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That Which is Most Perfect in Gothic Architecture: The Refectory of Saint-Martin-des-Champs, Paris

More adventurous tourists in Paris who wander north past the narrow streets around the Pompidou center may eventually arrive at the triangle formed by the wider roads of Réaumur and Turbigo, in which sits the church of Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs. From there can be seen the towers of another old church enclosed behind buildings that offer a significant contrast to the Haussmannian architecture surrounding it. This is the complex of the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers (CNAM), a technical university and science museum established in 1794. Before then, this was the site of the priory of Saint-Martin-des-Champs, once one of the most significant monasteries in France.

Researchers and students of CNAM may continue along the Rue Saint Martin and from there enter the library, which is held in the priory's old refectory, built between 1225-35 as part of a larger building campaign. To those seeing it for the first time, the beauty of the space can be breathtaking. There is probably no other place in the world where you can browse through books on electrical engineering and quantum mechanics under the same Rayonnant Gothic rib vaulting that once soared over the Benedictine monks as they ate their meals (Fig. 1). Dividing the space in half is a line of tall, thin columns on which the vaulting converges, mirrored by decorative columns on the walls with a similar lightness and elegance. The effect is such that the elements seem to float in the air, an ethereal canopy hovering above the ground. Indeed, in 1742 Jean-Aimar Piganiol de la Force declared that "the Refectory is seen as that which is most perfect in Gothic Architecture"[1] (Mercier, 2012). Viollet-le-Duc (1859) too would call it 'one of the most beautiful

[1] "le Refectoire est regardé comme ce qu'il y a de plus parfait en gothique" All translations are my own.

abbey refectories' [2]. Yet today the building is far less known, especially outside of France, and hardly accessible to non-users of the library.

This essay therefore aims to understand how the refectory of Saint-Martin-des-Champs – a relatively minor building in the city and one with no liturgical use – came to be. It will be shown that the design of the refectory embodied the ambitions of the Clunisian monks to align their architecture with styles of the rapidly developing Parisian environment while also pushing it to innovative new levels, a continuation of an earlier modernist tradition as exemplified by the priory church. As they faced competition from other abbeys for prestige and significance, the monks may have wanted to assert with their new refectory that their brand of monasticism would remain relevant for the rest of the century, a vital and important part of the city they had embraced. Little did they know that the refectory and the 1225 building campaign it was part of would come to represent the last gasp of St Martin's golden age, the final triumph before a long and difficult decline.

In Section I, we shall examine the origins of the priory and its history as one of the major monasteries of the Order of Cluny prior to construction of the refectory. In Section II, we then situate the priory in Paris at the beginning of the 13th century with particular attention to the city's development, royal influence, and rayonnant Gothic architecture. In Section III, we narrow our scope to the refectory and analyze how it may have been conceived and experienced, with comparison between other refectories at a similar time. We then summarize and conclude.

I.

The origins of Saint-Martin-des-Champs are traced to sometime during the Merovingian dynasty (5th-8th centuries) when a chapel was dedicated to Saint Martin of Tours, commemorating the time he had apparently cured a leper as he was heading north out of the city of Paris (Huisman, 1925).

[2] "Un des plus beaux réfectoires d'abbayes est celui qui fut construit au commencement du XIIIe siècle, dans le prieuré clunisien de Saint-Martin des Champs, à Paris."

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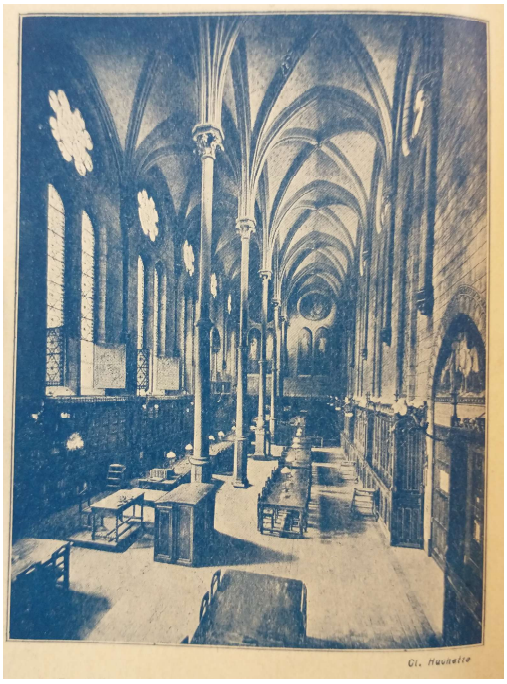

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Figure 1: Four views of the refectory of Saint-Martin-des-Champs, Paris. (a) recent photograph (Wikimedia Commons), (b) Photoprint (Huisman 1925) showing 19th century additions, (c) Color drawing from 1840, done before 1850 alterations, and (d) Engraving from 1867

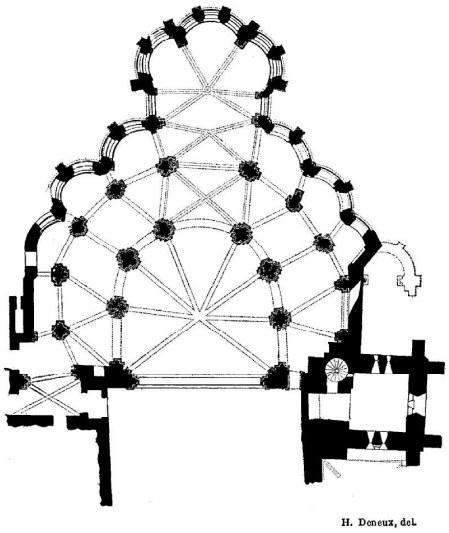

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Figure 2: East choir of priory church of Saint-Martin-des-Champs, Paris. (a) Diagram and (b) Ambulatory (photo: author)

After the site was destroyed by the Normans, king Henry I founded a collegiate church, which was soon transferred to the order of Cluny in 1079 by Phillip I. It was Cluny's first acquisition in the île-de-France and the first north of the Loire river. Located outside the city, in the fields (as suggested by the name), the priory would soon become one the order's most important dependencies.

Cluny was the site of a Benedictine abbey founded in the 10th century. Over the next two centuries, Cluny became the headquarters of an influential network of hundreds of monasteries and thousands of monks across western Europe (Pacaut, 1986) that has been jokingly called the first 'multinational corporation in history'[3]. Hugues de Semur, the expansionist abbot of Cluny from 1049 until his death in 1109, oversaw the establishment of the St Martin priory as well as hundreds of other monasteries. Along with the priories of Charité-sur-Loire and Lewes, Sussex, St Martin managed some of the largest numbers of dependencies in Cluny's network as one of motherhouse's 'Elder Daughters' (Mercier, 2012). St Martin would grow rapidly under Hugue. Even though some

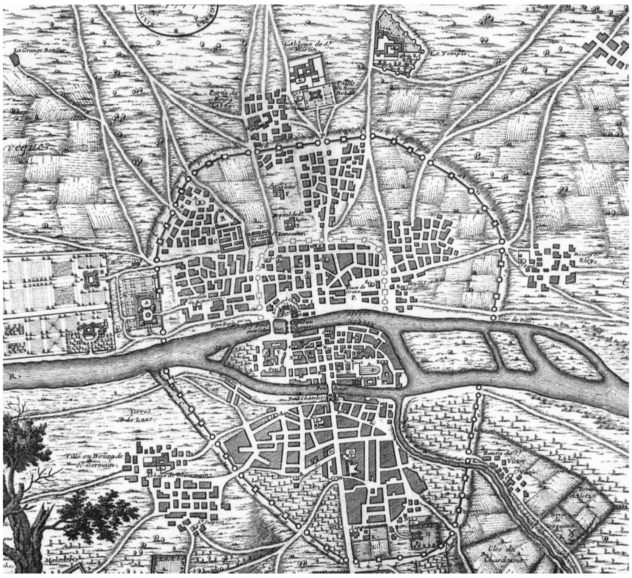
[3] 'les clunisiens ont formé la première multinationale de l'Histoire' (Backer, 2009)

consider his abbacy to be the peak of the order of Cluny's history (Evans, 1972), at St Martin in Paris, things were still looking up.

Construction of a new eastern choir for the priory church of St Martin lasted from 1130 to 1140 under Pierre le Vénérable, abbot of Cluny 1122-1156. Pierre oversaw extensive reforms in response to the growing Cistercian order, which threatened the primacy of Cluny. His leadership rapidly expanded St Martin's influence north of Paris, perhaps because of his good relations with the Capetian monarchs, making the priory one of the largest land-owners in northern France, in addition to several holdings in Paris itself (Racinet, 1990). It is therefore fitting that the priory church's new choir, ambulatory, and chapels would be done in the most modern and innovative styles. While not quite Gothic, the architecture represents the 'feeling around for something new, from a transitional period characterized by the progressive decline of the Romanesque... the convergence of pioneering attempts that initiate the passage from the Romanesque to the Gothic'[4]. (Fig. 2). There is a double ambulatory with an extremely thin space between the exterior and interior passages, topped by pointed arches and the suggestion of ribbed vaulting. Moulin (1984) describes the new choir as a 'masterpiece that could almost be described as strangely irregular, concerned both with the unity and diversity of its construction' [5]. Mixing traditional Anglo-Norman and Picard forms with experimental architectural elements spoke to Cluny's wealth and the monks' desire to be seen as the authority in monastic life (Valin-Johnson, 2009). Clunisians at St Martin placed themselves at the forefront of church design several years before the works of Abbot Suger at the Basilica of Saint Denis, setting themselves a high standard that they would attain once again in their refectory almost a century later.

[4] 'tâtonnements d'une période de transition marquée par le déclin progressif du roman...la convergence des tentatives pionnières qui amorcent le passage du roman au gothique (Mercier, 2012)

[5] 'un maître d'oeuvre qu'on pourrait presque qualifier de baroque, soucieux à la fois de l'unité et de la diversité de son bâtiment.'



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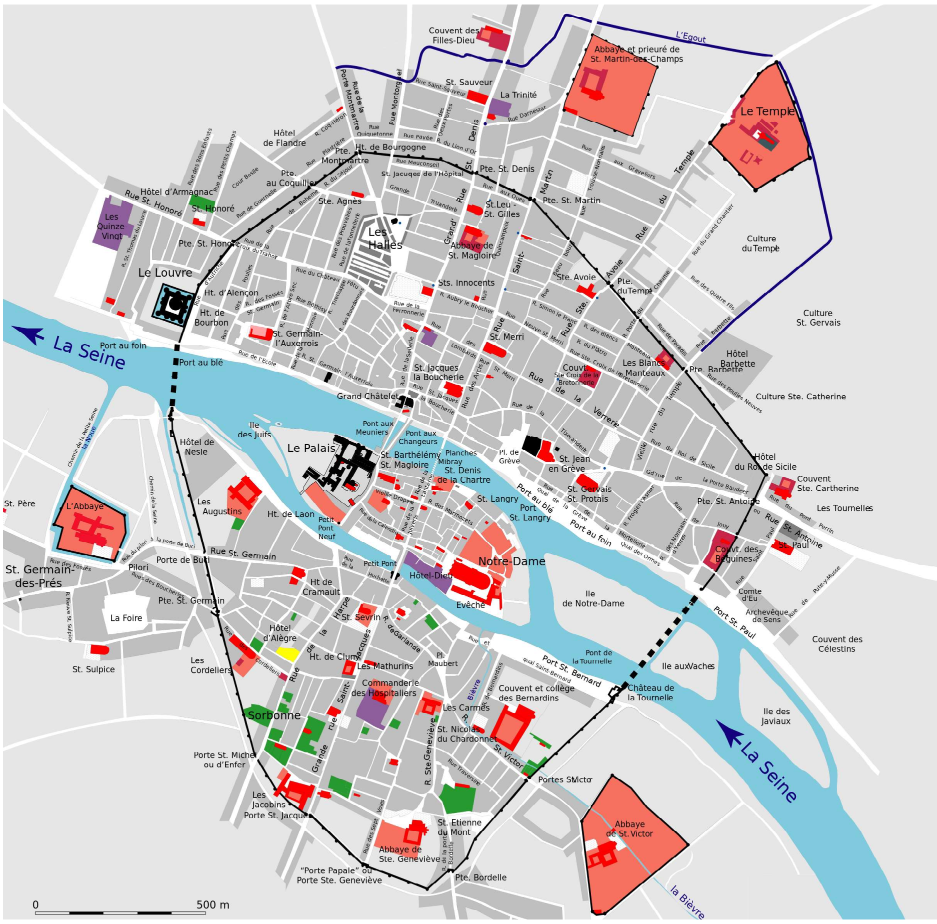

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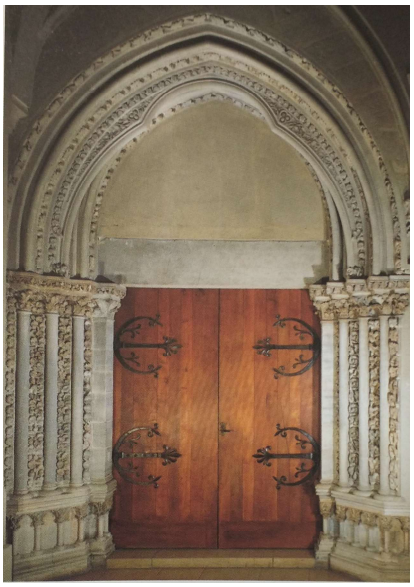
Figure 3: (a) Reconstituted map of Paris in 1223, made in 1705 (Wikimedia Commons), (b) Paris in 1300 (ALPAGE, 2024)



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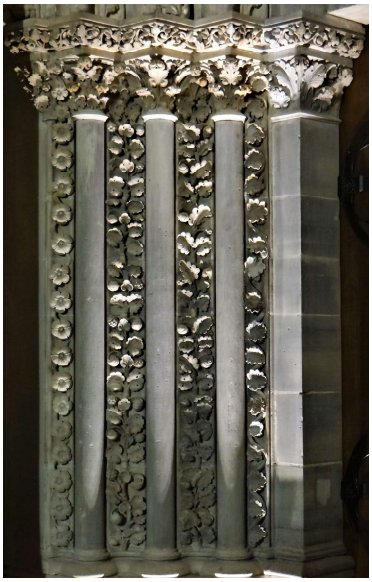

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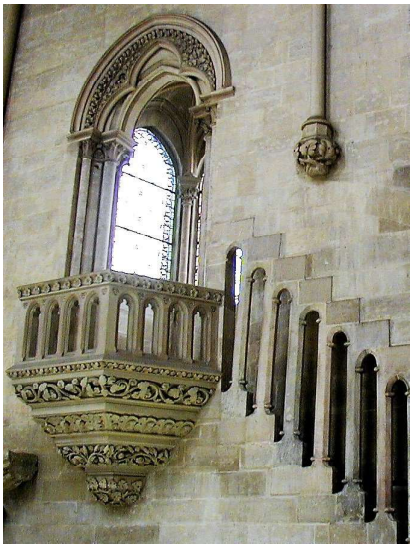

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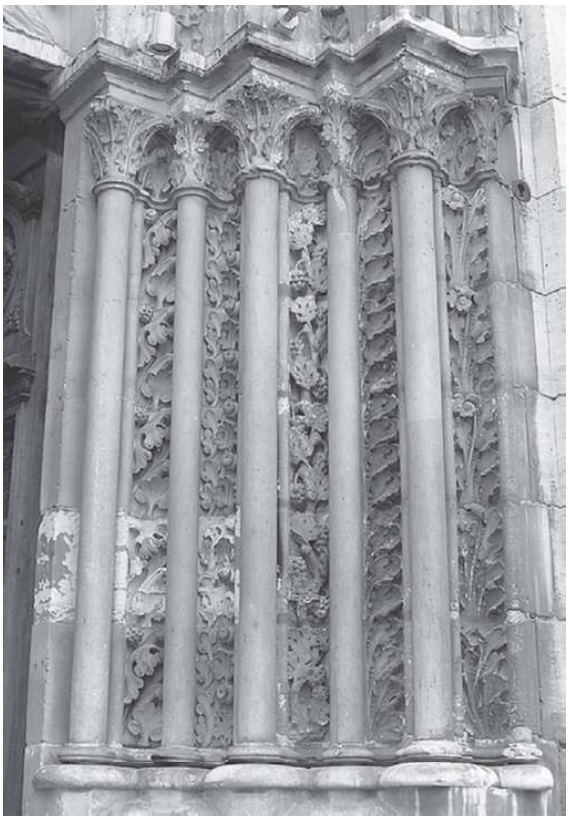

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Figure 4: (a)-(c) Saint-Martin-de-Champs refectory decorative elements (Wikimedia commons), showing (a) Portal and door, (b) detail of embrasures, and (c) reader's chair; compare to (d) embrasure of Saint-Pierre-des-Boeufs (photo: Cohen, 2014) and (e) portal of Gonesse (Wikimedia commons)

II.

Saint-Martin-des-Champs in 1140 was Cluny's 'flagship' urban monastery located close to the Capetian monarchs, who, beginning with Louis VI, would establish their permanent residence in Paris. In 1190 Phillippe II (Phillippe-Auguste) began his fortification of the city, accelerating economic and intellectual development – over forty years from 1180 to 1220, the population would double to fifty-thousand (Cohen, 2014). By the time of Phillippe-Auguste's death in 1223, Paris had become a center of philosophy and theology from its university (chartered 1200), which spurred book production and manuscript illumination, in addition to the already-thriving textile and goldsmithing industries. New immigrants to the city and the consequent wealth allowed for a building boom that drew heavily on rayonnant motifs, leading to a significant change in the streetscape. As can be seen in Fig. 3, ostensibly rural areas within the walls in 1223 were completely built out by the end of the 13th century.

The most notable examples of rayonnant style can be found in Saint Denis, Notre Dame de Paris, and the Sainte Chapelle. Branner's seminal 1965 book characterizes buildings in the style as 'virtuoso performances... Light and thin in the extreme, they mark the absolute victory of void over solid... each one is a spare skeleton from which the unnecessary parts have been removed... a stateliness without excessive weight that were peculiarly Parisian qualities surviving from the twelfth century.' As Branner traces the development of the rayonnant from the cathedrals of Chartres, Soissons, and Reims (designed 1194-1210), he identifies the balance between weight and height as a major theme, reaching 'the greatest success of a very thin structure and extreme tallness' at Amiens, begun 1220. So strong was the desire to push technological limits that the 'gigantic void' of Beauvais would be started in 1225, resulting in one of the tallest buildings in the world, 'a prodigious speculation upon the nature of the universe and man's place in it'. Branner further declares Beauvais to be the 'last imaginative French experiment with the configurations of space until the

end of the thirteenth century'. By embracing the rayonnant style, architects could align their buildings with landmarks such as Notre Dame and the Sainte Chapelle, allowing them to claim affinities with royal and spriritual motifs while also promoting a certain uniformity across the city.

By 1225, the Clunisians' Paris outpost was no longer the idyllic 'Saint Martin of the fields', but perhaps more accurately 'Saint Martin of the suburbs'. They contended with the spread of knowledge and spirituality outside of monasteries, such as in the university. They did not 'give up trying to make themselves heard, but their message was weakened'[6]. Though the order of Cluny was not in widespread decline at this time, they were no longer expanding as fast and some monasteries had begun to exit their network (Backer, 2009). Their hospitality was costly and the Clunisians, often from noble backgrounds, would tend to 'continue living materially as nobles'; they owned agricultural land and managed serfs like lords overseeing their manor (Pacaut, 1986). Aided by the often 'large personalities' governing it, St Martin 'would have a special place in Parisian intellectual life' (Denoël, 2011). The priory was a major land-owner in Paris and, as such, a 'decisive voice in the urbanization process of the emerging Capetian metropolis' competing with 'abbeys, the king, the bishop, and the cathedral chapter' (Oberste, 2021). In response, the monks would make a forceful architectural statement in their building campaign.

III.

It is clear that construction of the refectory in 1225 would have been subject to numerous influences and considerations. The most obvious is that of the rayonnant style. Embrasures on the entrance portal and the reader's chair have leafy, floral motifs between columns that resemble the elegant patterns in Paris and its surroundings, such as Saint-Pierre-des-Boeufs, Saint-Denis, the Sainte-Chapelle, and Gonesse (Fig. 4). Though the refectory would have been restricted to the monks and travelling religious people (Hurel, 2010), given St Martin's prominent location just outside of

[6] 'les clunisiens n'ont pas renoncé à se faire entendre, mais leur message s'affaiblit; (Hurel, 2010)

(a)

(b)

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Figure 5: (a) refectory of Maulbronn abbey, (b) refectory of Saint-Jean-des-Vignes, Soissons, (c) refectory of Royaumont abbey, and (d) chapter house of Noyon cathedral (photos: Wikimedia Commons)

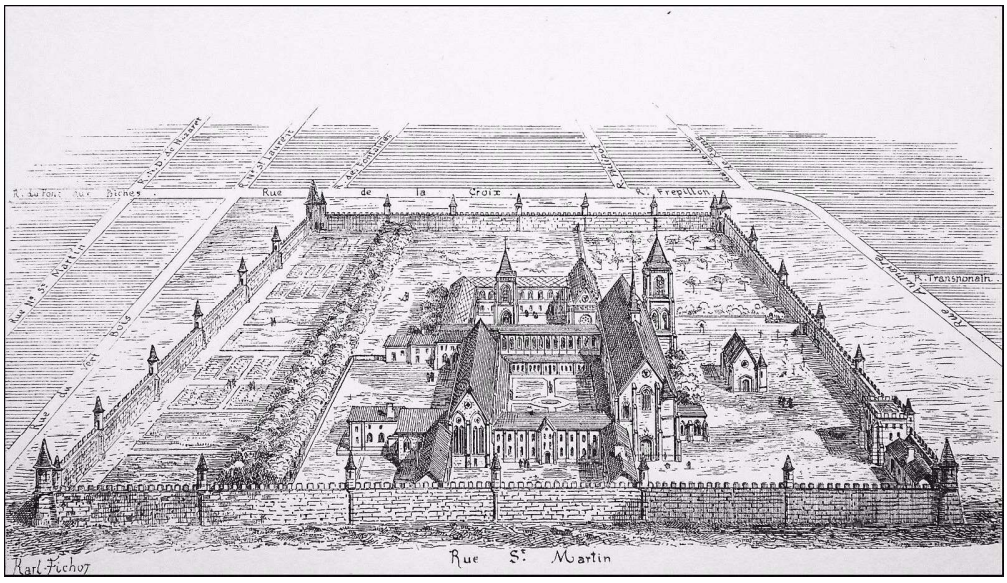

Figure 6: Reconstituted engraving of Saint-Martin-des-Champs after 1280, made in 1850 (Wikimedia Commons). The view faces east, showing the cloister in the center with refectory on the left and the priory church on the right.

Paris on the ancient axis leading from the île de la Cité to Saint Denis, the monks would likely have been eager to include their priory among the modern edifices along this road, regardless of whether the public could see it. Later on, liturgical processions from the Sainte-Chapelle would often terminate at St Martin, underscoring its prominent role in the geography of Paris (Cohen, 2014).

Beyond the decorative elements, the refectory plays with a sense of emptiness to achieve its ethereal qualities similar to the experimentation between void and solid that Branner describes. Branner did not seem to consider its design particularly innovative, and indeed it appears to follow traditional forms. Other refectories, such as those of the abbeys of Maulbronn (Cistercian, 1220), Royaumont (Cistercian, 1228-35), Saint-Jean-des-Vignes, Soissons (Augustinian canons, 1234?), or the chapter house of Noyon cathedral (1240-69) all have the same central spine of pillars, ribbed vaulting, and rose windows (except Maulbronn). Royaumont is an especially interesting comparison, especially when we consider its years of construction and its association with the Capetians.

Founded by Blanche de Castille as a Cistercian monastery in 1228, Royaumont abbey would welcome her son Louis IX many times during his teenage years for 'meditative retreats', which he seems to have remembered fondly (Branner, 1965). The favor of the Capetian monarchs, once key to St Martin's expansion a century earlier, seemed in the 1220s to have been re-directed north, to Royaumont. It is conceivable that the Clunisian monks at St Martin were keen to best their monastic rivals; that both the Cistercians and the Clunisians were building grand rayonnant refectories around the same time could suggest a certain dialogue between the two.

Comparing the St Martin refectory with the others makes clear its ambition. The columns are stretched extremely thin and tall and look like a set of Corinthian pillars placed precariously on top of a set of Tuscan pillars, almost as if they defy gravity to stay perfectly upright. Nowhere else do the columns have such a transparent quality. The effect is enhanced by the wall columns – absent in the other refectories – which mirror the Corinthian style and occupy the same upper plane of the space. While the other refectories appear to be rooted in the ground, like oak trees growing out of the earth, St Martin's more resembles a line of exotic palm trees, soaring above our heads into another realm entirely. It is not difficult to imagine that first ones to eat in the completed refectory in 1235 would have experienced a headiness that directed their minds towards a more celestial sphere.

The refectory was one of the construction sites in a campaign that also resulted in a new nave in the priory church (heavily reworked in the 19th century) and cloister (no longer extant), with fortifications built later in 1263-1271 (all seen in Fig. 5). These buildings were the core of the monastery (Fig. 6) and the center of monastic life. As in the priory church and cloisters, conversation was banned in the refectory. Monks ate without speaking a word to each other, while ingesting at the same time 'the spiritual food' of the Gospel, as read out by one of their colleagues from the reader's chair or recited by the group (Mercier, 2012). From the 11th century, Pacaut (1986) writes that the Clunisian monks enjoyed meals that were 'carefully sourced and prepared, with excellent sauces,

savory fish, and desserts made with honey... Saint Bernard found it scandalous that the cooks knew thirty-six recipes for cooking eggs...' – understandably, this led to accusations of gluttony. It was fitting, then, for the monks of St Martin to devote themselves to a refectory that would be one of the most modern and beautiful buildings in Paris, applying their tradition of innovation to existing forms to attain a stunning result which embodied the experimental roots of the rayonnant style.

IV.

We have examined the history of Saint-Martin-des-Champs to understand how its 1235 refectory came to be designed in such an ambitious and compelling manner. We identified the early modernism of the priory in its church's 1140 eastern choir and the late 12th century development in Paris, as major catalysts for adopting the aesthetics and approach of the rayonnant Gothic style in their new refectory. As Cluny began to decline after the abbacy of Pierre le Vénérable, ensuring that their monastery remained a vital part of the city may have been particularly important. We saw how the monks may have experienced their refectory, both as monastics in the order of Cluny and as residents in the suburbs of Paris connected by the same road to both the royal palace and the royal basilica of St Denis, and how this experience may have shaped their designs.

As the 13th century continued, Cluny and Saint-Martin-des-Champs would never return to their 'golden age' in the previous two centuries. The order would suffer loss of fortune, degradation of their practice, and declining numbers, especially during the Hundred Years War. Yet we may be assured that their devotion has been immortalized, in some sense – not simply in the stones of their refectory, now under the care of the CNAM, but also by its reputation. Indeed, Fraisse (1989) notes that Marcel Proust seems to have used Viollet-le-Duc's effusive descriptions of St Martin to define his fictional church of Saint-André-des-Champs in *La Recherche*; and so Saint-Martin-des-Champs continues to exist both in stone and in ink, open for us to explore.

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