



The altars of the two aisles of the main church of Moustier have cryptic texts. The signs appeal so much to the imagination the US Secret Service devoted an article to it.

Does a cryptogram in a church altar contain clues to a Templar treasure?

The mystery of Moustier

In a Hainaut village near the French border is a church with mysterious altar tables. To date, the cryptic characters have not been deciphered. Jarl Van Eycke, who helped cracking the codes of the Zodiac Killer and of Langrenus, shed his light over the mystery.

Moustier, a borough of Frasnes-lez-Anvaing in the province of Hainaut, Belgium, is recognizable from afar by its two towers standing next to each other: one of a church, the other of a very large chapel just next to it. They raise a first mystery: where did the humble rural village get the money to build two churches next to each other?



Two church towers, close to each other, adorn the view on the village of Moustier.

What really matters however, are some inscriptions in the church. Inside the building are two marble altars. One is dedicated to Saint Martin, the other to Mary. The pedestals of the altars are decorated with a kind of Tables of Moses. They contain Latin and Greek characters as well as some cryptic characters.

For decades, no one has been able to decipher them. And so, the code became part of top ten lists of remarkable secrets. The NSA, the American National Security Agency, devoted a paper to it in the September 1974 issue of its magazine *Cryptolog*. It was entitled ‘Secrets of the Altars’. In the nearly fifty years that passed since then, no one has proposed a decipherment.

Evelyn Bastien, a veterinarian from the nearby village Cambron-Casteau and volunteer Latin teacher, has been fascinated by the Moustier codes for years. When she read about the deciphering of the code of Belgian astronomer Langrenus, she contacted us, hoping that the Moustier mystery could be cracked in a similar way. At our request, Jarl Van Eycke had pondered over the more than 400-year-old Langrenus code. In less than two weeks, this Belgian genius cracked the code that had left so many puzzled. It was not a first for Van Eycke: at the end of 2020 he had helped to decode the mysterious message of the Zodiac Killer, on which the FBI had been struggling for more than half a century. “What is his opinion on the Moustier code?” Bastien wondered.

Cryptography or abbreviations?

In 1838 the church of Moustier was restored. The parish registers mention that “a stonemason received board and lodging for eighteen days”. That stonemason would have been Pierre Brébart, from the nearby town of Tournai. This is written in a fifty-year-old booklet, published in-house by a resident of the village, Jean Connart. Connart paid attention to the cryptograms and went looking for a solution. He found no information in the church archives. The closest he came to a possible decipherment was by a chance meeting with a certain Paul de Saint-Hilaire. In the 1970s, this award-winning writer focused on esoteric subjects, such as the Templars.

The writer pointed Connart to the coding method of the German Benedictine abbot Johannes Trithemius (1462-1516), author of the *Polygraphia*, the oldest printed work on cryptography. It appeared in 1518 and received quite some resonance in then numerous brotherhoods. In Moustier, a ‘Confrérie à la Vierge Marie’ was founded in 1488, an association of laymen committed to the Church. Trithemius’ book contains endless pages in which one letter of the alphabet is associated with one word. Whoever owned the book could read texts coded according to his method. In his book, Connart included the complete Latin text of the thus deciphered altars but made no translation of it. Because, Connart thought, “one cannot attach meaning to it.”

That is not so. A legible text does appear, with a religious meaning. Let’s show how to ‘decipher’ the beginning of the codes according to Trithemius’ Polygraphia. The codes on the altar start with the letters JNLK. The first column of the many pages of codes states that I (the Latin J) corresponds to ‘Luder’, while the second shows that N is ‘sempiternus’, and so on. And so: ‘Luder sempiternus produces terram’ or: ‘The eternal player producing the earth...’. The beginning on the altar of Mary is LGammaEG, or: ‘Illustrator ? gubernans humana...’, that is: ‘The enlightened one ? who rules over man...’. We replaced the Greek gamma, which is not in the second column, with a question mark, but this column only contains adjectives so that this word has little influence on the actual content. In this way a text about the goodness of God appears on both tables.

a	Deus	a	clemens	a	creans	a	celos
b	Creator	b	clementissimus	b	regens	b	celestia
c	Conditor	c	pius	c	conseruans	c	supercelestia
d	Opifex	d	piusissimus	d	moderans	d	mundum
e	Domnus	e	magnus	e	gubernans	e	mundana
f	Dominator	f	excelsus	f	ordmans	f	homines
g	Consolator	g	maximus	g	ornans	g	humana
h	Arbitrator	h	optimus	h	exornans	h	angelos
i	Luder	i	sapientissimus	i	constituens	i	angelica
k	Illustrator	k	inuisibilis	k	dirigens	k	terram
l	Illustrator	l	immortalis	l	produccens	l	terrena
m	Rector	m	eternus	m	decorans	m	tempus
n	Re	n	sempiternus	n	stabiliens	n	temporalia
o	Imperator	o	gloriosus	o	illustrans	o	cuum
p	Gubernator	p	fortissimus	p	intuens	p	cuterna
q	Factor	q	sanctissimus	q	monens	q	omnia
r	Fabricator	r	incorporensibilis	r	confirmans	r	cuncta
s	Conseruator	s	omnipotens	s	custodiens	s	vnuerſa
t	Redemptor	t	pacificus	t	cernens	t	orbem
v	Senex	v	misericos	v	discernens	v	astra
x	Princeps	x	misericosdissimus	x	illuminans	x	solem
y	Idolo	y	cunctipotens	y	fabricans	y	stellas
z	Moderator	z	magnificus	z	saluificans	z	vitam
zv	Saluator	zv	excellentissimus	zv	faciens	zv	viuentia

The first pages of ‘codes’ from Trithemius’ Polygraphia.

That is of course quite possible for a text in a church. Moreover, the signs on the tables of the altars correspond nicely with two ages of the Polygraphia. This may be an indication of the use of this kind of encryption in vogue at the time. But on the other hand, about any sequence of

letters according to the system of Trithemius leads to a religious text. And the content doesn't indicate a need for encryption: no real secrets are revealed.

Connart also suggested the altars could consist of classical abbreviations. Think, for example, of the well-known *SPQR*, the abbreviation of *Senatus Populusque Romanus* (the senate and people of Rome). It is on many Roman monuments. The Church had its abbreviations too. Perhaps the altars are lists of gifts? According to a 'lexicon of abbreviations', the *Lexicon Abbreviatorum* (1901) by Adriano Cappelli, the left part of the altar of Saint Martin could read:

<p><i>Il?lustris Karolus (B ?) PRaefectus Vir Magnificus Gratis Haec VoVit ECclesiae Qui Legitis Sit Benedictus Nostro ? PaPa MaGister ? Karolus, Honoris Usum Remicet ? Libertissime Reddidit Nobis ? Solidos XV</i></p>	<p><i>The Exalted Charles (B gamma), administrator and great man, has selflessly given these things to the Church, he who is blessed by the Pope. Charles Lemaître has bestowed the honour, very generous, to pay us 15 cash</i></p>
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A certain Magister Karolus (1693-1778), whose name could be translated as Charles Lemaître, is indeed buried just in front of the altar of Saint Martin, with his family. Two of his sons were priests, a daughter was a nun and a grandson a canon. Another grandson, also carrying the first name Charles, lived during the construction of the altars. It is likely that these donations were coded in a church, though it raises new doubts. After all, the decoding is very speculative, with many question marks. And other gifts, such as for the stained-glass windows, are mentioned in the church with names and titles.



This stained-glass window was donated by the Miss Augusta du Sart, and it clearly says so.

Echo of the Merovingians

In the footsteps of his uncle, Philippe Connart also devoted himself to the history of Moustier. He looked more specifically at the forms of the letters in the cryptograms. They vary, although both tables clearly seem to have been sculpted by the same person. It is striking that the text contains the symbols J, U and W, as these letters do not appear in the Latin alphabet. And so do not do Y and Z either, because they were only added later for the transcription of Greek words. Latin was nevertheless the official language in the Church until the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The inverted L perfectly resembles a Greek capital gamma. An inverted V also

occurs a few times: is that the Greek capital letter lambda? The letters were coloured in black, as is often the case with texts carved on stone, to increase legibility. But here and there, distinctly chiselled dashes were skipped without even a hint of a remnant of black.

According to Philippe Connart, the stonemason based the curious shape of his letters on signs from the 10th century, used by a monk of the abbey of Saint-Amand-les-Eaux. That village is now located in France, on the border with Belgium. It is barely 40 kilometres from Moustier. These 10th-century Merovingian letters, in turn, are said to have been derived from 4th-century works by a bishop of Constantinople, Saint Gregory the Theologian, founder of the Trinity doctrine. If those time laps seem far-fetched, Connart's main argument certainly is, as it is all about the resemblance of just one letter, a kind of angular C. That type of letter can be found over all those centuries. Overall, Connart did provide compelling evidence of Moustier's ties to the distant past, but they didn't help him to decipher the code.

Magritte's Surrealism

We leave the trail of Jean and Philippe Connart and return to the Templars. Twenty years ago, Rudy Cambier, who studied languages at the University of Liège, wrote a book about it: 'Nostradamus and the legacy of the Templars'. In the book, he forwards a new hypothesis about the Moustier code. According to Cambier, it was written in a consonant script, in which the reader must fill in appropriate vowels. The ten lines would refer to the ten commandments from the Bible and in one fell swoop also to a hidden treasure of the Templars. To this end, the linguist reinterpreted the book Prophecies by the 16th-century Michel Nostradamus. According to him, it was based on an older book, 'Centuries', by the 14th-century Yves de Lessines, a monk from the abbey in nearby Cambron-Casteau (just next to where Pairi Daiza zoo is today).



Southeast of Moustier lays Cambron, with the Cistercian abbey where the monk Yves de Lessines lived.

Nostradamus' book contains words in Picardian, Moustier's dialect, Cambier claims. Moreover, the astrologer is said to have visited the region and the word *moustier* is indeed mentioned in Nostradamus' writings, in the chapter Century I, verse 95: *Devant moustier trouvé enfant besson, D'heroic sang de moine & vetustique ...* The old French word 'besson' means 'twins', which can refer to the two churches of Moustier, or to the two altars. Or, according to Cambier, to two holy water fonts. One of them is in the church and the second one would be at his home, in nearby

Wodecq, where there would also be a Templar cross on a beam. All that would be a reference to a hidden treasure of the Templars, on the property of Cambier!



The 'Templar's Cross' in the church.

Others strongly doubt whether Nostradamus ever visited the Moustier region. Moreover, the reference to the village of Moustier in his verses is not a certainty, since 'moustier' is an old French word for 'monasterium'. In an unbiased translation by Marten Hofstede, there is no mention of the Walloon village: *An old monk finds a twin child of / Heroic blood in front of a monastery.* Some soil probes on Cambier's site did indicate underground anomalies, but in 2001 the Walloon government refused to allow excavations. These were done on an adjacent terrain, until a land subdivision permit was granted there. With the argument that 'routes pass through this field that are described in the Centuries', it could be halted. So don't say any longer Nostradamus cannot be used for one's own benefit.

The then mayor of neighbouring village Frasnes-lez-Anvaing and later foreman and minister of the Belgian political party MR Jean-Luc Crucke argued: "I would very much like the site to be classified as a Walloon heritage [...] With this treasure we find ourselves in the surrealism that is already strongly present in our region where René Magritte was born. When the treasure is discovered, that is the icing on the cake. If not, and it really doesn't matter, it appeals to the imagination." A treasure was never found, although unknown persons did damage the stones under the altars in their search.



Damaged stones under the altars

Philippe Connart, mentioned above, was one of the few who could see Cambier's 'decipherment'. He described it as follow: "It takes a lot of imagination to read anything into it." Cambier didn't let it bother him: "I just want to expose Nostradamus and bring the excellent author Yves de Lessines to the attention".

Contemporary opinion

In the modern computer age, genius decipherers might be able to see through the code in no time, Bastien thought. In particular, she put her hopes in Jarl Van Eycke. And so, we did submit him the cryptograms. Van Eycke quickly pointed out the lack of repetitions per line. For the altar of Saint Martin, there are only seven lines in which a letter is repeated. And when the code is cast in seven-character lines, he went on to say, the number of repetitions should normally drop, but it rises, to eleven. He checked that even with lines of six characters each, there are still nine repetitions in total. According to Van Eycke, this means that “when the code was created, there was a conscious intention not to repeat too many characters per line. From a cryptographic point of view, this seems strange to me.”

British computer specialist and writer Nick Pelling had also pondered on the code on an internet forum. According to him, the letters of the cryptograms do not look as if they were chiselled by a good craftsman. The marble stones could therefore simply have been some practice material on which a stonemason had chiselled some letters. That meaningless text resembling tables of the Ten Commandments could have been incorporated into the altar as a stopgap to adorn the altar. And after all, that part is usually covered by a cloth.

Bastien was disappointed. Why would a parish that could build two churches barely 10 meters apart not have had the money for a good stonemason – and that for the most important parts of the church, the altars? Moreover, the mentioned Pierre Brébart was indeed a professional sculptor, who could not have carved just anything in the eighteen days during which he received board and lodging. And so, there remains a mystery in Moustier.