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FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL RESEARCH**

**SUMMARY OF THE 2000 EXPEDITION  
TO  
THE ABBEY OF VALMAGNE**

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## INTRODUCTION

Members of the Texas Foundation For Archaeological and Historical Research (TFAHR) had worked with professors Vivian Paul and Robert Warden of Texas A&M University in previous seasons (1996 and 1998) on their survey of the Abbey of Valmagne (See Figure 1). The intention of the 2000 Expedition to Valmagne was to continue this survey and measurement work. In addition to producing a groundplan and elevations of the various buildings of the monastery, one of the aims of the survey was to come to an understanding of the proportions involved in Cistercian architecture. To understand these proportions and get a fuller view of all parts of the structures for the groundplan and elevations, it was decided to clear soil away from the structures at a number of places. These places are marked on Figure 2. (All measurements taken from point XYZ are in meters.) The intention was merely to expose the foundations of the buildings, but during the course of clearing the accumulated soil and debris from the foundations, a number of interesting discoveries were made.

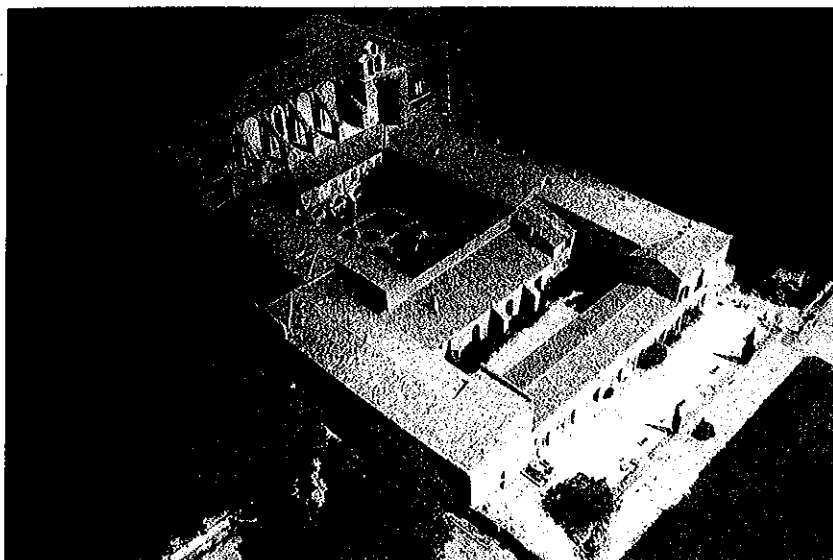


Figure 1. View of the Abbaye de Sainte Marie de Valmagne.

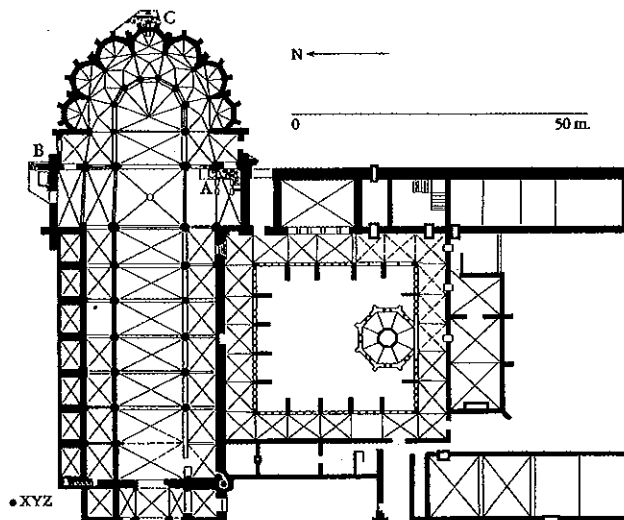


Figure 2. Excavated areas.

## **A Brief History of the Cistercian Abbey of Ste. Marie de Valmagne**

### **By Eulah Matthews and William Neidinger**

In the eleventh century there was established in the diocese of Albi the Benedictine Abbey of Adorel. With the passage of time conditions at Adorel became quite crowded, prompting Abbot Foulques to leave the monastery in the spring of 1138. With a sizeable following of monks he crossed the Lacaune and Espinouse Mountains to the shores of the Mediterranean, stopping not far from the Thau Lagoon in the region of Tortoriera, an arid scrub land inhabited by wild animals. Here they carved out a small piece of the wilderness, called over the ages either *Vallis Magna* (The Big Valley) or *Villa Magna* (The Big Mansion), which would eventually be Francified into Valmagne. It was located near an abundant, perennial water source and was protected from the north winds by a sheer wall of limestone jutting out from the earth. It also happened to be near the *Via Domitia*, the ancient Roman road linking the province of Gallia Narbonnensis with Italy.

Raymond Trencavel, Vicomte of Beziers, granted an endowment to the new monastery and in 1139 Bishop Raymond of Agde blessed its foundation. Valmagne was placed under the authority of the Monastery of Cadouin in Perigord and dedicated itself to following the Rule of St. Benedict. But the second abbot of Valmagne, Abbot Pierre, had designs to transfer the monastery to the authority of Citeaux in 1144 or 1145.

Citeaux, the home of the Cistercian Order founded by Robert of Molesme in 1098, espoused a form of the Benedictine Rule, stricter and more austere than was commonly practiced. It claimed to hearken back to the original intentions of St. Benedict himself, who, in the sixth century, had imposed upon his monks a regime of poverty, penance, solitude, and prayer. The Cistercian reform of the Benedictine Order spread rapidly throughout Europe, eventually founding more than seven hundred monasteries.

The placement of Valmagne under the authority of Citeaux was accomplished not without a certain amount of difficulty. Abbot Pierre, armed with the written consent of his monks, wrote to Pope Eugenius III to obtain dispensation from obedience to the

monasteries of Ardorel and Cadouin. This was agreed to, in principle, in 1145 by a Papal decree, releasing Valmagne from the authority of the said monasteries. Valmagne was finally and definitively attached to the Cistercian Order by a decree of Pope Hadrian IV in 1159.

Cistercian monks were sent to instill in the brothers of Valmagne the customs of the Order, to verify their charter, and to determine whether the site met all the necessary conditions: absolute solitude, a reliable water source, and sufficient lands to support the monastery. The self-sufficiency of each monastic enterprise was an integral part of the Rule of the Cistercians; all abbeys had to be provided with a water source, a mill for grinding flour, a vegetable garden, and workshops for the various trades so as to render it unnecessary for the monks to leave the abbey grounds.

The first abbey church was, according to tradition, built on the highest point of the site by eighty monks in the latter part of the twelfth century. If the monastery followed the typical Cistercian layout, the plan would have taken roughly the following design: the church would have been in the form of a simple Latin cross and adjacent to it, the cloister. A square or rectangular cloister enclosed a fountain (if possible) and into its four wings would have been built the usual library, sacristy, chapter room, auditorium, infirmary and scriptorium. A dormitory for the monks usually occupied the upper story of the east wing of such a complex and on the south wing were the kitchen and the refectory. The west wing of the complex provided lodging for the lay brothers attached to the monastery. (It was the lay brothers, recruits from among the local peasantry, who maintained the agricultural estates associated with the abbey. They cleared the land and sowed and harvested the crops. And the lay brothers who worked the distant estates of the monastery would leave the abbey in the spring to do the sowing, stay gone until the harvest was in, and then return to the abbey for the winter.) The north wing was usually just a covered ambulatory abutting the church's outer wall.

Some remnants of this twelfth-century structure are still visible in the extant buildings of the monastery. The basic structure of the chauffoir (the heated room or infirmary), chapter room (where meetings of the monks were held), auditorium and most of the west wing, with their low rounded arches, seem to place them in the context of the first building phase of the monastery. Another telling remnant of the first structure can be discerned in the stonework of the south transept wall (See Figure 3).

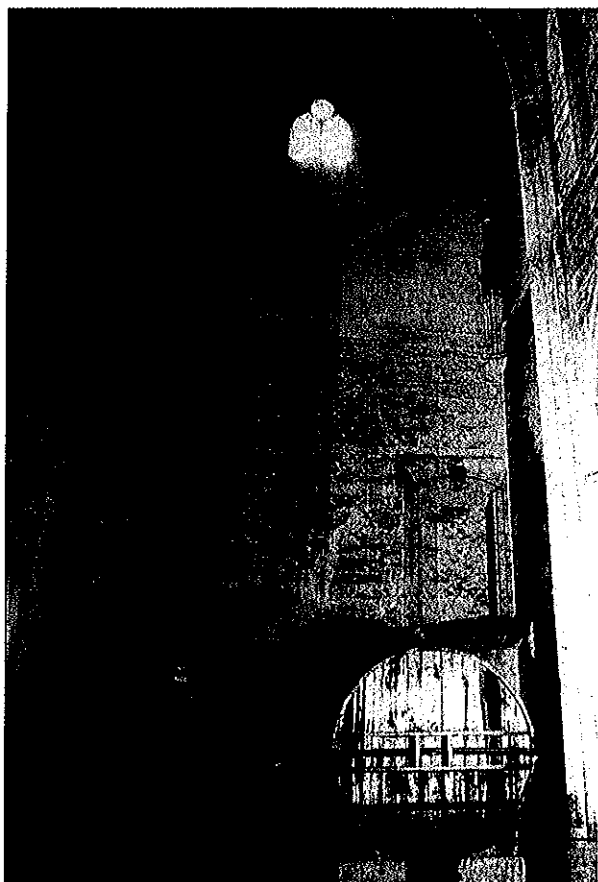


Figure 3. South transept wall.

Here, imbedded in the later thirteenth-century wall, can still be clearly seen the traces of a circular "rose window" surmounted by a round arch that would have been the top course of the twelfth-century wall. The window was filled in the thirteenth century and the earlier wall incorporated into the later wall.

The early days of the Abbey of Valmagne constituted a period of great prestige, growing wealth, and expansion. Over

nine hundred charters mentioning donations of lands, privileges and exemptions were recorded in the great cartulary of Valmagne, begun around 1185. Some of Valmagne's early abbots, at this time elected by the monks themselves, are recorded as participating in the Cathar or Albigensian Crusade (1209-1249).

In 1257 Abbot Bertrand obtained permission from the Bishop of Agde to build a new church at Valmagne, that which stands to this day (See Figure 4). The abbey had actually already begun to raise funds for the new construction some years earlier, when it received a legacy from the Bishop of Beziers and a donation from the King of Aragon. Architectural details on the inside of the church would indicate that much of the building occurred in the last quarter of the thirteenth century and continued into the fourteenth century.

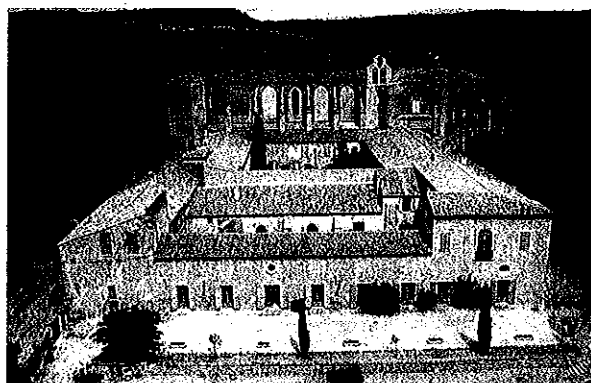


Figure 4. View of the Abbey of Ste. Marie de Valmagne

The new church's groundplan is similar to the Cistercian cathedrals of Longpont, Royaumont and Ourscamp. It has a basic basilical plan in the form of a Latin cross (See Figure 5): a central nave flanked by two side-aisles (seven additional chapel-bays along the north side) and crossed by a short transept. East of the transept is a choir with its rectangular bays and an apse in ambulatory form with seven radiating, polygonal chapels. The aisleless transept barely projects beyond the choir bay walls; this may have been due to the still functioning twelfth-century cloister rooms on the south side. And a sense of architectural symmetry would have demanded a similar abbreviated transept on the north.

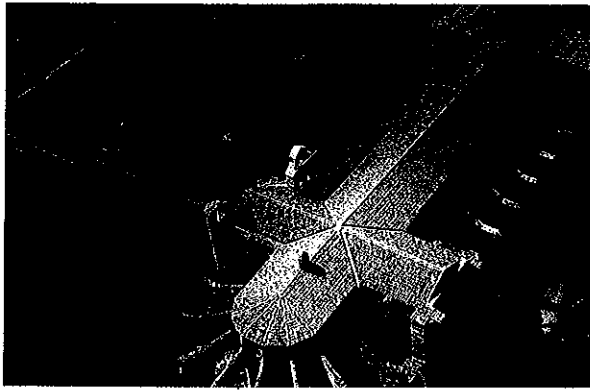


Figure 5. Latin cross shape of the church.

The building of this new church and the maintenance of the enormous staff employed in the endeavor put a financial burden on the community. The burden was alleviated somewhat when, in 1274, Abbot Jean III received the right to collect the toll on the Lunel Bridge along the so-called "Salt-Makers Way" connecting Frontignan and Nîmes. But further funds were required to construct new cloisters, as it became apparent that the dimensions of the old cloister did not suit the new church. The new cloister was begun in the early fourteenth century and incorporated parts of the old cloister, including: on the east, the *armarium*, the sacristy, the Chapter Room (See Figure 6), and the scriptorium; and on the west, the quarters of the lay brothers.

But hard times were about to descend upon Valmagne. At the beginning of the fourteenth century a terrible famine ravaged Europe, followed by the Black Plague in the middle of the century. Monasteries fell into decline as the monks fled the plague, and even when the monks returned, they had little inclination to uphold the austerities of the Rule. The Hundred Years War (1337-1453) continued to wreak havoc throughout the land, and even during periods of comparative peace the countryside was terrorized by roving bandits. During this period the Abbey of Valmagne was fortified to ward off brigands. To add insult to injury, Valmagne began to lose its lands little by little over the century as these were enfeoffed to various lords and vassals of the king.

The fortunes of Valmagne did not improve in the following century. Valmagne, like many of the other French monasteries,



Figure 6. Entrance to the Chapter Room.

was in a state of administrative chaos. Traditionally, the abbots had been elected by a vote of the monks, but in the year 1477 Valmagne was placed *en commende*, which meant that the abbots would henceforth be named by the King, in an attempt to assure proper management of the abbey, though it came about that they did not necessarily have to reside at their appointed abbey.

During the last half of the sixteenth century the Abbey was subjected to further deprivations. Around 1560 the entire region was immersed in the Religious Wars between Protestants and Catholics. In 1571 Mass ceased to be said at Valmagne when the abbot left the monastery and joined forces with the Protestant reformers. The renegade abbot took to raiding the nearby villages and in 1575 led an assault against Valmagne itself, killing many of the monks and those villagers who had sought sanctuary within the church walls. Shortly thereafter, records indicate that Valmagne was wasted, abandoned by the monks and given over to the bandits; it was very nearly razed by Damville, the governor of Languedoc, in his attempt to bring order to the region. Valmagne survived, but in a sorry state. The glass in all the windows, including the rose windows, had been broken. Furthermore the Chapter had decided to sell off much of the estates of the Abbey.

It would be nearly a century before Valmagne recovered even a little of her former splendor. But it was first necessary to shore up the unstable parts of the monastery. In 1624 the apse of the church was repaired by Jean Thomas, the Master of Works who constructed the Herault Bridge and the Pezenas Market. In 1635 most of the

windows were closed up to prevent further deterioration to the structure.

During the second half of the seventeenth century Valmagne came to be controlled by abbots of Italian origin. The first of these, Victor Siri, was a friend of the famous Cardinal Richelieu. Siri spent little time at Valmagne, handing over the day-to-day running of the abbey to the prior, Dom Maffre, who continued the restoration work. Dom Maffre began rebuilding the western gallery of the cloister in 1663, and his name is inscribed under one of the vaults of the refectory. Cardinal Pierre de Bonzi, a Florentine nobleman, administered Valmagne between 1680 and 1697. This brilliant

ecclesiastic had been named bishop of Beziers by King Louis XIV, and had served as an emissary of the King to Venice, Poland and Spain. He was later named archbishop of Toulouse and became a cardinal in 1672.

Cardinal de Bonzi is said to have reigned in Languedoc as a virtual king, and turned Valmagne into his palace. He added another story to the cloister and turned the dormitories into a vast corridor of rooms with an alcove and oratory. His personal parlor overlooked French-style gardens, inspired by the Cardinal's frequent visits to Versailles. The splendid fountain in the south side of the cloister garden was probably given its final form at this time (See Figure 7).

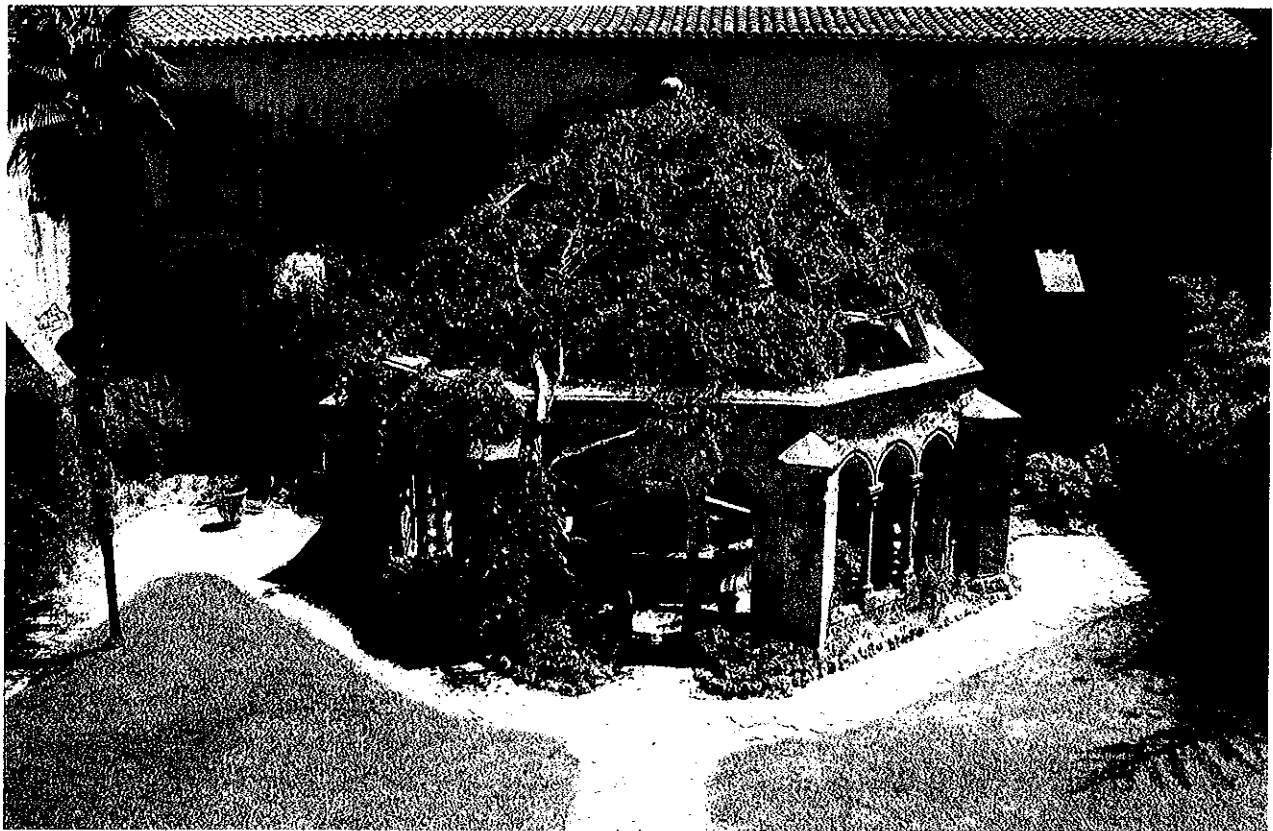


Figure 7. Cloister garden with fountain.

Cardinal de Bonzi's successor, his nephew Armand-Pierre de la Croix de Castries, continued the lavish lifestyle of his uncle. But the monastery now had less land attached to it and fewer lay brothers to work the land as the community declined. By 1786 there were only six monks left at Valmagne, plus some servants and an altar boy. In 1790 the last

four monks fled, just ahead of rebellious peasants who invaded and ransacked the abbey, burning precious documents, furnishings, and works of art. As with most of the other monasteries in France during the Revolution, the abbey and its remaining dependencies were nationalized and sold. In 1791 Valmagne became the property of a certain M. Granier

for the sum of 130,000 pounds. M. Granier resumed cultivation of the vineyards and is responsible for turning the church into a wine cellar, with the addition of the huge casks (some still in use today) in the nave and apsidal chapels of the church (See Figure 8).

In 1838, following the death of M. Granier, the abbey and its dependencies were sold again, this time to Henri-Amadee-Mercure, the Count of Turenne. The abbey was completely restored during the second half of the nineteenth century, and remains to this

day in the possession of the descendants of the Count of Turenne.

In modern times the Domaine of the Abbey has remained a producing vineyard, and its wines are achieving much recognition. Concerts are held in the restored refectory of the abbey. The apartments of Cardinal de Bonzi, restored and furnished in the style of the Cardinal's times, serve as the private apartments of the owners. The abbey has been open to the public for visits since 1975.

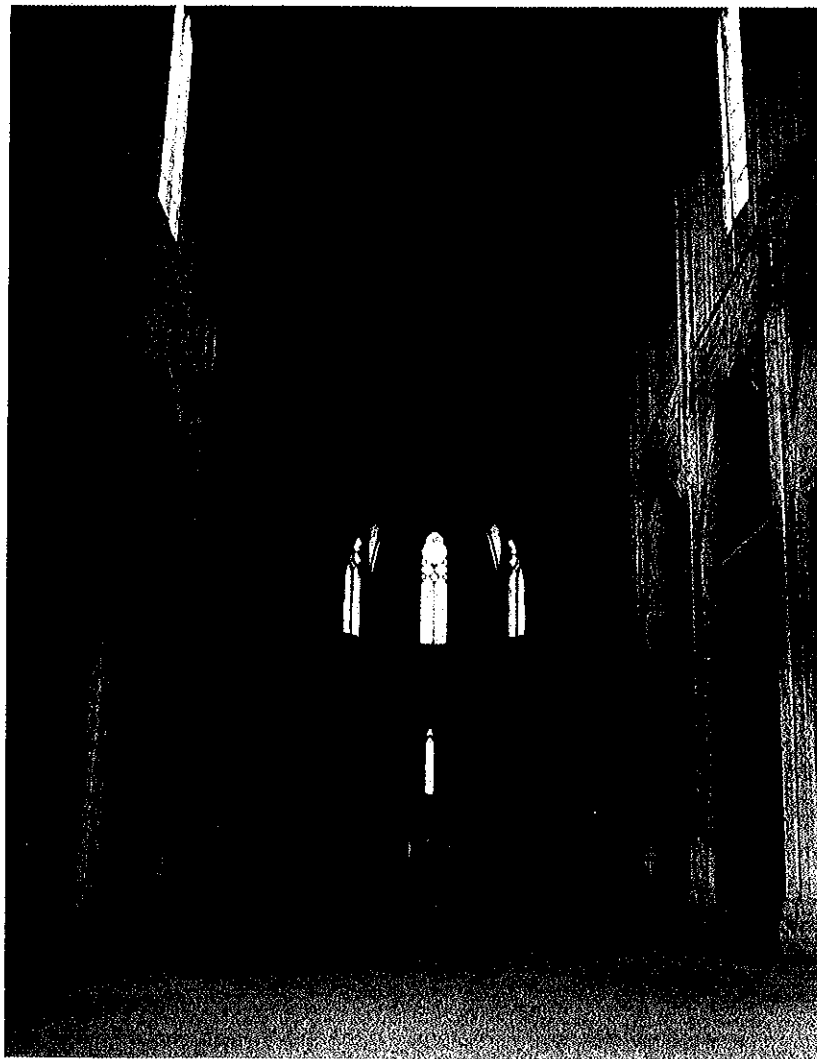


Figure 8. Interior of church; note the giant oak casks in the chapels.



## Stratigraphic Report

By William Neidinger and Eulah Matthews

Area A (see Figure 2).

Inside the church around piers S29 and S39 (See Figure 9) soil was cleared away in an effort to uncover the original paving stones of the church and any differences in the floor levels that were believed to exist between the ambulatory and the chapels and the choir. Mme d'Allaines, the present owner of the abbey, had informed us that a few decades ago dirt was laid down in the church to protect the paving stones of the floor from the heavy equipment that was being used in the church. To the north of pier S29 at a depth of -1.64 (relative to the universal bench mark X-Y-Z at 0-0-0) several paving stones (A1) were located *in situ* (See Figure 10).

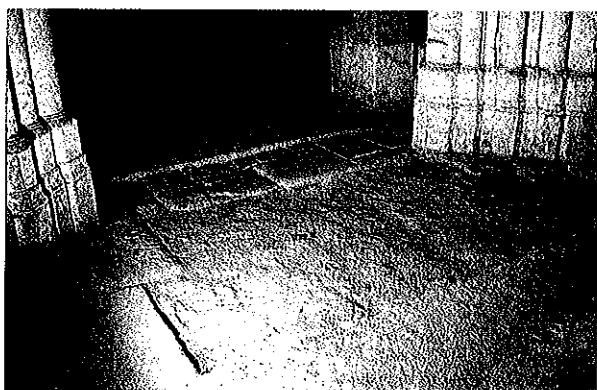


Figure 9. Paving stones between piers S29 and S39.

They stopped abruptly on a line even to the edge of pier S29. We postulated that this might mark a step down between the ambulatory and the choir. But at a depth of -1.92 we uncovered not paving stones, but a well bonded ashlar structure (A2); pier S29 straddles this structure in an uneven manner. This indicates that A2 is not the foundation of pier S29, but perhaps a wall from the earlier church, which we know from our survey and photography to have existed on the site. In addition, A2 was constructed of a different type of stone from the pier S29 and it was much more finely cut. We continued clearing soil to a depth of -2.48 and wall A2 continued to that depth. We decided to stop at this point. A marker was left where we stopped and the soil filled back in. No artifacts were

discovered in this trench, indicating that a clean fill was used to raise the floor levels between the earlier and present church. Neither were there any discernible strata in the fill.

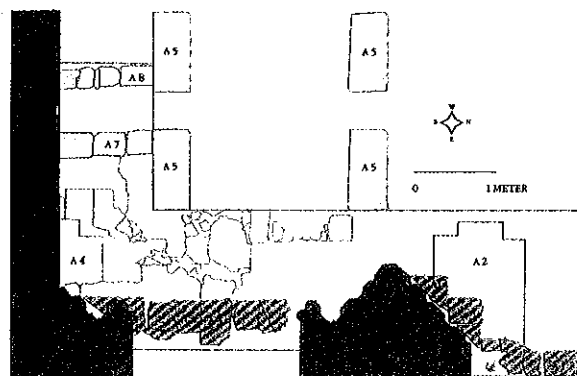


Figure 10. Area A.

Between piers S29 and S39 soil was cleared and again paving stones A3, similar to A1, were discovered, at a depth of -1.55; they stopped at a line absolutely even with the edges of piers S29 and S39. When soil was cleared west of this edge, irregularly cut stones, haphazardly bonded together with mortar forming a very rough surface, were discovered at a depth of -1.75. They may have served as a fill for the supports (A5) of the great wine cask stored here. At a depth of -1.91 structure A4 was uncovered; A4 is identical in material, construction, and measurement to A2, both of them being survivals of the earlier church. Between A5 and the south transept wall (A6; part of wall A6 is a re-used wall of the earlier church) run two walls, A7 and A8, constructed in alignment with the wine cask; they probably had something to do with the winemaking industry at Valmagne. Between A7 and A8 was a very soft fill of soil that had seeped down between the two walls over the years. Various strata were noted in this fill (representing different times of seepage), but no artifacts were discovered.

A2 and A4 were uncovered at a depth of approximately 30 centimeters beneath the present floor level of the church. Both are in an excellent state of preservation. But since

various constraints prohibited our excavation any deeper, it was impossible to ascertain how much of the walls of the earlier church A2 and A4 are. Are they merely foundations or are they perhaps a significant remnant of walls several courses high? It would take only a few well-placed trial trenches throughout the interior of the church to get a reliable groundplan of the earlier church.

A substantial part of this earlier church was absorbed into the rebuilding of the new church in the 13th century. Embedded within the south transept wall of the 13th century church are the clear remains of the south transept wall of the earlier church, including its blocked-up circular window (See Figure 3). Likewise on the exterior of the church at the place where the chevet and the cloister meet, a section of the earlier church still stands (See Figure 11). Some soil was cleared away at this point to reveal the foundations of this earlier segment of the church.



Figure 11. Clearing soil from around remains of wall of earlier church.

#### Area B (See Figure 2).

Outside the church soil was cleared around the buttress immediately to the east of the north transept door. Some shards of flat colored glass, Roman terra sigillata, and modern plastic were found on the surface. At a depth of between -1.11 and -1.26 a wall (B1) of large, roughly cut, unbonded stones was discovered (See Figure 12). Soil continued to be cleared to the east and west of B1 to a depth of c. -1.64. The wall continues down past this depth. The wall B1, which is built up against the buttress, may have been a later retaining wall to divert the rain and mud away from the threshold of the north transept (B2).

The decision was made to extend the area cleared of soil to include the area between the buttress and threshold B2.

Less than two centimeters of soil were swept from the threshold itself. Soil clearance was continued north of the threshold to a depth of -1.06. This appears, from the change in soil color and texture, to have been the original ground level of the soil around the church. A few modern pottery shards and fragments of wine bottles were found in this soil.

In the angle between the buttress and threshold B2, a line of stones (B4) running parallel to the wall of the church was found at a depth of -0.78 (See Figure 13). Upon further clearance of soil it was discovered that wall B4 was, in fact, inserted into the church wall and at such an angle that it indicated that it was a row of stones springing to form an arch or vault. At a depth of -0.83 a supporting arch (B5) for this vault was reached. B5 is built directly against the buttress. At a depth of c. -1.20 wall B6, running parallel to B4 and connecting to B5, was uncovered (See Figure 26). At a depth of -1.30 wall B7 was uncovered, being not an arch like B5, as one might suspect, but a wall of roughly cut stones mortared together; although it may have at one time supported an arch similar to B5.

B4, B5, B6, and B7 form the perimeter of a partially underground vaulted room whose purpose is uncertain. At a depth of approximately -1.05 we should have expected to find the original ground level, but the construction of this vaulted room precluded that.

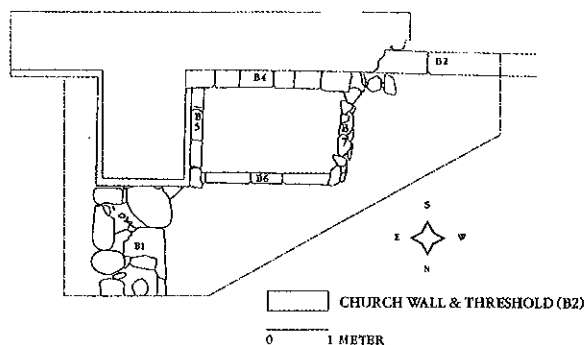


Figure 12. Area B.

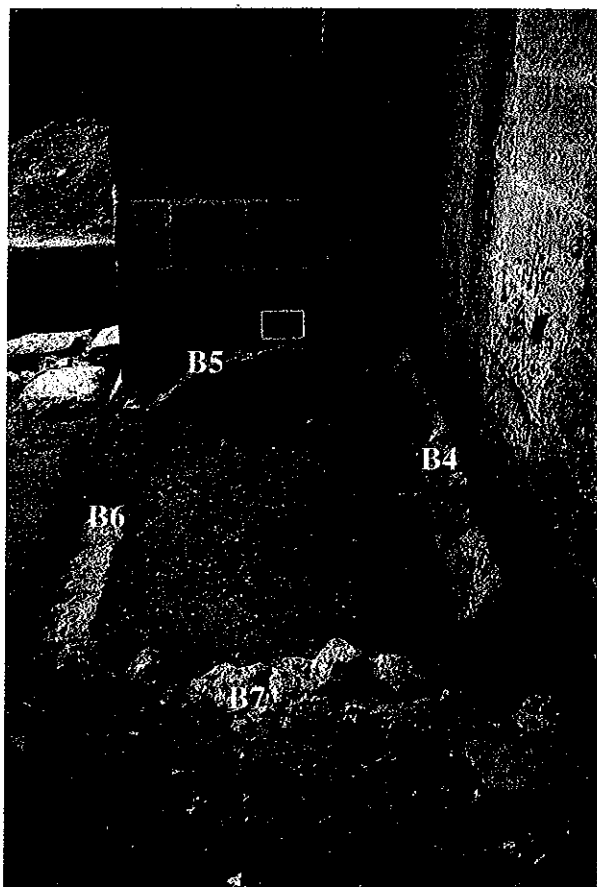


Figure 13. Walls of the room with the collapsed vault.



Figure 14. Type One glazed tiles.

In the room we discovered a quantity of decorated glazed tiles. They are of two types. Type One (See Figure 14) is approximately .02 m. thick with a highly vitrified green glaze on both sides and sometimes along the edges. Type Two (See Figures 15-20) is approximately .015 m. thick

with a dull glaze on one side only; the glazed side has various floral, geometric and heraldic decorations. No complete tiles of either type have been found, but Type Two appears to be about .10 x .10 m. and Type One slightly larger.

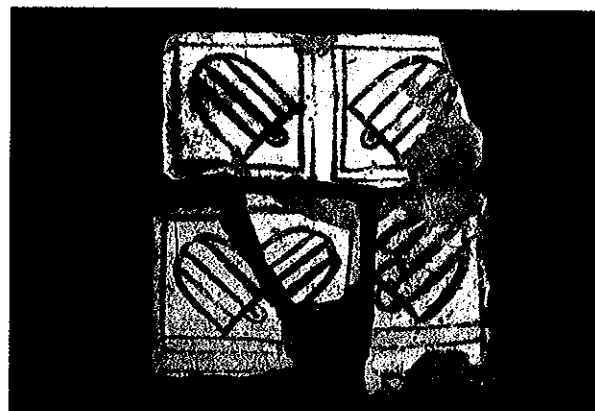


Figure 15. Type Two tile: escutcheon design.

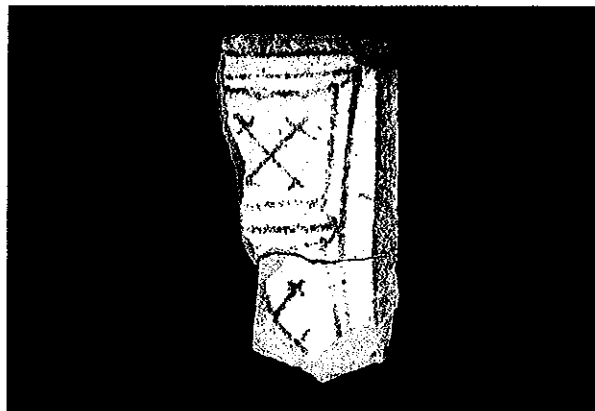


Figure 16. Type Two tile: cross design.

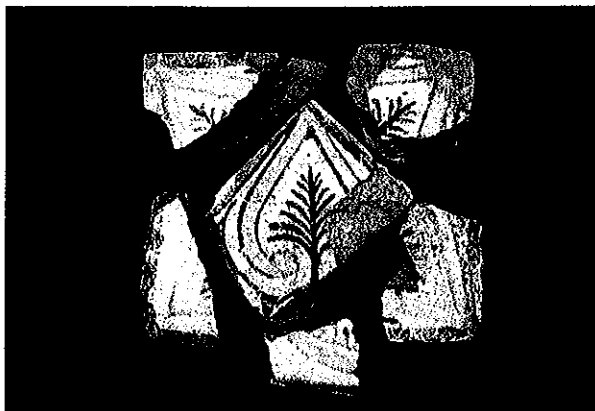


Figure 17. Type Two tile: frond design.

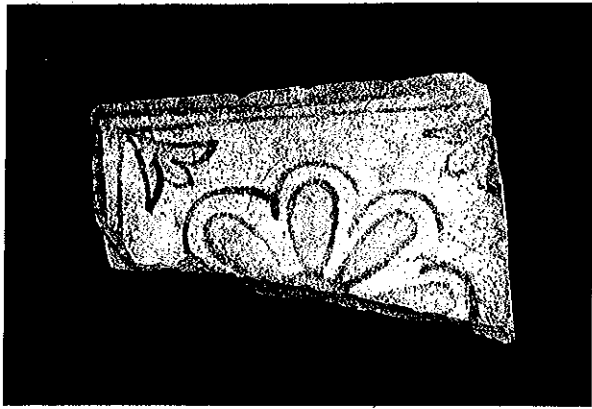


Figure 18. Type Two tile: rosette design.

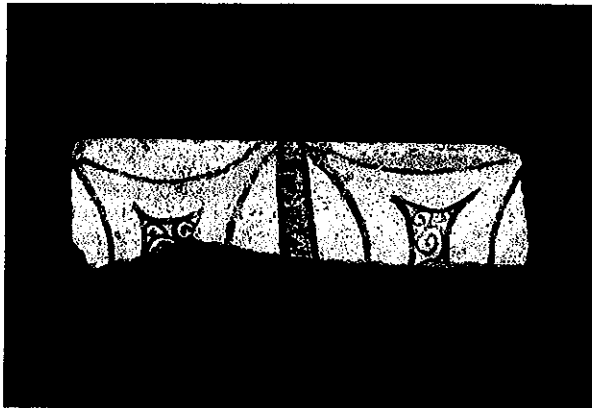


Figure 19. Type Two tile: concave rectangle design.

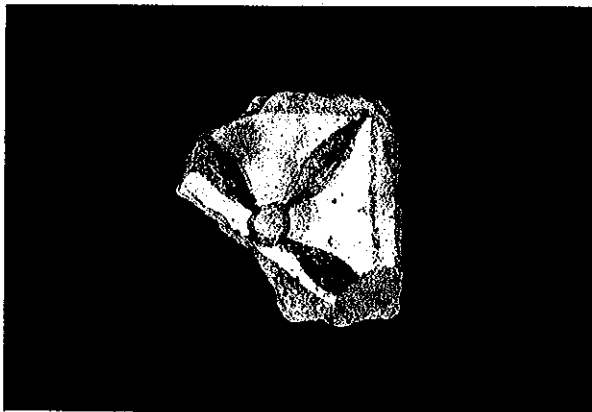


Figure 20. Type Two tile: star design.

In addition to tile fragments, a number of (red) painted architectural (See Figure 21) and sculptural fragments (See Figure 22), a battered statue head (See Figure 23), and much stone tracery (See Figure 24) were found.

At a depth of -3.03 three adult (probably male) skeletons were found (See Figure 25). The skeletons overlap one another and there are a few bones that are

obviously disarticulated, for example, a left femur near the ribcage of the largest skeleton. The confused arrangement of bones indicates that this is not a primary burial but a secondary "re-burial." The presence of a few medieval-style nails indicates that the bodies may have been in coffins when they were thrown into the room. This would certainly seem to be supported by the fact that few of the bones were fractured or broken, despite the weighty stone debris thrown in on top of them. Only with the decay of the wooden coffins, did the discarded stone and tile debris come to rest on and around the skeletons.

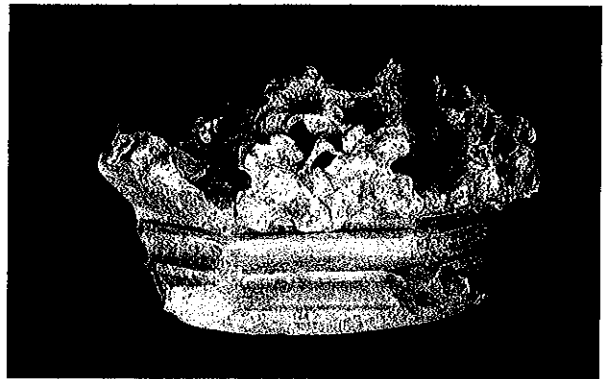


Figure 21. Architectural fragment with floral design and remains of red paint.



Figure 22. Fragment of a statuary group.

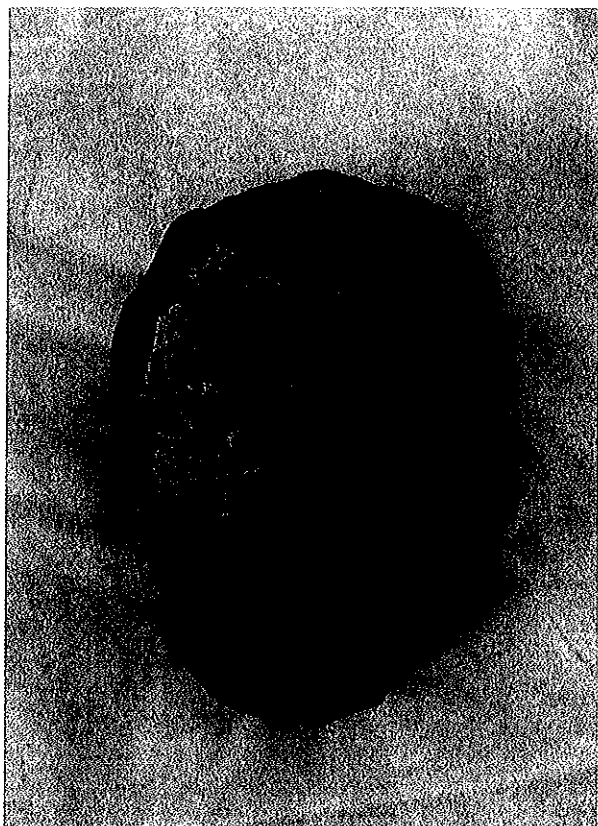


Figure 23. Well battered head with worn facial features and remains of whitewash and paint.



Figure 24. Window tracery found in the vaulted room.

The entire room seems to have served, ultimately, as a disposal bin for discarded construction debris and bodies. Its original purpose is unknown but it is certainly doubtful that these burials were the reason for the construction of the room. Moreover, the vaulted room's construction was definitely an afterthought to the church building itself. For

whoever built this room had to smash through the actual foundations of the church wall (B8) and buttress (B9), a foundation approximately .85 meters thick of large roughly cut stones bonded together by mortar (See Figure 26). Had the vaulted room been contemporary with the construction of the church, a more commodious integration of the room, buttress, and church wall could have been executed.

The bottoms of walls B4, B5, B6, and B7 have not been reached, meaning that we do not yet know the full depth of this underground vaulted room. Neither were there discovered any of the curved stones of the vault originally covering this room, except, of course, those of wall B4 still imbedded in the outer church wall. This could mean one of two things. First, that the stones of the collapsed vault are at the very bottom of this underground vaulted room and have yet to be discovered. Or, second, that the stones were robbed away intentionally. In either case, once the vault disappeared, the room came to be used as a refuse pit



Figure 25. Skeletons found in the vaulted room.

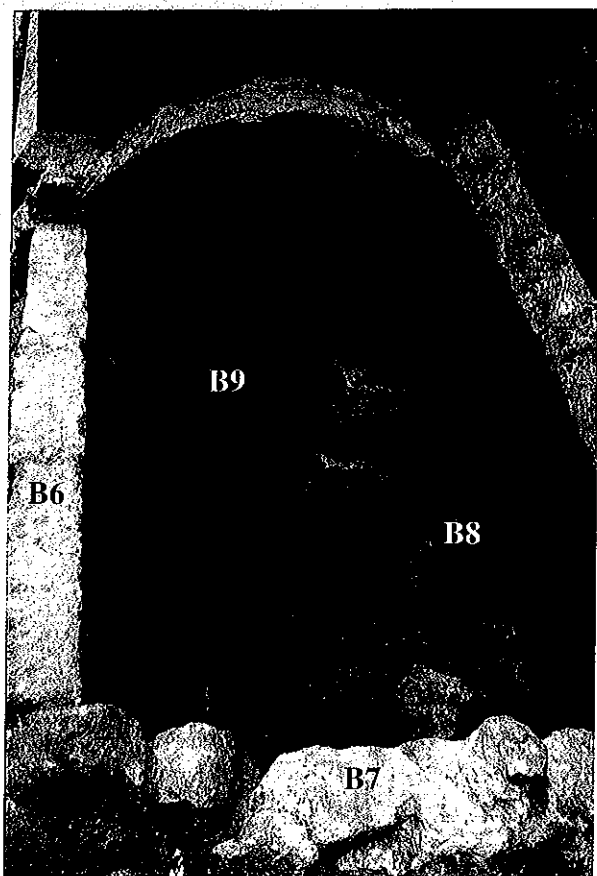


Figure 26. Vaulted room cutting through foundation of church wall (B8) and foundation of buttress (B9).

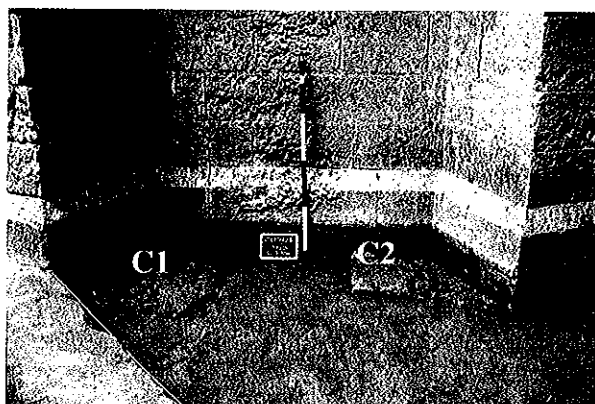


Figure 27. C1 and C2 outside the eastern apse of the church.

#### Area C (See Figures 2 and 32).

Outside the church, directly east of and contiguous to the axial chapel, another area was cleared to reveal the foundations. After just a few centimeters of soil clearance two stones C1 and C2 were unearthed (See Figure

27). Slightly below C1 and C2 a well-plastered surface (C7) was found radiating in a rough semi-circular fashion around the chevet (See Figure 28). This surface was the top of the church wall's foundation; it was well-mortared on the exposed surface because it also served as a "splashboard," that is, a surface that deflected the torrents of water coming out of the gutters above, to prevent the water from undermining the foundations themselves.

Between C1 and C2 no part of the

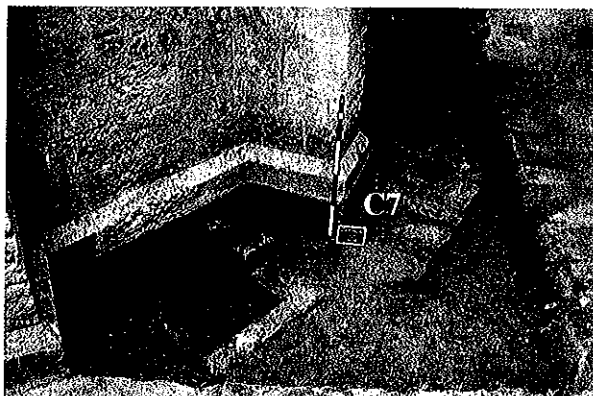


Figure 28. Splashboard and foundation (C7), and entrance to the tomb.

splashboard was discovered and the smooth semi-circle of the edge of the splashboard was also broken parallel to this point. As more soil was removed from between C1 and C2, a step (C10) was uncovered going down between C1 and C2. At 1.40 below the level of the splashboard (C7) a long, narrow floor (2.352 x 0.826 m.) was reached, C11. As the debris was cleared from this small room, an anthropomorphoid cut in the floor, 0.465 m. deep, was unearthed; this cut (C12) obviously served as a tomb (See Figure 29). Locating the tomb with the Total Station on the overall plan of the monastery, it appears that the head of the deceased would have been situated within the axial chapel. And an oblique cut of the lintel stone between C1 and C2 would have offered the deceased "a view" towards the eastern horizon. By examining the construction style and tight fitting of the stones of this tomb, we concluded that its construction was co-terminus with that of the church itself and definitely not a later addition. It might be the tomb of the abbot who oversaw the beginning of the construction

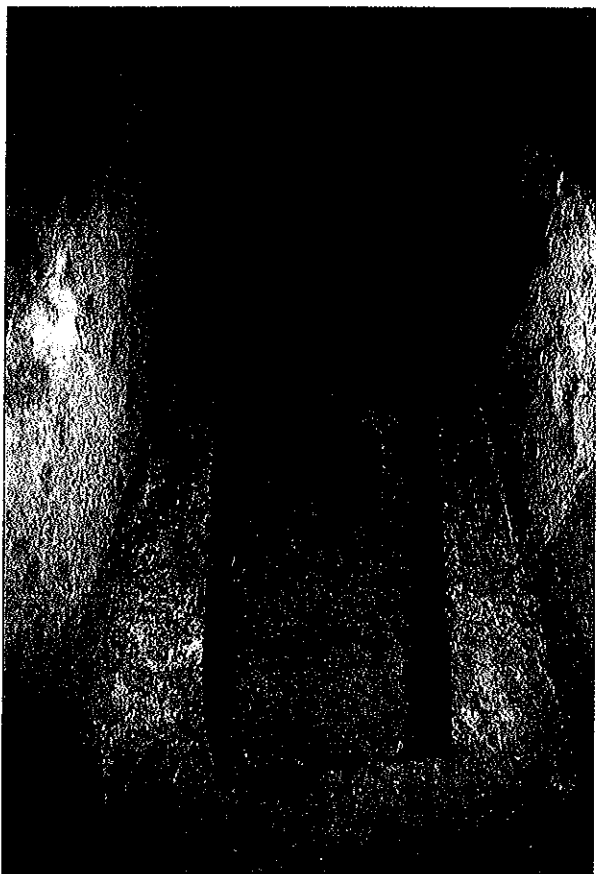


Figure 29. The tomb.

of the second church.

Nothing but modern debris (plastic, beer bottle fragments, clear glass shards) was found in the tomb along with the mud that had seeped in over the years. The tomb must have been violated and the corpse removed well before the twentieth century. When Jules Renouvier wrote his *Monumens de quelques anciens dioceses de Bas-languedoc* in 1840, he made no mention of the tomb in his description of the abbey. This would seem to indicate that the tomb and whatever superstructure (the remains of which are C1 and C2) that guarded it were robbed, destroyed, and covered over by that time. If so, then how does one account for the twentieth century debris in the tomb? The remains of a dog's skeleton wrapped in plastic may provide the answer. Apparently the family's pets were, over the years, buried in the area east of the apse. A gardener who buried the animals just may have accidentally buried one of the dogs right in the tomb without realizing the nature of the structure where he was digging.

Slightly to the east of the edge of the splashboard (C7) was a line of terracotta rooftiles (C9) (See Figure 30), .55m. long, laid end to end and going the full length of the trench. A few of the tiles were removed to expose terracotta tubes (approximately 1.0 m. long) that were part of the original medieval water pipeline to the cloister fountain (See Figure 31). The tubes were mortared together and laid in a shallow channel whose bottom had been filled with sand. The tubes were then covered with the terracotta rooftiles for protection. The rooftiles were probably exposed above ground originally; a change in the color and texture of the soil does indicate that this was the original level of the ground outside the church.



Figure 30. Roof tiles covering the water pipe to the cloister fountain.

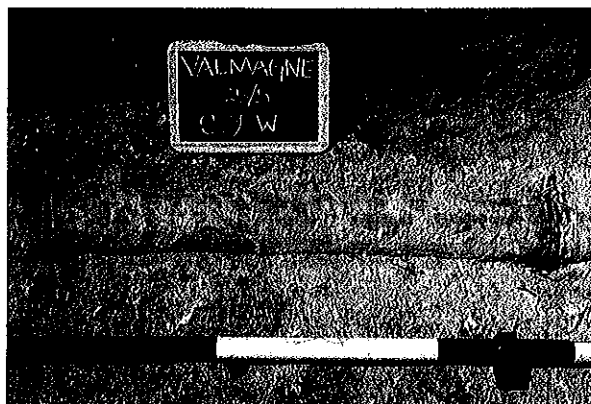


Figure 31. Lengths of pipe.

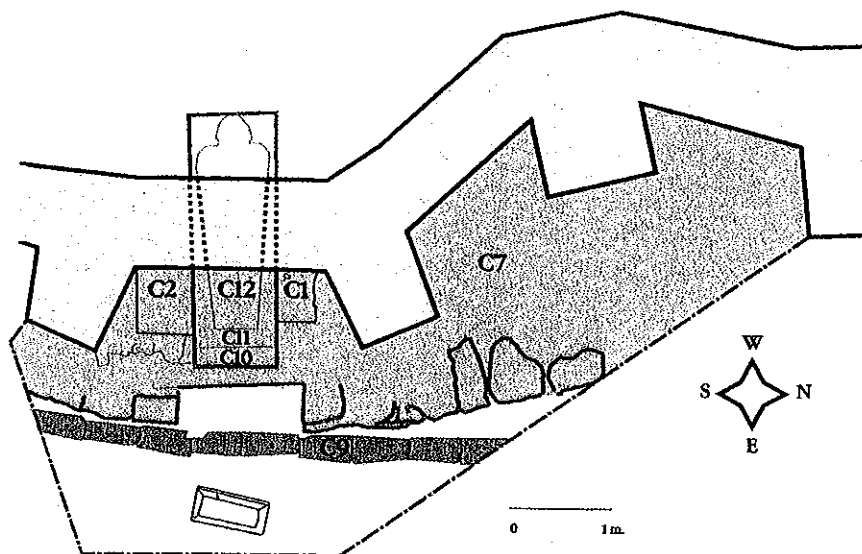


Figure 32. Area C.



Figure 33. Clearing the terracotta pipe.

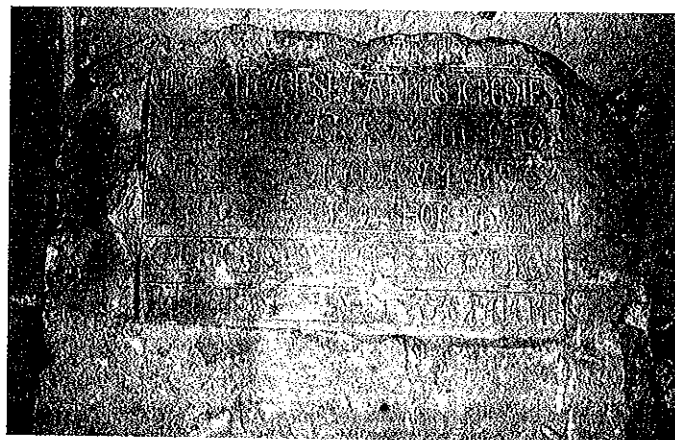


Figure 34. Funerary inscription.



## The Funeral Inscription By Brian Prince

In the chapter room at the Abbey of Valmagne amidst the lapidary collection (see following article) is a funeral stone of which seven lines are partially intelligible. The first extant line is badly damaged and it is certain that there was at least one other line above it. The last line is also fairly unintelligible.

### Transcription:

Line 1. CC:XXX:III:II                      ARCH:G:I  
Line 2. VIA:UNIVERS[A]E:CARNIS: I[N]GREDIES:  
Line 3. EREPT[IS] :EA:REB[US] :HUMANIS:O:H[OM]O:  
Line 4. CUR:ME:ASPICIS:QUID:SUM:ERIS:EX  
Line 5. [H]OC:[TEMPORE] N[UM]Q[UAM]:MIREIS:Q[UI]A:FORS[A]N:CRAS:  
Line 6. MORIARIS:QUI:LEGIS:ISTA:DIC:  
Line 7. PATER:IN:                      P·AIA: ME

### Translation:

Line 1. 200:30:3:2                      The arch[itect?] G  
Line 2. when you have entered into the way of all flesh,  
Line 3. since human affairs have been removed in this way. O, man,  
Line 4. why do you regard me? What I am, you will be. From  
Line 5. this time on, may you never be astonished because perhaps tomorrow  
Line 6. you may die. He who reads these things, say:  
Line 7. Father, in                      for my soul.

### Notes:

1. The top line is puzzling. Although the stone has been broken off, some of the letters nevertheless are complete in the reduced space left. The initial two characters look like CC, which may abbreviate "200." It is hard to interpret the three numbers following. They might be the age of someone deceased, perhaps in years followed by months and days. Perhaps the right side of the inscription contains a name; the three marks at the far right seem cut off, so it is difficult to guess what they might be.
2. The "a" in UNIVARSE seems to be a medieval misspelling (the classical spelling is "e"). The "e" at the end of the word stands for "ae," since "a" and "e" merged in medieval Latin.
3. The "N" has been omitted from the word INGREDIES.
4. The sign following the "t" in EREPTIS can abbreviate -os, -us, -is, or simply -s. It occurs twice in Line 3, once to end EREPTIS, and again, written much larger, to finish REBUS.
5. The characters in the middle of Line 4 probably represent "quid." The "d" has been cut without its usual left-hand vertical stroke. However, this does not explain the sign added to the upper right-hand part of the "d." "Qualis" can be suggested, but "quid" seems better.
6. At the end of Line 4, the "e" in EX has been left without its middle horizontal stroke.
7. HOC at the beginning of Line 5 also has the initial "h" omitted.
8. We should understand "tempore" along with "ex hoc" in Lines 4-5.
9. Also in Line 5, MIREIS as an active form of the usually deponent verb "miror," with EI used to spell, or misspell, the long subjunctive "e."
10. The two characters in the middle of Line 5 read as an abbreviation of "quia," although "quod" is also possible.
11. FORSN abbreviates "forsan."
12. The DIC at the end of Line 6 is imperative, assuming that the final line contains a prayer. But since it is hard to decipher the final line, "dic" could also turn out to be "dicit" or some other variant.
13. After "Pater" on Line 7 the inscription becomes illegible. At the end of the line, the "P", separated from the following "A" by a single dot, may represent "pro." "AIA" may abbreviate "anim\_", and "ME" may stand for "me\_." The phrase would then mean "for my soul."

## The Reliefs of Valmagne By William Neidinger

In the chapter room of the cloister at Valmagne there is a small lapidary collection consisting of various stones from different proveniences that have been placed there over the ages. No systematic record has been kept of their date or place of discovery. Some of the stones are worked pieces of non-local marble that have no apparent relationship to any part of the extant monastery. The present owners of the monastic estate believe that there is a Roman villa somewhere beneath their grounds and the quantity of Roman era sherds and many of these marble fragments seem to bear out their hypothesis, although only an actual excavation could prove their thesis. Other stones are clearly from a later and Christian context and may be part of the early monastery. Two of the stones are tombstones, one of which is legible and able to be translated (see previous article).

The most common stones in the chapter room are the set of thirteen limestone blocks approximately 65 x 80 centimeters each (16.5-18 centimeters thick), all of which have the remains of low relief figures carved on them. In almost every instance on every block the most prominent features of the low relief figures have been sheared away, leaving an extremely low relief outline close to the background block of what the figure used to be. In many instances it is difficult if not impossible to ascertain what the scene represented was.

These disfigured sculpted stones are thought to have been part of a chancel or choir screen. Whether they were of the first or second church is difficult to tell because of the extensive disfigurement. But considering the very low nature of the relief, the perfectly preserved facial features of one figure on stone 4, and the over-sized hands and heads of some figures, a date somewhere in the thirteenth or fourteenth century may not be too far amiss. Whatever the stones' date and function, whenever the structure of which they were part ceased to be useful, that structure was dismantled and these stones, rather than being burnt down for lime, were saved and later re-used.

All of the figured stones have been shaved down to a fairly uniform thickness of 16-18.5 centimeters. All the stones have also been carved into various polygonal shapes, cutting through the scenes and sometimes the individual figures depicted. In addition, all the stones have one edge with a carved lipped molding, which is certainly not a part of the original carving; most of these lips shows signs of a whitewashing and slight discoloration that is evident nowhere else on the block. This would seem to indicate that the edges with the whitewashed lips were exposed to view. And as the backs of the stones and the faces with the cut-away figures show no signs of whitewash, wear, or damage, it is safe to say that these two sides were neither exposed to view or use.

The owners of Valmagne repeat a story that these stones were once part of a stairwell that led from the upper story of the cloister down into the church, through the southern transept wall. And, in fact, even though such a passageway has long since been blocked (See Figure 3) and the stairs dismantled, there are still a few limestone blocks approximately 15 centimeters thick embedded in the south transept wall. Due to the patina on the transept wall, it is impossible to say if these blocks are of the same limestone as the figured blocks. And the nature of the arrangement of the stones in this hypothetical staircase remains problematical. Outside the church in a pile, partially buried in dirt, on the southern side of the apse are a number of other carved stones of the same variety of limestone that may have been part of the original screen structure.

In the 1999 TFAHR publication on the work at Valmagne, an initial attempt was made at identifying the scenes depicted on the disfigured stones. Since that time more research has been done on the stones' iconography and a complete re-assessment of that iconography has been made. There are two distinct stories depicted. One is the life and death of Jesus Christ, most of the scenes of which are fairly easy to decipher. The other is that of St. Martin of Tours. The episodes of the life of St. Martin of Tours are chronicled in Sulpicius Severus' *Vita sancti Martini*, Gregory of Tours' *De virtutibus beati Martini episcopi*, and Jacopus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, which draws heavily on the former two. In addition, there are a number of works of the plastic arts that depict scenes similar to the ones on the Valmagne stones. The most interesting of these is an Icelandic embroidery in the Louvre dated to the eleventh century; it is adorned with various episodes of the life of St. Martin. In trying to decipher the scenes, use has been made of the written sources, the Icelandic embroidery, various sculptures of St. Martin, and a number of extraneous (non-St. Martin) works of art to

elucidate specific enigmatic features of the stones. For the purposes of this article the stones have been numbered arbitrarily, having no relationship to their arrangement in the chapter room nor to their appearance in the 1999 TFAHR publication. Although most of the scenes depicting the episodes of the life of Christ are self-explanatory, a few included below are difficult to explain and, in fact, may not be part of the Christ cycle.

### The Life of Christ

**Stone 1.** The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem (See Figure 35).

The figure of Christ is immediately identifiable by the cruciform halo. With His hand raised in benediction, He rides upon a donkey towards a crowd of people. An upright behind the first extant person of the group probably represents the Golden Gate of the city. In front of this person there is a large cut away section which fans out towards the top of the frame of the scene. This is the tree which would have held Zacchaeus, and, indeed, Christ's gesture might also be one of his summoning Zacchaeus down. In front of the donkey another cut away section is identifiable by the ruffles of a cloth held by a hand, the remnants of someone spreading out a cloak before Christ.



Figure 35. The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem.

**Stone 2.** The Last Supper (?) (See Figure 36).

Two, possibly three, haloed figures are depicted; two of them are clearly haloed, but neither clearly with the cruciform halo of Christ. The figure on the right has his oversized right hand raised with the index finger pointed up. In front of all three (or two) persons there is a sharp cut away of the stone at slightly higher than waist level all across the scene. This may represent a table at which all are seated. If so, this may be the Last Supper. Against this interpretation, however, is the fact that the gesticulating person, which one would expect to be Christ, lacks the cruciform halo and obviously has short hair, the latter of which is not usual with the Christ depictions of our sculptor.



Figure 36. The Last Supper (?).

**Stone 3. The Crucifixion (See Figure 37).**

In Stone 3 we have a continuous narrative with Christ appearing twice. On the right Christ, identified by the cruciform halo and long hair, appears with downcast head carrying the cross; He seems to be being pushed by a figure behind Him. To the left Christ is being nailed to the Cross by two men on ladders. The cross is clearly imbedded in a small mound, Golgotha. There is a distinct change in the depiction of the cross in both scenes. The cross Christ carries is thin and the one upon which He is crucified is flat. The sculptor reverts to the thin style crucifix in the scene of the Deposition.



**Figure 37. The Crucifixion.**

**Stone 4. The Deposition (See Figure 38).**

Not only does Stone 4 follow Stone 3 chronologically but they seemed to have been one stone originally. The main feature is, of course, Christ being lowered from a thin cross. A ladder rests against the cross and the body of Christ is being supported by a haloed figure on the extreme left on the stone. A group of three people are to be seen at the right. The one closest to the cross (the only figure with its face fully preserved amongst all the figures on all of the stones) seems to be supporting a small figure perched on the ladder who is grasping Christ's left arm; only the cut away scar of this diminutive figure on the ladder remains.



**Figure 38. The Deposition.**

It is interesting that the other two figures of this group are not turned towards Christ but are looking up and gesturing in the opposite direction. This is because they are part of the previous scene, the Crucifixion. Perhaps the one gesturing, obviously up towards the crucified Christ is one of the bystanders; maybe the one who, according to the Gospel of St. Luke, said "...save yourself..." or possibly the one who said "...certainly this was a righteous man..."

**Stone 5. The Three Marys at the Tomb (See Figure 39).**

To the right, a large angel with feathered wings unfurled is approached by three veiled women, the foremost of whom has her hands clasped in prayer. The flat cut away section that hits all four figures at waist level is obviously the remnants of what used to be the tomb of Christ.



**Figure 39. The Three Marys at the Tomb.**

## The Life of St. Martin of Tours

**Stone 6.** St. Martin and the Beggar (See Figure 40).

This is the stone that first gave us the clue that there may be two different cycles represented on the Valmagne stones. The haloed figure on the right is riding a horse; the animal's haunch, hind legs, one hoof, and the hair of the tail are clearly visible on close examination. The rider is clearly turned towards the back (not backwards on the horse) and holds a large billowing cloak in what would be his right hand. The cloak covers and serves as a backdrop to a man standing behind the horse. This man's lower legs are fully preserved and it is obvious that he is barefoot and without leggings or robe; clearly he is a poor man. The scene represents the catechumen, Martin, dividing his cloak with a beggar. St. Martin of Tours is represented in medieval depictions both standing and riding a horse.

The group to the left of St. Martin and the beggar confirms the interpretation of the scene. There are two personages visible on what remains of the stone; the larger one has a halo and his head is turned to his right, as the position of his beard clearly indicates. Neither of these figures are grounded; they are floating above ground level and the bottom of the "platform" upon which they hover is portrayed in the same fashion as the cloak which St. Martin divides with the beggar. It is, indeed, the half of the cloak which St. Martin gave to the beggar. In all the sources regarding the life of St. Martin of Tours it is stated that during the night following the episode of the dividing of the cloak, Martin had a dream in which Christ accompanied by angels appeared to him with the half-cloak, indicating that Christ was the beggar. The dream scene is depicted, for instance, on a Moissac cloister capital (See Figures 41 and 42).

A number of objections might be raised against this interpretation. First, the so-called figure of Christ is without the cruciform halo. This is true, but the cutting away of the stone here appears to have been deep enough to obliterate all signs of the cross on the halo.



Figure 40. St. Martin and the Beggar, and Jesus appearing to Martin in a dream.



Figure 41. Reconstruction of the scene of St. Martin and the Beggar, and Jesus appearing to Martin.

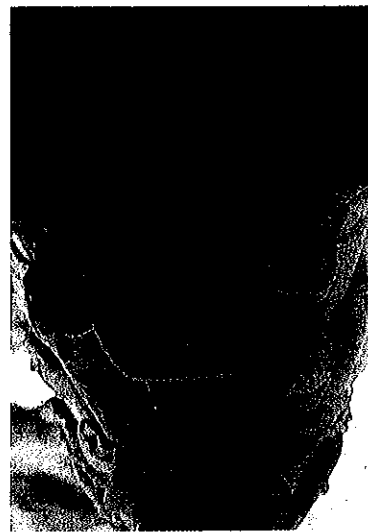


Figure 42. Christ holding Martin's cloak on a capital from the cloister at Moissac.

Second, why is Christ's head turned away from Martin and the beggar, as is indicated by the direction of the beard? The direction of Christ's gaze may be due to the fact that he is looking down at St. Martin sleeping or at the next episode in the story of St. Martin, which would be Martin's baptism.

**Stone 7. The Baptism of St. Martin (See Figure 43).**

The badly damaged figure on the right hand side of the stone is at a lower level than the central figure and appears to be in or on some sort of structure; his right arm is upraised. The disposition of this figure (St. Martin) follows fairly closely the usual representation of a person in a baptismal font that can be found depicted from Spain to Italy from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. The person standing next to him would be the one baptizing Martin. The square device around the baptizer's neck is probably the remains of the collar of his robe, a bishop's dalmatic or a monk's cowl (See Figure 44). The written sources are ambiguous as to who baptized Martin. But they are in agreement as to the fact that Martin was baptized immediately after his dream of Christ with the beggar's cloak. Consequently, this stone would immediately follow Stone 6 chronologically and in the actual arrangement of the stones on the screen.

The item on the left hand part of the stone is perplexing. It has the appearance of a mast of a ship. And, in fact, the written sources all mention a miracle in which a ship is saved at sea during a storm by the invocation of "...the God of St. Martin..." It is not, admittedly, a miracle that immediately follows his baptism, but there is no real sense of narrative continuity in these written sources between Martin's baptism and death, just a relation of miscellaneous miracles in a rather haphazard fashion with no regard to chronology. The same item might also be interpreted as a gallows of some sort. The sources again relate that Martin brought back to life a man who had been hanged for a crime he did not commit.



Figure 43. The Baptism of St. Martin.

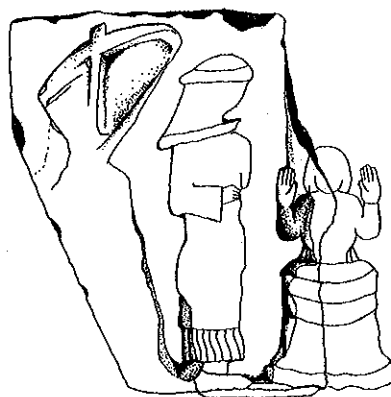


Figure 44. Reconstruction of the Baptism of St. Martin.

**Stone 8. The Cell of St. Martin (?)** (See Figure 45).

An interpretation of this stone is highly provisional. There is a figure of a bishop (wearing a miter) on the right separated by some sort of structure from four figures on the left. The bishop appears to have his right hand touching this structure. Three of those four figures on the other side of the structure have their arms intertwined around one another in the traditional iconography of "The Three Hebrews in the Furnace." The fourth figure appears to be gesturing to them and is partially within the structure which divides the bishop from them. Despite the use of the Three Hebrews motif, I think the stone belongs in the St. Martin cycle.



Figure 45. The Cell of St. Martin (?).

The written sources all agree that after Martin (the figure on the right) became a bishop he was accustomed to keep a private cell (represented by the central dividing structure) to which he could retreat for a little private prayer and relaxation from the daily routine of being a bishop. There, it was claimed, he was visited on many occasions by either Sts. Peter and Paul or Sts. Mary, Agnes, and Thecla. Our scene would indicate the latter group. Martin would, in this interpretation, appear twice: as the mitred bishop on the right closing the door to his cell, and as the largely destroyed figure on the other side of the door bidding adieu to his saintly visitors. But it is disconcerting that such saintly guests would appear without their haloes.

**Stone 9. The Death of St. Martin** (See Figure 46).

The most readily identifiable figure of this scene is, of course, Christ with the cruciform halo, roughly in the center. His hand is raised in benediction. A mitred and haloed bishop is presiding at a Mass to the left. And at least two figures are behind a low flat structure on the right hand part of the scene; one of them is again a mitred haloed bishop with a crook. Another rather fluffy and amorphous figure appears to be descending from the top of the frame to grab (arms and hands are clearly visible) a bundle from the low flat structure. Here we are in the realm of solid medieval Christian iconography that fits completely with the written sources. The scene depicted is the death of St. Martin and the translation of his soul to heaven (See Figure 47).



Figure 46. The Mass at the Death of St. Martin.



Figure 47. Reconstruction of the Mass at the Death of St. Martin.

The corpse of Martin would have been sculpted on the low flat structure, his bier. At his funeral Mass, it is said, St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan, was magically transported there to preside (the mitred-haloed bishop at the altar to the left). The mitred-haloed bishop to the right might be St. Bricius, Martin successor as bishop of Tours, although

the sources do not specifically mention him being at the funeral. The figure descending from above is an angel bearing the soul of Martin to heaven; the soul, as is customary, is represented as an infant dressed in swaddling clothes. Christ blesses the soul of Martin.

### Uncertain

#### Stone 10. Uncertain (See Figure 48).

There is a crenellated building on the left, probably representing some city's walls. Two figures face right; the one with a squarish cap has his arm raised. There appears to be a seated figure facing the two. There also appears to be the remains of another figure in front of the standing two who is also kneeling and facing the kneeling/seated figure on the right.

A possible interpretation is that of the Magi at Bethlehem (the crenellated walls). One Magus is gesturing upward, perhaps at the star, another looks in that general direction, and the third Magus is on his knees presenting a gift to the Virgin (seated figure of the right). The apparent absence of the Christ Child on her lap is puzzling. The interpretation is highly tentative.

#### Stone 11. Uncertain (See Figure 49).

A mitered bishop with his crook is at the left side of the stone. Facing him is a veiled female (?) holding some sort of vessel. Facing away from them is a person with a squarish cap (like one of the Magi in Stone 10) with a staff who appears to be seated upon some large throne (?). One important scene lacking from our St. Martin cycle is Martin's consecration as a bishop. But this may just be due to the vicissitudes of fortune, for it appears highly improbable that Stone 11 bears upon this episode in any fashion.

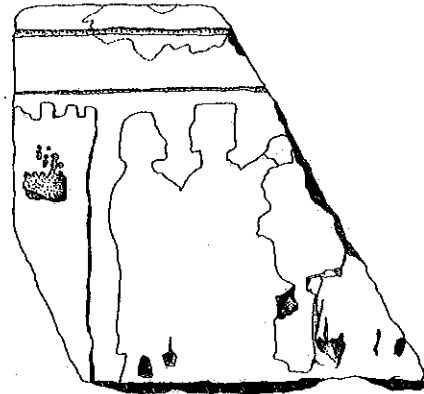


Figure 48. Drawing of Stone 10.



Figure 49. Stone 11.



**Stone 12. Uncertain (See Figure 50).**

Christ is again easily identified by the cruciform halo (incisions visible upon close examination), and again one over-sized hand is raised in benediction. There is a haloed person behind Him and some sort of structure in front of Him. The person He blesses stands stiffly before Him. One possible explanation is that this is Jesus' raising of Lazarus (left) from the grave (structure at the bottom). The haloed figure behind Christ might be either St. Mary or St. Martha, one of Lazarus' sisters.



**Figure 50. Stone 12.**

We have two distinct cycles before us, the life of St. Martin of Tours and the life of Christ. How they were arranged is virtually impossible to tell. The Martin Cycle has all of its action definitively moving from right to left: dividing the cloak to the dream to Martin's baptism to his first miracle (boat/gallows) to his death. The starting point for their arrangement would, then, be on the viewer's right and he would walk to the left to take them all in. Some of the scenes of the life of Christ are also arranged with the action going right to left: carrying the cross to the Crucifixion, to the Deposition, the Entry into Jerusalem with Christ moving to the left; this would indicate an arrangement similar to the St. Martin cycle. But other scenes seem to have their action going left to right: the Three Marys approaching the angel to the right; the Magi approaching the Virgin to the right. If the two cycles had their frames of action moving in opposite direction, this might have given an easy clue as to their arrangement: an opening in a chancel or altar screen with the cycles on either side, starting at the opening and moving in opposite directions. But such is not the case, so their arrangement remains conjectural.



**Figure 51. Sketching the reliefs in the Chapter Room.**



**Figure 52.** Uncovering a stamped tile in the vaulted room.



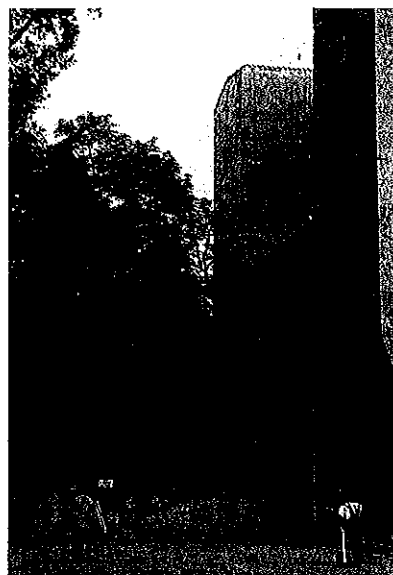
**Figure 53.** Excavation team.



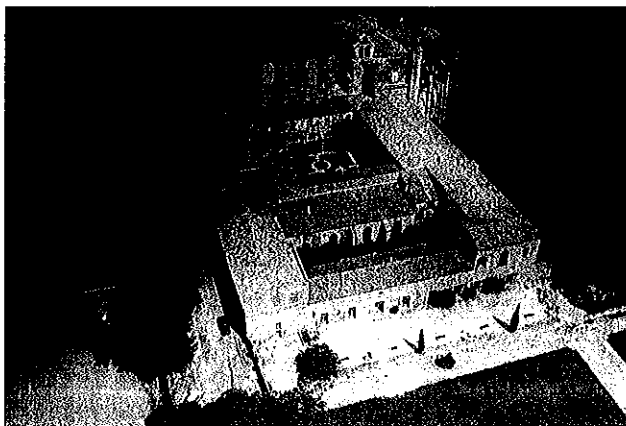
**Figure 54.** Uncovering the skeletons in the vaulted room.



**Figure 55.** View from the top of the church of the entrance to the tomb.



**Figure 56.** Survey work at Valmagne.



**Figure 57.** The Abbey of Valmagne.

## CREDITS

*A Brief History of the Cistercian Abbey of Ste. Marie de Valmagne* by Eulah Matthews and William Neidinger. Based upon the publication *Abbaye de Valmagne* by D. de Gaudart d'Allaines. Photographs by Tanja Peterson and Norma Wood.

*Stratigraphic Report* by William Neidinger and Eulah Matthews.

Photographs by Tanja Peterson, Norma Wood, and Kathy Poeppel.

Plans by Gene Ryan.

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*The Funerary Inscription* by Brian Prince.

Photograph by Norma Wood.

*The Reliefs of Valmagne* by William Neidinger.

Photographs by Tanja Peterson and Norma Wood.

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Reconstructions by Dorothy Neidinger and Sarah Reidell.

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