

## THE STORIED STONES OF SANTA MARIA DE OVILA

### PART I WILLIAM RANDOLPH HEARST'S MONASTERY

by Robert M. Clements

#### *Santa Maria de Ovila,*

like many Spanish religious establishments of the Middle Ages, was a fairly prosperous monastery. During the *Reconquista* it stood in that depopulated region behind the advancing Christian and the retreating Moorish armies. In a way the monks were as important in holding the land as were the soldiers in capturing it, for the monasteries provided secure islands of faith and farming in areas that were still a no man's land between Christian and Moslem. This explains why Santa Maria de Ovila had walls seven feet thick in places and tiny slit windows. Like the wise little pig, the monks of Ovila had no intention of fighting but they knew how to build themselves a strong house.

If we judge by the buildings, Santa Maria de Ovila was most active before about 1650, since that is the date of the last major building project, a large Renaissance doorway for the chapel. The doorway was something of an afterthought, however, and most of the buildings are Gothic; they include the very early Gothic refectory, which Saint Martin had watched being built; a somewhat later and very handsome High Gothic chapter house; a rebuilt version of the chapel with late and flamboyant Gothic vaults; and a rebuilt version of the Gothic cloister with a High Renaissance arcade. In fact, Santa Maria de Ovila displayed a bit of each style of Spanish religious building from 1200 through 1600.

Like all small Spanish monasteries, its history ended in August of 1835, with a royal decree suppressing all religious houses with fewer than twelve inhabitants. Santa Maria de Ovila then had four. The mayor of the nearby town of Trillo presided over the sale of the monastery's worldly goods; the highest price went for the wine-making



Destroyed by a tycoon: Santa Maria de Ovila in the 1930s. image via Wikimedia Commons

equipment and an oxcart. Bargain hunters could also buy old beds, old broken tables, old cracked chairs, and old kitchen equipment. Most of the items in the inventory are disdainfully described as *viejo* (antiquated), probably because the sale took place several months after the monastery had been closed and nearly everything of value had disappeared in the meantime. In following years the roof tiles also disappeared, exposing the curious method which the Spanish medieval builders had of making their roofs: on top of the pointed vaults they packed dirt, smoothed it, and laid tiles loosely on top. A twentieth-century visitor reported seeing trees six to eight feet tall growing from the exposed roofs of the monastery.

The buildings themselves began to decay, of course, and this was hastened by very rough treatment from the local landowner, who used them as service buildings for a farm. The ornate Gothic chapter house, for instance, served as a manure pit. By 1930, about a hundred years after the monastery was closed, the buildings were in a reasonably advanced state of ruin, though all were still standing.

#### *At this point*

Santa Maria de Ovila was discovered by an expatriate American art dealer, Arthur Byne, who had for years been selling European bric-a-brac to Americans, especially to William Randolph Hearst. Admittedly Santa Maria de Ovila was larger than the usual *objet d'art*, but Byne knew that size—and cost—were no impediment when it came to gratifying the Hearstian taste, and he naturally was interested in the commission that the sale of an \$85,000 monastery would produce. Since he represented the His-

panic Society of America, he also may have thought that Hearst's pocketbook offered the best way of preserving this decrepit but interesting piece of architecture.

Byne did some graceful perspective sketches of Santa Maria de Ovila, which for some reason he called Mountolive, and in late 1930 he sent them off to Hearst; very promptly the reply came back: Mr. Hearst was delighted and wanted to buy the entire monastery and have it transported to California. It should be added that such a request was not so astonishing as it might seem today; Hearst already had bought some gigantic architectural pieces—ceilings, a Gothic fireplace, doorways, and the like—to decorate his houses, especially the colossal castle at San Simeon. He also had bought another monastery from Byne in the twenties, and it was then sitting in a warehouse in the Bronx.

Despite the dire financial news of 1930, Byne's timing was excellent, for Hearst felt that he had plenty of money and was growing restless as San Simeon neared completion. The next project that he had in mind was an even bigger house in the forests of far northern California, where his mother had built a large hunting lodge called Wynntoon. Wynntoon had burned down, but Hearst planned to replace it with something truly stupendous—a medieval castle. It was to front on the McCloud River and rise in commanding towers and bastions to eight stories of pure fairy-tale splendor. It would have sixty-one bedrooms on six floors, and the eighth floor, at the top of the tallest tower, would contain only a solitary, round study for "the Chief," who could gaze upon his own domain and the thousands of acres of virgin forest surrounding it. But in late

1930 the Chief was a bit irritated, having just learned that the Spanish medieval buildings that were to have provided most of the grand ornament for the cavernous first floor were not available. So when Arthur Byne found Santa Maria de Ovila, he knew just whom to write. Hearst snapped it up and instructed his architect, Julia Morgan, to use it—a piece here, a piece there—for the main floor of the new Wynntoon Castle.

Miss Morgan had no idea what it looked like, however, so she sent her associate Walter Steilberg to Spain to measure and survey the buildings, to design a packing method, and to help Byne oversee the demolition. Steilberg set out with a full set of Wynntoon drawings and a variety of American packing and strapping devices—so great a variety, in fact, that as he wrote Julia Morgan from the ship, "My stateroom looks more or less like a machinery exhibit."

Steilberg was a charming and extremely competent architect and engineer, and Byne was delighted to have him on the site. The problems they faced were formidable. The monastery was remote; the work had to be done largely by hand; the problems with packing and transportation were complex; and Spanish politics were very unsettled.

Politics turned out to be the least of the problems. In early 1931 Spain had a largely ineffective monarchy and severe economic depression. Byne used both these factors to aid his various treasure hunts, easily convincing the impoverished government that his export work helped the economy, though it quite openly violated Spanish historic preservation laws. The removal of Santa Maria de Ovila was strictly illegal; as Byne wrote, "it is forbidden to ship a single antique stone from Spain to-day—even the size of a baseball," in spite of which he was in the process of exporting an entire monastery in large crates. But the demolition, packing, and shipping employed more than a hundred men at its peak, and the authorities simply looked the other way. Byne worked fast because he worried that this cozy arrangement would disappear if the government disappeared, and his fears for the government were well founded.

In the Spanish municipal elections of April 1931, the monarchists did so badly that the King realized the jig was up. "The Sunday elections," he wrote, "clearly show me that I don't have my people's love" and he packed his bags.

#### *Thus began the ill-fated*

Second Republic and Byne had a whole new government to deal with. As he said, however, "they have more important problems than to bother about the demolition of an old ruin." His workers nailed the red flag of revolution to the church they were

illegally tearing down and went right on working. The new government was not much better organized than the old. When an order was issued to protect monasteries and convents from anticlerical mobs, the benighted civil service in Madrid used an eighteenth-century list of religious houses to draw up marching orders. Byne found himself explaining to a detachment of the ferocious Guardia Civil that they had arrived ninety-six years too late to protect the monks; there was a lot of shrugging and gesturing, but the soldiers went away.

Demolition and transportation presented greater problems. Farmers and laborers recruited from surrounding villages began clearing away rubble, debris, and manure, while other workmen built a series of scaffolds that fit snugly inside the arches so that when the keystones were removed, the whole building wouldn't crash to the floor. As each wall or vault was taken down, the Spanish foreman made careful scale drawings and assigned each block of stone a number. These numbers were written in his spidery hand on every stone in the drawing, and also were painted in red on the backsides of the stones themselves.

While the buildings were being demolished, a World War I trench railway somehow was produced and laid down to the river's edge. On the far shore Byne had another crew building a private road that led to the main highway. Connecting road and railway was an ingenious ferry, a large raft that was kept on course by an overhead cable set at such an angle that the flow of the river helped propel the loaded barge over to the other side. Laborers then hauled it back, hand over hand on the cable. While they were going back for another load, a crane lifted the stones up to the top of the bluff where Byne's road ended, and they were sent off to Madrid on trucks.

Generally the work went well. Steilberg and Byne both commented on the excellence of the Spanish workers and especially of their foreman, Antonio Gomez. The men were skilled and careful and above all glad to have the work. There were no accidents despite the great danger everywhere: Steilberg later said that "every time you went into those buildings you stood a fair chance of being killed." The buildings, however, turned out to be in better shape than their dilapidated appearance indicated. Byne comments in one letter that "the Chapter House was a joy to take down. Every stone was perfectly formed and absolutely intact. Furthermore the quality of the stone is superb, hard, and with clean-cut profiles." The buildings came down so quickly that stone started to pile up, and Byne, still worried about the political climate, began a day-and-night operation. He placed torches

all along the railway tracks and riverbank and wrote back to California that "it was all quite dramatic and gave the impression of the Crossing of the Styx."

As with any project of such a scale, however, there were constant headaches. The road turned swampy in the winter rains. The three Spanish excelsior factories could not keep pace with the crating operation. The old monarchy toppled. Gomez was laid up with a series of vicious boils under the arms. The river dried up and a bridge had to be built. Byne dealt with these vexations day by day, and the work somehow got done. But there was one problem that Byne could not control, and it drove him nearly wild. William Randolph Hearst hated paying bills.

When the project began, Hearst already owed Byne more than \$32,000 for earlier purchases, and Byne was very nervous about the cash situation. On December 29 he cabled back to California, apparently without irony, "THIRTY-TWO THOUSAND OWED ACCORDING TO STATEMENT SENT DECEMBER TWELFTH HAPPY NEW YEAR -BYNE." He started the project anyway, but on January 27 we find him complaining that the \$25,000 just received is not enough. On January 29 he writes to Hearst, "I, like yourself, must work on a budget." On February 17 he threatens to hold up the work. On February 20 he begs for another \$25,000 and writes, "I depend on your sense of fairness not to disappoint me." On March 10 he becomes positively truculent: "Mr. Hearst, in a week's time I shall have 100 men working. I have done everything humanly possible on my part; you in turn have fallen down lamentably on your part... If through lack of funds, I am forced to stop the work at Mountolive, I would never attempt to resume it."

On March 16 Byne has received another \$25,000 but needs more and says that he now will insist on advance payment. On April 4 he says that the entire program will collapse if Hearst doesn't pay his bills. On April 8 he seems to have reached the end of his tether: "All this [work] means thousands of dollars of expense, Mr. Hearst, and when Saturday night comes I can't put anybody off with the excuse that there is no money at hand (as you say to me). I admire you for the ideas you have, and collaborate enthusiastically, but it is only fair that you pay the musicians." This piece of eloquence brought in another \$25,000, but two weeks later Byne was out of money again—and so it went all year.

#### *Hearst was no deadbeat,*

and Arthur Byne knew it, but Byne's problem was cash flow. As he wrote in May, "Apart from the monastery I have laid out



so much for you that I am stripped of all capital and must, perforce, carry along in hand to mouth fashion." Oddly enough Byrne's problem was exactly like his client's, for "hand to mouth" is the very phrase that Hearst's biographer, W. A. Swanberg, uses to describe Hearst's own existence. Although his income was gigantic... estimates run as high as \$15,000,000 a year—Hearst was still perpetually broke. He couldn't pay Byrne and he sometimes couldn't pay a bill of fifty or a hundred dollars because he really didn't have the money at the moment. He spent everything.

### Castle building

and the allied pastime of art collecting were two of Hearst's principal financial drains, and Wynton was to be the ultimate Hearst fantasy. Those who have seen the excesses of San Simeon might find it hard to believe in something even more flamboyant, but Wynton would have put San Simeon in the shade. In creating all this grandeur, the role of Santa Maria de Ovila was crucial.

As the letters, photos, and drawings from Walter Steilberg came into her San Francisco office, Julia Morgan began to fit all the pieces into her design. The cloister, which originally faced an open courtyard, would be used as the walls of a vast library. The refectory would become an "armory." The chapter house would form an ornate reception hall, and the sacristy ceiling was to cover the "lobby." (Hotel terminology occasionally creeps into the drawings, and the effect of Wynton is, in fact, very close to some of the railroad-built resorts, like Quebec's Chateau Frontenac.) Another monastic building was first considered for a bratskeller and later for a breakfast room. Practical considerations were not forgotten: Steilberg asked Byrne to go out to the monastery's still-standing bodega and sing or talk loudly to test the echoes, since they were thinking of this large wine-storage barn for a movie theater.

The problem room was the chapel itself, the major building of the original monastery, the one that Saint Martin had waited to consecrate in September of 1213. In an early scheme it was used as a living room, but the long, narrow dimensions of the space seem to have been disturbing. Even with fireplaces here and there it looked too much like a bowling alley. The final solution was breathtaking—the chapel was to become an enormous swimming pool. It was to be 150 feet long, complete with diving board, and with the two side chapels converted into a lounge and women's toilet. Around the apse there was to be a very wide deck with a southern exposure, filled to a depth of two or three feet with sand,

so that one could sunbathe on "the beach" and go into the chapel for a swim.

Most of the monastery was to be used on the first floor of the castle, but not as weight-bearing structure, for Wynton was of course much, much bigger than the original Santa Maria de Ovila. The medieval masonry would merely have been applied to the downstairs walls, like very thick wallpaper. Realizing this, Steilberg at one point suggested slicing the stones to leave only a relatively thin veneer; rather than dealing with walls that were up to seven feet thick, the builders then would have only six inches of stone to fasten to the structure. But Hearst liked to have things authentic and rejected the idea.

The castle itself would show almost none of the Spanish stone on the exterior—only a few windows. Part of the reason was practical; the stone would have to be treated to stand the damp weather. But another strong reason may have been the deeply ironic fact that the Cistercians, who built Santa Maria de Ovila, had a strong aversion to any sort of ornament, and their buildings were almost forbiddingly plain. Hearst, whose taste ran decidedly toward the ornate, wanted none of their severity. From the outside, Wynton would look more like a fantasy by Maxfield Parrish than anything related to Spanish monasticism. From its lower gate on the river it was to rise eight or nine stories in an irregular and utterly fantastic aggregation of arches, peaked roofs, towers, and ramparts. To a boater on the rushing McCloud River who suddenly glimpsed this castle through the trees, Wynton would have looked like something that dropped in from another country, another era, even another planet.

### But it was all a dream...

Even as the medieval cargo, which came in eleven ships, arrived in San Francisco, financial forces were closing in on Hearst. Although he steadfastly refused to recognize it, William Randolph Hearst, along with the rest of the country in the early thirties, was running out of money. His financial advisers were trying frantically to put the brakes on Hearst's spending, and the first estimates on Wynton came in at over \$50,000,000. So the castle was canceled, and Hearst consoled himself with a picturesque and more affordable group of houses, built to resemble a Bavarian village.

The monastery arrived in San Francisco on schedule, but it was soon apparent that Hearst had no particular use for it, so he had it put in storage. He now owned two medieval monasteries, both in crates, both in warehouses, one in New York and the other in San Francisco. The only major difference was that in New York he also owned the

warehouse, so that he didn't have the obnoxious reminder of monthly storage bills. This difference, however, became important, for by the late thirties Hearst's finances had so dwindled that there was talk of actual bankruptcy, and the storage fee—more than \$60,000 had already been paid—began to look much greater than before.

Santa Maria de Ovila was a classic white elephant. It took up 28,000 square feet of warehouse and was totally useless. It was clearly time to sell, but there was probably not a sane man in the country who would have paid a reasonable price for it in 1939 when Hearst's agents began looking for buyers. Months turned into years with no buyer in sight, and as Julia Morgan rather plaintively remarked in a letter, "It will mean a lot to Mr. Hearst if this stone can be disposed of." In late 1940 Hearst began to consider giving it away. He flirted with Los Angeles and with the University of California but was persuaded by civic leader Herbert Fleishhacker to sell it for a token payment to the city of San Francisco, where it would be re-erected in Golden Gate Park as a museum of medieval art. In August 1941, the city paid Hearst \$25,000, and allocated another \$5,000 to cover moving the crates out to the park and building some sheds and canvas covers to protect them. The city did not, however, allocate any money to build the monastery.

Up to this point the story of Santa Maria de Ovila is strange but mildly comic, except to the Spanish who mourned the departure of what one called "the glorious ashes of our past." Just after the move to Golden Gate Park, however, the stones suffered a considerable blow when their packing cases caught fire. "Piles of burning boxes were pulled over and down by the Fire Department, many hurled over a hundred and fifty feet," Julia Morgan reported mournfully. Naturally some of the stones were injured, and many of the cases, with their vital numbers, were burned up. The park workmen had to gingerly excavate and laboriously renumber all the burned stones, which took nearly a year.

### For the next sixteen years

these thousands of crates stood in the back service area of the de Young Museum while museum officials tried various tactics to raise money for the reconstruction. They even went so far as appointing a "curator" of this pile of boxes and engaging an architect—Julia Morgan. Once more she sat down with the numbered drawings, and once more she plowed through the stone-by-stone inventories, this time to design a compact and unostentatious series of galleries that would incorporate the medieval buildings in approximately their original

arrangement. It was a long jump from the diving board on the altar to the hushed restraint of an art museum, but Miss Morgan's second design for the stones was as sober as her first design was riotous, and the second one undoubtedly more pleasing to her taste for understatement.

### In 1954

a syndicate of Cincinnati businessmen did on the East Coast what no one could seem to do in California: they bought, shipped, and re-erected the first of Hearst's monasteries, the one that had been stored in the Bronx. It cost them about a million and a half dollars and was not done as a museum but as a tourist attraction ("STEP BACK INTO TIME 800 YEARS!") in North Miami Beach, Florida, where it still is today. The man who coordinated the Florida reconstruction wrote expectantly to the museum authorities in San Francisco and offered them his experience, but a kind of fatalistic lethargy seems to have settled on the California project. The architect was by then a very old woman; the "curator" had gone off to the war and never come back to San Francisco; there had been a civic wrangle over placement of the medieval museum that somewhat dissipated support for reconstruction; and the museum director who had pushed the project energetically in the early forties was probably just as weary of that odd rockpile in 1955 as Hearst had been in 1939.

### The future of the monastery

was more decisively determined in 1958, when the packing cases once more caught fire. This time they burned for more than three hours, and the newspaper reported that "the edifice... can never be put together again. Hundreds of its limestone blocks and pillars crashed and broke in pieces yesterday." Then, about six months later, an area of the crate pile that had escaped the first fires was discovered blazing, and this was the worst fire of all. When it finally was extinguished, two hundred more stones had been damaged by the heating and sudden cooling. One museum trustee hinted darkly to the fire department that "some unknown party" wanted to make sure the monastery would never be built, but the cause was officially listed as "unknown," and the firefighters generally believed it was children playing among the crates that started it.

The fires also burned most of Antonio Gomez's numbers off the stones and to some degree turned the monastery into a giant maimed puzzle. Without the numbers any quick reconstruction became impossible; an expert certainly could tell a column from a ceiling vault and probably could distinguish the stones of one building from those of an-

other, but beyond that there would lie an almost endless labor of trial-and-error fitting. Actually the pile of stones was never a complete set of buildings that could be put together like children's blocks; many of the walls had been judged uselessly heavy rubble by Steilberg and Byrne and were left in Spain, so that reconstruction would have required a good deal of newly cut material even in 1932. But with nearly half the stones damaged beyond use in 1958, the task was clearly beyond reach.

### In 1960

Walter Steilberg was again hired to work on Santa Maria de Ovila but this time for the melancholy task of breaking up the rest of the flammable crates and sorting the stones as best he could into rough heaps. The refectory went over here, the chapel over there, but they were all just big piles of rock. He tested each stone by sounding with a large chisel and discarded the cracked ones; at the end he found that of the original five buildings at least two—the refectory and the chapter house—were more than half there. Since he considered these two the most architecturally interesting of the group, the news was not all bad, but chances of reconstruction seemed more and more remote, with costs mounting all the time.

In 1963 there was a brief flurry of interest when the monks of a Buddhist monastery in California's gold-rush country offered to rebuild what they could if the city would give them the stones; in 1970 a San Francisco official suggested that the stones be used as embellishment in the subway stations then being built. Both these plans, like all the other plans for Santa Maria de Ovila, got mired in complications and eventually were forgotten.

### Reconstruction...

The museum authorities got a taste of the cost of reconstruction in 1964 when it was decided to put up the large central door of Santa Maria's chapel at one end of the "Hearst Court" in the de Young. This door is a hefty piece of Spanish Plateresque stonework, very atypical of the rest of the monastery buildings, since it is about four hundred years younger than most of them and since its elaborate ornament contrasts sharply with the monastery's ascetic plainness. Nevertheless it was still intact and it seemed like a good and relatively inexpensive idea to reassemble it. The first estimates were under \$10,000, but as the job progressed it became evident that the twenty tons of limestone would not support their own weight and still meet earthquake standards, so a structural steel framework had to be buried in the wall, and the door-

way fixed to the steel one block at a time. When the dust settled, the bill was about one and a half times the original estimate. That doorway, however, is the only piece of Santa Maria de Ovila that is back in its original form.

### The actors in the story

are all dead. Arthur Byrne died in Madrid in 1939; William Randolph Hearst lived to be eighty-eight, dying in 1951; Julia Morgan, hoping to the very end that the medieval museum would be built, died at age eighty-five in 1957; in early December 1974, Hearst's wife Millicent died in New York, and in the same week Walter Steilberg, a vigorous but radiantly serene eighty-eight-year-old, was run down and killed by a car in Berkeley.

The stones too are dead. Unprotected, they gradually are weathering away. Occasionally a tourist gets off the path to the Japanese Tea Garden and is startled to find the heaps of large limestone blocks; some whimsical and very strong artists have stacked a few of the stones into gigantic throne-like chairs; the piles are slowly being diminished by park crews who use the damaged ones for retaining walls; a bulldozer was used not long ago to clear away the few remaining crates, and many of the blocks show fresh marks of the machine's blade.

### Now, in 1981,

the crates and the canvas and the sheds that covered the stone are gone, and the moss and eucalyptus sprouts are taking over. The steady winter rains beat down, the shrubbery covers the jagged shapes, and the Royal Monastery of Santa Maria de Ovila is slowly, ever so slowly, disappearing from view. □

Originally published in *American Heritage Magazine*, Volume 32, issue 3, 1981 and reprinted here with the permission of the author, Robert M. Clements.





## THE STORIED STONES OF SANTA MARIA DE OVILA

PART II

### ACTS OF CREATIVE REDEMPTION by Edwin Hamilton

#### Act I : The LIBRARY TERRACE GARDEN

In San Francisco, in 1999, I was being interviewed as a candidate to design a sculptural fountain in what was then known as Stryling Arboretum in Golden Gate Park. As I was showing my portfolio to the director of the Arboretum and the landscape architect they became interested in my stonemasonry work and said that there were some stone walls in the project. Then, when they told me they had permission to use the fabled monastery stones for these walls it took a great deal of self-control on my part not to visibly salivate.

I had known about these stones for a number of years: Originally, they came from the ruins of Santa Maria de Ovila, a Cistercian monastery in Spain that had been acquired by wealthy media titan William Randolph Hearst and were transported by ship to California to be used in the construction of an immense and extravagant (\$50,000,000—in the 1930s!) medieval castle near Mt. Shasta. When the project was abandoned due to financial constraints, the stones became a financial burden to him and he ceded them to the city to be used for a Museum of Medieval Art that never proceeded past the planning stage. For years after, the stones languished in Golden Gate Park, suffering neglect and disrespect, a succession of fires and the depredations of various scavengers—landscapers, gardeners, builders, sculptors, from which their blanket of blackberry brambles failed to protect them.

As any responsible stonemason would, I yearned to use them in a creative and respectful way, to give them a new life.

Now, with the commission in hand, I could implement my plan, which was to juxtapose a contemporary granite fountain against a freestanding dry stack wall built using the ancient stones—a wall that would be as much of a sculptural element as the fountain itself. I felt it was important to give a nod to the architectural provenance of the stones by exposing the beautiful carving and thus raise awareness of their history. All stone walls tell stories but these stones had a particularly interesting tale to tell.

In 2001, I finally got my hands on them. What a joy it was to assemble these stones, a present-day California mason handling material worked by ancient Spanish masons. Carving a molding into a block to match a molding carved 800 years ago was a highlight of my career.

At the entry to the Library Terrace Garden I incorporated a lattice-like element in the wall that is a "deconstructed vault" composed of a springer, voussoir, and keystone—tribute to its architectural heritage. A seating area was made of some of the choice carved work; many old masons' marks and incised layout lines are exposed in the stone; it gives a really interesting insight into the story of the work.



42 stonexus xiii

## THE STORIED STONES OF SANTA MARIA DE OVILA

PART II

### ACTS OF CREATIVE REDEMPTION by Edwin Hamilton

#### Act II : The BIODIVERSITY GARDEN

Soon after the completion of the project a few newspaper articles came out criticizing my use of the stones—in particular the fact that I had re-cut some of them. One archaeologist stated it was "... the most egregious desecration of a historical monument since WW II."

Certainly there is a tragic element to the story of these stones, but the ruinous disarray they were in was nothing like a monument—their desecration had already occurred long ago.

I was given an opportunity to make something beautiful out of something that suffered a succession of misfortunes—to redeem these stones that had been cut and lovingly carved so long ago, to restore them to respectful view. This seems a better fate than having them remain covered in brambles and subject to theft. Adaptive reuse of material is a part of the continuum of stonemasonry and I felt honored to have a role in the story.



stonexus xiii 43



## THE STORIED STONES OF SANTA MARIA DE OVILA

PART II

ACTS OF CREATIVE REDEMPTION by Edwin Hamilton

### Act II: The RHODODENDRON PAVILION

Years later, in 2007 I was asked by what is now called The San Francisco Botanical Society at Strybing Arboretum to design and build the Rhododendron Pavilion, the centerpiece of their newly renovated Rhododendron Garden—again using the monastery stones!

I welcomed this unforeseen second opportunity to work with this material, the residue not only from fire damage, the effects of weathering, use in various municipal walling projects and scavenging, but from the removal of 19 truck/trailer loads of stone selected for use at the New Clairvaux monastery being built in La Vina up near Chico—after 80+ years the ‘prodigal’ stones had returned home, or at least to the Cistercian domain. I appreciated this felicitous turn of fate and followed the work there with interest.

While the stonework in the Golden Gate Park Library Terrace Garden gives hints of what once existed in medieval Spain, I saw this new project as an opportunity to further, and more directly, address this heritage here in San Francisco. While the stonework in the Library Terrace Garden gives hints of what once existed in medieval Spain, I saw this new project as an opportunity to further, and more directly, address this heritage here in San Francisco.

My conception for the Rhododendron Pavilion was to create a garden folly—there is a strong element of folly in the story of these stones—with the entirety of the design influenced by the original architectural use of the stone. Among them I discovered a *clief de voûte*—a keystone that had been the meeting place for multiple arches. I envisioned placing this at a central point on the ground plane to which everything built there would relate—the circular benches, the walls and the column bases, the paving elements.

The central area would be partially covered by a trellis made of curving steel I-beams supported by vertical posts and meeting at a steel compression ring above the *clief de voûte* at the center of the paving. These I-beams replicate the arches that once emanated from the *clief de voûte*. The posts would be encased in Greenscreen, a wire mesh product that accommodates the growth of plant material and fleshes out the proportions of the structure. (It helps to be married to a landscape architect—my wife, Tammara, came up with that idea.)

I decided the walls should be mortared and plumb—as they were originally—except for a slightly angled back-rest on the bench wall. As for the paving, I imagined bands of limestone radiating from the *clief de voûte* that would mimic the arching ribs that once converged on it—and between these bands, granite gravel.

With these basic ideas we began to build. From the previous project I had a pretty good idea of the inventory of available stones but found it impossible to draw up definite plans for what to build with them—this was improvised on a daily basis. I matched up column segments and had enough to place at the two entries to the pavilion, bracketing the bench. The placing of a beautiful semicircular column base at the center of the seat wall was inspired by the plan view of these columns.



The basic symmetry of the layout, two arcs of built stonemasonry, was enlivened by the irregular character of the variously carved seating elements. The irregularities in the seating area are calmed by the orderly nature and even height of the backrest wall running above it. Ribbed arch segments were arrayed along the wall opposite the bench to give an open feel to the main view corridor to the lake; the sixth I-beam half-arch was omitted to preserve this view corridor.

My crew consisted of Rogelio Ortiz, Eustorgio Chavez, Israel Ortiz, Clemente Chavez, Armando Gaytan, and Troy Silveira. Rogelio, who has worked with me for 15 years, is a 5th generation Mexican stone carver from Oaxaca and enjoyed putting hammer and chisel to stones carved in ‘Mother’ Spain over 800 years ago. We used the same rule of hand work as on the Library Terrace Garden: hammers, chisels, and star drills (though I will admit to caving in and using the Hilti drill after a few days of spending 20 minutes with a star drill as opposed to 2 minutes with the rotary hammer.)

Writing this now I am struck once again by how bizarre the history of these stones has been and how fortunate I was to become a part of it. I remember a friend stopping by one day while we were busily working away. He took in the scene, the sounds of hammer and chisel, our concentration on the work and said he thought we should be wearing monks’ habits.

But my favorite comment about the Rhododendron Pavilion came from the project’s landscape architect, John Northmore Roberts. He remarked that it evokes a variety of different garden images and cultural associations without being specific to any one in particular.

Above all else it breathes new life into these ancient stones. □



## THE STORIED STONES OF SANTA MARIA DE OVILA PART III THE LINEAMENTS OF GRATIFIED DESIRE

by Pierre de Montaulieu

Desire entered the heart of the young Cistercian monk. Twenty-one-year-old Brother Thomas X. Davis arrived in San Francisco in 1955. He had been sent from the Cistercian Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky to serve in the order's new monastery, established only months before in northern California: the Abbey of Our Lady of New Clairvaux. During a brief sight-seeing tour of San Francisco before departing to the monastery in the Sacramento River Valley, he was taken to Golden Gate Park and there shown the Ovila stones, a small mountain of crates in the underbrush shadowed by eucalyptus trees—a fragmented Cistercian creature. Brother Thomas, informed about their history, was inspired to revive those Cistercian stones, to integrate them in the fabric of the new monastery.

*"I resolved during the drive north to New Clairvaux to bring the stones home someday, where they would be loved and cared for on Cistercian soil. After all, Ecclesiastes tells of a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together."*

For 40 years he patiently petitioned and doubtlessly prayed for the 'return' of the stones to Cistercian soil. Meanwhile, they suffered neglect, misuse, theft, vandalism, several destructive fires and, finally, an oddly fortuitous earthquake.

### Ground breaking for the grandiose castle

that Hearst planned to build near Mt. Shasta was scheduled to begin in July 1931—but before then, even before the last of the flotilla of eleven German freighters bearing the Ovila stones arrived in San Francisco, the project was halted. His wealth had been diminished by the Great Depression and the \$50,000,000 project was no longer feasible. The stones, encased in thousands of crates, were placed in the largest warehouse in the Port of San Francisco. They had entered a state of limbo which would last for decades.

Ten years later Hearst was persuaded to donate the stones to the city in exchange for waiving his very considerable storage fees (\$15,000 each year). He did so with the stipulation that they would be used for a Museum of Medieval Art associated with the de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park.

Hearst's architect, Julia Morgan, designated sites and developed plans for several arrangements of buildings, one of which was selected by city officials, but the project was forestalled by the war. In 1946 Morgan was again commissioned to prepare plans for the museum—a west coast version of the Cloisters in New York City was envisioned but funds for it never materialized.

Then a series of disastrous fires occurred. Many of the super-heated stones cracked or spalled when they were rapidly quenched by the firemen's hoses. What was left was a vast heap of stones, their identifying markings obliterated, which would be exploited by landscapers, municipal, private and amateur, by artists, by mystics...

### Spiritual re-purposing...

Ovila stones were used to configure a Druid sanctum in a grove of oak trees in the park. Ovila stones were also arrayed around a notable holy icon, but not a Christian one: City workers dumped a four and a half foot tall, bullet-shaped granite traffic bollard onto the

'bone yard' in the Park for safe-keeping, where it was discovered by Michael Bowen, aka Baba Kali Das, a disciple of the Goddess Kali. He and his fellow devotees, through the power of faith and acts of devotion, transformed it into a *Shiva Lingam*, an object of veneration, and using Ovila stones constructed an open-air Shakti Temple around it. Devotees, Hindu and hippy, came from around the world to attend Vedic ceremonies there.

The Golden Gate Park Shakti Temple became a *cause célèbre* when the city sued to repossess the land. In court it was determined that the Shakti Temple and the Druid sanctum had been consecrated by religious practice and were therefore legally inviolable.

The city finessed the *Lingam* issue by agreeing to transport the icon to the Baba's garage which he had transformed into a temple. The Druid sanctum is still there in the park.

The Ovila stones nearly went to Cincinnati; they nearly went to Michigan; they were nearly given to a Buddhist monastery elsewhere in California. There was even a proposal to use them to beautify a BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) station. All plans came to naught. It was as if the Ovila stones were cursed or, perhaps, had another destination.

In 1973 Brother Thomas X. Davis, now the Abbot of New Clairvaux, was made aware that Golden Gate Park officials had ordered a cleanup of the area and many of the revealed stones were beginning to be used in different landscaping projects. Some sort of arrangement was made with the Park Superintendent and a truck (or trucks, accounts vary) was loaded with some of the more ornately carved stones and driven to the Abbey for 'artistic use' there.

In 1980, enabled by a generous grant (from the Hearst Foundations!) Dr. Margaret Burke (PhD, Architectural History) began the work of cataloguing the stones. She discovered that approximately 60% of the stones of the chapter house, architecturally the finest of the monastery buildings, were usable. Most of the missing stones could be recut using the existing stones as templates. Restoration was possible.

She also learned of the stones that had been taken to the Abbey and requested their return; all those identified as chapter house stones were trucked back to the park and secured in a chain link enclosure with the other chapter house stones. (All, that is, except for one springer stone that had been incorporated as a decorative element in a bell tower there. The abbot 'didn't have the heart' to tell her about this particular stone. (later it joined the others.)

Unfortunately, the funding for Dr. Burke's plans was no more forthcoming than it had been for Julia Morgan's. So, though secure within their enclosure, the stones were still in limbo.

### The angel in the black helicopter...

In September 1989, Abbot Davis noticed a black helicopter hovering over the Abbey complex. A few days later he received a call, and a few days after that a visit from the helicopter's pilot, businessman and philanthropist Alfred S. Wilsey, who had taken an interest in the chapter house restoration project. He had come to assess the Abbey's ability to follow through and was favorably impressed.

Only days later matters were greatly altered by the '89 Loma Prieta earthquake. The de Young Museum suffered extensive damage and would need to be rebuilt so any priority the construction of a Museum of Medieval Art had, as well as any reticence the Museum felt toward releasing the Ovila stones to the Abbey, was removed.

In 1994, the 'de-accessioning' of the stones was approved by the Board of Trustees of the Fine Arts Museums and they were released to the monastery with the stipulation that the chapter house be restored accurately and that the public have access at certain times.

As the museum's director later told reporters, "We've had 75 years to put the monastery back together and we couldn't get it done." Shipping carvings to New Clairvaux, he added, "is the closest we've come to properly and respectfully displaying these stones."

The day after the Agreement of Transfer was signed the first of 19 trailer truck loads of Ovila chapter house stones left the Park bound for the Abbey (slightly more than a hundred miles from their original destination, Wyntoon). Abbot Davis was there, four decades after his 'enchantment' in that very place, watching.

He was also present when the last truck departed—at the behest of the Druid community. They were attached to the stones, having used some of them in their ceremonies, and they "wanted to perform a ritual, in my presence no less, over the last load of 12 pallets of stone to leave in order to bring closure to this transfer of the stones. They wanted to say 'goodbye', and at the same time, open a new chapter in the life of these stones at New Clairvaux by 'handing them over' to me personally... It was a sight to behold... these pallets all lined up on the curb, waiting to be loaded, while the druids performed their ritual, pouring sacred Scotch whiskey over each pallet of sacred stones. After everything else that had happened to them, why not that? Only in San Francisco, and in the Golden Gate Park in particular."

### 'Home' at last...

After the stones arrived at New Clairvaux, Patrick Cole, the Abbey's architect and Phil Sunseri, its contractor, both traveled to Spain and visited the ruins of the Santa Maria de Ovila Monastery and other Spanish Cistercian sites to get a sense of the space shaped by Cistercian architecture.

Geology has affected the design. New Clairvaux is in a seismic zone so the chapter house is encased like an heirloom (which, of course, it is) within a steel frame structure rooted in an engineered, three-foot-thick reinforced concrete foundation mat that will enable the building(s) to move as one unit in the event of an earthquake.

Because the markings on the stones were erased long ago, their placement in the configuration was only speculative and putting the structure together was like assembling a jigsaw puzzle with many missing pieces. Using calipers and protractors, the team, led by European-trained master stonemasons Oskar Kempf and Frank Helmholz, measured every stone, fed the data into CAD, and laboriously matched up the outlines.

The process of rebuilding the chapter house is too complex, too interesting, too technical and much too long to include here.\* Nor is it really germane to the epic saga of the Ovila stones. That saga has come to an end... the stones have realized their manifold destiny. □

left: view from inside the rebuilt 800-year-old chapter house  
photo: Frank Schulenburg, via Creative Commons

\* Part Four, Issue XIV? Sources for this article can be found on page 72

