




Eglise  
protestante  
de Genève

# espace saintgervais



The Church  
of St. Gervais  
6000 years  
of history



The church of Saint-Gervais houses one of the oldest Christian remains of Switzerland, its crypt. This is a vestige of a large funerary church that was built in the 5th century on the right bank of the Rhone. The former medieval parish church, fully rebuilt in the 15th century, was converted into a Protestant church in 1535 and its Catholic religious ornaments were removed. The church nevertheless still holds an especially significant collection of medieval works of art unequaled by those of any other church in Geneva.

Remarkable mural paintings, in particular, were uncovered during the church's early 20th-century restoration when it was given its present appearance. Further restoration carried out between 1993 and 2000 mainly renovated the furnishings and the decoration of the church and did not alter any part of its structure, with the exception of an archeological site organized in the crypt.

**Photos:**

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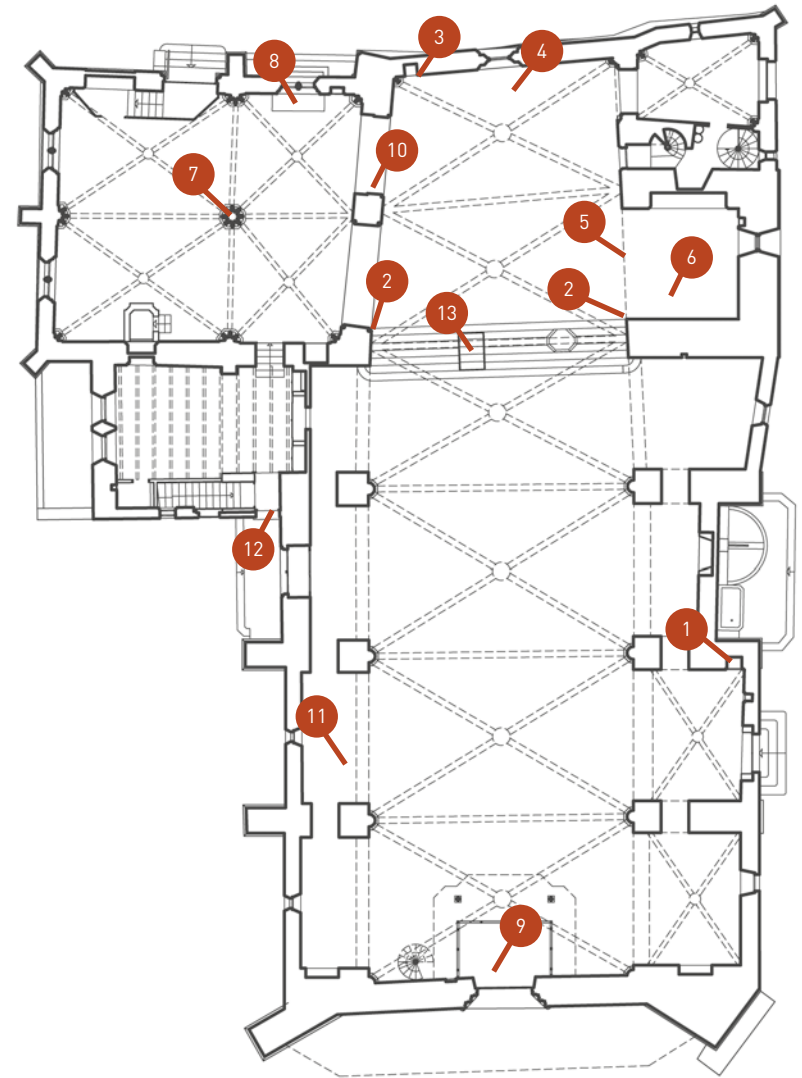
The history of Saint-Gervais is associated with the age-old bridges built in Roman times over the Rhone and over the submerged land that was later to form the foundations of the so-called Ile district. This strategic site, referred to by Cesar in 58 BC, remained, until the 18th century, an essential point of passage for people travelling from the south of France to the Swiss Plateau.

The terrace overlooking the river, where a funerary church once stood in the 5th century, was occupied as far back as ca. 4000 BC.

This Neolithic site preserves today the oldest trace of human presence in Geneva. Its tombs and megaliths, and its later Gallo-Roman sanctuary attest to its nearly uninterrupted religious significance up to this day, as brought to light by recent archaeological excavations. This first place of Christian worship in the 11th-12th centuries became the center of a parish that extended not only to the village of Saint-Gervais, but also beyond to the left bank encompassing the streets of the Confédération (up to the Place de la Fusterie), and to what is today the Cité and the Corratierie.

With the growth of Geneva in the 15th century and around the time when the rue de Coutance was built in 1428, the paleo-Christian church, except for its crypt, was entirely rebuilt and richly painted and decorated with sculptures that largely still remain today. The then Gothic church was refurbished twice: first in 1547 to meet the requirements of the Protestant liturgy, and later in the early 20th century when it was restored to its original medieval appearance. The rich historical past of the St. Gervais church distinguishes it as one of Geneva's most remarkable monuments.

a. floorplan in the 15th century | b. ca. 1800  
 c. floorplan ca. 1890 | d. ca. 1900  
 e. current floorplan | f. 1903 (projected)



- |                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| 1. Tabernacle dated 1438        | 8. Escalade memorial and stained-glass window |
| 2. Sculpted angels in the choir | 9. Great organ                                |
| 3. Apse                         | 10. Choir organ                               |
| 4. Choir-stalls                 | 11. Artwork by Brigitte Crittin               |
| 5. Renaissance fresco           | 12. Entrance to the archeological site        |
| 6. Tous-les-Saints chapel       | 13. Entrance to the crypt                     |
| 7. Escalade chapel              |   |



The church of St. Gervais was built of stone and brick between 1430 and 1446 by local and Piedmont masons. The materials were found in the surrounding region. Molasse, a type of soft sandstone commonly found in Geneva, was extracted from the shores of Lake Geneva. The terracotta was produced in a tile factory located at

the end of rue de Coutance, and run by a certain Pierre Mascrot from Ivrea. The stockiness of the church, the reddish color of its walls, and its hollow roof tiles are Mediterranean features. In the rue du Temple, built in 1773, a fountain was erected against a chapel wall in 1809 and later equipped with fire pails in 1826.



On August 10, 1535, the Geneva authorities abolished the celebration of the Catholic Mass. Nine months later the transition to the Reformation was completed. This conversion of religion entailed the immediate removal of the church's altars,

relics, and sacred images.

While Catholicism asserted the importance of the sacraments and the mediation of the saints to attain salvation, Protestantism was to place the word of God, as preached by the pastor, at the heart of its credo. The church was reorganized in 1547 to form a vast area around the pulpit in the center of the former nave for worshippers. Pews, formerly scarce, and wide galleries along the north wall near the chapels, allowed worshippers to comfortably follow the liturgy. In the early 20th century, these Protestant furnishings were removed.

Outside view of the church  
Inside view of the church in 1830 by Pierre Lescuyer



1.

The parish cemetery surrounded the church up to the Reformation. Inside the church, chapels were built on both sides of the nave and the choir by wealthy parishioners for the burial of their family members. Each chapel features an altar where services were offered every day for the dead. One of them has a tabernacle with a cross inscribed on its surface and the date it was consecrated: August 24, 1438. In the following century, burials in houses of worship were banned and city cemeteries were closed by the authorities. The contemporary stained-glass windows in the side chapels, with the exception of those in the Escalade chapel, are the work of the Jura painter Jean-François Comment (1995).



2.

In the Middle Ages, the choir, where the main altar was erected, was the most sacred part of the church, the «holy of holies». It was raised because it overlies the crypt where "holy relics" were preserved. It was originally protected by a grid. Cherubs in the back of the vaults, carved around 1430, are an indication of the degree to which this spot was significant. They are the work of Guillaume de Peytoz, a Flemish sculptor from Saint-Gervais.

The crypt's central entrance we see today that was refurbished during the last restoration corresponds to the entrance of the

former paleo-Christian church. In the 15th century, one could go down into this sanctuary. Now it is half-buried by lateral corridors that are still visible today in the archeological site.

1. Tabernacle of a south wall chapel  
2. Sculpted angels in the choir



The apse is decorated with remarkable medieval mural paintings featuring large foliated scrolls on each side of the central alcove and on the tabernacle. There are two angels, one holding a censer, the other a medallion adorned with a sun inscribed with the monogram of Jesus' name: IHS. This is the oldest attestation of what became in the 16th century the crest of the arms of Geneva. Note that the apse is marked with black crossed streaks, probably left by the priests when they extinguished the candles. On the south wall, a white rectangular area marks the location of a reliquary.

The stained-glass central window was created by Géo Fustier in 1944.

3.

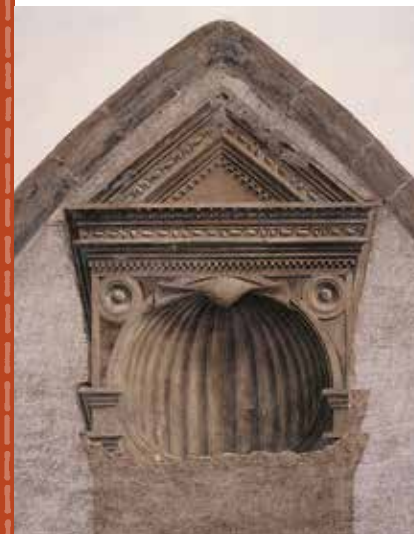


The choir of St. Gervais holds several medieval walnut choir-stalls dating back to the 1440s that can be attributed to the Geneva atelier of the sculptor Jean de Vitry. In the mid-16th century, the furniture built for the former church (a row of five low-lying stalls) was supplemented with stalls retrieved from churches abandoned after the Reformation. The backs of eight stalls displaying St. John the Baptist and St. Francis of Assisi were originally

carved for the chapel of the Italian confraternity of Geneva in the Franciscan monastery of Rive, as evidenced by the lily of Florence on the crested shields.

4

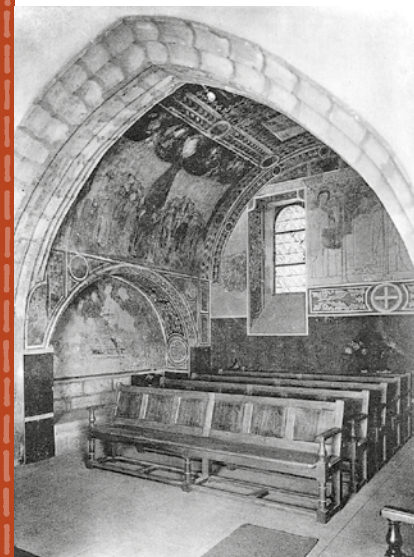
3. Choir  
4. High choir stalls



The fragment of a mural painting at the top of the choir's south wall is another testimony of Geneva's relations with Italy. It is a trompe-l'oeil niche forming an inverted scallop shell, under which originally stood a holy figure that was removed during the Reformation. Painted as a true fresco by an artist who was surely Italian – as local artists did not master this technique – this painting demonstrates that the art of perspective was already developed in Tuscany in the second third of the 15th century.

It is the oldest Renaissance work preserved in present-day Switzerland.

5.



The loveliest chapel of St. Gervais was built around 1440 by Matthew Bernard of Spain. This merchant draper decorated it with murals painted by artisans from two ateliers. The first mural, fashioned in a Piedmontese style, suggests the art of Giacomo Jaquerio of Turin. His fresco on the east and south walls depicts the Virgin of Mercy, St. Anthony, and St. John the Baptist and two other saints, probably St. Catherine and St. Marguerite. A second artist was commissioned to represent the four Evangelists, as fresco-secco, on the vault's west wall.

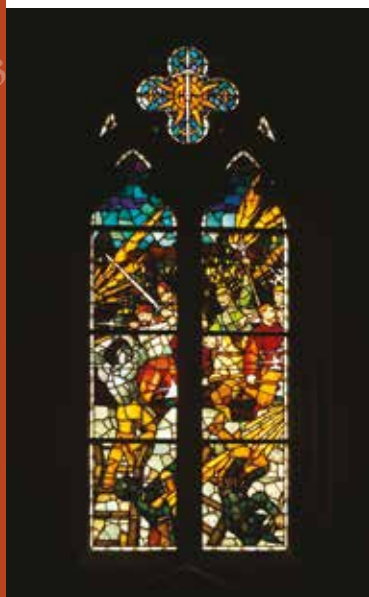
6.

5. Renaissance fresco  
6. The Tous-les-Saints chapel in its 1904 condition



The Escalade chapel was created around 1478 by the brotherhood of Germans of Geneva. They were merchants from German-speaking Switzerland and South Germany. They settled near the Fusterie, on land belonging to St. Gervais parish. The breadth of the chapel's flamboyant vaulted

7. ceiling is astonishing. The first of its two entrance arches is decorated with an image of St. Christopher painted at the end of the 15th century.



In the night of December 11 to 12, 1602, Geneva victoriously pushed back an attack by the Duke of Savoy's troops, who had launched an assault by climbing the city walls with ladders. This event was to be called l'Escalade.

The people of Geneva fallen in this memorable battle were buried in the St. Gervais cemetery and an epitaph, still visible in the rue des Corps-Saints, was erected in their honor in the following year against the advice of the pastors. In 1895, their remains, hampering the building of the rue Vallin, were transferred to the Escalade chapel, and a new stele was built under a stained-glass window created by Eugène Demole ten years later. Burials had not taken place in the church

8. since the Reformation. In 1952, stained-glass windows created by the painter Bodjol were placed in the other chapels of the church.

7. Escalade chapel  
8. Stained-glass window of the Escalade



Built by Orgelbau Felsberg in 1995, the present organ is the fifth to have been installed in the St. Gervais church. It was designed by Jean-Marie Tricoteaux as the reconstruction of an early 17th century Norman organ suitable for performing the works of Jehan Titelouze. They are the basis of French classical organ music. Although not a facsimile, the instrument was created using the techniques and materials of its time. Two 16' Gottfried Silbermann-style registers were added to the pedal to play pieces from the German repertoire.

9.	Great Organ	Positif	Pedal	Windowstyle console
	Bourdon 16'	Montre 8'	Subbass 16'	Keyboards: 54 notes
	Montre 8'	Bourdon 8'	Flute 8'	Pedalboard: 30 notes
	Bourdon 8'	Prestant 4'	Flute 4'	Shove coupler I/II
	Prestant 4'	Flûte d'Allemand 4'	Bombarde 16'	Tirasse GO
	Flute 4'	Nasard 2'2/3	Trumpet 8'	Diapason: 440 Hz
	Nazard 2'2/3	Doublette 2'		Arnold Schlick's temperament
	Doublette 2'	Tierce 1'3/5		
	Small Flute 2'	Larigot 1'1/3		
	Tierce étroite 1'3/5	Mixture IV		
	Sifflet 1'	Cromorne 8'		
	Mixture IV			
	Cymbale III			
	Cornet V			
	Trumpet 8'			
	Clairon 4'			
	Vox humana 8'			
	Tremulant			
	Rossignol			

9. Great Organ



Built by the Manufacture des Grandes Orgues de Genève SA in 1966, the choir organ was originally installed in the Escalade chapel. Set on a movable platform, it is now played to accompany choirs, especially for liturgical cantatas.

10. Suavial 8'  
Bourdon 8'  
Principal 4'  
Chimney flute 4'  
Doublette 2'  
Larigot 1'1/3  
Nazard 2'2/3 (break at Do3)

**Pedal**  
Subbass 16'

Window-style console  
Keyboard: 56 notes  
Pedalboard: 30 notes  
Tirasse  
Diapason: 440 Hz  
Bach-Kellner temperament

10. Choir organ

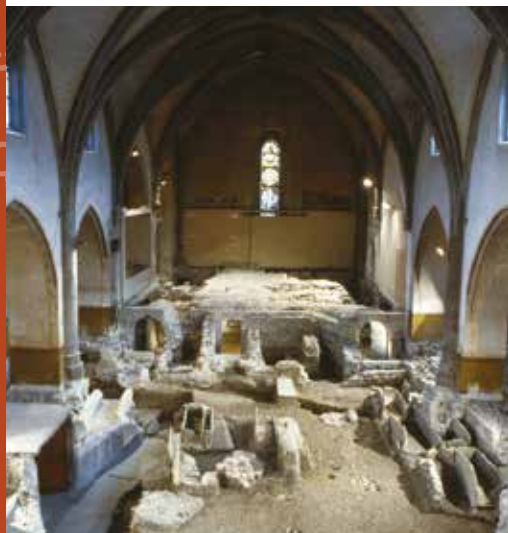


“ Speech is not immaterial substance lying beyond reality or added to matter. The spoken word does not bear testimony to the universe, nor does it express what some animals may say. Speech is not an added-on adornment. Speech lies at the very origin of things. It has not been acquired from the evolution of animals, but rather it has extended beyond all visible things because it connects with their appearance. The spoken word does not describe. It calls

11. out. It acts as a flash, a thunderbolt. Words do not merely evoke, they slice, they split rocks. Speech cannot describe anything, because it is at the origin of things. Each word calls out the world anew. Matter holds no greater secret than the verbal conundrum. We carry the world in our mouth when we speak. There is, through speech, at the root of language, in the spoken word, a moment, a place, where matter is weightless, where matter has been vanquished. There is a remote spot without obstacles where, through speech, the substance of death is broken and laid open. There is a place where nothing opposes our joy. Each word, any word, no matter how small the word, is the lever of the world. Each word, even the smallest, any word, is the lever of everything. It uplifts the substance of death. The word passes over the world to carry off its remains.”

Valère Novarina, interview with François Bon (*Parler est un drame*, 1992).  
Republished and amended in *Devant la parole*, Paris, P.O.L., 1999.

11. Artwork by the Swiss artist Brigitte Crittin, inspired by the writings of Valère Novarina, and acquired by Espace Saint-Gervais in 2013.



Research carried out in the St. Gervais church and its surrounding area have revealed much information on the expansion on the right bank of the Rhone, from prehistoric times to the modern era.

The oldest recognized settlements date from around 4000 BC and were made up of a group of dwelling units. When the site was abandoned, raised stones, protected by a fence, were aligned along a road.

12. An incineration tomb going back to around 1000 BC is also located at this spot. The road was deviated between 60 and 40 BC, when two megaliths were laid over the line of fences to level the ground that would permit the construction of a wooden building around 40 BC.

During the Augustan period from 20 BC to 20 AD, other wooden and earthen constructions were built one after the other at the same location. Some of these buildings were devoted to worship, others to dwellings. It was also during the first half of the 1st century AD that a Gallo-Roman sanctuary, comprising a dual place of worship enclosed in a peribolos, was built out of raw brick and stone. In the second half of the 1st century AD a third place of worship on the west side was added. The entire site was again modified in the 3rd century and abandoned in the mid-4th century following a fire.

12. Archeological site



A large cruciform funerary church was built in the 5th century on the site of the ancient religious complex. Prior to it, stood a mausoleum, whose architectural blocks were reused for the crypt that was built under the choir of this first funerary church.

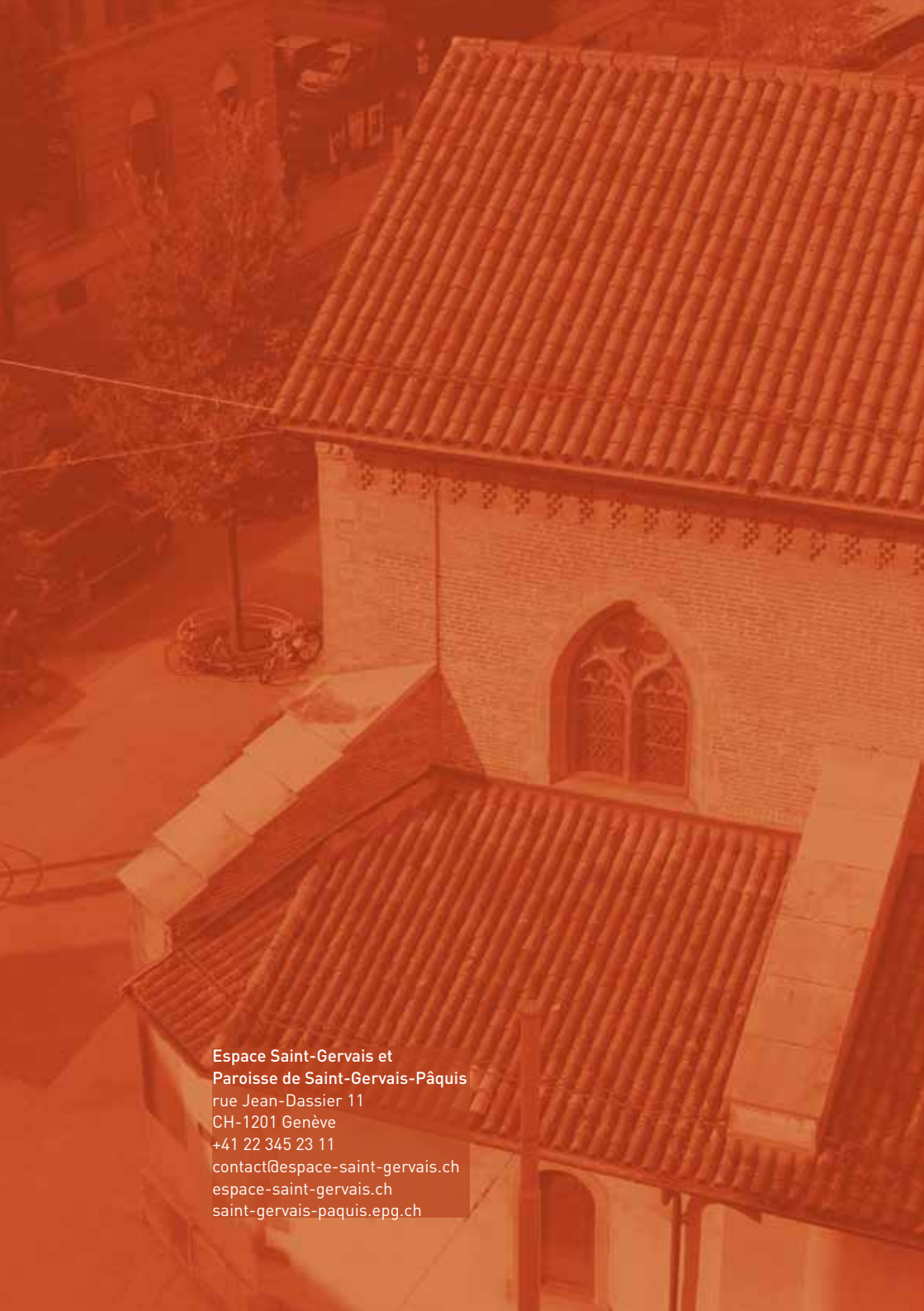
13. As early as the 6th century, the large tomb in the crypt was followed by the digging of numerous other graves in the nave of the church and in two annexes located on each side of the sanctuary. Galleries and porticos were built against the north, west, and south walls of the nave leaving room for new graves. It was again in the 6th century that two annexes for graves were built on either side of the choir, the north side being later extended by an apse. Gravesites surround this group of monuments. They form the beginnings of the parish cemetery that was built north of the church, initially restored in the 14th century and finally entirely rebuilt in the 15th century.

The crypt and the archeological site can be visited upon request. To arrange a tour, please contact:

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13. Crypt





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