

# Guide-book

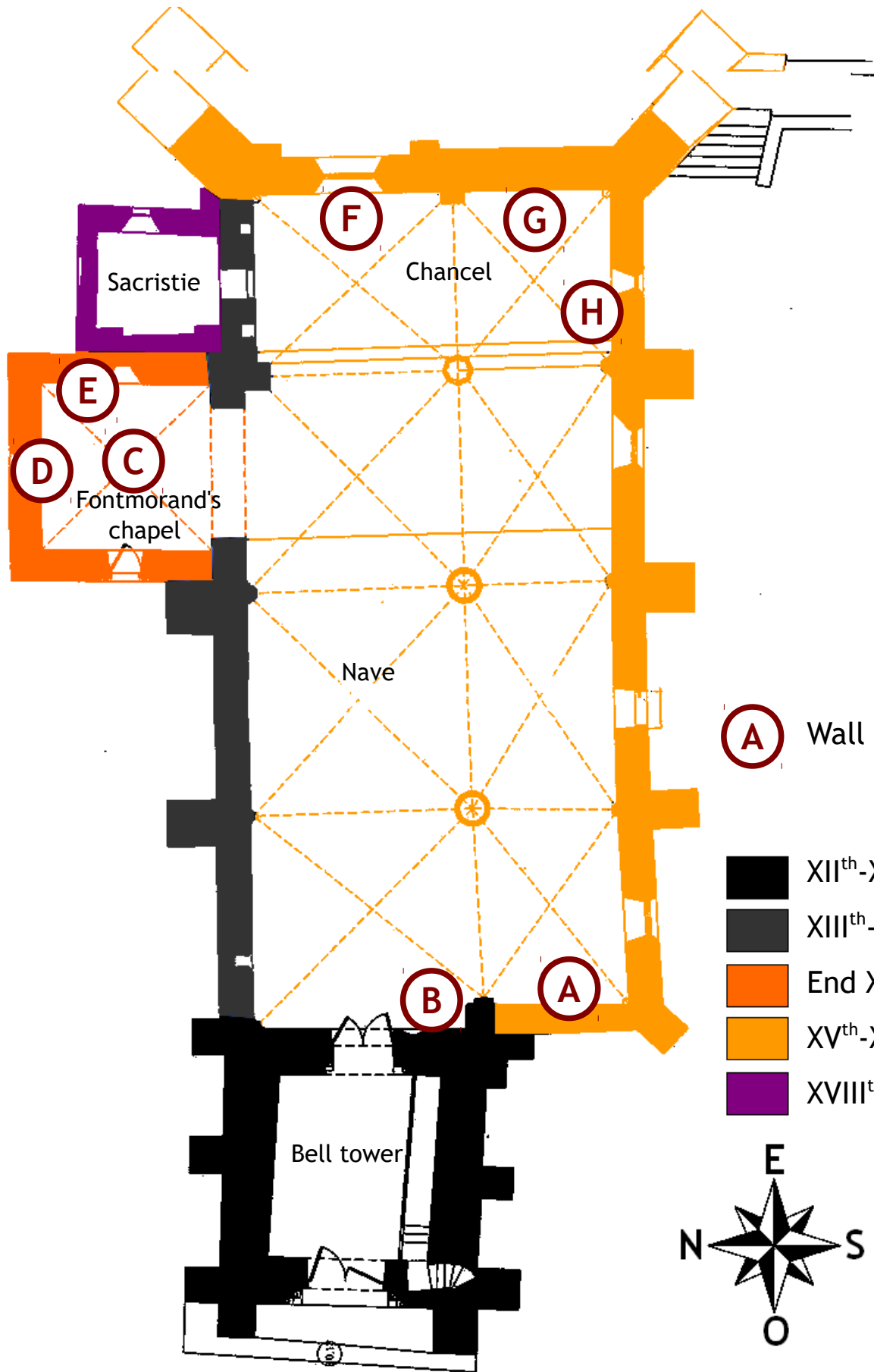
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Saint Martin's church, PRISSAC

*Commentary on the*  
**Mural's**

# Plan



Eglise Saint Martin, PRISSAC

## Origins

The church at Prissac belonged to the Benedictine abbey of Saint Savin (Vienne). It is dedicated to St. Martin, Bishop of Tours, who converted the centre and the west of Gaul in the 4th century.

## The bell tower

This is the oldest part of the church. Constructed at the end of the 12th century, it forms the entry porch of the church. The Gothic arch of the door is supported by four small columns each surmounted by a small capital with plant motifs.

You pass then under a square porch, with a ridged arched roof. Large dark bands occupy the high parts of the walls. These are funerary litres which are painted on the death in the seigniorial family. You can also distinguish, in yellow, the vestiges of the coat of arms of the La Trimouille family who were the Lords of Fontmorand at Prissac. The roof arch is decorated with ancient paintings of plant motifs. This roof is pierced at its summit to allow the passage of the bell ropes.

Two bells date from 1913, but the third dates from 1555 and is contemporary with the rest of the building. Named 'Marie', its dedication is an invitation to calm God's anger and banish lightning and storms.

A second door, in the Roman style, allows entry to the nave. Probably earlier than the main door, it has been cleared of the crude plaster decoration which covered it.

Some reddened stones are a reminder that the building was the subject of a fire. This door has lost its small columns.

## The nave

Originally, the building comprised only one nave, narrower and fully vaulted. The left wall is probably the oldest, as shown by the monstrous head in the corner with its bulging eyes, sharp nose and pointed ears, set almost at the top of the head. On the outside, this wall is the only one to carry several roman style modillions, which can be seen from in front of the bakery. In the nave, a copy of the painting of 'The Visitation of Saint Sebastian del Piombo' is framed by the statues of Saint Joseph and a Virgin with child.



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At the end of the 15th century, the Lords of Rochechevreux and the people of Prissac added three chapels to the right side of the nave. However, the construction of these weakened the old church and a wall collapsed. At the beginning of the 16th century, the old church and the chapels were brought together under one roof giving the impression of two naves side by side. They are composed of four square bays separated from one another by three columns. The one nearest the chancel is grooved while the others are simple stone cylinders creating a gothic flamboyant style.

Two families exercised their influence on the building. As it is, the principal nave is surrounded with a funerary litre showing the arms of the Lords of Fontmorand while the secondary nave on the right has the arms of Couraud de Rochechevreux.

## *The vault paintings*

The paintings which decorate the vaults are probably from the end of the 19th century, but are practically identical restorations of the original 14th century paintings underneath.

Different plants are arranged into bouquets. One can recognize wild flowers and leaves of ivy, strawberry, oak and grasses. The colours are soft; yellow ochre, brown ochre, white, black and blue etc. For each nave, a roof decorated with plants alternates with a roof decorated with imitation dressed stone.

## *The seigniorial chapel*

The chapel is situated at the northern end and is entered through a multi-coloured arch. It dates from the 15th century and belonged to the Fontmorands, Lords of Tremouille. It is decorated with numerous paintings from the end of the 15th century (see further in the commentary on the paintings).

## *The chancel*

The back of the chancel (called the chevet) is flat, as in many churches in the region. The mullioned window which illuminates it, is in the flamboyant style. A very realistic Christ on the cross from the 17th century occupies the north wall.

The main altar is decorated with a bas-relief representing 'the four evangelists surrounding Christ' which are recognisable by the symbol at the foot of each. To the left are St. Mark and St. Matthew. To the right are the beardless figures of St. John and St. Luke.



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The stained glass window over the main altar represents St. Martin and St. Radegonde.

The paintings decorating the wall were damaged at the time the opening was made for this large window. One can, nevertheless, distinguish the vestiges of the apostles, situated all around the chancel (only four can still be made out). Each one of them has his right hand placed on a consecration cross (a cross inscribed in a circle); a representation very rare in France.

The second altar known as the 'Altar of the Holy Sacrament', is decorated with a scene evoking the crowning of the Virgin. Above is a niche with a Virgin and child from the 18th century which was worshipped for a long time in Prissac. She used to be carried in processions on the 15th of August.

On the same wall, the removal of a covering in 2006 revealed a new niche in stone, sculpted in the Gothic style, containing fragments of a very old polychrome.

Finally, the restorations of 2013 have exposed new paintings (see further in the commentary on the paintings).

## *Stained glass Windows of the nave.*

In the second nave, turning towards the entrance, you can see windows from the 19th century by Charles Leveque de Beauvais. These windows have been reworked over time and illuminate the north wall.

The first stained glass window represents the Adoration of the Shepherds as well as the interior of Nazareth.

The next window shows King St. Louis bringing the crown of thorns, for which he built the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris. Under the feet of each figure there appears the coat of arms of the de Lanet family who financed the stained glass. To the right of the head of the window can be seen the Chateau de la Garde-Giron, owned by this family.

The last window shows Mary at the foot of the cross and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin.

## *The west wall*

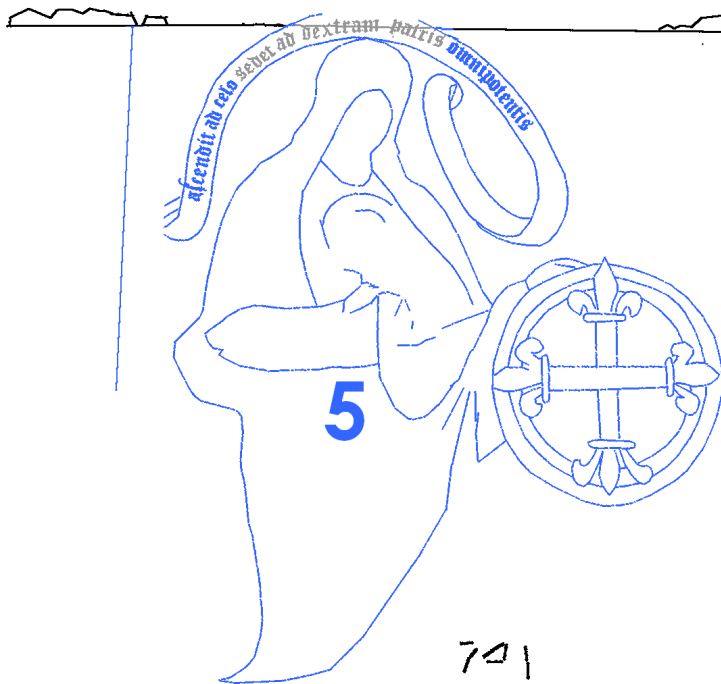
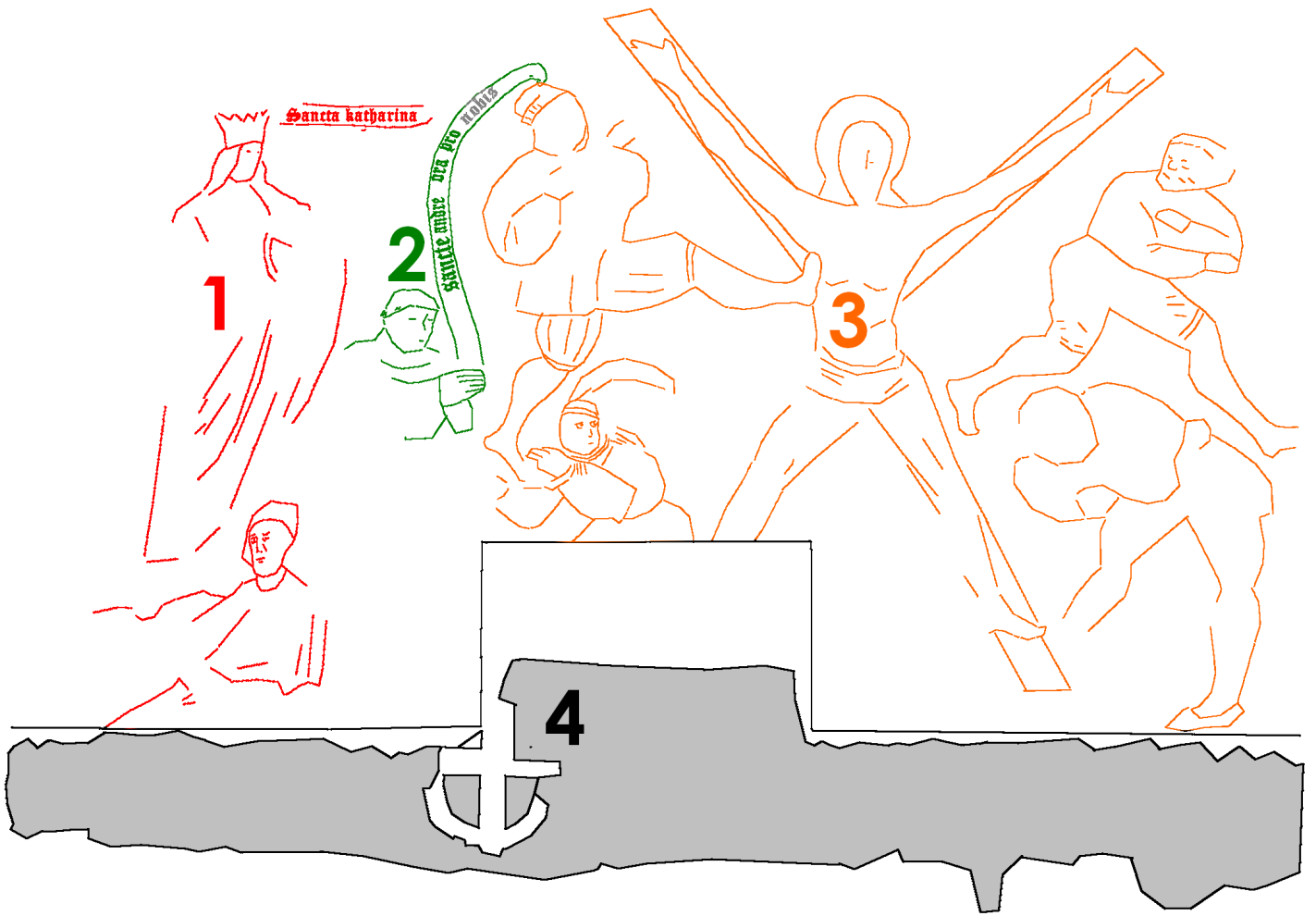
The west wall is decorated with paintings from the middle of the 16th century. However, between the pillar and the entrance, one can make out Saint Christopher holding the infant Jesus. This painting from the 14th century is the oldest in the church, and owes its preservation to the fact that it is opposite the wall of the bell tower (see later in the commentary on the paintings).



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# Paintings' sketch

A



6

## 1. Saint Catherine of Alexandria

**trampling on the Emperor Maximin at the beginning of her martyrdom.**

The phylactery\* "Sancta Katherina" confirms the identity of the person.  
Mid 16th century.

## 2. Person in prayer (perhaps the sponsor of the work).

Phylactery: "sancta andre ora pro nobis" (Saint Andrew pray for us). Mid 16th century.

## 3. The martyrdom of Saint Andrew.

Four executioners are binding the limbs of the saint to a cross in the shape of an X. The executioner above and to the left is pulling with all his strength on the bonds while pushing against the body of the martyr. The peoples' clothing (culottes, jodhpurs, ruffs ...) allows this painting to be dated as mid 16th century.

## 4. Funerary Litre (dark band) with the arms of the family Courraut de la Rochechevreux (white cross).

Difficult to date because several dark bands are superimposed upon one another. For example one of the later bands occupied a much wider space and has been systematically chipped off.

## 5. Virgin with child placing her left hand on a consecration cross.

The faces of the Virgin and the infant Jesus have been chipped off. This may have been an act of vandalism linked to the religious wars. (Siege of Bêlâbre in 1587).

Phylactery: "*ascendit ad celo sedet ad dextram patris omnipotentis*".  
Mid 16th century.

## 6. Vestiges of a consecration cross.

17th – 18th Century?

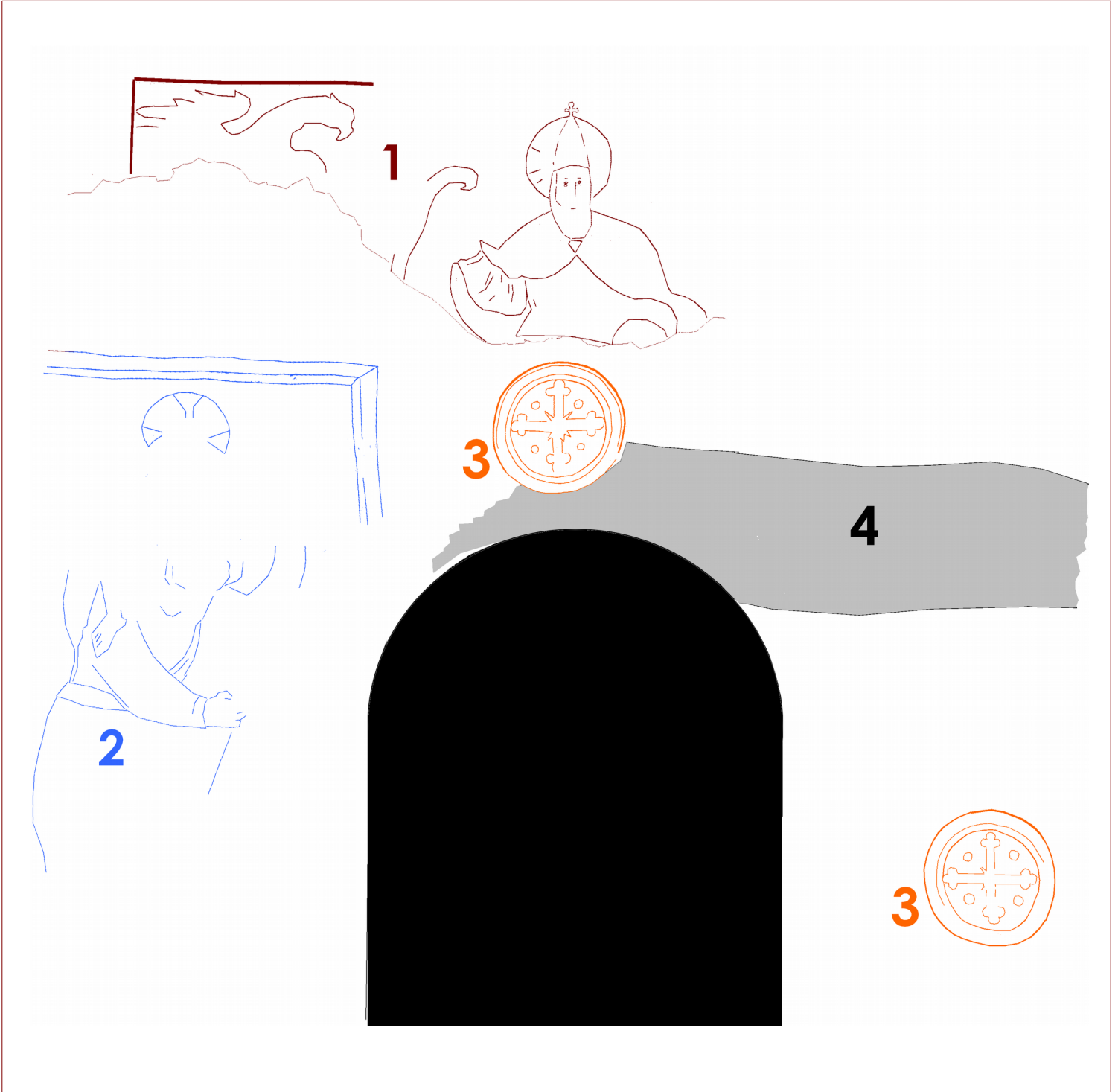
\*inscribed scroll



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# Paintings' sketch

B



## 1. God the Father enthroned and a fragment of an eagle.

The Father is represented with the papal tiara. He is blessing with his right hand and in all likelihood holding a globe (a symbol of universalism) in His left hand. He is probably surrounded by the tetramorph (the four evangelists represented in their symbolic form) of which there remains only the eagle of Saint John, situated on the left of the scene. 16th century.

## 2. Saint Christopher carrying the infant Jesus.

This much damaged painting is probably the oldest in the church and could date from the 14th century. It is painted on the wall of the steeple and constitutes one of the rare vestiges of a nave earlier than the original one. One can distinguish the halo of the infant Jesus and His foot on the arm of the saint.

## 3. Consecration cross.

Like the Saint Christopher, these crosses could date from the 14th century. Twelve crosses are affixed each time a church is consecrated (after a fire or when blood has been spilt in the building for example).

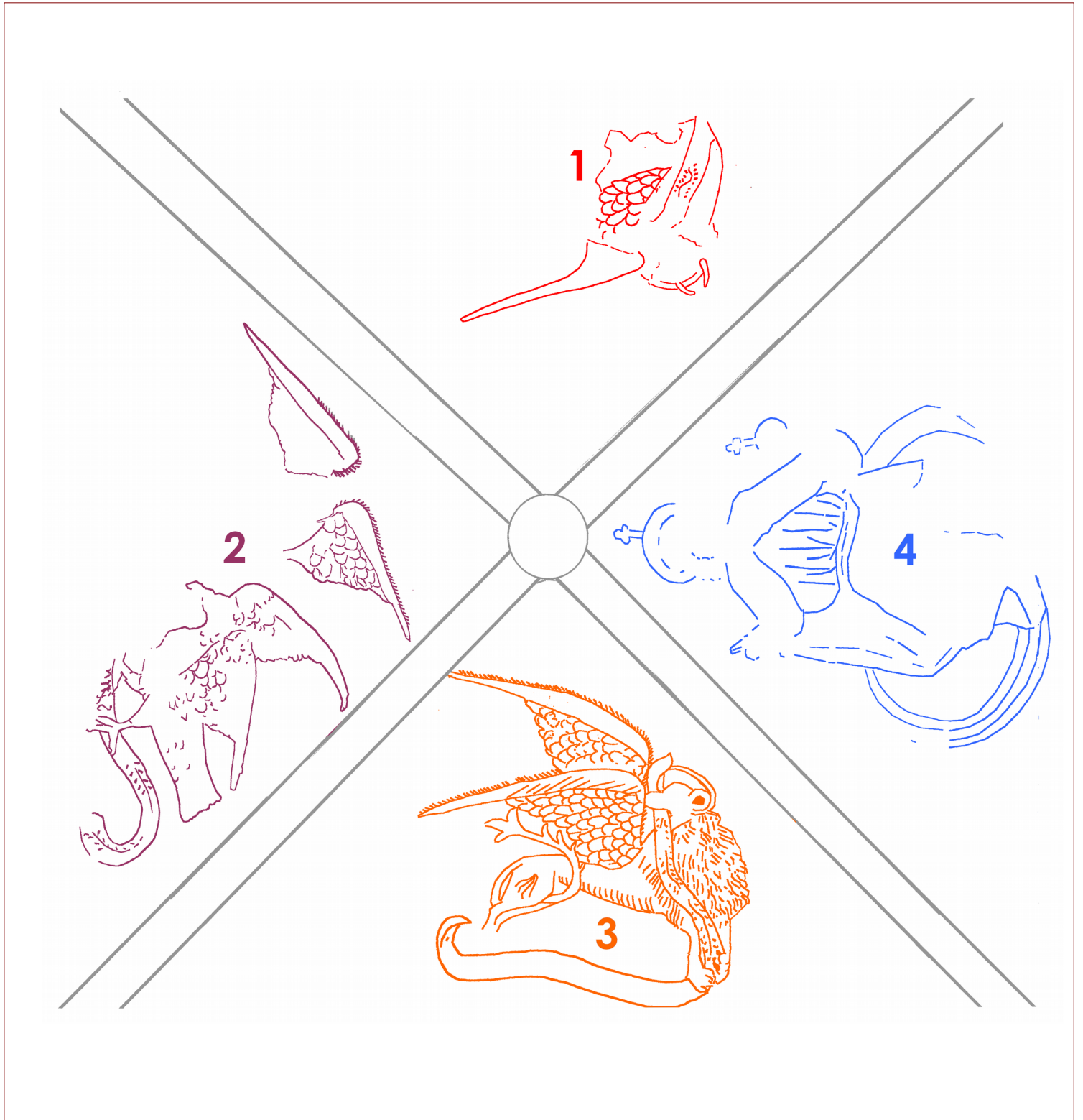
## 4. Funerary Litre

These dark bands are repainted in the church on the occasion of the death of the lord. Generally, the coat of arms of the family is applied.



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# *Paintings' sketch*



## 1. Saint Luke.

This is a figure of the tetramorph (the four evangelists represented in their symbolic form). It is possible to make out here the horns of a winged ox of which the head is encircled by a halo. The face has been chipped off, probably during the religious wars of the sixteenth century. End of 15th century.

## 2. Saint Mathew and Saint John.

Two figures of the tetramorph. Recognisable are a pair of wings which correspond to those of the angel representing Saint Mathew which has lost all of its human face.

The eagle representing Saint John is more recognisable and is holding a phylactery in its talons. End of 15th century.

## 3. Saint Mark

The best conserved scene of the tetramorph, this contains the certainly recognisable winged lion attributed to Saint Mark. The animal surmounts a phylactery which probably read "sanctus marcus".

## 5. God as Pope

This painting represents God as the Pope. Also called the 'Majesty of the Father', it is typical of the 15th century and was the object of vandalism in the 16th century during the religious wars when the protestants called into question the worship of the saints and the power of the Pope. The work of destruction was particularly strenuous because this representation of God as Pope was extremely shocking in their eyes. They therefore destroyed the face of the figure and the tiara (papal crown), the globe surmounted by a cross (a symbol of universal power) which He is holding in His left hand, as well as the right hand with which He is blessing.

End of 15th century

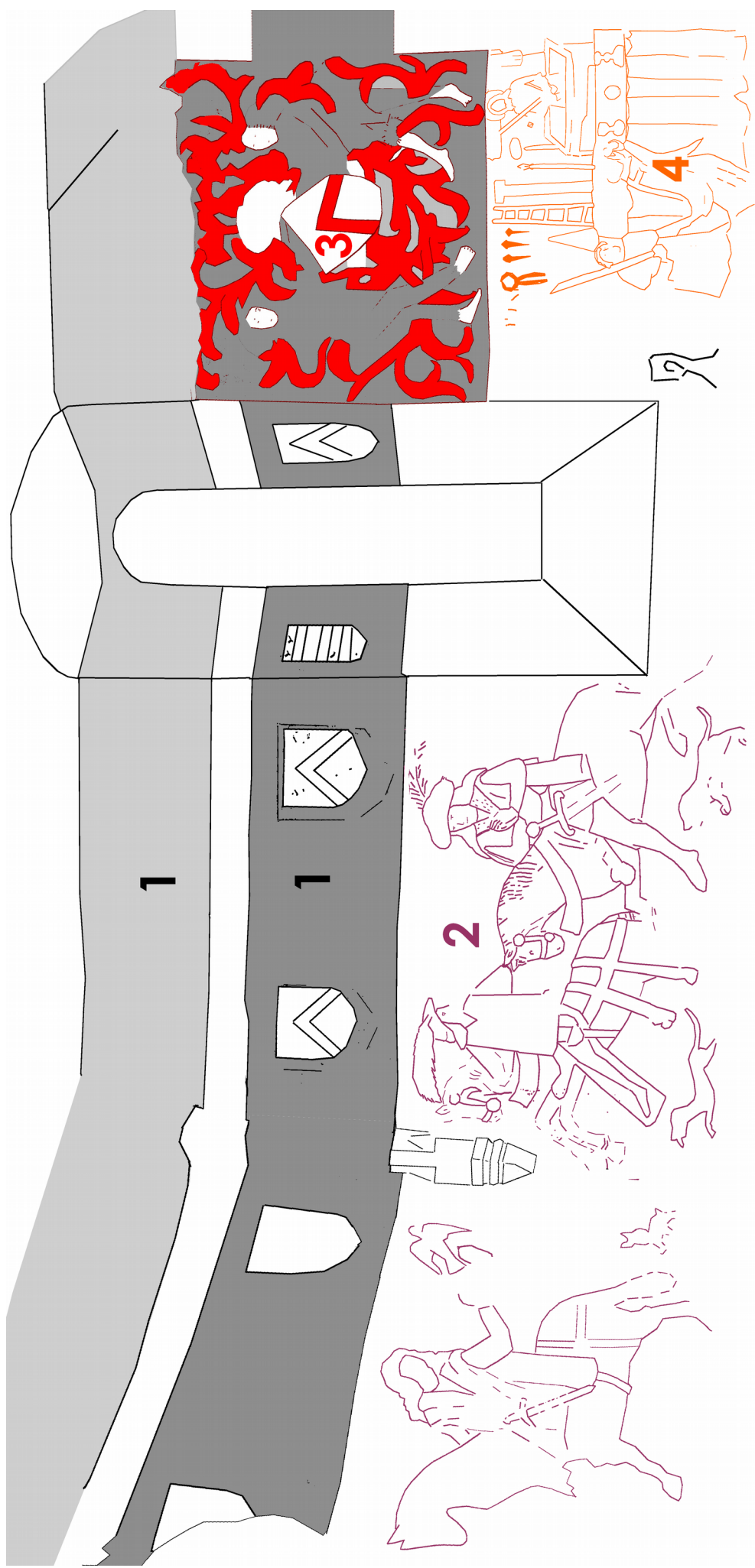


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# Paintings' sketch

D



## 1. Double Funerary Litre.

These dark bands are repainted in the church on the occasion of the death of the lord. This litre carries the coat of arms of the La Trimouille family, Lords of Fontmorand, whose funerary chapel this is. The band stretches across all of the north wall of the principal nave. End of 15th century.

## 2. The Three Living and the Three Dead.

This scene evokes “The Three Living and the Three Dead”\*. Three corpses leaving their tombs call out to three happy young hunters reminding them of the brevity of their lives. Here there are only the young hunters, but the three corpses can be found on the degraded wall to the left of the door. The first of the nobles, frightened by this sight, is turning his head to the rear and releasing a falcon which is preparing to plunge onto a rabbit. He is followed by the other two riders each of whose headdresses is decorated with a large feather. They are accompanied by two dogs who are chasing the rabbit. The third rider can be seen to be praying. End of 15th century.

## 3. Coat of arms of the La Trimouille Family.

Hidden amongst the red foliage, two indistinct figures of savages are supporting the coat of arms of the Trimouille, Lords of Fontmorand family. Their arms are « d’ or au chevron de gueules, accompagné de 3 aiglettes d’azur, becquées & membrées de gueules »\*\*. (The eaglets are no longer visible). End of 15th century.

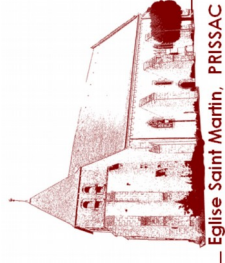
## 4. Mass of Saint Gregory

Pope Gregory the Great is praying at the foot of an altar. He is helped by a cleric carrying a candle. Behind the altar there appears Christ and the instruments of the Passion. End of 15th century.

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\* This theme is a relatively common form of ‘memento mori’ (remember you mortality) in mediaeval art.

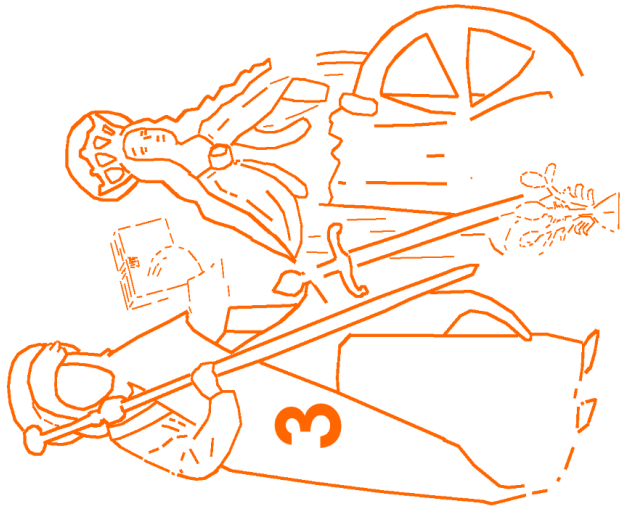
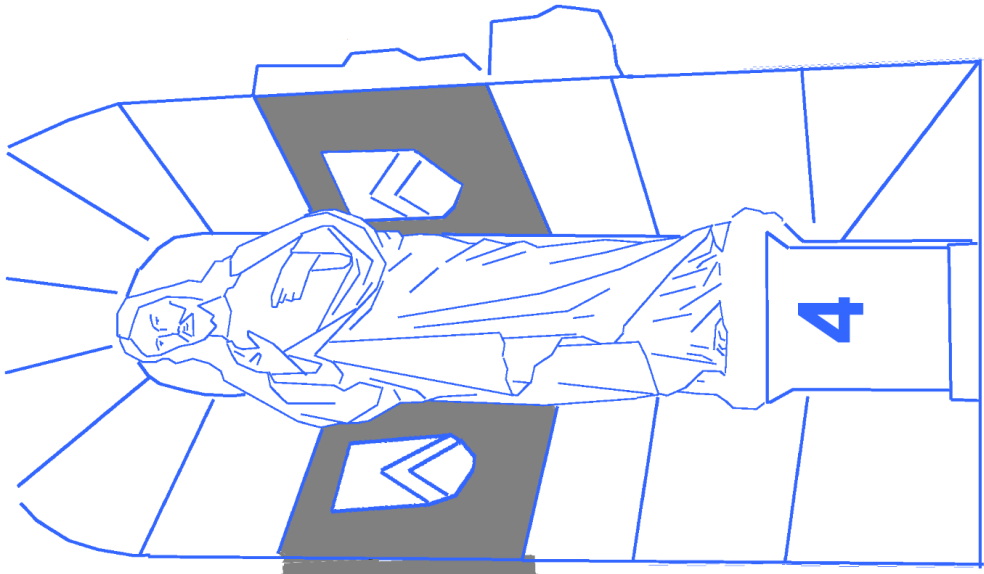
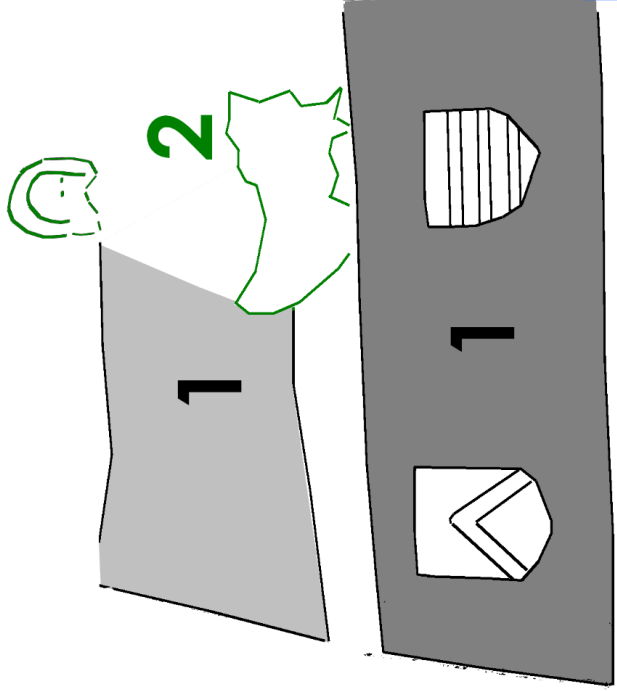
\*\*☐ This roughly translates as a red chevron accompanied by 3 blue eaglets, with full beaks and limbs in red.



Eglise Saint Martin. PRISSAC

# Paintings' sketch

E



## 1. Double funerary litre.

These dark bands are repainted in the church on the occasion of the death of the lord. This litre carries the coat of arms of the la Trimouille family, Lords of Fontmorand, whose funerary chapel this is. It extends around the whole north wall of the principal nave. End of 15th century.

## 2. Sainly person.

This persons head is encircled by a halo creating an appearance of holiness. The painting is too damaged to be able to make an identification. End of 15th century.

## 3. Saint James ? and Saint Catherine of Alexandria.

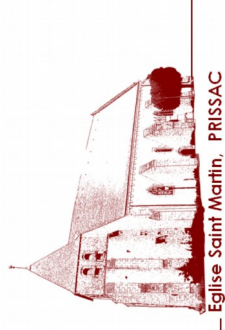
The person on the left, holding a pilgrim's staff and brandishing a book in the left hand could be Saint James, (the book has now almost disappeared). He is accompanied by Saint Catherine of Alexandria. This crowned princess is certainly identifiable by virtue of the broken wheel and the sword used at the time of her martyrdom. End of 15th century.

## 4. Statue of Christ.

This plaster statue from the 19th century represents Christ of the Sacred Heart. The niche containing the statue is, in fact, an ancient window, blocked up at the time of the construction of the sacristy in the 18th century.

## 5. Female Saint.

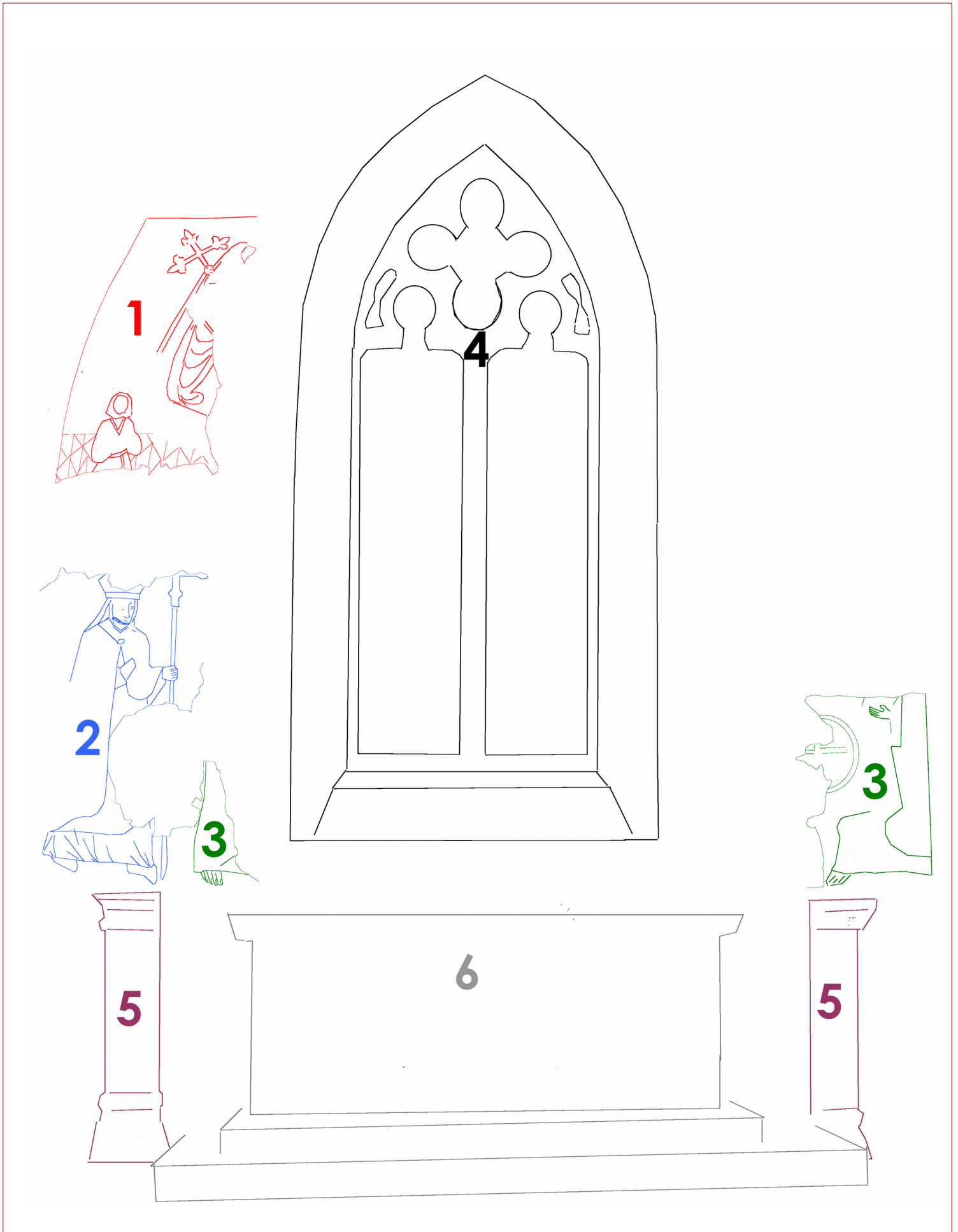
This much damaged painting clearly shows a female figure whose head is haloed. Another person can be made out facing her. This may be a representation of the visitation, the female figure would then be the Virgin. 15th century.



Eglise Saint Martin. PRISSAC

# Paintings' sketch

F





## 1. Person in prayer

This small figure appears to be in prayer in front of a large individual brandishing a cross. This scene was severely damaged at the time of the installation or enlargement of the window. Also, what appears to be some sort of sail may equally well be a drapery. End of 15th beginning of 16th century.

## 2. Saint Martin ?

A bearded bishop is represented with his cross and mitre. In all probability it is Saint Martin, to whom the church is consecrated. End of 15th beginning of 16th century.

## 3. Fragment of 2 apostles

Identifiable thanks to their naked feet, these two figures probably comprise part of a collection of 12 apostles, each holding a consecration cross, and spread around the choir. End of 15th beginning of 16th century.

## 4. Window in the flamboyant gothic style.

These stained glass panels represent Saint Martin and Saint Radegonde. Like the others in the church they were made in the workshops of Charles Lévêque de Beauvais between 1869 and 1873.

## 5. Polychromatic Roman columns.

These two columns are perhaps the vestiges of the preceding edifice and served to support statues of Saint Martin and Saint Radegonde. 12th – 13th century.

## 6. Principal altar.

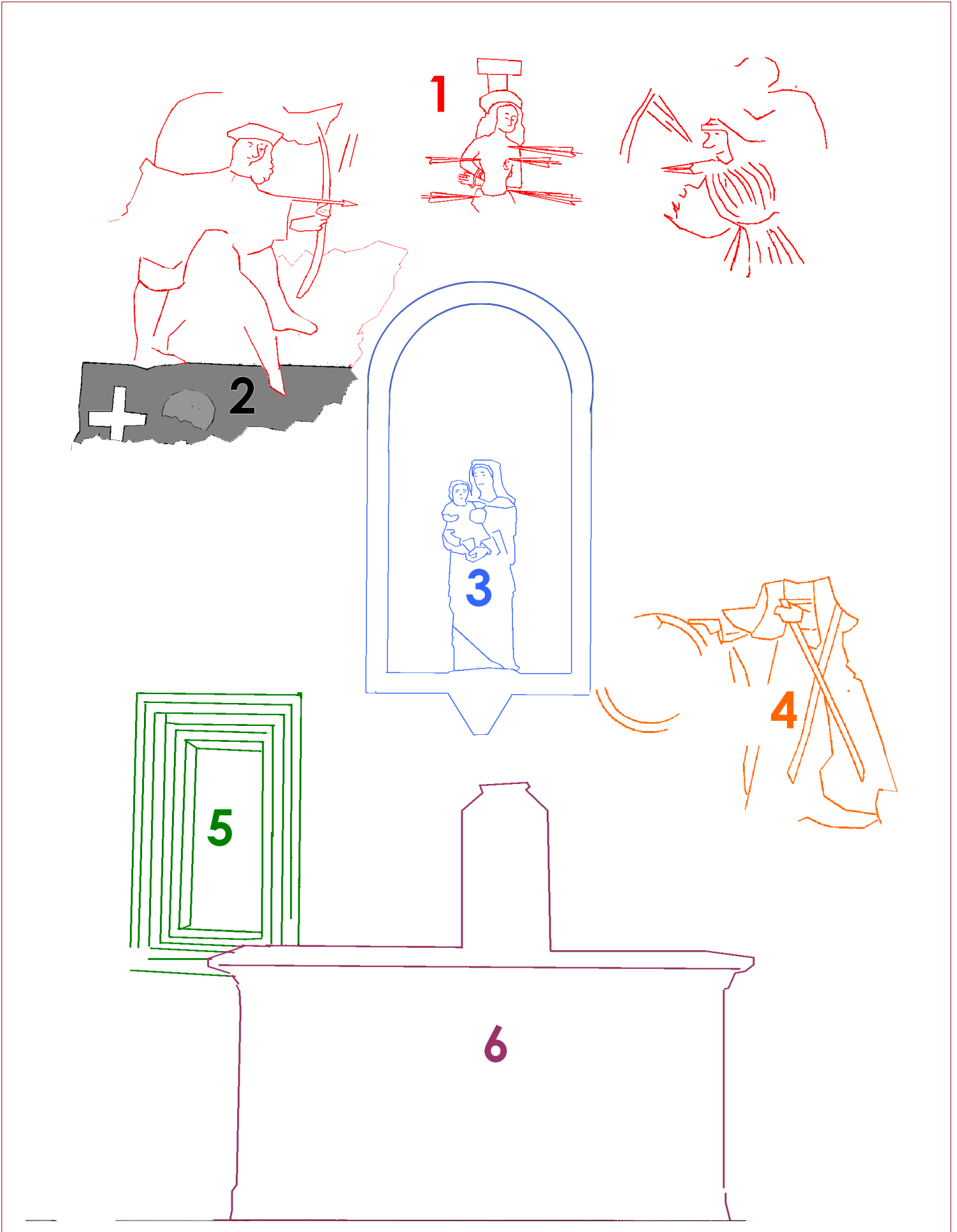
Consecrated by the Archbishop of Bourges, Charles Arnaud de la Tour d'Auvergne on the 16th October 1871, it is decorated with a bas-relief which represents the four evangelists surrounding Christ.



Eglise Saint Martin, PRISSAC

# Paintings' sketch

G





## 1. The martyrdom of Saint Sebastian.

The saint, tied to a column, is pierced by arrows fired by the archers situated on either side. The costumes of the four archers allow the scene to be dated as at the end of the 15th century, or the beginning of the 16th.

Saint Sebastian is invoked for protection against the plague.

## 2. Funerary Litre

These dark bands are repainted in the church on the occasion of the death of the lord. This litre carries the coat of arms of the Courraut de la Rochechevreux family: a white cross. It continues all along the south wall of the choir.

## 3. The 'Bonne Dame'

This statue of the Virgin with child in multi-coloured wood, dates from the 18th century. It could have been found under the willow trees around the town's lavoir \*. The miraculous water of the spring of the Bonne Dame was reputed to treat fevers. Each august 15th the statue is specially dressed, and then carried by four men at the head of the procession from the church to the lavoir.

## 4. Saint Andrew

This apostle is identifiable by his bare feet and his cross in the shape of an X, the symbol of his martyrdom. He is holding in his right hand a consecration cross and is probably part of a collection of twelve apostles, each holding a consecration cross, and arranged around the choir. End of 15th century – beginning of 16th.

## 5. Multi-coloured niche

End of 15th century – beginning of 16th.

## 6. Altar of the Blessed Sacrament.

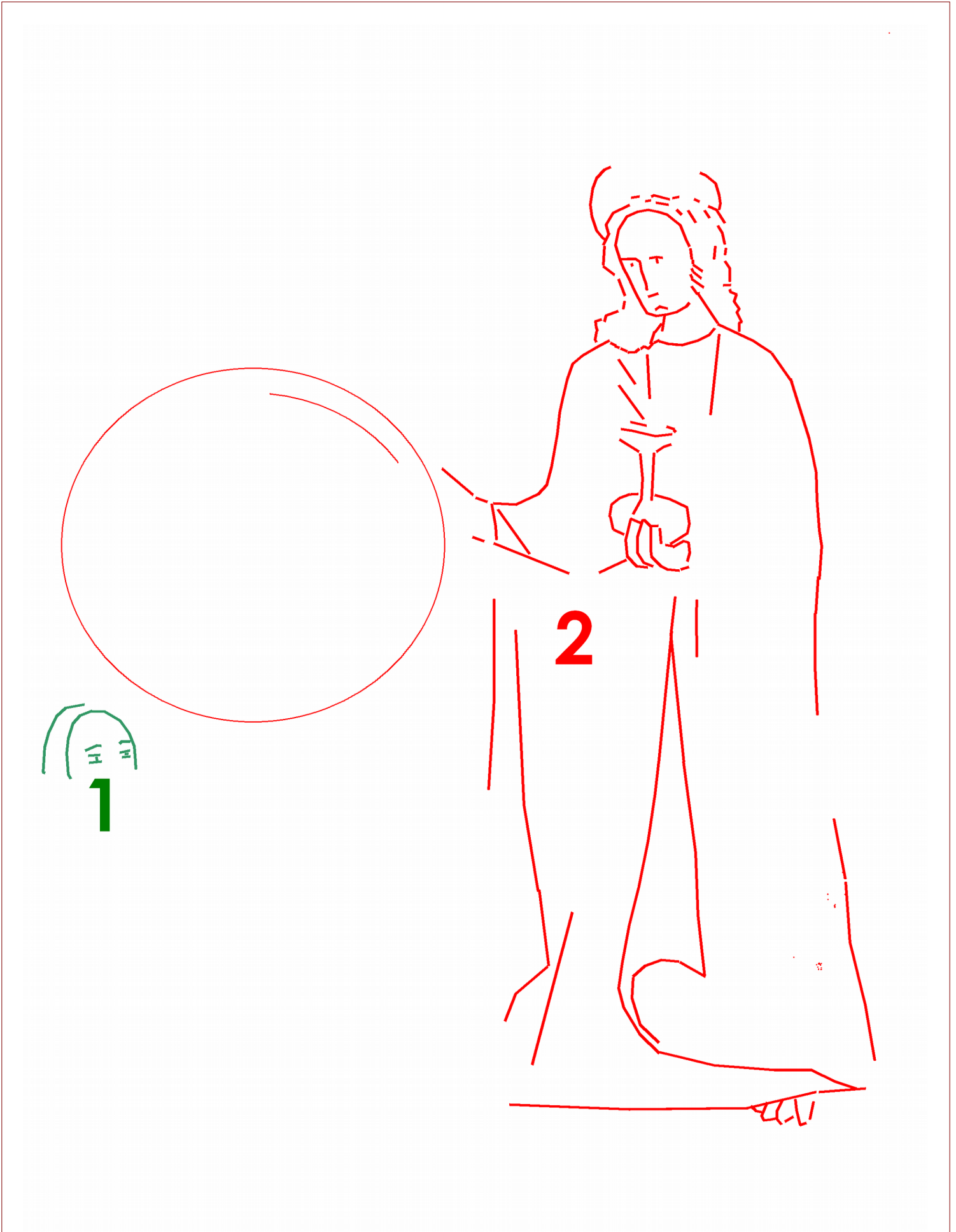
This is decorated with a scene evoking the crowning of the Virgin.

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\*Usually an open-air wash place, with a pool fed by a spring, where people would gather to do their laundry.



Eglise Saint Martin, PRISSAC



## 1. Person in prayer.

This is a fragment of the face of a person kneeling in front of Saint John. It could represent a sponsor of the painting.

End of 15th century – beginning of 16th.

## 2. Saint John.

This apostle is identifiable by his bare feet and the chalice which he is holding in his left hand. His right hand rests on a consecration cross. He is probably part of a collection of twelve apostles, each holding a consecration cross and arranged around the choir.

Texts and sketch : Loïc Pavageau

Translation : John Porter



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