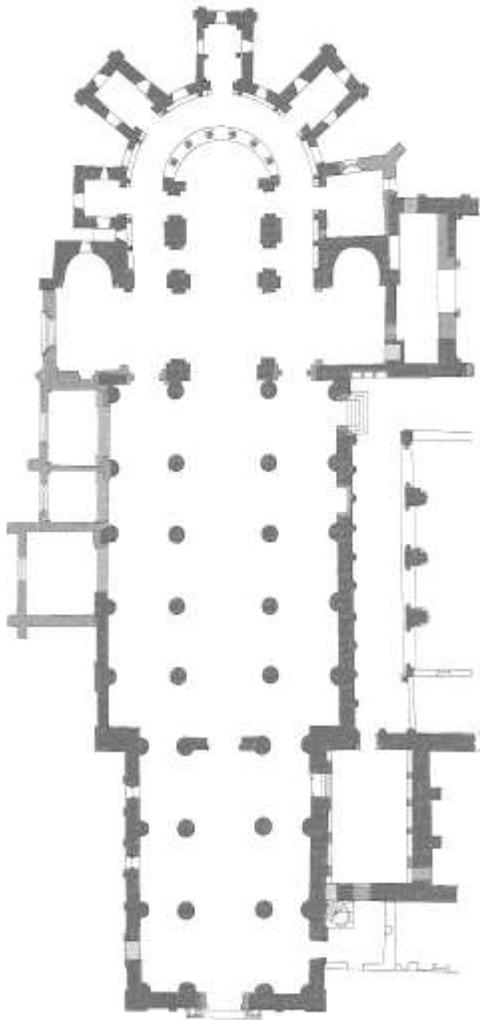


The Abbey of Saint Philibert

The abbey is composed of a group of buildings, of which the most remarkable is of course its Romanesque church built between the eleventh and twelfth centuries.



Encircled by the Abbot's Lodging (galleries and tower dating from the late fifteenth century), the Chapter House (thirteenth century vaults and pillars), the monks' refectory (eleventh century) and storerooms, as well as various other buildings adjoining the cloisters and also several towers, which lend it an air of a fortress, St Philibert's Church is one of the most original Romanesque edifices in France, since it sums up the entire history of Romanesque art.

The Abbey of Saint Philibert may be considered as one of the oldest monastic centres in France. It started out as a primitive oratory put up over the tomb of the early Christian martyr Valerian. This was later turned into a sanctuary where the monks of St Philibert settled in 875 AD after their flight from Noirmoutier due to the incursions by the Normans. Thus little by little the abbey and its church were built, reaching its present dimensions and becoming a cultural centre with a well-endowed library which attracted many pilgrims.

The facade, made of lovely stones broken with a hammer, dating from the tenth and eleventh centuries, closely resembles a keep, with its narrow arrow slits. The blank stone walls are enlivened by Lombard strips, small blind arcades, and stone friezes in a saw tooth design. Two towers frame the western facade, linked by fluted structures which date from the nineteenth century (as does the main door), and these reinforce the impression of a fortification. The South Tower is topped by a saddle-roof, whereas the other one, which was raised in the twelfth century by adding a steeple in pink stone, offers two storeys which are outstandingly ornamented with statues, columns and carved capitals.

The **Narthex**, known as "Galilee", is the area where the transition between the outside world and the

sanctuary takes place. Pilgrims would meditate here in the darkness and would also contemplate two frescoes: the **Mystery of Christ**, Lord of the Universe, inside an almond-shaped glory held up by two angels (twelfth century) and the Crucifixion: the Son of God shares in the suffering of humanity. In the floor there are tombstones, some of which are even circular.

The **central nave** of the rose-tinted luminous church has transversal barrel vaults, while the side aisles have groined vaults. On the insides of the great arches, decorative wall paintings show plants and animals. In a wall niche tomb on the south side, a reliquary statue, **Our Brown Lady**, presents her son Jesus, who has an adult face. He is holding the Word of God in one hand and is giving a blessing with the other.

In the crossing of the transept, topped with a richly decorated cupola, carved capitals denounce the vices which lie in wait for us, such as calumny, lust, greed and also the risks of the punishment they bring with them.

In the chancel, the liturgical objects are contemporary works of art: they include the altar, ambo, St Philibert's reliquary and the processional cross. These were created by the Georgian artist Goudji for the new Millennium.

The ambulatory, which encompasses the chancel, opens out onto five chapels. It allowed pilgrims to venerate the relics of saints and also facilitated access for processions inside the church. Twelfth century mosaics embellish the floor, showing the signs of the zodiac and the months of the year, thus reminding us that God is Master of time and the seasons.

Three gothic chapels were opened out of the North aisle during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, serving as oratories for the local aristocracy.

Beneath the chancel is the crypt, which is the oldest part of the church. It was built over the tomb of the martyred St Valerian, who evangelized Tournus and was put to death in the second century AD.

St Michael's Chapel, situated above the narthex, is a remarkable piece of architecture and is well worth the visit all on its own! The Gerlannus arch with its ancient sculptures framed a corbelled apse over the nave, now filled by the organ casing, which is classed as a historic monument in its own right.

The abbots of Tournus were confirmed builders, overlords of the town and its surrounding area, to say nothing of vast estates around Mâcon, in the Bresse region and even as far afield as the Auvergne. They answered to no-one but the Pope where religious affairs were concerned and to the King of France himself for civil matters. From 1627 to the Revolution, the secularised monastery was administered by canons. Since Bonaparte's concordat, the abbey has served as the local parish church.

Tournus is a pleasant small town. All along the main street, houses dating back to the seventeenth century are to be admired: private mansions, the market place in front of the Town Hall with the so-called "Snail House". In the oldest part of the town, on the site of the original Roman camp, you can wander along streets with symbolic names, past St Madeleine's Church (built in the twelfth century, rebuilt in the fifteenth, and again in the eighteenth centuries), then go on past the former court buildings, which have been restored, before finally coming to the Hôtel-Dieu – the former hospital – which now houses the Greuze Museum.

“So David summoned all the people of Israel to Jerusalem in order to bring the Covenant Box to the place he had prepared for it.”

(1 Chronicles 15 v3)

The Abbey of Tournus is part of the Parish of Saint Philibert en Tournugeois, which is made up of fifteen villages/towns and sixteen churches, with a total of just over 10 000 inhabitants.

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La Chapelle-sous-Brancion,
La Truchère, Le Villars, Mancey,
Martailly-les-Brancion, Ozenay, Plottes, Préty,
Royer, Uchizy, Vers.*

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