

Sovereignty and Territory: the Construction of Monastic Domains in the Medieval Diocese of Soissons as a Case Study

Sheila Bonde, Clark Maines

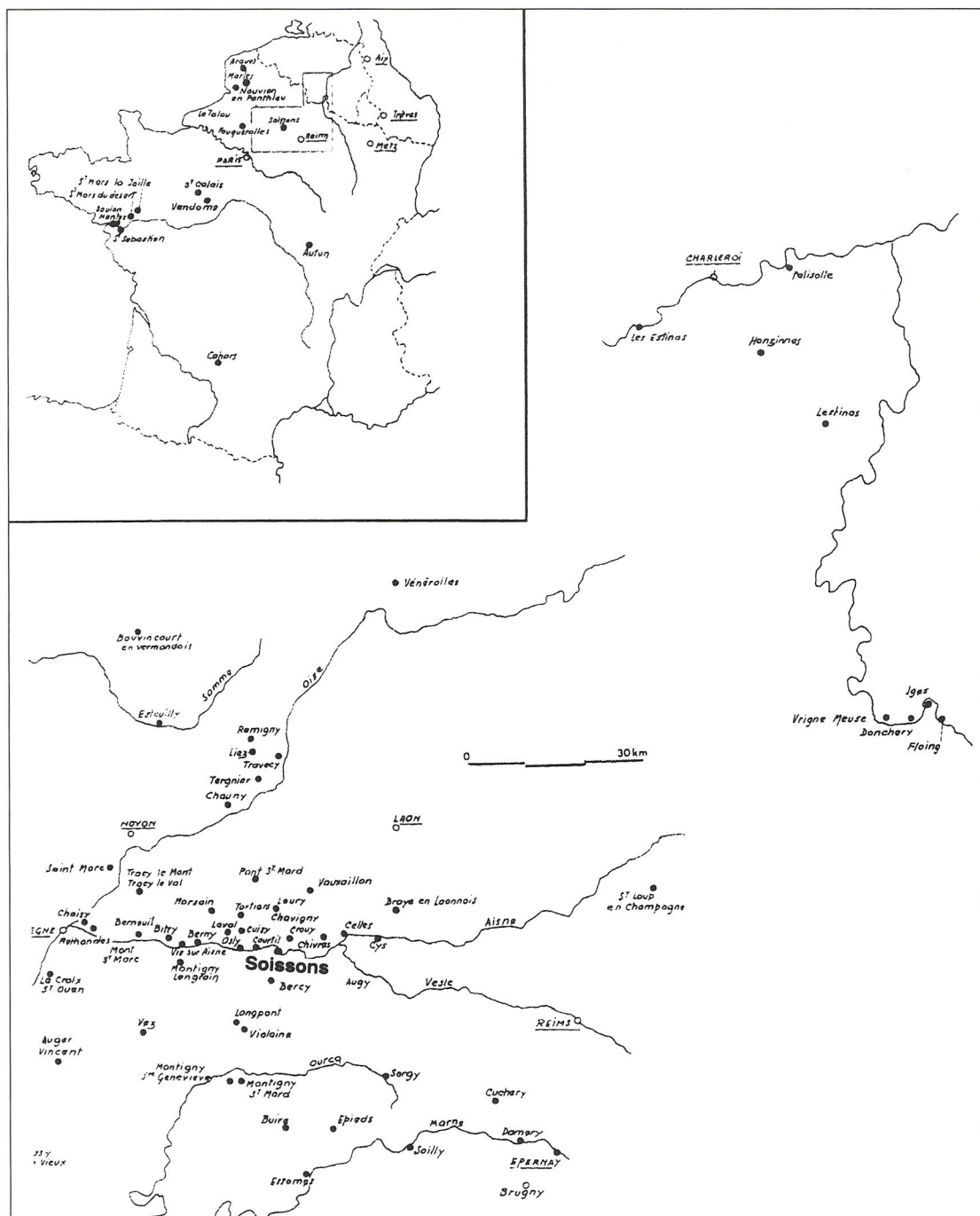
Domain; monastery; settlement; reform; territory

The geography of a monastic domain is shaped in ways similar to the choice of a monastic site itself. For example, the spiritual ambitions of the Augustinians often led them to form an active liaison with the secular world. Their domains, like their urban monastic sites, tended to include well-populated parishes. The urge toward isolation encouraged Cistercians to seek monastic sites and domains consisting primarily of rural farmland and forests. The cumulative and interlocking construction of these monastic domains represented discontinuities in the settlement histories of their regions, and often exercised a lasting influence on the shape of the settled landscape.

This paper will trace the histories of monastic implantation and domain development in the diocese of Soissons, with particular attention to the period of great monastic reform from c. 1050 to 1200. We will examine the impact on the landscape of the placement of monasteries in urban and rural settings, and the effect of their acquisition and trade of various properties. Nearly twenty years ago, Dietrich Lohrmann observed that what is essential "... consists no longer of drawing domainal maps for each abbey only, but to superimpose those maps with the goal of obtaining new data on the shape of the regions" (Lohrmann 1983, 243). We would go further. Comprehensive domain maps pre-sent a monastery's properties in static form. Phased maps, on the other hand, present the construction, expansion and contraction of a monastery's domain over time. Such phased maps must first be created, and then must be combined with phased maps for all houses within a given region. This phased understanding of the interlocking establish-

ments and domains of all abbeys is far from accomplished for any region. Nonetheless, in this paper, we establish the larger monastic context for two houses in Soissons (Saint-Jean-des-Vignes and Saint-Léger), and point the way toward the larger goal. In so doing, we seek to establish the value of a method that combines the evidence of archaeology, archival research and cartography with the approaches of spatial analysis and social anthropology.

Traditionally, monastic domains have been studied geographically, with the monastery itself considered to be the centre of its domain. In this model, as the house prospers, the circle of influence increases. When a monastery encounters difficulties, the domain contracts and distant properties may be contested and lost. According to this model, the influence of a monastery on its region, and the control of its domain, is greater near the centre, where the monastery itself is located. Often valid for monastic foundations of the early Middle Ages, the principles of centre and periphery are much less useful for many foundations of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. These more recent establishments were created in a landscape that was in part already ordered and controlled by older, powerful monasteries. Consequently, the domains of these newer houses often could not correspond to a simple concentric model. For these later foundations, any model of a monastery and its domain must reflect the more complicated history of its region. The domain of any monastery, furthermore, should not be treated as a constant. It must rather be conceived as a variable, often increasing but sometimes diminishing and frequently modifying its shape, as a monastery



manoeuvred with other monasteries and social groups for position and power within a region – or failed to do so.

The notion of the diocese of Soissons as a stable entity must first be problematised. Precisely when the shape of the diocese of Soissons became defined is unclear, but it was probably during the Carolingian period. The limits of any medieval diocese were never defined in the modern cartographic sense. Instead they consisted of agreements about where bishops held authority over parishes, monasteries,

people and land. A diocese thus consisted of a number of places in use, separated from one another by spaces that were unused. As such, a diocese was not a broad geographic area enclosed by precise, recognised borders, but a set of negotiated spaces.

The medieval diocese of Soissons saw the foundation of seven major monasteries during the Merovingian and Carolingian periods, including the royal abbey of Saint-Médard, established outside the city of Soissons in the seventh century. These early monasteries con-

trolled enormous domains that reflected the extensive holdings of their powerful founders. Though Saint-Médard held far-flung properties throughout Francia, its regional possessions were concentrated in the Aisne River valley (fig. 1). It is notable that its domain, though not perfectly understood for the early medieval period, is arranged concentrically around the monastery.

It is also notable that not a single new monastic foundation has been identified for the period c. 875 to c. 1050. Toward the end of the eleventh century, however, the picture of foundation and domain development changes. Enterprising nobles were able to establish new villages and new churches so that large numbers of smaller churches and former ecclesiastical properties were taken under secular control. The religious reform movement which began in the eleventh century and spread rapidly throughout western Europe had numerous objectives, one of which was clearly the return to ecclesiastical control of the *eigenkirchen*, personal churches of secular lords. The number of new monastic foundations in the diocese of Soissons during the period between c. 1050 and 1200 attests to the recognition by church authorities that monasteries were the most efficient way to administer these new and re-acquired churches.

For the period from c. 1050 to c. 1100, the options available to reformers were essentially six: the traditional Benedictine order; regular canons following the Augustinian rule; the recently-established reform order of Cluny (which also followed the Benedictine rule); the newly-created reform order known as the Carthusians; and, at the end of the period, a new order for female and male religious known as Fontevrists, as well as the new order of monks and lay-brothers known as Grandmontains. In the next half-century, the options were increased by three: the important orders of Cîteaux (which followed the Benedictine rule); Prémontré (which followed the Augustinian rule combined with more austere customs based on those of Cluny and Cîteaux); and Arrouaise (a cloistered order of regular canons whose customs were also modelled on those of Cîteaux).

The diocese of Soissons offers a remarkable opportunity to study the impact of monastic reform on medieval settlement as twenty new houses were established within it between

c. 1050 and c. 1200 (fig. 2). Of the eight reform orders, the diocese could count at least one house for each of seven orders. Reformers opted to found 2 new Augustinian houses and one new Cluniac house in the first fifty years of the period. In the years between 1100 and 1150, ten new houses were established. Six of these were Praemonstratensian, a number which reflects the nearby presence of the mother house of the order at Prémontré in the diocese of Laon. Two Arrouaisian houses, a Cistercian community, and a Fontevrist one were also founded. The last fifty years witnessed the foundation of 7 more new houses. Two were Benedictine, 2 were Fontevrist, and 3 were Grandmontain. Of the 20 new houses, 16 were for male religious, and 4 were for females. Among the new male houses, 7 were urban or located in the immediate vicinity of towns, and 9 were sited in rural areas. Of the new female houses, all were located away from significant settlements.

The new monastic implantation in the period from c. 1050 to c. 1200 quadrupled the existing number of monasteries in the diocese of Soissons. These new houses effectively changed the character of the landscape even if they did not yet alter its settlement pattern dramatically. It was in the construction and operation of their monastic domains that landscape was reorganised and, over time, more fully exploited. The domains of Saint-Jean-des-Vignes and Saint-Léger, to which we now turn, provide examples of that process.

Our analyses for these two houses are based on medieval charters, with complementary information supplied from property registers and the texts of early modern local historians. Our phased distribution maps for both houses trace the development of the abbeyes' domains over the formative years of the communities' existences. These maps permit us to see the development of the domains spatially as well as chronologically. The phases chosen are not arbitrary moments (every decade, for example), but are instead based on the sources themselves, specifically on the foundation charters and then on the major *pancartes* (periodic confirmations that identify all of the abbey's holdings at a particular time). While these *pancartes* represent irregular intervals, they seem to mark major stages of consolidation in the development of the abbeyes' domains as these stages were viewed by contemporaries.

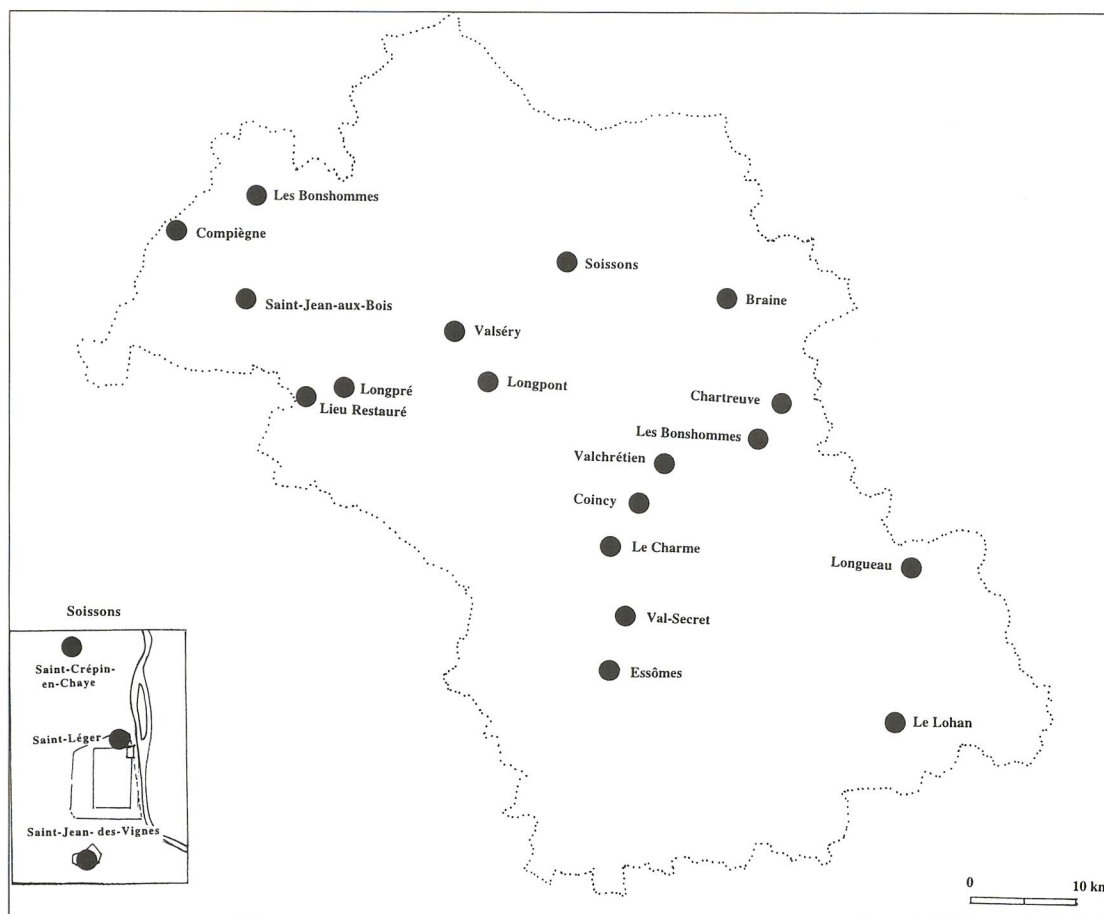


Fig. 2: New monastic foundations in the diocese of Soissons, c. 1050–c. 1200.

Saint-Jean-des-Vignes was an important eleventh-century Augustinian foundation, sited just outside the medieval walls of Soissons. The mother house of a regional order, the abbey found patrons among the major regional nobility. During the first seventy-five years of Saint-Jean's existence, the bulk of its property was acquired. In that time the abbey created an impressive regional domain which included more than 40 parishes and priories, 5 farms and 6 mills. In addition, the canons garnered other sources of support and power: revenues, lands, forests, vineyards, ovens, *hospites*, and rights of usage and justice.

The written sources for the abbey are remarkably rich, including more than 1000 charters or medieval copies dating from the time of the foundation c. 1075 to c. 1350.

The foundation charters for Saint-Jean-des-Vignes tell us that Hugues of Château-Thierry had usurped properties belonging to the bishop of Soissons. These properties, which seem to have included the parish church on the site of the future abbey, were subsequently returned to the church with the object of establishing the new abbey of Saint-Jean-des-Vignes. In

addition to the parish of Saint-Jean-du-Mont on the site of the abbey, Hugues's initial gift included two mills in Soissons, one parish near to the town, a second further to the south and four parishes and a port in the valley of the Marne River (fig. 3a). The construction of the domain over the next seventy-five years would follow this same eccentric pattern and the abbey's sphere of influence was to extend almost exclusively to the south. Thus, with the foundation gift, the shape of Saint-Jean's extensive regional presence was delineated.

The *pancartes* of 1100 and 1110 reveal a profusion of newly-acquired properties as well as new types of possessions, such as rights of usage, justice, tithes and forests. To the two poles of power, Soissons and Château-Thierry, is added a third, that of the parish *in castro* (within the castle) at la Ferté-Milon. The extension into new zones seems to have been effected rather rapidly, while the initial, eccentric distribution of holdings toward the south remained unaltered.

To some degree, this eccentric organization of the abbey's domain can be explained by the availability of lands in a region already control-

led by venerable Benedictine monasteries like Saint-Médard. It was also related to the new economy of viticulture developing in the region south of Château-Thierry, where well-drained chalky soils were discovered to be suited to growing vines.

Our map of the 1140 *pancarte* (fig. 3b) reveals that the region between the Aisne and the Marne was in process of being “filled in”. By this time, the number of parishes *in castro* had reached five. Some of these properties also lay in the neighbouring diocese of Meaux. As such, they represent an expansion of Saint-Jean’s power and prestige into a new ecclesiastical region. The link which took Saint-Jean outside its own diocese was not ecclesiastical but secular: the family of donors who also held the castle at Montmirail.

The major regional nobility, in fact, were important contributors to the foundation and to the early, exceptionally rapid growth of Saint-Jean-des-Vignes. We can also be sure that they supported the abbey with the encouragement and example of their lords, the counts of Champagne. Further, all of these families seem to have come recently into possession of their status – and their new vineyards – so that we can trace none of them back much beyond the middle years of the eleventh century. They were, in other words, *nouveaux arrivés* who appeared on the regional scene at virtually the same time as the canons of Saint-Jean-des-Vignes. Although we can never know for certain, it may have been this very simultaneity which attracted these regional lords and their vassals to the new abbey. Their continued patronage over the seventy-five year period under study here suggests that they enjoyed a special, long-lived relationship with Saint-Jean-des-Vignes.

While possession of parishes *in castro* attests to the activity of the nobility in the construction of the domain of Saint-Jean-des-Vignes, aristocratic support was not limited to the secular nobility. During the first fifty years of Saint-Jean’s existence, the abbey also benefited from the support of the bishops of Soissons.

The absence of account books, *censiers*, or other contemporary administrative documents for Saint-Jean makes it impossible to have a clear picture of the mechanisms by which the widely distributed array of properties, privileges and possessions belonging to the abbey was administered. It is therefore necessary to turn

to other approaches, in this case spatial analysis, in order to suggest ways in which the regular canons may have organised and controlled their distant properties. It seems reasonable to suppose that the parishes *in castro* belonging to Saint-Jean-des-Vignes served as secondary centres for the administration of properties and possessions within their immediate area. That is, we propose that elements of the abbatial domain were organised and controlled by the clerical communities located within the various châteaux and supported by the lords of the various castles. The castle-parish hypothesis and the zones of influence of each castle can be plotted on a map as a set of points and modified Thiessen polygons (fig. 3b). In an ideal landscape, the secondary centres, represented by the castle parishes, would be evenly distributed and the polygons of territory controlled by them shown by regular hexagons. Siting of the castles was in reality determined by landscape features such as defensible promontories and by communication links such as roads and rivers, with a result that their distribution was uneven, but typically about 25 km apart. Our polygons of territory are thus “modified” to reflect this, their sides being created by orthogonals bisecting straight lines drawn between each of the castles. Lines connecting the castles (secondary centres) and the other sites within each territory reflect site interaction at the local, or territorial level. Lines connecting the castles with the abbey (the central place) reflect site interaction at the larger, regional level. While abstract in form, this cartographic conception of the function of the parishes *in castro* is the consequence of the combination of geographical and historical givens. The châteaux are all spaced approximately 25 km apart, and they all formed part of a single network linked to the counts of Champagne. Where the charters allow us to see it, the properties and possessions surrounding a castral parish belonged to the domain of the lord of that castle, or to one of his vassals.

Spatial analysis of the sort we have attempted to apply here has traditionally been the domain of the prehistorian, who, working in the absence of texts, faces two key questions. Namely, are the sites under consideration all contemporaneous? And, do the known sites constitute a representative sample? Where the prehistorian may establish contemporaneity

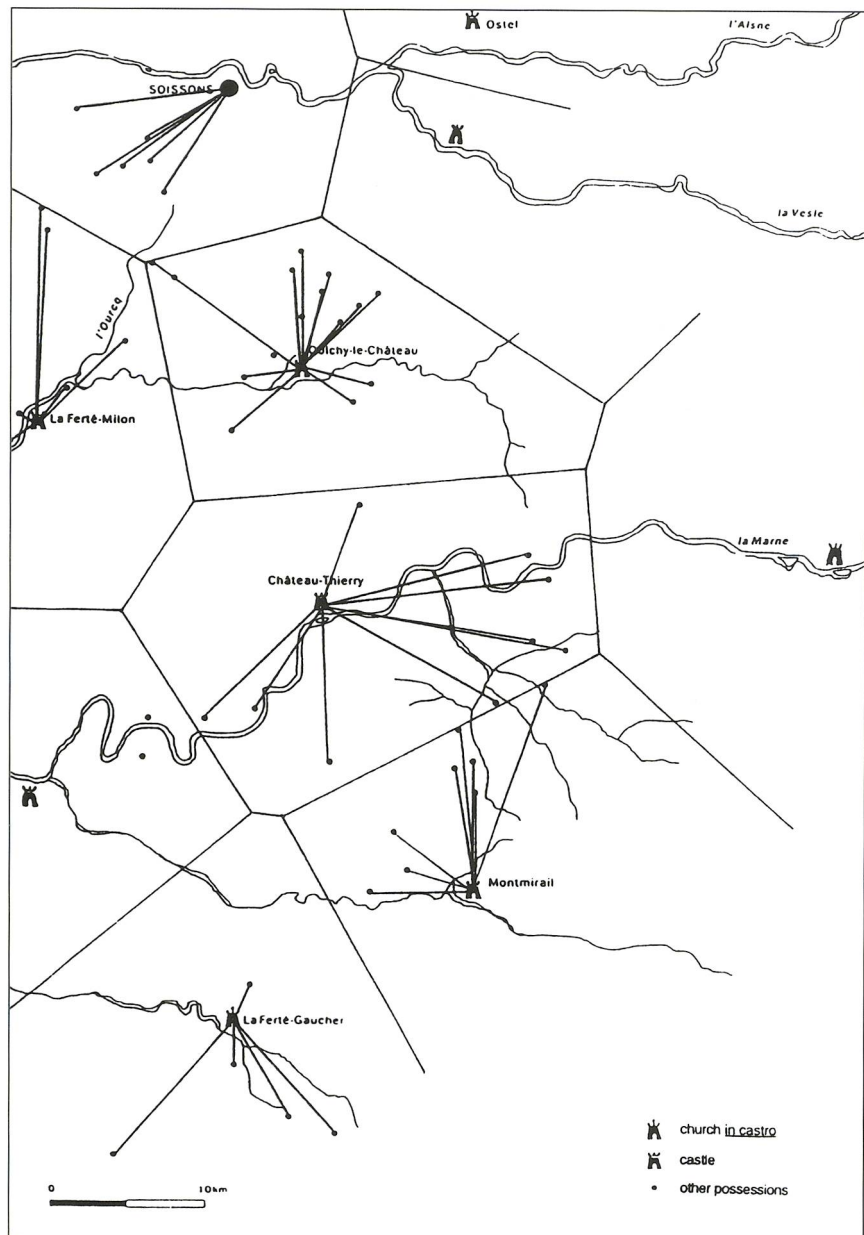


Fig. 3a: Domain of Saint-Jean-des Vignes at its foundation, c. 1076.

based on the analysis of material culture from any two sites, the monastic archaeologist usually has no effective formal criteria to distinguish between two contemporaneous sites forming part of the domain of two different monasteries. On the other hand, textual evidence permits the monastic archaeologist to be certain that the sites in question are contemporaneous and that the sample is not only representative but complete. These circumstances have two important implications. First, confirmation of the spatial analysis provided by the texts from Saint-Jean serves as a general affirmation of the potential of spatial analysis

for the understanding of social and economic systems in prehistoric and early medieval societies for which no texts ever existed. Second, Saint-Jean-des-Vignes suggests, as a case study, that spatial analysis can be useful in understanding a monastery's domain in cases where the domain can be established from later sources but for which contemporary sources do not survive.

To summarise, the spatial and chronological distribution of the properties and possessions belonging to Saint-Jean-des-Vignes reveals the organising structure of the abbey's domain. Unlike the earlier, concentrically-arranged do-

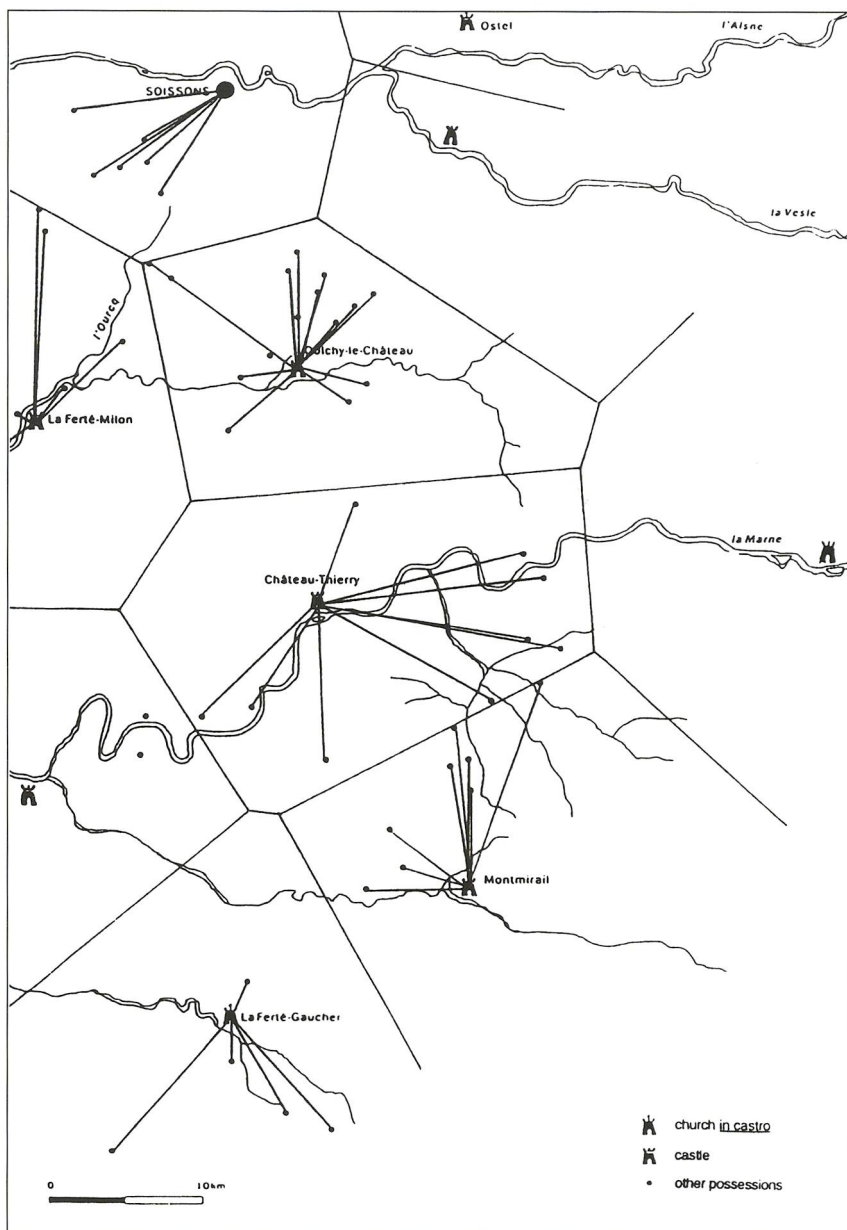


Fig. 3b: Domain of Saint-Jean-des Vignes, c. 1140, showing administrative zones.

main of Saint-Médard, the domain for Saint-Jean was eccentrically distributed. Instead of one centre (the abbey itself) and one periphery (the domain), the phased distribution maps distinguish a group of subcentres (the churches *in castris*) and a corresponding set of sub-peripheries. This distribution pattern also reveals the respective and interlocking rôles of both the ecclesiastical and secular nobility, not only in the formation of the abbey's domain, but also in the control of that domain over time.

Like the Augustinian abbey of Saint-Jean-des-Vignes, the Arrouaisian house of Saint-Léger

was situated at the edges of the episcopal city; but, unlike Saint-Jean, it practised an enclosed, contemplative form of monasticism. Saint-Léger was not a major foundation, but was linked to the count, and was physically proximate to the comital castle which stood adjacent to the abbey within the corner of the castrum.

During the first thirty-five years of Saint-Léger's existence, the greater part of its domain was acquired (figs. 4a and b). During this period, the abbey created a modest, sub-regional domain which included five parishes, two farms and a mill. In addition, the commu-

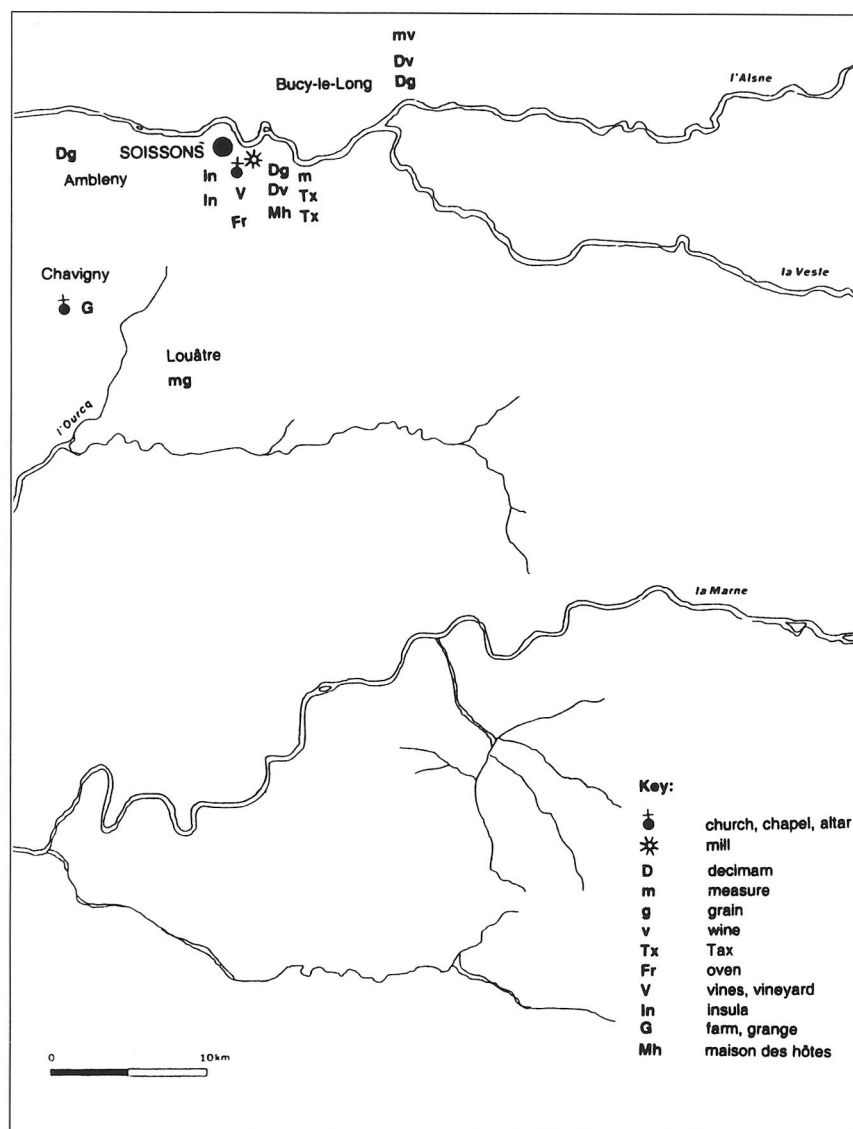


Fig. 4a: Domain of Saint-Léger at its foundation, c. 1139.

nity acquired vineyards, houses in Soissons, ovens and numerous donations in cash and kind.

The written sources for Saint-Léger are limited, being principally the abbey cartulary. Our phased distribution maps trace the development of the abbey's domain over the first thirty-five years of the community's existence, using the foundation charter of c. 1139, and the *pancartes* of c. 1143, c. 1153 and c. 1170. Bishop Jocelyn's foundation charter tells us that the count(s) of Soissons had long held the church of Saint-Léger from the bishop's benefices. For the welfare of his own soul as well as those of his parents, Count Renard returned Saint-Léger (then a church of secular canons) to the bishop, who in turn gave it to the abbot

and a community of regular canons. Along with the church, the count also gave a mill near his castle, houses in and around Soissons, and an oven in the town as well as gifts of money and goods. The community evidently also retained an altar and farm in the hamlet of Chavigny, properties already held by the secular canons of Saint-Léger prior to the foundation of the abbey. The elaboration of Saint-Léger's domain over the next thirty-five years would follow much the same pattern, as the abbey's modest sphere of influence remained centred in Soissons and the immediate environs. As might be expected for a community of cloistered canons, the initial gifts of property were all in the city of Soissons, with the single exception of the farm and chapel at Chavigny.

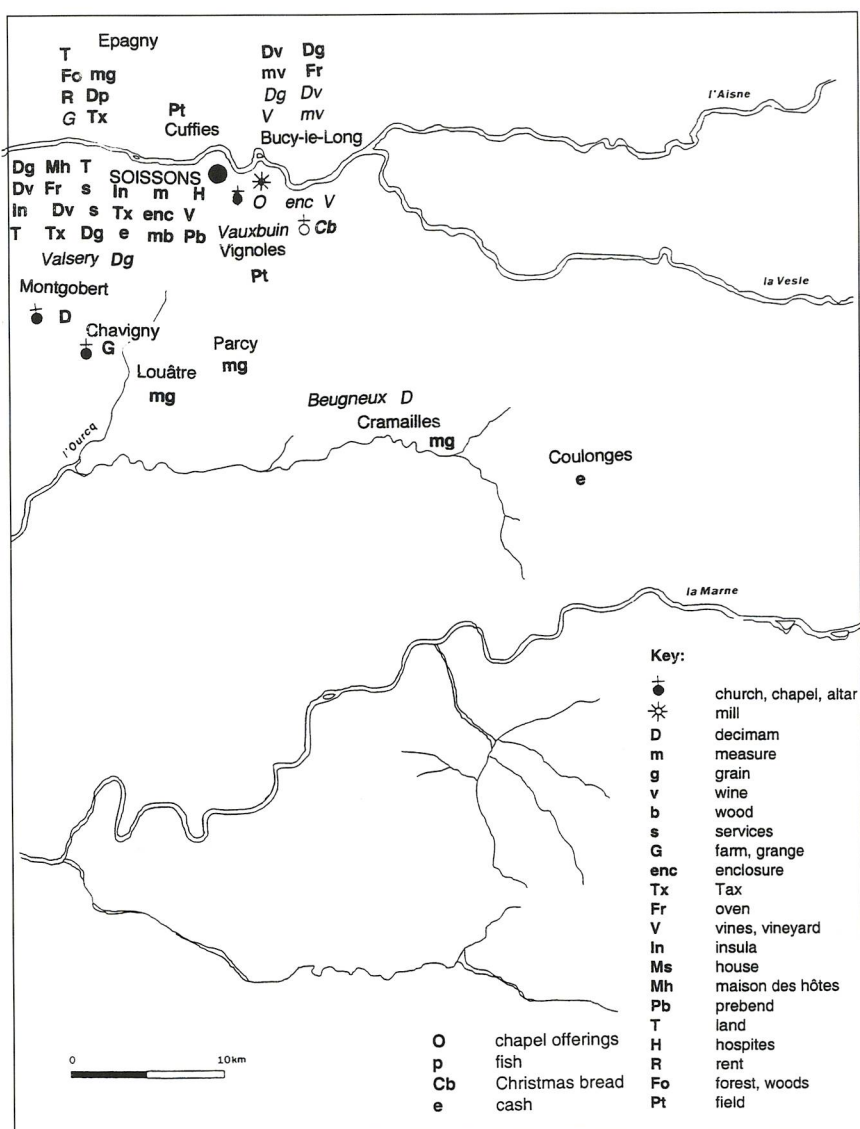


Fig. 4b: Domain of Saint-Léger, c. 1170 (symbols in outline and letters in *italic* signify possessions added with this pancarte).

The *pancartes* for 1143, 1153 and 1170 added 26 new gifts to the abbey's domain, bringing the number of properties and possessions held by the abbey in 1170 to 48. Of these, 23 were gifts of property or altars, and 25 were gifts of money or goods and services. Seventeen of the abbey's gifts of property were located in Soissons and its immediate environs (defined as a morning's walk from the abbey). Only one in three lay farther out, and two of these 6 were the abbey's farms (of necessity outside the town). Of the 25 gifts of money or goods and services, 17 came from sites in Soissons or its immediate neighbourhood, 8 from sites more distant. Of the 20 locations outside Soissons where Saint-Léger received gifts, 9 lay at a distance of 20 km or less; all but 3 lay less

than 40 km from the abbey. Saint-Léger's core domain was thus arranged concentrically around the city, with a second group of possessions concentrated along a semi-circle at a distance of 30–35 km. Only 4 lay farther out, and these all consisted of gifts of cash or kind.

Several observations and inferences can be drawn from this spatial arrangement of the domain of a community of cloistered canons. First, nearly three-quarters of the properties and possessions could be administered from the abbey itself. Of the 6 outlying properties, 2 were the abbey's farms and would have needed on-site administrators. (One is known from the charters.) Two others were land which might, of course, be rented out to produce revenue, and one was an *altare* in a farm-

ing hamlet. Second, the modest nature of the domain is reflected in the donors and the witnesses who, apart from the counts and bishops of Soissons, come from among the minor nobility and bourgeoisie of the town and region. Missing from the charters is any support from the major castellans of the area who, as we have seen for Saint-Jean-des-Vignes, devoted themselves to more important foundations. Primarily distributed in and around the city of Soissons, Saint-Léger's domain would have been easily supervised by the officers of its cloistered community.

Comparative study of the domains of Saint-Jean-des-Vignes and Saint-Léger marks only a first step in our assessment of the impact of monasteries on medieval settlement in the diocese of Soissons. The scale and distribution of

the two abbeys' properties and possessions reflect both the different nature of these two monastic communities and their different strategies for administering their domains. Study of the charters for the two houses also makes clear the symbiotic relationship between the secular and ecclesiastical élites in their effort to control both the land and the people who worked it. The re-organisation of the landscape begun in the late eleventh century and carried forward during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries established a pattern which lasted largely intact until the French Revolution. That pattern, together with its inevitable alliance with the French monarchy, eventually made the Church the enemy of the people whose souls monks and canons had long sought to save.

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Address

Sheila Bonde
Department of History of Art and Architecture
Brown University
Providence
RI 02912 USA
Sheila_Bonde@brown.edu

Clark Maines
Department of Art and Art History
Wesleyan University
Middletown
CT 06457 USA
cmaines@wesleyan.edu