CHAPTER SIX

FROM GATEHOUSE TO CHOIR SCREEN

In this chapter, I focus on the sequence of spaces of the gatehouse, narthex and choir screen. The topography of Cistercian precincts encompassed not a single enclosure, but a series of them, comprised of the walls, courts and cloisters that structured the relations of the various groups depicted on the tomb of Stephen of Obazine. My focus on these spaces as a sequence aims to interpret them as thresholds, and as spiritually charged entranceways. They embodied opportunities for articulating continuities between the various secular social spheres and the community of choir-monks in the very act of differentiating between them. Each of these architectural configurations was a form of carefully choreographed seclusion and entrance. In each space, the encounter between monks and lay people was of central importance. Gatehouse, narthex and choir screen formed a major route that cut across the primary enclosures of the precinct. They were linked through physical connections, and through overlapping uses, as well as certain symbolic affinities. Within the carefully laid out topography, these interrelated boundary spaces served to establish a differentiated continuity between either ends of the spectrum of monastic spirituality; from the focal point of the liturgical drama in the monks’ choir, to almsgiving outside the monastic walls. Beside their conspicuous separating function, I argue that each of these structures also embodied a mode of access and incorporation, a self-sufficient place of mediation between the different spheres of monastic life that involved lay people to varying degrees. Most monks would have frequented these spaces only on particular, albeit regular occasions. Yet if we take into account the full range of related events, and the lasting impact of these practices and spaces on the community, it will become apparent that the sequence of gatehouse, narthex and choir screen assumed a significant, and to some extent determining role in the life of a Cistercian community.

The abbey of Valmagne in the Hérault, equidistant from Béziers and Montpellier, serves as the concrete architectural example for exploring the nature of permeable boundaries in a Cistercian monastery. The relative dearth of scholarly studies of Valmagne’s architecture stands in
stark contrast to its importance in the context of southern France. Completely re-built in the last third of the thirteenth century, Valmagne presents the best preserved southern French Cistercian abbey church of the thirteenth century (Figs. 34 & 35). Funds were collected from 1227, and the permission to begin building was gained from the bishop of Agde in c. 1252–7. Its inception thus falls right in the middle of an order-wide trend of intensified architectural adaptations. Valmagne is equally the best preserved Cistercian abbey in France of the important group of ‘cathedral-like’ abbeys which originated in the Île-de-France in the early thirteenth century. Furthermore, Valmagne is the only one of the great, thirteenth-century ‘Rayonnant’ building projects of the Midi that was completed. The reconstruction of the cathedrals of Narbonne, Toulouse, Clermont-Ferrand, Limoges and Rodez (traditionally attributed to the architect Jean Dechamps) did not get much beyond the building of massive choirs. The survival of an elaborate western end with a narthex, which clearly constitutes an integrated part of the overall coherence of the design, presents a particularly striking example of this configuration at the threshold of a Cistercian church. Rare remains of both the gatehouse complex and choir screen at Valmagne allow us to understand these boundary spaces as part of a meaningful whole.

My focus is on the interplay of practical and symbolic functions. The variety of encounters and exchanges between monks and lay people staged by these boundary spaces needs to be seen in relation to their paradigmatic significance in the history of their representational traditions. It is therefore important to look not only to the precedents and contemporary counterparts of gatehouses, narthexes and choir screens within

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1 Paul (1982) and Freigang (1992: 323–30) are notable exceptions. Both scholars have principally focused on formal and structural aspects of the church.

2 Cistercian building in the Languedoc concentrated itself in three basic phases: the first phase being in 1170–1200, the second in the two decades before and after the end of the Albigensian crusade in 1229; while the final, and in many respects the most important phase, occurred late, stretching over the whole of the second half of the thirteenth century and into the early fourteenth century; see Biget (1986: 326–29, 330).

3 Gorsse (1933: 17–18). There is no known written evidence of when the construction was completed. Paul (1982: 640–41) and Aubert (1953: 243) argue on stylistic grounds that the western part of the nave and narthex were finished soon after 1300. See Udphuay et al. (2010) and Paul et al. (2011) on the earlier twelfth-century church.

4 For an overview, see Untermann (2001: 531–59); see also the discussion above, Chapter 2, p. 62.

5 Bruzelius (1979) and Untermann (2001: 531).
