

## ABBAYE SAINTE-MARIE IN ARLES SUR TECH



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Construction of the Benedictine Abbey of Sainte-Marie in Arles-sur-Tech began from 881 upon the initiative of Abbot Suniefred. The edifice is a major site combining different periods and architectural styles (pre-Romanesque, Romanesque, Gothic and Baroque). The abbey is unusual in that it does not face east (towards to the sunrise) but west (to the sunset, symbolising darkness and death).

In 960, the abbey, which was to become the focus of spiritual life in Vallespir, was endowed with the relics of Saint Abdon and Saint Sennen by the Pope. An extension was also added thanks to a donation from the widow of Count Oliba de Cerdagne. In the 11th century, major works were carried out to create the current building which was consecrated in 1046 and became the principal abbey in the Catalan Pyrenees.

At this time, the church comprised three naves with wooden roofing and two rows of high windows to illuminate the main nave. Many features from this period can still be seen on the main entrance. In the centre of the tympanum, a cross engraved with Christ in Majesty stands on the pre-Romanesque triangular lintel. The arms of the cross feature symbolic signs of the evangelists: the eagle for John, the bull for Luke, the lion for Mark and the winged man or angel for Matthew. On the façade, a series of arcatures reflect a new trend, the so-called Lombard architecture from Northern Italy which can be seen in many bell towers and religious buildings.

In 1260, the abbot Raymond Deç Bach ordered construction of the cloister in white marble from Céret with stone from Girona used for the columns. At the end of the 13th century, the church was enlarged with Gothic chapels opening onto the side aisles. In the 14th century, the north chapels were covered by a roof which deprived the church of some of its original light. At the end of the 14th century, the monks of the abbey turned away from the strict Benedictine order towards a more secular lifestyle and Sainte Marie fell into a long period of decline.

In 1647, an altarpiece depicting the lives of St Abdon and St Sennen was sculpted by Lazare Tremullas, a sculptor and gilder. In the second half of the 18th century, a German organ-builder built the great organ by recovering an re-using pieces from the original 16th century instrument. It was later placed in one of the bays.

During the French Revolution, the last six monks left the abbey and the church was declared a parish church, while its property and outbuildings were sold.

The sarcophagus (4th or 5th century) known as the Holy Tomb contains water of unexplained origins.



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