

## The Castle Ruin of Randeck – a Fortress as Refuge for Robber Barons?

The trade route along the Altmühl river was as profitable as it was dangerous for medieval merchants. Upon approaching the township of Essing, any 13th century merchant will have anxiously eyed the hills. He could never be sure to pass this spot unscathed, for high above Essing loomed Randeck Castle. It used to be a defiant and well fortified fortress, from where the trade routes along and on the Altmühl were surveilled.

In order to safeguard their possessions, the Randeck family had already built the fortress in the 11th century. The menace it posed in the 13th century, however, was not due to its strong fortifications, but rather to its ferocious inhabitants. By this time, the entire complex with all its estates had fallen to a dynasty of knights from Abensberg, who were notorious for their robbing raids.

These knights, however, would not have considered themselves robbers at all. In their view, they were merely exercising their vested privileges and noble rights, such as the right of feud. A noble knight was accordingly entitled to settle an injustice directly between the injured party and the injurer, without calling an arbitrator or appealing to an official court.

Emperor Frederick Barbarossa had formally limited the right to conduct a feud to the days from Monday through Wednesday. But most robber barons did not bother too much about this regulation.

In 1495 the German King Maximilian the First officially put an end to robber baronry. He revoked the right of feud and declared all feuds unlawful at the Diet of Worms. Even if this did not put a prompt end to all robber barony on German soil, the robber barons were nevertheless in for serious trouble.

In Randeck, these goings-on had already ended by then, anyway. The robber dynasty of Randeck had died out without heirs in 1485. The castle had fallen by inheritance to the Duke of Bavaria. The duke enfeoffed it to deserving ministeriales, so Randeck Castle saw many lords and owners in the following centuries. The castle finally reached its end as a military facility in the Thirty Years' War, when it was besieged and burnt down by the Swedes. Only ruins remained of the castle.

It was not until the mid-19th century that Crown Prince Maximilian of Bavaria stood up for the preservation of the historic building. He had the complex secured and partially rebuilt after parts of the castle, including the mighty keep, had collapsed a few years before. The preservation of Randeck Castle continues to be a major concern for the people in the region. The Free State of Bavaria sold

the ruins in 1996 to the market town of Essing, which has since then committed to keeping the castle open to the public.

Although Randeck Castle is still to be seen looming over Essing, there is no need for travelers of today to feel anxious: Robber barons no longer roam here anymore. The hike up to the fortress is actually highly recommended for the magnificent view over the Altmühl river valley.