gnomon with a lance-shaped rod end, which probably dates from the Classicist period (1770-1840), and thus from after the construction of the vicarage in 1752, corresponds quite well to the actual local time. However, it is noticeable that the intersection of most of the hour and half-hour lines is slightly too far to the left. In addition, the angular distances between the painted timelines are not harmonious; in particular, at VIII and III, the hour line does not meet the centre of the respective numeral. The “embellished” cornerstone painting is likely to have been created in a much more recent layer of plaster. I thank the Austrian sundial experts Heinrich Stocker and Adi Prattes for their analysis and explanatory emails dating from 18 and 30 November 2025. A remarkable aspect is that this part of the outside of the church is not actually used by churchgoers. Its location may appear as unusual. The lower, non-original western portal is covered by a pillar portal, some of whose crooked columns show signs of static pressure. This contrasts with the marvel, after passing the wooden organ loft dating from the Baroque period, that greets church visitors as they enter the light-filled interior.

The view from the altar to the west (**Figure 20**) shows the slender dimensions and proportions of this church. The height of the nave is 6.5 metres. This is slightly less than the total length of the nave of the church, which is 12.5 metres. It is not much more than the height of the presbytery, which is 5 metres, and the width, which is 4.9 metres. The triumphal arches, on the other hand, with a height of 4.4 metres, span almost the entire width of the church, which is 5.9 metres, with a span of 4 metres. The dimensions are based on Dr. Schiestl’s excellent work from 2012. The width of the triumphal arches shows that the architect did not prioritize the idea of placing side altars, nor did he include any pulpit. Everything was fo-

cused on John the Baptist as the patron saint. This tailor-made church combines simplicity on the outside with splendour on the inside. The architect had a keen eye for symmetry, perspective, and simplicity. It is unknown why the church was built lower than the surrounding terrain, but it could be due to the choice of a stable foundation. Perhaps the cemetery next to the church was raised because of the rocky ground to be able to bury the deceased?

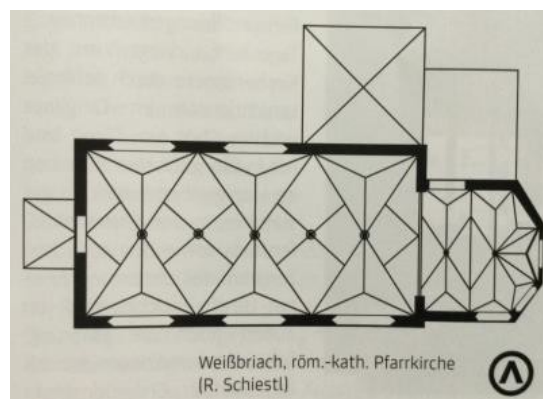


Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 20.** View from the altar to the west. Notice the proportions, the wooden confessional at the back on the right and the new floor.

Various cracks in the vault, possibly caused by the devastating earthquake in Friuli on 6 May 1976 and a powerful aftershock on 15 September 1976, have been expertly restored as mentioned in the *Liber Memorabilium* Weißbriach Nr. 1 1847. However, this has not improved the stability of the centuries-old leaning tower and the adjoining nave.

The floorplan of the church and building structure follow a very simple geometric form but has a few remarkable aspects (**Figure 21**).



Source: Picture courtesy of Dr. R. Schiestl (2012).

**Figure 21.** Floorplan of the catholic parish church in Weissbriach drawn by Dr. R. Schiestl. The nave, which was added later, is offset from the axis of the choir. Notice also that between the choir and the tower a later (baroque) built-on sacristy extension is visible and that there are no side aisles.

The first thing that strikes you when looking at the floor plan is the shift in the central axis of the church. The nave, which was added later, is offset from the axis of the choir from the 14th century. The church is undoubtedly oriented east-west, but the deviation between the central axis of the oldest part and that of the enlarged church building, probably dating from 1520, is striking. On the 15 August 2025 the Azimuth was approx. 119 degrees southeast (**Figure 22**). The “short roof” has an azimuth orientation of c. 135 degrees southeast. Due to the short sight line of the “short roof”, the accuracy of the angle specification is questionable. The discrepancy between the two seems significant to me, which may be due to various factors of inaccuracy.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 22.** 119 degrees south-east. Axis of the presbyterium in Weissbriach.

The azimuth is the horizontal angle between a reference direction (often north) and another point, measured clockwise on the Earth’s surface. The altar, located in the oldest part, is not in the centre of the presbyterium of the church. The axis has shifted to the north.



Source: Picture. Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 23.** Arabesque looking Quadrifoglio (four leave clover), an adaptation of an eight-pointed star window on the west facade of the nave above the portal.

An “arabesque” looking quadrifoglio (four leave clover), an adaptation of an eight-pointed star window is on the west facade of the nave above the portal (**Fig-**

ure 23). Here I must thank Mag. Herwig Hubmann for his kind message dating from 3 December 2025.

*Ostung* is a German term for the deliberate orientation of a church building towards the east or towards the rising sun. The architectural alignment of the church towards the east is an arrangement in which the most important viewpoint in the interior is directed towards the rising sun at the time of the patron saint's feast day (24 June) of the year in which construction of the church began.

This would lead us too far afield, but it cannot be ruled out that, when the extension was built, the east was reoriented (*Ostung*) based on the patronage of St. John the Baptist, which had "shifted" since the original 13th-century construction. Evidence of the *Ostung* of the location of the church of Weissbriach, towards Arnoldstein, is the former Benedictine Monastery in Arnoldstein (Figure 24). In this regard, I thank Ing. Christian Mairamhof, MSc for his kind help via email dating from 17 November 2025.



**Figure 24.** Evidence of the *Ostung* of the location of the church of Weissbriach (in the upper left), towards Arnoldstein (in the lower right corner), and the former Benedictine Monastery in Arnoldstein. Picture courtesy of Geoland.

The first aspect that strikes you is the shift in the central axis of the church. The church is undoubtedly oriented east-west (*Ostung*), but the deviation between the central axis of the smallest and oldest part and that of the enlarged church building, probably dating from 1520, is striking. The altar, located in the oldest part, is not in the centre of the church. The axis has shifted to the north. A kind of axle bend. This may lead us too far afield, but it cannot be ruled out that, when the extension was built, the east was reoriented based on the patronage of St. John the Baptist, which had "shifted" since the original 13th-century construction. Thanks to Prof. Dipl.-Ing. Dr. techn. Erwin Reidinger, one of the world's leading experts in this field (Reidinger, 2013; Reidinger & Brenner, 2023), and his email of 13 August 2025, I was made aware of the feasibility of determining the date of the start of construction of the first stone church in Weissbriach. However, this would require extensive research, which would exceed the

scope of this article.

The second, perhaps even more remarkable fact is that the tower and the original construction of the church were apparently not connected. The tower is reminiscent of the defensive construction tower of Thurnhof Castle near Hermagor dating from 1340 (Wiessner, Seebach, and Vyoral-Tschapka, 1986). The floor plan shows that this is not a typical Romanesque choir tower church, in which a church tower was built above the choir (altar area) of the church and in which it usually also serves as a bell tower. This is a first in the research of the construction history of the parish church of Weissbriach. The floor plan of the church provides irrefutable evidence for this. In addition, the record from the church chronicle, regarding the tower and the clocks, kindly mailed on 10 November 2025 by Harald Brendörfer states the following two citations:

1) Pastor Josef Huber, Weißbriach, March 15, 1916: Regarding the age of the bells, the parish chronicle notes that the church tower and the built-on presbytery are already over 600 years old, and therefore the bells are likely to be just as old.

Notice the wording with regard to the built-on (attached) presbytery and the age referral to prior to c. 1316.

2) Pastor Josef Huber, Weißbriach, August 1917: “At the beginning of August, the following welcome news arrived from the Imperial and Royal Monuments Office, Laibach 10. III. Z 725: ‘Based on the decree of the Imperial and Royal Ministry of National Defence of May 22, 1917, the bells with diameters of 68 and 53 cm and alleged weights of 180 kg and 89 kg, both from the Middle Ages, in the parish church of St. John the Baptist in Weißbriach, are exempt from being used for war metal production’”.

I don't know how many Austro-Hungarian medieval bells, searched for mainly because of their bronze content, enjoyed the privilege of being freed from being melted down for cannon production during the First World War, but it is significant testimony that both in Weissbriach and at the responsible ministerial agency in Laibach, the historical value and religious significance of these polyphonic musical instruments were recognized. Clocks with special artistic or historical aspects were spared (Schubert-Soldern, 1919) and did not land in the bell cemetery (Figure 25). During the Second World War, the largest of the two bells was not spared from its tragic end. Parish priest Hans Carl Hartmann, Weißbriach, 8 July 1947, documented the large medieval early 14th century Marian clock of Weissbriach used during the Angelus prayer. It had a diameter of 85 - 90 cm, a heavy weight of approximately 177 - 178 kg, rang in C, and had inscription around the rim of the bell which was forever lost: “Ave Maria gratia plena” meaning “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee”. This description and in this case the sound of the thus not silent historical witness provides an important terminus ante quem for the date of the construction of the medieval military watchtower of Weissbriach. Perhaps one could find irrefutable evidence based on C14 dating of the wood in this tower, as suggested during a personal inspection by the art expert Mag. Michael Hubmann, which

could possibly date back to the 12th (as the Rupert Church) or 13th century. Pastoral care in the parish of Weissbriach was initially provided by the Benedictine monastery in Arnoldstein, founded in 1102 by Bishop Otto of Bamberg (*Evangelisches Pfarramt A.B. Weissbriach, 1982*).



**Figure 25.** Example of a bell cemetery in Wilten, Innsbruck in 1917. Picture courtesy of the Bell Museum, Grassmayr.

On the side of the enlarged church where the tower stood, there is no opening for a window. Furthermore, there is no entrance to the tower under the missing window, but one must go through the presbytery to the adjacent, Baroque sacristy extension, to enter the medieval tower. And the tower is connected by a passageway (**Figure 26**) to the vaulted roof of the enlarged church.

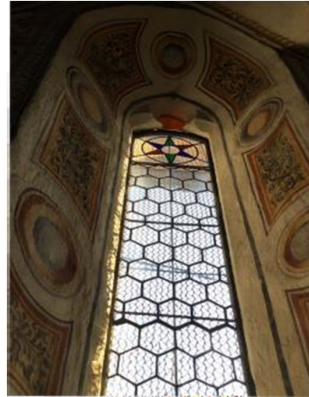


Source: Picture Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 26.** View from the passageway towards the tower. Evidence of the connection.

Perhaps a small church was built first, followed by a mighty tower (or vice versa), and when the church became too small, and prosperity from the discovery of gold and silver in Weissbriach allowed it, it was decided to expand it. Thus, perhaps for economic reasons, it was decided to attach the extension of the church to the southern side of the tower wall. As a result of this extension, and perhaps the unintended pressure exerted by this new lateral weight, the tower slowly began to lean towards the north.

This unique church has lancet windows (**Figure 27**) in the choir—tall, narrow windows with pointed arches that take their name from the lance. Not all windows have retained their original white, hand-blown round glass, but the windows at the end of the choir still feature the original stained monochrome glass. Visible in **Figure 28** are the “moon discs” of the round bull’s-eye windows, which were usually cut into hexagons as early as the 14th century, as is the case here, and were often used in church windows. These are quite valuable silent witnesses from the distant past of this church that have not been considered until now.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 27.** Window in the lancet arch in the choir of the catholic church in Weissbriach. To protect the interior from birds entering through the missing glass window, a pigeon screen was mounted.



**Figure 28.** Rests of blown-glass hexagon 14th century glass next to replaced modern glass.

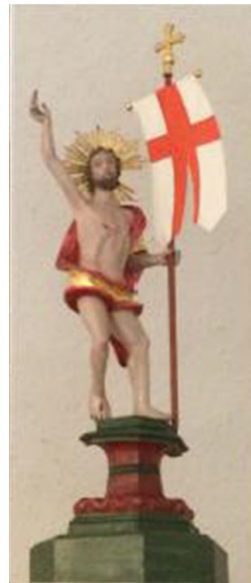
Another silent witness to this church’s eventful past is the baptismal font with an interior diameter of c. 36 cm. The location of this baptismal font, at the front right of the choir, struck me as unusual. The norm is either at the front left, as in the church of Hermagor, outside the choir, or more commonly at the very back of the nave of the church, next to the entrance. This indicated that newborns had to receive the sacrament of baptism before they were “admitted” to the inner sanctum of the church. This gave rise to the hypothetical assumption that the heavy baptismal font from Weissbriach may have consisted of two parts and the location of the 14th century octagonal baptismal font was chosen at the front right. Upon

closer inspection, it turned out that this sacred ecclesiastical element does indeed consist of two parts: the column of the baptismal font from a later date (perhaps 17th/18th century) than the upper part of the baptismal font (perhaps 14th century). The above is evidenced by the baptismal round font carved from a single piece of stone in the Romanesque St. Martin's Church in Gatschach, that I inspected, first mentioned in 1177.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 29.** Octagonal gothic baptismal font in the Catholic church of Weissbriach. Visible to the right is part of the low wall niche in the shape of a choir arch.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 30.** Polychrome painted wood carved Baroque Saint John figure holding the white flag with a split red cross.

The painted wooden polygonal pyramid-shaped lid (see **Figure 29**), possibly of later date, of the inconspicuous but beautifully simple baptismal font is held in place by a metal pin fixed into the stone rim of the font. On the lid is a Baroque statue of Christ with St. John the Baptist, the patron saint of the church of which

a second statue is kept in the sacristy (see [Figure 30](#)).

I was unable to find out where the stone came from. There is no decoration of any kind, such as on the baptismal font in the church of Hermagor, nor any inscription. In what follows I offer a summary description of the interior of the parish church.

### **3. Ornamental Renaissance Features in the Catholic Church of Saint John the Baptist in Weissbriach and Silent Witnesses from the Past**

Such an exceptionally inviting, harmonious, exposed painted environment, as found in the presbytery and large parts of the adjoining nave of the Catholic parish church of Weissbriach in the remote Gitsch Valley, is not only rare but also an eye-opener as to what it must have been like for believers in the 16th century. This small, remarkable church offers such a rare glimpse into the rich past in all its modesty. From 1500 onwards, one can speak of distinctive features of the Renaissance in Austrian art. Renaissance painting found its purpose in panel painting and mural painting.

Particularly in architecture, the Italian-influenced Renaissance was partly identified with Catholicism. There was often a rapid transition to Mannerism.

Remarkable Renaissance frescoes can be found, for example, in the Tyrolean Schloss Tratzberg in Schwaz and Schloss Ambras, and in Carinthia, particularly in St. Kanzian near Villach ([Austria-Forum, 2009](#)).

The church is a late Gothic structure with an exceptionally wide triumphal arch, but the western nave is from a later period. The richly decorated late Gothic parish church owes its opulence to the prosperity of the 16th and (early) 17th centuries, which resulted from precious metal mining, a flourishing cattle trade, and smuggling ([Fräss-Ehrfeld, 1984](#); [Hubmann, Müller, & Schiestl, 2010](#)).

In the three-bay nave is star-ribbed vaulting over moulded wall pillars and a choir with star-ribbed vaulting over corbels. Both the western nave and the eastern part were built at the same time, but likely because of cost saving measures, the vaulted rib that extends across the entire nave, ends at the beginning of the organ loft that anyhow prevents one from seeing the rib above. On the north side in the front gable, there is a pointed sacristy portal with a square-shaped cast iron grille next to it. Impressive is the large round-arched triumphal arch with slightly recessed wall paintings. Because of the dimension of the arch there is no space for side tabernacles. This feature is apparently quite unusual, because none of the other churches I visited in the nearby communities had such a wide arch. Particularly impressive are the puzzling ornamental Renaissance frames of the windows and the capitals decorated with coats of arms at the beginning of the vault ribs. The colours yellow for gold and grey for silver are predominant. It is striking that the baptismal gothic font, in the shape of an octagon, is located at the front right, contrary to all customs and traditions. The octagon as a form for the baptismal font is considered the Christian symbol for dying and resurrection with Christ.

Apparently, it does not date from the 17th century but from the 14th-century presbytery of the church, and the baptismal font was perhaps placed on a pedestal from a later, potentially 17/18th century date. The simple octagonal baptismal font, apart from the pedestal, does not have the characteristics of the Baroque period.

The parish church was restored in 1930 and in 1963 two altars were removed (**Figure 31**). During restoration work in 1992, Renaissance architectural polychrome was partially uncovered, and parts of the 15th-century west portal, or possibly originating from the circular adjacent unknown building, were rediscovered. The attractive church interior has a star-ribbed vault (**Figure 32**). It is brightly coloured.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 31.** Prior to the restoration: The view of the vault in the interior of the parish church. Notice the main altar in the middle and the second altar on the left. Notice the absence of sources for natural light in the parish church and the Renaissance frescoes. Source: *Liber Memorabilium* Weißbriach Nr. 1. 1847.

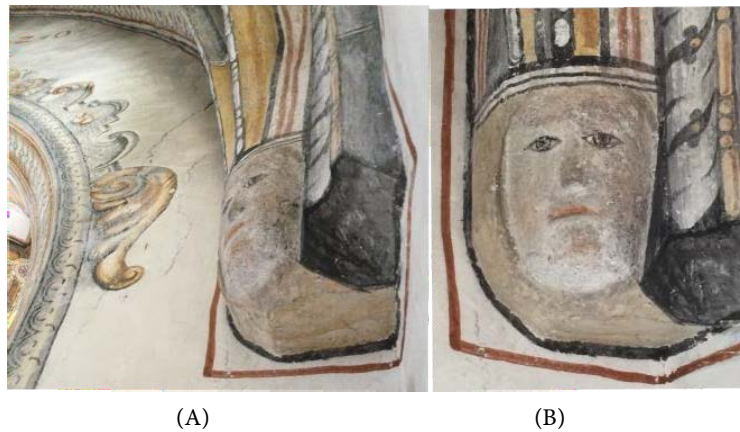


Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 32.** The text in German reads: the view of the restored ribbed vault. The round-arched triumphal arch separates the nave from the chancel, in which a star vault stretches across corbels. Notice the face, likely a hidden self-portrait of the Renaissance artist who painted the frescoes, in the lower right corner. Source: *Liber Memorabilium* Weißbriach Nr. 1. 1847.

During my investigations into the interior of the Catholic church in Weiss-

briach, I noticed this face on a pillar on the south side. It is not just a simple polychrome painted face, but a three-dimensional, albeit simply painted, sculptural form and not a grimace (**Figure 33(A)** and **Figure 33(B)**). This reduces the eventuality for it being an interpretation. It also means that it is, most likely, the work of the artist who was active here at the beginning of the 16th century (dated 1520 at the top). Is this a so-called hidden face that addresses the viewer, as other artists (including Rembrandt) have also practised?



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 33.** (A) and (B). A polychrome early Mannerist corbel head with a likely self-portrait of the Renaissance artist who was ordered to paint the frescoes. Notice the date 1520 in the upper left of Picture A.

What follows is a chronological table of the works on the Parish Church of St. John the Baptist in Weissbriach, received by email from Mag. Herwig Hubmann on 19 August 2025. It is a transcription and translation of a document originally dating from 2007 from the diocesan archives by the former diocesan curator and director of the Diocesan Museum of the Diocese of Gurk, Dr Eduard Mahlknecht:

1927: First reference to frescoes by a Prof. from Vienna; plans for a complete restoration are underway. This appears to be Prof. Dr. Otto Demus who 1928 completed his doctorate in art history in Vienna.

1929: A plan drawn up for the frescoes in the presbytery and on the pillars of the nave prepared by Prof. Dr. Otto Demus (1902-1990), who between 1929-1936 was State Conservator in Carinthia ([GeschichteWiki Wien, n.d.a](#)).

1930: Late Gothic fresco paintings and a chronogram were found on the walls of the presbytery and on the ribs. The paintings were dated to the last years of the 16th century.

Baptism of Christ, Dance of Salome, etc.

1932: Construction. Safety work, construction work on the church, a ventilation trench was dug, drainage work was carried out, roofing of the southern nave roof.

1950: Roof repairs would have been necessary, reference to damaged board covering. 1959: Drainage work, the parish priest wants to acquire a Baroque high altar.

1963: Interior restoration, the side altars are removed, as are the mensas, the floor is covered with concrete (dated 1963). Laymen uncovered frescoes, 17th-century peasant paintings (sic), baptism of Christ, etc., naive paintings, polychromy on the vault; further uncovering was carried out professionally (Campidell company).

1965: Without formal permission from the BDA (Austria's Federal Monuments Office), a church portal was broken out and a faux stone portal was constructed.

1969: Repeated reference to the fact that the entrances to the church had been redesigned without permission, the pews had been painted, etc. The district council grants permission to sell neo-Gothic furnishings and statues that are deemed worthless.

1977: Earthquake damage is repaired, puttying is carried out, retouching is applied.

1982: Two new church bells are purchased. These were cast by the Grassmayr Bell Foundry in Innsbruck, Tyrol. The bells have the pitches D/2 and E/2. In addition, the bell frame was renovated (Schiestl, 2012).

1983: Fresco restoration inside.

1985: Tower re-roofing by Mayerbrugge company. 1986: New roofing of the nave with Eternit shingles.

1988: Wall drying, concrete foundation walls constructed.

1989: Suggestion for the restoration of the baroque organ instrument. 1992: Restoration of the outside walls (Figure 34) and roof takes place.

2007-2008: The murals in the altar of the parish church of St. John the Baptist in Weissbriach, dated between 1616 and 1622, showed cracks in the plaster layer and large missing sections. The restoration concept involved thinning out o out of the old overpainting and filling in missing sections in a neutral manner to obtain a legible overall picture (Franz, Pröckl, & Ure, 2007). The murals and architectural surfaces of the chancel thus underwent high-quality conservation and restoration work by the local company RESTAURICON® Denkmalpflege (Schiestl, 2012).

As artists attained higher status, some of them adopted the attributes and symbols of court life and did not always discreetly identify themselves as producers in the works they created. Thus, in the late Gothic and Renaissance periods, many of them look at the viewer as if they were standing between the image and the reality outside it. A good example is Anton Pigram, who immortalised himself in stone in 1510 in St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, looking out of a stone window that he opens. This self-portrait in Weissbriach is analogous to the single smiling self-portrait of Thomas of Villach, mentioned in Paolo Santonino's "Travel Diaries" (Hundsichler, 2004), in the northern transept of the collegiate church of the Benedictine monastery in the Lavant Valley. In contrast, the facial expression of the polychrome corbel head in Weissbriach is rather melancholic, even Mannerist. There is no decoration whatsoever. In contrast to other cases in Catholic churches, this is a single example and not part of a group of several corbel heads, many of

which are frats—as in the church of St. Joseph in Freimersheim and in Bohemia (Jindra & Mudra, 2015). The round male face is outlined to create a contrast with the colourful triumphal arch, which rises above his head. Its prominent position on the south side of the sacrament building was not chosen at random. It is impossible to miss. It is as if the artist wanted to show that he is part of the triumphant feeling when contemplating the radiant church with its beautiful, ribbed vault. Normally, a heraldic coat of arms would be placed here.

In addition, in 2025, the last of the two original bells, one of which were requisitioned for the casting of cannons during the Second World War and thus never returned, dating from the 13th century, was restored by the experts of the company Perner Glocken und Uhren GmbH in Schärding. This bell, known as the death knell, was reconsecrated in 2025 during the Harvest Festival (Figure 35), after which it was returned to its place in the medieval tower of the parish church. The present priest of Weissbriach is Provisional Spiritual Advisor Mag. Bernard Grabowski.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 34.** Polychrome frescoes on the northern outside wall of the presbytery subsequent to the restoration at the outside.



**Figure 35.** The restored death knell. A more than 700-year-old small bell, with a diameter of c. 53 cm, reconsecrated during the mass celebrating the Harvest at Weissbriach. Picture courtesy of Harald Brenndörfer, 2025.

What is striking about this chronological composition is that the first notes on the art-historical significance of the hidden contents of the church were the result

of the detective work of a PhD art historian in 1927. It took until 1963 for a coincidence to confirm his suspicions, and until 1983 for them to be restored. And in 2025, almost a hundred years after the first note, it is again thanks to coincidence that I had the luck to be located for three weeks in Weissbriach to find the time to analyse and value its unique iconographic and historical significance.

During the restoration of the frescoes in 1983, the date 1520 posted below another smaller more inconspicuous date of 1530 in the nave of church was discovered. During a personal inspection in the interior accompanied by Mag. Herwig Hubmann, the key restorer of this remarkable church, I was informed that the technique used by the artist in the 16th century is *fresco secco* (in short fresco), a fresco applied like plaster on a thin layer of lime mortar. A *secco* or *fresco finto* is thus a wall painting technique where pigments mixed with an organic binder and/or lime are applied onto dry plaster. The octagonal Gothic baptismal fountain, apparently placed on a later pedestal, is positioned at the front right, which is rather unusual. Its weight may have hindered its placement at the back. While analysing this sacred and historical object, I noticed the absence of both historical gravestones in the small cemetery surrounding the church. Furthermore, not a single marble or other gravestone slab was found, either inside or outside. In addition, standalone statues of saints are, except for a small, mounted Saint John the Baptist on top of the fountain for baptism, lacking.

It is unclear why, but one may suspect that the reason lies in the Catholic church not being unoccupied for many years and the regularly changing jurisdiction, for whatever reason. In 1751, Karl Michael, Bishop of Gorizia, separated the parish of Weißbriach and the Weißensee area from the parish of Hermagor and elevated Weißbriach to an independent parish (Moro, 1956). Weißbriach became a vicariate with its own priest, which continued until 1961. The first vicar who moved into the newly built parish in 1752 was Matthias Laßnig. Subsequently as of 1961, pastoral care was provided by the parish of St. Lorenzen, and since 1999 this has been done from Greifenburg (Schiestl, 2012). In addition, it may even be a Protestant influence, just a lack of funds and lack of Catholic inhabitants, or a combination of the forgoing.

Traces of a circular clock on the outside wall are missing. On the exterior, facing east, a small, simple antique sundial is located. A historical water source and cistern well is also missing. The reason for this may be the rocky underground, some of which becomes apparent walking around the church. One cannot escape the impression that this small church has barely survived the numerous religious ravages of time. This is likely due to the voluntary efforts and motivation of the small minority of Catholic believers, who make up only 5% of the residents of the whole town.

Apparently, Weissbriach was on the route of secret Protestants and Bible smugglers between eastern Bavaria and southwestern Carinthia (Komoot, n.d.). The origins of the Reformation in Carinthia began with the inhabitants of nearby Villach. As early as 1525/26, its inhabitants managed to secure the appointment of a

Protestant minister. Shortly thereafter, the majority of the Carinthian nobility converted to Protestantism. They were able to finance a printing press. This resulted in the spread of this new faith like wildfire. Every believer was required to be able to read the Bible, so numerous new schools were built. From the early 1600s, many Protestants were faced with a choice: either convert or emigrate. This led to a period of secret Protestantism and brought about many cultural peculiarities in this otherwise Catholic country (Hanisch-Wolfram, 2010). One of these cultural peculiarities I encountered during my research was that male children born to the Catholic Church were baptized as Catholics, while female children were baptized as Protestants. To an outsider, the reason for the high percentage of Protestants isn't immediately clear. Was Weißbriach forgotten? A concise explanation offers itself. After the Lutheran Reformation in the 16th century, the majority of the population, especially the many knaves, miners, and their families in the Gailtal Alps, became Protestant.

The miners, known for their community spirit and independence, such as those in Upper Carinthia, a region with a lot of mining activity, including the Gitsch Valley, were among the first to become Protestant. The reasons for the success of the Reformation movement among miners lay in the mentality of these miners and their dangerous work, as well as in the similarities between mining tradition and religious belief. Mining traditions, incl. praying before and after the shift, culturally and anthropologically reflect both the fun and joy as well as the suffering and passion of the mining profession (Schreiber, 1962).

The treasure trove of Gothic frescoes and a starry sky dating from 1440/1450 discovered in 1946 in the pilgrimage Church of St. Leonhard in Pucking in Upper Austria (Hainisch, 1977), which is not located in any mining area, lacks the silver and gold-coloured discs that are so characteristic of Weissbriach.

Due to their numerical and economic dominance, miners and smelters influenced the design of churches and church life in general. Working in the darkness of the earth, pitmen were particularly dependent on luck and grace in a religious sense. Money was also collected for mountain church services and for the decoration of churches. This is already evident in the treasure hunt, i.e. the search for ore veins. Shafts and ore veins were given Christian names. The extension of the church donated by the miners' guild in Weissbriach is likely to have been decorated allegorically with discs portraying suns (gold) and full moons (silver). Allegorically, sun = gold = Jesus and moon = silver = Holy Mary (Pforr, 2008). It can therefore be assumed that the particularly wide arch leading to the altar was inspired by the desire for a spacious roof over the room, contrasting with the cramped, claustrophobic living and working quarters and corridors of the miners underground. The foregoing is a prime example of a cultural variation in this community in Carinthia and thus of Austrian cultural anthropology.

Bishop Martin Brenner's (1548-1616) Counter-Reformation (around 1600) (Eder, 1955) commission for religious reform did not visit the Gitsch, perhaps because of its remoteness. Consequently, unlike large other areas of Carinthia, this

area experienced no forced relocations based on Protestant adherence to other parts of the Holy Roman Empire. But there was another reason for the high percentage of Protestants, not primarily clandestine ones in Weißbriach. This is thought to be the fact that this Catholic parish, for whatever reason possibly the seclusion, remained unoccupied for a long time (Schroll, 2001; Hanisch-Wolfram, 2010). However contradictory it may sound, this seclusion, this abandonment, this church caught in the whims of church administration in an area whose population was largely Protestant, may be the reason why this architectural national Austrian heritage lay forgotten for all those years and was protected in its bulb from the influence of modernization and the tidal waves of change. Symbolic of this resistance to change of time is the leaning of the mighty church tower towards the village. Although the Dehio Handbook (Schroll, 2001) dates from 2001, the iconographic content of the Renaissance interior of the church has not been treated accordingly. The marvellous round triumphal arch that separates the nave from the chancel, in which a star vault stretches across the corbels is just taken for granted. An empirical test visit to various chapels and churches dating back to the 13th and 14th centuries in the districts of Spital an der Drau and Hermagor showed that in all cases the frescoes still present in the church portal had been restored or hidden behind a wooden Baroque high altar, in a back room, with ladders, vacuum cleaners and other utensils. In none of the randomly selected chapels and churches that are open to the public were the original frescoes restored to such an extent as in the Church of St. John the Baptist in Weissbriach, awakening them from their 500-year-old slumber.

#### 4. Some Aspects of the Iconographic Content of the Church Interior

The first thing you notice when you enter this small church is the majestic splendour of the frescoes and the large round-arched triumphal arch. The colours yellow for gold and grey for silver predominate. No wonder, given that this is a gem from the bygone glory days of gold and silver mining. These minerals, including lead and iron, were indeed abundant in the Gitsch Valley as part of the Steinfeld mining district (Wiessner, 1950).

The heyday of mining in and around the Gitsch Valley was at the beginning of the 16th century. Steinfeld, 16 km from Weissbriach, was chosen as the seat of its own mining court. Twelve court records, known as Raitbücher, from 1529, 1538, 1550, 1579, 1580, 1581, 1583, 1584, 1585, 1588, 1589, and 1602 contain information about the owners of the mines, the name of the mine, the quantity of ore extracted, and the prescribed deliveries to the state. These were kept in the archives of the Berghauptmannschaft in Klagenfurt and are now in the State Archive of Carinthia (Jordanhof Steinfeld, 2025). In the 1580s, production in the Gitsch Valley became dominant. Even Archduke Charles II owned princely shares here. The families of Anna Neumann von Wasserleonburg, Pflügl, Herberstein, Malenthein, Khünburg, and Putz (Schloss Großkirchheim in Döllach) were successful

miners.

Mining officials also acted also as mining entrepreneurs (Fräss-Ehrfeld, 1984). (Wiessner, 1950) Traditional records kept in the Carinthian Provincial Archives in Klagenfurt, which provide information—albeit with gaps—on developments up to 1602, show an increase in precious metal production in the Steinfeld mining district, especially in the second half of the 16th century. The village of Steinfeld is only 16 km from Weissbriach. In addition to technology, newly developed sites in the Drau and Gitsch (Wulnitzgraben) Valleys and, above all, in the town of Siflitz, were decisive factors in this development. The absolute best production year was 1578, which yielded exactly 304 marks of gold and 757 marks of silver. In the 1580s, the high figures were still maintained to some extent, but then they declined rapidly (Ludwig, 1993).



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 36.** Cherubs, winged creatures combining human and animal features are surrounded by fixed stars above the altar of the parish church in Weissbriach. Notice the bright silver and gold colouring and the different kind of faces and the depiction of the Holy Ghost in the form of a flying pigeon in the keystone.

This provides the economic basis for what we see here. When I confronted the head of the church council with this during my visit in August 2025, he seemed impressed. A female colleague who was present said, “We should write that down.” I asked them if they had ever read this in a description before, to which they replied to no. So I set to work, unravelling bit by bit the content that was initially full of riddles. Nowhere did the word Renaissance appear to have been used. So I decided to inspect the local church guide. In that I found that the murals inside the church adorn the first two eastern bays of the nave, the triumphal arch and the presbytery. According to the church guide of the parish church of Weissbriach, the ornamental frames of the lancet windows, the painting of the ribs, the cherub heads and the stars in the vault fields are one of the few early Baroque vault decorations in Carinthia that are still influenced by the Renaissance (Schiestl, 2012). Apparently, the art-historical importance of the frescoes was recognised, but no full explanation, perhaps because of the lack of space, was provided. Gustav Gugitz’s standard art history work dating from 1956 (Gugitz, 1956) on Styria and Carinthia could not have commented

on these frescoes as they were only found in 1963. I therefore have a closer look at them. I noticed that there were ten infant faces of cherubs, hybrid winged creatures that combine human and animal features, in the choir. These beings included the human, but there were also animal faces such as the horned (ox), maned (lion) and winged (eagle). In Christian-inspired art, cherubs, whose image is often reduced to the head and wings, are frequently depicted as infants, as in church frescoes and Renaissance works, for example by Raphael (Cahill, 2012). These angel-guardians protect the fixed stars (Figure 36).

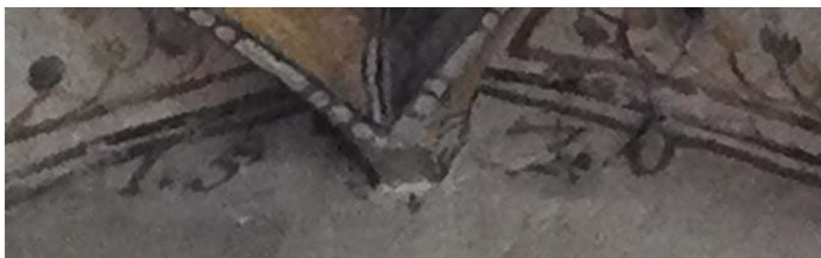
Above two windows, two more cherubs can be seen. The most impressive is the six-winged cherubim (Figure 37) above the arch as in Isaiah (6:1-3) (Cahill, 2012). Particularly striking is the unusually broad nose and the headdress, a palmette (i.e. fan-shaped leaves of a palm tree) reminiscent of a gorgon in an Etruscan Medusa head, terracotta antefix from Veji from 580 BC (Biedermann, 2000). The floral elements are exotic. On the sides of the cherub's distinctive head are motifs of an exotic palm tree, an important traditional visual element with a meaningful iconographic content.

These exotic palms have an important symbolic meaning. They represent victory (Palm Sunday), triumph and eternal life (Paradise), and salvation and peace.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025

**Figure 37.** Crowned and six-winged enigmatic cherub, in an unusual and odd pose, facing the West in the interior of the church. Notice the kind of Gothic writing of the date 1520, with the separated numbers by flowers, the additional date 1530 (Figure 38) in the nave of the church above the cherub and the cracking and the winged doves in the arch. Exotic palm trees decorate this impressive Renaissance cherub.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 38.** Detail of the date 1530 in the nave.

In addition to the date of 1530 in **Figure 38**, other components include a time calculation in Roman numerals in a horizontal S. A seraph (**Figure 39**), a winged celestial being of pure light who enjoys communication with God and is part of the highest choir of the hierarchy of angels (Cahill, 2012), is probably placed on the back of this cherub. It is not as exotic but nevertheless unique. The motifs in the fresco are early Mannerist and not completely symmetrical.

On the feast of 15 August, Assumption Day, I was able to give a brief interim report. In the meantime, the number of people who had gathered to hear what I had noticed had grown. This lively experience and confrontation with interested parties was a motivating factor.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 39.** Six-winged seraph in front of the altar, facing the east, in the parish church of Weissbriach.

I noticed that a floral, freaky animalistic fish motif and luxurious elements with pearls, jewellery and crystals recurred repeatedly.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 40.** Typical early Mannerist scrollwork on the interior of the parish church.

Frescoes of Mannerist scrollwork (**Figure 40**) with connecting cords and threads with the trifoglio symbol for the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—in the cross vault, in the heaven above the faithful, also predominated. What ap-

parently went unnoticed, but was actually quite conspicuous, was the fresco of the long line of symbols of the Holy Spirit in the pictorial form of winged doves on the outside of the arch. The symbol of music, the iconographic framework of Orpheus, was also impossible to overlook.

The colourful tendrils are striking, with their typical repeating pattern combined with various flowers, leaves, and ripe fruits (**Figure 41(A)** and **Figure 41(B)**). The fruit symbolism is linked with the painting above. The apple represents sin and temptation but, in some cases, as in the Madonna with the Christ, also the redeemer from Sin and Christ.



(A)

(B)

Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 41.** (A) Renaissance fruit symbol with grapes and pomegranate with leaf tendrils. This fresco located behind the wooden pew. (B) Renaissance fruit, pear, apples and grapes combined in exotic leaves.



(A)

(B)

Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 42.** (A) Picture of grapes surrounding a pear, next to exotic plants, leaves, and tendrils. (B) Odd over-dimensional grain-like depiction and a large curtain tassel.

The pomegranate, paired with the Virgin Mary and Child but also known for its abundance of seeds, represents fertility. It is as an attribute of Venus so also linked to desire and marriage. The grapes below the fresco with the decapitated Johannes represent the blood of Jesus (**Figure 42(A)** to the left). The pear in the middle stands for faithfulness and marital fidelity (**Figure 42(B)**, to the right).

What I at first sight missed was the plant of immortality, Acanthus, so present in the Renaissance, but I noticed it was incorporated in the Mannerist sea monster in a contorted pose on the south side of the parish church, creating surprise, as can be seen in **Figure 43**. I did not find any lobate style elements. The fitting, flat,

not perfectly symmetrically arranged ornamental form of the Renaissance is present. This is combined with intricate and rolled-up sculptural ribbon shapes known as scrollwork (Wichmann, 1977).



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 43.** An early Mannerist sea monster (turn to the right) with a mouth structure with sharp teeth and a circular tongue in a contorted pose (a part of a non-symmetrical composition in the side of a window on the southside of the parish church).

The above-mentioned date on the façade of the presbytery coincides with the period of Mannerism, which falls between 1520/1530 and 1600. By way of comparison, 1519 is the year of the deaths of Emperor Maximilian I and of Leonardo da Vinci.

The period between 1530 and the early 17th century, marks the transition from the High Renaissance to the Baroque. The eccentric artist who worked in Weissbriach and was able to indulge himself here impressively demonstrates how he distanced himself from the classical ideals of the Renaissance with his own, possibly Italian-inspired, eccentric style and very bright colours. He does not adhere to the rules of parallelism but applies artistic artificial representation. He incorporates religious, mythological, and cosmological themes. It is precisely this aspect that demonstrates why this unique Renaissance bubble from the 16th century, unprecedented in Carinthian art history, is so valuable to art lovers and academics, among others.

The unknown artist, possibly from the patriarchate Aquileia in nearby northern Italy, is not afraid to combine the symbols of the sun, moon, and fixed stars with exotic palm trees, diamond blocks, round containers, unknown faces of the six winged-cherub and the six winged-seraph, apples, pears, grapes, nuts, grains, exotic pomegranates, and an odd mythical mammal creature of the sea, symbol of Jonah and the monster. With its abundant light, this church ship depicts the biblical story of God's creation at the beginning of the age of discovery of the New World, paradise, with an incredible wealth of colours, impressions, and longing for the discovery of abundant mines with gold and silver. The virtuoso artist plays with proportions and perspective.

This art does not remove the miner's church in the remote village of Weissbriach in the mountains of Carinthia from the new world of Maximilian I and Emperor Charles V, where the sun did not set in his World Empire. The story in

this little church is therefore not that of a forgotten church, but that of the time, even of a witness, of the history of contemporary discoveries based on fragments of exotic information of the finding of gold that may have seeped from Spain via the Aquileia Patriarchate in northern Italy into these northern regions of the Habsburg Empire.

The above could potentially be corroborated by the first publication, in 1526, of *El Sumario de la natural historia de las Indias* (*A Summary of the Natural History of the Indies*), a book focusing mainly on American flora and fauna written by the chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1478-1557) and published in Toledo (Ladero Quesada & Ángel, 2008). The renowned historian and Dominican Bartolomé de Las Casas (1485-1566), advocating for indigenous rights, began working on his *History of the Indies* in 1527 and completed this in 1547. The first edition of another book on the subject, originally titled *La istoria de las Indias*, or *General History of the Indies* by Francisco López de Gómara, was published in December 1552 in Zaragoza (Andión Herrero & Antonieta, 2004).

This description provides evidence of the oldest known and preserved Mannerist art in Carinthia and possibly one of the oldest in Austria. Milesi did not cover Weißbriach in the remote Gitsch Valley (Milesi, 1973). A similarity was suspected with the frescoes in the chapel of Hochosterwitz, but definitive proof was still pending.

## 5. The Heraldic Weapons: Traces of the “DNA” of the Church

I was able to find a total of nine heraldic coats of arms, but their identification, with the exception of the coat of arms of Carinthia, is a challenging task. In my humble opinion, they are the “DNA” of this church. Once they have been identified, it will be possible to determine the individuals (and families) who played a role in their financing. Given that the heraldry signs in the church are still rather simple, it can be assumed that these are coats of arms from the 15th century. It is uncertain which families would possibly be considered as donors for the construction and especially for the expansion of this church in Weißbriach. It is therefore a two-way connection. Knowledge of the names of the financing families could help to identify the weapons and vice versa.

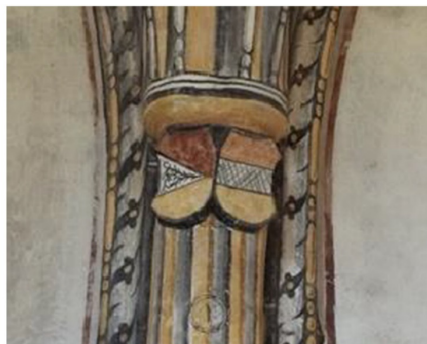
With the help of several experts, it was possible to identify some of the heraldic symbols. This is the way with attempts to resolve heraldic coats of arms and related issues; sometimes it succeeds, sometimes it does not. It is striking that the shield images are limited to a few motifs, which would suggest an earlier date.

According to Dr. Nikolaus Christian Kogler (e-mail dated 9 September 2025), heraldry has many rules and many exceptions and variations. When two coats of arms are placed side by side, they often represent alliance coats of arms, i.e., those of married couples. Their placement depends on the architectural situation and has no further significance, not even the direction of the wind. The coat of arms of the lord (and his wife) naturally occupies a place of honour. Without knowledge of the historical context of the location where the coats of arms are displayed, it is

impossible to proceed. In the case of churches, for example, one should find out who the donors were, who commemorated themselves by financing the display of their family coat of arms.

In addition, according to an e-mail from 29 August 2025 from Dr. W. Deuer in response to my enquiry, using detailed pictures from the interior of the parish church showing heraldic weapons, unfortunately some coats of arms could not be identified with certainty because the heraldic elements—known as ordinaries—were too general in design and, above all, the tinctures (colours) could not be determined with certainty. Dr. W. Deuer has often found that in such coat of arms depictions on church vaults, the colours have been changed during restoration work, making identification much more difficult. Except for what appears to be the coat of arms of the city of Verona, the coats of arms identified in the present case are, in his opinion, too general to allow any profound conclusions to be drawn.

The world renowned Heraldic-Genealogical Society Adler in Vienna (in short, Adler Archive), was consulted. Its registrar and former archiver in the Austrian State Archive, Hofrat Dr. Michael Göbl, informed me via email on 8 December 2025, after having received my enquiry and pictures, that the coats of arms in the church of Weißbriach date from the 15th century. They are greatly simplified representations of family coats of arms. They could be defined as coat of arms abbreviations. Due to the simplified representation and probably also due to incorrect colours, possibly because of their restoration, the families to which they belonged are difficult to identify. I can only list possibilities here that relate to characteristic figures that appear in the coats of arms of Carinthian families.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 44.** Two heraldic weapons in the interior of the church of Weissbriach in Carinthia. Missinne 2025.

In **Figure 44**, on the left is a silver tip in a shield divided into red and gold. On the right, a shield divided twice from red to silver and gold. According to Dr. Göbl (8 December 2025), the colours red, white, and yellow in both coats of arms are reminiscent of those colours that appear in the Khevenhüller coat of arms. Family coats of arms usually appear as patron families of churches, which is why they often have their burial place in or around the church.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 45.** Two heraldic weapons in the interior of the church of Weissbriach in Carinthia. On the left, an Austrian shield. On the right, a Carinthian coat of arms.

On the wall of the collegiate church in Viktring, near Klagenfurt, an epitaph with a reference to a certain Margarethe von Weispriach, who died in 1457 is mounted (Leitner, 2000a). The heraldic coat of arms features a decorative ordinary element in a triangle that is like the decorative element in the heraldic coat of arms in Weissbriach above. It is the first and apparently only element that could point to a von Weispriach. In literature, the name Weissbriach is repeatedly indicated with Weispriach. It cannot therefore be ruled out, although it is unlikely, that this Margarethe von Weispriach could have a connection with the mountain village in the Gitsch Valley, especially since this is not a complete heraldic coat of arms but only a partial element.

In **Figure 45**, the regular shield of Carinthia's coat of arms is divided into gold and red; in the foreground are three black lions with red tongues and weapons, one above the other, and in the background is a silver bar. In contrast, here, the lions are in the background. Normally, the lions must face the altar out of respect and therefore differ from the official representation (on the right). According to Dr. Göbl (8 December 2025), when animals in coats of arms look in a different direction, this has to do with what is known as heraldic courtesy. The lions are supposed to be looking at the Austrian shield.

Is this uncourteous sign a coincidental mistake, or did the painter literally want to paint a discreet rebellious sign, a case of ungentlemanly conduct, of an independent attitude of the working miners—for which they were known—who risked their lives daily for the rich nobility?

**Figure 46** shows a silver weapon with a bend in red and diagonal left bar, also known in heraldic terms as an *Argent*. Unknown, but according to Dr. Göbl (8 December 2025), the Schwerenfeld family has a red diagonal bar in white in the second and third quarters of their quartered shield.

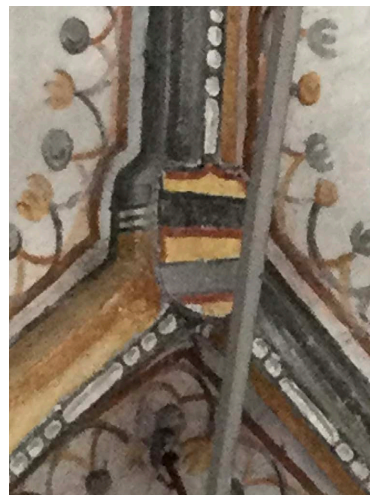
The solution may be that this coat of arms most closely resembles that of the Eppensteiners, and, above all, the subsequent Spannheimers. The Eppensteiners were a medieval noble family that died out in 1122 but that produced several dukes of Carinthia; they are considered its first indigenous ducal family (Leitner, 2000b; Leitner, 2000c). **Figure 47** shows gold, red, silver, black colouring in its bars. Its

origin is unknown, but according to Dr. Göbl (8 December 2025), perhaps belongs to the family Grebmer, who bear a gold, white and black shield.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 46.** A single heraldic weapon with a band in red, diagonal left bar, in the interior of the church of Weissbriach in Carinthia.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 47.** An additional heraldic weapon in the interior of the church of Weissbriach in Carinthia.

The origin of **Figure 48** is unknown, but according to Dr. W. Deuer (29 August 2025) it vaguely resembles the coat of arms of the Burgau (Swabia) and according to Dr. Göbl (8 December 2025) it is perhaps of the Leobenegg, as this family has a black lozenge on a silver background in its coat of arms. **Figure 49**, according to Dr. W. Deuer (29 August 2025), is the coat of arms of the city of Verona. This is of course a surprising finding. But in contrast, Dr. Göbl (8 December 2025) is not certain, and suggests rather the Dietrichstein family that has a silver cross running through the red. But then, these colours do not match. **Figure 50** may show the guild shield of the painters (three shields 2:1).



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 48.** An additional singular weapon in the interior of the church of Weissbriach in Carinthia.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 49.** A crossed heraldic weapon in the interior of the church of Weissbriach in Carinthia.

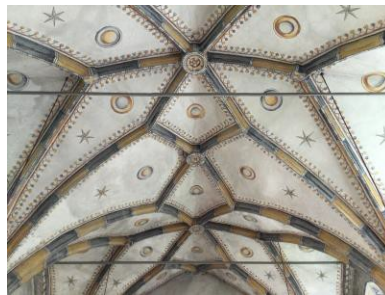


Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 50.** Not uncommon heraldic weapon in the interior of the church of Weissbriach in Carinthia.

According to Dr. Göbl (e-mail from 8 December 2025), it could be an artist's coat of arms, which have existed since the 14th century, but at that time they were assigned to the painters' guild. However, there is also a Schreiber family which bears three silver shields on a red background in the first field of their coat of arms. In summary, it can be said that this approach, as with the identification of DNA from the distant past, and with the help of two experienced Austrian experts, is a first tentative step that may lead to further research.

The floral bouquets decorating the frescoes at the bottom are impressive. They are richly varied and show the opulence of nature (**Figure 51**) in the Renaissance period when these frescoes were created. It appears as though an Italian or a local artist with experience in the Patriarchate Aquileia in Northern Italy has been at work here. These ornamental paintings, these floral images, and Weissbriach are mentioned in literature in the same breath as those in the Parish Church of Saint Leonhard (**Kienzl & Deuer, 1996**), but although the first impression may be interpreted in this way, the differences between those in Weissbriach and the ones in Saint Leonhard (**Figure 52**) are greater than the similarities. I must admit that I have not been able to personally view and evaluate the uncovered frescoes in Weissenstein.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 51.** The impressive opulence of the rich coloured ceiling of the interior of the parish church. Notice the vault rib and keystones with the ornamental flowery motive.



**Figure 52.** Floral decorative painting in the parish church of St. Leonhard in Weissenstein. Public domain.

Narrow decorative strips consisting of a series of small hemispherical links strung together like beads on a string (astragal) that are well known in the art of gold and silversmithing are clearly visible.

The choir has three stained glass windows through which natural light floods into the interior of the church. Some of the old, handmade, lead-framed, uncoloured original glass in the shape of hexagonal honeycombs has been replaced by modern glass elements. Only at the top are coloured monogram stained-glass elements in the shape of a star used. Secular or religious scenes in the glass are absent. Most probably this glass is from the 19th or even 20th century.

Due to lack of space, this series of images about John the Baptist is a concise thematic cycle with a selection of two major works: the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan and a work depicting the capture and beheading of John the Baptist, the feast with King Herod, and Salome with the head.

Motifs depicting the life and deeds of Saint John the Baptist in various works of art (*Anoniem, c1530*) include, in addition to those mentioned above, his birth and youth, the announcement of the approaching coming of God, and the ascetic life of John the Baptist in the desert. It is not clear why this selection was supplemented with the fresco *Arma Christi*.

The Resurrection cycle also consists of two frescoes: the *Arma Christi* fresco, which emphasizes the connection between suffering and redemption, and the fresco of Christ's Resurrection. In what follows, I begin with the impressive mural of the Feast of Herod, one of two about John the Baptist.

## 6. The Impressive, Uncovered Mural of the Feast of Herod

The fresco of Herod's Banquet, also known as the Feast of Herod and the Beheading of John the Baptist is part of a cycle on John the Baptist in the shield arches and appeals to the imagination. It is based on Mark and Mathew in the Old Testament. It is striking that the frescoes in the arches do not depict a series of scenes from the life of St. John the Baptist, but rather represent a single main theme (**Figure 53**).

The crowned King Herod and his crowned wife Herodias are depicted at the luxurious banquet table.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 53.** Visible are two frescoes in the shield arches from the cycle of Saint John in the Parish church of Weissbriach with the *Arma Christi* in the middle. Notice the bright colours.

The inventory of the inscriptions in Carinthia by the Austrian Academy of Sciences offered helpful background information and listed the following:

- Mural painting in the southern choir wall lunette with a depiction of the Feast of Herod with Salome, to whom John's head is brought (**Figure 54**). The painting (i.e. fresco) is completed at the bottom by a plaque. There is a three-line inscription, which is heavily worn in places. Below this, in a rectangular picture field, the donor's family is kneeling before the crucified Christ.
- On the left is the donor with his five (?) sons.
- On the right is the donor's wife with their nine (?) daughters. Above their heads are painted scrolls with individual names. These are completely worn away and therefore largely illegible. The mural (fresco) is framed by an ornamental border.
- Below the donor's portrait, the beginnings of a Mannerist scrollwork frame are painted. The fresco is approximately 310 cm high, 226 cm wide, and the letters are approximately 3 - 4 cm in size. (*Leitner, 1982b*)

Noticeable is the high number of children and the reference to Mannerist scrollwork.

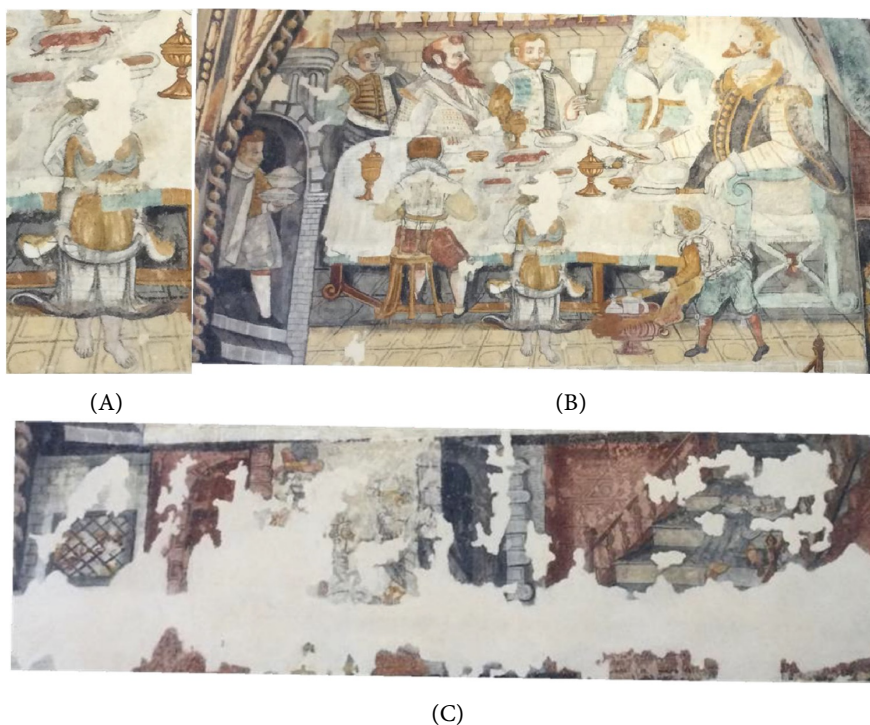


Source: Picture: Missinne 2025.

**Figure 54.** Mural of the Feast of Herod by an anonymous master in the church in Weissbriach. The translation of the inscription: “1...and this ... house of God in honour of Christian remembrance ... The honour ... vest ... angels ... This ... and be two ... the ... Make ... Married ... The other wife ... similar places ... Children made ... Happiness... on this date. In the 35th year... This was painted...October 15, 1616. 2. ... Eu... /Sabina/... /Affra/ (Bar)bara/...” (*Leitner, 1982b*).

The prophet John the Baptist, whose head was requested by Salome is presented on a platter in the lower right corner. The blonde “infamous” Salome stands in the centre of the image (**Figure 55(A)**). As she dances (*Scheef, 2005; Walz, 2008*), she is provocative and holds her upper skirt high, revealing her bare thighs. This

veiled skirt is a sign of dance. Her seductive dance led to the beheading of John the Baptist. Hans Liefrinck's (c. 1518-1573) engraving of Salome (Luyckx, 2021) also shows Salome's veiled thighs as she dances in front of the dining guests. Another example is the dancing Salome by Pieter Coecke van Aelst—dating from c. 1540 at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Unfortunately, her face has been made unrecognisable. The perspective and composition of the fresco of the not untalented artist depicting Herod's banquet with Salome are more reminiscent of a follower of the work "Das Gastmahl des Herodes, Der Tanz der Salomé" by F. Lippi (1452-1466) than the work "Tanz der Salome, Das Leben des Johannes des Täufers" by Jan Swart van Groningen (1553-1558) and certainly not to the banquet of Herodes by Naldini Giovambattista from c. 1580.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 55.** (A) Detail of Salome holding up her skirt, dancing on her bare feet. (B) Detail of the lavish banquet scene. Notice the long fingers of the hand of the man in the middle holding the foot of an over proportional goblet to speak out a toast to King Herod on his throne to the right. (C) Detail of the decapitated head of Saint John the Baptist being brought up the stairs on the right.

A servant wearing an apron to the right of Salome pours hot soup into a bowl. King Herod reaches for the knife with his left hand while holding the two-pronged fork. In front of him is a golden salt cellar and in front of that a chalice. To his right sits his wife, in front of an empty plate. Her neighbour on the left, dressed in Renaissance clothing like everyone else, makes a toast with a silver cup. His table companion on the right, with a long red beard, listens attentively to the toast. He is being watched over his shoulder by a young nobleman who is hiding something

behind his back. Opposite them sits a young nobleman in short red leather trousers. He is leaning back in a typical wooden three-spread-legged Alpine tavern board chair with round armrests. He is leaning back in his turned armchair, which is anchored by his weight. He appears to be paying no attention to the conversation. On the table are various valuable typical Renaissance drinking vessels and plates. Apparently, it is the beginning of the feast because all the plates are still empty and King Herod is being greeted with a toast (**Figure 55(B)**).

At the bottom of this fresco, the remains of the tentative spelling of several names can be deciphered, including Lucretia, Sabina, Barbara, and Affra on the women's side. On the men's side, only the ending of a name stands out, possibly Bartolome. The white vertical line is where the electric cable was put into the fresco (**Figure 55(C)**).

Paolo Santonino, secretary to the Bishop of Caorle, made diary entries during a previously mentioned historical visit to Carinthia in the 1480s. These entries provide insight into not only the culinary but also the musical practices of the time. Unfortunately, none of the table music he mentions appears to have been depicted in Carinthian music iconography. Santonino mentions polyphonic singing and flutes of different sizes (**Hundsichler, 2004**).

The fresco in Weißbriach depicting the banquet hosted by Herod, with the family of the benefactor, bears 1616 as a date for this ancestral depiction. **Henning (1991)** is a valuable example of a subject that has apparently not been considered enough until now: the musical iconography of Carinthia.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 56.** Detail of the four musicians playing on a balcony entertaining King Herod and his guests. Notice the square Renaissance window above and the elongated fingers of the musicians.

The four musicians at the top right (**Figure 56**) are playing typical Renaissance musical instruments, from left to right, an ensemble consisting of a shawm, a cornetto (crumhorn), a harp, and a lute (**Henning, 1991**). There are no singers visible, so it was probably intended to evoke secular music/dance music according to David Burn in an e-mail communication dating from 18 November 2025. In Carinthia,

where singing songs is in the blood vessels of its habitants like in hardly any other state, the absence of singers in this fresco is striking. The lavishly laid table with lots of food including a duck in the middle and three golden chalices, possibly from Augsburg or Nuremberg, are part of this impressive royal feast. At the bottom are scenes with the prisoners (**Figure 57**), the beheading of Saint John (**Figure 58**), and the bringing of the head on a plate (**Figure 59**).



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 57.** Scene of the imprisoned John before being beheaded on the left of the fresco.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 58.** Remains of the scene where John the Baptist, in the middle, is being beheaded by the executioner with the hat in the upper left corner.

Although it is part of a cycle of three works about John the Baptist, the narrative of this fresco is one of betrayal, the consequences of ruthless desire, and the lust for power. Perhaps it was a warning, a moral instruction? The fresco is reminiscent of the medieval mural depicting the beheading of John the Baptist in the church of St. Peter and St. Paul in Pickering, Yorkshire, although that one dates from much earlier (around 1450).

According to Dr. Deuer in an email dating from 10 December 2025, identifying parents based on their children's names is less effective than identifying their grandparents—grandchildren often took one or more of their grandparents' first names.

On the donors' portrait, which children had affixed in honour of the church (this house of God) as well as in Christian remembrance and for the salvation of

their deceased parents, “Happiness...” is probably the remnant of the usual wish for a happy resurrection of deceased ancestors and possible siblings. “The other wife” is the father’s second wife. The donor children are therefore presumably from two marriages. The baptismal names Sabina, Afra, and Barbara were common around this time (1535). It is often observed that the firstborn son is named after his paternal grandfather, and the second after his father. It follows that the frequent occurrence of the same (male) first names in families with the same surname, which initially appear separately, makes the connection to a clan clearer. Here, I ought to thank Nicolaus Christian Kogler from Tirol for his clarifying email dating from 4 November 2025.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 59.** The scene on the right of the fresco where the servant in the grey coat and wearing a hat carries the decapitated head of John Baptist on a silver plate up the stairs to the mother of Salome who is waiting in solitude while standing up the stairs.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 60.** Detail of the right side of the female ancestral family part of the genealogic fresco.

There is confusion between the word “founder”, which refers to a historical figure who initiates the establishment of a church, and the “ancestral gallery”. The two concepts are different, and the literature on this fresco in Weissbriach refers to Stifter, but it is actually an ancestral gallery with a genealogical representation of certain family members from the past (**Figure 60**).

The fresco at the bottom carries the date 1616, but refers to ancestors, probably a family that had become wealthy through mining, from the late 15th or early 16th century, who apparently played an important role in Weissbriach and possible in the enlargement of the miners' church. This could be through their possession of the rights to exploit the silver and gold mines. It does not refer to the founders of the medieval church in Weissbriach from the 14th century.



Source: Picture: Johann Jaritz, 2014.

**Figure 61.** (A) Christoph Khevenhüller in the middle with to his right his first wife Elisabeth and to his left his second wife Anna Maria. Detail of the Khevenhüller History manuscript dating from 1620 (Dinklage, 1980). Picture courtesy of Beate Murr (Murr, 2022). (B) Detail of the Renaissance epitaph of Christoph Khevenhüller and his two wives at the St. James the Elder Church in Villach. Source: Picture 61 B courtesy of Johann Jaritz, 2014.

The depiction of Jesus Christ, as a central image motif on the cross in a semi-circle, is reminiscent of Christ on the cross on the Renaissance epitaph with the relief of the governor of Carinthia (from 1540) Christoph Khevenhüller (1503-1557) and his two wives, Elisabeth Mannsdorfer (1519-1541) and Anna Maria Welzer von Eberstein (c. 1505-1564) (Figure 61(A)) in the Khevenhüller Chapel of the main parish church of St. James the Elder in the nearby statutory city of Villach (Figure 61(B)) and in a Khevenhüller history manuscript dating from 1620 (Figure 61(B)). However, the differences in clothing, posture, attributes, hats, etc. are dominant (Czerwenka, 1867). In the same church, there is also a certain similarity with the epitaph, albeit with a scrollwork frame, dated 1580, of Georg Khevenhüller (1533-1587), nephew of the governor, who is depicted kneeling with his family beneath the cross (Leitner, 1982b; Leitner, 2000a). Could the Khevenhüller or Welzer families have had direct or indirect family and or business interests in the Gitsch Valley? This is indeed the case, as I will show.

The director of the historical society for Carinthia Dr. W. Wadl put it in an email on 8 December 2025 like this: “One famous Protestant with the name Bartholomäus comes to mind, namely Bartolomeus Khevenhüller, builder of Velden Castle, Lord of Paternion and owner of a sheet metal factory in Kreuzen. But did Bartolomeus Khevenhüller also have economic ties to the Gitsch Valley?” I confronted the expert Dr. Karl Heinz Ludwig with this puzzling question. His response dating from 15 December 2025 was the following:

Mining in the Gitsch Valley can only be verified with certainty in the early modern period, more precisely in the second half of the 16th century, as more than mere prospecting. I have copies of the records of Hans von Maltitz's preparations in Carinthia (excluding his Salzburg and Bamberg holdings) and in Lower Austria as a whole in 1500/01, but they do not show the chief mining officer as being interested in the Gitsch Valley. So the state of research remains as it is. Hermann Wießner, who also mentions Khevenhüller in his history of Carinthian mining, published 3 volumes in 1950, 1951, and 1952. In *Edelmetallbergbau* (Precious Metal Mining), on p. 146, and in the index of names, especially for the so-called Fürstenbau (princely mine) in the Gitsch Valley, for which the Raitbuch (rent roll) from 1578 to 1585 is also preserved in the Carinthian Provincial Archives, Berhauptmannsarchiv No. 1014: Archduke Karl of Austria holds 18 quarters, Georg Khevenhüller 2 quarters (which he relinquished in 1580). On p. 162, Wießner also mentions "Herr Moritz Chrystof Khevenhüller", one of Georg Khevenhüller's three cousins.

This provides irrefutable evidence that the noble Khevenhüller family had direct economic interests in mining in the Gitsch Valley.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 62.** Detail of the left side of the kneeling male as a mining trader, part of the ancestral family in the genealogic fresco. Notice Bartolomä (Barlmäh), the head of the Protestant Church of Carinthia, also carrying the typical utensils, hammer and pickaxe, and wearing the leather jacket used by the mining traders and hammer workers (Gewerke) to the right of his father Christoph Khevenhüller. To the right the young female children.

At the bottom of the remarkable fresco of the crucifixion of Christ, known as the "Law and Grace Fresco" in the Eberstein Castle Chapel by Wenzel Aichler (Mahlknecht, 1995) dating from 1561 is a gallery of ancestors (the founding family) painted in a style that differs from that in Weissbriach. Is it a coincidence that the male family members are kneeling on the left, while the female family members are depicted kneeling on the right?

In 1572, Georg Khevenhüller had three tapestries made for Wernberg Castle: one was dedicated to his grandfather Augustin, one to his father Siegmund, and the third featured himself. In all three pieces, the male family members are depicted kneeling and praying on the left in the foreground, and the female family members on the right (Drobesh, 2022). I asked the present owner of Castle Hochosterwitz and his response by email 21 November 2025 was the following:

My great-grandfather in the 16th generation, Augustin (+1519), was married to Siguna von Weissbriach. One of his sons, Christoph, married Elisabeth von Mannsdorf in his first marriage and Anna Maria Welzer in his second. Both were wealthy mining daughters. He took over the mining operations in Upper Carinthia and Salzburg from both families, which his son Bartlmäh continued to run. The family settled in Spittal (today's community centre). The mines included gold and silver mining at Goldeck, the lead mine in Bad Bleiberg, and several iron mines. It is likely that the mines in Weissbriach also belonged to their operations. And it is also quite possible that the chapel you are talking about also contains an ancestral portrait of the Khevenhüller family. On the left-hand side (i.e. to the right of the priest), this Augustin could also be his son Christoph. Of course, I cannot say for certain.

The second depicted male person is named Bartolomeus (**Figure 62**). This was also the name of the second son, namely Bartholomäus I (1539-1613), owner of various mines in Carinthia, of Christoph Khevenhüller (1503-1557), who was married twice (*Czerwenka, 1867*).

The row of kneeling young girls next to the cross (**Figure 62**) and the similarity to the genealogical tree of Christoph Khevenhüller's family seem to offer possible confirmation of the above hypothesis. The analysis revealed the following: the youngest was Christina (born in 1491 in Spittal/Drau and died in 1541), whose name is omitted from the fresco, the middle child was her sister Florentina (born in Aichelberg in 1544), whose name is partially visible, and lastly the elder sister Barbara, whose name is also partially visible, born in Ortenburg in 1538.

But some mysteries remain. Why is the first son, who as of 1572 was an imperial ambassador at the Spanish court, Johann VII Khevenhüller (1538-1606) omitted in this fresco?

The names of the daughters, which may have been "adapted" during the restoration process, do not fully correspond to Bartolomeus' sisters but the numbers seem to fit (11 daughters and 2 wives). This is also the case for the six male children of Christoph Khevenhüller (1503-1557) except for the above-mentioned Johann VI Khevenhüller. Secondly, the heraldic coats of arms are missing from the figures, perhaps due to lack of space but the colours black (silver) and yellow, red and white, the colours of the Khevenhüller, prevail in the colours of the interior of the church of Weissbriach.

But according to a message via email from Dr. W. Deuer dating 10 December 2025, he questioned this concordance based on the similarity of these colours: what is special about all four coats of arms is the inclusion of Carinthia's colours of red, white and (since 1930) yellow. This also applies to Steinfeld: the red tip between gold and silver, like the crossed miner's tools of hammer and pickaxe, symbolises the importance of mining for the region. The similarity with the colours in the church in Weißbriach appears therefore to be a coincidence. Further research appears to be necessary. Absorption spectroscopy, which determines colours by measuring which wavelengths of light a substance absorbs and which it transmits or reflects, should

make it possible to define the original colours of the heraldic arms.

Thirdly, there is no written reference nor a heraldic weapon of the Khevenhüller family in the church. Was there a mix-up between Weissbriach and Weisspriach in Lungau? Or is this fresco, although incomplete and similar to the rip painting in the chapel of Hochosterwitz, now proof of the influence of this family, which ruled Carinthia for a long time, in Weissbriach in the Gitsch Valley?

Is it a coincidence that this fresco was created here? Apparently not. It is part of a religious painting cycle in which John the Baptist plays a central role. During the Counter-Reformation, Herod and Salome were also often depicted as part of the “Beheading of John the Baptist” painting theme. Perhaps we owe the fresco, which was added later, with the ancestral row on the south side of the presbytery, to a discreet spot being available here near the altar and opposite the built-in tabernacle. Could it be that although this fresco hangs in a Catholic church, this family, including the head of the Evangelical Church of Carinthia, Bartolomäus Khevenhüller, was painted here with the symbols of the miners, traditionally Protestants, prior to and at the time of the Counter-Reformation? The majority of the population in Carinthia in the 16th century was protestant (Trauhsnig, 2011).

What is striking about this aspect is that some male members of this important ruling family are depicted in Renaissance clothing, but with typical mining tools on their clothing. It is as if the painter wanted to commemorate the economic prosperity that was based in the second half of the 16th century on the leading role of gold and other precious metal mining in the Gitschtal and Weissbriach.

The artist may have used a model for this work, on which he based his composition, possibly a copper engraving from the Renaissance period. The male protagonist wears a typical leather apron with the tools of a gold and silver prospector, mining trader and hammer worker (Gewerke), including a hammer and pickaxe. The history of Weissbriach tells us that there were several tunnels in this part of the valley that contained rich deposits of gold and silver (Carnaval, 1926) in the 15/16th century, among other minerals and ores. Weißbriach was thus an important mining town in the late Middle Ages and early modern period. Therefore, my hypothesis that the patron of the fresco could have been a miner is very plausible. I thank the Director of the Historical Society for Carinthia Prof. Dr. Wilhelm Wadl for his email dating from 8 December 2025 and his help on this matter. Based on stylistic and formal characteristics, the frescoes are attributed in literature to the circle around the Carinthian painter Jakob Kazner, who lived and died in Villach around 1633 (Schiestl, 2012). In my opinion, the Mannerist style is unmistakable. However, the differences with his magnum opus of Jakob Kazner, the Sternberger Fastentuch from 1629, seem significant. It may be speculative, but I cannot shake the impression that different painting periods and thus different artists were involved in decorating the interior of the church. This is supported by the date of the renovation and extension of 1520, which is displayed in the presbytery. The year 1520 refers to the date on which the star vault in the church was completed. I thank Prof. Dr. Eduard Mahlknecht for his email dating from 24 No-

vember 2025 with this information.

Thus, there are ten years between the date 1520 and the date 1530 added above it. It is a conceivable time span to apply frescoes. But between 1520 and 1620 there are 100 years. Why would one wait so long to decorate the interior of the building, presbytery, and nave? These colourful frescoes were applied between 1520 and 1530. There is irrefutable evidence that the German inscriptions and the ancestral family gallery, dated 1616, was thus added many years later. The above is supported by the predominant Renaissance impression with a multitude of Mannerist characteristics, which were apparently “overlooked” in the literature. Secondly, not all frescoes are inscribed with text.

Thirdly, there is a similarity with the interior of the St. Nicolaus Chapel of Hochosterwitz, whose walls are decorated with frescoes from 1570 (**Figure 63**). Furthermore, there are no vine paintings at all on the ceiling of the church in Weißbriach, which is not the case with the vine paintings from 1615 by J. Kazner in the baptistery of the collegiate church of Mariä Himmelfart in Ossiach.



Source: Picture: Elfriede Mejchar, n.d.

**Figure 63.** Burg Hochosterwitz. Altar in the middle of St. Nicolaus Chapel. This chapel was converted into a Protestant church in 1586 by Georg Khevenhüller. Notice the painting with the ancestors of the Khevenhüller in the upper left corner and the predominance of yellow, red, white and black colours. Hochosterwitz in Carinthia.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 64.** Evidence of a possible later addition of the textual passage between the yellow lines.

The irrefutable evidence of a later addition to the text, in at least one case, is supported by the presence of remnants of the yellow lines between which the black

writing in the donor's painting appears.

There are also remnants of yellow paint in the band (**Figure 64**). Furthermore, the number 1 at the top of the arch differs from the number 1 in the date "16... Jahr". And at the bottom of the Arma Christi, there is no text whatsoever, with the most decisive argument for this hypothesis being the difference in the writing of the numbering between 1520 and 1620. I thank Dr. Eduard Mahlknecht for his email dating from 28 November 2025 that within Carinthia, the late Gothic style still prevailed in the first quarter of the 16th century. Could it be that the difference in style between Renaissance/Mannerism at the beginning of the 16th century and that at the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th century, as well as the turbulent, uncertain religious period (beginning of Protestantism and recatholicisation – Counter-Reformation) is the reason for this textual "adjustment"? The answer is yes. The proof is provided by the fresco depicting the ancestors of the donor's family. Donors, in a type of dedication picture that has been common since the Middle Ages, usually had themselves immortalised small and kneeling on the side of a sacred act (Fräss-Ehrfeld, 1984) as can be seen in **Figure 65**. The painter of this section did not bother to remove the decorative circles for his artistic composition. He simply painted over them. I had always wondered what the meaning of this decorative band was, but once I had formed an initial suspicion and knew what to look for, it was simple.

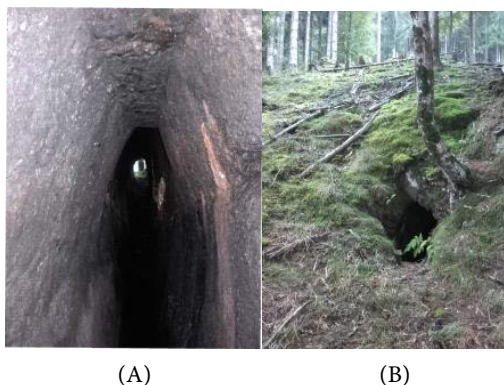


Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 65.** Evidence of the painting over of the circular decorative band with the 16th century depiction of the ancestral family immortalised while kneeling at the side of a sacred act.

Jakob Kazner as a painter for the frescoes between 1520 and 1530 can be refuted. But he may have been the one who was asked to add the German texts and to paint the gallery of the ancestral family. Further research will be necessary to assure this attribution. The inner church paintings in Weissbriach are a fine example of a so-called art-historical partial style mix, in which original frescoes from 1520 are updated with new text and dates around 1620. The commissioned painter of the 17th century knows that detective work would take a lot of time. So, thanks to the later

complete overpainting, no one noticed for the next 400 years until the publication of this work in the 21st century that the frescoes in the parish church of Weissbriach are a misdated treasure from the past.



Source: Pictures courtesy of Jürgen Bock. The above explains how the gap between the re-dedication of the church in 1485 and 1620 was covered.

**Figure 66.** (A) and (B) Claustrophobic tunnel, approx. 100 m long on the shady side (south side) of the Gitsch Valley near the village of Wulzentratten to the southeast of Weissbriach.

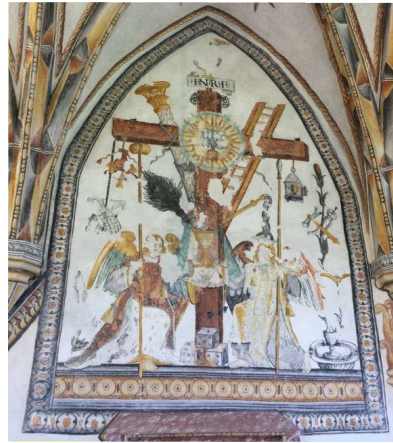
Between the documented visit of 1485 and 1520/1530, there was a period of economic prosperity, based on mining of gold and silver and other valuable metals (**Figure 66(A)** and **Figure 66(B)**), using claustrophobic tunnels that led to the expansion of this church.

### **7. The Uncovering of the Unique Mural Fresco in the Shield Arch of Instruments of Jesus' Crucifixion and the Secretive Dating in the Oversized Dice at the Foot of the Torture on the Arma Christi Cross**

It is no coincidence that this particularly iconic and impressive fresco is painted above the tabernacle where the hosts are kept, to the left of the altar area of the church. The mural of Jesus's crucifixion and torture (**Figure 67**) presents a very detailed list of instruments and objects also known as the objects of passion. Some were not difficult to identify, but others needed more time. I start with two rather difficult ones. The two mitres in the upper left corner can be compared to the crown of thorns that Christ was mocked with during the crucifixion as the "King of the Jews". And next to it, at the top left, we see a round leather bag containing vinegar or sour wine. On the bag skulls can be seen. Jesus was brought to a place called Golgotha, which means "Place of the Skull". In the middle of the undated mural is the large wooden cross on which Jesus was crucified after a long and enduring humiliating torture. Behind the wooden cross is a large Roman pillar, which is tied by rope to the cross. It also shows the rope with which Jesus was bound. The white, long, round Ionic marble column displays an abstract pattern of veins that resemble large and small oval pebbles which is rather unique.

The ladder that the soldiers used to climb onto the cross and take down his

body forms, together with the pillar on which he was tortured, the Cross of St. Andrew. This was the pillar or post to which Jesus was tied when he was whipped by the antagonizing instrument known as the Roman flagrum, a whip with at least three strands (McClister, 2000).



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 67.** Frescosecco showing the Arma Christi, or “Weapons of Christ” in the parish church of Weissbriach. Notice the absence of text at the bottom but a single row of decorative circles with flower motifs. Notice also the wings of the angels similar to the ones of the seraphim, the bright colours, the strange spatial relationship between the latter, the column and the cross, and the odd oversized dice at the foot of the cross.

In this case the flagrum is replaced by a torturing instrument known from the Middle Ages, a large three ball flail with its characteristic large pins. The short bat appears to have been painted by the artist as he wanted to assure that the horrendous, excruciating pain during the torture of Jesus would be seen from afar. The INRI sign, “*Jesus Nazareus Rex Iudaeorum*”, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, has above it a large crowing cock. This cock is positioned above the shield to show the Betrayal of Peter, who denied Christ thrice at night. The IHS, “*Jesus Hominum Salvator*” (Jesus, Saviour of mankind), in the halo Arma Christi is depicted with neither clouds nor putti (Figure 68). It is one of the numerous halo-variants (Alberti, 2013). At first glance it may appear rather baroque in style, but this kind of Trigram IHS in a flaming halo was already used in Italy by the Ferrarese artist Antonio Marescotti active 1444/1462, as evidenced by a bronze relic at the National Gallery of Art (Accession Number 1957.14.623.b) (Marescotti, 1444).

Tied to the post is a torch in the appropriate black colour of extinct fire. In the middle below the Holy Cross and the heart of Christ is the covered ciborium topped by a golden cross. The angel to the left and the angel to the right are both holding up this ciborium, covered by a blue/green veil. In its middle, a large silver coin can be detected. It is the iconographic symbol of Judas, his 30 pieces, and Jesus’ iniquitous betrayal. At the bottom of the ciborium is a textile in white. **Figure 67** shows the absence of text at the bottom, wings similar to the ones of the

seraphim, the bright colours, the strange spatial relationship, the column and the cross, and finally the curious looking oversized cubes at the foot of the cross. Where text would normally be placed, figurative flowers have been added in a monochromatic colour that does not match the above theme.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 68.** Detail of the circle halo with the IHS sign in the middle below INRI.

I would like to thank Dr. J. Ickx from the Vatican for his statement from 2 February 2026, after he consulted an art historian in his department, that the ecclesiastical setting, the symbolism of the scene and the artistic execution are most likely from the same period, namely the early 16th century and by the same hand of the anonymous artist. Therefore, a later 17th century addition can be excluded, which is to be confirmed by paint analysis.

In the upper left corner vinegar-soaked sponge is on top of a hyssop branch. In the New Testament, hyssop is associated with the complete and final purification that can only be achieved through the blood of Jesus Christ. The branch is held by a young, blond, kneeling winged angel whose left foot is naked. To his right is a young, blond, kneeling angel also with bare feet. To his right at the bottom is a Renaissance water carafe (vessel) in a large oval silver basin in which Pilate washes his hands. Above are other instruments including a hammer and pincers that hold a nail. These instruments are miraculously upheld by a large plant that grows from the bottom where the vessel is standing. On the right side of the cross a burning lantern is hanging. On the right side of the cross is also the pointed lance that pierced Jesus' heart. This lance is held by the kneeling angel to the right. In the wood at the foot of the cross, a large sharp nail is protruding – however, from an impossible perspective. A total of three nails, two for his hands (visible at the top of the cross in black) and one for his feet, nail him to the cross. The eccentric oversized dice (**Figure 69**) used by the Roman soldiers to divide Jesus' clothes among themselves (Mark 15:24–41) are prominently displayed at the foot of the cross. The points on the dice are chosen so that the numbers 1-2-3-5-6 are visible and other faces that also have points are

marked as shadows or are invisible.

Although perhaps at first sight somewhat speculative, there is a distinction between the visible numbers, the obviously omitted numbers, and the planes with numbers that are in shadow. If one adds up the front dots (6, 4 and 5), one arrives at 15. If one adds up the visible dots on the horizontal planes (2 and 1), one arrives at 3. And on one plane on the right, where every pip (dot) is deliberately missing, one arrives at 0. Together, these seemingly insignificant details disclose the date: 1530. And it is precisely this year, 1530, that is located above 1520 in the ridge of the nave at the front. One may assume that the artist who left his self-portrait was the one that concealed the date of his work in the dots on the stacked dice. The numbers on dice are not traditionally part of the symbolism of the Arma Christi. Usually, only three dice are shown, and even then pictographically, without numbers (O’Keeffe, 2001). Is it therefore a *mixtum compositum*? Based on the above analysis, I believe that this is not the case, but rather a conscious, albeit devoid choice.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 69.** The dice at the bottom of the cross with the hidden secret pun within the dice. The front dots (pips) 6, 4, and 5 of the dices add up to 15. The horizontal dots 2 and 1, add up to 3. And on one plane on the right, where every dot is deliberately lacking, one arrives at 0. The Renaissance pun to date the painting: 1530 and this date is visible above 1520 in the ridge of the nave.

This solution to the puzzle is valuable confirmation of the dating. It also proves that the previous hypothesis, that the paintings were inscribed at a later date, can be confirmed. Previously unseen is the knob of a stick with the face of a bizarre sea monster with a cord resembling a whip. This can be seen in the lower left corner of the fresco. This completes the list of the Arma Christi, or “Weapons of Christ”, the tools used in the crucifixion of Jesus (Galitzin, 2018; Effner, 2022).

The Arma Christi cross refers to important stages in the Passion of Christ between betrayal and arrest, through scourging to crucifixion. Through the victory over death in the Easter mystery, the instruments of torture of earthly suffering become weapons of Christ’s triumph, which also brings salvation and comfort to believers. In summary, the following are usually visible on such Arma Christi crosses:

the hammer, the tongs, and the three nails; Longinus' halberd and the staff with the sponge of vinegar; the scourging pillar with chain; the bundle of rods and the whip as symbols of the scourging; the dice as symbols of the casting of lots for Christ's robe; the money bag for Judas' betrayal; and the cockerel as a sign of Peter's denial. Finally, the ladder refers to the descent from the cross. The shroud and the robe of mockery are not depicted, but they are not tools either. Noteworthy are the recurring colours of gold, silver, copper red, black, light green, yellow, and white, and the extensive use of twisted cords with spoils.

## 8. Description of Other Frescos in the Church of Weissbriach

The painting above the sacristy portal in a choir wall lunette depicts the baptism of Christ. This, the third of four large figurative murals in the choir area, is not in particularly good condition. The crowned god with a long white beard, looking down on the scene above the clouds, holds his arms wide open. In his left hand he holds the globus cruciger. His right hand is free. He is flanked by two young angels with short arms, dressed in white and with red hair, flying angels holding open a large banner with scrolls above a white flying dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit, surrounded by putti. On it is written in old German, although hard to discern: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him. Matthew" (BibleServer, n.d.).



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 70.** Detail of the scene of the Baptism of Christ. Notice the unicorn on the right, the large walled city (Verona?) and the flying John the Baptist defying the laws of nature.

The baptism scene depicts a very muscular Christ standing, clothed in a loincloth and wearing a halo, in front of a blueish river and a backdrop of a large, walled stone city (Figure 70). To the left of Christ are several young believers with clay eggs and cloths for drying. The bearded Saint John, wearing a halo and a Roman tunic, performs the sacrament of baptism with a scallop shell. Flying, defying the law of nature while half kneeling on a column, he holds a golden staff with the text: *ANGELVS DEI* (angel of God). To the right of Saint John stands a unicorn,

under an olive tree in an orchard, on the red sloping roof of a building, symbolising the church. This white unicorn holds a long staff with a cross while blood spurts from its chest into a golden chalice. Attached to the long staff with the cross is a square banner with a cross. Noteworthy is the kneeling John with a scene of exotic plants at the bottom right, a landscape in the background and the unicorn instead of a sheep. What seems to be a building with a red roof and iconography undoubtedly refers to the patron saint of Weissbriach, John the Baptist (**Figure 71**). Underneath St. John the Baptist, there is another fragment of a word, with a capital letter, which I cannot identify. This script differs from the style of the script at the top of the baptism scene.

On the northern choir wall, is the fresco of the Resurrection. The Latin text with capital letters at the bottom reads (**Figure 72**): *CHRISTVS VTI VICTA SVR-REXIT MORTE TRIVMPHANS, MORTE IT(EM) DEVICTA FAXIT QVARE SVOS* 162(2) *DEN . . . ENBE*, in English: “Christ, just as he rose from the dead after conquering death, causes his own to rise in the same way after overcoming death.”



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 71.** Baptism of Christ in the Jordan. The text reads: *Diser ist geliebter Sohn, an dem ich Wohlgefallen hab. Auf ihn sollt ihr hören. Matthäus, 17 Vers 5.* In English: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him. Matthew. 17 vers. 5.” Notice the red covered building-like object to the right.

Although this fresco (**Figure 73**) has seen better days, it still reveals some remarkable secrets. Jesus, surrounded by a halo in bright golden sunlight, points to the starry sky with his arm raised straight and his hand bearing an open wound

from the crucifixion. He has a round face and high forehead. In his other hand, he holds a cross on a long pole with a pennant bearing a white cross on a red background. Blood on his cheek, his bruised ribs, and an open wound in his side are visible. His loincloth is woven and decorated with coloured stripes and a pattern.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 72.** Detail of the Latin text in capital letters. The red capital letters possibly are intended for an acronym.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 73.** On the northern choir wall is a fresco of the Resurrection. Notice the exaggerated muscles of Christ.

His gaze is directed downwards. In front of him, next to a purple pedestal, are armed Roman soldiers, one standing upright in an unnatural posture and one sitting, his hand in a strange unnatural posture resting on a bag containing Jesus' earthly possessions. It is the only fresco in the presbytery whose frames are decorated with stylised flames at the bottom. The 1622, as well as the other early 17th century dates—as evidence was offered above—were added to the 1520/1530 fresco.

A large oil painting on canvas depicting the coronation of Mary, dated 1674, is located on the north side of the first nave (**Figure 74**) of the restored church (**Figure 75**). It is apparently in urgent need of professional restoration. Although it has its own unique character, it pales in comparison to the iconographically distinctive frescoes described above. Finally, mention should be made of the folk-

style Fatima on the southside and the Baroque organ. A restored pew dated 1649, two years older than the painting of the coronation of Mary, is located to the right of the altar. Behind the pew part of a Mannerist floral and fruit-fresco is hidden.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 74.** Detail of the anonymous Baroque painting of the coronation of the Holy Mary on the north wall of the parish church in Weissbriach dated 1674.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 75.** The restored parish church of Weissbriach from the south side.

Weissbriach and Weisspriach have a few things in common: particularly valuable frescoes (Trautzl, 1949) in the local church, a history of being located in a strategic alpine valley before (or after) a mountain (massif), and a medieval tower—one in ruins next to a small church, the other standing, but inclined, next to a small church—and a courageous Catholic population. Some of this population is blessed with old age, as I look at next, and can be proud of their unique cultural heritage.

## 9. The Oldest European Altar Boy, at Weissbriach in Austria

The oldest altar boy of Europe is active in this unique parish miners' church in the small mountain village of Weissbriach in the Gitsch Valley. We had the chance to meet on several occasions during my stay in the spa. In **Figure 76** you can see him “at work” in his most familiar surroundings during the celebration of Assumption Day on 15 August 2025.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 76.** Oldest European altar boy in the white and green coat serving on Assumption Day at the parish church of Weissbriach in Carinthia. Notice also the wonderful frescoes and the heraldic weapons on the north side of the church.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 77.** Oldest European active choir “boy” during church service on Assumption Day, 15 August 2025. During his temporary leave, Provisional Spiritual Advisor Mag Bernard Grabowski was replaced by Father Bernard Frank Wszystkich from Poland.

His name is Peter Ebner. He was born on 16 August 1938. He is a descendant of a family of horticulturalists. In 1968, Peter moved to Weissbriach and continued his decades long career of being an active serving altar boy, which he started at the age of six in in 1947 in neighbouring Hermagor. In 2025 he celebrated his 80-year jubilee ([ORF Kärnten, 2025](#)). This is a European and almost a world record. This is particularly noteworthy as the parish church of Weissbriach is not

heated and the frosty wintertime in this high up valley can take many months. A long life seems to be reserved for early risers, people who exercise regularly, both mentally and physically, and those who lead a contemplative life within the circle of their religious family. The black hat worn with the traditional costume of the Gitsch Valley (**Figure 77** and **Figure 78**) is modelled on the hats used in the fresco depicting the ancestral gallery. I would like to thank Harald Brenndörfer, chairman of the church council, for pointing this out in his communication of 23 November 2025.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 78.** Group picture after the service on Assumption Day, 15 August 2025, in Weissbriach. Notice the type of black hats. Numerous summer flower bouquets visible in the crop basket in front were distributed to the participants of the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. From left to right: Elfriede Hörbiger, Anni Schrettlinger, Sigrid Memmer, Nada Fujs, Father Bernard Frank Wszystkich, Heidi Schrettlinger, Nadine Memmer, and Hild Brenndörfer.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 79.** Oldest European choir “boy”, on the left, at the table of the terrace of the Ferienhof Alte Post at the entrance of Weissbriach, with members of the Schattseitner. From left to right: Peter Ebner, Chairman and choir director Walter Pörnbacher, Deputy Chairman Anton Taurer, Deputy Treasurer Alois Gamberger and his wife. A rare Schattseitner a capella moment, late in the evening of 15 August 2025.

Praying, singing, and kneeling are his mottos. Late in the evening, on Assumption Day, I witnessed an intimate moment when members of the choir, together with P. Ebner, shared their famous a capella singing talents over a glass of beer or wine on the *terrasse* of the Ferienhof Alte Post at the entrance of Weissbriach (**Figure 79**). It was one of those special moments when time stood still in this small mountain community, just like in its parish church and its leaning clock tower without corresponding clockwork, until it by chance was rediscovered.



Source: Picture: Stefaan Missinne, 2025.

**Figure 80.** Cultural property sign.

Although this parish church is a listed building in the Gitsch Valley, an accompanying public sign to protect this architectural Austrian heritage site with the message “Convention of the Hague 14 May 1954” as on the church of Weisspriach in Lungau (as can be seen in **Figure 80**) is strongly recommended. It refers to the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, an international agreement to safeguard cultural heritage during wartime. I suppose it will require cameras and entrance control mechanisms. But then, for the next five hundred years and more, this long-forgotten treasure of the Austrian Alps will survive the times of change to come.

## 10. Conclusion

The research results, based on the silent witnesses, provide an explanatory picture of the complex history of the Catholic parish miners’ church of St. John the Baptist in Weissbriach. In the absence of a complete scientific overview, one of the most important sources is the floor plan of this Carinthian parish church. The mighty, leaning watchtower and defence tower, like the world-famous Tower of Pisa, is an early witness to the tumultuous Romanesque past.

Although an iconic 700-year-old and restored bell bears no inscription from the 14th century, it has been recorded to originate from the period of the first mention of Weissbriach. The Gothic church was built separately from the tower and enlarged in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. The frescoes, three from a cycle of St. John the Baptist, are incorrectly dated to around 1620 based on added texts and dates, and one additional one from between 1520 and 1530. The so-called

founder, but a genealogical retrospective, was added to the painting of King Herod and Salome in 1616.

In other words, the dates in the published literature regarding this historic religious place of Christian worship may be adapted based on this research. An unexpected result of this analysis is the polychrome early Mannerist corbel head with a likely self-portrait, perhaps of the Renaissance artist who was ordered to paint the fresco. The fact that the artist added his self-portrait so as not to be forgotten is not only remarkable but apparently based on an older example. This parish church houses the earliest extant evidence of the beginning of Mannerist fresco painting in Austria and the Alpine regions.

Finding a heraldic coat of arms that may have a connection with the city of Verona is indeed a surprise but it is in need of further research. A discovery of the secretive combination of numbers, a typical Renaissance pun, on the oversized cubes at the foot of Jesus' cross, and the number 1530 contained therein, which corresponds to the date in the ridge of the church, completes this detective investigation.

One may assume that it was the artist that created his self-portrait who concealed the date of his work in the dots on the stacked dice and made this discovery of historical significance for this miners' church, miners' patronage, and the history of art in Carinthia.

With its abundant light, this church depicts the biblical story of God's creation at the beginning of the age of discovery of the New World, paradise, with an incredible wealth of colours, impressions, and longing for the discovery of mines with abundant gold and silver.

This art does not remove the miners' church in the remote village of Weissbriach in the mountains of Carinthia from the new world of Maximilian I and Emperor Charles V, where the sun did not set in his global empire. The story in this little church is therefore not that of a forgotten church, but that of the time, even of a witness to the history of contemporary discoveries based on fragments of exotic information of the finding of gold that may have seeped from Spain via the Patriarchate of Aquileia in northern Italy into these alpine regions of the Habsburg Empire.

An important conclusion of this research is that, for the first time, the renowned Carinthian noble family Khevenhüller, and in particular Christof Khevenhüller shown with his two spouses (Leitner, 1982a) and numerous male and female descendants, can be identified as the most likely persons depicted below the fresco showing Herod's banquet. What is striking about this aspect is that some male members of this important ruling family are depicted in Renaissance clothing, but with typical mining tools on their clothing. It is as if the painter wanted to commemorate the economic prosperity that was based in the second half of the 16th century on the leading role of gold and other precious metal mining in the Gitschtal and Weissbriach.

Whether there is a connection with Weispriach in Lungau, and the nobility

named after this area in Lungau ([Austria-Forum, 2024](#)), could not be substantiated. What makes this church in Weissbriach in Carinthia particularly special is that it is the only church in Europe where, in 2026, a 88-year-old altar boy serves the faithful in all weathers, winter and summer. Not only does this time capsule apparently promote the preservation of unique frescoes, but it also guarantees the long life of this unique altar boy. My stay at the Spa in Weissbriach, which began with a chance visit, gave rise to this article which was only possible with the help of the persons mentioned throughout and listed in the Acknowledgements section after the Bibliography.

I am particularly pleased that the above results may lead to recognition and better protection of this world heritage site in the Austrian Federal State of Carinthia. This article comes just in time for the 700th anniversary in 2031 of the first written mention of the town of Weissbriach, where this early and unique Austrian parish church of St. John the Baptist, which already existed at that time in history, was a silent witness.

### Acknowledgements

Karl Memmer Senior, Nadine Memmer (Parish counselor), Mag. Herwig Hubmann (art historian and restorer), Harald Brenndörfer (Chairman of the Parish Council), Mrs. Hild Brenndörfer (wife of the Chairman of the Parish Council), Ms. Brenndörfer (daughter of the Chairman of the Parish Council), Jürgen Bock (cave explorer), Dr. Wilhelm Deuer (heraldic expert), Mag. Roland Sila (Head of the Ferdinandeum Library), emir. Univ.-Prof. Dr. Heinz-Dieter Pohl, the major of the market town Bad Bleiberg Christian Hecher, Vice Major of Weissbriach Michael Linhard, Univ. Prof. Dr. David Burn (University of Louvain), Univ. Prof. Dr. Barbara Baert, Univ.-Prof. Dr. Hubert Emmerig M. A., Director MMag. Dr. Andreas Rüdiger (Tyrolean State Museums), Dr. Rudolf Philippitsch, Laura Müller, BA BA BA (Schell Collection), Mag. Adele Kuenrath (Austrian Academy of Sciences), Dr. Veronika Polloczek (Head of the Gurk Diocese Archives), Dr. Markus Gneiß, BA MA (Austrian Academy of Sciences), Dr. Nikolaus Christian Kogler, Dir. Mag. Thomas Zeloth (Carinthian Provincial Archives), Librarian Miriam Holzer (Carinthian Diocesan Library), Librarian Mag. Adele Kuenrath (Austrian Academy of Sciences), Dr. Marcel van den Broecke and Dr. Deborah van den Broecke-Günzburger (Cartographica Neerlandica), Mag. Andrea Missinne, Prof. Dipl.-Ing. Dr. techn. Erwin Reidinger, Bernd Ludwig Müller-Lönnendung (church bell expert), Nicola Timmann (Fa. W. Iversen, Dimier & Cie., Nachf. GmbH & Co. KG), sundial expert Heinrich Stocker (Gnomonica), Mag.a Sandra Bertel (Villach City Museum and Archive), sundial expert Adi Prattes, Lord of Hochosterwitz Castle Count Karl Khevenhüller-Metsch, Provisional Head of the Restoration Centre Dr. Heinrich Piening (Bavarian Administration of State-Owned Palaces, Gardens and Lakes at the Nymphenburg Palace), Head of Furniture Restoration Dipl.-Rest Roswitha Schwarz (Bavarian National Museum), Mag. Geraldine Klever, Federal Monuments Office Carinthia, Dr. Eduard Mahlkecht, former di-

ocesan conservator and Director of the Diocesan Museum of the Diocese of Gurk, Ing. Christian Mairamhof, MSc. (KAGIS Management, Office of the Carinthian Provincial Government), Dr. Astrid Steinegger (Federal Monuments Office, Archaeology Carinthia), Department Head Mag. Robert Wlattnig (Carinthia State Museum), Prof. Dr. Dr. mult. h. c. Heinz Schilling, Dr. Karin Schamberger (Archive of the State of Salzburg), Bmst. Bmst. Dipl.-Ing. Ruprecht Obernosterer (Head of the Diocesan Building Department of Carinthia), President Prof. Dr. Wilhelm Wadl (Historical Society for Carinthia), Univ. Prof. Dr. Fritz Koreny (Renaissance art expert), Dr. Maurits Biesbrouck (Vesalius expert), Univ. Prof. Dr. Claudia Märzl, Dr. Renate Kohn (Austrian Academy of Sciences), Dr. Gorazd Živkovič, (Head of Department at the Federal Monuments Office in Carinthia, Privy Councillor), Mag. Dr. Astrid Steinegger, (Federal Monuments Office—Provincial Conservation Office for Carinthia), James Brittain (New Word Order), Terri L. Childs, Dr. Johan Ickx (Vatican), Dr. Geert Verhoeven (Institute for Prehistory and Historical Archaeology of the University of Vienna), Prof. Dr. Vivian Forbes (University of Western Australia) and others.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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