

# 14 GROUP VIEWS

Mélan, successively a charterhouse, a school and an orphanage, has the permanent calling of housing communities. Whether these communities were male or female, adults, teenagers or children, they all lived following precise rules and discipline. These communities only rarely allowed individuals to stand out and History holds the memory of only a few of them. Furthermore, these disciplined lives framed the relationships with the outside world very strictly. The relations developed were peculiar: they were complex, rarely based on equality and suffused with detachment.



*Effeuillage des betteraves fourragères dans le grand pré de Mélan. Première moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle.*

Auteur inconnu  
Photographie noir et blanc  
Collection Association les Anciens de Mélan.

# 15 COMMUNITY LIVES

Approaching Mélan from a human perspective means to become aware of the difficulty that these individuals experienced trying to emerge from the community on which they were depending. Where each one wanted to leave a trace of one's existence, none really emerged. In Mélan, the community always catches up with the individual who tries to stand out. It is all only a matter of time...



*Graffiti dans les combles de l'église de la chartreuse de Mélan. 2012.*

Jocelyn Laidebeur  
Photographie en couleur  
Conseil Départemental de la Haute-Savoie  
Service archéologie et patrimoine bâti.

# 16 PECULIAR NEIGHBOUR RELATIONS

Neighbouring Mélan was a peculiar situation because contacts with its inhabitants were scarce. « Those from Mélan » as they were called in Taninges were not, for instance, sent to the town school but schooled inside their own walls.



*ORPHELINAT DÉPARTEMENTAL de la HAUTE-SAOIE  
MÉLAN-TANINGES — 6. Une Salle de Classe*

*Jour de classe à Mélan.  
Deuxième quart du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle.*

Auteur inconnu  
Photographie en noir et blanc  
Collection Association les Anciens de Mélan.

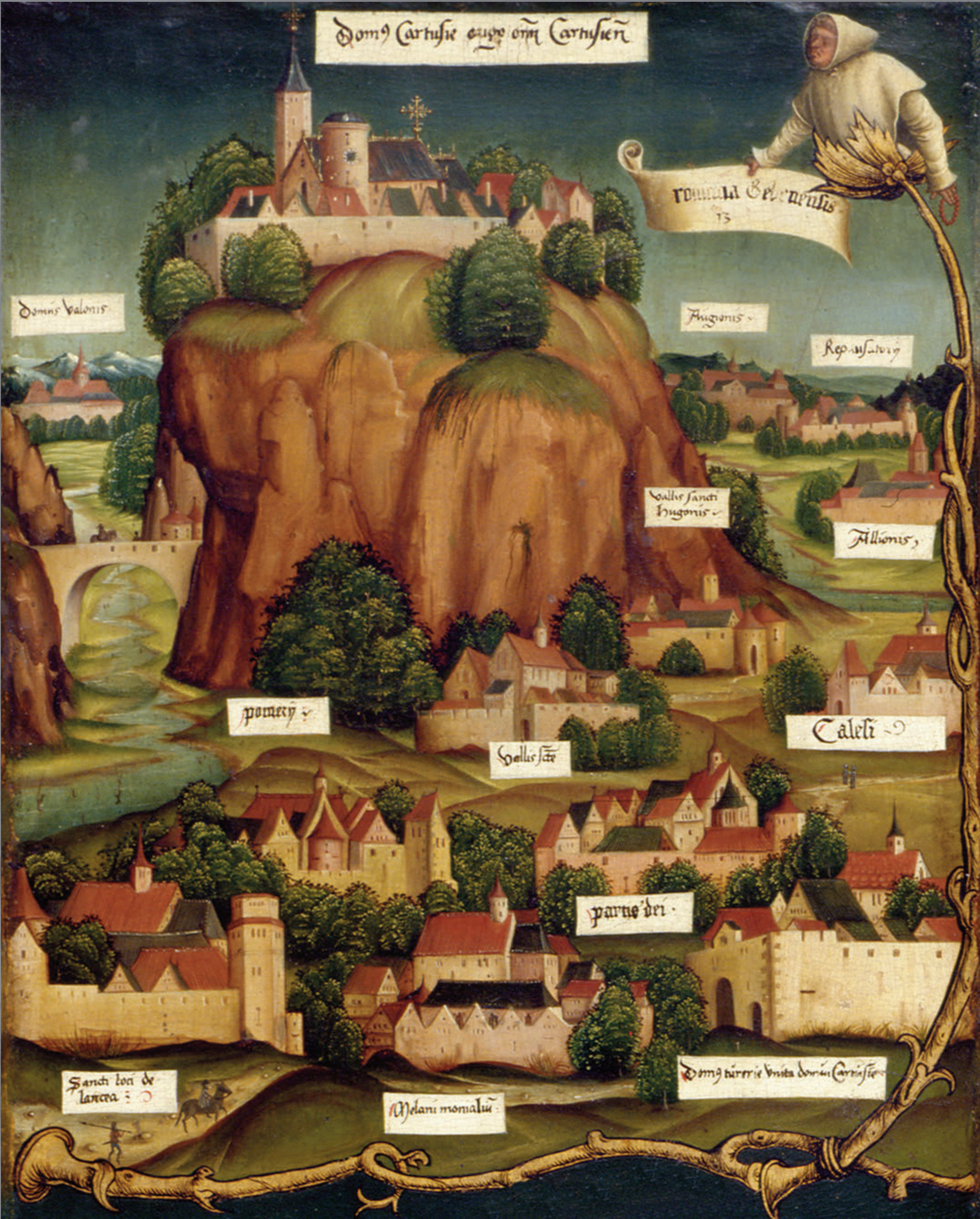
# 17 OUTSIDE THE WALLS

The successive communities in Mélan hardly managed to escape their isolation. At the time of the charterhouse, it was not an issue since the monastic rules forbade nuns and monks from crossing the enclosure. For the communities that succeeded them, the outings were still under close supervision. Even outside the walls, Mélan' occupants stayed in groups.



*La chorale Voies Unies de Mélan  
à Annecy, 1948.*

Auteur inconnu  
Photographie en noir et blanc  
Collection Association les Anciens de Mélan.



*Provincia Gebenensis  
Geneva's Carthusian Province.  
Extract from the triptych by Maria Saal.  
Bernhard Strigel, circa 1507 showing at  
the foreground the Melan charterhouse  
(Melanie monastery).*

# MÉLAN, DES IMAGÉS SORTIES DE L'OUBLI

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haute savoie  
le Département

Chartreuse de Mélan à Taninges

## GLOSSARY

**Carthusian:** qualifies all that has to do with the Carthusian monks' Order.

**Cell:** a small pavilion used as a hermitage in which a Carthusian monk spends most of his day, during his whole life.

**Charterhouse:** a monastery for monks and nuns belonging to the Carthusian Order.

**Cloister:** a connecting movement area made of galleries leading into the monastery's various buildings.

**Enclosure:** a sign of the division between the profane and the sacred.

**Customs (consuetudines cartusiae):** the Carthusians do not follow the Rule of Saint Benedict, but an ensemble of evolutionary dispositions: the customs, also called statutes.

**Desert:** a space circumscribed by the limits of the monastery's possessions. The desert has a strong spiritual worth, as it symbolises the retreat from the world, but also an eminently temporal worth because the charterhouse's economy rests upon it.

**Monk / nun:** a religious Christian man or woman living apart from the world, alone or in a community, after taking the vow to follow the rule or customs of the Order.

## MÉLAN, PICTURES EMERGING FROM OBLIVION

An exhibition by the **Haute Savoie Department**

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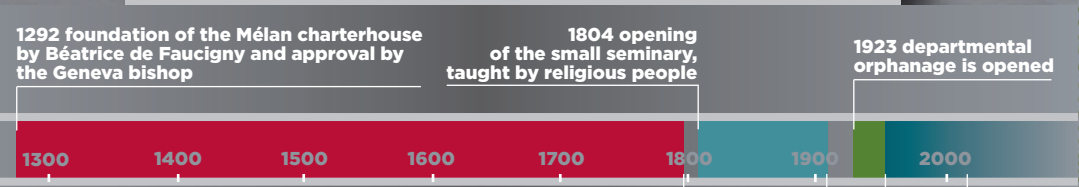
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# 1 MÉLAN, DES IMAGES SORTIES DE L'OUBLI



For about 500 years, until the French Revolution, Carthusian monks and nuns coordinated the religious life in Mélan and managed its economy. The teachers and students communities then succeeded to the religious ones. During the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, the Carthusian monastery housed a school at the instigation of Marin Ducrey who later became its headmaster. At the turn of the XX<sup>th</sup> century, the Haute Savoie Department decided to turn it into the Department orphanage, for the countless orphans engendered by the First World War. The institution opened in 1923 and closed in 1967 after a tragic fire. Since then, the priorities for the Mélan charterhouse are heritagization (“patrimonialisation”), promotion and a development of its cultural life.

The Mélan charterhouse’s history and occupants shaped its appearance. Using iconography, « Mélan, des images sorties de l'oubli » offers an enlightenment of its permanences and paradoxes which after all, act as so many strong identity markers.

# 2 PERSPECTIVES

The Mélan charterhouse looks like a jewel in its case. This monument stands in the middle of a widened valley, dominated by slender mountains. Not far from a major crossroads, all circumstances tend to turn Mélan into a centre... However, would looks be deceiving here? The place name that is Mélan, from the latin Mediolum, traditionally originates from medium, meaning middle. Yet, some specialists consider this quite common toponym to have a very different meaning: that of limit! Its very location, right at the heart of a remarkable landscape, seems to strike the traveler who discovers it. Mélan, a part of the former parish of Flérier, and then of the town of Taninges, is not the centre of the latter, this centre being further on the northern side of the valley.

The old charterhouse also kept its distance from the roads crossing Taninges, whether they come from the Arve valley, the Chablais, Geneva or lead up to the snowy peaks of the Upper Giffre. The charterhouse even holds a certain, slightly dangerous closeness to the Giffre... All this only makes it appear more isolated at the centre of a space of its own, traces of which are difficult to find nowadays. Even more so, Mélan seems to maintain this distance from its environment deliberately thanks to a system of walls that can still be spotted in some areas today. So, is Mélan really in the middle of the world?



# 3 THE LANDSCAPE

When you get to Taninges via the Gets or the Châtillon passes, the Mélan charterhouse’s domain still appears in all its uniqueness today, at the convergence of two streams, in the heart of the sedimentary plain of the Giffre middle valley.



# 4 AT THE CENTRE OF A DOMAIN

The Carthusian monasteries are peculiar in that they establish limits around them that define their « deserts ». These spaces are part of the monks and nuns’ both spiritual and economic life. In the material dimension, a desert and a domain often reflect the same reality.



# 5 TANINGES AND ITS THREE CENTRES

For centuries, the extended town that is Taninges had three centres: Flérier, with the parish church and its cemetery, the burg of Taninges where all economic and commercial activities take place and Mélan with its charterhouse. The first two attract people, the third one keeps them away.



# 6 THE ENCLOSURE

Whether they voluntarily retired from the world or were boarders of the school and then of the orphanage, the occupants of this site always were hidden from outside looks with walls. The enclosure was, for a long time, a strong identity element in the landscape of the Giffre middle valley.



# 7 FOCUS ON MÉLAN

Carthusian monasteries are often in contradiction with the customs of the Order. However, by confining all of its buildings inside the same restricted and enclosed space, the Mélan charterhouse seems to recreate a miniature version of the Carthusian ideal.

Here, the desert is reduced to a small surface. In its centre, walls enclose a space with many different edifices, imbricated in a way that clashes and raises questions.

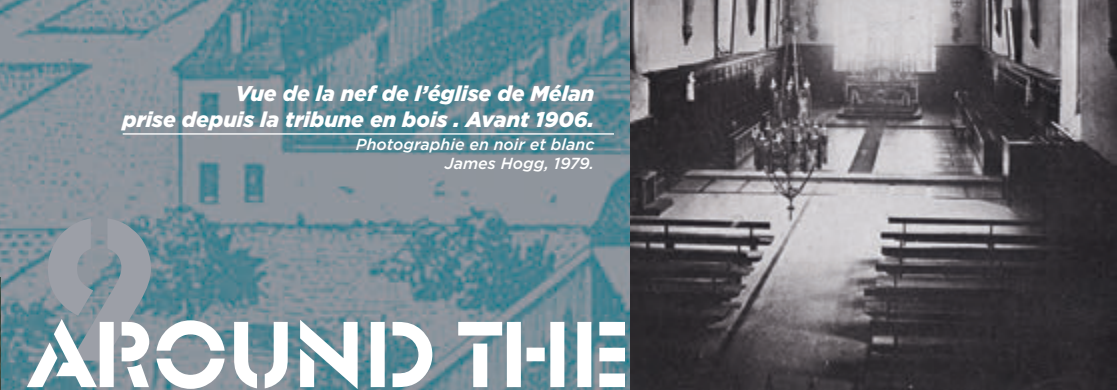
The church’s location participates in the physiognomy of the whole. Functionalism being the major rule, a partition established itself among the spaces dedicated to the cult and those dedicated to the community life, the economic life and the restricted opening to the outside world.

This idiosyncrasy allowed for an embedding of the buildings and a reutilisation of spaces during the times when the charterhouse was a school and then an orphanage, thus erasing the dominating place of the church. Therefore, after 1967, the question of patrimonial enhancement called for a change in the perception of this place.



# 8 THE CHURCH A PLACE OF PRAYER

One tends to forget that the Mélan charterhouse was first and foremost a place of prayer. Therefore, its spatial organisation mainly serves the cult needs.



# 9 AROUND THE CHURCH

Ever since the monastery’s foundation, the church of Mélan constitutes the central space around which numerous buildings were built. The map of the charterhouse thus meets functional necessities.



# 10 TOWARDS NEW ALLOCATIONS...

The built spaces around the sanctuary continued to expand until the XIX<sup>th</sup> century. The church lost its central character and other construction works such as the raising of the buildings’ height, eventually smothered it. The occupants began to perceive it differently.



# 11 AND THE DESECRATION OF THE CHURCH

Allocated to a secular institution, the old charterhouse no longer needed its sanctuary. Devoid of a sacred function, the church was no longer the central space of Mélan. Lacking maintenance, it was put at risk.



# 12 THE NIGHT OF MARCH 5<sup>TH</sup> TO 6<sup>TH</sup> 1967

The fire in March 1967 was a human tragedy. It also marked the end of the orphanage and posed again the recurring question of the buildings’ preservation and maintenance.



# 13 THE REMAINS BECOME HERITAGE

Among the vast charterhouse buildings, only the church and the cloister were protected as Historic Monuments and this as soon as the first half of the XX<sup>th</sup> century. This administrative protection and the fact that they were spared by the fire allowed for their preservation.

