



LE DÉPARTEMENT

VISIT GUIDEBOOK

ABBAYE DE LA CELLE 

REMARKABLE MEDIEVAL MONUMENT



EVERYWHERE, FOR EVERYONE, THE VAR, A PLAYER IN YOUR DAILY LIFE



The Benedictine monastery of La Celle, better known as Abbaye de La Celle, is an iconic 13th century Provençal Romanesque monument. Awarded Historic Monument Status in 1886, in 1992 it was acquired by the Var Department. It has been subject to several major renovations preceded by archaeological digs that have provided an understanding of the history of the site and ensured the authenticity of the restorations. The original building was a double monastery, housing nuns and monks under the authority of the Abbey of Saint-Victor of Marseille. In the female monastery, two buildings were built in succession. The one you are visiting today was built in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, replacing an earlier set of buildings dating from the late 11th century.





A look back at a two-thousand-year history...

BEFORE THE ABBEY... THE ROMANS

The site of the monastery has been inhabited since the Iron Age. This Gallic occupation was followed by the establishment of a Gallo-Roman villa whose main activity was wine production. The discovery of the foundations of the walls during archaeological excavations made it possible to draw up a partial layout. The villa's activity was extensive from the 1st to the 6th century, thanks in particular to the proximity of the Voie Aurélia (road), which enabled commercial activity. Wine production continued until the 8th century, with modifications being made to the layout of the buildings.

The period of transition, which preceded the construction of the first monastery, from the 8th to the middle of the 10th centuries, was a time marked by conflicts that ravaged the region. Little is known about it as there are few remains from this time. A return to calm and growth at the end of the 10th century and the structuring of society around the Christian religion resulted in the construction of various religious buildings, churches but also monasteries.


THE HISTORY OF THE MONASTERY

From the 970s, the Abbaye de Saint-Victor de Marseille was developing into a major religious order in Provence. It received many donations and in 1011 the monks from Saint-Victor received agricultural land from the former Bri-gnoles territory from the Bishop of Cavaillon, on which they erected a church, dedicated to Saint-Perpétue (Perpetua), to which they added a Priory. The presence of the monks is recorded from 1074, when the term “cella” appears, which would later be the name of the community, La Celle. At the end of the 11th century, a second church was built, dedicated to Saint-Marie (Mary), as well as a monastery, home to a community of monks whose presence is recorded in 1099. The Priory of La Celle became an important female monastery, receiving the girls of aristocratic families from Provence and Languedoc. From the end of the 12th century to the middle of the 13th, the monastery was completely rebuilt, and this is what is still preserved today.

Over its 600 years of existence, there was a progressive relaxation in the observance of the Rule of St Benedict and in 1660, Mazarin, then the abbot of Saint-Victor, decided to close the monastery and transfer the community to Aix-en-Provence. The buildings slowly fell into disrepair and after the death of the last nun in 1692, they were transformed into a farm, an activity which they retained after the monastery was sold as national property in 1792



GROUND FLOOR (plan of 1st floor on page 9)

 Areas open to the public

Monastery visit

West wing before restoration



© Photo Marc Heller



1 THE RECEPTION HALL

The reception hall is one of 3 rooms updated during the archaeological explorations in the west wing in 2018. The parts of the walls that existed before the restoration were left unplastered in order to allow the building's history to be better understood. The pillar at the entrance door, made of a particularly fine stone, is one of the architectural elements that helped to reassess the chronology of the construction of the monastery. The west wing, which we thought to be the oldest part, is in fact the most recent. In the Middle Ages, there was a first floor; the notches for the floor beams are still visible in the stairwell.



2 THE INNER COURTYARD

On leaving the reception hall, one is immediately attracted by the central light source: the inner courtyard. The inner courtyard was the cloister garden. At La Celle it did not have a practical function, there was no vegetable garden or Physic garden (with medicinal plants). Until the 14th century, it was a cemetery for the nuns, then it was used for meditation and walking. It also gave light to the galleries, which were enclosed and sombre. From the south-west corner of the inner courtyard you can see its trapezoid shape most clearly. In fact, the reconstruction of the monastery ran into financial difficulties in the 13th century and the planned orthogonal shape could not be completed. The new construction of the west wing was built on the foundations of the original monastery

3 THE CELLAR

Before visiting the cloister, we invite you to go into the “cellar” room. It is named such because plaster remains characteristic of food stores were found on its walls. It is partly composed of walls dating back to the first monastery, the one with openings and the one with five small windows. The arches on the walls suggest what must have been a beautiful arcaded room. The wall with the windows is reminiscent of a parlour that allowed communication with people outside the monastery (monks or visitors

►► After the cellar, the visit continues upstairs.

4 THE TERRACES



Access to the terraces is via the west wing, whose restoration has created a connection with the other terraces for a complete circuit around the courtyard.

During the time when the nuns lived here, the terrace right next to the dormitory was certainly covered, as we see numerous notches for beams

still visible on the façade. In the north, the wall of the church of Saint-Marie still has the remains of the supports for a staircase, which gave access to the octagonal bell tower surmounted by a Provençal campanile, built in the 19th century, and for a sundial, of which only the rectangular location remains under the eaves.

5 THE DORMITORY

At 28.8m long and 8.20m wide, it is the largest room in the monastery. It is vaulted and divided into five openings with double arches which are supported by single bases. It is also the brightest room, because it has openings on the four sides: two oculi (round windows) in the gable walls, four openings to the east over the gardens and two openings and a door on the courtyard side (the large door is a later creation). We have very little information about the layout of the dormitory, but it is known that in 1231 the prioress had a single room. In a later period, the space was divided to create individual cells.

The dormitory, like the refectory, was designed for around 50 nuns. From the 14th century, the hundred or so nuns that made up the monastery must have been housed in small dwellings within the gardens, of which there is no longer any evidence, except on a plan dating from 1659. In the 18th century, the dormitory was transformed into a silkworm farm and then into a hayloft.

▶▶ After visiting the dormitory, go down the stairs to continue your visit on the ground floor.

6 THE FORMER PARLOUR

This room has been left as it was discovered in 2018 because it contains remains that span the site's entire occupation period, from the Roman villa to the present monastery. It has undergone many alterations, since at the time of the first monastery it was larger and could not be accessed from the women's monastery since its function was that of a parlour. During the reconstruction, a large opening was made in it, changing its use. As you leave the parlour in the south gallery, you will notice on the floor the many coloured slabs that mark the remains of foundations, which pre-date the present monastery: red for the ancient villa, grey for the primitive monastery and blue for the water pipes

7 THE KITCHEN

This room, which had collapsed at the end of the 18th century and was filled with 4 metres of rubble, was cleared and excavated in 2011. Barrel vaulted, with an almost square shape, it measures 7.70m by 7m. The archaeological excavations have revealed much about its use over several centuries. The medieval kitchen reused part of the ancient

Reconstruction of the medieval kitchen - Created by Edikom.



concrete floor, linked to the pressing plant of the Gallo-Roman villa, which was completed with paving. The walls have niches and putlog holes made for inserting shelves. A large part of the space was used for the cooking fires, laid out on the ground. They left black marks that are still visible there, as well as on the west wall.

To support the pipe at its highest point, a counterweight from the ancient wine press was reused. A fenestra, a medieval term for a serving hatch, was built into the wall separating the kitchen from the refectory

8 THE REFECTORY



© Francisco Flaniginy



Reconstruction of the refectory

This room, which is an extension of the kitchen, had also collapsed. It was cleared and then an archaeological excavation was carried out in 2011-2012. Following canonical layout, the refectory was built in the opposite wing to the church. This vast space of 23.4m by 6.9m has five openings on the south side of the same design as those of the dormitory and the chapter house. The semi-circular vault, divided into three openings supported by two double arches, was completely restored in 2014. Opposite the entrance, a second door opened onto buildings and gardens, which extended to the south into the monastic enclosure. Masonry benches ran along three sides. In the eastern part, the raised bench marks the places reserved for the prioress and the sisters with specific duties. The

dimensions of the refectory (162 m²) reflect the volumes used by the large regional monastic foundations to accommodate the whole community during meals. In 1227, the abbot of Saint-Victoire placed a limit of 50 nuns at La Celle and this number probably dictated the dimensions of the refectory and dormitory. Leaving the refectory, the beige floor slabs indicate the location of the circular washbasin of the early monastery, which was used for the ablutions of the nuns. With an internal diameter of 4.20 m, it was destroyed when the new cloister gallery was extended. At the south-east corner of the cloister gallery, a wooden staircase or ladder, now replaced by a metal staircase, led to a door under the vault to access the dormitory



9 THE HEATING ROOM AND THE NUNS' ROOM

At the bottom of the stairs is a room with a semi-circular vault that is not open for visi-

ting. The chimney flue in the room identifies it as the boiler room, the only heated room in the monastery whose access was codified by the Benedictine rule. It is the same size as the adjoining room, the nuns' room, whose function is not defined

10 THE PARLOUR AND THE ARMARIA

Adjacent to the nuns' room, a corridor, which was closed by a door at each end, connects the cloister and the gardens integrated into the monastic enclosure. In this enclosed, very narrow, space the nuns were able to exchange several words, thus breaking the Rule, hence its name (parler = to speak in French). After the parlour, the walls of the gallery have three recesses originally with doors that were called armaria. They were used to store books for the nuns, although few of them were able to read

11 THE CHAPTER HOUSE

The Chapter house room was an essential space in the life of the nuns: it was the place where the community gathered each day and where the prioress received distinguished visitors. It is accessed through a pointed arch door. On each side of the door, two large openings, subdivided into three semi-circular arches supported by twin columns. This architecture is a restoration carried out in 1962, mainly inspired by the Chapter House in the Abbaye du Thoronet dating from the same period, with which this monastery has several similarities. The room, built in 128, measures 8m by 12m. It is divided into two aisles with three spans. The rib vaulting is supported by two squat columns whose capitals are decorated with waterleaves accompanied by floral decorations, 'pattée' crosses and volutes. The use of the rib vaults in a building of Romanesque style was not uncommon in the early 13th century.

In the walls, the crosspieces rest on bases decorated with relief accolades ending in an embellishment. The three openings in the eastern wall illuminate the room from the east. Around the perimeter of the room, there are traces of the removal of benches on which the nuns used to sit during the chapter meetings.

From the late 18th century, this room was a barn for sheep when the abbey was converted into a farm.



Chapter House Vaults

© Photo Marc Heller



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12 THE CHURCH OF SAINTE-MARIE

Consecrated in 1056, this conventual building, today a parish church dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption, was originally reserved for the women's community, which met there eight times a day for services, following the rule of Saint Benedict. The current-day church is a reconstruction from the last quarter of the 12th century. The Romanesque nave, 20.5m long and 7.8m wide, is made up of three aisles and the semi-circular vault rests on very substantial walls of 1.9m thick in the north and 1.5m in the south. In the Middle Ages, access was only via the cloister, the opening in the façade dates from 1816 when Abbot Brun, the rector of the parish, re-established services.

Originally, three doors opened directly onto the cloister. The eastern door, closest to the choir, was reserved for the nuns, while the western door was used by the novices. Between these doors, a third passageway gave access, via a staircase set into the thickness of the wall, to a gallery, which no longer exists today. The simplicity of the church of Saint-Marie, characterised by its verticality and bare walls, fits perfectly with the Romanesque art style in Provence, seen also at Le Thoronet, Sénanque and Silvacane. The liturgical furnishings, assembled in the first part of the 19th century, come in part from the former church of Sainte-Perpétue, then in ruins, which had served as the parish church until the Revolution.

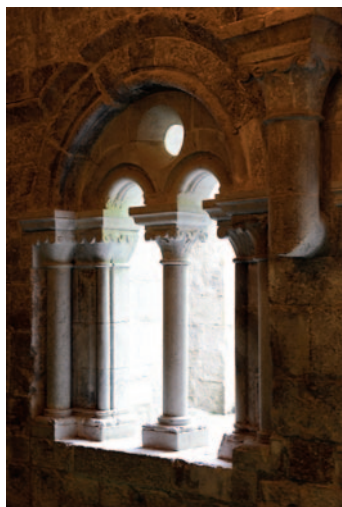


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Baroque altarpiece with the date 1682 In the centre, a panel painted on wood, called the "painting of the Cross", dating from the early 16th century, is inspired by an engraving by Albrecht Dürer.




13 THE CLOISTER GALLERIES

The galleries are covered with barrel vaults punctuated by double arches and lead onto the courtyard through double openings. Since the restoration of the west wing in 2020, all the galleries are accessible. They suffered with the agricultural activity and removal of stones after the sale of the monastery in the 18th century. Only the double openings in the north gallery were restored to their original state in 1990. The capitals on the columns are made up of plant motifs and complex mouldings. The bases feature claws decorated with leaves and, in some cases, with a small coiled animal.



FIRST FLOOR

 Areas open to the public



LE DÉPARTEMENT



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FREE ADMISSION

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