

## Section 66 Additional essays and other research

Evelyn Baker

Cross-references to Digital Supplement in red  
Cross-references to Printed Synthesis in brown

### 66.01 Financing the building enterprises: circumstantial and documentary evidence for patrons

**The 12th-century Fontevrault connection: La Grava, Amesbury, and the Plantagenets**

Archaeology suggests that some building work was taking place at La Grava in the mid- to late 12th century. Can this be matched by documentary evidence? In 1164 Fontevrault was granted the manor which had been restocked by the Crown eight years earlier; the same year they had possession, the abbey itself spent £5 12s 8d on restocking, despite the loss of Henry I's annual cash grant. Between 1164 and 1203 Fontevrault made annual payments to the Exchequer for the manor of Leighton. This suggests that, while money was probably short, the Abbess was investing capital in the property in order to increase her income from it. The nature of her investment, if it was on the La Grava site, was to build a hall S17, service buildings S20, S21 and S23, and the prior's lodgings S19; again, if it was on the la Grava site, farm buildings, grain and stock had been made good by the Crown in 1156. Although a good chamber block S16 was already there, it was earmarked for a chapel; it was probably domestic facilities, not listed in 1155 as needing attention, that required expenditure, and in the late 12th century this is what seemed to have happened. No agricultural buildings seem to have been built at this time; some outlying structures may have been earlier.

Through Plantagenet negotiation with the Pope, Fontevrault took over the failing Benedictine priory at Amesbury in 1177. For the refounding, the conventual buildings, including a church, were replaced by Henry II for £881 and the nuns installed at the end of 1186 (Colvin 1963, 88–90, RCHME 1987, 233–5). Canons did not arrive until the 13th century; their separate church is attested in 1246 when Henry III paid for the lead for the roof. Richard I confirmed both the takeover and the priory's enlargement in 1189, and granted the abbey £35 annually. Amesbury seemed well catered for and the Plantagenet connection remained strong.

**The early 13th century: Fontevrault, her English houses, and the Plantagenets**

Despite Richard's grant, Fontevrault was in financial difficulties at the end of the 12th century. Documents at the turn of the 13th century show the Prior of La Grava involved in a number of disputes over services and land that continue into the 1220s. Was the prior trying to exact sufficient cash for his major building enterprise – and would the abbess allow extravagant building when the mother house was in want? Would there anyway have been enough income from the manor to pay for it all? It is curious that the prior, perhaps Vitalis mentioned in 1196, spent a considerable sum on new quarters for himself and made significant progress in remodelling buildings in the early 13th century when there was obvious pressure to send estate proceeds to Fontevrault. There is no documentation regarding the phase 5.3 construction campaign, and we cannot

definitely assign the considerable cost to manorial income, the impoverished mother house, or to unambiguously documented continued generosity of the Plantagenets to their favourite order.

Or can we? In 1199 there may have been a windfall legacy from the daughter of Henry II, Queen Joan of Sicily, which allowed construction to commence in a serious way. The wording of her will is:

[1] She leaves to the abbey of Fontevrault her body, 900 marks (£600), to pay the debts of the abbess; towards the building of the houses of the brethren of St John the evangelist at Fontevrault.

Also:

[2] The residue of those 3000 marks (£2000) which the king her brother (John) owes her she places at the disposal of the lord of Canterbury, the lord of York, her brother, and the queen her mother, and the abbot of Torpenai and the prior of Fontevrault, to be divided, according to their information, among religious houses and the poor, for her soul.

As well as the will we have an important letter from the dowager queen:

[3] [Letter of] Alienor, the illustrious queen of England, duchess of Normandy and Aquitaine, countess of Anjou (addressed generally). 'She has gone to Gascony, taking with her the original of the testament of her dearest daughter queen Joan, that the count of St Gilles may see it, for the testimony of the six seals attached to it, and provide its alms as far as he is concerned. She begs them, therefore, to carry out its provisions, according to the transcript she sends them, in the presence of William prior of Fontevrault and the brethren who have come with him to England on this matter, as they love God and her, to the honour of God and the advantage of the queen's soul (Calendar of Documents in France, 918-1206, 392-3).

Reference [1] probably applies solely to the male house in Anjou, but La Grava was also dedicated to St John, and the use of plural 'houses' might infer building in more than one place. La Grava was the only Fontevraldine house in England with that dedication so it seems the only possible candidate in England (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, 104-5).

[2] Two archbishops of the church in England were involved, York and Canterbury, as well as the king. This has to imply that some of this English princess's money was intended for England. When all the individual legacies are disbursed there was a little over 450 marks or about £305 left. In 1199 the Fontevraldine houses were Amesbury, Nuneaton, Westwood and La Grava, the latter being apparently the only one without nuns (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, 104-5). Although Amesbury was much larger, La Grava had the advantage of its prior being Proctor of the Order in England. Amesbury had already been largely rebuilt and enlarged recently at great expense.

[3] It seems Queen 'Alienor', probably as countess of Anjou, duchess of Normandy and Aquitaine as well as being Queen of England, was contacting those involved to ensure that the provisions of her daughter's will were carried out, in Gascony and England and elsewhere. Prior William's presence in England to deal with the 'matter' of the will seems to imply that he was negotiating money for English houses with English prelates and Joan's brother and mother. There were other specific provisions for individuals and French houses and Joan was bequeathing property, money and perquisites from her dowry also.

Unfortunately La Grava's name is not singled out in this 'residue'. Nevertheless, due to the considerable influence of English royalty on Fontevrault, and the status of the Prior of La Grava, it is highly likely though entirely unprovable presently that some of Joan's remaining £305 was spent on La Grava Priory, and to dramatic effect – a third of that sum could finance a major building programme. Prior William (and his brethren) might either have belonged to the mother house and was in England to ensure that English Fontevraldine houses secured their legacies, or just possibly he was the successor to Vitalis and had come over to build a high-status religious-cum-farming complex at La Grava instead of just a grange. The next prior called William is not named until 1227; it could be the same man, but the priors may not all be listed [67.10].

The abbess was in debt, although Joan's provision to the abbey must have alleviated this; she was most unlikely either to send Fontevrault money to La Grava for conspicuous building, or accept a large cut in the income from the manor of Leighton to do the same. A Plantagenet legacy, under the watchful eye of Eleanor, was unlikely to be interfered with.

If Joan was the reason for La Grava's massive expansion, it is important that the circumstances of how and why this might have happened are explained. Joanna's story could have come from a Romance. She was the beautiful daughter of Eleanor and Henry II, born in 1165 at Angers, and probably brought up at Fontevrault with her younger brother John (Weir 1999, 177). In 1176, at the age of 11 she was betrothed to the hugely wealthy William II of Sicily, and married in 1177. She was widowed in 1189, imprisoned by the usurper Tancred, only to be rescued by her brother Richard the Lionheart. He promptly took her dowry to fund the crusades. When the married king Philip of France cast amorous eyes upon her, Richard established Joanna in the priory of La Bagnara on the Calabrian coast. His bride Berengaria was left in his sister Joanna's care, and she sailed with them to the Holy Land. In 1191, on the way, part of their fleet was shipwrecked and imprisoned by Emperor Isaac of Cyprus. Again, Richard came to the rescue. Joanna was offered as a bride to Saladin's brother Safadin, but she refused to marry a Moslem and he refused a Christian.

In 1196 she married Count Raymond VI of Toulouse, ending a feud between Toulouse and Aquitaine. Richard gave her Agen and Quercy as her dowry. Joanna was caught up in the Albigensian wars, fought for her husband against traitors while pregnant, but was badly burnt when they set fire to her camp; she fled to her brother for protection but Richard had died. So in 1199 Eleanor sent her to be cared for by the nuns of Fontevrault. Joanna joined King John and Eleanor at Rouen in the last stages of pregnancy, ill and destitute. John, seeing her sad condition, paid debts of 3000 marks for making her will, which was to be distributed by her mother (Weir 1999, 330). She was veiled as a nun of Fontevrault on her deathbed; according to Weir, Joanna and her son Richard were buried near Henry II and Richard I, but Boase speaks of her being interred with the sisters (Boase 1971).

The circumstantial evidence for a legacy to La Grava is compelling; it is suggested that Eleanor made provision for English Fontevraldine La Grava Priory on behalf of Joanna. This was partly through the generosity of John to his dying sister, but she had other wealth. Not only were English prelates, the king and the queen mother involved, the matter of executing Joanna's will was at least partly being resolved in England. La Grava was the oldest English Fontevraldine foundation and the only male house. John, who was no match in military terms for his brother Richard, was rapidly losing lands to the French; it does not seem unlikely that this was another reason to give preference to an English house rather than French houses, while continuing Plantagenet patronage to Fontevrault [67.08]. There is no alternative source of resources for such an expensive remodelling.