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# Visual encoding of a 3D virtual reconstruction's scientific justification: feedback from a proof-of-concept research

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## ABSTRACT

3D virtual reconstructions have become over the last decades a classical mean to communicate about analysts' visions concerning past stages of development of an edifice or a site. However, they still today remain quite often a one-shot output, neither reusable, nor expressing visually the diversity of the evidence behind the reconstruction. A 3D virtual reconstruction - obtained by means of a synchronic or diachronic study - is a hypothesis, but also a technical work, and ultimately confronts researchers with the challenge of finding a compromise between interpretation and assertions, even within the graphical encoding of a 3D model.

This research is based on a methodological proposal: introducing *justification matrices* that allow to associate to the components of a 3D virtual reconstruction, "indicators" that formalise in a synthetic way an assessment of plausibility. These matrices allow to assign to individual 3D objects or to groups of objects a quantitative evaluation of their plausibility by crossing four criteria: shape, dimensions, existence, and position.

The experiment led to the creation of a proof-of-concept prototype allowing a user to interact in real time with the graphic appearance of each object, represented in a 3D reconstruction, according to the values of its justification matrix. The approach is applied to four phases of the evolution of Marmoutier abbey's hostelry (corresponding to four synchronous states - 12th, 13th, 15th and 18th centuries), and re-uses 3D virtual reconstructions produced several years ago for communication. The paper positions and discusses the three families of issues the research intersects (knowledge modelling, visual encoding and 3D content reuse), presents the case study, details the services offered by the prototype and assesses lessons learned and limitations. The experiment should be seen as an attempt to reason about heritage data sets by drawing on practices from the InfoVis field and is thought of as a call to design and discuss in the scientific community news ways of visualising architectural data, information, and pieces of knowledge.

**Keywords:** Plausibility, uncertainty, 3D virtual reconstructions, Information visualization, HMI, 3D content reuse.

45 A 3D virtual reconstruction is the result of experts' analyses aiming to propose a plausible spatial  
 46 arrangement for a building that has changed over time. It is before all the result of an interpretation of  
 47 available data and information underpinned by 'knowledge' (explicit, tacit, ...). Each 3D reconstruction -  
 48 obtained by means of a synchronic or diachronic study - is a hypothesis.

49 But a 3D virtual reconstruction is also a technical work, through which assertive geometrical forms have to  
 50 be chosen in order to represent that spatial arrangement, even if uncertainties were spotted during the  
 51 interpretation step. Ultimately, from the knowledge and information visualisation standpoint, a 3D virtual  
 52 reconstruction confronts researchers with the challenge of finding a compromise between interpretation and  
 53 assertions, even within the graphical encoding of a 3D model (if the model aims to serve analytical purposes).

54 This research is based on a methodological proposal: introducing *justification matrices* that allow to  
 55 associate to the components of a 3D virtual reconstruction, "indicators" that formalise in a synthetic way an  
 56 assessment of plausibility. In other words, these matrices deliver information on the scientific justification of  
 57 a given spatial arrangement.

58 The experiment led to the creation of a proof-of-concept prototype allowing a user to interact in real time  
 59 with the graphic appearance of each object, represented in a 3D reconstruction, according to the values of its  
 60 justification matrix. The approach is applied to four phases of the evolution of Marmoutier abbey's hostelry  
 61 (corresponding to four synchronous states - 12th, 13th, 15th and 18th centuries), and re-uses 3D virtual  
 62 reconstructions produced several years ago (for communication purposes) by the team of archaeologists  
 63 involved in this experiment.

64 Several system querying modalities have been experimented in order to better circumscribe the services  
 65 such a prototype can offer. The prototype is based on a combination of classical and open technologies for the  
 66 web (RDBMS, JS/CSS/HTML interface, 3D JavaScript library Three.js). It is already operational and available  
 67 online with free access.

68 The paper first positions and discusses the three families of issues this research intersects (knowledge  
 69 modelling, visual encoding and 3D content reuse), then presents the case study the prototype is applied on,  
 70 before detailing the ways users can interact with the data thanks to the abovementioned prototype. A  
 71 discussion, an assessment of the research's limitations, and conclusions are provided for in the last section.

## Research background & methods

73 The need to differentiate, in a 3D model, between attested and assumed elements is not new, far from it.  
 74 This methodological challenge was already there before the digital era [], and is behind Jean-Claude Gardin's  
 75 approach (Dallas, 2015), which we will discuss later. For the past 30 years (see Messemer, 2016), the issue has  
 76 been regularly discussed in the scientific literature, and this in various scientific communities (architecture,  
 77 history, archaeology, ...) both in the form of recommendations and of feedback (Alkhoven, 1993) (Sylvaïou &  
 78 Patias, 2004) (Pfeiffer et al., 2013) (Morandi & Tremari, 2017).

79 We have been part of this move for about ten years, with reports of experiments centred on 3D modelling  
 80 and graphic encoding *per se* or in the form of online 3D information systems, at different scales, scanning  
 81 different technological solutions (Blaise & Dudek 2002, 2005, 2008). These experiments have led to a  
 82 collection of 'rules of conduct' inspired by practices in the InfoVis field, now used as a teaching tool (see  
 83 Appendix 1). The issue remains topical even if it tends to become more marginal under the double effect of an  
 84 overwhelming presence of 3D data acquisition experiments in the literature, and following on this question  
 85 the emergence of the still rather vague concept of 'digital twin' – most often viewed as an avatar of the real  
 86 thing, of an attested thing (and thus an inoperative concept if talking about 3D virtual reconstructions and  
 87 plausibility). We have chosen to reinvestigate the issue in the context of a wider research programme<sup>1</sup> focusing  
 88 on methodological aspects such as reproducibility<sup>2</sup>, traceability of research workflows, and this along with  
 89 archaeology colleagues. There are three main reasons for this new attempt:

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<sup>1</sup> See the MEMORIA IS platform - <http://memoria-dev.gamsau.archi.fr/is/enter.php>

<sup>2</sup> An acute question today, and one that obviously needs to be addressed in view of the effort involved in producing 3D reconstructions and the heavy risk of seeing this effort lost very quickly (whether on the technical level - obsolescence of the tools, or on the cognitive level - failure to perpetuate the reasoning mechanisms).

- 90 - new technological setups (3D js libraries, Collada 3D file format, etc.),  
91 - a pre-existing set of 3D models, sort-of dead branch, needing repurposing, and acting as a test bench,  
92 - finally, the idea that repurposability and interpretability are coming forward as a major part of the  
93 research agenda in heritage studies at large.

94 In view of these elements, the result we present should be understood basically as a proof-of-concept  
95 experiment, a way to question ourselves on *why not (re)dig a bit further into the question of what a 3D model*  
96 *can say, and be used for?*. The experiment is described below by distinguishing three complementary aspects:  
97 the knowledge representation problem, the visual encoding choices, and finally the technical approach to the  
98 re-use of pre-existing 3D models.

99

## The knowledge modelling issue

100 What exactly is uncertain when an expert proposes a 3D virtual reconstruction? How to account for the  
101 uncertainties associated with a 3D virtual reconstruction in a formal and shareable way, conducive to a  
102 comparison within a study case, or between case studies? And what exactly are these uncertainties about?  
103 Architectural forms? Their spatial arrangement? Their very existence? Can this notion of uncertainty be  
104 formalized in any way other than by an accompanying discourse? On this question, the scientific literature  
105 proposes numerous methodological reference points, often discipline-centered, leading to a formalization of  
106 uncertainty factors (e.g., Skeels et al. 2010, Zuk et al. 2007, Thomson et al. 2005). In addition, from an  
107 archaeological standpoint, how can we exploit the notion of argumentation, present for example in J.C Gardin's  
108 logicism (Dallas, *op.cit.*), to make the choices made by an analyst more readable within 3D models?

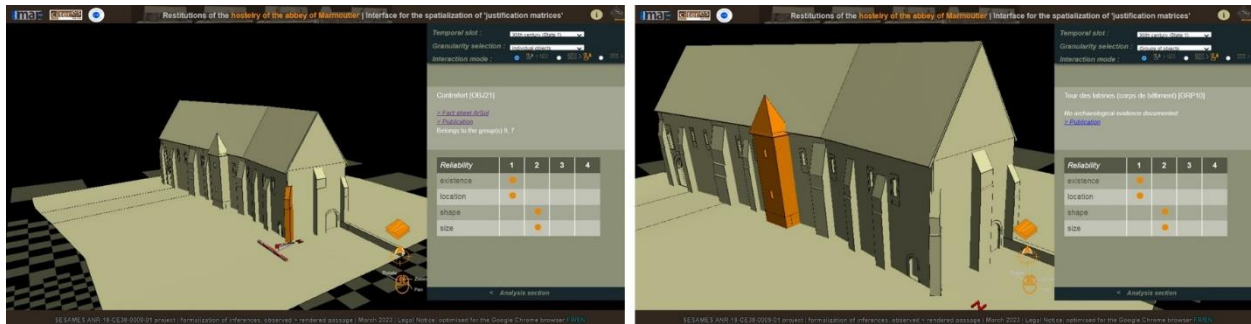
109 *Uncertainty* is in fact a sort of catchword covering a vast number of situations - analysing different types of  
110 uncertainties (and their consequences in terms of decision making) is indeed a research issue by itself, and one  
111 that goes far beyond the scope of this paper (see on this issue Blaise & Dudek, 2020).

112 Our contribution introduces a formal model, *justification matrices*, addressing the specific issue of handling  
113 *uncertainty* in the task of proposing a 3D virtual reconstructions: we therefore rather use the word *plausibility*,  
114 denoting a particular occurrence of *uncertainty*. Justification matrices deliver information on the reason for a  
115 proposal present in the 3D model, a proposal that is concretised by given 3D shapes in given positions within  
116 the model. It allows to assign individual 3D objects or to groups of objects a quantitative evaluation of their  
117 plausibility by crossing 4 criteria: shape, dimensions, existence, and position. This formalism materialises the  
118 vision of one analyst, and could potentially allow the materialisation of differences between analyses. It does  
119 not constitute an argumentation as such, but it reveals the result of an argumentation. The argumentation  
120 itself can naturally be associated with the object as paradata – but this is another discussion, falling outside of  
121 the scope of our contribution.

122 Our approach is a methodological questioning that complements the work done by the LAT team on digital  
123 architectural models. This team of archaeologists outputted a final publication of a research on the abbey in  
124 Marmoutier and used that opportunity to model four synchronic states of this building (12th, 13th, 15th and  
125 18th centuries). Emeline Marot and Elisabeth Lorans (LAT) worked with Nicolas Nony (computer graphic  
126 designer) to create these 4 models. The restitution of the various elements appearing on the models based on  
127 arguments of an analogical, symmetrical, functional order... Many graphic documents were used. If these  
128 choices were partly explained in the graphic and textual documentation accompanying the file of the models,  
129 nothing allowed to take into account the reliability of these restitutions on the model itself, and thereby to  
130 explain the passage between what is observed and what is returned on reconstruction models. The case of the  
131 hostelry and its four models appeared to us as an appropriate case study to try and fill this gap.

132 By starting to work on these objects produced by other researchers and with an objective of valorisation,  
133 we quickly asked ourselves the question of multiple or at least different uncertainty depending on the  
134 architectural objects questioned. Indeed, according to the available evidence we can be certain of the  
135 existence of an object without knowing its location, its shape and its dimensions. For example, it may be a  
136 fragment of a staircase, the location, shape or dimensions of which are unknown. In other cases, we are certain  
137 of the existence of an object for example a buttress whose foundations we were able to observe by excavation  
138 attesting its location but its shape and dimensions are not fully known. Thus, it appeared relevant to question  
139 the plausibility of each object according to four criteria: its existence, its position, its shape and its dimensions.

140 It also seemed interesting to question the plausibility not of an object but of a group constituted on the  
 141 basis of associations of functional, structural, rhythmic order (for example all the bays of the first synchronic  
 142 state – Figure 1).



143  
 144 **Figure 1** – Left - plausibility of an individual architectural element (angle buttress), right - plausibility of a  
 145 group constituted of walls, bays and a covering.

146 Indeed, the uncertainties applied to each object is not necessarily the same as the one applied to the whole,  
 147 the whole is not always the sum of the parts! To account for these different situations, we have proposed to  
 148 synthesize this information in the form of a matrix presenting in line four plausibility criteria (form, dimensions,  
 149 existence and position) and in column four values.

150 For each line four values are available, ranging from 1 (highest plausibility) to 3 (least plausible proposal);  
 151 the value 4 is used to indicate elements for which the plausibility analysis remains to be conducted (Figure 2).  
 152

Plausibility criteria	1 : "Attested"	2 : "Likely"	3 : "Possible"	4 : "Unassessed"
Existence	Presence of the element on the model attested because it still fully or partially elevated in reality	Presence on the model considered as likely on the basis of symmetry patterns, composition arguments, etc.	Presence of the element possible but not grounded on actual remains or documents	Plausibility still unassessed
Position	Position of the element in the model attested because it is still fully or partially elevated in reality	Position on the model considered as likely on the basis of symmetry patterns, composition arguments, etc.	Position of the element on the model possible but not grounded on actual remains or documents	Plausibility still unassessed
Shape	All the information needed to propose a given 3D shape is available.	Only partial information about the shape of an element is available.	The shape proposed is an expert's vision, not grounded on evidence	Plausibility still unassessed
Dimensions	All dimensions of the element or a large majority are known	Some of the dimensions of the element are known	No dimensions are grounded on evidence	Plausibility still unassessed

153  
 154 **Figure 2** – Verbalisation of the justification matrices' values, showing also value 4 "unassessed" added at  
 155 implementation time - elements for which the plausibility analysis remains to be conducted.

### 156 The visual encoding issue

157 A 3D virtual reconstruction is in essence a visual product, in which graphic components are combined.  
 158 What graphic vocabulary should be proposed, what interaction modalities in the 3D model should be  
 159 implemented so that the subjective choices behind a restitution hypothesis are legible? How can comparisons  
 160 between the different components of a 3D model (from the point of view of their relative plausibility) be  
 161 facilitated? Bertin's graphic semiology (Bertin, 2010.) has spread well beyond its original discipline, geography,  
 162 and particularly in the field of information visualization. However, it is hard to say there is an equivalent  
 163 methodological reference point in the field of 3D heritage-related modelling. In that area of concern, after  
 164 decades of research, practices still tend to privilege realism over semantic encoding, and representations often

165 primarily serve visual communication objectives. At the end of the day, 3D virtual reconstructions often do not  
166 really provide services (in terms of scientific added value) commensurate with the effort made.

167 In the proof-of-concept prototype we present once a plausibility evaluation is done - here formalised as  
168 *justification matrices*, comes the time when this evaluation has to be encoded visually, some would say  
169 *mapped* visually. Representing uncertainties using visual means is nothing like a new issue or practice: for  
170 instance Joseph Priestley's *A chart of Biography* is a classic timeline from 1765 that positions in time, using tiny  
171 lines running from left to right, the lifeline of more than two thousand famous men (Rosenberg & Crafton  
172 2010). When the dates of birth or death of these famous men are ill-known the otherwise continuous line turns  
173 dashdotted, thereby intuitively transferring to the reader a sense of *uncertainty*.

174 A wide number of solutions have been tried out before and since the digital age, often in relation with time  
175 oriented data with for instance the planning lines visualisation, the chronographs formalism and many others  
176 readers can find in (Aigner et al., 2011). Cartographers, geographers or historians have also faced the issue of  
177 how to distribute in the space of an objectivised representation - a 2D map - items the exact position of which  
178 is not clearly assessed. Depending on the nature of the type of uncertainty to handle solutions can range from  
179 the use of glyphs conveying the uncertainty information - through colours or shapes (see for instance Reimer,  
180 2010) to clouds of 2D points, polygons or other shapes that localise a *likelyliness area* - area within which the  
181 item is supposed to be localised, but that does not match exactly the geometry and position of the item  
182 (Davies, 1996).

183 Visual mapping is a task that has been both in cartography and in information visualisation somewhat  
184 rationalised with Jacques Bertin's (op.cit) graphic semiology and as part of it his identification of a finite  
185 vocabulary of graphic variables. Although written before the digital age, in the context of 2D paper based  
186 graphic outputs, his 'methodological frame' can still act as a reference model helping to explain visual  
187 encoding strategies.

188 The prototype we have implemented exploits five graphic variables: position, orientation, size, shape and  
189 colour. The first four variables are endowed with conveying information about the architectural elements: 3D  
190 components distributed somewhere in the 3D space. The plausibility information is conveyed by the fifth  
191 variable: colour. Depending on the interaction mode chosen by the user one or several colours are used to  
192 represent the plausibility evaluation visually in the 3D space. As will be shown in section Results a more  
193 abstract, InfoVis-inspired solution has also been developed that uses the same set of graphic variables. This  
194 solution consists of a sort of visual metaphor (Kienreich, 2006), used independently of the 3D space. Obviously  
195 our choice of using colour (and *only* colour) to convey the plausibility analysis visually could be debated. Other  
196 solutions that go beyond Bertin's original framework and base on specificities of digital platforms (such as  
197 interactive texture mapping or translucency) have been tried out but they have not been considered  
198 convincing. Translucency, typically, is not easy to handle since shapes tend to get harder to apprehend visually  
199 and what is gained in terms of visual differences between the known and the ill known can be lost in terms of  
200 global understanding of the 3D layout/structure.

201 Our strategy has been to privilege simplicity - as defined by J. Maeda (Maeda, 2006, Schuller, 2009) - as a  
202 mean to minimise the learning curve and augment the acceptability of the prototype. The graphic encoding is  
203 a simple bichromatic scale, allowing a natural ordering of values, with the grey used to convey information  
204 lacks. We do acknowledge though that a thorough and robust evaluation of alternative visual encodings  
205 remains to be done: a potential perspective for this work.

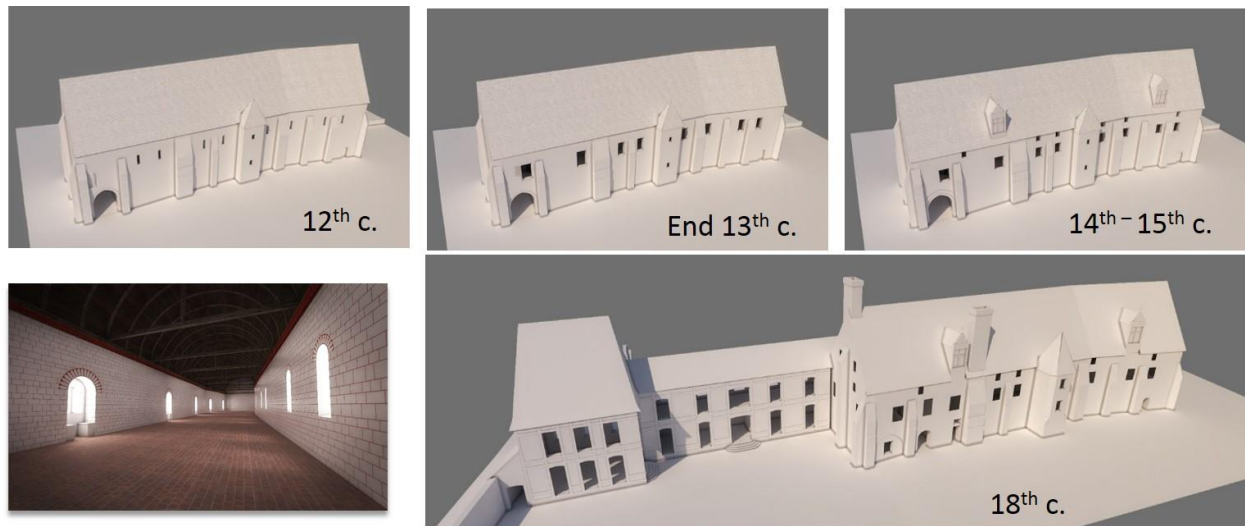
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### 3D models reuse

207 How can we re-use 3D content for other purposes, in our case 3D virtual reconstructions created primarily  
208 for scientific mediation and in a technological context that is obsolete today? This sub-issue can be seen  
209 primarily as a purely practical matter concerning technology. But it can also be seen as part of a broad societal  
210 movement towards more sustainability and economy of means, a movement that does affect the field of  
211 scientific research.

212 This is not a new issue, however, and the emergence of many XML-based formats where the information  
213 is detached from the application contexts is proof of this. But developing today such good practices does not  
214 necessarily provide practical solutions concerning the reuse of existing 3D content. The interface that we  
215 present has been developed to work online thanks to the open source Three.js library, and exploits a  
216 systematic repurposing of the original 3D models.

217 The original data we have based on are four polygonal mesh models corresponding to four synchronous  
218 states - 12th, 13th, 15th and 18th centuries - in the evolution of the abbey's Hostelry, and available today in  
219 the form of OBJ-format saves (Figure 3).  
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**Figure 3** – The original data: four polygonal mesh models and (bottom left) an illustration of the primary purpose of these models by the LAT team : communication for the general public (including with texture mappings) (UMR CNRS/Tours univ 7324 CITERES-LAT).

225 Each of these four models was first divided into significant architectural elements (a wall, a door, a buttress,  
226 an alignment of windows, etc.), to which justification matrices were associated (one matrix per element, single  
227 object or group of objects). This work was carried out using the Blender software, in editing mode, and  
228 consisted of separating and, if necessary, closing each element of the model. Choices had to be made during  
229 this step such as the suppression of the internal parts of the models (vaults) insofar as the experiment  
230 concerned only the external envelope of the building.

231 Each element was thus given its own geometry, exported in Collada (.dae) format, and corresponding to a  
232 justification matrix described in a relational database. The link between the 3D data and the matrices is made  
233 dynamically by exploiting correspondence tables (the identifier of an element in the database is used to name  
234 the corresponding Collada 3D file). In order to optimise the use of these models in a browser, each state (each  
235 synchronous 3D model) is loaded dynamically: only one 3D model is loaded at a time, while the others are  
236 removed from memory as they are loaded, a possibility offered by the Collada loader of the Three.js library.

237 The interface allows the selection of elements directly in 3D by the raycasting method - a native function  
238 of three.js - which has been adapted to our needs, in particular for the first interaction mode (see *Results*  
239 section) which required this direct selection of elements by clicking in the interface.

240 Finally, the interface allows the display or hiding of the ground and of a dimensional grid that the user can  
241 move along the horizontal or vertical axis using the keyboard. In addition, symbols with dimensions and  
242 orientation (in accordance with archaeological standards) allow the dimensioning and orientation of the  
243 model.

244 The method developed had the merit of demonstrating both the feasibility of the 3D models reuse scenario  
245 that we had imagined, thus reversing the usual process of research to valorisation, and the rather generic  
246 character of this type of web3D interface, reusable with few modifications for other architectural sites.

247 It should obviously not be forgotten that the time needed to segment and partly redraw the 3D models is  
248 a constraint, even a limitation, but a limitation to be relativised by comparing it with the time needed to build  
249 the original models... a few days versus several weeks per model.



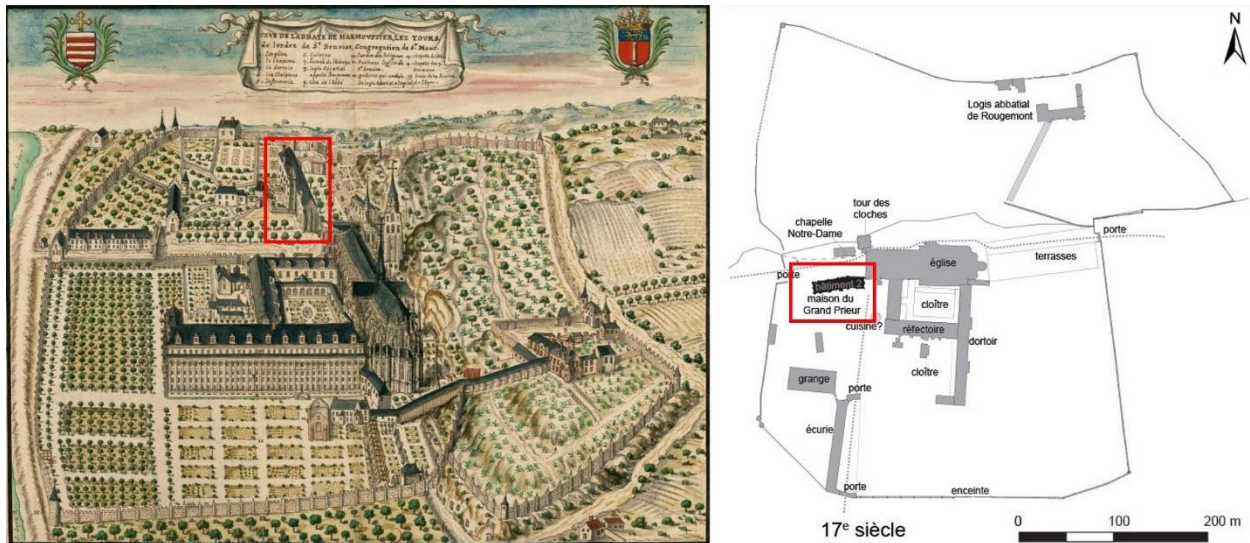
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### The case study: Marmoutier's abbey hostelry

251 The prototype re-uses the 3D virtual reconstructions of four phases in the evolution of the Marmoutier  
252 Abbey hostelry, a site that has been thoroughly studied for years by a team of archaeologist, the UMR 7324  
253 CITERES-LAT. The name of Marmoutier is inextricably linked to that of Martin, bishop of Tours from 371 to 397.  
254 In fact, during his episcopate he chose this place for his retreat and attracted to him disciples who gave rise to  
255 the first or second monastic community of the West.

256 After several centuries of development, this great Benedictine monastery became one of the most  
257 important in France. This establishment lasted until the French Revolution, which destroyed most of the  
258 buildings in the early 19th century. Archaeological research has been conducted since 2004 under the direction  
259 of Elisabeth Lorans of the Archeology and Territories Laboratory (University of Tours - National Center for  
260 Scientific Research). These investigations relate both to the spatial organization of the monastery and the  
261 architecture of the various buildings that made it up and to the uses of the land that preceded and followed  
262 the fifteen centuries of monastic life. It is therefore a question of a global approach to the site and its  
263 environment based on the crossing, at different scales of time and space, of all possible sources: archaeological  
264 data, written sources, which have existed since the end of the 4th century, and iconographic sources, available  
265 since the 17th century.

266 One of the buildings partially spared by the revolutionaries is the monastic hostelry which had the function  
267 of welcoming guests of mark of passage in the monastery (Figure 4).



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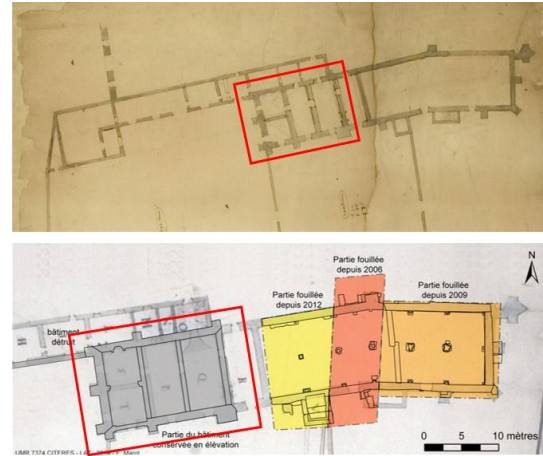
269 **Figure 4** – Overall views of the monastery, showing (outlined in red) the position of the hostelry within  
270 the site. Left, the monastery before the destruction of the 19th century - Elevated view from Marmoutier  
271 Abbey from the east, 1699, Gaignières Collection (BNF VA 407 (1) FT 4-H-183734). Right, Reconstructed  
272 plan of the monastery in the 17th century (UMR CNRS/Tours univ 7324 CITERES-LAT).

273 Installed near the main entrance, in order not to interfere with monastic life, a text from the Middle Ages  
274 indicates that it was built during the abbey of Hervé de Villepreux (1179-1189).

275 Today preserved on 20m of length, it originally measured 55m, a length known before the excavation by  
276 plans of the eighteenth century (Figure 5). A study of the archaeology of the building was conducted on the  
277 elevation while the destroyed part was completely excavated from 2006 to 2017.

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**Figure 5** – Left, a view of the hostelry today showing the part preserved in elevation and elements excavated (the picture shows the north façade). Right, plans of the hostelry, with parts preserved outlined in red (UMR CNRS/Tours univ 7324 CITERES-LAT).

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Several synchronic architectural states of the building were defined:

**State 1**

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This building originally had two levels. A vaulted passage located at the western end of the building allowed circulation between the part accessible to lay people, to the north, and the rest of the monastery, reserved for the community and its dependents. This passage was opened by large pointed arches still visible on the facade.

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The rest of the ground floor, also vaulted, was used for storage and may have been used as a refectory. The floor, used for lodging, was covered directly by the frame and was lit with bays to the north and south. It had access to latrines installed in a turret.

**State 2**

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At the end of the thirteenth or beginning of the fourteenth century, the vault of the ground floor was probably remodeled, the bays of the south façade were enlarged and the whole decoration was redone in false white joints on a yellow background.

**State 3**

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In the fifteenth century, the function of hostelry seems abandoned for that of residence of the Grand Prior, one of the main dignitaries of the abbey. This change in assignment required a significant recovery of the building. The available space was increased as the upper level was divided into three. The latrine turret was turned into a staircase to serve these new floors and bays were pierced to illuminate them. The ground floor has been used by craftsmen (forge).

**State 4**

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In the eighteenth century, the building underwent a new transformation when the interior ground level was raised. The old doors and windows were thus condemned and the vaults partially destroyed before the deposit of nearly a meter of earth on the entire surface of the ground floor and the installation of a paved floor still preserved to the west of the building. New doors have been created at this level, still visible today. A new wing is built against the north facade of the building. At this time, the vaulted passage, losing its function, was transformed into a living room.

**State 5**

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This building does not seem to have been used for a long time, since the Revolution, which intervened shortly after, led to its destruction (no virtual reconstruction was produced for this state). All that remains today is its south wall and the west end, in the street.

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Similarly, the eastern two-thirds of *building 2* was levelled in the early 19th century, with the western end used as a dwelling and agricultural dependency in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, the walls of the submerged part were kept in the basement, which allowed, thanks to archaeological research, to restore the chronology of the occupation of this area.

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## Results : the online prototype

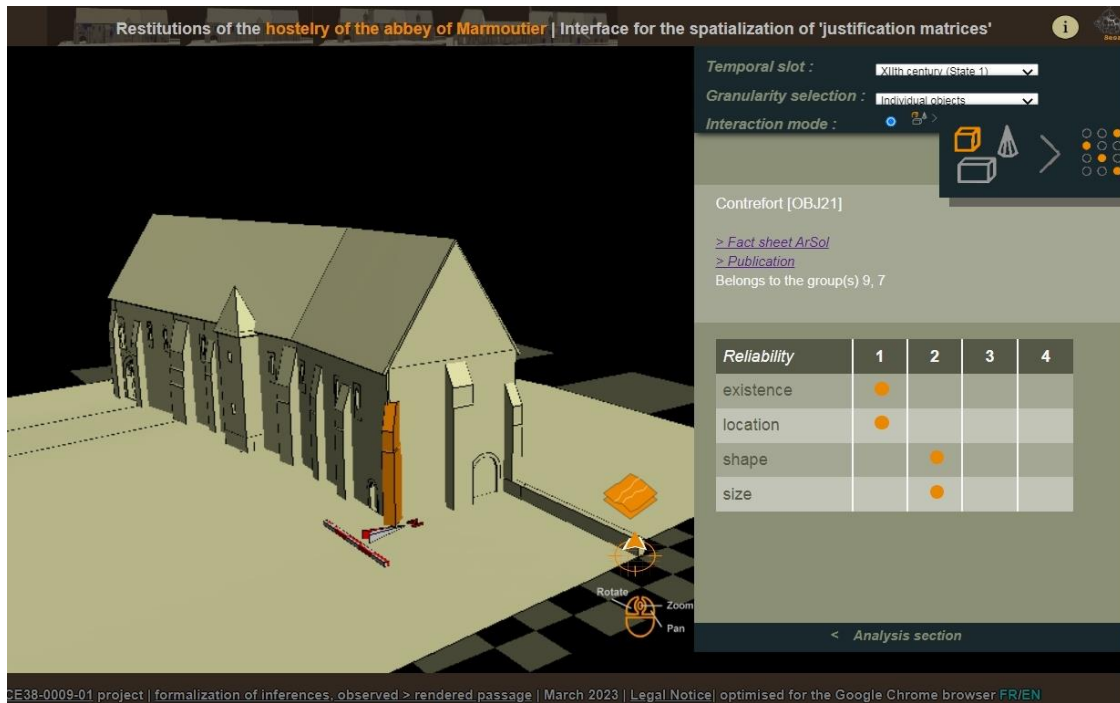
322 The basic service expected from our prototype is fairly simple: allow users to interact (through basic clicks  
323 on shapes) with architectural elements in the 3D scene so as to retrieve information about their plausibility.  
324 But naturally once each architectural element is associated with a justification matrix (concretely here inside  
325 an RDBMS) other services can be introduced that will build on the same data set. The prototype proposes three  
326 interaction modes exploiting the 3D virtual reconstructions, illustrated in the sub-sections below. In addition,  
327 the prototype also introduces an InfoVis-inspired overlay. In that case the focus is put on information patterns  
328 at an abstract level: the prototype enables comparing collection of justification matrices corresponding to the  
329 various synchronic phases or architectural elements.

### 330 Interaction modes in the 3D environment

331 For all three interaction modes building on the 3D environment, users first select one of the  
332 reconstructions, corresponding to one of the four synchronic phases of development of the hostelry that the  
333 LAT team has modelled. Users will then be empowered with three different means to analyse the plausibility  
334 of the reconstructions' components.

#### 335 *Mode 1 : visualising the matrix corresponding to one architectural element*

336 The first interaction mode is extremely simple: users select an architectural element in the 3D space and  
337 as a result the element's justification matrix is displayed in the right part of the interface (Figure 6). When  
338 relevant, links to associated URLs are also available, that can be used to get more detailed archaeological  
339 information thanks to online content proposed by the LAT team (the ArSol database factsheet, or the online  
340 thorough archaeological publication – covering not only the architecture but also the burial area, craftworks,  
341 etc.).

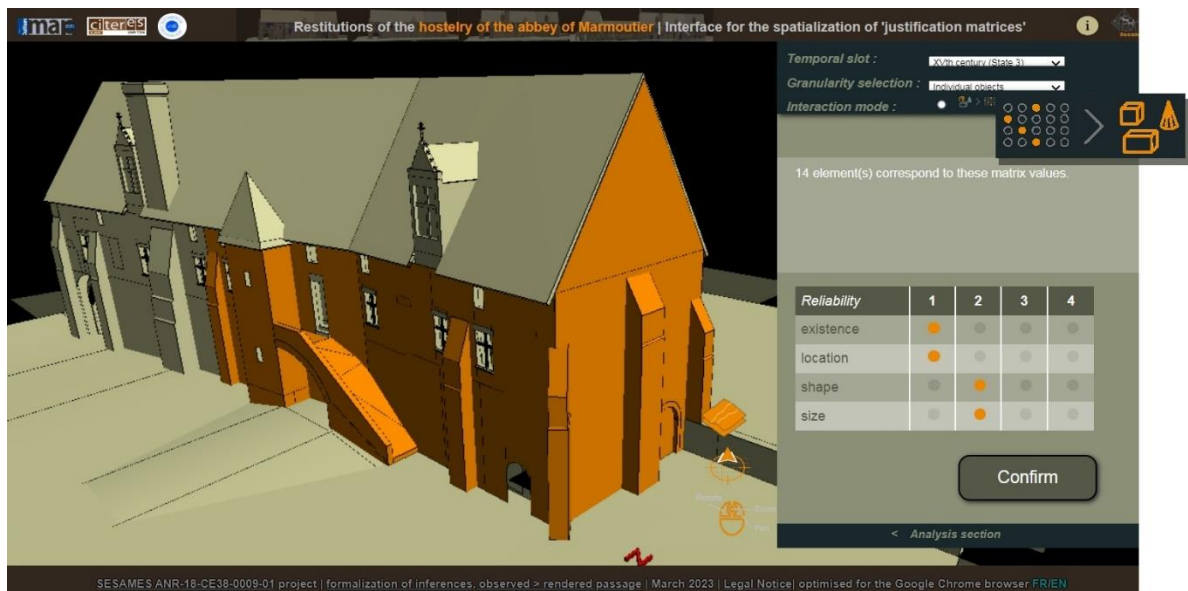


342

343 **Figure 6 – Interaction mode 1**, illustrated on the first synchronic state (13th century). The justification  
344 matrix corresponding to the angle buttress highlighted in orange in the 3D scene is displayed in the right  
345 part of the interface. The existence and location of this element are fairly well established (remains exist,  
346 value 1 for the two first lines of the matrix). Its shape and size are less certain (value 2 for the two last  
347 lines of the matrix means likely, but not attested). Two URLs exist for this element that the user can exploit  
348 to retrieve further information on it.

349 *Mode 2 : visualising elements corresponding to one matrix*

350 In this mode a user selects a matrix (four values), by choosing values for each plausibility criterion (Figure  
351 7). Once it is done, all architectural elements documented with a matrix that corresponds to the selected values  
352 are highlighted (orange colour). In other words, this mode allows users to explore the information set starting  
353 this time from a selection of plausibility criteria (one value per plausibility criterion) in the matrix, rather than  
354 from the 3D scene itself.



355

356 **Figure 7** – *Interaction mode 2*, illustrated on the third synchronic state (15th century). All components in  
357 the 3D virtual reconstructions with a justification matrix that corresponds to the user's selection (the right  
358 part of the interface) are highlighted in orange. Note, the spatial consistency of elements sharing a  
359 common justification matrix, and the change of colour for the last part of the building (a part today  
360 destroyed, raising more questions in terms of plausibility).

361 *Mode 3 : visualising all plausibility values for one criterion across all architectural elements*

362 The third mode corresponds to a filtering of the plausibility evaluation. A user selects a row of the matrix  
363 ("existence" or "shape" criterion for example) and all the architectural components in the 3D model are  
364 recoloured according to their plausibility evaluation for this specific criterion (Figure 8).  
365



366

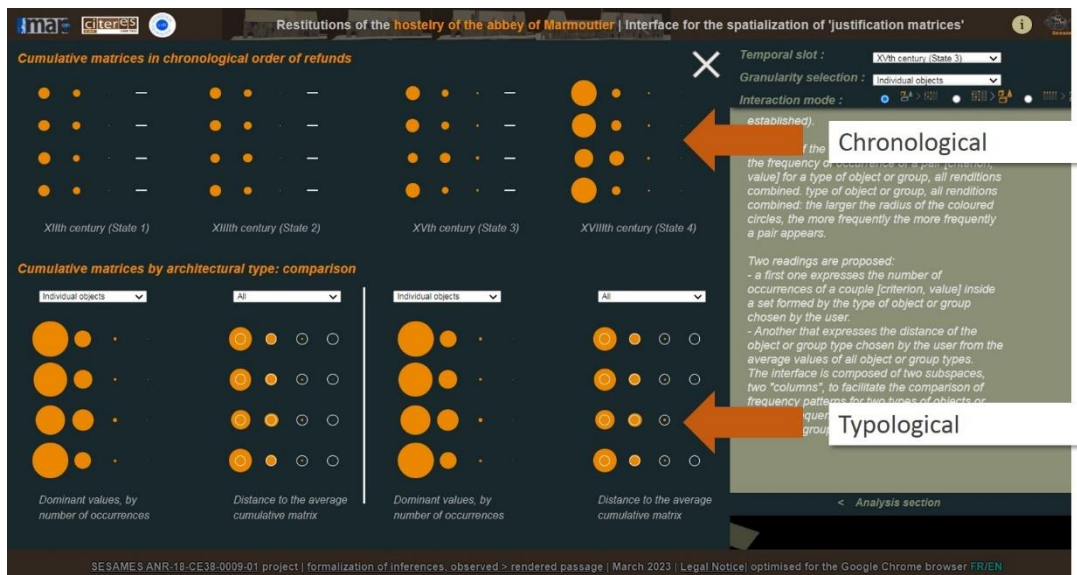
367 **Figure 8** – *Interaction mode 3*, illustrated on the fourth synchronic state (18th century). Each component  
368 in the 3D virtual reconstructions is attributed a colour that corresponds to its plausibility in terms of



369 shape. Note the use of the colour 'grey' (value 4) that indicates no evaluation of plausibility of the element  
 370 has yet been done – a way to assess visually the completion – or not- of the plausibility evaluation effort.

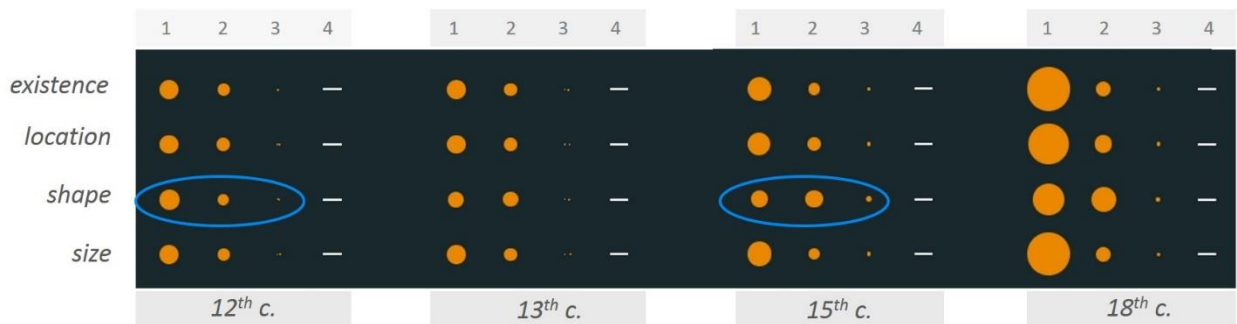
371 **The information visualisation layer**

372 The three interaction modes presented herebefore focus on the use of a 3D environment that allows a  
 373 user to interact with one architectural element, or one matrix, and one synchronic state *at a time*. But what if  
 374 the user is willing to observe, for instance, the plausibility pattern of buttresses in comparison to this of  
 375 openings, or differences between synchronic states? As an answer we have implemented a more abstract  
 376 overlay, building on the concept of 'cumulative matrices'. Cumulative matrices base on the same visual  
 377 formalism as this used elsewhere in the interface: a grid in which each row corresponds to a plausibility  
 378 criterion (existence, location, shape, and dimension) and each column corresponds to a plausibility value  
 379 (attested, likely, possible, unassessed). The visualisation shows in an abstract way values for *collections*  
 380 of elements, either promoting chronological comparisons across the four synchronic states, or comparisons  
 381 basing on architectural types. The size of the coloured circles is proportional to the frequency of occurrence of  
 382 a [criterion, value] pair: the larger the radius of the coloured circles, the more frequently a pair appears (Figure  
 383 9).  
 384



385  
 386 **Figure 9** – Visual display of the cumulative matrices, a mean to analyse the collection of objects basing on  
 387 chronological factors, or typological factors.

388 The top part of the graphics is used to compare values of matrices corresponding to the four synchronic  
 389 states (values of the matrices of all the architectural elements for a state are cumulated).



390  
 391 **Figure 10** – Cumulative matrices for the four synchronic states – the graphics shows for instance (circled  
 392 in blue) that for the third synchronic state the plausibility of shapes is lower than for the first synchronic  
 393 state, a somewhat counter-intuitive finding. The circles for the last synchronic state appear far bigger  
 394 than for the previous states – this is due to the fact that the edifice was significantly enlarged, and as a

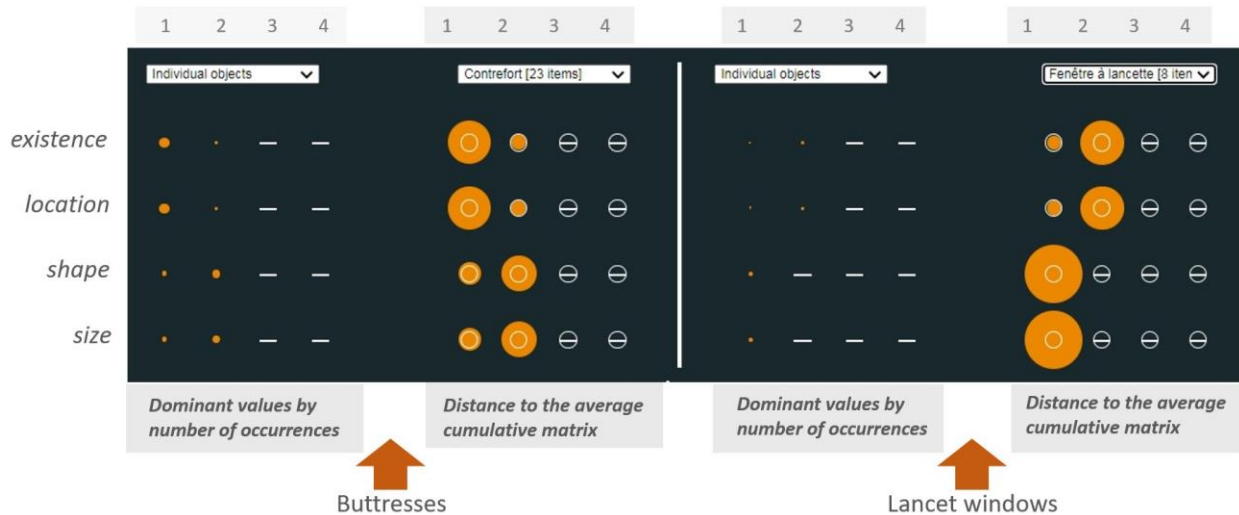
395 result the overall number of architectural element is bigger – and so are the number of [criterion, value]  
396 pairs. What is primarily read here are relative proportions, line per line, column per column.

397 The bottom part of Figure 9 is used for one to one comparisons of plausibility patterns corresponding to  
398 various architectural types (vaults, arches, doors, buttresses, etc.).

399 The graphics is composed of four visual matrices, two per architectural type. For each architectural type  
400 the two matrices correspond to two alternative readings of the plausibility information:

401 - the first (left matrix) expresses the number of occurrences of a [criterion, value] pair inside a set formed  
402 by the type chosen by the user. It helps spotting the plausibility pattern for the type chosen by the user.

403 - the second (right matrix) expresses the distance of the architectural type chosen by the user to the mean  
404 average value for all types. It helps unveiling specificities in terms of informational pattern for this or that type  
405 the user has chosen.



406  
407 **Figure 11** – Cumulative matrices for buttresses (left) and for lancet windows (right). The graphics clearly  
408 shows divergent information patterns. The white circles correspond to the mean value of each [criterion,  
409 value] pair across the collection of architectural elements. White dashes correspond to [criterion, value]  
410 pairs that are never found for the architectural type under scrutiny.

### 411 Implementation

412 The system architecture combines classic components in 3D web development – RDBMS/Php/Massive  
413 javascript (three.js). We have been considering the option of developing a so-called responsive interface but  
414 remain somewhat undecided on the relevance of this self-imposed development constraint. The issue is not  
415 technical, but a matter of readability: does it really make sense to navigate inside a complex 3D monument,  
416 with user interactions inside the 3D scene, on six inches screens (average size of mobile phones)? Moving  
417 inside or rotating the 3D model in those conditions is workable, but fine grain interactions are not. This aspect  
418 of the research remains undigged in, but would be a potential perspective – however falling out of the context  
419 of this contribution.

## 420 Discussion, limitations and conclusion

421 The prototype we present in this contribution has been designed as a tool aimed at distributing in a 3D  
422 space, and analysing visually, the scientific justification behind so-called *3D virtual reconstructions*. In this  
423 section we first comment on the prototype’s current limitations, some of which are significant and justify  
424 considering the experiment primarily as a proof of concept. We then conclude on lessons learned, on the  
425 relevance of re-examining today the issue, and on what could be done to go further.

### 426 Limitations

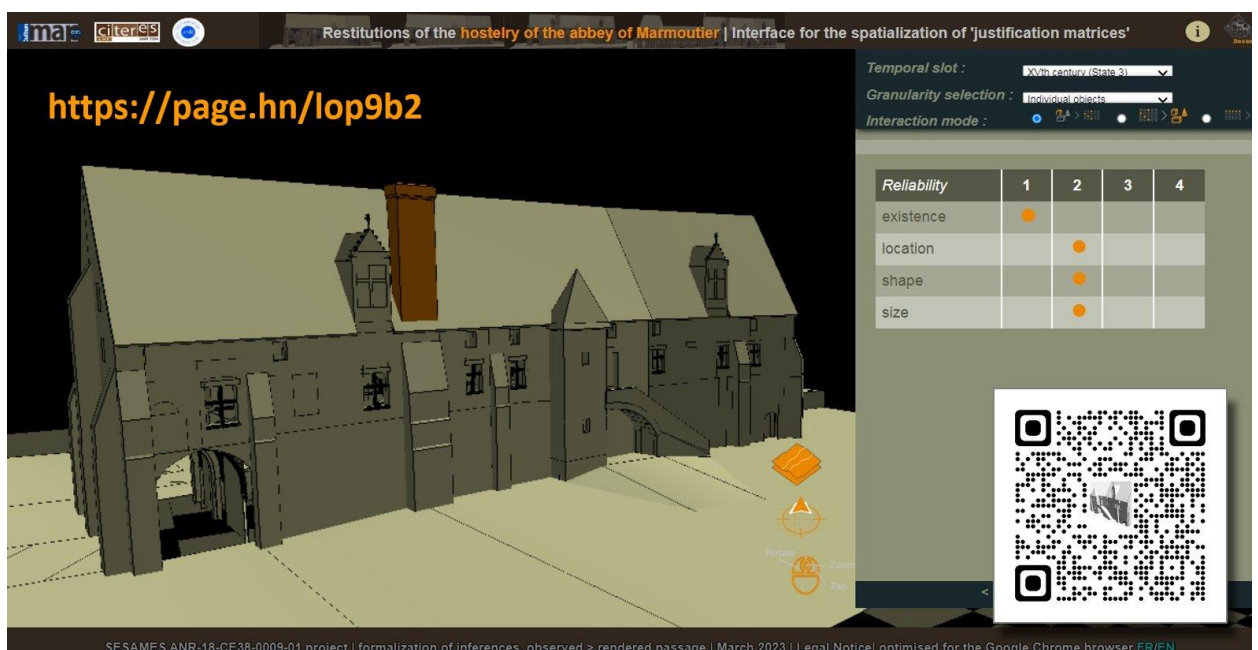
427 Our contribution focuses on how to convey visually, in a 3D environment, the **result** of an expertise through  
428 which 3D architectural elements present in a virtual reconstruction are associated with a formal model

429 expressing their plausibility (justification matrices). It does not address the issue of how to document and  
 430 model the expert's cognitive process, his/her choices, reasoning paths, decisions concerning a shape and the  
 431 corresponding matrix. There are ways to do so – starting from Gardin's logicism to today's MEMORIA IS - but  
 432 commenting on these approaches is beyond the scope of this paper (a key issue though). If sticking to this  
 433 contribution's core components various significant limitations have to be clearly stated:

- 434 • The plausibility analysis was carried out *a posteriori* (several years after the creation of the 3D models),  
 435 and not by the 3D models' creators but by a colleague, who had limited information on why this or  
 436 that modelling choice was made. What we present is a method, no conclusive results on this specific  
 437 case should be expected. Significant insights about a specific case would require conducting the  
 438 plausibility analysis task as the 3D model is created, or at least in direct interaction with the expert  
 439 that made the key modelling choices.
- 440 • An in-depth evaluation of the applicability and efficiency of the matrix itself would be needed – this  
 441 could be done by reapplying the approach to other cases, for instance. Labels and values of the  
 442 justification matrix as defined in this paper should be seen as a provisional methodological proposal,  
 443 requiring further debate and experimentation.
- 444 • The model's discretization is architecture-based: 3D elements present in the reconstruction are  
 445 consistent from the point of view of the architectural language (a wall, an opening, a buttress) but  
 446 obviously the reality can be far more complex. Typically sometimes within one consistent architectural  
 447 element (a wall) there are sub-parts that would call for different plausibility evaluations. As an answer  
 448 we have introduced a grouping mechanism (alternative granularities) but we acknowledge the  
 449 solution is at this stage partial.

#### 450 **Lessons learned and conclusions**

451 Shortly said, the experiment results in a number of lessons learned on methodological aspects (real-case  
 452 evaluation of the matrix formal model) and on technological aspects (interactions in the 3D scene, visual  
 453 encoding, 3D models reuse with a shift from proprietary 3D format to a web-enabled Javascript-based 3D  
 454 interface). But due to the above mentioned limitations we do not put forward any assertions concerning the  
 455 informational patterns that would characterise this particular case study. What we report on in this  
 456 contribution is a *potential*, backed up by a proof-of-concept experiment (Figure 12). Obviously the approach  
 457 can only be workable and lead to significant observations and informational patterns on a specific case study  
 458 if enough is known or remembered about the making of the 3D models (and we mean here the intellectual  
 459 choices of the expert).



460

461

**Figure 12** – An illustration of the prototype as it stands today, with URL connection links (open access).



462        However we hope such an experiment can act as food for *re*-thinking what type of knowledge can be  
463 expressed in a 3D virtual reconstruction. Said differently, we view this experiment as an opportunity to re-  
464 question the issue of sensemaking in 3D environments. The result we present materialises a sort of in-between  
465 Gardin’s demanding approach to documenting 3D models (oriented on decision processes that are conducted  
466 in the course of selecting this or that shape, this or that spatial arrangement), and traditional 3D models in  
467 which nothing is assessed as far as plausibility, human choices are concerned.

468        More generally, it seems to us that the technology, and the research agenda, may today open an  
469 opportunity to reconsider the information spaces connectable to 3D datasets, to enhance the interpretability  
470 of 3D scenes, as well as the repurposability of 3D components. The next step is probably to apply the method  
471 while producing the 3D models, and in the meantime to collect feedbacks on potential benefits as perceived  
472 by users.

473        To conclude, we argue in this paper that besides the most current research topics in and around the  
474 architectural heritage (acquiring 3D data, trying to store and share it in FAiR-like ways) providing researchers  
475 with means to analyse visually, to reason on (rather than to document) data and information sets is also a key  
476 issue (may the focus be put on 3D data or not). The experiment we have conducted is basically a proof-of-  
477 concept research, illustrating the fact that 3D datasets - if talking about a concrete implementation of FAIR  
478 principles -should be a repurposable material, *i.e.* content that can be reused to convey or discover new pieces  
479 of knowledge, or information patterns (in our case about uncertainty or plausibility). In that sense, our  
480 experiment is yet another attempt to reason about heritage data sets by drawing on practices from the InfoVis  
481 field. May readers considers the experiment as significant or anecdotal, it definitely is thought of, on our side,  
482 as a call to design and discuss in the scientific community news ways of visualising architectural data,  
483 information, and pieces of knowledge.

484

485

486 **Data, scripts, code, and supplementary information availability**

487 The prototype is available online: <https://page.hn/lop9b2>

488 **Conflict of interest disclosure**

489 The authors declare that they comply with the PCI rule of having no financial conflicts of interest in  
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550

## Appendix 1

551 As mentioned in the core of this paper, questioning the readability of 3D models, in terms of scientific  
 552 justification, is not a new issue. Back in 2006, we summed up lessons learned from a series of experiments,  
 553 in the form a methodological approach called ‘informative modelling’ including ‘rules of conduct’ inspired  
 554 by practices in the InfoVis field (Blaise & Dudek, 2006). A short booklet entitled ‘informative modelling: 14  
 555 rules + one’ defines these rules, and is now used as a teaching tool<sup>3</sup>. Definitions were preceded by an  
 556 introductory text that we naturally will not reproduce exhaustively here, but the following sentences are  
 557 quite clear about the challenge we faced then, and we still face today:

558 *“In the field of the architectural heritage, computer graphics have become an increasingly popular tool*  
 559 *for communicating results of historical investigations. Virtual reconstructions are often built in order to let*  
 560 *a wide public have an idea of how an architectural object may have been like at time t of its evolution. But*  
 561 *the use of graphics with this sole goal is often discussed in particular on two grounds:*

- 562 • *a lack of readability - due to the fact that the inferences for the reconstruction are hidden in the*  
 563 *final result;*
- 564 • *an appalling level of usefulness for the researchers, who invest time to produce a virtual*  
 565 *reconstruction, that in the end remains a side-effect of the research process - giving no access to*  
 566 *deeper information level and limited possibilities of updating.*

567 *In other words, the information-gathering effort made during a process of production of a*  
 568 *reconstruction, totally evaporates in the final result. [...] The basic idea behind informative modelling is that*  
 569 *the representation of artefacts should not necessarily claim veracity, but should support dynamic*  
 570 *information retrieval and visualisation. It is concerned with building information-effective graphics through*  
 571 *which a gain of understanding (not only of the architectural objects themselves, but also of what we really*  
 572 *know about them) can be achieved.”*

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<sup>3</sup> See [www.map.cnrs.fr/BlackWhite/PubSc/book\\_EN\\_FR.pdf](http://www.map.cnrs.fr/BlackWhite/PubSc/book_EN_FR.pdf)

573           The research we present in this paper definitely is an attempt to address the above challenges, and it  
574 seemed to us appropriate in the context of this contribution to list these rules here, as a mean to auto-  
575 question the prototype:

- 576           1. Each piece of information about the object will be interpreted in order to distribute  
577 information among semantic layers called informative scales.
- 578           2. The representation of an object will allow the user to retrieve data and information that justify  
579 the presence of the object at the time and date the representation shows.
- 580           3. The shape given to the object will stem from an interpretation of the data, stating the shape's  
581 credibility and making it visible
- 582           4. For each object, the representation will show what we know that we ignore, and will not  
583 contain unfounded affirmations that would not be justified by relevant data.
- 584           5. A theoretical model will describe architectural shapes in a structured way.
- 585           6. Objects represented inside 2D/3D models will be instances of the abovementioned theoretical  
586 mode.
- 587           7. The theoretical model's implementation will allow the reuse, the comparison and the  
588 sustainability of the information on the instances.
- 589           8. Each concept of the theoretical model will be attached to a given informative scale.
- 590           9. 2D/3D model will be the visual answer, displayed thanks to the representation of architectural  
591 objects, to a query about our state of knowledge.
- 592           10. 2D/3D models will be calculated in real time so as to reflect our current state of knowledge at  
593 query time.
- 594           11. The appearance given to an object will use a set of graphic codes that should be developed in  
595 order to visualise the object's underlying information.
- 596           12. The object will be displayed inside 2D/3D models with alternative levels of abstraction  
597 depending on both/either the scale and the level of knowledge reached in the investigation  
598 process.
- 599           13. The investigation process will be implemented as a nonordered process allowing the  
600 integration of disjoint sets of information.
- 601           14. The level of knowledge reached in the investigation process on a given object will be  
602 represented in real time inside 2D/3D models.
- 603           15. ***If a 2D/3D model does not produce a gain of insight into the underlying information - it  
604 should be considered worthless.***  
605