

THE THREE MAIN ABBEYS OF LYONS

TOPIC

ROOM 4: ABBEYS DURING THE MIDDLE AGES

The Savigny-en-Lyonnais abbey

Origins

The origins of the foundation of the Savigny Abbey, located 30 km to the north-west of Lyons, are unclear. Secure sources taken from its collection of deeds and charters (825) refer to its existence around the 9th c. However, there is no information regarding the date or persons responsible for its foundation.

Soar

During the 9th c., the royal abbey was placed under the dependency of the Church of Lyons by King Lothaire: it became Episcopal. Between 934 and 939, the abbey and the area were ravaged by the Hungarians. Abbot Badin launched its reconstruction, which increased the area considerably. Abbot Gausmar brought back relics from the Holy Land, which he donated to the abbey, thereby contributing to its wealth. Between 960 and 970, the three major abbeys of Lyonnais - Savigny, Ile-Barbe and Ainay - established the seigneurial system. In 976, the Lyons region was part of the kingdom of Burgundy, under the tutelage of the Holy Roman German Empire. The abbey gained its freedom thanks to Conrad le Pacifique (Pacifist), King of Burgundy.

The abbey played a key role in the struggle for the domination of the Count of Lyons, which earned him reprisals from the Counts of Forez in the late 10th c. It developed a self-defence strategy by having solid houses built and repurchasing such properties. Its political, economic and spiritual power was such that, in the middle of the 11th c., its territory extended to the dioceses of Lyons, Mâcon, Lausanne and Die!

Concerned by this power, Archbishop Renaud de Forez (**Inv. N 2595.1 - Son sceau – His seal**) suddenly stopped his donations at the turn of the 13th c. The abbey approached the sires of Beaujeu in order to fend off any attack. But, faced with this rebellion, the Archbishop used force to maintain his influence: The abbey was conquered... Savigny soon got back on track continuing an organisational policy.

Decline

In the 16th c., the "abbey barons" belonging to the Albon family followed in succession without any major consideration for the rule of Saint-Benoît*. This marked the start of the abbey's decline, accelerated by the invasion of the Huguenots in 1562 (**Inv. 1283.3 - Fac-simile of the plan of the abbey**). At the request of the monks, the abbey was suppressed by pontifical seal on 22 June 1780, and then sold as a national asset for the Revolution. Today, a few relics remain, incorporated in the local landscape.



François d'Albon, Chanoine-Count of Lyons, Abbot Savigny up to 1645, oil on canvas painting, 17th c., Inv. 71.1

Ainay Abbey

Origins

In 859, the first trace of the existence of Ainay Abbaye refers to its abbot, Aurélien. A contemporary text states that the abbey had been abandoned. Aurélien restored it with the assistance of the Bonneval Abbey monks (Chartres diocese). Appointed Archbishop of Lyons in 875, he remained in charge of the abbey until his death in 895.



Vue de Lyon remontant par le Rhône (view of Lyons upstream from the Rhône), extract showing Ainay Abbey, engraving by Israël Sylvestre, Inv. N 3471.02

Soar

The abbey, dedicated to Saint Martin, came under Benedictine rule. Belonging to the Church of Lyons, like Savigny, it was destroyed by the invasion of the Hungarians in the first half of the 10th c. Major restoration works were carried out by Abbot Amblard. Dedicated by Pope Pascal II in 1107, it rapidly expanded, making it an important heritage property in the districts of Lyons. Two pontifical seals dating from 1153 and 1250 confirm its merits: it had no less than 169 priories and parish churches, and owned a large half of the land south of the Lyons peninsula.

Decline

The decline started in the 13th c. A material crisis ensued: The abbey's income fell due to poor administration and extravagant spending. This was accompanied by a spiritual crisis: Monastery life left much to be desired and provisions were put in place to prevent monks from eating in the inns of the town or from sleeping outside the monastery... In the end, the crisis became political: In 1349, the justice exerted by the abbey was subjected to the secular court of the Archbishop.

Ainay became a social venue, frequented by the kings of France (**Inv. 55.144 - Reconstruction of the abbey in the 16th c.**). Ransacked in 1562 by Baron des Adrets during the pillaging of Lyons, its secularisation* followed in 1685. It became collegial* - the Benedictine monks became canons living around the church - and then swiftly parochial when the Archbishop of Lyons halted services in the neighbouring Saint-Michel church.

During the Revolution, the ramparts of the abbey collapsed and the canons' houses were sold. As for the church, it was used as a military warehouse before reverting back to a parish church in the days of the Empire.

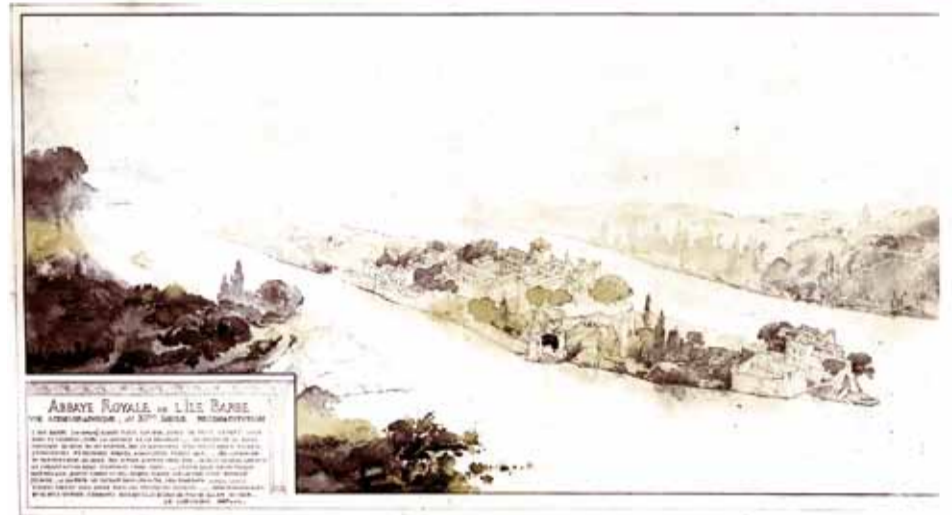
The Ile-Barbe Abbey

Origins

The Ile-Barbe Abbey to the north was the first monastery in Lyons. It was first mentioned as far back as the 6th c.: Grégoire de Tours referred to Maxime (Saint-Mesme), who, in the 5th c., would have witnessed a miracle on leaving the monastery in an attempt to go and set up another one in Chinon. In 515, the abbot of Ile Barbe, Loup, became Bishop of Lyons.

Soar

During the 8th c., the abbey was ransacked by Charles Martel. In the 9th c., it benefited from reconstruction by Bishop Leidrade and accommodated 90 monks. The Saint-Benoît rule was introduced at this time. In the 10th c., it owned a large heritage property in Val de Saône, the Dombes and Forez regions, and benefited from numerous privileges. Its fame (**Inv. 70.11.3 - Plan of the abbey in the 11th c.**), backed up by legendary tales of fabulous relics, attracted numerous pilgrims, thus boosting donations and allowing many foundations. In the late 12th c., the abbey controlled 40 priories and about a hundred or so churches and chapels!



Vue cavalière scénographique de l'île Barbe et de son abbaye au XI^e s. [a view on horseback of Ile Barbe and its abbey during the 11th c.], photograph of a painting, 1906, Inv. N 3009.29

Decline

In 1353, the Archbishop of Lyons was obliged to intervene and, following an enquiry, replaced the Abbey following increasing pilfering of income. Faced with pressure from local lords, the abbey had to relinquish land and several foundations disappeared. In the early 16th c., it was controlled by a "commende"* system benefiting the Albon family. In 1549, the Pope announced its secularisation: it became collegial. Damaged in 1562 by Baron des Adrets, its archives were scattered and its reconstruction lagged behind.

During the Revolution, the buildings were sold in lots like a national asset. Most of the convent buildings, churches and chapels were gradually destroyed as the dwellings were being constructed and the stone was reused in the new building works.

TO READ:

Topic data sheet
Roman
iconography

glossary

Collegial: Church having a number of canons without being the centre of episcopal authority.

commende: a system according to which an abbot or a layman held an abbey and received income for it without actually residing there.

Saint Benoît rule: a rule governing monastery and spiritual life established by Saint Benoît, describing the offices, work and other aspects of everyday life.

secularisation: the transfer of church assets to the public domain or the removal of religious institutions from the functions for which they were responsible.