

Hugues de Semur and the priory* of Berzé

Unique relations

Cluny's Abbot Hugues was very involved in the negotiations that led to the acquisition of land in Berzé-la-Ville.

He established a management method that differed from that of other deaneries*, giving authority for management of the site directly to the Cluny Abbey administration, which was only 10 km away, while *decani*, a type of intendant, were nominated in the other dependencies of the same type.

Economic ties

On the other hand, land revenue from the site provided Cluny's hospital and the convent with "full sustenance" every year, on the anniversary of the death of Abbot Hugues. This meant that the agricultural land around Berzé-la-Ville was used to feed all the monks of Cluny once a year, even after the abbot's death.

From 1103 onwards, historical sources indicate the Abbot frequently stayed in Berzé-la-Ville. Hugues was nearly 80 years old at the time, and it is probable he was seeking peace and quiet somewhere more isolated than the large abbey.

Glossary

Apostolic: relating to the Apostles or in keeping with their mission, following their example.

Bond: the arrangement of stones in a masonry structure. A fake bond is a design on a rendered wall that reproduces the arrangement of a bond.

Cul-de-four: vault formed by half a dome.

Deacon: title given to members of the congregation in the early Church who were in charge of distributing alms.

Deanery: small monastery responsible for managing farms belonging to the abbey.

Liturgical calendar: calendar relating to or in keeping with the liturgy, which indicates every feast day in the year.

Priory: religious community under the authority of a prior or prioress.

Spandrel: triangular-shaped masonry structure that fits into the angle formed by two walls.

Information

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Monks' chapel in Berzé-la-Ville

A Cluniac priory*

Birth of the chapel



The name Berzé-la-Ville began to appear in textual sources from Cluny Abbey in 1042. It was not until 1100 that Cluny Abbey obtained full ownership of the Berzé-la-Ville priory*, following numerous carefully arranged negotiations, acquisitions and alliances by the abbot Hugues de Semur (1049-1109). The priory* and chapel were built at this time. The iconography of the painted décor would have been designed at the same time.

When Abbot Hugues died in 1109, the work had not yet been completed.

Little-known recent history

The buildings were reconstructed in the 17th century. After the French Revolution, the upper chapel was converted into a barn and the lower chapel was used as a cellar. In 1887 the paintings were discovered by chance by Philibert Jolivet, the parish priest. The chapel was listed as a historical monument in 1893. The British archaeologist Dame Joan Evans raised money to save it and enable the Académie de Mâcon to acquire it in 1947.

The chapel is now open to visitors thanks to the Centre des monuments nationaux.

* Explanations overleaf.

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The chapel is the only feature of the medieval priory* still visible today. It is built on two levels and is in direct contact with the rock, as can be seen in the access corridor.

Lower chapel

The floor does not appear to have ever been paved. Two small bays cut into the apse provided a faint source of light.

The apse's *cul-de-four** has retained a number of traces of polychromy dating back to very early in the 14th century: a frieze and decorative red ochre pointing outline a regular fake bond*. The exact functions of this chapel remain unknown.

Upper chapel

Entry to the upper chapel is via the western façade, where the apse's décor immediately comes into view. The figure of Christ dominates the whole space due to its position and size.

The theme of the *cul-de-four** originates from early Christian art. It depicts *Traditio legis*: Christ presenting his law and giving it to St Peter. The décor is divided into three registers: the *cul-de-four**, the bays and the false arcading in the lower section. The painter managed to squeeze over forty figures into this small space.

Cul-de-four*

The Apostles are divided into two groups of six on either side of the figure of Christ. To the right of Christ are smaller representations of the deacons* Vincent and Laurent, and on the left are two abbots of Cluny.

This composition depicts the transmission of the law: Christ gives it to St Peter, who then hands it on to all his successors, as well as to the abbots of Cluny. This iconography positions the abbots of Cluny as direct descendants of the Apostles.

Windows

The second register is that of the windows. Six busts depicting saints appear in the spandrels* at the base of the vault. Five are holding lanterns, except St Consortia on the right, who is holding a cross. Relics of this saint were kept at Cluny, and a mass would be celebrated on her feast day. The depiction of these saints is a reference to the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins found in the Gospel according to St Matthew.

Blind arcading

On either side of the openings, the blind arcading is decorated with scenes of martyrdom. On the left you can see the martyrdom of St Blaise: in the upper section, a woman is visiting him in jail and offering him a pig's head to eat. In the lower section, the saint is being decapitated.

On the right is the martyrdom of St Vincent of Saragossa, where, under the orders of the governor Dacian, executioners are holding the saint down on an iron grill.

These two saints were greatly venerated at Cluny Abbey.

Lower register of the apse

Eight saints are identified in inscriptions – Abdon, Sennen, Dorotheus, Gorgon, Sebastian, Sergius, Bacchus, Dionysus and Quintius – now partially erased. Most of these Eastern and Western saints are very little known, but all appear on the Cluny liturgical calendar*, and their relics were kept in the Cluny Abbey treasury. Worship of these saints is not particularly widespread. Specialists have looked into the reasons for the presence of Eastern saints, and several theories have been put forward. You could read into it Hugues de Semur's interest in Byzantium, a depiction of the apostolic* transfer from East to West, or an illustration of the hostilities between East and West, and more precisely the first crusade (1096-1099).

The entrance arch to the apse rests on pilasters ornamented with two monks holding an abbot's crozier. These are Benedict of Nursia (6th century), founder of the Benedictine order, and Benedict of Aniane (8th – early 9th century), a monastic reformer. He was the author of the rule that the monks of Cluny revived and imposed on all their monasteries. They are depicted as pillars of monastic life and custodians of Abbot Hugues's sanctuary.

The chapel's nave and the back of its façade still bear traces of mural paintings. These décors date back to very early in the 14th century, like those of the lower chapel. This can no doubt be attributed to restoration of the chapel when Pope Boniface VIII came with nine cardinals to meet King Philippe the Fair – they spent five days at Cluny and in local priories* in the early years of the century.

The paintings in the monks' chapel of Berzé-la-Ville are a masterpiece of 12th century mural painting. They are the only surviving examples of Cluniac monumental painting in the abbey's heyday.

* Explanations overleaf.