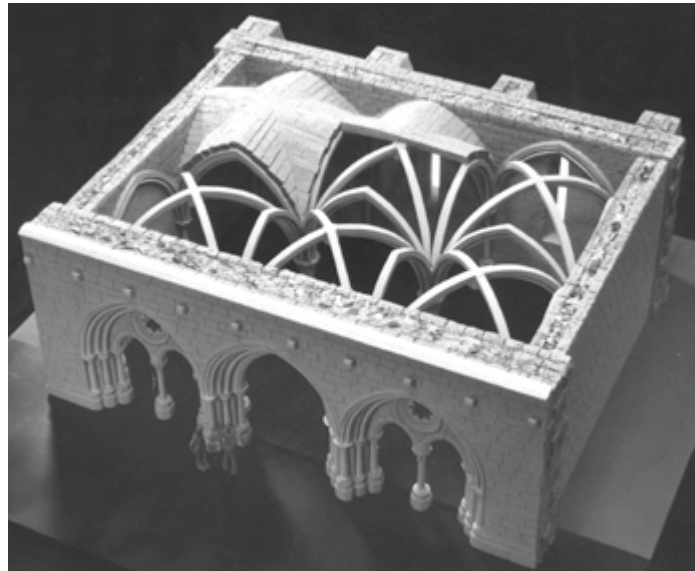


Sacred Stones Home
Page



Model by Dr. Margaret Burke

SANTA MARIA DE OVILA

ITS HISTORY IN TWENTIETH CENTURY IN SPAIN AND CALIFORNIA

By **MARGARET BURKE**

In 1931 William Randolph Hearst purchased the Cistercian monastery buildings of Santa Maria de Ovila, located in the province of Guadalajara in Spain. Ovila had existed for over seven hundred years, isolated from centers of population and from well-traveled roads. Founded in the late twelfth century by King Alfonso VIII of Castile, the monastery was one of the establishments which the king promoted along the border of the country he had recently re-conquered from the Moors -- a place which would attract needed settlers and which might serve as a refuge in case of attack or raid. The small monastic community at Ovila thrived and knew its greatest prosperity in the thirteenth and early fourteenth century, but thereafter its fortunes declined. Though the church was rebuilt in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and ambitious constructions were begun again in the seventeenth century, the success of attempts to revitalize the community was short-lived. Finally, in 1835, when the inhabitants had dwindled to four monks and one lay brother, the monastery was "secularized." The properties fell to private owners, who sold the roof tiles and other removable parts. The major buildings were still standing when the sale to Mr. Hearst was arranged by an expatriate American art dealer, Arthur Byne, who lived in Madrid and conducted a profitable business of selling Spanish works of art and architecture to collectors.

At the time Mr. Hearst envisioned the construction of a private castle in forested country in northern California. This project, unlike his palatial residence at San Simeon, would be a single large building with towers and turrets, built around a central courtyard. It was to be located at a place called Wyntoon, on the McCloud River near Mount Shasta, and would replace a house built there for his mother Phoebe Apperson Hearst by architect Bernard Maybeck, which had recently burned. Mrs. Hearst's house had been called Wyntoon Castle. Although it was simply a summer residence. The new Wyntoon Castle would indeed be a castle, in appearance as well as in size and to provide a proper setting Hearst increased the size of his mother's modest property to 66,000 acres. Miss Julia

Morgan, Hearst's architect for San Simeon, would provide the necessary technical knowledge for her client's visions of Wyntoon. Byne was commissioned to find architectural treasures in Spain to be incorporated into the major rooms of the castle.

Arthur Byne had wide connections in Spain and many influential friends. Among them was a wealthy director of the Bank of Spain who not long before had purchased the monastery and farmlands of Santa Maria de Ovila. Byne thought that the venerable buildings might well suit his client, as they included fine, vaulted structures dating from the twelfth to the seventeenth century. Fortuitously the new owner -- the most recent of a series of politician-proprietors -- was interested in selling the monastery buildings, then in a ruinous state with bushes and small trees growing from the vaulting, the roof tiles having long since been removed and sold. All wooden appurtenances such as doors and window frames had been carried away and at least one of the massive walls seemed about to collapse.

In December 1930 Arthur Byne drove to the monastery, in mountainous country about ninety miles from Madrid. With the temperature near zero and the snow swirling around he quickly drew a plan of the church and made photographs and sketches of the other major buildings. These he sent to Mr. Hearst who -- following Julia Morgan's enthusiastic recommendation -- agreed to take parts of the monastery that Byne considered usable in the castle project. These consisted mainly of columns, capitals, vault ribs, door frames, and window embrasures. From those buildings whose masonry was of particularly fine workmanship, the facing stones of the vault cells and walls would also be taken.

Immediately Julia Morgan and her staff drew preliminary sketches for Mr. Hearst's castle, employing monastery structures in the plan of the ground floor. She then called upon architect and engineer Walter Steilberg, who often collaborated on her projects. Supplying him with prints of the preliminary drawings, she sent him to the site in Spain where he was to be consultant and supervisor. Meantime Arthur Byne had already begun the work of the dismantling or, as he called it, the *delapidation* ("I use the word in its Latin sense," he said).

It appears unlikely that Mr. Byne drew a plan of the layout of the monastery buildings before their demolition, since his client had no intention of re-erecting the entire complex as it existed in Spain. Moreover, although Byne was a skilled draftsman and took interest in art-historical matters, he was at that time working with utmost haste to ship the monastery stones out of the country, aware that the recent change in government in Spain might bring the project of dismantling to a halt.

One plan of the monastery does exist from that time. It was drawn by a Spanish physician, Doctor Francisco Layna Serrano, whose family came from Ruguilla, a village that had once belonged to the monastery of Ovila. Dr. Layna had long been attempting to interest government officials in the preservation of Santa Maria de Ovila, among a few ancient monuments then remaining in the province of Guadalajara. But whereas Arthur Byne's project profited from what he called the "slop-over" period between the dictatorship and the elections for a new government in Spain, Dr. Layna's mission unhappily failed. Nevertheless -- as he wished that the monastery might not be completely forgotten -- he wrote a monograph on Santa Maria de Ovila and included a plan, drawn after the buildings had been dismantled.

As might be expected Dr. Layna's plan, drawn partly from memory, is not entirely accurate, but it does show the layout of the major monastic structures.

My plan (Fig. 1) derives from the plan of Layna and of Julia Morgan with changes dictated by a study of the photographs and the stone-setting diagrams made prior to the dismantling.

As was typical for a medieval monastery the buildings were arranged around a cloister edged by walkways. The church bordered the north side of the cloister. At the east side, adjoining the south transept of the church, lay the monks' wing. It included the sacristy, the library, the chapter house and what was probably the monks common room; a spacious dormitory was located above these rooms, giving the monks easy access to the church for service during the day and night. The south wing of buildings, opposite the church, contained the refectory, the kitchen, the pantry and very likely a warming room (calefactorium). At the west lay the bodega, a plain, utilitarian building whose ground floor and basement were the storehouse and wine cellar and whose upper story served as a dormitory for the lay-brothers.

The major buildings of the monastery had not yet been dismantled when Walter Steilberg arrived at the monastery site on March 9, 1931. To Julia Morgan in San Francisco he wrote: "The chapter house and the refectory are the rooms which appeal to me as the finest on account of their dependence for effect upon simple structural lines." The refectory (on the south side of the cloister courtyard) was a large, rectangular building about 21 feet by 85 feet on the interior, with walls five feet thick and with exterior wall buttresses. The interior space was divided into four square units by four bays of vaulting, whose ribs descended to corbels and made a pattern of huge pointed arches along the walls. The simplicity of the long walls was broken by narrow, deeply splayed windows and by a lectern placed high on the west wall, for the monk assigned to read to the community at meal times. A wide entrance doorway, deep and handsomely molded, provided access from the cloister. Constructed in the late twelfth century, the refectory was of a style transitional between Romanesque and Gothic, whereas the chapter house (in the east wing or monks' wing), a smaller, intimate room approximately 31 feet by 45 feet on the interior, was clearly Gothic in style, built in the early thirteenth century. Its construction, however, may have been roughly contemporary with that of the refectory because, in medieval abbeys, the chapter house generally showed the most careful construction, the finest workmanship and often an advanced style. At Ovila the chapter room followed the traditional plan, with two columns placed on the north-south axis, dividing the space into six compartments of rib-vaulting. The entire building had a sculptural quality, especially noticeable on the façade where there was a deeply recessed triple archway supported by piers with colonnettes. Mr. Steilberg was also attracted by the room above the chapter house -- the dormitory for the twelve monks and the novices. This was a spacious room spanned by huge transverse arches that extended to the floor. "I suggest," he wrote, "that these be used over the swimming pool" -- that is, the indoor swimming pool planned for Wynton Castle.

Steilberg then saw the bodega, which had not been included in Hearst's purchase. He was happily surprised to find that it was "a splendid room 27 feet by 90 feet, with a fine simple 'tunnel' vault. For my part" he wrote. "I would rather have it than the chapel (church)." Julia Morgan, following Mr. Hearst's instructions, immediately cabled "WILL TAKE BODEGA"-- but Hearst later changed his mind. The bodega is the single major building of the monastery now remaining at the site in Spain. Apparently the bodega and the refectory were the earliest of the permanent buildings at Ovila. One assumes their precedence not only because of the rugged simplicity of their style but because such utilitarian buildings, necessary for the life of the community, were often the first to be erected.

Probably the last of the major structures built during the initial building campaign (begun by Alfonso VIII and continued by his successors Enrique I and Fernando III) was the church consecrated in 1213. According to an anonymous document cited by Dr. Layna it was three-aisled with five chapels and was very magnificent. This church was reconstructed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, becoming at that time a single-aisle building. Following the practice then current, its "monks choir," formerly occupying the central aisle of the nave, was moved to a raised gallery or tribune at the west end of the church, to provide ample space in the nave for laymen who by that period were generally permitted to attend services in monastic churches. The ceiling of the east end and transept of this new church had a rich and complicated pattern of rib-vaulting. The single-aisle nave, also rib-vaulted, had tall, spindly columns along its walls and was less effective.

Walter Steilberg was disappointed with the church (and the quality of its masonry showed deterioration) but he did observe that it had a 'fine Renaissance (Plateresque) portal.' Arthur Byne, who had earlier considered that his client owned enough Renaissance art, immediately informed Mr. Hearst that the portal could be obtained for \$1,500. 'In the open market in Spain,' he wrote. 'This portal is worth \$8,000 to \$10,000.' Mr. Hearst bought it. The portal is now the only part of the monastery that has been re-erected in California.

The cloister gallery on the south side of the sixteenth-century church was the last major work at the monastery. Under construction in the first quarter of the seventeenth century, work on the new cloister ended abruptly when only eleven bays of the project had been completed. It is likely that at an earlier time the cloister had a timber-roofed gallery, because corbels to support roof beams existed along the front face of the chapter house and on the long wall of the bodega; yet no wooden remnants nor parts of a supporting arcade were evident in 1931. Dr. Layna believed that the south aisle of the original three-aisle church covered the area later occupied by the cloister walk -- that is, the aisles were simply cut off when the church was reconstructed. There were also, originally, five chapels (as noted in the early manuscript). The arrangement with "five chapels"--presumably two in each transept plus the apse -- instead of only one on each transept provides a logical resolution of the plan for the east end of the church, because it joins the sacristy directly to the south wing of the transept, as was usual in a church of Cistercian plan. Dr. Layna made no comment concerning the length of the nave of the thirteenth-century church. From a careful study of the monastery plan and the plans of the churches which were closely related to Ovila I propose that the original nave may have been four bays long instead of three (Fig. 2). Such a plan would permit a cloister of the traditional square plan, would leave ample space between the cloister gallery and the bodega for a walkway for the lay brothers (who were not allowed to enter the cloister), and would provide access from the lay-brothers' walkway directly to the narthex or porch, a structure which usually preceded a Cistercian church.

When Walter Steilberg arrived at Ovila early in March 1931 the dismantling of the cloister gallery operation was well under way, and the vaulting had already been removed. Sixty-seven men were employed on the project, and that figure would soon be increased to one hundred. The skilled masons and carpenters lived at the site; Byne provided bedding for them and a cook, and he had food supplies transported from Madrid. Unskilled laborers, who provided their own food, came from the surrounding countryside, some of them walking two hours from their mountain homes before working from sunrise to sunset and then returning to their homes at night. Arthur Byne was a very efficient administrator and had already completed all preparatory work. Wooden

centering was being constructed to support the stones of each arch during dismantling. He had transported to the site a trench railway used in World War I, whose tracks could be brought into any of the buildings; and its small push-cars when loaded with stones were pushed to the bank of the River Tagus, one quarter of a mile away, and then directly onto a 'ferry'. No bridge existed over the river, which at that time of year was a treacherous stream about 100 feet wide; so Byne had his men construct a barge or "ferry" guided by a cable threaded between vertical rollers (which could compensate for the frequent fluctuations in level). The cable was strung across the river at an angle so that the heavily laden ferry was propelled partly by the swift current. On the opposite bank the cars and their stones were hauled up a steep cliff by means of a windlass. There the stones were loaded onto trucks and carried to Madrid, where eighteen men were employed making wooden crates. The carved stones were packed first in excelsior, then placed in the crates; the plain stones were wrapped in matting and bound with metal straps. All were then sent to Valencia from where they were shipped, in eleven shiploads, to San Francisco.

Before Walter Steilberg had arrived Byne had also devised a system of marking for the stones and had his draftsman, a Senor Santos Perez, make scale drawings (plans of vaulting and elevations of interior walls) on which each stone was drawn and marked with its particular number, corresponding to the number marked on the stone. These drawings were the stone-setting diagrams. Photocopies of these diagrams which are the property of the De Young Museum are the principal evidence we have for construction of the monastery buildings.

Walter Steilberg left Spain at the end of March. The dismantling was completed by July first. During the intervening time officials - I of the new Republican government threatened the completion of the project. Byne wrote that it was then "forbidden to ship a single antique stone from Spain -- even the size of a baseball. Dismantling operations at Ovila were halted but Byne's lawyer persuaded the Minister of Labor to consider the work a partial solution to the serious problem of unemployment. So all the stones arrived in San Francisco, where they were inspected by Steilberg and placed in the largest warehouse in the city.

Julia Morgan and her staff were then perfecting the plans for Wynton Castle, and Walter Steilberg would soon be preparing the structural drawings. The chapter house from Ovila, Hearst decided, should be an entrance hallway or vestibule. The refectory he originally intended for the library but soon thought that the room would be more suitable for the 'armory,' where he would display his large collection of armor. In an early sketch the monastery church was shown as the assembly hall -- where Hearst would meet his guests before dinner. (This sketch shows a sitting room in the main apse, another at the crossing, and a grand piano at the east end of the nave.) Bedroom suites for guests were to be on the upper floors of the castle; and Hearst's special domain was the tower over the entrance, the tallest part of the entire construction. There, on the eighth floor (the top floor) was a single room of circular plan -- the study of Mr. Hearst, the Chief.

The plans, which mainly reflected Mr. Hearst's ideas, continually changed and became increasingly complex -- and then were pulled together and simplified by Julia Morgan. Yet throughout the planning the monastery church remained a problem for Hearst. It was over 150 feet long and 50 feet tall--too capacious and too tall, he thought, for an assembly hall. Finally the solution came to him; it would house the swimming pool. The diving board would be at the west end of the nave, where the 'plunge, as it was called, was to be eleven feet deep, and the transept wings and apse, with water two, three, and four and a half feet deep, could accommodate children and less active swimmers. The north

chapel then became the ladies dressing room, and all around the exterior of the apse (on the terrace, out-of-doors) there would be a 'beach' with sand two or three feet deep, for sun bathing.

When considering such disposition of the monastery's building at Wyntoon one must bear in mind that Hearst, who was then in his late sixties, intended the castle only for his temporary use. In the words of Walter Steilberg, both Hearst and his architect Julia Morgan were 'long-distance dreamers.' Although they did not always have the same dreams, they apparently both visualized Wyntoon Castle as a Medieval museum --a museum for architecture, not only for paintings and for sculpture. And one becomes aware, when studying the plans for Wyntoon, that if the swimming pool were covered over with flooring, the church building could become a handsome, spacious exhibition hall, as could also the bowling alley (which was to have sixteenth-century rib-vaulting) and the gymnasium or squash courts.

But this extravagant dream was not to be realized. Planning continued until 1931. In July of that year a steam shovel was ready to level land for the construction of the castle. Then suddenly Mr. Hearst halted all work on the project. The Depression years and taxes were bringing disaster to his huge organization of enterprises and properties; and although he irrepressibly continued buying works of art, he knew that it would be impossible to finance his magnificent castle.

Throughout the 1930s the monastery stones remained in a San Francisco warehouse, accruing storage fees of 15,000 per year. Many of Hearst's operations were liquidated and properties were sold, but attempts to sell the monastery stones were unsuccessful. In 1941 Mr. Hearst presented the stones to the city of San Francisco with the understanding that the entire monastery would be reconstructed as a museum near the De Young Museum in Golden Gate Park. City officials were enthusiastic: Museum Director Walter Heil wrote to Mr. Hearst that this was the most thrilling news that ever had come to him in his career as museum director. Even before the documents for the transaction of ownership had been prepared. Julia Morgan began research for the reconstruction of the monastery and investigated possible sites in Golden Gate Park.

As Miss Morgan's task was to use the monastery buildings as a museum she made several possible layouts for the complex. In the plan finally chosen by the city officials, the new site itself and the different use for each building determined the arrangement of the buildings, which differed somewhat from the original layout in Spain. But World War II interrupted the project. Soon after the war, in 1946, city officials contracted with Miss Morgan to prepare drawings for the reconstruction of the monastery of Santa Maria de Ovila as a Museum of Medieval Arts and to make a scale model of the entire complex of buildings. The monastery as a museum was to be located near the De Young Museum and surrounded by landscaped park lands. It would have been a very handsome group of buildings, an outstanding cultural attraction, unique in the United States.

Unhappily in the following years attempts to raise money for the construction of the museum failed; and more tragic, the monastery's stones, which were stored outdoors in the park, were badly damaged by five fires. The last two fires, in 1959, clearly the work of arson, were catastrophic. Great damage was caused by the spalling and sudden quenching of the stones. After these last disasters architect Walter Steilberg was called upon again -- this time to inspect the damaged stones and to determine whether any construction of the monastery buildings would be possible. In his report (1960) he stated that approximately

half of the stones for the vaulting, the capitals, and the columns of the refectory and the chapter house had been salvaged, which indicated that these structures could be rebuilt substantially as they were at the time of their construction in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

A general belief in the hopelessness of the task prevailed, and no funds were raised for the reconstruction. Nevertheless, in 1964-65 the Museum Society raised \$40,000 for the re-erection of the portal of the thirteenth-century church of Santa Maria de Ovila. It is now the principal decoration of the museum's central exhibition hall, which has been named Hearst Court.

Now, twenty years after the disastrous fires, returning interest has led to a new investigation of the state of the monastery stones. In March of 1980, through a generous grant from the Hearst Foundations, we began the work of identifying and segregating the carved stones of the chapter house, which was the finest of the buildings of the monastery. It has been tremendously encouraging and gratifying to find that at least 50% to 60% of the pieces still exist, confirming Walter Steilberg's earlier estimate. For some parts that figure is closer to 80% and a large quantity of the building's facing stones (for walls and vaults) exists as well. There is indeed now a possibility that a reconstruction of a part of the monastery of Santa Maria de Ovila could become a reality.

The above article was written by DR, Margaret Burke, in 1982. Now, nearly twenty years later, the reconstruction of the Chapter House is indeed becoming a reality. An order of Cistercian monks, from the Abbey of New Clairvaux, in Vina, California, took an interest in the stones. After several years of negotiating, they were able to acquire the Chapter House stones, which were then sent to their small, rural community in Northern California -- not too far from their original destination, Wyntoon. Dr. Burke is still involved in the story, as an enthusiastic supporter of the project, and a valued consultant.