English

The "Peace of God"

A peace movement

The late 10th century was troubled by numerous outbreaks of violence. The days when the Carolingian* sovereigns imposed a certain degree of protection had become a thing of the past, and the knightly class had not yet assimilated the norms of Christian morality. They were constantly at war, ravaging the countryside and showing no respect for the poor, women, or clerics. Two peace councils* were thus held at the turn of the millennium.

The Council* of Charroux

The Council* that was called at Charroux in 989 had by far the greatest impact. It issued anathemas against those who violated the church, pillaged the poor, and ill-treated clerics at a time when banishment from the Catholic community amounted to being excluded from society. The Council* thus started a process of social reorganisation by the Church coinciding with the development of the great monastic orders and arrival of the first reforming popes. The Council* of Charroux marks the birth of a spiritual and social movement still known as the "Peace of God", and laid down the moral principles of medieval society by establishing the rights and duties of the three orders of the clergy, the warrior nobility, and the farmers. The Church subsequently laid down periods of peace, from Wednesday evening to Monday morning and throughout Lent, so as to contain private wars and protect the population. Three other councils* were subsequently held at the abbey during the 10th and 11th centuries, showing the spiritual importance of Charroux.

Explanations overleaf.

Glossary

Apsidal chapel: a small chapel around the choir or chevet of a church.
Arching: a small vault covering the deep opening of a bay.
Benedictine: one who follows the Rule of Saint Benedict.
Carolingian: from the period of Charlemagne.
Commendatory abbot: from the 16th century to the French Revolution, a person named by the king to draw the revenues of an abbey but without residing there.
Council: an assembly of bishops called to rule on questions of doctrine, morality, or discipline.
Prosper Mérimée (1803-1870): one of the first historical monument inspectors.
Rotunda: a circular construction with columns and often covered by a dome.
Tetramorph: a representation of the symbols of the four Evangelists: the lion for Mark, the man for Matthew, the bull for Luke and the eagle for John.
Transept: the transversal part of a church that intersects the nave at right angles to form a cross.

Practical information

Average length of visit: 1 hour.
Guided tours.
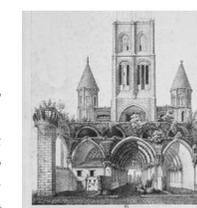Tours suitable for disabled visitors.

Charroux abbey

A fine example of Benedictine power

A place of pilgrimage

The Benedictine* abbey was founded around 783 by Roger, Count of Limoges, and Euphrasie of Auvergne, under the protection of Charlemagne. Its precious relics attracted a

The abbey in 1822, from a drawing by François Thiollet

large number of pilgrims. In 989 the first Council* of the Peace of God was held at the abbey, a key event for the protection of people and goods in Christendom. Building work on the new church started in 1017, and its altar was consecrated by Pope Urban II in 1096. Around 1269 a triple gothic gate was added to the Romanesque edifice.

A national monument

The abbey, impoverished due to destruction during the Hundred Years' War and embezzlement by commendatory abbots*, was plundered and sacked in 1569 during the Wars of Religion. The church, in ruins, was sold as national property in 1790, and was then used as a stone quarry before disappearing during the 19th century. The only part to survive was the Lantern Tower, bought by Abbot Loiseau de Grandmaison in 1801.
Prosper Mérimée* prohibited its demolition and ensured its protection in 1846. It was left to the State and became a national monument.

Explanations overleaf.

The 11th-century abbey church

The exceptional layout of the church was modelled on that of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, a sanctuary built on Christ's tomb. The tower was at the crossing of the nave and transept* and at the centre of the rotunda*.
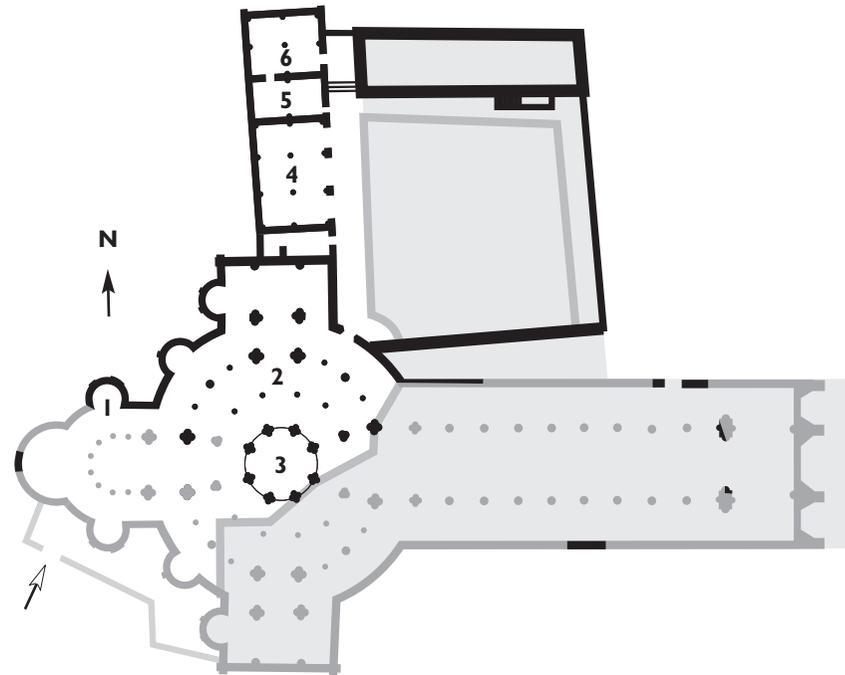The grassed part shows the area once covered by the east part of the church.

1 **The walls**, on the left, show the shape of the apsidal chapels* that were attached to the choir, rotunda* and south transept* respectively. The fireplaces are remains dating from 19th-century houses.

2 **The rotunda*** with its three ambulatories was used to control the flow of pilgrims.

3 **The octagonal tower**. The main altar was placed at the centre, just above the crypt where the relics were on display. The elevation shows the two first levels of archways which were once inside the church. The capitals of the quatrefoil pillars are decorated with fleshy leaves and animals. The band of quarry stone once supported the vault. The light entered by the upper windows and lit the altar, hence the name Lantern Tower.

The abbey buildings

An elegant gate leads to the former cloister, and the general layout can still be made out from the pillars and Gothic arches.

4 **The chapter house** was rebuilt in the late 15th century and has vaults with six Gothic cross ribs. This is where the monks organised the daily life of the abbey after having read a chapter from the Rule of Saint Benedict.
The sculpted elements are from the triple gothic gate which was added to the Romanesque facade in the 13th century. The realism of the faces and draperies shows the skill of sculptors who had also worked on the Sainte Chapelle in Paris.

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The Christ of the Last Judgement, sitting on an ornate bench, once adorned the centre of the tympanum above the entrance to the church. Churchmen with mitres and crowned kings are displayed on the walls, along with two keystones which once decorated the two archings* that crowned the gate. The plaque on the ground shows where 13 monks' tombs were found during archaeological digs in 1949.

5 **The 'treasure' room** has further arching* elements: apostles, Evangelists, and wise and foolish virgins. The tetramorph* capital probably comes from the old Romanesque cloisters, and the 9th-century capitals from the Carolingian* church. The lead coffin was discovered in the south transept* of the church in 1989.
The reliquaries on display in a glass case were the treasure of Charroux.

The finest piece, the angel reliquary, is a square box in gilded silver supported by a base. Christ and two monks at prayer are shown inside the lid. There are fleurs-de-lys and small castles on the back, perhaps the emblem of Blanche of Castile, which would indicate that it was commissioned by royalty. Every seven years the reliquaries are paraded through the streets of the village during a procession.

6 **The caldarium** with fine ribbed vaulting was also used as a chapel in the 19th century, which explains why there is an altar here. This was the only heated room and since there was no scriptorium, it was used by the monks when copying manuscripts.
A small sculpture on one of the walls shows two birds perched on either side of a piece of foliage.

Explanations overleaf.