

A unique plan

The abbey of Mont-Saint-Michel is a unique building: its plan is unlike that of any other monastery. Constrained by the **pyramidal shape of the Mount**, its medieval builders wrapped the buildings around the granite rock.

The abbey church, situated at the top, stands on crypts that create a platform designed to take the weight of a church 80 metres long.

The building known as the **Merveille**, often regarded as the jewel of the abbey's architecture, is evidence of the architectural mastery of its 13th century builders who succeeded in perching two blocks of 3-storey buildings on a steep rocky slope. This required very precise technical calculations. On the ground floor, the narrow side aisle* of the cellar acts as a buttress. Above that the supports of the first two storeys of the western building are stacked on top of one another. Finally, the structures become progressively lighter towards the top. On the outside, the building is supported by powerful buttresses*. The layout and architecture of the buildings is influenced by the guiding principles of monastic life. The rule of Saint Benedict*, observed by the monks of the Mount, dictated that their days be devoted to prayer and work, so the rooms were organised around these two activities and the space was reserved exclusively for the monks to respect the principle of an enclosed order. Again, faithful to this principle, the rooms set aside to receive the laity were put on the ground floor and first floor of the Merveille. The construction of the abbey of Mont-Saint-Michel therefore conformed to two major imperatives: the requirements of monastic life and the constraints of topography.

* Side aisle

Aisle running alongside the nave of a building.

* Buttresses

Pillars projecting from a wall to support it.

* Rule of Saint Benedict

Enacted by Benedict of Nursia in the 6th century for his monastery at Monte Cassino in Italy, this rule stipulates a life of prayer and work; it is observed by the Benedictines among others.

The archangel Michael

The worship of Saint Michael

Saint Michael, head of the heavenly militia, was of great importance to Medieval religious sensibility. In the New Testament, Saint Michael appears in the Book of Revelation: **he fights and defeats a dragon**, symbol of the devil. To Medieval man living in expectation and dread of the hereafter, Saint Michael was the one who led away the dead and put their souls in the balance on the day of the last judgement. Very widespread in the East from the 4th century, the worship of Saint Michael only appeared in the West in the late 5th century with the building of the first sanctuary at Monte



Gargano (Italy) in 492. Around the year 1000, churches and chapels dedicated to the Saint proliferated all over Europe, often on the top of hills or promontories. After the Hundred Years War, devotion to Saint Michael took

on a special dimension because of the resistance of the Mount against the English. Finally, this worship expanded rapidly with the Counter-Reformation, for in the eyes of the Church it was only the warlike angel who could fight against the Protestant heresy. In Christian iconography, Saint Michael is often depicted holding **a sword and a set of scales**. Popular traditions and cults have made Saint Michael the patron saint of knights and of all guilds associated with arms and scales. The statue that stands on top of the belfry has the traditional attributes of the archangel. It was made in 1897 by the sculptor **Emmanuel Frémiet** and commissioned by the architect Victor Petitgrand who wanted to see the new 32-metre steeple suitably crowned. The statue was restored in 1987.

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Mont-Saint-Michel Abbey

Mont-Saint-Michel

The long history of Mont-Saint-Michel is thought to date back to 708, when **Aubert, Bishop of Avranches**, had a sanctuary built on Mont-Tombe in honour of the Archangel. The mount soon became a major focus of pilgrimage. In the 10th century, the Benedictines settled in the abbey, while a

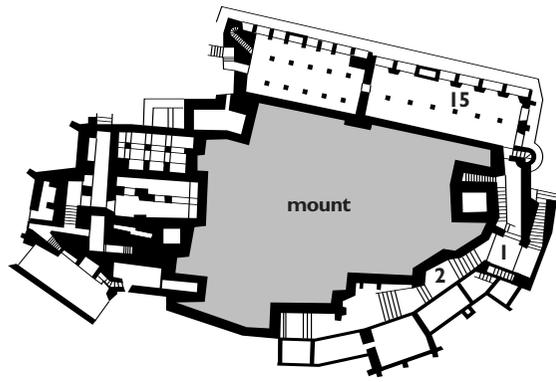


village grew up below its walls. By the 14th century it extended as far as the foot of the rock. An impregnable stronghold

during the Hundred Years War, Mont-Saint-Michel is also an example of military architecture. Its ramparts and fortifications resisted all the English assaults and as a result the Mount became a symbol of national identity.

Following the dissolution of the religious community during the Revolution and until 1863 the abbey was used as a prison. Classified as a historic monument in 1874, it underwent major restoration work. Since then, work has gone on regularly all over the site. The result is that visitors can now experience the splendour of the abbey that the people of the Middle Ages regarded as a representation of the heavenly Jerusalem on earth, an image of Paradise. Mont-Saint-Michel has been listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO since 1979.

lower floor



Having crossed the **Guard room ·1·**, the fortified entrance to the abbey, the visitor climbs the stairs known as the **Grand Degré ·2·** up to the Saut-Gaultier terrace. You then walk between the church, on the right, and the abbey buildings, on the left, linked by suspended passageways. These buildings, put up between the 14th and 16th centuries, were the stately residence of the abbots.

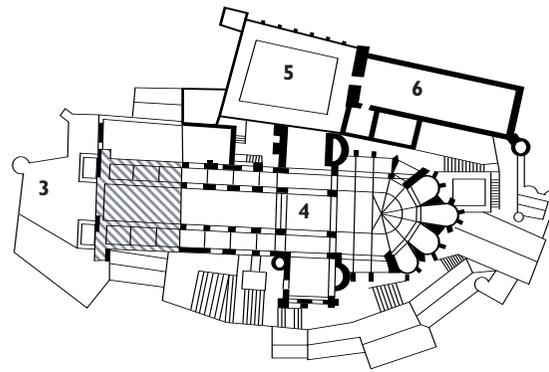


The **west terrace ·3·** consists of the original parvis of the abbey church and the first three bays of the nave destroyed in the 18th century following a fire. The classical façade was rebuilt in 1780. From here you have a general view over the bay, from the rock of Cancale, to the west and in Brittany, to the cliffs of Normandy to the east. You can also make out two granite massifs, Mont-Dol inland to the south west and the isle of Tombelaine to the north. Out to sea, you can see the archipelago of the Iles Chausey, source of the granite from which the abbey was built.

Finally, the terrace offers a unique view of the Neogothic spire of the church tower built in 1897 with the gilded copper statue of Saint Michael on top.

Built in the early decades of the year 1000, the **abbey church ·4·** was constructed on the top of the rock, eighty metres above sea level, on a platform eighty metres long. The nave has an elevation on three levels: arches, galleries and tall windows.

upper floor



* **Wood-panelled barrel vault**
Vault lined with wooden panels.

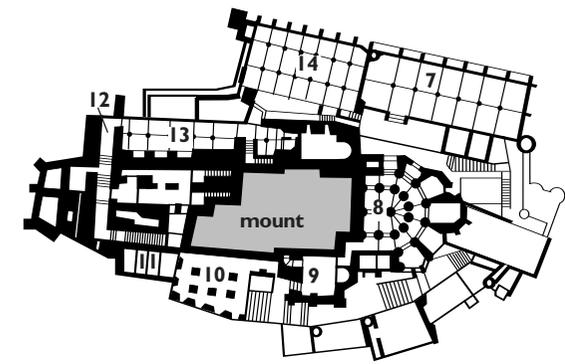


The structure of the nave is covered with a wood-panelled barrel vault*. The Romanesque chancel, which collapsed in 1421, was rebuilt after the Hundred Years War in flamboyant Gothic style. The visit continues through the **cloister ·5·**. This gallery which provided communication between the various buildings, was a place of prayer and meditation. Processions were held here during religious festivals. The cloister is situated at the top of a building known as the Merveille built at the beginning of the 13th century. It gives access to the refectory, kitchen, church, dormitory, cartulary and to various stairways. To the west, the central bay, looking out over the sea, was to have given access to a chapter house that was never built.

The galleries of the cloister have been constructed to make them light in weight. A double row of small columns, slightly out of line, creates ever-changing views. In the **refectory ·6·**, the monks took their meals in silence, whilst one of them gave a reading from the pulpit on the south wall. The side walls of this room have narrow windows invisible from the entrance.

A stairway takes you to the **Guests' Hall ·7·**, which is exactly beneath the refectory. This was designed for receiving royalty and nobility. The visit continues by entering the **great pillared crypt ·8·**. This crypt was built in the mid 15th century to support the Gothic chancel of the abbey church.

middle floor



* **Transept**
The transverse arm of a church between the nave and chancel.

* **Ossuary or charnel house**
A building or vault in which human bones exhumed from a churchyard are preserved.

You then come to the **Saint Martin crypt ·9·**, built after the year 1000 to serve as a foundation for the south arm of the transept* of the abbey church. This crypt has a vault with an impressive nine-metre span.

From the Saint Martin crypt a small passage leads to the enormous wheel that occupies the former **monks' ossuary* ·10·**. This wheel was installed around 1820 in order to hoist provisions to the prisoners held in the abbey when it was turned into a prison. It is a replica of the pulleys used for hoisting building materials in the Middle Ages.

The **Saint Etienne chapel ·11·** is situated between the infirmary which collapsed in the early 19th century, and the monks' ossuary. This was of course the chapel of the dead.

You then take the **north-south stairs ·12·** that run below the west terrace. This is the main axis of circulation of the Romanesque monastery. It opens onto the **covered walk ·13·**, a long room with a double nave. Its architects designed it with ribbed vaults: an innovation that was the harbinger of Gothic art in the early 12th century.

The Merveille is reached through the **Knights' Hall ·14·**. Built to hold up the cloister, this was the work and study room of the monks. Much of their intellectual work has come down to us: the abbey's manuscripts are preserved at Avranches. The visit to the Merveille ends at the **almonry ·15·** on the first floor beneath the Guests' Hall. This was the place where the monks received the poor as well as pilgrims from all walks of life.

For further information:
LE MONT-SAINT-MICHEL
Henry Decaëns
Coll. "Itinéraires du patrimoine" Éditions du patrimoine 1997
À LA DÉCOUVERTE DU MONT-SAINT-MICHEL
Olivier Mignon
Éditions Siloë 1999

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