

Architecture and Its Decoration

To my wife

THE STORY of the monastery of Centula (present-day Saint-Riquier), of its construction and its downfall, is the very symbol of all that was brilliant and transitory in the civilization of the Carolingian renaissance.

Saint-Riquier is a small market town in northern France (Somme department), about thirty miles north of Amiens. Its population today is 1,130. It stands on the site of what in Carolingian times was a city, one which, according to extant records, had a population of about 7,000, and which stood at the gates of an abbey whose resident community numbered 300 monks, 100 novices and a large staff of servants. Town and abbey together formed a sort of holy city, whose sacred character appeared to promise it a long and peaceful future. But in the year 881 the Northmen devastated the region, the abbey was burnt down and everything destroyed. In the Middle Ages the monastery was rebuilt on a much smaller scale. The present church of Saint-Riquier—a fine building of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, measuring over 250 feet in length—is the only remaining monument which gives some idea of the size and extent of the abbey buildings in the time of Charlemagne.

Were it not for the fact that there has survived a view of the Saint-Riquier monastery, whose features, though very schematically represented, can be filled out on the basis of textual records and a study of local topography, one would hesitate to believe that the Carolingian Centula covered an area as great as that of Cluny in the twelfth century (and Cluny was the largest monastic establishment of medieval Christendom). My conjectures as to the size of Centula have been confirmed by the recent discovery of vestiges of the round church of Notre-Dame, in the course of excavations carried out by Honoré Bernard.

Centula and Cluny each had a community of 300 monks. This is about the only point of resemblance between the two abbeys, which existed three centuries apart. In all other respects they differed conspicuously. Cluny was a house of prayer; though it accepted gifts from laymen for the construction of its churches and the support of its monks, it was quite independent of secular authority. Centula,

on the other hand, was a state-supported institution. The construction of the monastery was completed in 799. It had been carried out in less than ten years, the bulk of the funds having been supplied by Charlemagne, who, due to his conquests, was already disposing of immense resources. The founder-abbot, Angilbert, had a son by one of Charlemagne's daughters. Angilbert distinguished himself as a poet and scholar; the nickname Homer was bestowed on him by his fellow members of the Palace Academy. He also became one of the highest dignitaries of the court. Between 792 and 794 Charlemagne sent him on three missions as imperial legate to the pope. At Centula Angilbert acted both as abbot of the monastery and as mayor of the holy city outside it. He had his private residence in a villa built outside the walls of the abbey, but he held audience in a hall near the main gate.

The monastery was dedicated to the 'holy and indivisible Trinity,' symbolized by the number 3 and the form of a triangle given to the layout of the monastic buildings. Although the symbolism of numbers had been taken over by Christianity from ancient Greece, rarely was it given so concrete an application as here. The main church was placed under the triple patronage of the Saviour, the Virgin and St Richarius. There were two other churches, one dedicated to the Virgin and the Apostles, the other to St Benedict. These three churches stood at the three extremities of a vast triangle bounded by porticoes and walls, forming not an inner courtyard like that of the monastic cloisters of the later Middle Ages but a triangular area nearly 1,000 feet long on each side in which the various monastic buildings stood. The porticoes visible in the old view of the monastery form a covered walk, abutting the enclosure wall, which the monks could use in inclement weather for their morning and evening processions from the abbey church to the two other sanctuaries.

The church of Notre-Dame was a large rotunda to which was attached a rectangular part that has just been cleared in the current excavations. We know from documents that in the centre of the rotunda, beneath a gold-plated ciborium, stood the altar dedicated to the Virgin. Round the periphery stood twelve altars dedicated to the Apostles. The dome overhead was decorated with mosaics or paintings.

If the old view of the abbey gives a trustworthy picture of the main church, dedicated to the Saviour, the Virgin and St Richarius, then this great monument too was very different in design from French Romanesque churches. The main altar was at the west end of the church and stood over a crypt housing the most precious relics of the monastery. Like the other altar at the east end, it was surmounted by a 'tower' whose outward aspect resembled that of the top of the rotunda of Notre-Dame. These towers, as in the Palatine Chapel at Aachen, were flanked by turrets with spiral staircases. At each end of the church was an atrium; that at the west end formed the main entrance of the monastery. The gates were surmounted by three oratories dedicated to the guardian angels.

As for the interior of the church of St Richarius, it too was of a very unusual design. For the divine service the 300 monks were divided into three choirs, one in the centre of the nave and one at each of the two sanctuaries at opposite ends of the church, so that their alternating chants resounded throughout the vast edifice. At certain hours the service was broken by processions whose itinerary and stations

were carefully regulated. Devotions were performed at twelve altars. Three main altars, dedicated to the Saviour, the Virgin and St Richarius, were entirely faced with gold, silver and precious stones. Six 'bronze images' representing 'animals, birds and men' surmounted the columns which closed off the altar under the east 'tower.'

In addition to the twelve altars, there were four commemorative monuments inside the church, one at each of the four cardinal points; these were the principal stations at which the daily processions of the monks halted for prayer. Their decoration was no doubt similar to that of the crosses which, in the British Isles at the same period, marked the stations of the liturgical processions. But these British crosses stood outdoors and were carved in stone, while the monuments inside the church of St Richarius were made of stucco. Each of these monuments offered a representation of the scene it commemorated: at the west end was the 'Nativity,' at the east end in front of the choir, the 'Holy Passion'; on the north side of the nave was the 'Resurrection,' on the south side the 'Ascension.' They were stucco reliefs, as a text tells us, of 'admirable workmanship,' enhanced with gold, precious stones and sumptuous colours. As in Britain, there was then in Gaul a flourishing school of figural sculpture, although such imagery had been banned over a large part of Christendom at that very time by the triumph of Iconoclasm in the Eastern Church.

A remarkable feature of Centula was the town that adjoined the abbey and formed with it an imposing holy city—larger and more populous than most of the cathedral towns of Gaul at that time. The houses were built with light materials (like those shown on the plan of St Gall), so that they were probably all destroyed in the fire of 881. But texts of the early Carolingian period leave no room for doubt as to the town's size and the well-ordered layout of its streets; it must have been more like an ancient city than a straggling medieval town. According to a census taken in the year 831, it had 2,500 houses and five churches, divided into several *vici* (streets or wards), each reserved for a particular category of inhabitants. The *vicus militum* was the residence of 110 knights with a church of their own, the 'chapel of the nobles.' Of these, one hundred held benefices, while all of them owed military service to the abbey. In the other *vici* lived people of various crafts and trades, who owed the monastery services in kind corresponding to their profession. There were also merchants who had their forum or marketplace.

The holy city was surrounded by suburbs. Seven villages within a radius of four miles played a part in the liturgical life of Centula similar to that of the seven processional stations of Rome. On certain feast days the villages were visited by processions of monks and townsfolk. On other days the villagers came into town to take part in the processions held at Centula. As in Rome, all these processions kept to a strict pattern. The number 7 symbolized the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. There were accordingly seven processional crosses, seven reliquaries, seven deacons, seven subdeacons, seven acolytes. The monks and townfolk followed seven abreast, and the hundred novices of the monastery brought up the rear carrying seven standards. Every detail was regulated, even the route taken by those on horseback.

We are fortunate in having this precise and detailed information about Centula, set down in written records. The monastery and its holy city were organized and



3 - SAINT-DENIS, ABBEY. COLUMN BASE. MUSÉE LAPIDAIRE, SAINT-DENIS.

their way of life regulated by their founder, Angilbert, who was appointed abbot in 790. The buildings were therefore only a few years earlier in date than the Royal Palace and the Palatine Chapel of Aachen. Centula and Aachen were virtually contemporary institutions, founded by Charlemagne or his councillors, and each sheds light on the other. For Aachen no written records remain, but the essential part of the buildings still stands. Antedating the revival of letters, eighth-century architecture, whose fine workmanship is exemplified by the column base from the abbey church of Saint-Denis consecrated in 754 by Pope Stephen II, is for us the visible link connecting the Carolingian civilization with a past that is still obscure. In the history of Centula, however, one is struck by an entirely new feature. The texts show that, alongside a nascent feudalism, there was a very strict organization of civil and religious activities, so strict as to smack of military discipline. The same observation has been made regarding the monastic institutions established by Benedict of Aniane. The civilizing achievements of the Carolingian dynasty cannot obscure the fact that its power rested on its prowess in war; it lost that power when it ceased to be capable of answering violence with violence. We have no very clear idea how, in the early years of the ninth century, the Carolingians assembled the talent required to set up ateliers of calligraphers, painters, ivory carvers and goldsmiths who at once produced masterpieces. Strict discipline was probably a significant factor.

CHARACTERISTICS AND SOURCES OF CAROLINGIAN ARCHITECTURE

The buildings of Centula and Aachen prove that, during the long interval separating antiquity from the Middle Ages, there was a brief period of time—about three centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire, and about three centuries before the first Gothic cathedrals rose into the sky—when Gaul produced a well-ordered architecture, capable of covering wide spans with vaulting and designed on a scale that aspired to give men the taste for grandeur. At no other stage in the formation of Europe was architecture so directly and forcibly the expression of a political ideal.

In the Merovingian period there had indeed been an architecture worthy of the name, but there had been no distinct art form styled to reflect the aspirations of the Merovingian dynasty. Now, on the contrary, there appeared under Charlemagne a specifically Carolingian architecture, a court art whose full development took place after the publication of the *Libri carolini* shortly after 790, and which continued into the reigns of Louis the Pious and Charles the Bald. This court art soon spread far and wide, for the prelates and palatines of the Emperor's entourage imitated it in the buildings which they themselves sponsored. The workshops, being few in number, moved from place to place as the need arose; this is proved by characteristic similarities of design and decoration at Aachen, Saint-Médard of Soissons, Ingelheim, Regensburg and Germigny-des-Prés. The heavy labour was done by local workmen, and the bishops did not fail to complain when, as occasionally happened, too much was asked of their diocesans. These similarities among widely distant monuments provide some valuable clues to an art that has become much better known due to excavations carried out since World War II. Very few Carolingian monuments have survived in their entirety, but the remaining vestiges often enable us to reconstruct the ground plan or even in part the elevation of a vanished building. Many of these buildings can be accurately dated, and sometimes the purpose and circumstances of their construction are known thanks to an abundance of documents which make the history of the Carolingian period easier to write than that of the early Capetians.

Wall Painting

Before considering in detail the different elements of Carolingian architecture as shown by the monuments themselves, something must be said about one of its highly original features. We can still admire the church books of the ninth century with their magnificent illuminations and beautiful handwriting. All evidence seems to indicate that churches and palaces were also painted in bright colours skilfully



4 - LORSCH, ABBEY GATEWAY. PAINTED DECORATION, UPPER HALL.

combined in decorative patterns or narrative scenes. Such paintings were described by the poet Ermoldus Nigellus in his *Life of Louis the Pious*. He vaunted not so much the palace itself, which had been built and decorated for this ruler at Ingelheim near Mainz, as the paintings that covered its walls. The large frescoes in the Imperial Hall depicted the epic and legendary history of the Franks from antiquity to the conquests of Charlemagne. The nave of the palace church was decorated, symbolically, on one side with Old Testament scenes, on the other with Gospel scenes. (The religious iconography of the Carolingian period was at once stricter and more varied than that which we see in later Romanesque frescoes.) For the Ingelheim frescoes Alcuin, Theodulf and Florus of Lyons composed painted inscriptions which in some cases show an impressive elevation of thought. Were the paintings themselves, to which the inscriptions refer, informed by anything like the same grandeur? For a long time this seemed hard to believe, but today, in the light of the magnificent sets of paintings discovered at Lorsch, Saint-Germain of Auxerre, San Satiro of Milan and St Maximin of Trier, it can no longer be doubted.

5 - AUXERRE, SAINT-GERMAIN, CRYPTS. VAULT DECORATIONS. ►





6 - AUXERRE, SAINT-GERMAIN, CRYPTS. THE ARREST OF ST STEPHEN.

The gateway of the monastery of Lorsch, which the Germans call the *Torhalle* and which appears to date from the early ninth century, is designed in imitation of a Roman triumphal arch with three archways. It stands alone on the west side of the vast atrium in front of the monastic church, as the antique triumphal arch stood at the entrance of a forum. This complex falls short of the perfection achieved by the Romans in the first centuries of our era, but it aspired to the same ideal of grandeur.

On the upper floor of the gateway is a large hall thirty-three feet long and twenty-three feet wide. Its exact purpose is not known. It may have served as a reception hall when the emperor, exercising his privilege as the founder, came to stay at the abbey, for kings often had living quarters of their own at the entrance of monasteries. It may also have served as audience hall for the abbot, as did that at Saint-Riquier. This would have been in keeping with an old tradition, for we know that at Reims in the seventh century the bishop lived over one of the town gates. In any case the paintings in this hall, discovered underneath some medieval frescoes at the beginning of this century, evoke most impressively the majestic forms of ancient palaces.



7 - AUXERRE, SAINT-GERMAIN, CRYPTS. THE STONING OF ST STEPHEN AT THE GATES OF JERUSALEM.

Probably nowhere else do we get so vivid an idea of the setting of palace life in Carolingian times, for these remarkably well-preserved wall paintings are like a stage momentarily deserted by the actors. They are illusionistic paintings, in the manner of so many ancient Roman frescoes. They show a delicately moulded architrave carried by marble columns resting on a low wall. Squares of two colours form a chequer pattern on the wall. The same chequerwork appears on the ground floor of the eleventh-century narthex at Tournus, and subsequently in many decorative paintings of the Middle Ages. There is unfortunately no way of telling whether the Lorsch paintings represent a survival or a deliberate renaissance of antique art.

At Auxerre, however, the wall paintings in the crypt of Saint-Germain have an unmistakable originality. These remarkable scenes, brought to light by René Louis in 1927, were painted expressly for the 'admirable series of crypts' (in the words of a contemporary chronicler) which were consecrated in 865. They are not the work of one painter or one workshop. The latest of them appear to be the figures of several bishops of Auxerre painted life-size on the outer wall of the *confessio* contain-



8 - AUXERRE, SAINT-GERMAIN, CRYPTS. DECORATIVE PAINTING.



9 - MILAN, SAN SATIRO, PIETÀ CHAPEL. DECORATIVE PAINTING.

ing the body of St Germanus—silent guardians, as it were, of their own tombs hidden from view under the pavement of the crypt and around the saintly remains of the holiest of their predecessors. The three episodes from the life of St Stephen painted in the north ambulatory may well be prior to 857, the year Bishop Heribald died. For this prelate is known to have donated a silver altar, dedicated to the patron saint of his cathedral and placed under the fresco representing the arrest of St Stephen. This piece of information is all the more valuable since the same bishop is said by a contemporary chronicler to have had his cathedral adorned with 'most beautiful paintings.' The Carolingian cathedral of Auxerre dedicated to St Stephen no longer exists, but the Saint-Germain frescoes show that the mural painters of this period could surpass the illuminators in skill and imagination. Some analogies have been rightly drawn between these frescoes and manuscript paintings from the scriptorium of Saint-Denis. But in the ninth century, and later as well, mural painters must have specialized, since they had their own techniques and conventions. Significant in this respect is the scene of the stoning of St Stephen. All the most

emphatic lines, both in the figures and in the architectural elements evoking Jerusalem, run parallel to the oblique lines of a grid easily reconstituted on the basis of the half-square in which the circumference of the arch is inscribed. The beauty of the two figural scenes reproduced here is so evident to the visitor that they scarcely call for comment. Another scene represents St Stephen being questioned by the judge: this, in my opinion, is the most moving of the three. Unfortunately it is all but effaced. As in the other two scenes, one is struck by the variety of expression given to the faces. On this score the Auxerre paintings are superior to the best frescoes of the twelfth century. The realism of this Carolingian figural painting had its origin in the practice of portrait painting which had been maintained in Italy and possibly Gaul as well since late antiquity. (Many of the admirable ruler-portraits in Carolingian manuscripts seem to have been painted from life.) The Auxerre painter's evident sincerity and directness did not, however, exclude convention, since he did not scruple to paint a simulated capital under a real abacus of stone. This feature of the Auxerre paintings is very much in the spirit of those in the Lorsch gateway. Another of their features—the decorative arabesques setting off the architecture of the vaulting—links them with the frescoes in San Satiro, Milan, which are only slightly later in date.

The crypt paintings in St Maximin of Trier, which were probably executed soon after the Norse invasion of 883 and certainly before the partial collapse of the church in 943, may be likened to Romanesque frescoes in their uniformity of facial expression, but the Crucifixion scene still retains much of the Carolingian vigour in its composition and colour scheme.

By this time, the end of the ninth century, the best workshops had moved for safety far away from the river valleys most exposed to Norse raiders, as Mme Gaborit-Chopin has recently shown conclusively redating to the last quarter of the ninth century the very fine Gospel Book of Saint-Martial of Limoges, which hitherto had been attributed to a painter of around the year 1000.

Mosaics

Wall mosaics, more dazzling than frescoes, were used in church architecture from Early Christian times to the ninth century, both in Italy and in Gaul. It is not known, however, whence came the mosaicists who were employed by Charlemagne to decorate the dome of the Palatine Chapel at Aachen and by the councillor Theodulf to decorate the apsidal vault and some of the walls in the oratory of his country residence at Germigny-des-Prés. Unfortunately the large Aachen mosaic, showing an over-life-size figure of God enthroned opposite the imperial loggia and surrounded by the twenty-four elders of the Apocalypse, is known to us now only from a print by Ciampini, a seventeenth-century sketch by Peiresc and a few short descriptions. Its iconography was traditional in Italy, but the mosaicist's colours



10 – GERMIGNY-DES-PRÉS, CHURCH. APSE MOSAIC.

seem to have been richer and more numerous than those of contemporary mosaics in Rome. At Germigny-des-Prés all that remains after many restorations and the reconstruction of the oratory is the main apse mosaic, but some years ago I published some early copies which give us an accurate picture of the lost mosaics.

It is instructive to compare the Germigny-des-Prés mosaics, finished about 806, with those in the church of Santa Prassede in Rome, commissioned by Pope Pascal I (817–824); these are the finest of ninth-century Roman mosaics. The two works differ in technique, and their only iconographic feature in common is the representation on the intrados of the vaults of worshipping cherubim, each with a double pair of outspread wings. The two works are very different, and each has its particular merits. The inspirer of the Germigny-des-Prés mosaics—undoubtedly the poet Theodulf himself—must be credited with having sought to convey in them a philosophy of his own, one that was not without affinities with contemporary aniconic theories. This point has been well brought out by André Grabar. The general theme was an evocation of the Paradise promised to man, with its flowers, trees and angels, from



11 – GERMIGNY-DES-PRÉS, CHURCH. APSE MOSAIC, DETAIL. ►



12 - SAINT-QUENTIN, COLLEGIATE CHURCH, CRYPT. MOSAIC PAVEMENT.

the time when God (represented by the divine hand issuing from a cloud) gave the Israelites the Ark of the Covenant guarded by two angels. The divine hand and the Ark figured in the apse mosaic, Paradise in the wall mosaics around the altar.

This outstanding work shows no trace of Byzantine or Roman influence, and its subtle iconography had no effect on any subsequent work. It must be remembered that the Germigny-des-Prés church was not designed for crowds of worshippers. It was the private oratory of the most cultivated member of Charlemagne's entourage. Judging by the poems he wrote, Theodulf was a genuine lover of art, a dilettante who knew, for example, how to interpret in choice and scholarly terms the representation of the Earth and the World which he had had painted on the walls of his villa. Although it is clear from his description of this painting that it was based on antique models, there were other sources of inspiration as well. In the main apse of the oratory there was a blind arcade, each arch of which was decorated in mosaic with a large-petalled, highly stylized flower which has been designated as the 'Sassanian palmette.' True, this motif occurs in Iranian art from very early times. But it passed

into the decorative repertory of the Arabs, and it must have reached Germigny-des-Prés by way of Moorish Spain. Theodulf as a child had lived further south, close to Spain. He was a native of Septimania and his parents were Goths. Several Carolingian manuscripts of the ninth century, in particular the Gospel Book of Lothair, contain pictures of pointed arches, multifoils and characteristic ornaments undoubtedly deriving from Umayyad art; by what channels these alien forms were transmitted to Gaul it is impossible to say.

From the British Isles, Septimania, Italy and Rome, Charlemagne summoned clerics of high repute to become his collaborators. It was as if he were trying to regain control of the driving energies of the lands that had once formed the Roman Empire. What has been said above about wall paintings and mosaics shows the variety of sources on which Carolingian art drew, but also the freedom with which the chief men of the kingdom handled art forms and shaped them to suit their purposes. It must not be supposed, from the high quality of these works, that the Carolingians ever practised 'art for art's sake.' On the contrary, it would appear that everything was made to answer to a religious or political purpose.

Of the mosaic pavements in Carolingian churches and palaces, there remain only a few vestiges. Those that have come to light at Saint-Quentin and Aachen testify to the survival or revival of antique practices.

EXAMPLES AND MODELS FROM NORTH ITALY

In the previous volume of this series, in dealing with the 'crypt' in the church of Saint-Laurent at Grenoble, I pointed out how much this late eighth-century monument has to tell us about the origins of Carolingian architecture. The superimposed orders of engaged columns and colonnettes, the wall ribs (formerets) and the stucco decorations reappear at Germigny-des-Prés. Now, these elements of early medieval architecture came not from the North but from Lombardy. The same is true of the triapsidal choir. This type of chevet existed at Parenzo as early as the sixth century; by the eighth it had spread to Italy, Switzerland and Gaul. The main road taken at that time by travellers from northern Gaul to Italy ran through Switzerland. It is on this road that we find the main evidence for the extension northwards of forms already established along the Mediterranean and the Adriatic.

Many factors favoured this northward migration of forms, beginning in the eighth century with the reigns of Pepin and Charlemagne. The introduction of the Roman liturgy into Gaul was one episode in a political undertaking which, carried out with remarkable foresight and consistency, cemented a close alliance between the early Carolingians and the papacy. Continual embassies and journeyings to and from established almost unbroken relations between Rome, Saint-Denis and Aachen. Further exchanges arose from the founding of many monasteries by Franks in Italy in the late eighth and ninth centuries. To give an idea of the level reached by the



13 - CASTELSEPRIO, SANTA MARIA FORIS PORTAS. NATIVITY, DETAIL.

arts in Italy at that time, it is enough to cite the discoveries of wall paintings made in recent years in Santa Maria Foris Portas of Castelseprio, San Salvatore of Brescia, San Benedetto of Malles and the Johanneskirche of Müstair: all are highly significant.

As related in our previous volume, the choir frescoes in the church of Santa Maria Foris Portas at Castelseprio in Lombardy were discovered by chance in 1944. This remote country town was once the summer residence of the archbishops of Milan. The Castelseprio frescoes are among the pinnacles of Christian art but cannot be dated with precision: they may have been painted at any time between the early eighth and the late ninth century. The technique bears the obvious mark of Byzantine training, but the mistakes made in the lettering of a Greek inscription indicate that the artist must have been a Latin. Two other features conform to Western usage: certain iconographic details in the scenes of Christ's childhood and the arrangement of the scenes in superimposed registers, like the Müstair paintings and the later frescoes of the Ottonian school.

14 - CASTELSEPRIO, SANTA MARIA FORIS PORTAS. ADORATION OF THE MAGI.





There can be little doubt today that southern Italy, steeped as it was in the Byzantine civilization, played a very important part in transmitting a knowledge of Byzantine art to the workshops of north Italy and Gaul. It seems to me that the stuccoes and frescoes of Santa Maria della Valle of Cividale tell the same story. In Constantinople the Iconoclast controversy had thrown many artists out of work, and some of them must have taken refuge in Italy. This influx of foreign masters gave new life and vigour to Western art. The Adoration of the Magi at Castelseprio, a work of sovereign grandeur, remains in our memory as the symbol of this upsurge of Western painting, of which Carolingian book painting represents another aspect.

A few years ago a series of wall paintings and stuccoes was methodically cleared in the church of San Salvatore at Brescia, which was part of a monastery founded in the eighth century and rebuilt in the ninth, probably in the reign of Louis the Pious. The church is a basilica of grandiose proportions. The nave and side aisles are covered with a timber roof. The nave arcading consists of semicircular arches supported by fluted columns, some of which, together with nearly all the capitals, were taken over from ancient monuments.

The church was decorated with both paintings and stuccoes, the latter of remarkable workmanship. They adorn the intrados of the semicircular arches in the nave, in accordance with a long-standing tradition of which the most famous examples are at Ravenna and date from the sixth century. The patterns obtained by modelling the stucco are astonishingly varied, ranging from woven designs to stars. Some patterns recall in more rustic form the stuccoes in Santa Maria della Valle of Cividale. Whatever may be the date of the Brescia stuccoes, it is impossible to attribute them to artists hailing from Gaul. Nor are they related to any known Roman works. They must have been made by one of the many local workshops active at that time in northern Italy, where religious architecture was then enjoying a vigorous revival.

The same remarks apply to the Brescia paintings, which were brought to light in the nave above the arcading. Like many Early Christian churches, the basilica of San Salvatore was expressly designed so as to leave plenty of room for wall paintings between the nave arcading and the upper windows. The fine drawing and vivid colouring of these frescoes can be seen from the ones that have come down to us in a good state of preservation.

At Malles, in the Italian Tyrol, a few of the wall paintings decorating the oratory of the monastery of San Benedetto have survived. Its closure slabs and some of the strange and precious stuccoes in high relief, which adorned the east wall, are now preserved in the Bolzano museum. The oratory consists of a single rectangular hall with a timber roof. In one feature, however, its plan is highly original. Recessed into the west wall are three tall niches forming apses and housing three altars. In so small an oratory one altar would have sufficed. Clearly then, at the time of its construction in the early ninth century (the dating suggested by the carving of the closure slabs), a special point was made of placing three altars side by side, and even giving this arrangement an architectural setting: the altars were enclosed by stucco columns carrying elaborately decorated arches. This monumental ensemble marks,



16 - BRESCIA, SAN SALVATORE. FRESCO, SOUTH WALL.

as it were, the first step in the direction of the great altarpieces of the later Middle Ages.

This piece of stuccowork is of particular interest, for it may possibly represent a replica in popular style of the great altar enclosures with marble columns and bronze figures which, as we know from documents, could once be seen at Saint-Riquier and other monastery churches of the ninth century. The columns at Malles, some with flutings, others with interlace patterns, are accompanied by crouching quadrupeds (lions and panthers); on the upper parts are spirited caryatid figures. The Malles oratory stands on what once was a busy highroad over the Alps; the fact that this route later was used infrequently saved these priceless decorations from destruction. They were executed by a highly skilled workshop which must have produced many others. The art of stucco carving was a legacy of late antiquity. Being easy to practise, it may not have led to the creation of masterpieces, but it did play a key part in transmitting the traditions of ancient sculpture and high relief carving. The almost complete destruction of these fragile works is a great loss for archaeology.



17 - BRESCIA, SAN SALVATORE. FRESCO, FRAGMENT. MUSEO CRISTIANO, BRESCIA.

All these stuccoes were painted. At Malles, as at Cividale, polychrome stucco-work alternated with paintings of figures or scenes. A large figure of Christ was painted over the main altar. He is represented standing, holding an open book and flanked by two angels. Above the side altars the figures of St Stephen and St Gregory can be made out. In the space between the main altar and the two secondary altars, two standing figures are represented. One is a churchman, his head set off by a square nimbus; the other is a bare-headed warrior, holding with both hands a heavy sword sheathed in its scabbard. It has been assumed, no doubt rightly, that this churchman and knight were two donors, or rather—since the former is shown holding a model of the church—the founders of the Malles monastery, which provided accommodations for travellers making their way over what was then the main road between Switzerland and northern Italy.

The faces of these two figures give the impression of being portraits, and the painting, full of subtle gradations, gives the illusion of life. No such pictures of living people appear on the walls of Romanesque churches, for by then the art of portrai-



19 - MALLES, SAN BENEDETTO, EAST WALL. NICHES FORMING APSES.

ture had been lost, not to be revived in France until the early fourteenth century.

A short distance to the west of San Benedetto of Malles stands the Johanneskirche, the abbey church of St John, at Müstair in the Grisons. Founded in the early years of the ninth century, it was patronized by Charlemagne himself. Even so, both architecture and decoration are characteristic of this part of Switzerland bordering on upper Italy, which still preserves precious vestiges of its early medieval art at Disentis, Chur and Schänis. Another church in the Grisons, at Müstail, picturesquely situated on a mountainside, does not go back beyond the early Middle Ages; its apse is so close an imitation of that of the Johanneskirche at Müstair, built two centuries earlier, that we are justified in regarding this as the standard type of church in the architecture of this region.

The Johanneskirche reproduces the very simple plan of San Benedetto of Malles, but on a scale of uncommon size. In the fifteenth century the building was divided into nave and side aisles by two rows of columns, these being installed to support the cross-ribbed vaulting which then replaced the timber roof. Originally the church

18 - MALLES, SAN BENEDETTO, EAST WALL. A DONOR.



20 - MÜSTAIR, JOHANNESKIRCHE. FRESCOES, NORTH WALL.

was a very large rectangular hall church, nearly sixty feet in width and correspondingly high. This large hall ended on the east side in three apses of equal depth, which projected outside beyond the hall itself. As at San Benedetto of Malles, the apses rise to such a height above ground level that they are more like the niches of ancient monuments than the apses of Romanesque churches. Crowning them is a lofty semidome obviously intended from the start to contain a vast fresco whose every detail should be clearly visible throughout the church. The side walls were pierced with rather narrow windows, so that a considerable surface area remained for the wall paintings. These were arranged in a long series of rectangular panels, extending from the floor to roof level. This type of hall church was clearly designed with a view to making the most rational use of wall painting. In what remains of the Carolingian construction, there is no trace of any stone carvings or mouldings. It is possible, however, that before the extensive interior alterations of the fifteenth century there were stucco decorations on the east wall similar to those in San Benedetto of Malles. (In one of the former abbey churches at Disentis, also in the Grisons,



21 - MÜSTAIR, JOHANNESKIRCHE. FRESCOES, NORTH APSE. ▶



22 – MÜSTAIR, JOHANNESKIRCHE, NORTH WALL. SCENES OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST, DETAIL.

about one hundred miles distant from Malles and Müstair, various stucco fragments have been found, some from friezes, some representing the heads of figures; they were undoubtedly part of the church decorations. Of rather uncouth workmanship, they still show touches of bright colour.)

The square tower standing on the south side of the chevet of the Johanneskirche is a twelfth-century addition. The two galleries, however, which ran along the north and south side walls were of early medieval construction. They represented a belated form of the side porches of early basilicas; such porches were a common feature of the churches of Gaul in Merovingian times, as shown in the church plans grouped together in our previous volume. Here the open gallery became an oratory, while no doubt retaining its funerary character.

Ninth-century paintings were brought to light in the Johanneskirche under the medieval frescoes which had been painted over them. They would have been of inestimable value to us, were it not that in all too many places they have been over-restored, to an extent that has completely changed their character. But the overall



23 – MÜSTAIR, JOHANNESKIRCHE, WEST WALL. THE LAST JUDGMENT, DETAIL.

effect remains, and it is impressive. By the early ninth century wall painting had become a means of edification and instruction comparable to the book. The pictures painted in the nave of Old St Peter's in the time of Constantine the Great or the large fifth-century mosaics decorating Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome had none of this imposing and insistent continuity.

The arrangement of the Müstair paintings in a long series of rectangular panels perpetuated the compositional principle which had already been adopted at Santa Maria Foris Portas of Castelseprio and anticipated that of the Ottonian paintings in churches of the Lake Constance region. The side walls represent scenes from the Old and New Testaments; among them are also a few scenes from saints' lives. The west wall is covered with a huge composition representing various episodes of the Last Judgment: above, the return of the Son of Man, the angel sounding the

trumpet and the dead rising from their graves; lower down, Christ the Judge, enclosed in a circular glory and accompanied by the Apostles. It is difficult to give a fair appraisal of these paintings, which are much less proficient than those in San Benedetto of Malles and which yet leave the impression of a grandiose work. The colours, in which browns and ochres predominate, are lustreless. Faces are rough and churlish. Yet this rather uncouth art has a grandeur of its own, due to the skilful design of the composition as a whole and its architectural character. The influence of northern Italy can also be seen—indeed it predominates—in the stone carvings of the sanctuaries.

The sanctuary round the altar, where the priest officiated, was separated from the worshippers in the nave by chancel parapets or closure slabs. Such partitions became a prominent feature of monastery churches and cathedrals; they marked the limit of the 'choir' of monks or canons assembled for the divine service or the sacred chants. These screens, consisting of upright slabs fitted together and held in place by grooves and tenons, were an ideal medium for ornamental carvings. So was the ambo, the stone pulpit facing the congregation assembled in the nave; so too was the ciborium, the canopy placed over the altar, which was sometimes made of metal but usually of stone. Since the most venerated object in the whole church was the altar, it was often covered in the Carolingian period, like the shrines containing saints' relics, with sheets of gold or silver with elaborate repoussé work; such was the altar given to Saint-Denis by Charles the Bald, whose beauty and richness can be seen from a fifteenth-century painting in which it is represented (see p. 251). It is known from written records that the choir of Saint-Denis was decorated with bronzes and ivory carvings; of these splendid fittings nothing remains.

What has survived however, over a large part of Europe (Italy, Switzerland, Germany, France), is a number of carved closure slabs from eighth- and ninth-century churches. Their patterns of interlaces, spirals and vine scrolls, though often fascinating in their virtuosity, are in sharp contrast to the still classical elegance of the marble slabs of the sixth-century churches in Ravenna. The carving of interlace patterns is not, as was long supposed, a creation of the Carolingian renaissance. It has now been established beyond doubt that the Carolingians borrowed this design from northern Italy and gave it a prominent place in the art of Gaul by using it for the adornment of their renovated or newly founded churches.

The only closure slab whose design—and a most remarkable one it is—can be attributed to the Carolingian renaissance, or at least to the ingenious activity of the workshops in or around Metz in the late eighth century, is the one from the former monastery church of Saint-Pierre-en-Citadelle at Metz. Its style is so directly inspired by themes of Early Christian art that archaeologists used to date it to the seventh century. That this dating was erroneous has been shown by the recent discovery of some slabs carved by the same workshop; they come from the church of a monastery founded in 783 in the royal villa of Cheminot, quite close to Metz.

Several hundred closure slabs carved with interlaces or braid designs are now known to exist. Many of them had been reused as paving slabs, with the carved



24 - METZ, SAINT-PIERRE-EN-CITADELLE. CLOSURE SLABS. MUSÉE CENTRAL, METZ.

side turned face down and thus preserved intact. The same decorative patterns occur in many different places and countries, sometimes at a great distance from each other. How is this to be explained? Research work has been carried far enough for a plausible hypothesis to be put forward.

By pinpointing on a map all the places where these carvings have been preserved, we find that they extend over an area including northern and central Italy, Switzerland, Gaul, Istria, Austria and southern Germany. The densest concentration lies in the vicinity of the famous quarries (still being worked today) at the meeting point of the present frontiers of Italy, Switzerland and Austria. The earliest stone carvers must have set up their workshops here, near the quarries, and exported their products far and wide, by land and sea, following the economic practice of antiquity. The exported carvings were copied locally, and these copies were imitated in turn by other workshops. This would explain the wide uniformity of a decorative design formerly attributed to the genius of the barbarian artists of northern Europe. The investigations of Raffaele Cattaneo, Maurice Prou and Nils Åberg have thrown light



26 - AIX-EN-PROVENCE. CLOSURE SLAB. MUSÉE GRANET, AIX-EN-PROVENCE.

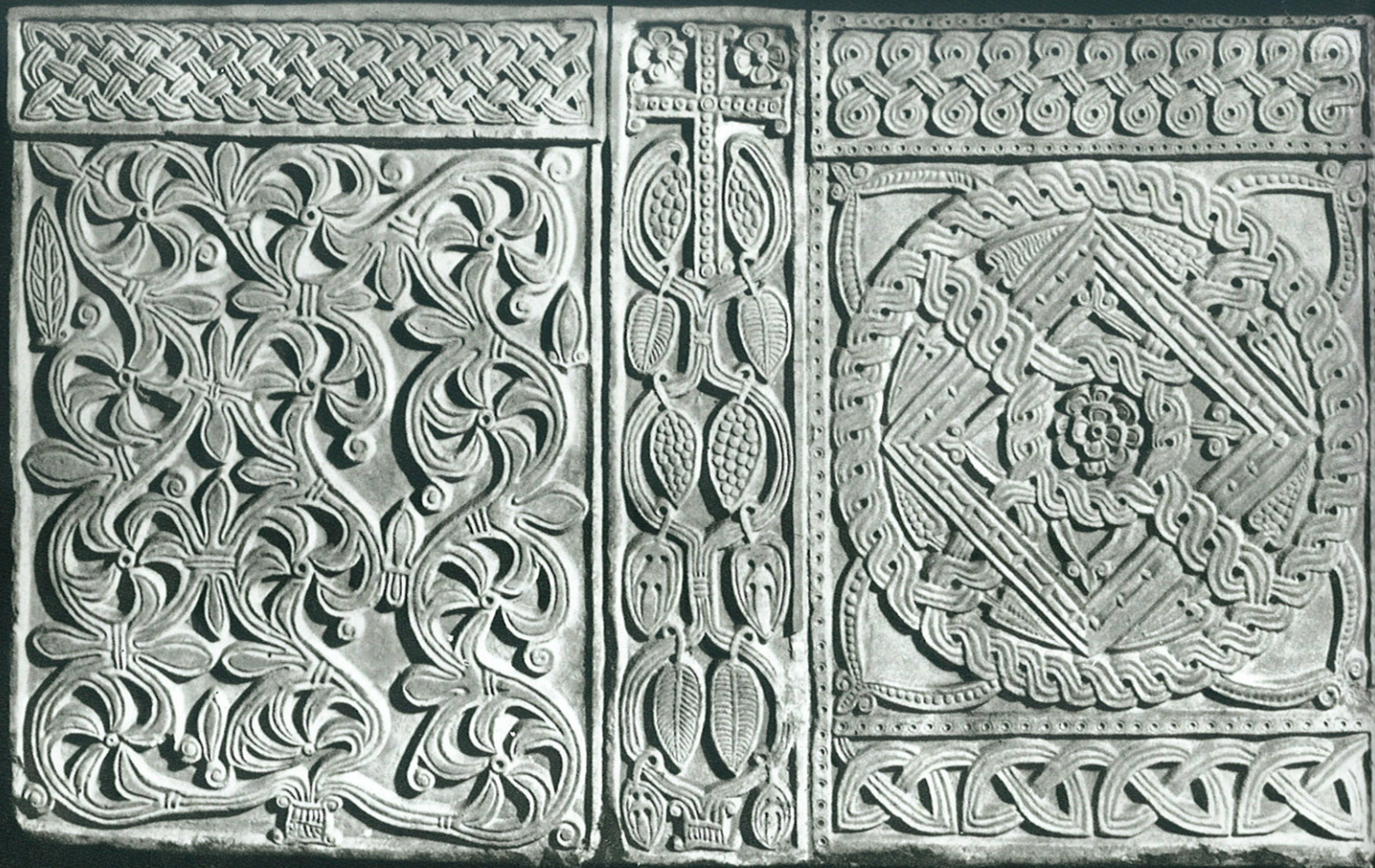
on the origin of this design: it stems from the rustic imitation of models provided by Syria and Byzantium, and transmitted by way of Istria to the northern Adriatic.

The chronology of these carved closure slabs can now be established with sufficient accuracy to show the slow evolution of this craft industry, which has to its credit such fine works as the Aix-en-Provence slab.

The oldest known carving of this type served in the decoration of the tomb of St Pontius (Pons) at Cimiez near Nice. An inscription records that the tomb was restored at Charlemagne's behest some time after the year 775. The same carvers decorated the wall-niche tombs installed at that period in the baptistery at Albenga.

Several other works can be dated with certainty to the first quarter of the ninth century. First of all, there are the closure slabs which in our time have been employed to adorn the altar of the crypt at Schänis in eastern Switzerland; they stood originally in the abbey founded here shortly after 800. One of the Schänis slabs is very similar to that of San Benedetto of Malles, which is now in the Museo dell'Alto Adige at Bolzano. Then, further south in Italy, the ciborium in Sant'Apollinare in Classe,

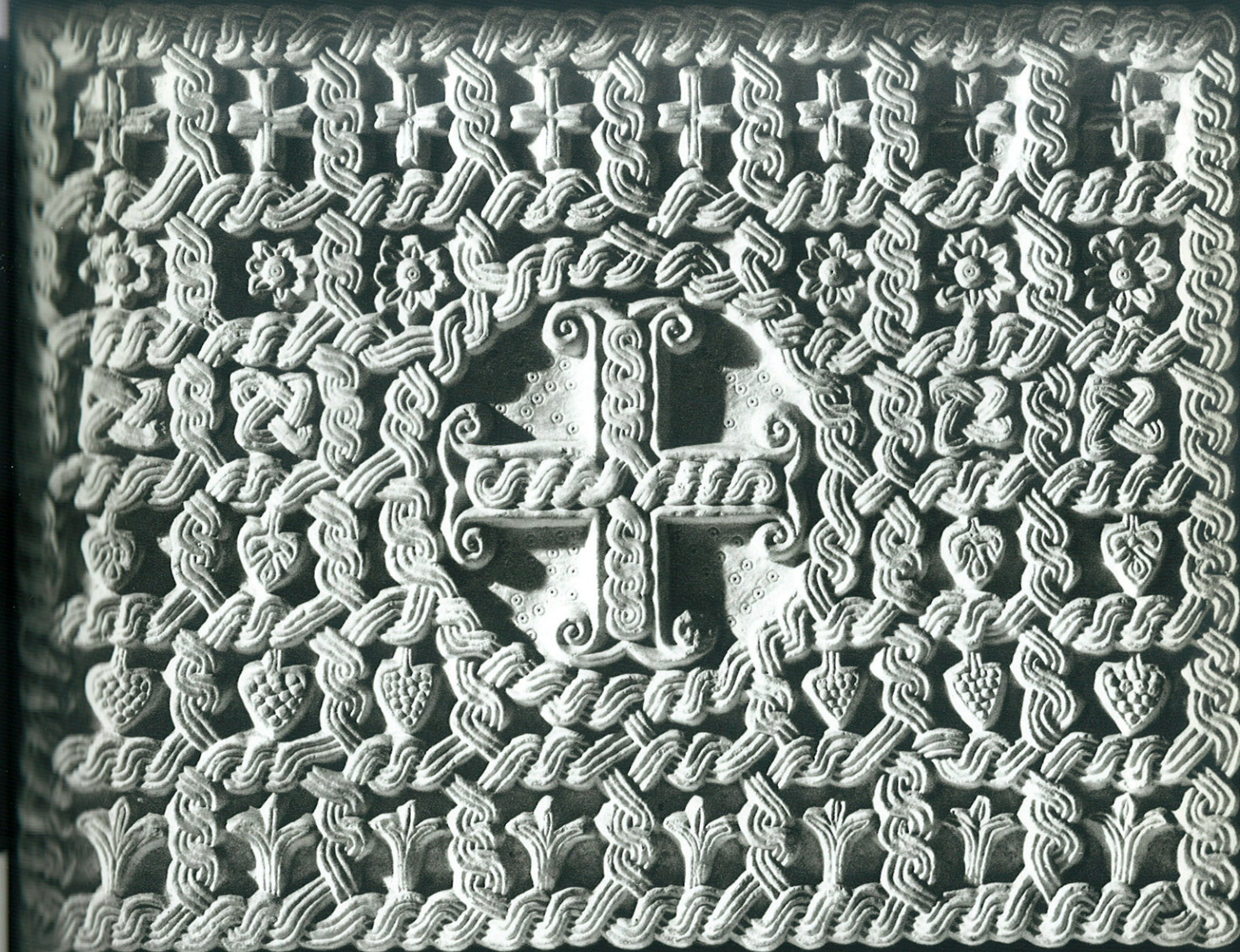
25 - MALLES, SAN BENEDETTO. CLOSURE SLAB. MUSEO DELL'ALTO ADIGE, BOLZANO.



27 - SCHÄNIS, CHURCH, CRYPT. CLOSURE SLABS RE-USED AS AN ALTAR FRONTAL.

Ravenna, and the Budrio cross in Emilia are dated by inscriptions to 810 and 827 respectively. Finally, in the church at Saint-Geosmes (Haute-Marne), there is a large closure slab which undoubtedly comes from the church consecrated in 886. The interlace patterns of this late Carolingian work at Saint-Geosmes are so neatly and accurately carved that they almost become monotonous. Many similar closure slabs date from this later period, with the result that in numerous regions the interlace became a stock theme of early Romanesque sculpture.

One point must be emphasized. Closure slabs with Lombard designs had become common in Gaul by the first half of the ninth century, for they have been preserved, or fragments have come to light, in many different places: Marseilles, Aix-en-Provence, Les Arcs (Var), Fréjus, Apt, Avignon, Carpentras, Vienne, Lyons, Bordeaux, Bayon, Reims. Investigations recently undertaken will reveal others. These works provide us with valuable clues. Of course Charlemagne's contemporaries, Einhard in particular, duly credited the emperor with the large buildings which he himself sponsored (the Palatine Chapel and palace of Aachen, the Ingelheim palace) and



28 - MILAN, SANT'AMBROGIO, CHAPEL OF SAN VITTORE. CLOSURE SLAB RE-USED AS AN ALTAR FRONTAL.

the projects which he initiated (like the large stone bridge over the Rhine, which remained unbuilt); but he was praised even more for the care he personally took, through ordinances and the intermediary of his *missi dominici*, to see to the restoration of any churches in his kingdom that were too poor or too decrepit to serve as worthy places for the celebration of the divine service. The carving and setting up of new closure slabs undoubtedly formed part of this vast programme of church renovation. As the marble carvers of Aquitaine had ceased all activity since the Arab incursions and the wars of Aquitaine, the field was free over a large part of Gaul for the diffusion of the interlace design from northern Italy.



29 - MODEL OF THE EINHARD RELIQUARY. PRIVATE COLLECTION, PARIS.

THE IMITATION OF ANTIQUITY

Writing to his 'very dear son' Vussin, Einhard advised him that, if he wanted to understand certain architectural terms used by Vitruvius, he should carefully examine a reliquary adorned with ivory colonnettes which had been made by the artist Eigil 'in imitation of ancient models.' Some modern scholars have been reluctant to attach much importance to this remark—quite wrongly, for Count Blaise de Montesquiou-Fezensac has found in a manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale a picture of another reliquary: presented by Einhard to his abbey at Maastricht, it had the form of a Roman triumphal arch. It was made of wood plated with chased silver. On the pediment, enclosed in a clipeus, was an inscription in the antique manner recording the donor's name. This small triumphal arch carried an allover decoration. The ground area of each of its two main sides formed a perfect square, and the registers of the composition corresponded to the regular divisions of this square. While the geometry of antique models, based on the equilateral triangle, was more subtle, the decoration of the reliquary's cradle vault faithfully reproduced that of Roman triumphal arches. As Count de Montesquiou-Fezensac rightly says: 'Everything considered, what has been termed the Carolingian renaissance expressed itself not so much by the revival of this or that motif of classical antiquity or the Late Empire, which may never have quite died out in Gaul, as by a better understanding of these motifs and a renewed aptitude for reproducing them directly.'

As early as the late sixth century we find imitations of the antique, such as the reliquary cippus of Saint-Marcel-de-Careiret and the marble sarcophagus with hunting reliefs in the Toulouse museum. The eighth-century inscription on the tomb of Theodechilde at Jouarre is based on Roman lettering. But what in the Merovingian period was only a chance for the artist to enrich his means of expression by imitation, became in the Carolingian period a deliberate return to antiquity. Political ideas certainly had their share in this return, for the new institutions were modelled on those of the West Roman Empire. In its form (though not in the details of its execution), the bronze chair of Saint-Denis closely enough resembles a Roman curule chair for it to have been regarded at one time as an ancient work. The equestrian statue of Charlemagne has the same 'antique' character as the coins bearing his effigy (see p. 224). The return to the sources, moreover, had the same didactic value in the arts as in letters. It was no more unusual then to study works four or five centuries old than it is now for a French child to learn a fable by La Fontaine. For the contemporaries of Charlemagne the majestic remains of the ancient world were as familiar and suggestive a part of daily life as a seventeenth-century château is for a present-day Frenchman. So in all this there was nothing strictly comparable to the sentiments that inspired the sixteenth-century Renaissance theorists.

One thing is true of Carolingian sculpture which is not true of that of any later period: the artists were capable of reproducing with the strictest accuracy a capital or a frieze of classical antiquity, as is shown in the Palatine Chapel at Aachen



30 - AACHEN, PALATINE CHAPEL, TRIBUNE. BRONZE PARAPET, DETAIL.



32 - NÎMES, MAISON CARRÉE. ENTABLATURE, DETAIL.



33 - LORSCH, ABBEY GATEWAY. WEST FAÇADE, DETAIL.



31 - CARVED SLAB, DETAIL. SANTA MARIA VECCHIA, GUSSAGO.

by a stucco capital standing next to its ancient model, and by the admirable parapets of the chapel's tribune. Carolingian copies of fifth-century ivories are so perfect that archaeologists have been fooled by them. Although this extraordinary mastery must be attributed rather to the skill of the Carolingian artist than his sensibility and imagination, it entitles him to a special place in the history of the psychology of art. After him, for a span of several centuries, no one in the West seemed capable of copying a model correctly. The crisis of the invasions in the tenth century put an end to the practices bequeathed by antiquity. The medieval artist had lost the knack of copying. Villard de Honnecourt proved incapable of reproducing in his sketchbook the rose windows of the cathedrals at Basel and Chartres. Medieval man had an imperfect vision of the outside world; a vision which in some ways is more revealing than a straightforward record of reality, but which for the period extending from the late ninth to the early fourteenth century has deprived us of an essential document—the portrait. In Carolingian times the art of the portrait was not so much a revival as simply the continuance of an age-old practice. Pope Gregory the Great, (died 604), had commissioned a pair of stucco medallions of his mother and himself. In the next century, the stucco figures in Santa Maria of Cividale have such telling expressions that one feels they must have represented real people.