

Stadt Ulm
Information

ulm

The Ulm Sparrow



*D'r Ulmer Spatz
Da standet se mit ihrem Karra
Ond kenet neme weiter fahra.
Doch guck – sell Spätzle thuet dia Herra
Dort mit seim Hälmle schnell belehra;
Goh't des de breite Weg net nei,
No kan's d'r Länge noch doch sei.*



The Ulm Sparrow

The sparrow is Ulm's unofficial heraldic animal. They identify themselves with this bird, they call themselves, their children's and youth choir as well as their soccer players of SSV 1846 "Sparrows". They have mounted a copper sparrow, which even used to be gold-plated on their Münster's roof, they pack chocolate-sparrows when travelling to visit friends. Their national holiday, Oath Monday, is incomplete without the ear-shattering cheer: "*Ulmer Spatza, Wasserratza hoi, hoi, hoi*" (swabian: Sparrows, water-rats) to accompany the afternoon "Nabada" (= bathing downriver), a festival on, around and in the Danube. And every four years at the traditional "Fischer-



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1 The copper sparrow on the roof of the minster.

(on the left side in the picture: a rhyme of the legend of the sparrow carrying the straw – giving an ironic view on the citizens of Ulm.)

2 The sandstone sparrow, once on the cathedral roof, today in a display cabinet inside the minster.

3 The Ulm Sparrow at the "Fischerstechen" parade,

4 and at the Nabada on the Danube.

Title picture: Spatzenbad (sparrow's bath)
In 2011 sparrows were placed all over the city in order to collect money for the restoration of the southern choir tower of the minster.

stechen" (a joust on the Danube in traditional boats and costumes) they have the Ulm sparrow contending against the Ulm Tailor.

This behaviour may seem just a bit bird-brained considering the legend of the Ulm Sparrow, which does speak for the bird but leaves the Ulm citizens looking quite stupid. The legend tells us that the Ulm citizens were transporting wooden beams for the Münster construction into the city. The beams were loaded crosswise on the carriages which led to a problem upon entering the narrow city gate.

The citizens had already deduced that the gate had to be demolished to enable the wood's passage. As a blessing to the gate they then noticed a sparrow winging by, carrying a long straw in its beak. When they observed the sparrow inserting this straw lengthwise into a niche of the gate-tower where it was building its nest the good citizens of Ulm experienced a revelation and they repositioned their beams lengthwise on the carriage. Overcome with gratitude they then placed a memorial to the sparrow on the Münster's roof.

In fact such a copper likeness of the sparrow armed with its straw really does exist. It was commissioned, in copper and gold-plated, in 1889 by the citizens' club "Hundskomödie" to replace a sandstone sparrow on the Münster's roof that was sadly threatened by decay. This copper sparrow may be hollow but it



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is not empty. Originally it contained a document naming the manufacturer and the noble sponsors. During the latest restoration efforts the sparrow received an implant of several coins, a ballpoint pen and a plastic replica of the Münster. The Münster Master builder at the time, Gerhard Lorenz, justified the selection of this curious collection: later generations were meant to grasp the spirit of our contemporary synthetic culture.

But back to the predecessor, the sandstone sparrow: at its demise it had not yet reached a particularly old age. It had taken up its perch on the long-roof as recent as 1858 – replacing the original ancestor which had to be removed four years prior due to its state of decay. There is only one thing we know for sure about this sculpture constructed of hollow bricks: It has never represented a sparrow. As crown witness we may call Ulm shoemaker Sebastian Fischer. He had compiled a detailed Ulm Chronicle around 1530 including a description of the Münster, which he had not only measured himself but drawn with his own hands as well. His drawing reveals the bird on the Münster's roof resembling not so much a sparrow but much rather a parrot. The chronicler explains his drawing: "... as has been revealed to me in a trustworthy manner the large stone bird on the long-roof is to mark the center of the city, I know however no explanation for it and none has been

brought to my attention". If the "stone bird" had been intended to resemble a sparrow, trust Fischer to have told us of the fact. That the mystery bird served as a marker for the city center is also maintained by Münster Priest Elias Frick in his Münster Description of 1731. He refers to a "stone bird" as well, not a peep about a sparrow. The figure shown in the book's exact copperplate etching gives no sparrow-like impression. The Ulm sparrow research therefore forms following hypothesis: said sculpture had originally represented another species, an eagle for instance, a dove or a jackdaw. The eagle's case is fortified by the fact that it was the heraldic animal of the free imperial city, carried in the coat of arms. There however both wings are always spread, which tips the balance between eagle and dove towards the dove's advocates. Their contention that it is quite logical to place this symbol of peace and the holy ghost on the roof of a church seems to be quite convincing as well.

The arguments of those who claimed to see a jackdaw's features in the hollow brick statuette were based on practical observations: the frequency and multitude of the species around the Münster. This school of thought is however almost non-existent by now. Jackdaws had multiplied to an extent that they had turned into a plague – copied today by the doves – and had to be outlawed which left them free to extermination.

What needs to be kept in mind is the fact that the Münster-bird's species could not be verified without doubt as early as 1550, a mere 80 years after completion of the Münster roof in 1471. This fact has lead historian Rudolf Max Biedermann to the conclusion that the bird as well as the portals had been rescued from the old parish church to the newly founded Münster in 1377. An "Akroterion" = gable ornament is considered a typical romanesque building feature, a theory which is supported by the material as well. Biedermann also declares that eagles and doves had been favourite animals for these ornaments in the romanesque period, hereby exiling the jackdaw from the ranks of likely feathered friends.

The sparrow however has recently made some recovery due to the interpretation of sepulchral historian Hans-Martin Ungericht. In his book about the Old Cemetery in Ulm he gives a deeper cult meaning to the sparrow, connects it with a female moon principle and its adoration and therefore recognizes in the ground plans of Ulm's Old City the outline of a bird carrying a straw in its beak. The animal visualized from this ground plan resembles nothing so much as something that must have been bred close to a leaking nuclear power station. It has however enriched the already rich Ulm sparrow history with a mystic even an esoteric aspect. But this interpretation will not alter the fact that neither in the 16th nor in the 18th century anybody had the slightest idea of a sparrow when looking at the figure on the Münster's roof. But how did it happen that the Ulm citizens replaced the mystery bird with a successor that could not be mistaken for anything but a sparrow carrying a straw in its beak? The reason: at the time when the replacement had become necessary the legend of the Ulm sparrow had become popular folklore. Biedermann has detected first written evidence of the legend in Ulm around 1826. He and earlier sparrowlogists have also proven that this gothamite story had been told before in similar versions about other towns, for instance Jagel in Schleswig-Holstein. Biedermann suspects Ulm's book and art trader Theodor Nübling (1767–1837) of being the legend's carrier, having infected himself during his 8-year military service in the Danish Army, spreading the epidemic from the North to Ulm. The legend manifested itself in Ulm in an elaborate version for the first time in 1842, taking the guise of a poem. Its author, editor Carl Hertzog remarked: "I have heard this folklore hereabouts however it is not widely known."

His version exonerates the Ulm citizens as far as it fingers the devil as the culprit. The visible progress of the Münster construction annoys the prince of evil and he resorts to previously tested countermeasures (remember the events at the Babylon Tower!). He plunges the Münsterbuilders into confusion – the results are known. The sparrow finally liberates their confused souls. Other poems followed. One of them, written in 1847, already gives a hint about



the replacement of the old bird on the Münster with a sparrow. This did happen seven years later. The already mentioned sandstone starling was sponsored with 500 guilders by merchant Groschopf Jr. His daughter later married confectioner Tröglen, who added a new angle to the sparrow cult, a culinary and therefore enduring flavour. But more of that later.

When Münster Master builder Ferdinand Thrän commissioned the new sandstone sparrow it did not cause unanimous enthusiasm at all. Religious as well as memorial concerns were voiced. The starling and his straw were put in a holding pattern without permission to land by the council. Even later Edward Mauch, co-founder of the memorial society, was of the opinion that it was quite alright to put the sparrow on a guesthouse sign. But to elevate plebeian sense of humor in sparrow-shape on top of the Münster, hereby concocting a legend with no relation to art-historical truth, that was going too far indeed.

The guesthouse "Sparrow" raises one more angle: the commercial one. The innkeeper had initiated the legitimate attempt to prosper from the sparrow-legend by renaming his inn, which ironically was located in "Rabengasse" (raven lane) and calling it "Sparrow". The aforementioned confectioner Tröglen assured his business of lasting success between 1860 and 1870 by casting the sparrow in croquant and chocolate. The sweet bird was nesting in a scenario showing the demolition of the gate. The clever confectioner used the Ulm Neutor-Gate as a model.

The gate had actually been destroyed during the demolition of the medieval gate towers. This had been hotly protested not only by the memorial society. It was therefore plausible to connect the bird-brained gate destruction plan of the sparrow legend with these actual demolitions. It could only lead to more popularity for the legend.

We see now that the sparrow legend has not arrived in Ulm until the final quarter of the last century. All the more we ask ourselves: Why did the little starling find such an enduring perch in Ulm? There must have been a pre-prepared nest. There was. And naturally this nest was a sparrow's nest.

In those years when the first news of the legend about the dumb Ulm citizens, the sparrow and his straw were heard, Wilhelm Hauff's historical novel "Lichtenstein" was published. The author describes the Ulm magistrate giving an order to shoot all sparrows since a spy for Württemberg has turned himself into a sparrow to escape the city. "I do believe they are still called the Ulm sparrows" Stuttgart-born Hauff, a citizen of hostile Württemberg, denounces the citizens of the free imperial city in his novel.

This puts the nickname "Ulm Sparrows" at least as far back – if not further – as the legend of the cross-wise beam problem. Ulm citizens did indeed suffer this nickname in earlier centuries. As to the origin of this tease there are again several assumptions. One of them maintains that Ulm had awarded a shooters' bounty to battle the annual sparrow plague. This is stated as well in the poem "Flöhhatz" by Strasburg satirist Johannes Fischart in 1573. It is the oldest existing evidence relating Ulm to sparrows.

A city ordinance to that effect has never been found, however the troops from Ulm have been called "Sparrow shooters" in the army of the swabian defence league. Such teasing nicknames are not a specific Ulm phenomenon; residents of other towns were and still are also teased with ornithological nicknames, for example the citizens of Eberbach whose neighbours call them "cuckoos".

We have now separated the various cells which have germinated into the sparrow in its current character. History shows that Ulm citizens were clever enough to turn this originally degrading nickname into a symbol of cleverness which they like to identify with albeit that is not always justified.



They have also managed to lift the moral of the sparrow legend out of the transport and building field on to a higher general plane. The sparrow-doctrine, which can be seen as a laymen's approach to dialectic thinking, is articulated in two verses of the Ulm song: "Spargala, wargala". They read:

*"Ond goht des net da grada weag,
no dreaH mr's Hälmle rom"*

For Non-Ulm-readers: and if it won't go straight,
we'll turn the straw until it fits.

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Manuela Hudelmaier
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Text: Henning Petershagen, Translation: Sylvia Gebhardt
Pictures: Reinhold Armbruster-Mayer, Jochen Kohlenberger,
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