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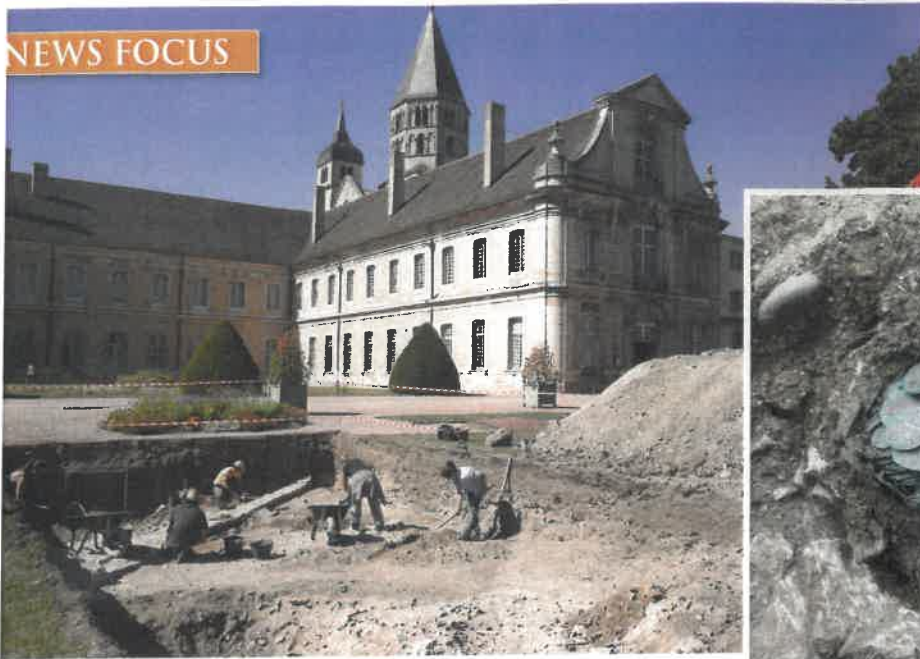
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LEFT & BELOW Archaeologists excavating at Cluny Abbey's infirmary have uncovered thousands of silver and gold medieval coins, buried underground.



Holy hoard

Discovering a medieval abbey's hidden secrets

Recent excavations at Cluny Abbey in France have unearthed a surprising 12th-century hoard containing thousands of coins, as [Anne Baud](#) and [Anne Flammin](#) report.

In AD 893, William of Aquitaine received a villa (villa Cluniacensis) in Cluny, Saône-et-Loire, from his sister Ava. A couple of decades later, in 910, he founded an abbey there that would become a leading intellectual centre, a hotbed of Benedictine reform, and a symbol of monastic revival in the West. From the end of the 10th century, Cluny Abbey developed at an impressive speed, receiving funding from high-profile donors – such as Henry I of England – over the centuries. It acquired the relics of St Peter and St Paul, which were placed under the main altar of the second church on the site (Cluny II). A century later, in 1088, the costly construction of the third church (also known as the Great Church, the Maior Ecclesia) began under Abbot Hugues de Semur.

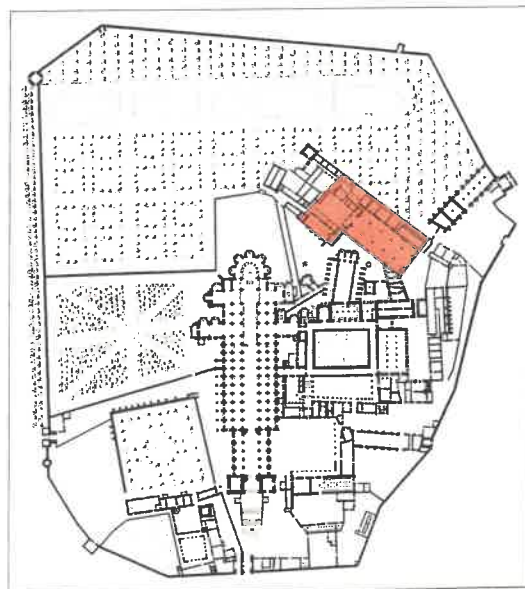
From the 13th century, however, the abbey experienced a change in fortune and started its slow decline. When the papacy moved to Avignon in the 14th century, Cluny suffered the ravages of war, famine, and plague. The following centuries saw the abbey confronted with the disorganisation of the Order of

Cluny, a spiritual weakening, humanist and reformist forces, and, sounding the death knell for Cluny, the French Revolution.

Little remains of this once great religious complex. Today, the south branches of the church's large and small transepts still stand, but the monastic buildings gave way to new constructions long ago – in the 18th century. The infirmary

was one of these now lost buildings, and, since 2015, excavations have been focusing on this area of the abbey as part of a larger investigation of the medieval monastery, initiated in collaboration with Christian Sapin (CNRS).

In a medieval monastery, the infirmary forms its own community (of sick or elderly monks and sick children) within the wider abbey community, and the infirmary at Cluny with its Marian chapel is considered an important liturgical centre in its own right. Before our project, no archaeologists had explored this part of the monastery.



LEFT The location of the infirmary can be seen in red on this anonymous plan of the abbey.

The team set out to identify the origin of the building and its various developments, and to work out the diet of its patients through the animal remains discovered during the excavation and studied by archaeozoologist Benoît Clavel (CNRS, National Museum of Natural History). Then, during last year's campaign, they made an unexpected discovery of a rather different kind.

Silver and gold

In 2017, a survey of the infirmary's south-western corner confirmed the location of the Great Hall, whose precise position was until now known only through an anonymous plan dated 1700. While exploring this area, an excavator came across a hoard dating from the second quarter of the 12th century, buried in a hole in the ground. The find came as a great surprise. As a result, the team turned their attention to a detailed search of the area.

The hoard consisted of thousands of coins that were once held in a cloth purse. The purse has largely disintegrated, but traces of its frame have lingered on the surface of some of the coins. It contained, after the initial evaluation, 2,252 silver coins: more than 2,100 deniers, mostly Clunisian, and 142 obols, also from Cluny Abbey. This was not the extent of the riches unearthed though: in the middle of the silver coins, a second, smaller purse made from tanned leather was discovered. CREAM restorers Delphine Gillot and Florent Duval extracted its contents in the laboratory, and found that it held 21 Islamic gold dinars. These more exotic coins were minted between 1121 and 1131 in Spain (Almería, Granada, and Seville) and Morocco (Nul-Lamta), during the reign of Ali Ben Youssef (1106-1143) of the Berber dynasty of the Almoravids. They were carefully arranged, nestling against a gold ring adorned with an ancient carnelian intaglio that depicted the bust of Hercules holding a club. It is a signet ring with the inscription 'AVETE' engraved in the gold rim. The purse also contained a small (24g) ingot of folded gold leaf in a leather pouch, and a small circular object, also of gold.

This composition is exceptional. In the same closed set are silver and gold coins of the 12th-century period, during which Western currency is largely dominated by the silver denier or the billon. Moreover, there was no issue of gold coins in Christian Europe at that time, so studying the coins will tell us more about the circulation and the use of gold coins in the Christian West in the 12th century.

The hoard is partly of interest because it was found in a known archaeological context, but it is also important that this is the first Cluniac treasure known to date, according to doctoral student Vincent Borrel (AOROC/ENS Paris/EPHE), who has been studying the coins. Cluny's coinage remains poorly documented, so the discovery of such a large number of examples from the abbey presents a great opportunity to enhance our understanding of this aspect of the institution.

But who buried the coins? Too modest to have belonged to Cluny Abbey in its heyday, the purse and its contents could be the prized possessions of a religious dignitary or a high-ranking clergyman. Further study will explore this hypothesis, as well as the potential link with Spain suggested by the presence of gold in the form of Islamic coins and bullion. The same team will

return to the site later this year to investigate the building that once stood where the coins were found – such halls are not normally present in traditional monastic sites – in order to establish its connection to the infirmary. □

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The excavations were carried out by Anne Baud (research professor at Université Lumière, Lyon 2) and Anne Flammin (CNRS archaeologist engineer), attached to the Archaeology and Archaeometry Laboratory (UMR 5138 of the CNRS/Université Lumière, Lyon 2/Université Claude Bernard, Lyon 1), with the collaboration of a team of students from Université Lumière, Lyon 2. The restoration of the hoard was entrusted to CREAM (the Center for Restoration and Municipal Archaeological Studies) of Vienne (Isère) and ARC-Nucléart in Grenoble.

BELOW As well as silver coins, the hoard contained a leather purse, shown at the right of this image (TOP). When restorers opened the purse, they found a 24g gold ingot (BOTTOM LEFT) and 21 Islamic gold dinars nestle against a gold ring (MIDDLE), which bears an intaglio of Hercules in its center and the inscription 'AVETE' around its rim (BOTTOM RIGHT).

