

# FOCUS

## ON THE CANONS' CLOISTER OF SAINT- VINCENTS CATHEDRAL



**A CLOSER LOOK AT  
CHALON-SUR-SAÔNE**

**VILLES  
& PAYS  
D'ART &  
D'HISTOIRE  
à DIRE**

**Chalon  
sur Saône**

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## According to :

Gilbert Prieur, *The cloister of Saint-Vincent cathedral*, memories of the SHAC.

Frédéric Didier, *The cloister, Chalon-sur-Saône of Saint-Vincent cathedral*, in *Monuments of Saône-et-Loire*, Bresse bourguignonne, Chalonnais, Tournugeois, French Archaeological Congress, French Archaeological Society, 2008

Benjamin Saint-Jean-Vitus, *Under the Gothic galleries, a corner of Cabillonum and a cloister of the millet*, operation report of Archaeological excavations, INRAP, July 2018

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The restoration of the gothic cloister of Saint-Vincent's cathedral in Chalon-sur-Saône involved a number of archaeological surveys between 2015 and 2017, both on the upper parts of the peripheral walls, in the floor of the galleries and in the central garden. These recent studies have completely changed our understanding of the how these places have evolved from ancient times to the 16th century. Furthermore, the major restoration works to the gothic cloister which took place from 2013 to 2019 have given us a monument today the like of which has not seen by anyone since...

## **ROMAN ANTIQUITY (1ST – 5TH CENTURY)**

### **STRUCTURED URBAN ORGANISATION**

On the cloister site the excavations, dug to around 3 metres deep, revealed an outline of structured urban organisation from the first half of the 1st century AD. The discovery of two main walls, running parallel to the river Saône, reveal the outlines of the roads and buildings in the current neighbourhood. The remains of houses with wood frames and mud walls, reflect the activity of a very lively residential area. The clues given by the ceramic goods or the many fragments of painted plaster prove the presence of a relatively « affluent » population. After the beginning of the 2nd century there follows a period of more than three centuries of which no trace remains. During this lapse in time, a first fortified enclosure was built (circa 260 – 340 AD) which surrounded this part of the town. In the final decades of the 4th century or around the year 400, buildings on wooden pilings were discovered, associated with the main walls from



the 1st century. These walls would have run alongside a road, which was probably situated at the junction between the cathedral and the cloister.

## **THE SITE IN THE MEROVINGIAN ERA (5TH – 7TH CENTURY)**

### **THE BIRTH OF THE CATHEDRAL**

With the spread of Christianity in the 5th century, Chalon-sur-Saône became a bishopric. It was a dazzling period for the town, in particular under the reign of Gontran, king of Burgundy (561-593 AD) who made it his capital. At the end of the 6th century, Gregoire of Tours made the first explicit mention of a building housing the church of a bishop – or cathedral – in Chalon-sur-Saône, but without giving its actual location. It is thought that this was close to where the current cathedral is found. In addition, the excavations in the presbytery courtyard have revealed layers of « Merovingian » occupation. Evidence in the soil, followed by large levelling embankments attest to a major restructuring towards the beginning of the 6th century. A new series of floors and layers of occupation follow until at least the start of the 7th century. One could ask if these new dwellings were already a part of the complex linked to the neighbouring cathedral.

# FROM « A CHURCH PALACE » TO A GRAIN SILO

1. Detail of the East wing

© INRAP

2. East wing, general view

© INRAP

## LE SITE À L'ÉPOQUE

### DE L'EMPIRE CAROLINGIEN

#### THE SITE AT THE TIME OF THE CAROLINGIAN EMPIRE (END OF THE 8TH - 10TH CENTURY)

A prosperous Carolingian town in the 9th century, in 834 Chalon was looted and burnt by the troops of Lothaire, grandson of Charlemagne. By removing the previous major constructions, a large group of buildings with interior floors of cement is documented in nearly all the excavation zones. It is bounded to the north west by a wall made re-using ancient cut stones and which extends to the north in the direction of the cathedral, surrounding a great courtyard paved in large slabs notched with a lateral trough. This together revealed an edifice that was certainly included in the residential complex of the « domus ecclesiae » or « house of the church ». The presence of fragments of marble or coloured porphyry and three blocks sculpted in bas-relief seem to confirm the importance and decorative wealth of this period on this part of the site and in the cathedral. However, the whole place was once again razed and partially destroyed at the end of the 9th century, beginning of the 10th century, by a fire. It was left for several decades as an open space (a courtyard more or less paved), over time pierced by pits of which several revealed underground siloes (where reserves of grain were stored).



Cement floor

© Ville de Chalon-sur-Saône



## **THE FIRST TRACES OF THE CURRENT CLOISTER**

### **A FOUNDATION THAT DATES FROM THE YEAR ONE THOUSAND**

Since the early Middle Ages, a bishop has had a college of priests to help him with his duties: the canons. In 816 the synod of Aix la Chapelle tried to impose a cloistered life on canons everywhere. The presence of canons at Chalon-sur-Saone is attested to in writings from 885.

The archaeological surveys and digs have been able to determine that around the year 1000 this space was definitely bounded by the four walls that enclose the current cloister. Under the wall coatings of today, the original elevations are preserved to between 4 and 8 metres high.

The spacing and types of primitive openings (blocked off today) leave no doubt as to the function of this place. One entered the site through a large doorway centred on the north wall, next to the cathedral. On the three other sides were ranged the facades of the canons' buildings: the aspect of the two large twin bays on the eastern side (next to the current rectory) each originally topped with a triple arch of double rolls, brings to mind a Chapter House (daily meeting place for the canons under the direction of their Dean). The whole thing was constructed in successive large horizontal sections, with no real break. Mention should be made of the sandstone benches, which reinforce the comparison with the remains of the former powerful Abbey of St

Pierre (the remains of which are visible on Rue Doneau and Rue Saint-Alexandre in Chalon). All that is missing are the cloister galleries, and these were very probably wooden porticoes adjoining the façade.

These remains show that the Chalon cloister is an older building than the cathedral itself (rebuilt around 1090) and the oldest in the region still standing. This cloister performed the same function here as those found in the abbeys: it gave the canons a place of peace and serenity, ideal for reading and meditation. The covered gallery ensured shelter from sun or rain.

These augmentations were repeated many times between the end of the 11th century and the 12th century, echoing the reconstructions of the cathedral itself, and along with the evolution of the practice of community life. This explains the blocking of the doorway in the « north wall », on the cathedral side. One of the two windows in the possible Chapter House was also blocked, which might have corresponded with a reduction in the number of canons or a change in the community practices, leading to a change of use of the buildings. In effect, between the 10th and 14th centuries, the mission of the canons changed: they still had to assist the bishop in spiritual matters, but also become involved in the care of the building, its financial management or the administration of the diocese. Little by little, they gained a certain amount of independence from the bishop, whilst still remaining attached to the service of the cathedral.



## THE GOTHIC CLOISTER

### A LATTICED TRIPLE ARCHWAY

In this context, the reconstruction of the cathedral from the 13th century involved the construction of a new Chapter House outside the cloister. The canons moved into independent houses surrounding a closed courtyard called the « great cloister » (where the current Saint-Vincent cloister is located). Nearby, the buildings surrounding the 11th century courtyard (eventually called « little cloister ») were greatly modified during the 14th century. This is notable in the case of the East wing, which housed from this time the Dean's house (current presbytery). In the 14th to 15th century, a stairway tower called « Tour du Doyenné » was constructed in stone and brick for the Dean of Chapter. This was sold in the 19th century, dismantled and transported to Paris, then bought back by an American philanthropist and brought back to Chalon-sur-Saone (today found at the point of St Laurent island).

The major works earlier in the 14th century around the « little cloister » prepared the way for the installation, in 1400, of the latticed triple archway which today still surrounds the galleries. There is no doubt that this work was initiated by Bishop Olivier de Martreuil (1387-1405). The galleries all have six bays that give numerous openings, each subdivided into three lancet windows whose three lobed arches with perforated spandrels. The trellis is built on a low

wall and mounted on a rough blind wall topped with a row of stones. The dressed stones are mostly a local fine-grained limestone, light in colour, that comes from Fontaines near Chalon, in addition to other, more yellow, limestone. As was often the case at the time, the gallery was covered with a framework roof, which left the façade open with no need to install buttresses. However, the Chalon galleries have one notable change : for every third lancet, one pillar is stronger (larger) than the others. This probably corresponded with a structural improvement at the level of the roof frame : the trusses had tie beams (horizontal beams, perpendicular to the cloister walls) which supported the weight of the wall on the trellis, removing the need for the lateral stresses found in other forms of roof frame.

Even though the positions of the original pathways to the central garden are not well known, it seems that in each gallery, the path corresponds with a mis-aligned lancet, the supports being even in number. The columns are supported by bays that are on a prismatic base and which have capitals decorated with repetitive foliage, very typical of the 14th century. There have been pits and a furnace discovered during the excavations in the central yard, which reflect the life of this site.

It is from this period that the first burials within the galleries start to appear, more numerous in the modern period.



### 1. 12th century furnace

© Ville de Chalon-sur-Saône

### 2. Saint-Vincent's cloister

© Ville de Chalon-sur-Saône

### 3. Detail of a lancet arch from the cloister in Chalon

© Jean-Luc Petit

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## VAULTS ON INTERSECTIONS OF THE STONE LANCET ARCH

Work recommenced around 1500 after a long break. It is from this time that the covering of the galleries with brick over intersections of the stone lancet arches, typical of the gothic period, date. On the garden side of the cloister, these vaults were supported by a series of large buttresses. Built as a result of donations by wealthy Chalon families, these vaults often have the coat of arms of their benefactors carved on the key stones (where the two arches meet).

Following on from these works, at the beginning of the 16th century work resumed on the north-east corner bay (at the cloister entrance), where the « dropped keystone » arch is ornamented with decorative ribs (lierns and tiercerons) and carved motifs. It is flanked by a small chapel – dedicated to the saints Cosimo and Damien. The most remarkable decoration from this period has since disappeared. It was a large Calvary erected in the centre of the garden, surrounded by the figures of Mary Magdalene, the prophets and angels. A final embellishment would be added during the Renaissance in the north aisle, with the installation of a funereal recess or « enfeu », which again proves the existence of graves on the site. During the wars of religion, which were violent in Chalon, especially in 1562, the carved group in the centre of the



garden disappeared, and most of the coats of arms on the keystones were destroyed. As everywhere else, monastic life relaxed and the cloister lost its usefulness. By the 18th century it appears that some of the canon's houses were beginning to infringe on the gallery. However, in 1774 maintenance work took place and we know that the doors of the main entrance to the cloister were replaced in 1778.



## FROM THE REVOLUTION TO TODAY HISTORICAL MONUMENT

Sold as property of the state in 1793, the cloister was divided into lots and had multiple owners; buildings, mostly housing, were erected in the centre of the quadrangle. The northern gallery was destroyed to allow an extension to a house situated on the Rue de la Poissonnerie. The eastern gallery and the former chapter house which had become the presbytery, were donated to the town in 1821. However, from 1855 to 1903, the town's alignment plan provided, for reasons of health, for the demolition of the cloister in order to create a street parallel to the Rue de L'Eveche. It was Abbot Mugnier, vicar then abbot of the parish from 1895 to 1924, who was responsible for the reconstruction and the first restoration of the whole of the remaining cloister. He started in 1895 by installing a catechism chapel in the eastern gallery, including clearing the lattices and filling them with grey-toned stained-glass windows, made by the Chalon master Besnard. There was insufficient light due to the neighbouring buildings so four oval windows, or « oculi », were created in the vault. The sloping roof was replaced by a flat roof, thus allowing the windows on the first floor of the presbytery to be enlarged. The priest continued with his acquisitions in 1896, then, from 1907 with the separation of church and state, he continued his work under the auspices of the parish association. The whole of the area of the cloister, with the exception of the north west corner, was bought back between 1912 and 1924.

From 1914 to 1924, Edmond Malo, the architect for Historical Monuments, cleared the garden and restored the east, south and north galleries (next to the rue Edgar-Quinet, rue du Cloître and rue de la Poissonnerie). It is no doubt through his driving force that the cloister was then classified as an Historic Monument in 1928. From 1931, the chief architect Paul Genlis proposed the restoring of the sloped rooves over a part of the galleries, in place of the flat roofs which were not watertight. Due to a lack of available funding, this project did not take place. In 1951, his successor Maurice Berry, made the terraces watertight by a simple reconstruction of the flat roofs, removing the east facing openings that had been made in the vault during the 19th century.

In 1956 the town became the owner of the cloister, as a result of a donation, and in 1962 some improvements were made by Maurice Berry : the parasitic floor built over the south gallery (next to Place du Cloître) was demolished and replaced with a terrace, while the separating wall in the north west corner of the garden was brought back into alignment with the gallery, allowing a better reading of the site of the cloister. It was at this time that the coping of the 17th century well, which came from the Chateau de La Loyere was rebuilt on top of a pre-existing well.





**1/2. The cloister at the beginning  
of the 20th century**

© Musée Nicéphore Niépce

**3. The well from the Château de la Loyère**

© Jean-Luc Petit



# RESPECTING ARCHITECTURAL CODES WITHOUT COPYING THEM

## THE RE-BIRTH OF THE CLOISTER

In 2009, the site was closed to the public as a result of serious damage to the building following water infiltration, and in 2010 a preliminary restoration study was undertaken. The decision to proceed with the complete restoration was taken by the town in 2012. The main contractor, chosen following a public tender process, carried out detailed studies of the work, and the contracts were awarded to companies at the end of 2013.

It was decided to remove the existing flat roofs, which were unattractive and responsible for the water infiltrations. Traditional tiled roofs were installed on each gallery, sloping only towards the central garden, as they had been originally. Special attention was paid to the collection of rain water. The creation of a large channel between the facades and the re-establishment of the attic spaces allowed the



existing windows to be cleared. Similarly, the overhanging roofs direct the water towards the flagstones at the base of the facades. The water evacuation system has been placed underground in order to stabilize the masonry of the galleries.

The restoration, which cost in total 1.2 million euros, extended through several stages. In 2014 and 2015 the three existing galleries, east, south (next to the place du Cloître) and west were waterproofed. From this point on, there was no further degradation. The restoration of the interior of these three galleries took place from the second half of 2015 and up until the beginning of 2017. At this point, the damaged stones were replaced, the sculptures and ribs of the vaults were cleaned and restored, then a lime wash was put over the walls and the vaults.





Finally the north wing, which had partially disappeared, was completely restored in 2018 and 2019. This consisted of a gallery with lattice made to blend with the existing galleries, but with a recognisable and more modern architectural style, according to the wishes of the representatives of the « Direction Regionale des Affaires Culturelles ». The objective was that visitors would be able to differentiate between the original conserved galleries and the one that had been rebuilt. It was no easy task to reconstruct this part of the cloister, following the established architectural codes of the time, but without simply making a facsimile. By working together, all the different trades involved in the renovation have done a harmonious and meticulous job.

In the spirit of the existing mediaeval and 19th century capitals, 40 sculptures in Saint-Marc stone (Burgundy limestone) carved by the sculptor Laëtitia de Bazelaire de Rupierre decorate the capitals of the new north wing of the Saint-Vincent's canons' cloister. This restoration is completed by the laying out of the garden, which gives this place back its calm and peace.

The whole operation was the subject of ongoing consultation with residents and owners of adjoining buildings in the cloister. The town of Chalon has benefitted from the financial support of the State (Ministry of Culture and Communication and the Interior Ministry), from the region of Burgundy Franche-Comté and of the department of Saône et Loire.



# « HOW CAN ONE NOT LOVE CLOISTERS (...) ? »

Guy de Maupassant, *Travelling*, 1890

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## **Le service animation**

### **de l'architecture et du patrimoine,**

run by the architecture and heritage activity leader, organises various events based on discovering the architectural and cultural riches of the town for its inhabitants of all ages, as well as for its visitors, with the help of professional guides.

**Nearby**, Autun, Auxerre, Besançon, Bourges, Dijon, Dôle, Joigny, La Charité-sur-Loire, Langres, Moulins and Nevers all benefit from the title of « Ville d'art et d'histoire »; the countryside of Auxois, the countryside of Charolais-Brionnais, the countryside between Cluny and Tournus and the countryside of Montbéliard, benefit from the title « Pays d'art et d'histoire ».

## **Renseignements, réservations**

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