

The Cistercian order

The main founders

At the dawn of the 12th century, the Clunisian monastic order was in its heyday, displaying power, glory and wealth. A monk, Robert de Molesme, reacted against this and decided to return to the strict rules of Saint Benedict, drawn up circa 534, recommending humility, obedience, poverty and the rightful balance between manual work and prayer. In 1098, he founded the monastery at Cîteaux, near Dijon, which gave its name to the new order. From 1109 onwards, Étienne Harding wrote the rules of the Cistercian order.



Expansion

Between 1113 and 1115, Cîteaux founded its first four "daughters": La Ferté, Pontigny, Morimond and Clairvaux. From 1115 to 1153 under Abbot Bernard who vigorously reaffirmed Saint Benedict's rules, Clairvaux became the centre of the Cistercian order which spread throughout Europe. Fiercely critical of the pomp of Cluny, Bernard de Clairvaux laid down a course of renunciation and hard work. The Cistercians, known as the "white monks", were allowed only to work and pray. In 1153, when Saint Bernard died, Clairvaux had over 160 monks, and the new Cistercian family had almost 350 abbeys.

Glossary

- Apse:** the eastern part of a church, outside the choir.
- Bay:** a part of a nave between four supports.
- Cross-ribbed vault:** supported by at least two diagonal ribs, and two transversal arches, called double arches.
- Lay brother:** the lay brothers were in charge of manual work. They were not allowed into the chapter house and so did not take part in important decisions
- Oculus:** a circular opening.
- Prosper Mérimée:** a writer, one of the first inspectors of historic monuments.
- Recess:** a niche made in church walls for burying the deceased.

Practical information

- Visit takes on average: 1 hour
- Guided tours.
- Tours suitable for disabled visitors.



The Centre des monuments nationaux publishes a collection of guidebooks about French monuments, translated into several languages. Éditions du patrimoine publications are on sale in the bookshop-giftshop.

Centre des monuments nationaux
Abbaye du Thoronet
 83340 Le Thoronet
 tél. 04 94 60 43 90
 fax 04 94 60 43 99

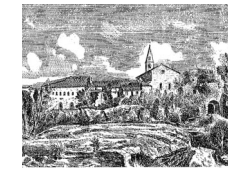
www.monuments-nationaux.fr

Le Thoronet Abbey

A "wonder" among Cistercian Abbeys

Foundation

With its "sisters", Silvacane and Sénanque, Thoronet Abbey is one of three Cistercian abbeys in Provence. In 1136, a group of monks left Mazan Abbey in the Ardèche to found a monastery, which they built 15 years later near Lorgues, in a wooded place between the bend of a small river and a spring. Building work began



in 1160 and continued until 1230. In the early 13th century, the monastery was home to around twenty monks and a similar number of lay brothers*.

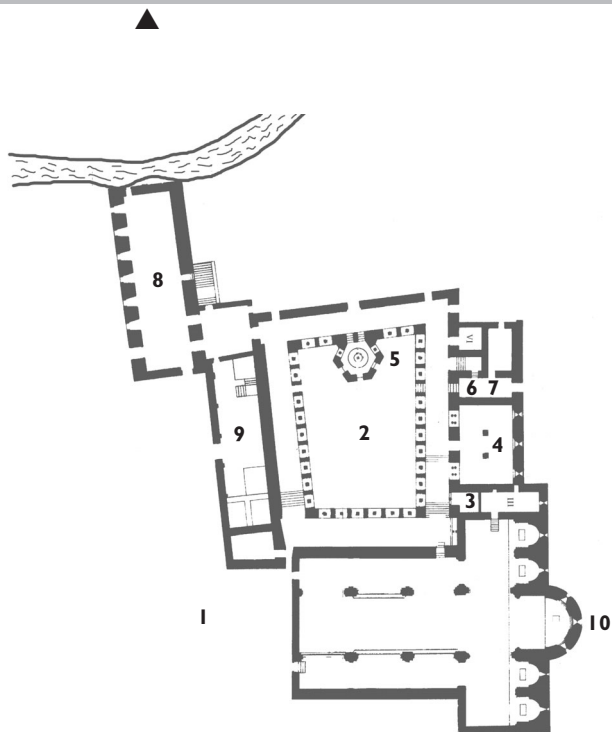
Decline and restoration

Less than two centuries later, the abbey had already begun to decline. In 1660, the abbot raised the question of restoring it. In 1699, cracks and collapsing roofs were recorded, along with broken doors and dilapidated windows. In 1790, seven elderly monks were still living there.

The abbey seemed doomed to disappear when Prosper Mérimée* saved it by notifying Révoil, the architect for historic monuments, of its existence. Restoration work began in 1841 and continues today. The State bought the site progressively from 1854 onwards.

* Explanations overleaf.

crédits photos M. Hervé, « l'atelier du regard » © Centre des monuments nationaux, Paris. conception graphique Plein Sens. Andert. réalisation beau fixe. traduction Caractères et catena. impression Neo-Typo, avril 2008.



Thoronet Abbey is an expression of the very essence of Cistercian art with its extreme sobriety, the purity of its lines and the simplicity of the volumes dictated mainly by the organisation of community life. In this respect it has been a source of inspiration for generations of architects, as noted by Fernand Pouillon in *Les Pierres sauvages*.

Around the cloisters

- 1 The west face of **the church** dominates by its simplicity and the quality of the stone cladding. As at Sénanque, there is no central doorway since the church was not open to the faithful. Only two side doors lead onto the side aisles, one for the lay brothers* on the left and the other for the monks on the right. Built into the southern wall of the church, one of the rare outdoor recesses* in Provence can be seen. Inside, the pointed barrel-vaulted nave has three bays*. The choir finishes with a half-dome vaulted apse with three semicircular arched windows, symbolising the Trinity. The absence of any decoration highlights the purity of the shapes. The sung services, aided by exceptional acoustics, marked the rhythm of the monks' spiritual life.
- 2 **The cloisters**. At the heart of the monastery, these join the church to the community's buildings. The thickness of the walls with double arcades, the simple oculus* opening the tympani and the capitals free from any decoration lend an exceptionally austere feel to the site.
- 3 **The armarium or library** contained books for meditation.
- 4 **The chapter house**, where the monks met every morning to read a chapter of Saint Benedict's rules and deal with the questions of community life, was also used to elect the abbot. The architecture here is more elaborate and already shows the influence of Gothic art with the cross-ribbed* vaults resting on two columns with decorated capitals.
- 5 **The lavatorium** is as usual opposite the door to the refectory, which no longer exists.
- 6 **The parlour**, a passageway between the cloisters and the outside garden, is the only place where the monks were allowed to talk. They went there to share out the tasks before going to work in the fields.

- 7 **The dormitory** is on the upper floor, with the abbot's cell on the left. A monk slept in front of each bay. The place for the mattresses was marked out by paving stones.

Other buildings

- 8 **The lay brothers'* building**, partially restored, included a refectory on the ground floor and a dormitory upstairs. Since 1978, this building has been placed at the disposal of the Sisters of Bethlehem.
- 9 **The cellar**, where the monks made wine and olive oil, the main resources of the abbey, contains some 18th-century wine vats, and opposite them an oil press operated with a screw system. Ventilation chimneys prevented the buildup of alcohol vapour. A beautiful pointed barrel-vaulted arches over the room.
- 10 **The monks' cemetery** is in the apse* of the church. The deceased monks were brought there via the "porte des morts". The very strict rule imposing poverty on the monks meant that they were buried in a white shroud, without a coffin or headstone.

On the edge of the stream, the foundations of the ancient inn have been cleared, but they are not accessible at present.

* Explanations overleaf.