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*Vales of Tears & Fountains of Marble:
Recent Archaeological Discoveries at the
Cistercian Abbey at Fontfroide*

Fontfroide was founded as a Benedictine house in 1093 and attached to the cistercian Order in 1145/6. Sometime afterward an abbey was built in stone, modest in size but jewel-like in detail. Impressively modernized during the neo-classical period, it served the Cistercians until their expulsion in 1791. Re-inhabited by cistercian monks from 1858 until the definitive separation of church and french state in 1905, it was purchased by a private owner in 1908 and remains in the possession of this same family. Fontfroide has never been the object of a scholarly study.

Cistercian abbeys frequently have magnificent cloister fountains, but this element is regrettably lacking today. However, four large stone fragments (two in imported white marble) found on excavation in July 1993 are thought to be part of this structure: archaeological traces in the cloister suggest its original location. This discovery is fascinating in its own right, reclaiming a part of Fontfroide's history that disappeared with its monks in 1791. But an engaging scholarly twist brings together the seemingly unrelated fields of hydraulics and manuscripts: a splendid fountain was recently identified on an ownership seal in three books once belonging to the abbey. This find may help reconstruct the fountain as well as the library.

The hydraulic system at Fontfroide, which has been even less investigated than its architecture is an outstanding surviving example of cistercian water management. The abbey is tucked away in an isolated valley among the arid garrigues of southwestern France, but a plentiful source of water (still used today) is suggested by its name. This region is, however, regularly tormented by an alternation of draughts,

forest fires and violent rainstorms. Such an architectural complex would not have survived if these natural elements had not been taken into account from the very beginning.

Carefully built and untouched during modern times, Fontfroide's 12th century drainage system is a noteworthy example of pre-construction site management. The main tunnel extends more than 120 meters under the abbey. It was built of carefully cut ashlar blocks running along the foundations and is vaulted in stone; a subsidiary system evacuates roof water and provides drainage under buildings at this rocky site. A barrel-vaulted cistern in the cloister serves as catchment storage for the claustral buildings, while a second underground collecting structure in the outer court has a barrel vault built over a natural cavern.

Because of a drainage problem at Fontfroide today, a team was formed to investigate possible solutions; the author is the archaeological advisor. This paper will provide an overview of progress on a rare cooperative project to put a medieval water system back into use - a project not only satisfying to the intellect & the researcher's spirit, but to the combined efforts of archaeology and modern technology.