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Introduction

The canon of Romanesque architecture and sculpture in France generally focuses on the grandest of monasteries and cathedrals, often paying less attention to the numerous rural churches and modest priories that dot France’s countryside. Yet it is the study of exactly such modest rural churches that enables evaluation of the architectural dynamics of one of the most fundamental processes of the eleventh and twelfth centuries – the rise of the castellans and the development of hundreds of new villages and small towns that appeared in the countryside around the newly constructed castles. These castle towns were a major part of the medieval processes

of urbanism, signaling, according to Robert Maxwell, “the beginning of the rebirth of the long narrative of European urban development that continues today.”

Very few studies, however, have sought to analyze the visual culture of these castle towns, the architectural discourse between the different edifices within the

Figure 1 Fortress of the Lords of Semur-en-Brionnais, 11th- and 12th-century stages. Photo: Daniel Villafruela, Wikimedia Commons, under GNU Free Documentation License.


new urban panorama, or the way in which different choices of architectural forms and models were used by the patrons, often the castellans themselves, to manifest their prestige, status, and power.

The present article examines one such example of urban development in the eleventh and twelfth centuries – the town that grew up around the castle of Semur-en-Brionnais (département de Saône-et-Loire, Burgundy, France), focusing on the monumental visual discourse that involved the parish church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée and the castle church of Saint-Hilaire, each with its own distinct location and function within the social and urban development of the town. Analyzing the differences between the architectural vocabularies chosen for each of these two institutions will provide insight into, and evaluation of, the major urban and political stages in the evolution of Semur-en-Brionnais. Examining the models (and variations of these models) chosen for each of these edifices will enable an assessment of the identities, desires, and policies of their patrons, and the architectural manifestations of these policies.

The Lords of Semur-en-Brionnais and the Rise of the Castellans in 11th-century France

Delineated to the west by the River Loire, to the east by the hills of the Mâconnais, and to the north by the Charolais region, the area known as the Brionnais occupies approximately 100 square miles in southern Burgundy.5

4 The origin of the name Brionnais is somewhat obscure. 11th-century documents mention the “Ager Beronisense” and the “Pagus Briennensis,” which may preserve the memory of a Gallic tribe who
By the mid-9th century Burgundy was still enjoying relative security from the Norman invasions that had begun to devastate other regions of France, but in 886, in return for the ending of the siege of Paris, Charles le Gros (839-888) agreed to allow the Normans to continue their way up the River Seine where they invaded Burgundy. While they were halted before they reached Sens, they plundered Auxerre and Troyes in 887, bringing havoc to numerous monasteries. With the waves of invasions continuing into the end of the 9th century/beginning of the 10th, castles intended to block future invasions were built on the hilltops of the Brionnais, such as the construction of the fortress of Dun, documented from the mid-10th century, and that of Charlieu, documented from the end of the century. The construction of fortresses in the Brionnais was part of a wider phenomenon in settled in the area before the Roman conquest, as Julius Caesar mentions the tribes of the Branoves and of the Aulerques Branovices. Jean Richard, “Aux origines du Charolais: vicomté, vigueries et limites du comté en Autunois méridional (Xe-XIIIe siècles),” Annales du Bourgogne 35, no. 138 (1963), pp. 81-114 (pp. 103-105); Henry de Chizelle, Le Brionnais, histoire des institutions, des origines aux temps modernes (Paris, 1992), p. 7, 28, note 1.


6 This is shown by the large number of relics transferred to monasteries in Burgundy for safekeeping from areas more exposed to danger, such as the relics of Saint Philibert which were carried from Noirmoutiers to Délos and from there to Auvergne and finally to Tournus. Jean Richard, Histoire de la Bourgogne (Paris, 1965), pp. 32-33.

7 Among the monasteries devastated were Flavigny, Saint-Germain d’Auxerre, Bezé, and others. Chizelle, Le Brionnais, p. 20.

8 Camille Ragut, Cartulaire de Saint-Vincent de Mâcon, connu sous le nom de livre enchaîné (Mâcon, 1864), p. 242, no. 420.

Burgundy, manifested in the fortresses of Mont-St.-Jean (first mentioned in 924) and Montréal-en-Auxois, Vignory, and Clémont built around 935 by the Duke of Burgundy, Hugues le noir (†952). Castle building was not unique to Burgundy, but occurred in other duchies and counties where such castles were established in the territories of the declining Carolingian empire as a means of stopping the Norman invasions.

The origin of the settlement at Semur would seem to lie in these complex historical conditions, as the fortress of Semur was most likely built to hold back the Norman invasions and Auvergnate incursions. Its construction was perhaps entrusted to one of the founders of the Semur dynasty by Richard le Justicier (858-921), Count of Burgundy. A genealogy in the cartulary of Marcigny-sur-Loire presents a certain Freelan as the head of the lineage of the Lords of Semur. Much


11 Fernand Vercauteren, “Comment s’est-on défendu au IXe siècle dans l’Empire franc contre les invasions normandes?” Annales du XXXe congrès de la fédération archéologique de Belgique (Brussels, 1936), pp. 117-132.


13 Chizelle, Le Brionnais, p. 42.

controversy surrounds the origin of Freelan and whether it was him or his son
Joceran who initiated the fortress.\textsuperscript{15} Whatever the case may be, Constance Bouchard
and Jean Richard place Joceran's death between 944-988 and the time of his father to
the beginning of the 10\textsuperscript{th}, locating the construction of the castle of Semur firmly
within the chronological timeframe of the historical phenomenon described above.\textsuperscript{16}

From this point on, the Lords of Semur gained increasing power and began to
spread their political, judicial, and economic rule over much of the Brionnais.\textsuperscript{17} Even
if formally subordinated to the Counts of Chalon, throughout the 11\textsuperscript{th} and 12\textsuperscript{th}
centuries the Lords of Semur enjoyed such a degree of independence that this
subordination had little, if any meaning. Jean Richard noted the scarcity of evidence
of the presence of the Lord of Chalon in the Brionnais, as well as the relatively few
instances in which there was an account of the presence of the Lords of Semur in the
court of the counts. This growing independence of Semur was part of a larger
phenomenon taking place in many regions of France during the 10\textsuperscript{th} and especially

\textsuperscript{15} For different views on this and on related issues see: Chizelle, Le Brionnais, p. 39; \textit{idem}, “Chamilly et
les seigneurs de la maison de Semur-en-Brionnais,” \textit{Mémoires de la société d’histoire et d’archéologie de
Chalon-sur-Saône} 41 (1972), pp. 39-47; Richard, “Aux origines du Charolais,” p. 105; Constance B.
357.


\textsuperscript{17} In Burgundy the rise in power of established castellans and the continuous establishment of new
fortresses was recognized as a central phenomenon of the 11\textsuperscript{th} century. In southern Burgundy, more
than 34 such fortresses were constructed during that period. Richard, “Châteaux, châtelains et
vassaux,” pp. 437-438; Bouchard, \textit{Sword, Miter and Cloister}, p. 27; André Deléage, \textit{La via rurale en
Bourgogne jusqu’au début du XI\textsuperscript{e} siècle} (Mâcon, 1941), p. 535; Jacquier, “Le château de Semur-en-
Brionnais,” pp. 185-199.
the 11th century, characterized by castellans taking advantage of the declining authority of the dukes and counts in order to increase their own power and authority.\textsuperscript{18}

In his ground-breaking study of society in the 11th - and 12th -century Mâconnaise, Georges Duby noted a fundamental change in the political structure of the region in the early 11th century. Taking advantage of the declining power of Otte-Guillaume (ca. 960-1026), Count of Mâcon, the lords of large castles gradually ceased to obey his authority and began exerting authority over the territories controlled by their castle, manifested in the ever-decreasing presence of the castellans in the count’s court, and in the loss of the Count’s ability to preside as judge over them.\textsuperscript{19} A similar phenomenon has been described by Jean-François Lemarignier\textsuperscript{20} and in a series of regional studies reflecting this widespread phenomenon.\textsuperscript{21}

These changes led to the creation of a new judicial, political, and economic structure at the beginning of the 11th century, at the heart of which were the


\textsuperscript{19} Duby, La société dans la région mâconnaise, pp. 137-144.


castellans.22 The castellans began to dispense justice, proclaiming their authority to sit as judges in cases of crimes which had, up to then, been the sole prerogative of the Count, and documents thus increasingly refer to the judicial rights of the castellans – the *Vicaria* or *Justicia*.23 Castellans also began to establishing economic monopolies, such as enforcing the peasants’ obligation to grind their wheat solely at the millstone of the fortress and a ban on the storage of grain other than in the granaries of the castle. These developments were not uniform everywhere, but are always indicative of the ever-tighter control of the castellans over every aspect of the lives of the peasants in the vicinity of the fortress.24 Castellans also began to levy heavy taxes on the peasants; these were not restricted solely to serfs, but were applied to all those living in the area of the castle’s influence. This sort of territorial authority was new for the castellans and contributed to the consolidation of their status.25 So conspicuous were these phenomena in the first decades of the 11th century that Marc Bloch termed this period “the second feudal age” and other scholars, a “feudal revolution,”26 though these ideas have been subject to criticism.27

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24 *ibid.*, 31.

25 Genicot, *Rural Communities*, p. 66.

The power to levy taxes of different sorts created wide-scale exploitation, and scholars have sometimes regarded the 11th century as a period of the oppression of peasants, some of whom had earlier been free. The documents include many references to the exploitative use to which the castellans put their new power, often referring to it in terms such as Malae Inventiones, Mals Usos, or Male Consuetudines.

The Lords of Semur in the Brionnais in the 11th and 12th centuries held extensive authority, as evidenced by the heavy taxes they levied through the 13th century. In 1106-1109, the cartulary of Marcigny-sur-Loire mentions a tax on wheat levied by Geoffrey IV, Lord of Semur, then in 1186, the Prior of Marcigny-sur-Loire complained about the extensive agricultural services demanded by the Lord of Semur, which included the provision of manpower for the harvest.

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29 Genicot, Rural Communities, p. 64. Prominent examples can be found in: René Merlet, La chronique de Nantes, 570 environ-1049 (Paris, 1896), pp. 29-30 and Sigbertus, “Vita Wicberti” in Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores, 8, ed. Georg Heinrich Pertz (Hanover, 1848), p. 509.


comprehensive demands of the Lords of Semur from Marcigny-sur-Loire caused recurring conflicts, and in 1102 Hugh (of Semur) Abbot of Cluny (1024-1109) forced Geoffrey IV to take an oath that he would not make any new demands on the Priory of Marcigny.

The sources thus present a clear picture of the Lords of Semur as a dynasty that had built its fortress during the 10th century; and which, as part of a wider phenomenon in the 11th century, enjoyed increasing power and independency, exercising both judicial and economic power. I turn now to examine how the new power of the Lords exerted a major influence on the settlement in Semur, and on both secular and ecclesiastic architecture in the area.

The settlement in Semur-en-Brionnais: urban development, topography, and the language of power

The increasing authority of the Lords of Semur was primarily manifested in their fortress. Construction, probably in wood, began in the first half of the 10th century in the eastern corner of a large plateau situated atop a steep hill. At the beginning of the 11th century, the wooden fortress was dismantled and a stone structure was built in its place, reflecting the emergence of the Lords of Semur as the leading power at this time in Brionnais. This development is not unique to Semur. In

33 Bruel and Bernard, Recueil des chartes de l’abbaye de Cluny, VI, pp. 165-171, no. 288.
Burgundy, where the supply of stone is abundant, the moment the castellans reached a certain level of importance they rebuilt their fortresses in stone.\textsuperscript{34}

At the heart of the fortress of Semur stands the rectangular central tower, which once rose five stories and is encircled by the thick fortress walls (Fig. 1). The gates of the fortress, which faced the plateau, were protected by massive fortifications.\textsuperscript{35} The walls of the rectangular tower reveal clear differences between the two lower floors, where the stones are only coarsely worked and set in an irregular manner, and the upper portions, which reveal fine carving of the stones and regular lining of the walls. Emily Decors noted that these differences reflect the passage of time separating the two parts, ascribing the lower floors to the first stone fortress of the early 11\textsuperscript{th} century and the upper floors to a period later than the 12\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{36} In contrast, in a much earlier study, Dosso-Greggia dated the upper part to the 12\textsuperscript{th} century, at the same time as the construction of the Church of Saint-Hilaire.\textsuperscript{37}


\textsuperscript{35} It is likely that the walls retained their original path throughout the centuries, especially since construction of the fortress was dictated in most directions by the slopes of the hill.


The fortress was also a symbol, manifesting in stone the elevated status of its lord. This was expressed not only in the measurements of the fortress, but also in its elevated position with regard to its surroundings and the language of power of its architectural components, such as the tower, gates, and curtain walls. This is reflected in the epic poems of the 12th century in which the glory of a lord is often emphasized through a description of the physical strength of the fortifications of the fortress.

Figure 2 Aerial view of Semur-en-Brionnais. At right is the fortress of the lords of Semur; at left: is the Church of Saint-Hilaire. Photo: Public domain.

cities and fortresses he has conquered, including their walls and towers.\textsuperscript{39} Thus the construction of the stone fortress of Semur, and later on its heightening, even if this was for military and defensive means, also manifested the increasing status and authority of the Lords of Semur.

In addition to the fortress walls themselves, a second wall surrounded the upper plateau, encompassing the fortress and the other structures on the plateau, most prominently the Church of Saint-Hilaire, within a single compound and creating a sort of “upper-town” (\textbf{Fig. 2}). A great deal can be learned about the arrangement of this upper town from the various \textit{vitae} of Saint Hugh of Semur, Abbot of Cluny, who grew up in the fortress. Even if most of the miraculous details mentioned in the \textit{vitae} must be treated with skepticism as part of the genre of hagiography, the architectural and material reality described in these texts can, in my opinion, be studied as a legitimate source, both because they were written not long after the death of Saint Hugh and because the writers include Renaud of Semur (†1129) – Abbot of Vézelay and Hugh’s nephew.\textsuperscript{40} The \textit{vitae} describe how Saint Hugh


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grew up with the children of other knights and practiced with them the foundations of warfare. A school he attended is also mentioned, probably located in the upper

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41 Gilo, for example, mentions that Hugh was taught how to control his horse during battle, how to carry his shield and use his sword. He also describes how Hugh, together with some of his friends, while practicing the foundations of warfare, robbed a rustic of his few possessions, but that Hugh, then filled with remorse, compensated the victim. See Gilo, “Vita sancti Hugonis abbatis,” lib. I, 2 in Herbert E. J. Cowdrey, *Two Studies in Cluniac History 1049-1126*, Studi Gregoriani, 11 (1978), pp. 43-109 (pp. 49-50).
These descriptions reveal the existence of houses inhabited by the lord’s militia (Milites castri), as well as of the above-mentioned school, all of which were typical components of Burgundian fortresses.43

The construction of the fortress at Semur had a decisive economic and demographic impact on its surroundings. The security provided by the castle walls, as well as the economic boost the castle provided, led during the 11th century to the growth of a small settlement on the slopes of the Semur hill, to the north-east, outside the compound of the upper-town.44 Various documents attest to the growing economic activity in this “lower” town, which included vineyards and a market (Fig. 3).45 Clothing and fabrics were also laundered there, as mentioned in Peter the Venerable’s De Miraculis. Peter (1092-1156) describes how Geoffrey III, Lord of Semur, appeared shortly after his death to one of the nuns of Marcigny-sur-Loire and complained that demons were trying to snatch his soul to Hell, because he had levied new taxes on clothing and fabrics brought from the vicinity of the castle of Rainaldus Vizeliacensis, “Vitae, vol. 2, in Robert B. C. Huygens, Vizeliacensia II, B – vies de Saint Hugues de Cluny par l’Abbé Renaud de Vézelay, Sacris Erudiri – Jaarboek voor Godsdienstwetenschappen 23 (1978-79), pp. 519-551 (p. 524).


45 Richard, Le cartulaire de Marcigny-sur-Loire, p. 5, no. 3; pp. 13-14, no. 13; p. 11, no. 10.
Semur to be washed “at the foot of the castle.” These sources attest to the transformation that Semur had undergone in the 11th century, from a fortress of a strictly defensive nature to an economic, agricultural, and demographic center, as well as to the tensions regarding taxation that accompanied this transformation. This process is typical of the 11th and 12th centuries, including the fortresses of Montbard, Pontailler-sur-Sâone, Montréal, Mont-St.-Jean, and others. Moreover, these fortresses are likewise characterized by a clear spatial division between the residential area of the Lords of the castle, together with other knights and often a church – all within the circumference of an inner wall or an upper-town – and the settlement that developed at the foot of the walls or in a lower-town.

Semur thus displayed a physical division that exploited the natural topography of the hill in order to create an alignment with a clear vertical hierarchy. This served both a functional-defensive purpose (with the fortress at the highest point) and a symbolic purpose, as an expression of the elevated status of the lord of the fortress.

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The parish church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée and the architecture of parish churches in the Brionnais

The political and demographic developments at Semur did not affect only secular architecture, exemplified by the fortress and the upper and lower towns, but also religious architecture. Through a nuanced and intricate dialogue with Brionnais architectural traditions, as well as through a careful selection of architectural models, the different ecclesiastical edifices at Semur reflected the complex political and demographic changes in the region, as well as expressing the intricate messages of their patrons.

The earliest ecclesiastical building still standing in Semur is the Church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée, built at the foot of the hill. During the 11th century, and with certainty until the year 1120, this church served as the parochial church of the area, as mentioned in two lists from the end of the 11th century enumerating the parochial churches in the diocese of Autun, as well as a document dated 1065-1094 which mentions the right of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée to collect tithes and conduct...

49 On the parish church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée and different problems related to it, such as the exact dates of its construction and the period in which it was used as parish church, see Raymond Oursel and Anne-Marie Oursel, Les églises romanes de l’Autunois et du Brionnais – ancien grand archidiaconé d’Autun, Cluny et sa région (Mâcon, 1956), pp. 275-276; Matthias Hamann, Die burgundische Prioratskirche von Anzy-le-Duc und die romanische Plastik im Brionnais (Würzburg, 2000), II, pp. 72-74; Anelise Nicolier, “L’église de Saint-Martin-la-Vallée à Semur-en-Brionnais dans la contexte du Brionnais,” (Ph.D. diss., Université Lumière – Lyon II, 2005).

burials, indicative of parochial status. The most specific document however, is a bull issued in 1120 by Pope Callixtus II (1065-1124), in which he confirms the various holdings of the Priory of Marcigny-sur-Loire, referring directly to Saint-Martin-la-Vallée as a parochial church (“Parrochiali ecclesia sancti Martini”), indicating that this church was, at least in part, the property of the Priory of Marcigny. Relations between monasteries and the parochial churches that passed into their possession were often complex. Monasteries claimed a share of the revenues that parochial churches received from two principal sources: the territorial possessions of the parochial churches, and revenues connected to their liturgical functions (Spiritualia). Monasteries could hold the rights to revenues from both sources, or solely from the liturgical functions, which were often, in the 10th and 11th centuries, given as a donation, sold, replaced, or divided among several beneficiaries.

Marcigny-sur-Loire held the rights to a share of both the land holdings of Saint-

51 Richard, Le cartulaire de Marcigny-sur-Loire, p. 59, no. 80.
52 Richard, Le cartulaire de Marcigny-sur-Loire, p. 148, no. 270.
Martin-la-Vallée and to the revenues connected to its parochial function, specifically noted in the document dated 1065-1094 mentioned above.

Figure 4 Church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée, view of nave towards the apse, second half of 11th century or beginning of 12th century. Photo: author.
Turning now to examine the architectural vocabulary of the Church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée, it comprises a single nave (13.41 m long, 6.50 m wide) with no aisles and covered by a wooden roof (Fig. 4). Three narrow, almost slit-like windows (0.25 m wide) open to the nave high up in the wall, close to the roof (top of window slit only 0.54 m below roof level), but do not create any sort of division of the wall surface or of the space of the nave, which remains a single undifferentiated whole (Fig. 5). The internal and external walls of the nave are very simple, unadorned by any element such as blind arcades, pilasters, or friezes that could have somewhat eased their massive appearance (Fig. 6). Two steps lead from the nave to a slightly elevated short choir, which terminates in a shallow round apse (4.72 m wide, 2.10 m...
**Figure 6** Church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée, outer view from the north, second half of the 11th century or beginning of the 12th century. Photo: author.

**Figure 7** Church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée, choir and apse, second half of the 11th century or beginning of the 12th century. Photo: author.
deep). Towards the nave the choir is framed by a massive round triumphal arch supported on both sides by a heavy base (Fig. 7). Unlike the wooden roof of the nave, the choir is vaulted by a stone barrel-vault while the apse is covered with a stone semi-dome. Three round windows once adorned the apse, although only the one in the central axis of the apse remains open today.

The use of small and irregular masonry as well as the small slit-like windows has led several scholars to date the nave of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée to the second half of the 11th century, or to the latter part of the century at the latest. Similar masonry in the apse area suggests that the apse and choir belong to the same building campaign as the nave. Hamann, in contrast, relying on a certain similarity between capitals in the bell-tower of the church (to be discussed later) and capitals in the tower of Anzy-le-Duc, dates the Church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée to a little later, around 1120. Setting aside the dating issue, an evaluation of the place of the Church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée within Brionnais architectural traditions will contribute to understanding the extent to which Saint-Martin-la-Vallée reflects regional developments, and in what ways it diverges from them. The ground plans of Brionnais churches differ in the presence or absence of aisles, the existence of a transept, and the varying number of apses aligned in diverse formations in the


57 Hamann, Die burgundische Prioratskirche von Anzy-le-Duc, p. 74.
eastern side of the church. Most rural churches in the 11th-century Brionnais, as well as a considerable number in the 12th century, present a single nave without aisles, as found in the churches of Curbigny, Vareilles (Fig. 8), Montmegin, and Baugy. Even within this group of churches featuring a very basic plan, variations occur, such as the existence of an apse with apsidioles.⁵⁸ Alongside this elementary plan, there developed in the Brionnais, already in the 11th century a more complex type of

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church that included a central nave with aisles. These churches present a wide variety of types differing in the outline of their eastern sections and the alignment of the apses.\textsuperscript{59} The most common type features three-round apses, a large central one and two smaller side apses, which continued the central nave and the aisles, sometimes directly and sometimes being preceded by choirs, as seen at the churches of Saint-Germain-en-Brionnais, Melleret, and Saint-Pierre in Sévelay. More complex types include churches with two apses on each side of the central apse (the innermost continuing the aisles and the outermost opening into the transept arms), for example the Church of Anzy-le-Duc; or churches with an ambulatory, with or without radiating chapels, as in the Church of Sacré-Cœur in Paray-le-Monial.\textsuperscript{60} It should be emphasized that churches of different types were often build in great proximity and at the same time, and thus differences in type cannot be used as a factor in establishing the date of a particular building.\textsuperscript{61}

Regarding the vaulting, in an important study dedicated to the Romanesque churches of the Brionnais and the Autunois, Anne-Marie and Raymond Oursel noted that the challenges of stone vaulting were being studied and were the subject of experimentation in the Brionnais from the very early stages; and that the region developed some of the most effective solutions to the engineering problems.


\textsuperscript{60} Oursel and Oursel, \textit{Les églises romanes de l’Autunois et du Brionnais}, pp. 24-27.

presented by stone vaults. Most major types of stone vaulting are represented in the Brionnais: A) barrel-vaults. At times these are carried over a central nave without direct lighting, such as at Saint-Germain-en-Brionnais, and at other instances over a nave into which windows open, such as at Châteauneuf-sur-Sornin; B) groin-vaults over the central nave appear in several instances in the Brionnais, such as in Anzy-le-Duc; and C) pointed barrel vaults, as at Paray-le-Monial.

Regarding wall elevation, several different alignments are typical of the Brionnais: A) a nave with no clerestory at all (often vaulted by a barrel-vault) such as at Saint-Germain-en-Brionnais; B) a two-story wall elevation comprising an arcade of large pointed arches carried on cruciform piers presenting engaged columns, and a clerestory window in each bay. The nave is usually covered by a groin vault; C) a three-story wall elevation comprising an arcade, triforium, and a clerestory. Variations feature in the number of arches of the (often blind) triforium and their shape, as well as in the decoration of the friezes delineating each wall area.

This examination of Brionnais architectural traditions reveals that within this relatively small region there appears a great variety of architectural concepts differing in all major aspects: from ground-plan to vaulting and from wall elevation to lighting, and no architectural type can be described as predominantly

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62 Oursel and Oursel, Les églises romanes de l’Autunois et du Brionnais, p. 29. See also Hamann, Die burgundische Prioratskirche von Anzy-le-Duc, p. 197.

63 A similar conclusion was reached by Jean Valléry-Radot who, in his studies of the architecture of southern Burgundy, noted the coexistence side-by-side of all types of ground plans and of all vaulting and elevation types. See “La limite méridionale de l’école romane de Bourgogne,” Bulletin
characteristic of the area. Several scholars have discussed the possible reasons that led to such diversity and such an early architectural bloom in the region. While some have noted the abundance of easy-to-carve limestone, others have seen the power of the Lords of Semur and their control over the area, enabling commerce and security, as a key factor in this process. Jean Valléry-Radot, however, in his study of what he called “the southern border of the Romanesque school of Burgundy,” described the Brionnais as an area opened to architectural currents from the Auvergne, from the Lyonnais, and from the Rhone.

monumental, 95 (1936), pp. 273-316. Liliane Schneiter reached a similar conclusion, noting that diversity has always been the basic characteristic of Brionnais architecture. Liliane Schneiter, Le Brionnais (Geneve, 1967), pp. 7-13.


Within this great variety the Church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée belongs to the group of simplest rural churches, which comprised the majority in 11th - and 12th century Brionnais, numbering 118 of the 160 churches studied in the great compendia dedicated to the churches of the Diocese of Cahlon by Marcel and Christiane Dixon, and of the diocese of Mâcon by Jean Virey. Of the several

![Figure 9](image_url)

**Figure 9** Chapelle du vieux-bourg, Chapelle-sous-Dun, arcaded apse, early 12th century. Photo: author.

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variations within this group, the Church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée, as noted above, does not constitute the most advanced type. Although in Saint-Martin the choir is framed by the triumphal arch supported on both sides by a heavy base, in other cases in this group the choir is marked by niches on both sides, resembling very narrow transept arms. A good example of this is found in the church of Chapelle-sous-Dun in which pilasters demarcate square niches and a blind arcade adorns the apse, creating an elaborate system of architectural decoration (Fig. 9). A similar alignment is also found in Ligny-en-Brionnais.

Figure 10 Church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée, ground plan made by architects Janusz Ciemnoloński and Janusz Gujski of the Gdańsk University of Technology (Politechnika Gdańska). Photo: Courtesy of the Centre d’Études des Patrimoines culturels du Charolais-Brionnais.
However, one unusual feature distinguishes the Church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée within the group. From the southern wall of the choir, an arched opening leads to a square chapel terminating to the east in an additional apse, smaller than that facing the nave (Fig. 10). The chapel features a round dome and above it a tower, while the apse is covered by a semi-dome. The tower comprises two stories and its plain walls display no architectural elements or friezes that break the solid surfaces (Fig. 11). The location of the tower above a side chapel rather than above the choir, as is customary elsewhere in the Brionnais, has spurred debate concerning the circumstances of its construction. While some scholars have perceived the building as a remnant of a transept whose north arm has disappeared, Raymond and Anne-Marie Oursel, as well as Matthias Hamann, contend that the decision to build the

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tower was taken when the church was already standing, and thus the tower had to be built adjacent to the choir and not directly above it. They estimate the time span separating between the construction of the church itself and the tower as very short, because both display similar architectural qualities.\textsuperscript{71} What is most important is that both the Oursels and Matthias Hamann interpret the side chapel as a private chapel for the use of the Lords of Semur.\textsuperscript{72}

There are some indications regarding the existence of a private chapel for the Lords of Semur at the beginning of the 12\textsuperscript{th} century. In the same papal bull issued by Pope Callixtus II in 1120, in which he confirmed the holdings of Marcigny in Saint-Martin-la-Vallée, the Pope also confirmed the holdings of Marcigny in two chapels – that of St. Mary Magdalene and that of Saint-Hilaire ("capellis sancti Hilarii et sancta Mariae Magdalenae").\textsuperscript{73} The chapel of Saint-Hilaire mentioned in the document is not the present Church of Saint-Hilaire, which is dated to later in the 12\textsuperscript{th} century, but an earlier edifice, which probably served as a private chapel for the Lords of Semur in much the same way as did the later Church of Saint-Hilare, built adjacent to the lords’ fortress (a point to which I will return later). The document of 1120 does not provide any indication of the exact location of the chapel, with the most probable


\textsuperscript{73} See note no. 52.
options being that it was located adjacent to the fortress in the present location of the Church of Saint-Hilaire, or built within the fortress itself. Such chapels were a common feature of castle architecture, and Josef Avril, who studied the foundation of dozens of castle chapels in the 12th and 13th centuries, found that many were built within or adjacent to castles by the castellans, and were meant to cater to the religious needs of the founder, his family, and dynasty, as well as to enable prayers to be said for the salvation of the souls of his ancestors.74 Recall also that the different vitae of Saint Hugh state that in addition to the above-mentioned school, Hugh also attended a church in Semur, strengthening the possibility that an ecclesiastical edifice had existed in Semur as early as the second quarter of the 11th century, when Hugh was growing up in the village.75

If indeed the chapel of Saint-Hilaire served as a private chapel for the Lords of Semur, what then was their relationship with the parish church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée; and, especially, what does this tell us about the possibility that the side chapel at Saint-Martin-la-Vallée also served as a private chapel for the use of the Lords of Semur, as suggested? The relations between the lords of the castles and the parochial churches in their domain, taking into account also the existence of chapels in many of the castles, are often complex. Although castle chapels often fulfilled


many of the religious and liturgical needs of the lords of the castles, in many instances the parochial church was able to retain the right to perform certain ceremonies, or even the entirety of the ceremonies on specific feast days.\textsuperscript{76} Thus, for example, no ceremonies could be performed in the chapel of Plessis-Placy on major church holidays, and in the chapel of the fortress of Vatteville no marriage ceremonies were allowed to be conducted.\textsuperscript{77} In Saint-Martin-de-la-Place the founder of the chapel and his family attended the parochial church on important feast days such as Christmas.\textsuperscript{78} In other instances the priest of the parochial church attended the fortress chapel in order to conduct ceremonies on different occasions. The picture that emerges thus suggests a possibility of a multilayered ecclesiastical network in Semur-en-Brionnais at the end of the 11\textsuperscript{th} and beginning of the 12\textsuperscript{th} century, in which the Lords of Semur used the private chapel of Saint-Hilaire, and might also have used the side room of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée as their own designated space or chapel within the parish church on the occasions when they attended that church. The architectural features of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée support such an understanding of the ecclesiastical network at Semur: the edifice of the Church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée, serving as the parish church and located at the foot of the hill and distant from the fortress – and thus not reflecting the prestige and power of the Lords of Semur –

\textsuperscript{76} Avril, “Églises paroissiales et chapelles de châteaux,” pp. 468-470.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., pp. 469-470.
belongs to the group of simplest rural churches. Its only architectural distinction can be understood as connected to the occasional presence of the Lords of Semur – the castellans.

The connection between the rising power of the castellans and architectural developments within Semur-en-Brionnais is made absolutely clear when we compare the modest features of the parish church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée, with those of the present Church of Saint-Hilaire, dated to the second half of the 12th century. The latter, I contend, constitutes a unique declaration by the Lords of

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79 The date of the eastern portions of Saint-Hilaire was mostly established through a detailed comparison of the sculptural style of the foliate capitals and other ornamented architectural components in the apse, choir, and crossing to various other monuments in Burgundy. A central comparison in this regard is to the famous narthex façade of Charlieu as well as to the façade of Saint-Julien-de-Jonzy, which both display a style similar to that of the eastern portions of Saint-Hilaire, characterized by a dynamic tension between contrasting forms and lines, great movement, and colorful contrast between deep drilled holes and shiny smooth surfaces. The respective dates given by different scholars to the narthex portal of Charlieu and to the façade of Saint-Julien-de-Jonzy thus very much dictated their position regarding the date of the eastern portions of Saint-Hilaire. Dating Charlieu to 1125-1135, Raymond and Anne-Marie Oursel assigned the same dates to the eastern parts of Semur. Jean-Louis Dosso-Greggia and Denis Grivot supported these dates. See Oursel and Oursel, *Les églises romanes de l’Autunois et du Brionnais*, pp. 296-297; Dosso-Greggia, *Semur-en-Brionnais*, p. 30ff; Denis Grivot, *Semur-en-Brionnais – Iguerande* (Lyon, 1984), p. 3. Christiane Sapin dated the sculptures of Charlieu to the third quarter of the 12th century, and thus suggested c. 1160 for the choir sculpture of Semur in *Bourgogne romane* (Dijon, 2006), p. 144. The most innovative study devoted to the stylistic filiations of the narthex façade of Charlieu, is that of Neil Stratford, who has greatly expanded the group of works stylistically related to Charlieu to include monuments such as Saint-Bonnet-de-Cray, Dun-le-Roi, and Mussy-sous-Dun, as well as central monuments in the Rhone valley such as Saint-Maurice in Vienne, Saint-André-le-Bas, and Saint-Ruf in Valance. This nexus of stylistic relations led Stratford to the understanding that the workshop of Charlieu cannot be perceived merely in terms of a “Burgundian workshop,” but must be understood as one with much wider connections and influences, even if the chronology and nature of these is not yet clear. These connections and the chronological data they provide strengthen the possibility of dating the “Charlieu group” to the middle or third quarter of the 12th century. See Neil Stratford, “Chronologie et filiations stylistiques des sculptures de la façade nord du porche de Charlieu” in *idem, Studies in Burgundian Romanesque Sculpture* (London, 1998), pp. 289-296, first published in *Actes des journées d’études d’histoire et d’archéologie organisées à l’occasion du Xle centenaire de la fondation de l’abbaye et de la ville de Charlieu*, 14-16 July, 1972 (Charlieu, 1973), pp. 7-13. In an article also devoted to the “Charlieu group,” Johan Zink proposed a slightly different chronology as part of establishing an inner chronological development within the group. Without describing the details of this complex
Semur of their power and status in the Brionnais. Thus, the comparison between the parish church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée from the beginning of the 12th century, and the Church of Saint-Hilaire connected to the fortress of the lords, provides us with an understanding of the importance of the growing power of the castellans, not only for urban development but also for the complex architectural vocabulary of the settlements that developed around their castles.

The architectural vocabulary of the Church of Saint-Hilaire and the prestige of the Lords of Semur

The Church of Saint-Hilaire was built at the center of an active upper town where the essential functions for the continuing existence of the dynasty of Semur were concentrated. The connection between the Lords of Semur and the Church of Saint-Hilaire is plausible, supported by the documents mentioning the church. One proposal, it should be noted that Zink dates the whole group to the second third of the 12th century, thus proposing a slightly earlier range of dates (although in parts congruent) to that proposed by Stratford. See Johan Zink, “Zur dritten Abteikirche von Charlieu (Loire), insbesondere zur Skulptur der Vorhalle und ihrer künstlerischen Nachfolge” Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch 44 (1983), pp. 57-144. If the dates of the eastern portions of Saint-Hilaire in Semur-en-Brionnais are established through meticulous stylistic comparisons, those of the nave and western façade of the church have been mostly based on prefixed conceptions regarding the decline of Romanesque art in the Brionnais, supposedly expressed in the western tympanum and lintel of Saint-Hilaire. Raymond Oursel, for example, sees the western façade of Saint-Hilaire as an expression of the exhaustion of Brionnais sculptural traditions, dating it generally to 1150-1200 in Bourgogne romane (La Pierre-qui-Vire, 1974), pp. 289-316. I believe, in contrast, that the unique style of the western facade is not the result of a 'decline,' but instead reflects conscious and deliberate choices. This subject cannot be developed here, but since the eastern portions of the church could be dated to the second third or third quarter of the 12th century, the nave and western facade, can be dated to the last third of the century. I propose this without attempting to determine the span of dates any more precisely, an attempt that without additional documents would be speculative and arbitrary. See Gil Fishhof, “The Master of the Tympanum of Saint-Hilaire in Semur-en-Brionnais: Rethinking the Meaning of Style and Concepts of Decline in Burgundian Romanesque Sculpture,” Annales de Bourgogne 84, no. 3 (2012), pp. 245-280.
of the most important of these is a charter issued in 1274 by Jean de Châteauvillain, Lord of Semur, together with Girard de Beauvoir (†1283), Bishop of Autun, in which they elevated Saint-Hilaire to a collegial church while providing it with important privileges. The charter attests that, as late as the third quarter of the 13th century, the Lords of Semur enjoyed a decisive authority in regard to the church built adjacent to their castle.

Although the connection between the lords and the church is directly documented only for the 13th century, the topographical, dynastic, and economic circumstances analyzed so far, support my contention that it is also valid for the 12th century. The location of the Church of Saint-Hilaire within the special hierarchy of

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80 Archives départementales Saône-et-Loire: série G, 531, fol. 2.
Semur, integrated with the fortress in the upper town, provides major support for its interpretation as the castle church of the Lords of Semur, as does its design.

The Church of Saint-Hilaire comprises a central nave with two aisles, a short transept which barely exceeds the width of the nave, a choir, and three round apses. A dome carried on a drum surmounts the crossing, and above it, a tower decorated with an elaborate system of arches, pilasters, and cornices. The four bays of the nave present a three-story wall elevation (Fig. 12). The lowest of these is the nave arcade, with pointed arches carried on compound cruciform piers. Over the arcade runs a blind, but deep, triforium, comprising six arches in each bay. The third level is that of the clerestory which, through a large window in each bay, sheds direct light onto the nave. Facing the nave, the compound piers of the arcade present a rectilinear fluted pilaster, which changes above this first level into two engaged half-columns that rise as a giant order through the two upper stories of the wall. This elevation originally supported a pointed barrel vault.

As in the case of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée, a comparison of the architecture of the Church of Saint-Hilaire with Brionnais architectural traditions will provide a more precise understanding of its place within that tradition and of the significance of the choices of forms that were made. As discussed above, there was no one typical Brionnais ground plan of a church, and so it is difficult to examine the plan of the Church of Saint-Hilaire in such terms. Yet a large number of the churches in Burgundy, and the majority of rural churches in the Brionnais, present a ground-
plan of a single nave without aisles. Therefore, the Church of Saint-Hilaire with its aisles and three apses, presents a plan that is noticeably larger and more complex than that of a typical rural church, and one which was usually reserved for important monastic churches. At the most basic level, this choice constitutes a declaration of the importance of Semur and the power and prestige of its patrons. Moreover, Matthias Hamann has connected the variation of ground-plans in the Brionnais to the different liturgical functions of churches. For example, the complex choir of Anzy-le-Duc with its five apses opening directly onto the transept arms is tied to, to the church’s function as a pilgrim church, with the tomb of Hugh of Poitiers located in the crypt. Similarly, the ground plan of the Church of Saint-Hilaire indicates a different purpose than the average parish church of the time and region. While most of the larger churches in the Brionnais, with a nave accompanied by aisles, were monastic churches in which a complex liturgy was performed throughout the day, Saint-Hilaire was not a monastic institution but the castle church of the Lords of Semur. So in terms of its official function the Church of Saint-Hilaire belongs to a group of churches that are characterized by relatively simple plans, while architecturally it belongs to the group of the more complex edifices in the region. This discordance between the liturgical function of the church and its ground-plan reinforce my interpretation of the plan of Saint-Hilaire as a manifestation of the power of its patrons.

An additional distinct architectural element of the Church of Saint-Hilaire is the two-storied octagonal tower that surmounts the crossing and is decorated with an elaborate system of arches, pilasters, and cornices (Fig. 13). All the facets of the tower on the first story are blind, with each one adorned with a double blind-arch supported by a fluted pilaster in the center and round colonettes at the sides, surmounted on high bases and bearing sculpted capitals. Above the capitals, a profile stretches across the wall surface, crossing from one facet to the next, creating a continuous flow of lines between the different facets of the tower. The double arch is adorned with three archivolts, the outermost presents an intricate checkerboard pattern. The double arch of each facet of the second story is supported by a colonette in the center and by a series of three recessed colonettes at each side, bound

**Figure 13** Church of Saint-Hilaire in Semur-en-Brionnais, tower, middle to end of the 12th century. Photo: author.
together by a continuous profile and bearing sculpted capitals. Here, too, a series of archivolts encircles the double arch, albeit much more elaborate than those of the first story, and constituting the largest and most significant element of the tower’s architectural vocabulary.

Even taking into account the effect of structural considerations, such as the desire to reduce the number of openings in the first of the two stories, it is clear that the two stories were not built at the same time, with the second being added later than the first. Regarding the dates of construction, the first storey can be safely dated to the campaign responsible for the eastern parts of the church (mid-12th century) as the slightly later building campaign of the nave resulted in blocking the facets of the tower facing towards the west. As the second story already reveals Gothic influence alongside Romanesque ornamental vocabulary, it has been dated to the end of the 12th century by Aubert.\(^82\) While an octagonal tower of two stories above the crossing of the transept is familiar from several churches in Burgundy, among them Bagé-le-Chatel, Garchizy, and Huriel, in the Brionnais this formation is rare and appears only in Saint-Hilaire and Anzy-le-Duc. Other than these examples, all other church towers are square or rectangle.\(^83\) Beyond the general square formation, however, there is no typical Brionnais tower, and the various examples display enormous


differences in regard to number of stories, place and shape of windows, and decoration with engaged columns or pilasters. Nevertheless, even compared to such diversity, the tower of Semur-en-Brionnais is exceptional in the complexity of the architectural decoration of each of its faces. A telling comparison is the tower of Montceau-l’Etoile (Fig. 14), which is characterized by a much larger area of unarticulated solid wall-surface than the tower of Semur, without any profiles creating a continuous flow of lines between the different facets of the tower.

That the tower of Saint-Hilaire exceeds the norm of Brionnais towers in its shape, its high-level architecture, and the complexity of its decorative system, would

seem to be significant. It strengthens the possibility that the choice of forms and models in Semur was not subjected to regional currents, but expressed a particular intention. Then, a church's tower is one of its most prominent elements and its importance in transmitting messages of power and dominance is well known. Thus, major elements of the Church of Saint-Hilaire are unusually complex for Brionnais architecture and manifest the power of the Lords of Semur.

Alongside these, the architectural vocabulary of Saint-Hilaire's nave presents clear and intentional references to the architecture of the third Abbey Church of Cluny (Cluny III), and was meant, as I would like to argue, to reflect and manifest the Lords of Semur's ties with that powerful and internationally renowned Benedictine abbey, and especially their familial connection to one of the most illustrious Abbots of Cluny – Hugh of Semur, son and brother of the Lords of Semur.

A consensus exists that Cluny III originally featured a three-story wall elevation. The great arches of the nave arcade were pointed and an archivolt decorated with a pattern of round discs stretched along the span of the arches.


The triforium arches, three in each bay, were apparently rounded, with a fluted pilaster stretching between them. The clerestory also featured three windows.

(Fig. 15). The triforium arches, three in each bay, were apparently rounded, with a fluted pilaster stretching between them. The clerestory also featured three windows.

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87 The compound pillars carrying the arcade were covered by a fluted pilaster facing the nave and by columns facing towards the intrados – both eastwards and westwards. Above the capital of the pilaster, at the base of the arches, commenced a second pilaster flanked by a column on each side.

88 Apparently only the middle arch was actually open, while the side arches were blind. Conant reconstructs the arches as adorned with a flat archivolt decorated with 17-19 horse-shoe lobes, similar to those still existing in the transept. Kenneth J. Conant, Cluny – Les églises et la maison du chef d’ordre (Macon, 1968), p. 96.
in each bay as seen in Saint Hilaire, but the pilasters were replaced in the latter by round double columns.89

The similarities between the churches of Saint-Hilaire and Cluny III have been previously interpreted mainly within the general outlines of the so-called “school of Cluny.”90 This “school” employed the characteristic architectural features of Cluny III, with each church making a different use of this recurring architectural vocabulary. Among the notable examples cited are Saint-Lazare at Autun, with its slender pointed arches and one clerestory window in each bay; the Cluniac Priory of Parey-le-Monial, with its three clerestory windows in each bay and a miniature order of pilasters separating the triforium arches; and Saint-Andoch of Saulieu, with its use of engaged half-columns instead of the fluted pilasters.

Here, in contrast, I would like to suggest that the architectural resemblance of Saint-Hilaire to Cluny represents a conscious and deliberate choice by the Lords of

89 This daring arrangement gave the span of the windows a considerable portion of the wall of each bay, in spite of the danger of weakening the wall. Based on the findings from the south transept arm, the clerestory walls were apparently surrounded by a flat archivolt decorated by a pattern of oblong strips known as a “Billettes” pattern. See: ibid., pp. 96, 105.

Semur. This connection to Cluny (and to its Abbot, Hugh, a son of Semur) was a central component in the dynastic strategies of the Lords of Semur, and had vast political and economic implications in the Brionnais.

Saint Hugh of Semur and the Church of Saint-Hilaire: constructing dynastic identity via architecture

A careful examination of the specific parts of the Abbey Church of Cluny that were used as a model at Semur and, even more importantly, those that were not used as a model, enables a more nuanced understanding regarding the meanings of the latter church’s resemblance to Cluny for the Lords of Semur. A case in point is that there is no reference in Semur to the narthex of the third abbey church, a narthex

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91 For a more detailed analysis of the architectural resemblance between the two churches see Fishhof, “Meaning of Models in 12th-century Burgundian Architecture”; idem, “The Master of the Tympanum of Saint-Hilaire in Semur-en-Brionnais.”

that was being built at approximately the same time as the nave of Saint-Hilaire, in the second half of the 12th century.

The elevation of Cluny’s narthex is known mostly through the description by Philibert Bouché, and from two visual sources – a drawing attributed to Jean-Baptiste Lallemand (Fig. 16) depicting the four easternmost bays of the narthex, and a colored engraving made by Pierre-Laurent Auvrai based on another drawing.

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by Lallemand, this time depicting all five bays of the narthex. All sources are in accordance regarding the general outlines of the elevation. The first two eastern bays present a four-zone wall elevation comprising an arcade of pointed arches, a gallery with two components in each bay, each of which comprises two pointed arches framed under a large blind arch, a narrow triforium, and a clerestory. This alignment resembles the early Gothic cathedrals of Champagne and Picardy, such as those at Laon, Noyon, and Soissons, while the gallery itself reveals the influence of Sens. The three remaining bays are different in shape from the first two. The narrow triforium and clerestory are replaced by one large clerestory, most probably indicating a different construction campaign.

The dating of the narthex and of its different building stages is controversial, as are the methods by which it was built and the meanings of the change in plan seen in the upper levels of the walls. Whereas Conant perceives the building process as progressing in vertical sections, thus dating the first two bays to between 1145-

94 Narthex of the Church of Saint-Pierre and Saint-Paul in Cluny (Cluny III), engraving by Auvrai based on a drawing by Jean-Baptiste Lallemand, after: Jean Etienne Guettard, Jean Benjamin de La Borde and Edme Béguillet, *Voyage pittoresque de la France*, II (Paris, 1784), pl. 56. See also Erlande-Brandenburg, “Iconographie de Cluny III,” pp. 308-309.

1155 and the three western bays to after 1177, Salet notes that the change in elevation is detectable only above the gallery, which, in his opinion, indicates that the narthex was built in horizontal sections. Accordingly, the two lowest levels of the wall in all five bays belong to the earlier campaign, whereas in the east, this first campaign included the third level of the wall, while in the west, the work ceased before the wall had reached this height and was only renewed much later and according to a different plan. Salet dates the earlier campaign to the abbacy of Peter the Venerable (i.e. to before 1156) and the continuation of work to the end of the 12th century or as late as the beginning of the 13th.

Returning now to Semur, it is clear that the Church of Saint-Hilaire does not relate architecturally to the new, more modern forms that were being used in Cluny shortly before or even concomitant with the building of Saint-Hilaire's nave. Rather, it relates to the more traditional vocabulary of Cluny’s own nave. This was not coincidental. Bearing in mind that the third abbey church itself was --in large part-- the work of Saint Hugh, whereas the narthex considerably postdates his abbacy, it is reasonable to assume that Saint-Hilaire's specific reference to those parts of Cluny that were the work of Saint Hugh, attests to an explicit desire in Semur to manifest the dynasty’s ties with its most prominent member.

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96 Conant, Cluny – Les églises et la maison du chef d’ordre, p. 112.

The desire of the Lords of Semur to manifest their connections to their illustrious sainted relative, expressed via the architectural reference to specific parts of the third abbey church, is well-rooted in the characteristic strategies of noble dynasties in the 11th and 12th centuries. While the exact meaning and origins of nobility in the Middle Ages are hard to define, and therefore controversial, belonging to an illustrious dynasty is generally accepted as a central tenet of the concept of medieval nobility. In genealogical literature, for example, and especially after 1100, great emphasis was placed on the glorious deeds of the dynasty’s ancestors and on the virtuous tradition that they had handed down to their

98 This lack of clarity is partly because, at that time, there was no exact definition. Although medieval people knew who was a nobleman, and used terms such as venerabilis, iluster, praeclarus or nobilis in order to distinguish them, nobility as a group was not precisely defined. See Bouchard, ’Strong of Body, Brave and Noble,’ p. 1.


100 Bouchard, ’’Strong of Body, Brave and Noble,’’ p. 3; Génicot, “Recent research on the Medieval Nobility,” pp. 23-24. Examples of references to glorious dynasties in this context are numerous. As part of the description of the Lords of Amboise for example, Lisoi de Bazougers is thus characterized: “He was…a most illustrious man, of the most renowned lineage, outstanding in character, tireless in combat. For physical strength, fierceness of mind, and preeminence in virtue he was deemed distinguished even in distant lands, his reputation spreading far and wide.” See “Gesta Ambaziensium dominorum ” in Chroniques des comtes d’Anjou et des seigneurs d’Amboise, eds. Louis Halphen and René Poupardin, Collection de textes pour servir à l’étude et à l’enseignement de l’histoire, 48 (Paris, 1913), p. 77; Stephen, C. Jaeger, The Origins of Courtliness - Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals 939-1210 (Philadelphia, 1985), p. 202.

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descendants. This manifestation of ancestral deeds was meant to emphasize the merits of the dynasty handed down from generation to generation, singling it out among its contemporaries. Thus, the memory of ancestral deeds helped to define the dynasty’s superiority and privilege.

This desire to manifest the dynasty’s glorious past led to the invention of legendary ancestors. Some were located in an ancient mythic or fabulous past, while others were placed in a real, though inaccurate, and frequently also pseudo-historical, past which would be set in a period less distant and vague. Even more important in the present context, this attempt to glorify the dynasty was achieved not only by reshaping its past, but also through placing emphasis on those contemporary members of the dynasty who had reached powerful positions or excelled in their endeavors. A noteworthy example is to be found in the Annales Cameracenses, written between the years 1152 and 1170 by Lambert of Wattrelos, a


104 Among the many examples are those attesting to the desire of noble dynasties to associate themselves with the great senatorial families of Roman Gaul. Thus, the Lords of Déols claimed to be descended from the senator Leocadius who was celebrated as among those who had brought Christianity to the region of Berry. The Lastours dynasty in the 11th century included among its celebrated ancestors the 5th-century Bishop Ferréol of Limoges and the 7th-century Senator Lantarius. See: Bournazel, “Mémoire et parenté,” pp. 115-118.
canon at Saint-Aubert, Cambrai. The author gives an elaborate description of his dynasty, focusing on members who had reached important positions, whether in the ecclesiastical or secular hierarchy. The most recent of those mentioned had died only shortly before the annals were written.

For castellan dynasties, such as the Lords of Semur, whose status was not very ancient, the effort to increase their own prestige via the celebrated deeds of both ancestors and contemporary dynasty members had special significance. A prominent example is that of the castellan Lords of Parthenay. Joscelin II (†1086), Lord of Parthenay, became Archbishop of Bordeaux in 1059, and acquired his fame through his relentless struggle against the heresy of Berengar of Tours (999-1088). His successors as Lords of Parthenay commemorated their glorious relative by adopting the surname "Larchevêque", thus commemorating Joscelin's elevation to the office Archbishop. Thus, as in Semur, in Parthenay the fact that a member of the dynasty had reached an elevated ecclesiastical status served as a focal point in the complex process of constructing (and manifesting) a dynastic identity.

Among others are mentioned the relatives of one of his grandmothers, including Lambert, Abbot of Saint-Bertin, from 1095-1125, Gisla, Abbess of Bourbourg c.1100-1130, and another Lambert, Abbot of Lobbes from 1137-1149. The author stresses his maternal line because it is through the distaff side that his dynasty gained its most important connections. See Vercauteren, “A Kindred in Northern France,” pp. 94-96.

A seal of William III, Lord of Parthenay (1170s), depicts a man battling a lion and wearing a miter, thus expressing the current lord’s relation to the celebrated Castellan-Archbishop. This image was

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The decision of the Lords of Semur to manifest and celebrate their relationship to Saint Hugh via the architecture of their church thus coheres with the dynasty’s most essential objectives, including their attempt to establish its legitimacy in the Brionnais and to raise its status in comparison to other local dynasties in southern Burgundy.

Conclusion

In Semur-en-Brionnais, the visual discourse that involved the parish church of Saint-Martin-la-Vallée and the castle church of Saint-Hilaire was part of the extensive urban development of this small castle town in the 11th and 12th centuries. As I have sought to demonstrate, specific choices of architectural forms and models manifested the attitudes and intentions of the new castellan dynasty of the Lords of Semur-en-Brionnais, who used architecture to display and consolidate their status and prestige. The examination of the architecture and urban development of Semur-en-Brionnais has thus served to evaluate the architectural dynamics of one of the most fundamental processes of the 11th and 12th centuries – the rise of the castellans, a phenomenon whose visual culture has only just begun to be studied. 

also reflected in the monumental sculpted façade of the church of Notre-Dame-de-la-Couldre, situated in close proximity to the fortress of the Lords of Parthenay and interpreted by Robert Maxwell as reflecting the dynastic identity of these lords. For the Lords of Parthenay’s use of the memory of Joscelin II. See Maxwell, The Art of Medieval Urbanism, pp. 42-43, 187.