

The painted ceiling in the cloisters

A unique bestiary

The weight of the upper gallery, added to the cloisters in the early 14th century, obliged the builders to replace the old vaulting with a timber frame. This ceiling is made from larch wood, which grows in the Alpine forests and is said never to rot. It features painted coffers dating from the mid-14th century.

Three categories of people are represented, on blue and red backgrounds, depicting various themes:

- religion: canons*, saints, bishops, angels and demons, etc.
- daily life: tradesmen, prominent citizens, troubadours, war, etc.
- the bestiary, representing the largest number of images: fantasy creatures such as dragons; hybrid beings, grafting human extremities, or more unusually, inanimate objects onto animals.

An unexplained work

Due to a lack of knowledge about the context in which it was produced, the meaning of this composition remains unexplained. These living images of good and evil are linked to the imagination of people living in the 14th century and form an exceptional ensemble. There were many painted wooden ceilings in the Middle Ages, but there remain too few to be able to make comparisons. In Fréjus, 300 of the original 1200 small paintings can still be identified, the others having been destroyed or erased by damp conditions.

Glossary

Baptismal candidate: a person receiving religious instruction in preparation for baptism.

Bossage: dressed stone with bumps on the external side, giving the wall a rough aspect.

Canon: a member of the clergy who serves the cathedral for worship and administration services.

Chapter: the assembly of canons.

Floor block: a wooden plank placed between two floor joists.

Machicolation: a stone overhanging gallery with openings in the floor for missiles to be shot downwards.

Narthex: a covered vestibule or porch in front of the nave of a basilica.

Paleochristian: relates to early Christian times (1st to 5th centuries AD).

Reredos: a vertical panel above an altar, usually painted and richly decorated.

Tambour: a cylindrical or polygonal part of a monument.

Information

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Bookshop-Giftshop

The guide to this monument is available in the 'Cathédrales de France' collection in the bookshop-giftshop.

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Fréjus cathedral cloisters

At the heart of the cathedral buildings

In the early days of Christianity

The Bishop of Fréjus is mentioned for the first time at the Council of Valence in 374, proving the existence of a Christian community. In the



Fréjus
in the early
18th century:
engraving by
Mariette, BnF,
Estampes

early 5th century, the baptistery, which still remains today, and the first cathedral were erected.

After a dark period and the raids by Saracen pirates, the town came to life again in the early 11th century thanks to Bishop Riculf. The presence of a college of canons* led to the construction of the canons' buildings around the cathedral, from the 11th to the 14th centuries.

A fortified ensemble

During the same period, the town added the protection of new walls, enclosing a much smaller area than that defined by the Gallo-Roman walls. The cathedral ensemble is surrounded by a fortified wall with bossages* and a high tower topped with machicolations*. After the destruction of the Revolution, the bishop's palace was rebuilt from 1823 onwards. The facade was pushed back to the west. Jules Formigé, architect of historic monuments, restored the cloisters and cathedral ensemble between 1920 and 1932.

* Explanations overleaf.

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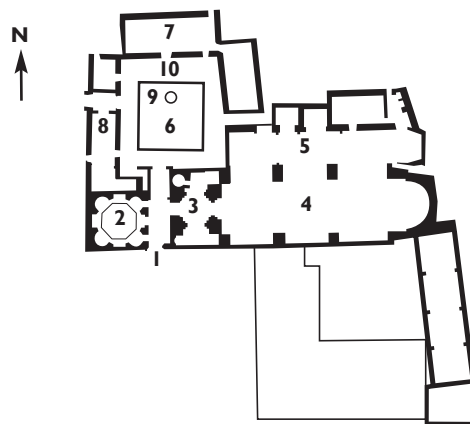


The cathedral buildings

From Place Formigé, looking towards the cathedral's main door, several different buildings can be seen. On the left, there is the Paleochristian* baptistery, the octagonal tambour* of which was three-quarters removed from its medieval protective cover by Formigé. During the restoration of the dome, he also reinstated a circular tambour*, which has been contested by historians who believe there was a continuous octagon up to the roof. The bell tower has a square base, built in the 13th century, an octagonal part dating back to the 16th century and a spire covered with varnished ceramics from the late 16th century. On the right, the old bishop's palace was given a new facade in the 19th century; it has housed the town hall since 1905.

1 The present south door to the cathedral was made during the Renaissance period: magnificent sculpted leaves were added to the Gothic-style gate in 1530, now protected by wooden panels**.

2 The baptistery, one of the oldest and best preserved in France, is a rare example of Paleochristian* architecture. In the centre, a basin originally covered with white marble was used for baptism by immersion, in accordance with the original means of performing this rite. The baptismal candidates* came in via the small door to the left of the present entrance – which was made at a later date and is closed off by an 18th-century wrought iron grille. Having received the sacrament, the newly-baptised Christians left via a larger door to the right and were at last allowed to enter the sacred area of the cathedral.



Saint Leonce cathedral

The cathedral has been rebuilt and extended several times since the 5th century and consists of two adjoining churches which were made into one in the 13th century.

3 The narthex* is surrounded by four huge pillars supporting the weight of the bell tower. The northern wall, all that remains of the cathedral built in the 5th century, includes the great arch of a main door in its face.

4 Notre-Dame Church has been the cathedral since the Middle Ages. In the 13th century, it was covered by “Lombard” style cross-ribbed vaulting with square ribs. The canons’* stalls are still present in the apse.

5 Saint-Étienne Church, the former parish church, features a semi-circular arched vault. It was probably built in the 11th century. In one of the side chapels, the reredos* dedicated to Saint Margaret is by Jacopo Durandi, an artist of the Niçoise school, and dates from the mid-15th century. Below it is the church’s old stone altar, dating from the 11th century.

The canons' buildings

6 The cloisters were built in the 13th century with stones cut from colourful Esterel sandstone and reused stones taken from the ancient monuments in the town. The small twin columns are hewn from white Carrara marble. The capitals are simply decorated with plant leaves, shells and so on. A wooden ceiling was added to the cloisters, which originally had stone vaults, in the 14th century when another floor was added above the galleries. The floor blocks* forming the ceiling were then painted with scenes of daily life and a fantastic bestiary. The faithful passed through the cloisters to enter the churches. In the eastern gallery there is an arch denoting the entrance into Saint-Etienne Church. In the southern gallery, another arch denotes the entrance into the original cathedral.

7 The cellar is one of the buildings belonging to the canons’* community. There were twelve of them at most and they lived close to the bishop in the bishop’s palace until the 13th century. They then moved into private houses around the cathedral ensemble.

8 The provost's house shows its intended use as a place of residence for the canon* at the head of the chapter*. In the 15th and 16th centuries, other canons’* buildings were erected to the north-east, enclosing the cloisters.

9 The cistern in the garden is used to collect water from the roofs.

10 The stairs leading to the upper galleries have high steps, made from the tiered seating of the Roman amphitheatre.

* Explanations overleaf.

** The sculpted leaves can only be viewed during guided tours.