

Movement and landscape around the Cluny Abbey: lines and dots in the Anthropocene

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In this paper, we will consider the practice of walking and link it to a case-study of the Cluny Abbey: the Sacred Ring¹.

Walking is ancestral. We have walked since standing upright. Once we started walking, to discover the world, we have sought to understand it,² explain it, represent it³ and modify it. As we walk, we create patterns in lines and dots that are inherent in many collective activities⁴ - weaving, pottery, music, writing, mathematics, physics, architecture – which are the basis of our contemporary, linear thought⁵.

As we walk along lines,⁶ we encounter natural markers, or geographical borders: mountain ranges, hill crests, forests, rivers, streams, and we create our own: mile stones, crosses, prayer knolls, burial piles, cairns.⁷

Cluny Abbey has a particular relationship with lines and dots and has done much to modify its landscape. Begun in 910, the Cluniac community thrived. Relying on local labour and quarried stone, churches were built for worship; deaneries and granges for food; towers and castles for safety; roads and pathways for transport, and access to its many sites now spread across Europe. Ways were devised to ensure protection and development. One such system, the Sacred Ring, represented by ten natural markers and stone posts around the Abbey, was consecrated on 25 October 1095 by Pope Urbain II⁸. The Ring marked a turning point in the Abbey's financial and juristic affairs. Nobody could enter this space carrying arms and the civil population was tied to ecclesiastic rule⁹. Peace, safety and wealth were key to the Cluniac community.¹⁰

For centuries, the Benedict community dominated the landscape. Three churches were built in rapid succession and the last, Cluny 3 or the *major ecclesia*, for a time rivalled Rome as the largest church in Christendom. By the start of the French Revolution in 1789, however, most of the Abbey's splendour had declined and only a handful of monks remained. The *major ecclesia* was destroyed and the town regressed into a poor rural burg. It was 'rediscovered' in the 1920s by Kenneth John Conant, an archaeologist who spent thirty years excavating parts of Cluny. In 1985 a new tourist route was opened to the public that encompassed the Abbey grounds and monastic palaces. Excavation work continues to this day¹¹ as does restoration¹² of the Abbey and the *major ecclesia*.

¹ *Walks around Cluny and the sacred ring*, FAPPAH, 2016

² Alfred Watkins : *The old straight track*, Heritage Hunter, 2015

³ Julian Spalding: *Realisation: from seeing the world to understanding it*, Bitter Lemon Press, 2015

⁴ Tim Ingold: *Lines*, Routledge, 2016

⁵ René Descartes is often attributed as the father of mathematical, linear thought

⁶ See the work of the artist Richard Long who has reinstated the walk as a basic, minimalist, artistic expression: <http://www.richardlong.org/>

⁷ Alexandre Chollier : *Autour du cairn*, Editions Héros-Limite, 2010

⁸ The Abbey of Cluny, Monum, Editions du patrimoine, 2008

⁹ Dominique Iogna-Prat : *Ordonner et exclure : Cluny et la société chrétienne face à l'hérésie, au judaïsme et à l'islam*, Champs Flammarion, 2004

¹⁰ Didier Mehu: *Paix et communautés autour de l'Abbaye de Cluny*, PUL, 2010

¹¹ "In mid-September 2017, a large treasure was unearthed during a dig at the Abbey of Cluny, in the French department of Saône-et-Loire: 2,200 silver deniers and oboles, 21 Islamic gold dinars, a signet ring, and other objects made of gold. Never before has such a large cache of silver deniers been discovered. Nor have gold coins from Arab lands, silver deniers, and a signet ring ever been found hoarded together within a single, enclosed complex." <http://www2.cnrs.fr/en/3025.htm>

¹² Under the supervision of its head architect, Frédéric Didier:

<http://www.2bdm.fr/medias/communications/communications-de-frederic-didier/>

Today, tourism is Cluny's mainstay and there is hope that the network of Cluniac sites will be registered on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites¹³.

What of the Abbey's impact on the landscape today? Where are the lines and the dots? In the third part of this paper, we will consider the topographical and administrative contours of the Sacred Ring.

A circuit of about 46 kilometres, the Sacred Ring is a popular walk. Local associations¹⁴ have retraced the contours and five walks cover the ten original points and heritage sites. The points are still visible environmental markers: crossroads or crests. Some "manufactured" markers – towers Romanesque chapels, priories – have been restored by local heritage associations.¹⁵

The ring has changed as a result of social transformation, our relationship with space and time. It is now a broken line, traversed by the TGV high speed railway and bus routes that cross the circumference transporting tourists from one point to another, the Abbey ruins and nearby castles.

The area is still part of a pilgrimage route and is crossed by the St Jacques de Compostelle pathway.

Most importantly, the Sacred Ring is now an administrative frontier, a line that divides or links communities and small villages, and defines political boundaries. The town of Cluny is still at the centre, a vortex that draws crowds to the Abbey ruins and cultural programmes. Since the demise of the Abbey, ecclesiastic power and jurisdiction have been replaced by the State. It is now a national monument run by the Ministry of Culture in conjunction with two other ministries, Education and Agriculture, that are responsible for the engineering school and the national stables, respectively. This large State presence in a small city has significant impact on the lives of the citizens of Cluny and surrounding areas.

In addition, local public administration is changing. The traditional Jacobean model is being abandoned in favour of a more decentralised governance where rural communities collaborate with each other and power has shifted from city and town mayors to local community leaders. The impact on the local populations is tangible: management of public institutions is moving from town councils to more federal community councils. Taxes are paid to the town, to the community...

The pathways of the Sacred Ring of Cluny are now the contours of the administrative map of a larger Cluny territory, no longer confined to the city walls and once again part of a periphery that a monk could travel in a day.

¹³ Cluny as a world heritage site, project carried by the European Federation of Cluniac Sites :

<http://www.sitesclunisiens.org/article-275--cluny-and-cluniac-sites-prepare-for-unesco-recognition>

¹⁴ *Walks around Cluny and the sacred ring*, FAPPAAH, 2016

¹⁵ FAPPAAH: <http://www.fappah.org/>