

# THE STORIED STONES OF SANTA MARIA DE OVILA

PART I

## WILLIAM RANDOLPH HEARST'S MONASTERY

by Robert M. Clements

### *Santa Maria de Ovila,*

like many Spanish religious establishments of the Middle Ages, was a fairly prosperous monastery. During the *Reconquista* it stood in that depopulated region behind the advancing Christian and the retreating Moorish armies. In a way the monks were as important in holding the land as were the soldiers in capturing it, for the monasteries provided secure islands of faith and farming in areas that were still a no man's land between Christian and Moslem. This explains why Santa Maria de Ovila had walls seven feet thick in places and tiny slit windows. Like the wise little pig, the monks of Ovila had no intention of fighting but they knew how to build themselves a strong house.

If we judge by the buildings, Santa Maria de Ovila was most active before about 1650, since that is the date of the last major building project, a large Renaissance doorway for the chapel. The doorway was something of an afterthought, however, and most of the buildings are Gothic; they include the very early Gothic refectory, which Saint Martin had watched being built; a somewhat later and very handsome High Gothic chapter house; a rebuilt version of the chapel with late and flamboyant Gothic vaults; and a rebuilt version of the Gothic cloister with a High Renaissance arcade. In fact, Santa Maria de Ovila displayed a bit of each style of Spanish religious building from 1200 through 1600.

Like all small Spanish monasteries, its history ended in August of 1835, with a royal decree suppressing all religious houses with fewer than twelve inhabitants. Santa Maria de Ovila then had four. The mayor of the nearby town of Trillo presided over the sale of the monastery's worldly goods; the highest price went for the wine-making



Destroyed by a tycoon: Santa Maria de Ovila in the 1930s. image via WikimediaCommons

equipment and an oxcart. Bargain hunters could also buy old beds, old broken tables, old cracked chairs, and old kitchen equipment. Most of the items in the inventory are disdainfully described as *viejo* (antiquated), probably because the sale took place several months after the monastery had been closed and nearly everything of value had disappeared in the meantime. In following years the roof tiles also disappeared, exposing the curious method which the Spanish medieval builders had of making their roofs: on top of the pointed vaults they packed dirt, smoothed it, and laid tiles loosely on top. A twentieth-century visitor reported seeing trees six to eight feet tall growing from the exposed roofs of the monastery.

The buildings themselves began to decay, of course, and this was hastened by very rough treatment from the local landowner, who used them as service buildings for a farm. The ornate Gothic chapter house, for instance, served as a manure pit. By 1930, about a hundred years after the monastery was closed, the buildings were in a reasonably advanced state of ruin, though all were still standing.

### *At this point*

Santa Maria de Ovila was discovered by an expatriate American art dealer, Arthur Byne, who had for years been selling European bric-a-brac to Americans, especially to William Randolph Hearst. Admittedly Santa Maria de Ovila was larger than the usual *objet d'art*, but Byne knew that size—and cost—were no impediment when it came to gratifying the Hearstian taste, and he naturally was interested in the commission that the sale of an \$85,000 monastery would produce. Since he represented the His-

panic Society of America, he also may have thought that Hearst's pocketbook offered the best way of preserving this decrepit but interesting piece of architecture.

Byne did some graceful perspective sketches of Santa Maria de Ovila, which for some reason he called Mountolive, and in late 1930 he sent them off to Hearst; very promptly the reply came back: Mr. Hearst was delighted and wanted to buy the entire monastery and have it transported to California. It should be added that such a request was not so astonishing as it might seem today; Hearst already had bought some gigantic architectural pieces—ceilings, a Gothic fireplace, doorways, and the like—to decorate his houses, especially the colossal castle at San Simeon. He also had bought another monastery from Byne in the twenties, and it was then sitting in a warehouse in the Bronx.

Despite the dire financial news of 1930, Byne's timing was excellent, for Hearst felt that he had plenty of money and was growing restless as San Simeon neared completion. The next project that he had in mind was an even bigger house in the forests of far northern California, where his mother had built a large hunting lodge called Wyntoon. Wyntoon had burned down, but Hearst planned to replace it with something truly stupendous—a medieval castle. It was to front on the McCloud River and rise in commanding towers and bastions to eight stories of pure fairy-tale splendor. It would have sixty-one bedrooms on six floors, and the eighth floor, at the top of the tallest tower, would contain only a solitary, round study for 'the Chief,' who could gaze upon his own domain and the thousands of acres of virgin forest surrounding it. But in late

# THE STORIED STONES OF SANTA MARIA DE OVILA

## PART II

### ACTS OF CREATIVE REDEMPTION by Edwin Hamilton

#### *Act 1*: The LIBRARY TERRACE GARDEN

In San Francisco, in 1999, I was being interviewed as a candidate to design a sculptural fountain in what was then known as Strybing Arboretum in Golden Gate Park. As I was showing my portfolio to the director of the Arboretum and the landscape architect they became interested in my stonemasonry work and said that there were some stone walls in the project. Then, when they told me they had permission to use the fabled monastery stones for these walls it took a great deal of self-control on my part not to visibly salivate.

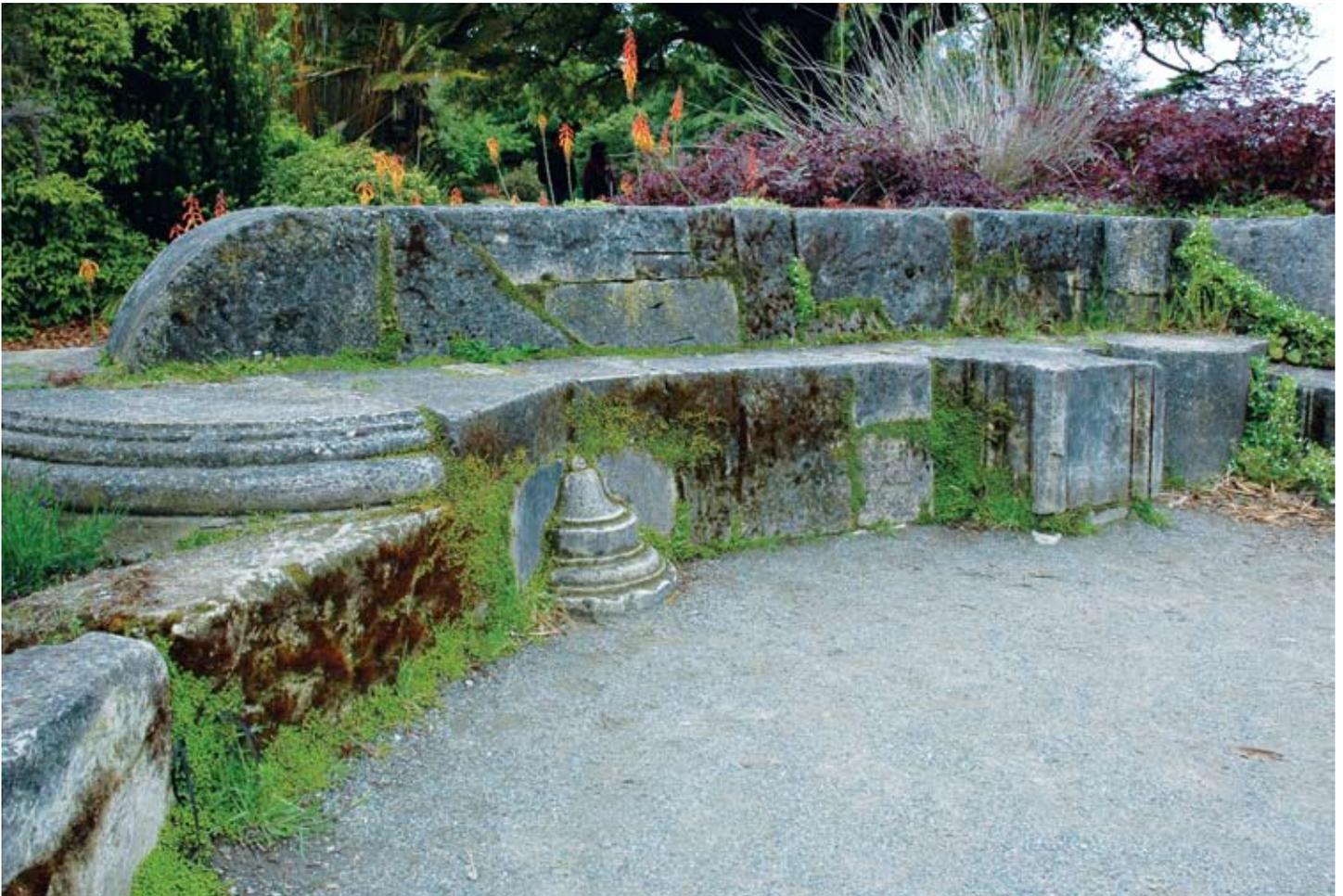
I had known about these stones for a number of years: Originally, they came from the ruins of Santa Maria de Ovila, a Cistercian monastery in Spain that had been acquired by wealthy media titan William Randolph Hearst and were transported by ship to California to be used in the construction of a immense and extravagant (\$50,000,000—in the 1930s!) medieval castle near Mt. Shasta. When the project was abandoned due to financial constraints, the stones became a financial burden to him and he ceded them to the city to be used for a Museum of Medieval Art that never proceeded past the planning stage. For years after, the stones languished in Golden Gate Park, suffering neglect and disrespect, a succession of fires and the depredations of various scavengers—landscapers, gardeners, builders, sculptors, from which their blanket of blackberry brambles failed to protect them.

As any responsible stonemason would, I yearned to use them in a creative and respectful way, to give them a new life.

Now, with the commission in hand, I could implement my plan, which was to juxtapose a contemporary granite fountain against a freestanding dry stack wall built using the ancient stones—a wall that would be as much of a sculptural element as the fountain itself. I felt it was important to give a nod to the architectural provenance of the stones by exposing the beautiful carving and thus raise awareness of their history. All stone walls tell stories but these stones had a particularly interesting tale to tell.

In 2001, I finally got my hands on them. What a joy it was to assemble these stones, a present-day California mason handling material worked by ancient Spanish masons. Carving a molding into a block to match a molding carved 800 years ago was a highlight of my career.

At the entry to the Library Terrace Garden I incorporated a lattice-like element in the wall that is a “deconstructed vault” composed of a springer, voussoir, and keystone—tribute to its architectural heritage. A seating area was made of some of the choice carved work; many old masons’ marks and incised layout lines are exposed in the stone; it gives a really interesting insight into the story of the work.



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## PART II

### ACTS OF CREATIVE REDEMPTION by Edwin Hamilton

#### *Act II:* The RHODODENDRON PAVILION

Years later, in 2007 I was asked by what is now called The San Francisco Botanical Society at Strybing Arboretum to design and build the Rhododendron Pavilion, the centerpiece of their newly renovated Rhododendron Garden—again using the monastery stones!

I welcomed this unforeseen second opportunity to work with this material, the residue not only from fire damage, the effects of weathering, use in various municipal walling projects and scavenging, but from the the removal of 19 truck/trailer loads of stone selected for use at the New Clairvaux monastery being built in La Vina up near Chico—after 80+ years the 'prodigal' stones had returned home, or at least to the Cistercian domain. I appreciated this felicitous turn of fate and followed the work there with interest.

While the stonework in the Golden Gate Park Library Terrace Garden gives hints of what once existed in medieval Spain, I saw this new project as an opportunity to further, and more directly, address this heritage here in San Francisco. While the stonework in the Library Terrace Garden gives hints of what once existed in medieval Spain, I saw this new project as an opportunity to further, and more directly, address this heritage here in in San Francisco,

My conception for the Rhododendron Pavilion was to create a garden folly—there is a strong element of folly in the story of these stones—with the entirety of the design influenced by the original architectural use of the stone. Among them I discovered a *clef de voûte*—a keystone that had been the meeting place for multiple arches. I envisioned placing this at a central point on the ground plane to which everything built there would relate—the circular benches, the walls and the column bases, the paving elements.

The central area would be partially covered by a trellis made of curving steel I-beams supported by vertical posts and meeting at a steel compression ring above the *clef de voûte* at the center of the paving. These I-beams replicate the arches that once emanated from the *clef de voûte*. The posts would be encased in Greenscreen, a wire mesh product that accommodates the growth of plant material and fleshes out the proportions of the structure. (It helps to be married to a landscape architect—my wife, Tammara, came up with that idea.)

I decided the walls should be mortared and plumb—as they were originally—except for a slightly angled back-rest on the bench wall. As for the paving, I imagined bands of limestone radiating from the *clef de voûte* that would mimic the arching ribs that once converged on it—and between these bands, granite gravel.

With these basic ideas we began to build. From the previous project I had a pretty good idea of the inventory of available stones but found it impossible to draw up definite plans for what to build with them—this was improvised on a daily basis. I matched up column segments and had enough to place at the two entries to the pavilion, bracketing the bench. The placing of a beautiful semicircular column base at the center of the seat wall was inspired by the plan view of these columns.



# THE STORIED STONES OF SANTA MARIA DE OVILA PART III

THE LINEAMENTS OF GRATIFIED DESIRE

by Pierre de Montaulieu

Desire entered the heart of the young Cistercian monk. Twenty one-year-old Brother Thomas X. Davis arrived in San Francisco in 1955. He had been sent from the Cistercian Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky to serve in the order's new monastery, established only months before in northern California: the Abbey of Our Lady of New Clairvaux. During a brief sight-seeing tour of San Francisco before departing to the monastery in the Sacramento River Valley, he was taken to Golden Gate Park and there shown the Ovila stones, a small mountain of crates in the underbrush shadowed by eucalyptus trees—a fragmented Cistercian creature. Brother Thomas, informed about their history, was inspired to revive those Cistercian stones, to integrate them in the fabric of the new monastery.

*"I resolved during the drive north to New Clairvaux to bring the stones home someday, where they would be loved and cared for on Cistercian soil. After all, Ecclesiastes tells of 'a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together.'"*

For 40 years he patiently petitioned and doubtlessly prayed for the 'return' of the stones to Cistercian soil. Meanwhile, they suffered neglect, misuse, theft, vandalism, several destructive fires and, finally, an oddly fortuitous earthquake.

## ***Ground breaking for-the grandiose castle***

that Hearst planned to build near Mt. Shasta was scheduled to begin in July 1931—but before then, even before the last of the flotilla of eleven German freighters bearing the Ovila stones arrived in San Francisco, the project was halted. His wealth had been diminished by the Great Depression and the \$50,000,000 project was no longer feasible. The stones, encased in thousands of crates, were placed in the largest warehouse in the Port of San Francisco. They had entered a state of limbo which would last for decades.

Ten years later Hearst was persuaded to donate the stones to the city in exchange for waiving his very considerable storage fees (\$15,000 each year). He did so with the stipulation that they would be used for a Museum of Medieval Art associated with the de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park.

Hearst's architect, Julia Morgan, designated sites and developed plans for several arrangements of buildings, one of which was selected by city officials, but the project was forestalled by the war. In 1946 Morgan was again commissioned to prepare plans for the museum—a west coast version of the Cloisters in New York City was envisioned but funds for it never materialized.

Then a series of disastrous fires occurred. Many of the superheated stones cracked or spalled when they were rapidly quenched by the firemen's hoses. What was left was a vast heap of stones, their identifying markings obliterated, which would be exploited by landscapers, municipal, private and amateur, by artists, by mystics. . .

## ***Spiritual re-purposing. . .***

Ovila stones were used to configure a Druid sanctum in a grove of oak trees in the park. Ovila stones were also arrayed around a notable holy icon, but not a Christian one: City workers dumped a four and a half foot tall, bullet-shaped granite traffic bollard onto the

'bone yard' in the Park for safe-keeping, where it was discovered by Michael Bowen, aka Baba Kali Das, a disciple of the Goddess Kali. He and his fellow devotees, through the power of faith and acts of devotion, transformed it into a *Shiva Lingam*, an object of veneration, and using Ovila stones constructed an open-air Shakti Temple around it. Devotees, Hindu and hippy, came from around the world to attend Vedic ceremonies there.

The Golden Gate Park Shakti Temple became a *cause célèbre* when the city sued to repossess the land. In court it was determined that the Shakti Temple and the Druid sanctum had been consecrated by religious practice and were therefore legally inviolable.

The city finessed the *Lingam* issue by agreeing to transport the icon to the the Baba's garage which he had transformed into a temple. The Druid sanctum is still there in the park.

