

## The Cistercian order

### The main founders

At the dawn of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Clunisian monastic order was in its heyday, enjoying



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, advocating humility, obedience, poverty and the right 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”, lived a life of work and prayer. In 1153, when Saint Bernard died, Clairvaux had over 160 monks, and the new Cistercian family had almost 350 abbeys.

### Glossary

**Chevet:** 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.

**Geminate:** double

**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.

**Recessed tomb:** 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.



#### Gift and book shop

The guide to this monument is available in the 'Itinéraires' collection in 5 different languages, in the bookshop-giftshop.

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# Le Thoronet Abbey

## A wonder among Cistercian Abbeys

### Foundation

With its sister abbeys, 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



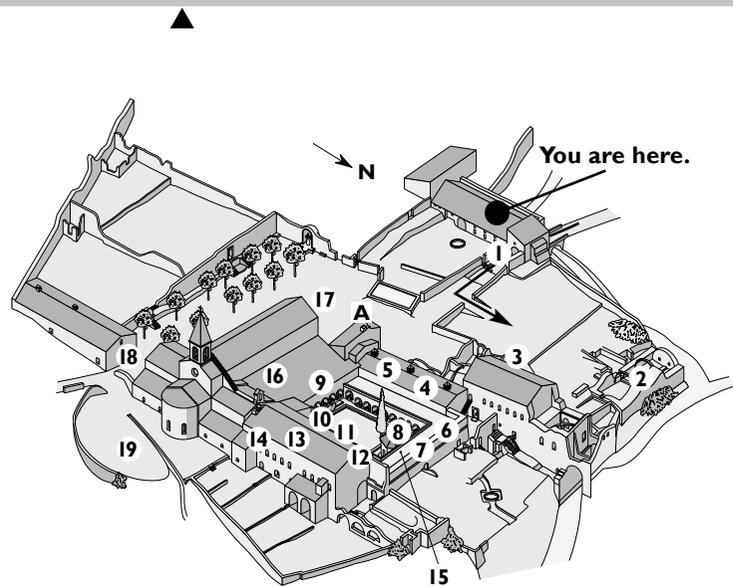
in 1160 and continued until 1230. In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, the monastery was home to around twenty monks and a similar number of lay brothers\*.

### 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 informing 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.



**A** Introductory visit room

Le Thoronet Abbey expresses the very essence of Cistercian art with its extreme sobriety, pure lines and simple shapes dictated essentially by the organisation of community life in accordance with the Rule of St Benedict. Its architecture inspired generations of architects like Le Corbusier and Fernand Pouillon, whose book *Les Pierres Sauvages* recounts its construction.

## The monastic square

### 1 The gatehouse

2 On the remains of the **hostelry**, at the edge of the river, arch-beams have been restored to give a clearer idea of the size of the lower hall where important guests were received.

3 The **lay building**, partly restored, consisted of a refectory on the ground floor and a first-floor dormitory.

4 The **cellar**, where the monks made wine and olive oil, the abbey's main sources of income, contains some 18<sup>th</sup> century wine vats, and opposite, an oil press operated by a screw system. Ventilation chimneys prevented the accumulation of alcohol fumes. A beautiful pointed barrel-vaulted ceiling covers the room.

### 5 The model

6 The **cloister**. The heart of the monastery, linking the church with the community's living quarters. The thick walls, with geminate\* arches, the simple oculus\* piercing the tympanum and the capitals devoid of any ornamentation confer a sense of exceptional austerity on the space.

7 The **remains of the refectory** evoke a building formerly accessible from the cloister.

8 The **lavabo** is located, as is the custom, opposite the door to the refectory, which no longer exists.

### 9 The south gallery

10 The **armarium** or **library** notably housed the choir books, as well as manuscripts.

11 The **chapter house**, where the monks assembled every morning to read a chapter of St Benedict's rules and to discuss issues relating to community life, was also used to elect the abbot. The architecture is more elaborate and shows early gothic influence with cross-ribbed vaults\* resting on two columns with decorated capitals.

12 The **parlour**, a passageway between the cloister and the outer garden, was the only place where monks were permitted to talk. Here, they allocated duties before starting work in the fields.

13 The **dormitory**, on the upper floor, with the abbot's cell on the left. A monk slept in each bay. The placement of each straw mattress is marked by stone paving.

14 The **archive**, adjoining the dormitory, features a barrel vault and two stained-glass windows.

### 15 The terrace

16 The western façade of the **church** is striking by its simplicity, highlighted by the quality of its stonework. As at Sénèque, there is no central door, as the church was not open to the faithful. There are only two side doors, both leading to the side-aisles. The left door was for lay brothers\*, the right door for the monks. Built into the south wall of the church is one of the only exterior recessed tombs\* in Provence. Inside, the barrel-vaulted nave has three bays. The choir finishes with a semi-domed\* vaulted nave with three arched windows symbolising the Trinity. The absence of decoration highlights the purity of the lines. The sung services, enhanced by exceptional acoustics, regulated the spiritual lives of the monks.

### 17 The western façade

18 The **'Grange Dîmière'**, or tithe hall, near the Lorgues door, was where agricultural produce was collected, the 'dîme', or tithe, being a tax collected by the abbey, which managed a vast seignior.

19 The **monks' cemetery** is located in the chevet\* of the church. Deceased monks were brought here through the 'door of the dead'. The strict rules imposing poverty on the monks meant that they were buried in a simple white shroud, with neither coffin nor headstone.