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Call for paper

Monasteries and religious communities in the Alps from the Middle Ages to the present day

History, landscape, architecture and enhancement of cultural heritage

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In Bolzano, the walls of Muri-Gries stand before me in the scorching sun, revealing a new world compared to the Lombardy plain. Whereas the monastery of Viboldone was poor and essential, this abbey is rich and triumphant, with its massive structure, its farmland, its six hundred thousand bottles of vintage wine, its nine bronze 'Tyrolean swing' bells installed in the tower, its green blinds and coloured shingles, shining against the blue sky, dotted with swallows [. ...] The Abbey of Bolzano is Counter-Reformation, Council of Trent, power of the prince-bishops, frontier bastion and watchtower against the Protestantism that spread beyond the Alps during the stormy 17th century[1].

Through his impressions of the Abbey of Muri-Gris in Bolzano, Paolo Rumiz evokes the legacy that monasteries and abbeys have left to European history. At the same time, they provide an opportunity to read the history of the Alps, through the place and roles – economic, social, political, cultural and artistic – played by monasteries; a place and roles that stretch from the early Middle Ages to the present day, with the challenges of a secularised world and a historical heritage that seeks to reinvent itself.

Volume 31/2026 of *Histoire des Alpes – Storia delle Alpi – Geschichte der Alpen* wishes to dedicate its *Dossier* to the theme of monasteries and religious communities in the Alpine region. While the history of regular communities was largely investigated from the second half of the 19th century until the first years of the 20th century, in particular thanks to the impetus of members of the clergy who devoted themselves to collecting, transcribing and translating archives, as well as publishing monographs, there has been a revival of interest in this subject over the last few decades in the Alps and Pre-Alps, driven in particular by archaeologists, by the diversification of issues concerning the religious world and, locally, by the desire of the public authorities to broaden the range of the tourism offer by promoting local heritage.

With a broad chronological scope stretching from the Middle Ages to the present day, the *Dossier* aims to gather contributions that examine the phenomenon of the Alpine monasteries from a variety of perspectives, including economic and social history, the history of culture and ideas, political history, and the history of art and architecture. Five lines of analysis provide the reference points that will guide the *Dossier*.

Proposals that consider mountain areas close to the Alps could also be taken into consideration. Proposals about female or mixed communities would be particularly welcome.

[1] P. Rumiz, *Il filo infinito*, Roma, Feltrinelli, 2019, p. 63.

1. History and documentation

Thanks to new methodologies based on the use of databases and the digitalisation of ancient books, as well as a renewed interest in primary sources – illustrated by the reconstitution of cartularies – historical research has benefited from the (re)discovery of numerous sources that have made it possible to rewrite the history of regular communities. This includes the origins of the monasteries, which are gradually breaking free from centuries-old traditions to make way for the rapports between the religious communities and the ecclesiastical authorities (bishoprics) and secular authorities (princely and noble families), who relinquished some of their privileges to them and turned them into players in the mountain feudal system.

2. Land development

The reassessment of the 'monk who cleared the land' raises questions about the development of the territories ceded to the mountain religious communities. Archaeological research carried out in recent years on mountain pastures and forests has supplemented data from archives and land registers, enabling us to reconstruct the economic functioning of these areas, from the development of natural resources to commercial activities. The structuring of the land, through the construction of outbuildings (barns, chalets, mills, etc.), the building of paths, passages and bridges, and the rerouting or channeling of watercourses, creates one or more networks directed by the monastery.

3. Relations between religious leaders and the general public

Established on the plains during the early Middle Ages, then in the mountains' 'deserts' between the 10th and 12th centuries, and finally in the heart of the towns of the Prealps from the 13th century onwards, religious communities mostly lived alongside the lay population, attracted by their lifestyles (conversions, pilgrimages) and ensuring their subsistence through their work. These neighbourhoods may have been fraught with conflict, particularly at times of population growth and decline between the 13th and 14th centuries, and during the Enlightenment. In addition, with the regionalisation of recruitment from the late Middle Ages onwards, religious establishments also welcomed members of local families, not just the nobility. Relations between religious communities and the lay population can therefore be approached from different angles: relations of domination, particularly seigniorial domination, religious, economic and defensive co-operation, but also personal relations (origins of religious men and women, family relations, private lives), etc.

4. Architecture and remains

In recent years, our knowledge of religious architecture has grown as a result of building archaeology, restoration and redevelopment work. Proposals that describe buildings and developments that illustrate the contacts between religious and secular communities (shared abbey or priory churches, village chapels, but also places of justice, shared mountain chalets or barns, hospices and sick homes, etc.) will be particularly welcome.

5. Future of the religious heritage

Since the 16th and 17th centuries, many religious establishments have closed their doors. This is the result of the Religious Wars upheavals – which led to the abolition of a number of Catholic monasteries and the return of persecuted Protestants – the anti-monasticism of the 18th century, the French Revolution and the gradual secularisation of society. What has become of these churches, convents and barns? Before the cultural and tourist development that followed the realisation of the heritage value of these former religious sites, sometimes very recently, the former monasteries were

used for a variety of purposes: as homes for private individuals, as industrial or commercial establishments, particularly hotels, as public services (town halls, courts, schools, tourist offices, social housing) and as religious buildings (presbyteries). Today, many of these sites are open to the public. In an economic context long dominated by winter sports, but forced to diversify because of climate change gradually leading to the closure of ski resorts, what role can these heritage sites play in tourism development? What awareness is there among the local population and elected representatives? How can they stand out from other abbeys, priories and carthusian monasteries? Finally, with the forthcoming closure of monasteries and convents as a result of the decrease in vocations, how to maintain and preserve the buildings, the archives, the liturgical items and works of art?

All paper proposals will consist of a text (title and abstract) of up to 1,500 characters submitted by e-mail only to vanessa.gianno@usi.ch by 31st March 2025. In the case of acceptance by the scientific committee, papers will be sent to the same e-mail address according to the redactional criteria (further information: https://www.labisalp.usi.ch/storage/app/media/normes-histoire-des-alpes-vers-f-2013.pdf) before 30th November 2025.

· Maximal lengh of the paper, including spaces and footnotes: 40 000 characters
· Maximal number of images (black and white, minimal definition 300 DPI): 3 (one vertical for the cover of the paper, 600 DPI)

Scientific Committee:

Laurent Auberson, historien et archéologue
Sidonie Bochaton, archéologue (université Jean Jaurès de Toulouse)
Alessandra Panicco, historienne de l'architecture et du paysage (Politecnico di Torino)
Carlo Tosco, historien de l'architecture et du paysage (Politecnico di Torino)