

# Giving back a bell tower to Saint-Laurent-l'Abbaye

Jeanne Pautrat's legacy,  
hope for restoration of the abbey church

Presentation file



# An extraordinary story

Two years ago, Jeanne Pautrat passed away.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, the human adventure of an old lady of almost 105 years, who had devoted a part of her life to the development of the Saint-Laurent Abbey site in Nièvre, came to an end.

However, by bequeathing her possessions to the Camosine, a Nièvre-based association dedicated to promoting cultural heritage, she chose to open a new chapter: that of the rebirth of the abbey complex at Saint-Laurent-l'Abbaye. This major bequest, subject to the restoration and enhancement of the remaining parts of the abbey complex, will provide the impetus and support for the town of Saint-Laurent. The dynamic Association for the Safeguard and Promotion of the Abbey and its Site (*Association pour la Sauvegarde et la Promotion de l'Abbaye et du Site*) also supports the project.



Jeanne Pautrat's centenary in 2017, photo by the town of Saint-Laurent

## Jeanne Pautrat (1917-2022), a singular trajectory

An only child, she was the daughter of a tax collector, Oliver Pautrat, and a young woman from the Toulon family. As a result of her father's professional moves, she was born in Châtel-le-Neuvre, a town on the banks of the Allier river to the south of Moulins.

Jeanne Pautrat owes her attachment to the town and, later, to the history of Saint-Laurent to her maternal family, the Toulons, who were originally from Saint-Laurent. Her great-grandfather, Pierre Toulon, was mayor of the town, and her father also became one. Concerned about the abbey, he carried out research which served as the basis for a series of articles on the history of the abbey, published locally in several articles in the *Régional de Cosne*.

Jeanne Pautrat expanded on this research, which she published in 1990 in the form of a monograph, *Saint-Laurent through the centuries (Saint-Laurent à travers les siècles)*. Involved in local life as a town councillor, she was also a member of the young Association for the Safeguard and Promotion of the Abbey and its Site (*Association pour la Sauvegarde et la Promotion de l'Abbaye et du Site, ASPAS*), of which she was elected president from 1991 to 2008. She became its honorary president from that date on.

Jeanne Pautrat's other passion was painting and drawing. She exhibited her work on numerous occasions and hosted the "Painters on the street" ("*Peintres dans la rue*") event in Saint-Laurent.

In 2009, Jeanne Pautrat had to leave Saint-Laurent and move to a retirement home in Sancerre.

## From the bequest for the benefit of Camosine to the foundation hosted by the French Art Saveguard Foundation (Fondation pour la Sauvegarde de l'art français), a *sine qua non* condition

The amount of the bequest made by Jeanne Pautrat, approaching one million euros, is conditioned *sine qua non* to the abbey's renewal.

On the one hand, this bequest will be assigned for the abbey and no one can dispose of it freely: Jeanne Pautrat trusted Camosine and she was its loyal member. It makes this association the pivot of the project, and not the beneficiary of the bequest. As such, the Camosine, with its in-house engineering resources, will be the setter for Jeanne Pautrat's will.

On the other hand, the situation of the abbey is alarming, so this bequest will serve as a catalyst for its renewal.

Indeed, between 1945, the date of the bell tower collapse, and 1980, nothing was done. Since 1980, some reinforcement and restoration works have been carried out. However, this work is limited now by the town's ability to raise the necessary funds for a project that has yet to be imagined.

This project can only be carried out in partnership with those involved (i.e. the municipality and the ASPAS association).

The Camosine has therefore decided to set up a foundation under the auspices of the French Art Saveguard Foundation (Fondation pour la Sauvegarde de l'art français). *The Jeanne Pautrat Foundation for Saint-Laurent Abbey* is currently being set up to provide financial support to the municipality and the Camosine for the restoration of the abbey.

All the assets from Jeanne Pautrat's legacy will be allocated to it. An executive committee made up of representatives of the Camosine, the municipality of Saint-Laurent, the ASPAS association, the Sauvegarde de l'art français and a number of prominent figures will be responsible for examining and supporting restoration projects.

This solution also frees the Camosine from the asset management (financial investments) and administrative management, which are carried out by Sauvegarde de l'art français.

The Camosine can therefore refocus on supporting the project with the local municipality.

At the Camosine's general meeting, held on 14 May 2023 in Saint-Laurent-l'Abbaye, the agreement between the Camosine and the Fondation pour la Sauvegarde de l'art français was signed in the presence of Daniel Barnier, Prefect of the Nièvre department, formalising the creation of the Jeanne Pautrat Foundation for Saint-Laurent Abbey.



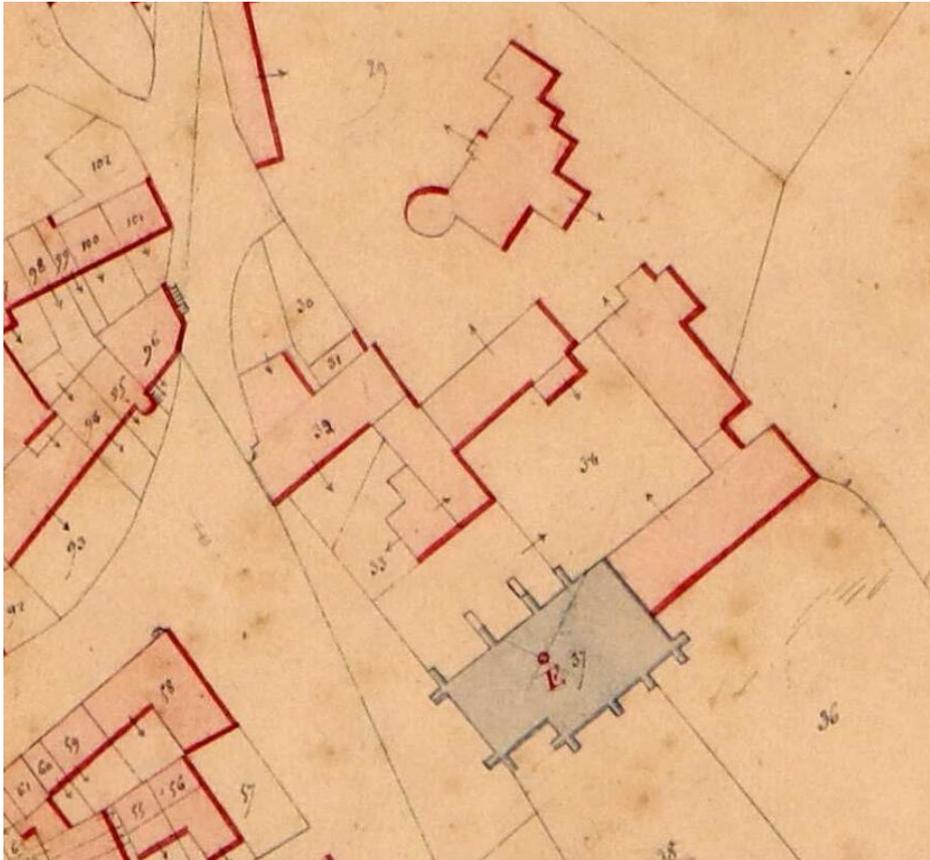
Signing of the creation of the Jeanne Pautrat Foundation for Saint-Laurent Abbey, the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 2023

# Saint-Laurent Abbey, from the past to the present

## History of the abbey

This history and the architectural description that follows are largely taken from research carried out by the Atelier Cairn (Paul Barnoud, Chief Architect of Historic Monuments) during the restoration study carried out in 2000.

The monastery is located in the centre of the village. The church is made of a choir, a transept and a six-bay nave flanked by side aisles. All that remains today is the transept, which served as the parish church before the bell tower collapsed in 1944, and a few remains of the nave walls preserved in the houses that were built around it.



Cadastral map of the town of Saint-Laurent drawn up in 1839, Archives départementales de la Nièvre

Mentioned as early as the 6th century, the monastery depended on the abbey of Saint-Hilaire de Poitiers.

The monastery is said to be founded at the end of the 5th century. The name Vulfin is associated with it. Vulfin, a Frankish prince, is believed to be the one to found a monastery on the land of Longrest. After the Battle of Poitiers, Clovis is said to have donated the land to the church of Saint Hilaire-le-Grand. He attributed his victory over the Visigoths to the intervention of Saint Hilaire.

The monastery was called *Longorotense monasterium*, to which was added *albaratum* since its monks were dressed in white; it was later called Saint-Laurent des Aubats, Saint-Laurent-l'Abbaye and monastery of Saints Laurent and Hilaire.

In the 11th and 12th centuries, the abbey grew steadily, situated on the pilgrims' route to Santiago de Compostela. The monastery was established as an abbey and entrusted to the canons by Robert de Nevers, Bishop of Auxerre from 1070 to 1084. This situation certainly favoured the reconstruction of the church in the 12th century, in a style similar to that of La Charité-sur-Loire.

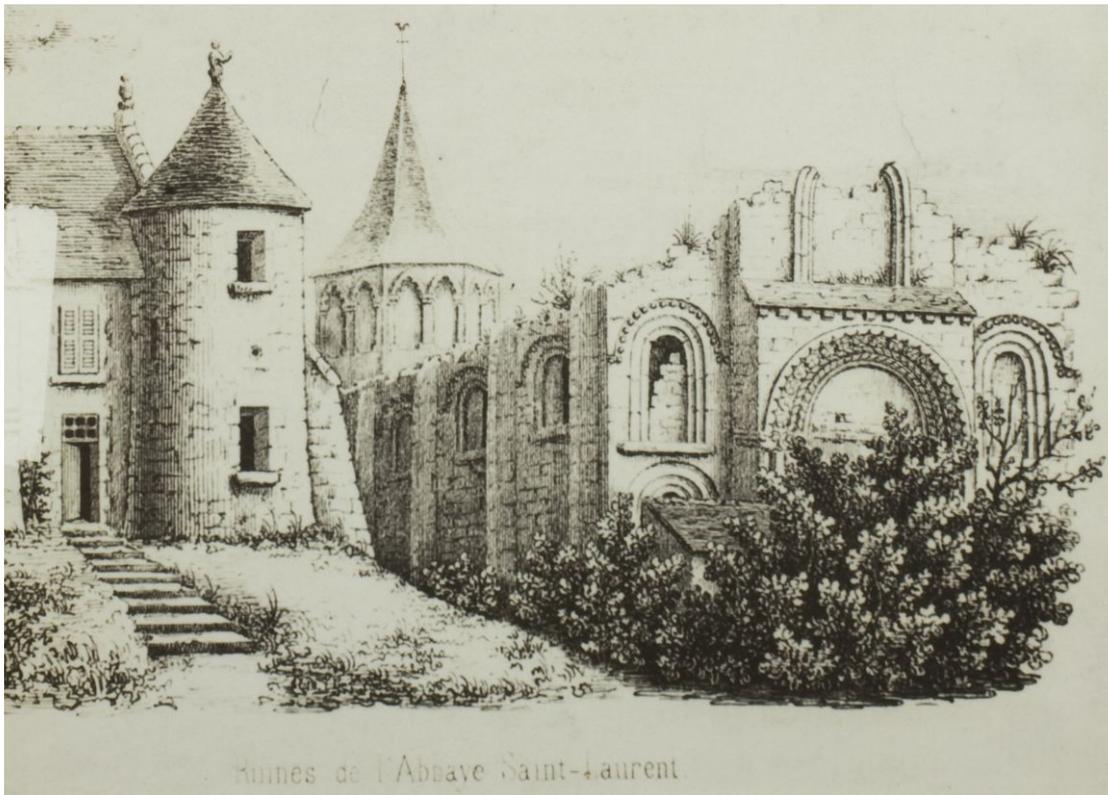
In 1199, Saint-Laurent was the site of a battle between Hervé, Baron of Donzy, and Pierre de Courtenay, Count of Nevers, Auxerre and Tonnerre, for possession of the county of Gien. The church suffered as a result. Count Pierre had assembled his barons with a multitude of people of no religion called the "Cottreaux"; however, he was defeated by Hervé "so that it appeared that the holy martyrs Stephen and Laurent had helped Hervé in this victory; for there was then in this monastery a church of Saint Stephen in addition to that of Saint Laurent which the Cottreaux had destroyed".

On several occasions, the abbey was taken and pillaged. During the Hundred Years' War, in 1411, the Armagnacs, from the royal party, committed the first acts of looting; and in 1475, the same party looted and burnt down the church during the Franco-Burgundian rivalry between Louis XI and Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy.

Less than a century later, in 1567, during the French Wars of Religion, the passage of troops that traditional historiography designates as Protestant completed a ruin that the commendatory management had not been able to repair.

In the 17th century, the abbey joined the general monastic reformation movement initiated by the Benedictine abbey of Saint-Maur. However, the desire for reformation did not seem to pay off, as Colbert, the bishop of Auxerre, noted the negligence of the local clergy after his visit in 1699.

As a result, it was a poorly-maintained abbey, with an exhausted community, that was destroyed by the French Revolution at the dawn of the 19th century.



Engraving after a drawing by Commandant Barat, before 1839. The nave, although ruined, was not destroyed and the portal is still visible and in place. On the left, the abbey dwelling, now transformed.

In 1816, the dilapidated state of the abbey, combined with a violent storm, led to a fire that ruined the abbey. Soultrait, in his *Répertoire archéologique de la Nièvre* in 1875, notes that all that remains of the church are the portal, the north aisle converted into a stable, the transept, the choir and a 13th century chapel.

The parish church occupied the former transept and choir, while private houses occupied the former nave, resting on ancient walls.

In 1928, the west portal and capitals were sold to the Philadelphia Museum.

In 1945, the crossing tower collapsed, taking the south transept with it. The north and east arches remained in place, along with part of the tholobate. The remains of the dome were strengthened in 1980.



Photographic plate from around 1900 of Saint-Laurent parish church, Médiathèque du patrimoine et de la photographie (Heritage and photography multimedia library)



The abbey at the beginning of the 20th century, postcard, Archives départementales de la Nièvre

## The current state

Although protected as a historic monument (the church was listed in 1926, then a large part of the abbey's remains were listed in 1996), the building has deteriorated due to a lack of maintenance. The south arm of the transept collapsed in 1945, taking with it the transept crossing and a part of the bell tower.



Collapse of the transept and crossing, 1945, Heritage and Photography Media Library

## Architecture

The church is made of a choir, a transept and a six-bay nave flanked by side aisles.

All that remains today are the transept and the choir, which served as the parish church until it collapsed in 1945.

Some remnants of the nave walls are preserved on private plots and have been absorbed into private houses. The building as a whole was around 55 m long before it was destroyed in the 19th century.

### The transept

The transept, overflowing compared to the nave, consisted of a crossing onto which the two arms opened. The crossing was vaulted with an octagonal dome on conical trunks, and the crosspieces were covered with barrel vaults. A crossing tower included a blind tholobate decorated with arcatures and a structural spire.

The structure of the north arm has been preserved and is out of water, but the total collapse of the south arm caused half of the crossing tower to fall.

### The choir

The original layout of the choir is unknown. In its current layout, it consists of a straight bay that was covered by a false wooden vault when it collapsed in 1945. Above this false vault, on the north elevation, is a window flanked by colonnettes that appears to date from the 12th century; above this, the start of a barrel vault is still visible. A curious trace of flashing on the diaphragm arch of the crossing seems to indicate the presence of a very low roof that may have predated the stone vault.

Today, only the elevations remain.

A square chapel flanks the choir to the north. It is cross-vaulted and opens onto the choir through an arch, the archivolt of which intersects the Romanesque bay window. This chapel appears to be very late in its construction,

and in its current form can scarcely predate the 16th century.

A roof protects the structure.

### **The monastery**

The church is flanked to the north by the abbey cloister, whose buildings are well preserved.

The dormitory was traditionally on the upper floor, in direct contact with the north arm of the transept.

A connecting door between the dormitory and the church can be seen in the eastern wall of the north transept.

The Romanesque dormitory had a much lower roof than today, as a large Romanesque window opens onto the north wall of the transept inside the dormitory roof. The roof was reinstalled during the Gothic period; the original roof was most likely a low-pitched canal tile roof.



Chevet and a wing of the Chapter, view of the cemetery, photo by Laure Duroyon

### **Saint-Laurent in the evolution of religious architecture in the Nivernais region**

Saint-Laurent church is one of the great Nivernais churches of the period.

- The poly-lobed arch decoration can be compared to that of Notre-Dame de la Charité (choir and first bays of the nave); the pointed arches with double scrolls are also found in the nave of Notre-Dame. However, the lack of direct lighting in the central nave brings Saint-Laurent closer to the churches of the Loire Valley than to the Cluniac lineage.
- The large pointed arches and sculpted capitals are reminiscent of the nave of Notre-Dame du Pré in Donzy.

It is difficult to reconstruct the eastern part of the building. A chevet with an apse and two apse chapels, as at Saint-Aignan de Cosne or Saint-Laurent de La Charité, is a possibility, with perhaps a right choir bay between the crossing and the apse.

While the masonry structures can be roughly restored, the same cannot be said for the roofs. In the last known state, before the collapse in 1945, the choir and transept roofs were of the Gothic type, with steeply pitched rafters forming trusses, as in the attic of the dormitory. However, it seems likely that all the roofs were originally covered

with canal tiles. Several factors support this hypothesis.

With their steep slopes, the roofs obscured the arch of the bell tower; an examination of the gable of the north transept shows a neat structure topped with rubble stone masonry; the break in the two structures seems to correspond to a raising of the roof slope. In addition, the side aisles had very low-pitched roofs, attesting to the use of canal tiles.

Thus, Saint-Laurent abbey's model seems typical of the traditional Nivernais gothic period characterized by roof raising. It is thus possible that these changes were made during the construction period and that the upper parts of the building only had steep-sloped roofs. However, in order to rediscover the spirit of the design, we need to imagine a very horizontal church of southern character, close to La Charité.

## Work since 1980

At the end of the 1970s, during the mandate of mayor Modeste Crebs, the municipality became aware of the state of the abbey ruins and their architectural and historical value. She starts the first reconstruction works, with the support of the French government, the Sauvegarde de l'art français, the Conseil général (départemental council), the State and the Camosine. Her efforts were soon relayed by the fledgling ASPAS association, founded in 1980.

The first works, in early 1980, were aimed at clearing the transept of all the masonry that had collapsed in 1945 and was cluttering up the crossing, the transept arm and the south transept arm. The ruins were reinforced with solid wooden buttresses.

The roof of the north transept and the Chapter wing were then restored in 2 stages during the 1980s, at a cost of 670 000 francs. In 1992, the restoration work focused on making the upper floors of the Chapter wing more accessible. Since the early 2000s, these major structural works have been followed by campaigns of maintenance and reinforcement work, some of which have been complex, but which have not led to the long-term restoration of the abbey, due to a lack of financial resources.

Following a study, a project drawn up by the Cairn architectural studio, with Paul Barnoud as head architect of historic monuments, proposed two options: restoration of the ruins (reinforcement and crystallisation) and restoration of the masonry, supplemented by a wooden reconstruction of the volumes of the bell tower. No action was taken on this proposal.

Since then, major work (excluding major maintenance) has been carried out on the window frames and roofs: in 2021, ASPAS won the Nièvre participatory budget (a scheme for funding local projects of general interest run by the Nièvre Departmental Council) and, along with the Direction régionale des Affaires culturelles (DRAC, Regional Directorate of Cultural Affairs) and the municipality, is helping to fund the latest restoration work on the transept roof by heritage architect Agnès Sourd-Tanzi (total cost: €41 500).



Restoration of the transept roof, autumn 2022 (photo Journal du Centre)

# The project: giving back a bell tower to Saint-Laurent-l'Abbaye

The project, which is currently being defined, will have several components and should focus on both restoration and enhancement. While the bequest is significant in absolute terms, it does not allow for the identical restoration of the bell tower and transept. The project will therefore focus on defining priorities.

The project must also set an example for the whole of the Nièvre region. Too many heritage restoration projects still suffer from a lack of engineering and studies prior to restoration. Financial resources are not the only issue here: a lack of understanding of the different stages in the restoration process means that many municipalities undertake haphazard and sometimes incoherent restoration work, depending on the resources available and the urgency of the situation. So this project needs to be a showcase for the art of proper restoration.

The other major challenge is to articulate a collective conversation around this project.

Today, we need to seize every opportunity offered by this restoration project to interest the public and pass on our passion for our cultural heritage.

**The first action** undertaken was the purchase by the municipality of the house built in the nave of the church. This opportunity was seized by the Camosine thanks to funds from the Pautrat bequest, and enabled the architectural unity of the site to be restored.

It is the first stage in a redevelopment project that integrates the environment of the remains, including the square, and should eventually make it possible to host events and public awareness activities linked to the enhancement of the site.

Concerning the incorporating part of the north aisle, it requires urgent work, particularly on the roof (framework and roofing in very poor condition).

Its historical and architectural interest will soon lead to a request to extend the protected area so that it can be protected as a historic monument.



Nave and the Western Massif at the beginning of the 20th century, Heritage and Photography Media Library

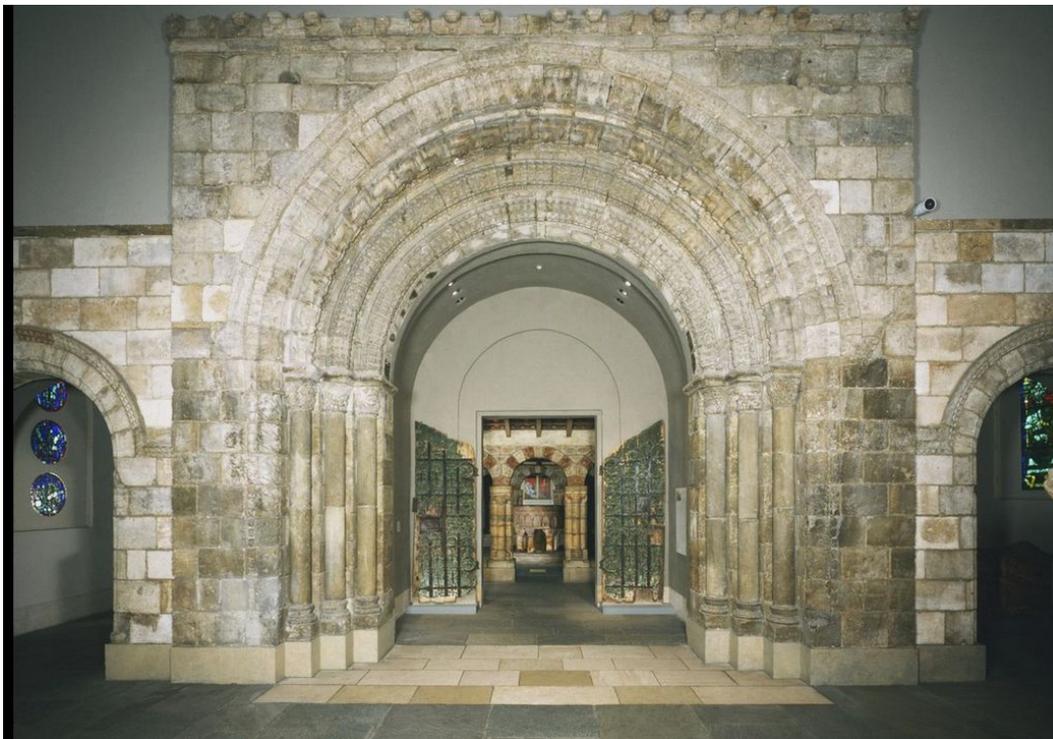


Current state of the nave

**The second action** is to carry out a photogrammetric and 3D survey of the remains of the abbey.

On the initiative of the Camosine, the municipality of Saint-Laurent has been awarded the *Graphic Art and Heritage Award 2022* by the French Art Saveguard Foundation (Fondation pour la Sauvegarde de l'art français). Valued at €15 000, the prize consists of a sponsorship of skills provided by the company Graphic Art and Heritage.

During the selection process, the jury was sensitive, on the one hand, to the ruiniform state of the abbey, the complexity of which represents a technical challenge for Graphic Art and Heritage. Secondly, the history of the abbey and its dismemberment at the beginning of the 20th century (when its portal was sold to the Philadelphia Museum, USA) resonated with the history of the Graphic Art and Heritage, founded in 1921 to combat the ruin and the sale of French cultural heritage assets.

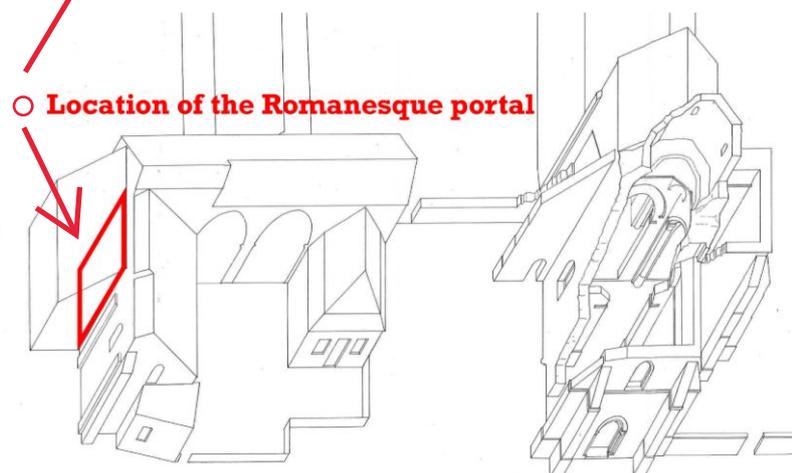


Abbey portal, Philadelphia Museum of Art (United States)

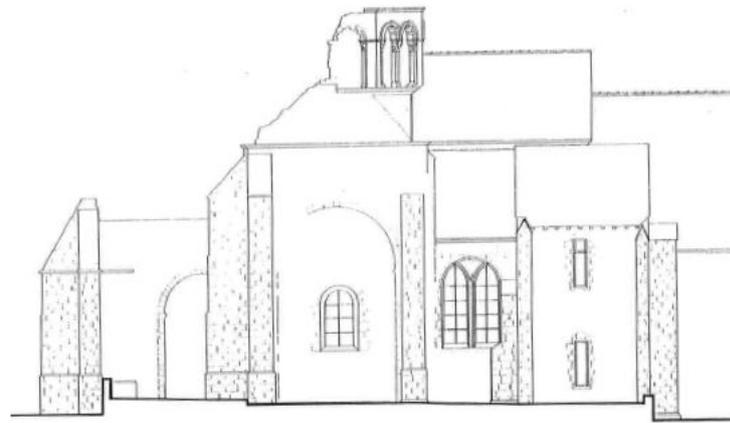
In the spring 2023, specialists came to carry out a 3D survey of the abbey using drones and photogrammetric sensors, in order to provide a multi-dimensional survey of the abbey. This service is an important complement to the programme study, as it provides a precise overview of the abbey and enables its evolution to be measured in great detail.



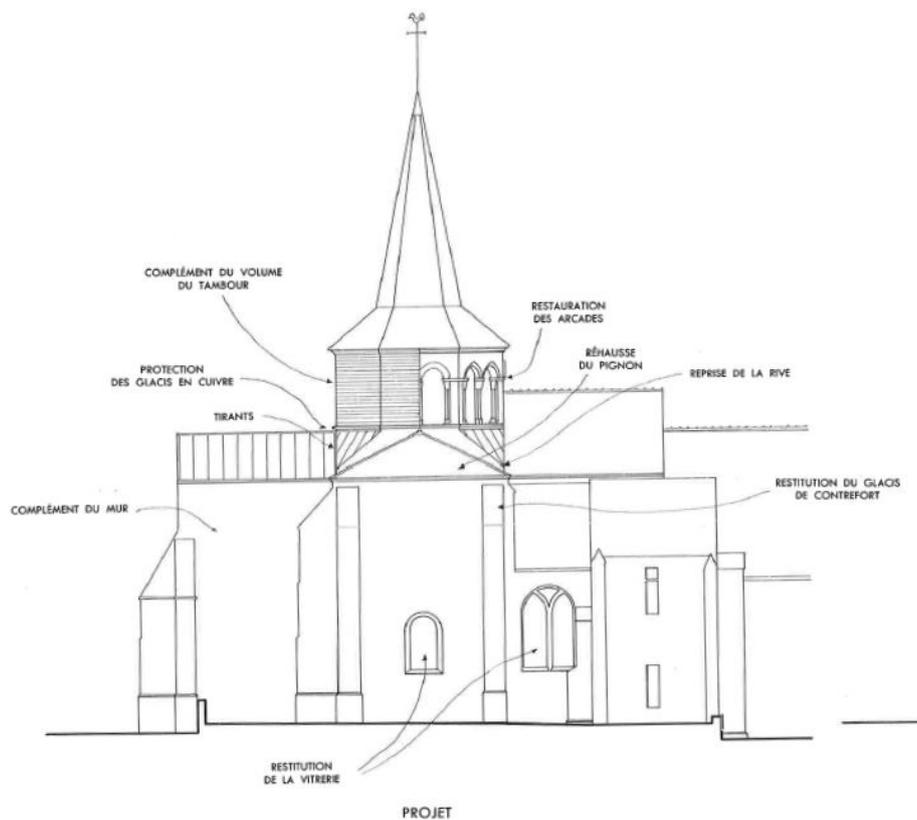
First results of the 3D reconstitution by Graphic Art and Heritage,  
May 2023 (Photo: Graphic Art and Heritage)



**The third action** is therefore an update of the study carried out in 2000 by the chief architect of historic monuments, Paul Barnoud. The proposals made at the time included consolidating the remains and restoring the wooden bell tower to its original volume before the 1945 collapse. The new study will have to determine whether this option is still a desirable option, both in terms of feasibility (due to the fragility of the masonry) and financial cost.



ÉTAT ACTUEL



PROJET

Option to restore the spire, study by Paul Barnoud in 2000

## **The next phases will therefore depend on this programmatic study.**

However, the various partners are also keen to include the entire abbey environment in the study, including the cloister building owned by the municipality (chapter house wing).

This project is also an opportunity to interest the local population, the residents of Saint-Laurent and the surrounding area, in the reappropriation of their church and its history. For many, it is a blot on the urban landscape, a tear in the fabric. With its gaping wounds, it is a daily reminder of the difficulties that successive municipalities have been unable to tackle due to a lack of resources. So we need to invent and implement actions that will reshape the town's image: mediation actions with schools, participation in restoration projects.

Finally, this restoration project will also need to involve other local participants: through their actions and sponsorship, the economic players will be able to support this project. On a national and international scale, the project will involve partners such as the Heritage Foundation and, hopefully, some American patrons.

Since the building is listed as a historic monument, the work will be carried out under the scientific and technical supervision of the Regional Conservation of Historic Monuments department of the Burgundy-Franche-Comté Regional Department of Cultural Affairs (DRAC). This regional governmental department will also provide financial support for the restoration work.

## **Our partners**

### **The municipality of Saint-Laurent**

One of the smallest communes in the Nièvre, including 214 inhabitants, Saint-Laurent is a wine-growing and farming commune in the Pouilly and Pouilly-Fumé appellation. Over the last 40 years, it has carried out a number of restoration projects on the abbey, but until now has been unable to undertake a comprehensive restoration project for the site.

### **The Caisse for the Monuments and the Sites of Nièvre (Camosine)**

The Camosine is an association founded in 1971 by Jacques Gandouin, Prefect of the Nièvre region, and recognised as being in the public interest in 1977. Its mission is to safeguard and promote the cultural heritage of the Nièvre region. It is composed of 1400 members (1150 individuals and associations and 250 towns).

A major player in cultural heritage restoration, the Camosine advises all its members, both private and public, on their heritage projects. It also provides financial assistance to member associations and towns in the Nivernais who are restoring or enhancing their heritage: its work reflects the diversity and richness of the Nivernais cultural heritage.

When it comes to cultural heritage restoration, the Camosine works in conjunction with public funding bodies (the State, the Region, the Département and local authorities) and private funding bodies (the Heritage Fondation in particular). It is in contact with numerous cultural organisations and other heritage conservation associations.

Through the publication of the *Annales des Pays nivernais*, a quarterly magazine sent to all its members and available in many outlets in the Nièvre (bookshops, newsagents, etc.), the Camosine plays an active role in raising awareness and promoting the Nièvre's cultural heritage: architecture, fine arts, literature, popular arts and traditions. It also enriches knowledge of cultural heritage through the publication of thematic works.

The Camosine also organises exhibitions, detailed tours of sites and monuments, cultural trips and conferences for its members and supporters.

The Nièvre department is a long-standing partner of the Camosine, providing financial support for the association. The Camosine also relies on the broad support of local authorities and its many individual and association members. As a dynamic association, it relies on its chairman, officers and board of directors, whose policies are

implemented by the director and the Camosine team (4 salaried employees), supported by a large number of volunteers.

### **The Association for the Safeguard and Promotion of the Abbey and its Site (ASPAS)**

Created in 1980 by André Miroff, the association's aim is to contribute to the conservation, preservation and upkeep of the former abbey. To this end, it works closely with the local council to initiate and support restoration projects.

Its financial support and its ability to mobilise members and volunteers make it a local participant.

The association also provides guided tours of the site, and organises numerous events to support its work.

### **French Art Saveguard Foundation (Fondation pour la Sauvegarde de l'art français)**

Since 1921, the Sauvegarde de l'Art Français has been dedicated to protecting our national cultural heritage. Created to prevent whole sections of architecture and works of art from being exported abroad, the foundation is now dedicated to preserving the beauties that make up our country.

It provides support to all those who wish to take action to restore and promote French cultural heritage.

Recognised as a society working in the general interest of the public, the foundation can count on a national network of correspondents and friends, as well as numerous private individuals and corporate sponsors to support its actions.

There are 3 main areas of its activity:

- aid for churches and chapels (each year, the Foundation allocates an average of €1.5 million to help restore around a hundred buildings);
- aid for movables, thanks to the Le Plus Grand Musée de France project launched in 2013;
- and finally, through a policy of awards, the foundation supports initiatives by civil society and research into heritage and the history of the arts.

A few figures illustrate its work:

- 3 500 church and chapel restoration projects supported since 1972;
- €1.5 million distributed each year to help restore around a hundred buildings in France;
- 200 works of art restored since 2013;
- and €1.3 million raised since the launch of the "Le Plus Grand Musée de France" ("*The Biggest Museum of France*") campaign.

### **Graphic Art and Heritage Award (Prix Art Graphique et Patrimoine):**

"The Graphic Art and Heritage Award, organised in partnership with the French Art Saveguard Foundation, rewards a heritage restoration project involving 3D digitalisation or digital enhancement. It enables heritage restoration projects to benefit from the technical expertise of Graphic Art and Heritage.

On the strength of their shared objectives, Graphic Art and Heritage and the Foundation for French Art Safeguarding have joined forces in 2021 to create a sponsorship prize to provide scientific and technical support for a heritage project.

The partners are committed to the quality of restoration work on the architectural cultural heritage and want the project leader to benefit from the best technological tools available. For the second edition of the prize, Graphic Art and Heritage and French Art Saveguard Foundation have awarded a prize to the project led by Camosine, the association and the town council of Saint-Laurent-l'Abbaye, to contribute to the renaissance of this remarkable site."

## **Contacts**

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