

Monastery of Sant Pere de Rodes

Visit





Historical summary

The origins of the monastery of Sant Pere de Rodes are lost in the mists of time and legend. Archaeology has revealed the existence of a large building in the 6th century, whose purpose is still not known. In the late 9th century, the first documentary mentions of the monastery refer to a small monastic cell that was in dispute between two abbeys: Sant Esteve de Banyoles and Sant Policarp de Rasès.

The monastery's golden age began in the 10th century, when a noble called Tasi and count Gausfred of Empúries took an interest in Sant Pere de Rodes. The monastery received large donations of land from them and it received precepts and privileges from the popes and the Frankish kings, becoming an abbey in 944. The church we can now see was built in the 10th and 11th centuries, and the monastery began to become important as a place of pilgrimage.

The abbey's power and prestige became consolidated in the 12th and 13th centuries. It was one of the most important centres of spiritual, political and economic power of the day, able to greatly extend its buildings and commission works of great artistic value, such as the doorway by master Cabestany.

The first signs of decadence appeared in the 14th century. There were various causes, including a series of wars and epidemics that directly affected the Empordà area; furthermore, this was a period in which the feudal system and the Benedictine order began to go into crisis. The problems grew worse during the 15th and 16th centuries: wars continued to directly affect the monastery and its properties, there was a growing number of attacks by pirates and bandits and religious life became laxer.

There was a time in the 17th and 18th centuries when the financial situation improved, thanks to the expansion of vine-growing in Catalonia. This fact is reflected today in the terraced hillsides of the Cap de Creus, with their dry-stone walls, as well as in the large buildings erected around the core of the monastery at this period.

Nonetheless, the abbey continued to suffer attacks and plundering by French troops and bandits, and in 1798 the monks decided to abandon the monastery completely and move to Vilasacra. In 1818 they moved again, this time to Figueres. Soon afterwards the community of Benedictine monks of Sant Pere de Rodes was definitively dissolved, with the disentailment of church property in 1835.

Once abandoned, during the 19th and early 20th centuries the monastery of Sant Pere de Rodes fell gradually into ruin, and at one stage suffered intensive plunder. Having been declared a monument of national historic and artistic interest in 1930, the first restoration work began on the buildings, work which continued sporadically throughout the rest of the 20th century. Between 1989 and 1999 an ambitious programme of archaeological research and restoration took place. Since then, the monastery of Sant Pere de Rodes has become one of our country's most visited ancient monuments.

1



Cellar

17th–18th centuries

This three-storey building was erected on the site of earlier structures. The two upper floors were used as storerooms and accommodation for farm labourers and servants. The rooms that have been preserved on the ground floor would have been used as larders and cellars. The arcades serve to divide the vaulted interior into different areas, and at the southern end you can see how advantage was taken of the living rock of the hillside. We must relate the construction of the whole building to the period of expansion in wine production which took place on the Cap de Creus from the 17th century.

Plane



2



Church

10th–11th centuries

The exact dating of the church is still a matter for debate amongst historians. Recent studies suggest that the works could have begun at the end of the 10th century, and that although the only date of consecration that we know is 1022, this need not mean that the church was finished then, as only the east end may have been consecrated. The church would have been finished by the mid 11th century. The difficulties in dating the church spring from the paucity of surviving documentation and from the great originality of its architecture, which make it unique in the mediaeval world.

Plane

3



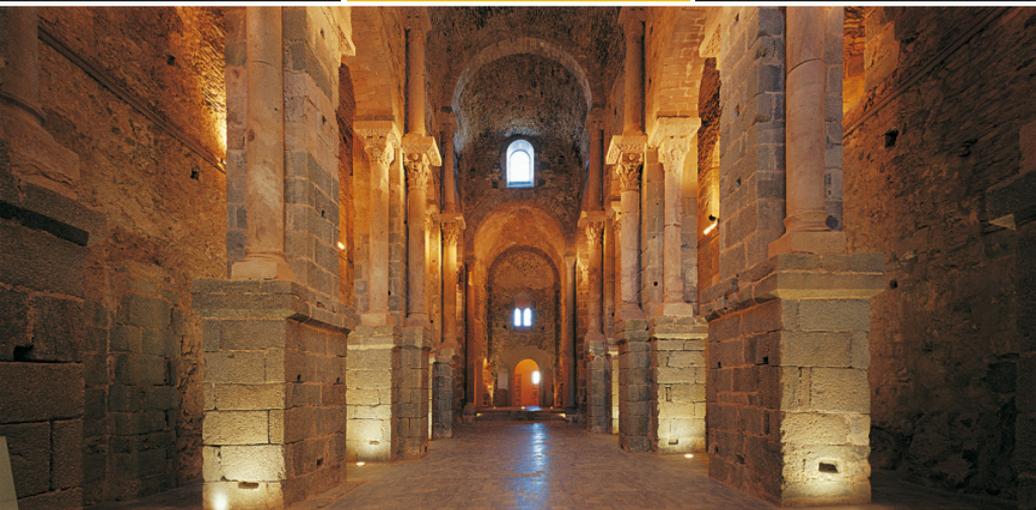
Atrium or galilee porch

11th century

Built a little after the church, at the west end, the most striking feature of the galilee was the doorway sculpted in marble by master Cabestany's workshop in the mid-12th century. This doorway was plundered at the beginning of the 19th century, and most of the pieces are now scattered in museums and collections around the world. Only two small fragments remain of the interior part of the doorway and two copies of the reliefs can be seen on the northern wall of the room.

Near the copies of the doorway, remains of a mural painting showing the arms of the counts of Empúries recall the galilee's function as a family pantheon.

Plane



4



Nave

10th–11th centuries

Both the architecture and the decoration on the capitals in the church de Sant Pere de Rodes seem to deliberately recall constructions from the Roman period. The barrel vault over the central aisle, 16 metres high, is supported by a mighty system of columns which constitutes the most remarkable feature of the architecture. The decoration on the capitals in the nave is Corinthian in style and the arcade arches are decorated with interlaced patterns.

The side aisles, covered by semi-barrel vaults, act as buttresses for the central aisle and they are continuous with the ambulatory of the main apse. To realise the scale of the work involved in building the church of Sant Pere de Rodes, bear in mind that it stands on a hillside. The ground was lowered at the southern end, while on the north side, up to four metres of infill was used to level the site.

Plane

5



East end

10th–11th centuries

The east end terminates in three semi-circular apses: the side apses are dedicated to the apostles Paul and Andrew and the central apse to Saint Peter. The central apse is a complex construction, with crypt and ambulatory. The rectangular opening in the floor of the presbytery gave access to a chamber used to safeguard the relics which attracted the pilgrims. This was one of the parts of the building that suffered most during the years the monastery was abandoned. The marble altar and other ornaments were plundered, and in the early years of the 20th century, dynamite was even used in clandestine excavations, causing great devastation.

Plane

6



Ambulatory

10th–11th centuries

The ambulatory is the passage around the presbytery, and it was used by pilgrims who had come to revere the relics kept under the presbytery. In the east end of the ambulatory there is a small absidiole, in the ceiling of which can be seen a painting showing figures with haloes. On each of the walls of the accesses to the ambulatory and crypt there is a funerary niche, possibly used to hold the sarcophagi of Tasi, the great patron of the monastery in the 10th century, and Hildesind, his son and first abbot of Sant Pere de Rodes.

Plane



7



Crypt

10th–11th centuries

The crypt was related with the cult of relics, its curved shape recalls that of the ambulatory above and its position, below the presbytery, made it a particularly holy place. Architecturally, the construction of the crypt was necessary to compensate for the difference in level of the ground, making it possible to erect the apse. On the western wall can be seen what is perhaps the only remnant of the church before the present one: a pilaster with a palm vault which supports not only the ceiling but also the weight of all the structures above.

Plane

8



Lower cloister

11th century

This very early cloister was discovered in the 1989 excavations. It originally had four arcaded galleries surrounding a trapezoidal cloister garth. However, such was the splendour and prosperity of the monastery by the 12th century that this cloister was considered to be insufficient, and it was decided to build a larger one. The topography of the site made it difficult to extend the cloister, so it was decided to bury it in order to build a new one above. The western gallery was destroyed centuries later in order to build a cistern, and the eastern gallery is the only one to preserve the original barrel vault. It also preserves some remains of mural paintings, notably the image of a lion and a Calvary scene.

Plane



9



Upper cloister

12th century

This cloister, which was one of the important enlargement projects undertaken by the monastery in the 12th century, has now been practically rebuilt. Very little remains of the original: the capitals and columns were plundered, with the consequent demolition of the gallery walls. In the 20th century it underwent two restorations: the first was in 1973 when, with the criterion of imitating the original, the south and east sides were rebuilt; and the second was in 1997, when the other two sides were restored using materials that contrast with the originals. The cloister can be regarded as the heart of the Benedictine monastery. Amongst other functions, it was a place to read, write, meditate and play, but above all it acted as a distribution space leading into the rooms the monks used in their daily lives.

Plane

10



Chapter house

12th century

In the chapter house, the abbot dealt with important matters for the rule of the monastery as well as meeting with the community of monks. It stands on the east side of the cloister, and the original entrance was through the central door in the wall. It shared the building with other spaces that were important for monastic life, such as the monks' dormitory on the floor above. According to the Benedictine rule, the monks were to sleep together in a large room, usually close to the church so that the monks could easily go there for matins, the canonical office which was sung at night. Today the interior of the building is a large empty space, the ceiling and a large part of the eastern wall of which have been rebuilt. It cannot be visited.

Plane

11



Refectory

12th century

The refectory, on the south side of the cloister, was where the monks ate their meals. Access to it is through a door with lintel and tympanum, above which is an oculum, or round window. The ceiling consists of a pointed vault and the room is surrounded by splayed windows. The space was shared with the kitchen, at the western end, where there was a door, now sealed, which led into the kitchen gardens. The dimensions of the refectory show that the community of Sant Pere de Rodes almost never exceeded twenty monks.

At the end of the same cloister gallery there is a lavabo, or fountain where the monks could wash their hands before meals. Beside it, on the gatehouse facade, can be seen an example of *opus spicatum*, or herringbone stonework, characteristic of the 10th and 11th centuries.

Plane

12



Porter's lodge

10th–12th centuries

The gatehouse, adjacent to the base of the bell-tower on the north and to the defence tower on the south, connected the cloistered life of the monastery with the outside world, via the gate leading into the square, opened in the 12th century. Although the Benedictines were not an enclosed order, it was not advisable for the monks to go out into the world. Similarly, few laymen would gain access to the intimacy of the cloister.

At the southern end of the room traces have been found of a 16th-century kitchen.

Plane

13



Larder

12th–16th centuries

The room known as the larder was connected to the modern-period kitchen and gate-house as well as with the stables and kitchen gardens. Within the room there are two underfloor structures which have been identified as a cold room and a water cistern. The cistern was filled via a channel that brought the water from the kitchen-garden area to feed the fountain we have seen in the cloister, next to the refectory.

It cannot be visited.

Plane



14



Square

12th century

As a result of the excavations which took place between 1989 and 1991, it was discovered that until the 12th century this area had been used for the burial of important persons, and that access to the interior of the monastery was through the galilee, as can be seen under the glass at the base of the bell-tower. From the 12th century, when the new cloister was built, the access to the monastery was modified. The entrance which today connects with the gate-house was opened and the burial area was paved to become the esplanade we can see today.

Plane

15

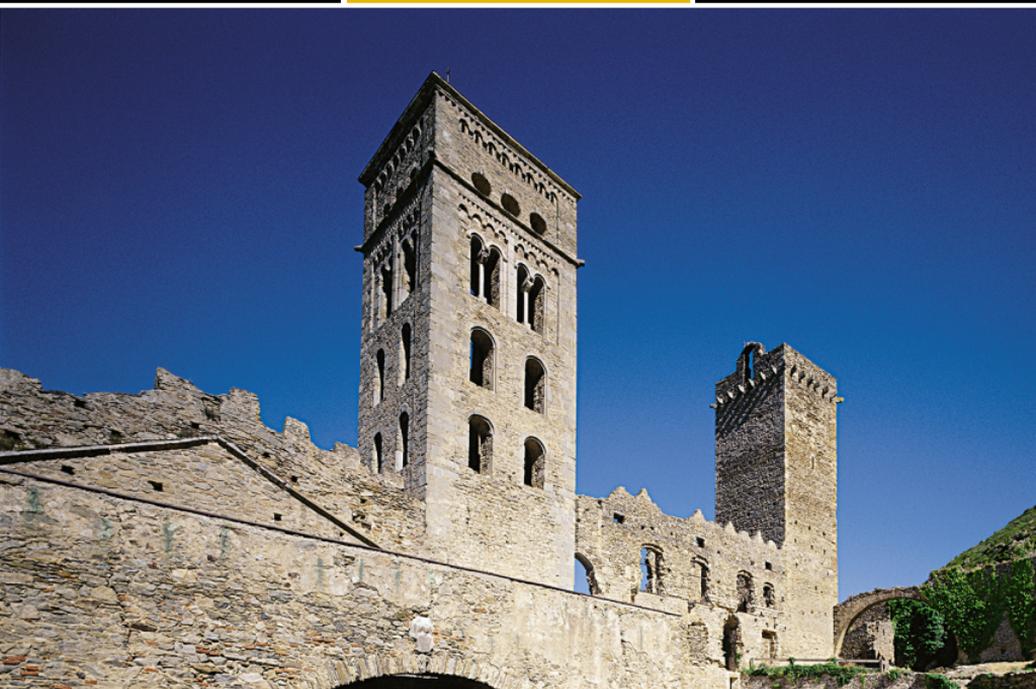


Cloister overcroft

17th–18th centuries

As early as the late middle ages, the monks began to abandon communal life as prescribed by the rule of Saint Benedict, to the point that in the 18th century each monk had his own apartment in this part constructed over the cloister. In the various rooms there are traces of windows, balconies and fireplaces. On the side opposite the defensive tower there is a vantage point with a spectacular view over the coast north of the Cap de Creus, of the castle of Sant Salvador and of the former kitchen gardens.

Plane



16



Tower

12th–13th century

This was a defensive tower: there was no entrance at ground level, but through the openings on the first floor. Once inside, communication between the three floors was through trap-doors like the one that can be seen in the ceiling of the ground floor. At the top of the building can be seen the machicolations which supported a wooden gallery from which the monks and others taking refuge could defend themselves and safely look out as the monastery was attacked.

Plan



17



Bell-tower

12th century

Like the defence tower, the bell-tower is 27 metres high. It is one of the works that was carried out during the major enlargement of the monastery in the 12th century. It has a square ground-plan and consists of three storeys. The lower two have windows with semi-circular arches, simple and unadorned. On the third floor, however, can be seen the characteristic Lombard-style decoration, present on most Catalan bell-towers of the 12th century. Behind the bell-tower there is access to the upper ambulatory of the church.

Plane

18



Upper ambulatory

12th century

This was built above the ground floor of the ambulatory, following the upper part of the wall of the main apse, on which can be seen herringbone masonry, or opus spicatum. It contains two funerary niches with traces of 13th-century paintings. Beside the stairs at the end of the ambulatory there are traces of a small circular chamber, today known as the chapel of Sant Martí, which must have served as a sacristy for the chapel of Sant Miquel.

Plane

19



Tower and chapel of Sant Miquel

11th–12th centuries

Built over the north transept of the church, this would have served as a bell-tower, together with a matching tower over the south transept, which no longer exists. When the 12th-century bell-tower was built, these towers lost the function they had served until then and were converted into chapels for ceremonies restricted to the monks.

Access was directly from the church via a narrow spiral staircase.

Plane



20



Hospital

10th–11th centuries

In the context of a Benedictine monastery, the purpose of the hospital was to provide accommodation for pilgrims. It is a two-storey building with a rectangular ground-plan. On the west wall can be seen another example of opus spicatum and the entrance door is on the east. Pilgrimage to Sant Pere de Rodes is documented from a very early period, and we know that a jubilee or great year took place whenever 3rd May, the day of the Holy Cross, fell on a Friday. The practice continued until 1697.

Plane

21



Sacristies

18th century

This large rectangular building, with its embattled parapet, is adjacent to the north wall of the church. The sacristy was used to store the items used during the liturgies in the church, and had to be close to it. Two older structures can be discerned in its base, possibly an earlier sacristy and an archive. Only the facade remains of the original building; the interior was completely rebuilt in the early 1990s. It cannot be visited.

Plane



22



Abbot's house

15th–16th centuries

Only the facade now remains of the old abbot's palace. In it can be seen a double window, and at the top, the embattled parapet. It was built as a residence for the monastery's abbots. During the 1989 excavation season an important hoard of coins was found. It consisted of 658 gold and silver coins dating from the 14th and 16th centuries. The treasure is now kept in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya.

On the ground floor of the palace there is now an information point for the Cap de Creus natural park.

Plane



23



Vegetable gardens

17th–18th centuries

The area to the south of the monastery, sheltered from the north wind but exposed to the rain-bearing winds from the east, was used to cultivate the vegetables and medicinal plants the monks needed. The soil on the two large terraces was brought from elsewhere and large walls and buttresses were built to retain it. Some of the buttresses, those closest to the monastery, date from the mediaeval period, while the remainder are modern. The gardens were connected with the parts of the monastery to which they were related: stables, workshops, kitchen, larder and refectory.

Plane

History

Guide

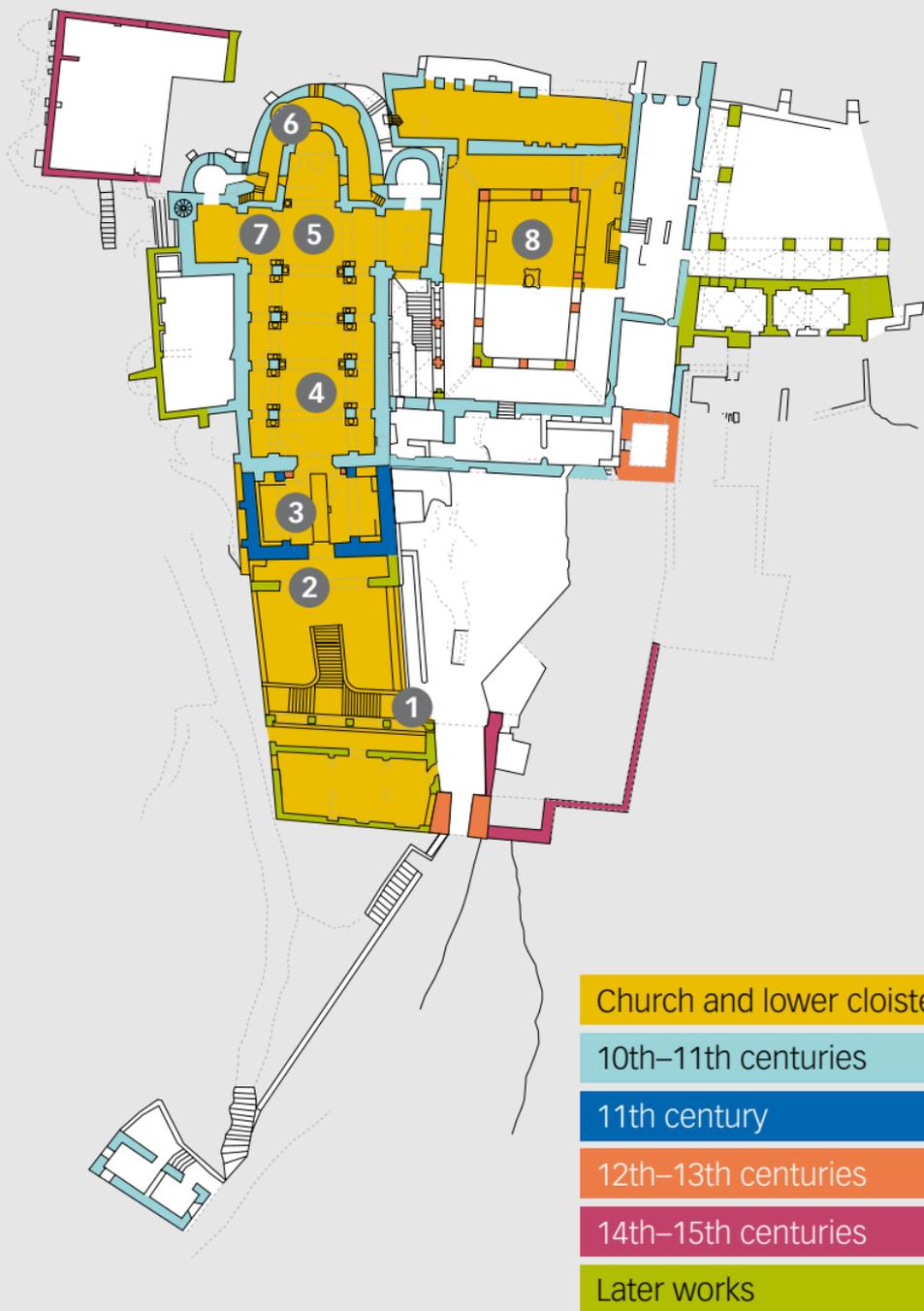
Plane

Level 1

Level 2

Level 3

Church and lower cloister



History

Guide

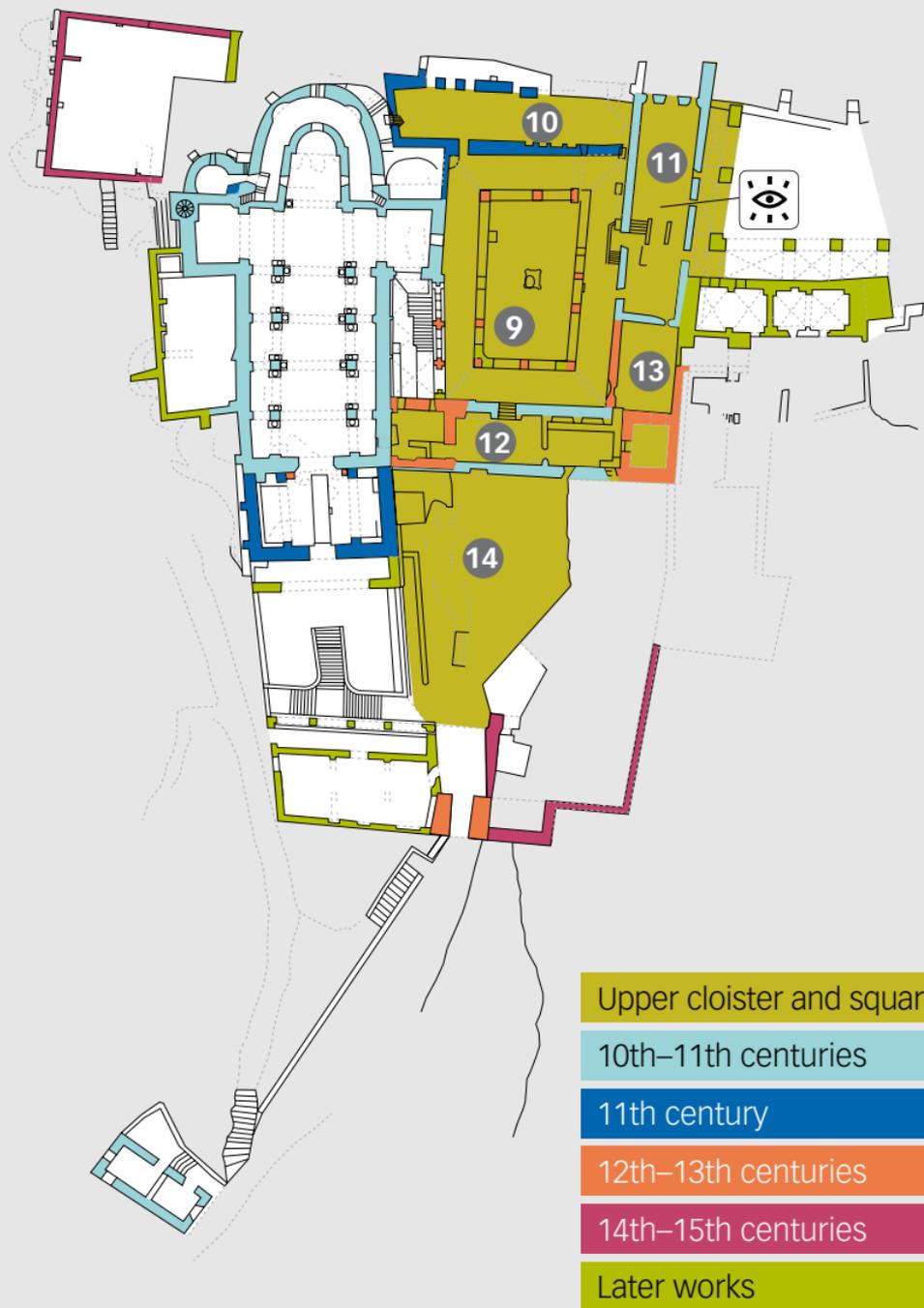
Plane

Level 1

Level 2

Level 3

Upper cloister and square



History

Guide

Plane

Level 1

Level 2

Level 3

Cloister overcroft and outbuildings

