

Architecture and Decorative Carving

IN the fifth century the civilized world was convulsed by a momentous event: the occupation of a large part of the Roman Empire by the barbarians. Historians of the last century differed widely in their interpretation of this event, according to the view they took of Roman civilization. Opinion was divided between Romanists and Germanists, soon to be opposed by a third group—those whom recent explorations in Asia had convinced of the overriding importance of the ancient civilizations of the East. The scholars of that day indulged freely in hypotheses. Since then, half a century of excavations and methodical research has taught us to think twice before venturing on risky generalizations.

On the eve of the barbarian invasions, art, and in particular Christian art, then in its early stages, exhibited throughout the Empire, both in Europe and in the eastern provinces, an impressive unity of style. Western Europe still held the lead in the creation of forms. This has been strikingly demonstrated by the fourth- and fifth-century monuments discovered or cleared since the last war (San Lorenzo, Milan; Trier Cathedral; St Gereon, Cologne; Saint-Pierre, Metz). These have revealed ground plans and architectural forms which do not appear until slightly later in the churches of the East.¹ So far as our present knowledge goes, the oldest baptisteries with corner niches and a lantern tower are to be found in France, not in the East, as used to be supposed. It is only fair to add, however, that the architects employed at Milan and in Gaul could have been natives of the eastern provinces of the Empire; it was as easy at that time to bring in a team of master-builders from a distant province as it was to transfer a legion. The unity of the Roman Empire explains how offshoots of the trunk retained enough features in common to convince art historians that there must have been, in after times, new and wholesale exchanges of architectural forms. One point, however, is worth emphasizing: after the period of the great invasions the finest, most vigorous offshoots developed in those parts of the former Roman Empire which were never occupied by the barbarians or which they only passed through. Syria, Armenia and part of Asia Minor

1. To facilitate comparison, all the plans are grouped together on pp. 294-307, most of them reproduced on a common scale.



4 - FRÉJUS, BAPTISTERY. EXTERIOR.

shared this privilege with Byzantium. As regards architecture, these parallel developments account for the resemblances—to take one example—between sixth-century Syrian churches and French Romanesque churches. As regards decoration, the successive waves of influence are explained, on the contrary, by the exportation of textiles and luxury objects from the great cities of the East to regions as remote as Gaul and, later, by the exodus of Coptic and Syrian artists fleeing from the Arab invasions.

Architecture and all the arts dependent on it were introduced into Gaul by Roman civilization.

The early cathedrals, some of them built on a colossal scale, as shown by the vestiges found at Trier and Aquileia, were vast halls of rectangular plan designed to hold large crowds of worshippers. More ingenuity was demanded of the architects of the Later Empire when it came to building baptisteries, places of Christian initiation, and funerary basilicas, portals to eternity. The cathedrals of Aquileia and Trier date to the fourth century. The baptisteries of Fréjus and Albenga appear to date to the late fifth century. The Fréjus baptistery is a solid, well-designed construction on a square plan with corner niches and a central dome resting on a drum pierced with many windows. The Albenga baptistery, near the Italian frontier, has

3 - FRÉJUS, BAPTISTERY. INTERIOR.



6 - ALBENGA, BAPTISTERY. VAULT MOSAIC.

a high interior colonnade like that of Fréjus, but its plan is a polygon, from which radiates a series of niches, alternately rectangular and semicircular. The handsome mosaics still adorning some of the vaults show how magnificently these first sanctuaries of triumphant Christianity were decorated; the imagery, still very sober, evokes the vault of Heaven and the symbol of salvation.

There were some very fine mosaics, too, in the basilica erected in Cologne towards the end of the fourth century, on the spot where forty soldiers of the Theban legion had been martyred, and known in the time of Gregory of Tours as 'the church of the golden saints.' In the Middle Ages this church bore the name of St Gereon. Remnants of the original structure were brought to light during World War II: it was an oval-shaped building, with niches, reproducing the plan of certain ancient mausolea.

4 - ALBENGA, BAPTISTERY. INTERIOR.



7 - MILAN, SAN LORENZO. WEST COLONNADE OF THE ATRIUM.



8 - MILAN, SAN LORENZO. VIEW FROM THE SOUTH-EAST.

The basilica erected in honour of the martyred St Lawrence outside the ancient walls of Milan, to the south, was probably built to house the tombs of members of the imperial family; several bishops of Milan were also interred there. This church with a central dome and a high tribune was surmounted on all four sides by tall square towers. Of all the buildings of this period, throughout Christendom, which have come down to us, this is without any doubt the most skilfully constructed one. It is preceded by an imposing colonnade, which closed off the west side of a vast atrium.



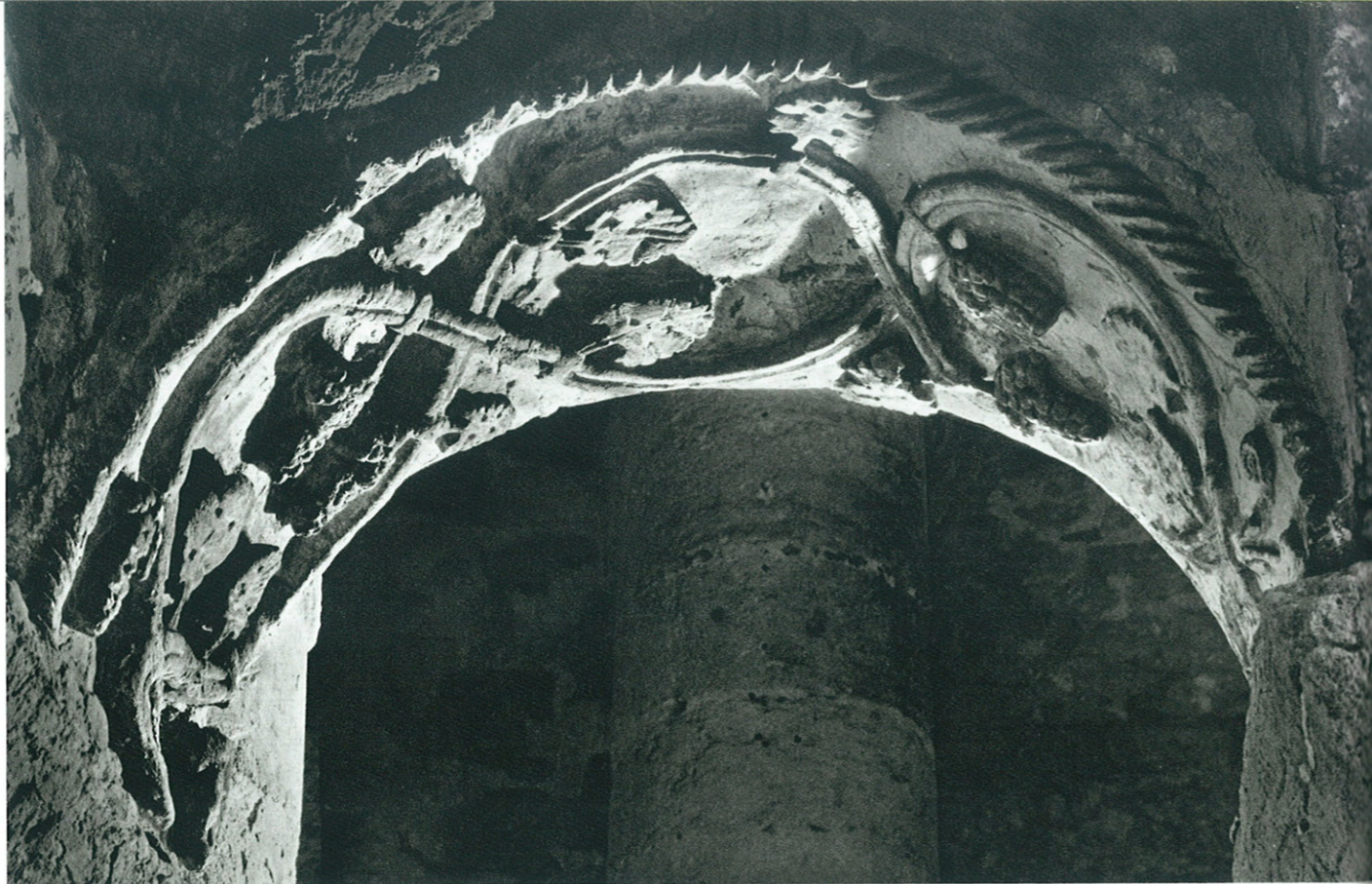
111 | MILAN, SAN LORENZO. INTERIOR FROM THE SOUTH-EAST.

112 | MILAN, SAN LORENZO. INTERIOR FROM THE SOUTH-EAST.



12 - MARSEILLES, CHURCH OF SAINT-VICTOR, CRYPTS OF NOTRE-DAME-DE-CONFESSION. MOSAIC.

Shortly after the grandiose church of San Lorenzo was built in Milan, a tiny edifice with groin-vaulted aisles was erected in Marseilles, at the back of a quarry where the martyr Victor had been buried. Recent excavations have shown it to be a mausoleum. In front of this commemorative monument stood a colonnade extending round three sides, like the porticoes of an atrium. A fine piece of mosaic, with a vine-pattern on a gold ground, can still be seen on the intrados of an arch, part of which has miraculously escaped destruction. Also, at the entrance of one of the



13 - MARSEILLES, CHURCH OF SAINT-VICTOR, CRYPTS OF NOTRE-DAME-DE-CONFESSION, VINE-BRANCHES DECORATING AN ARCH.

aisles of the mausoleum a stucco ornament of vineshoots has survived. Both mosaics and painted stuccoes were characteristic elements of the decoration of religious edifices in early Christian times.

In less than two centuries Gaul had been endowed by its Roman conquerors with some sixty magnificent cities, their streets intersecting at right angles and forming a clear-cut chequer-work pattern, so far as the lie of the land permitted. The forum was the centre of public life. Around it stood the temples, the basilica where the law courts sat, the curia, seat of the municipal assemblies, and the theatre. But this sumptuous way of life lasted only for a time. In the year 276 seventy towns and cities of Gaul were annihilated by a gigantic horde of invaders from Germany. Subsequently the barbarians returned to their own lands, but only after having devastated the richest provinces of Gaul from the Rhine to the Pyrenees. To guard against the danger of another such calamity, a measure was taken which, while all to the good for purposes of defence, proved disastrous for the future of urban civilization in Gaul. From the North Sea to the Rhone, all along the Loire Valley and at the strategic approaches to the valley of the Garonne, some fifty cities, hitherto unenclosed by walls, were converted into strongholds. The quarter of the old open city which happened to stand on rising ground or had some natural means of defence was girdled with high walls, quadrangular or curvilinear, which were crenellated and flanked with towers. These fortified towns of the Later Empire

proved their strength and lasted for centuries, but they checked the growth of urban life. Air and light were lacking within these grim strongholds, the largest of which covered an area about the size of the garden of the Tuileries. The decay of the towns is all the more significant for the art historian because it was peculiar to Gaul. Nothing of the sort happened in Italy and Spain. In many of our old French towns, the stout walls of the Later Empire, whose facing of small stones was often reinforced with courses of bricks, were demolished only in the nineteenth century. They were found to contain many pieces of sculpture and the debris of monuments which had been utilized to add bulk to the construction material. These remnants, which have done so much to enrich our archaeological museums, came either from buildings wrecked by the barbarians or from others which had to be razed in order to clear a sufficient area for defence, a no man's land, around the stronghold. Beyond this perimeter there remained inhabited districts which had once formed part of the old open city, but excavations have in many cases shown that these suburbs rapidly decayed and made way for vast cemeteries, and that the first signs of an active revival of urban life hardly occur before the second half of the sixth century. The decline of the towns in Gaul, beginning under the Later Empire, led to the development in the open countryside of *villae*, fortified or not, where the aristocracy took the habit of residing.

In the time of Constantine Christian churches had been erected in most of the Roman cities of Gaul. It is known that at first they were built on the periphery of the cities. The oldest of them were so small and so ramshackle (this was the case in Paris) that three centuries later, in the time of Gregory of Tours, no one even knew where they had stood. It was not long before they were given a more honourable and better protected position within the walls of the stronghold. By the beginning of the fifth century all the towns in Gaul had their bishop, and little by little each one became a sort of 'holy city' where the living and the dead had their sanctuaries. In the most favoured cities the bishop's church, styled the *ecclesia*, was composed of three buildings: a place of prayer for the catechumens, those who were to be initiated into the faith through baptism in the baptistery (second of the three buildings) as a preliminary to their admission to the third building, the church, where the religious services were celebrated, and which, much later, became known as the cathedral. After the Peace of the Church, the lowering of the minimum age required for baptism made the rites of initiation superfluous, but the force of tradition remained so strong in religious architecture that in the eighteenth century, on the eve of the French Revolution, the city of Auxerre still had its two ancient episcopal churches with a detached baptistery. Outside the city walls the community of the dead, kindred to that of the living, spread out its graves in the shelter of another church, the 'basilica,' which was complemented by chapels for private worship or funerary monuments having the form of vaulted shrines half sunk into the earth.

Little is known of the decoration of the churches erected in Gaul at that period, except that the presbytery and some of the walls were covered with mosaics and paintings. The walls were not adorned with bas-reliefs of figure subjects, but



14 - MARSEILLES, ABBEY OF SAINT-VICTOR. ALTAR SLAB. MUSÉE D'ARCHÉOLOGIE, MARSEILLES.



15 - MARSEILLES, ABBEY OF SAINT-VICTOR. ALTAR SLAB, DETAILS. MUSÉE D'ARCHÉOLOGIE, MARSEILLES.



16 - ARLES, CEMETERY OF LES ALISCAMPS. SARCOPHAGUS OF CONCORDIUS. MUSÉE LAPIDAIRE CHRÉTIEN, ARLES.

such reliefs were used to beautify the tombs of the rich, following a practice that went back to pagan times. Mythological scenes carved in marble on the visible sides of the sarcophagus were now replaced by Christian scenes of a historical or symbolical nature. A large number of these fine marble sarcophagi have been preserved at Arles. They closely resemble those of Rome and Italy. There was a time, however, when historians were convinced that in the last days of Roman domination a great school of sculptors flourished at Arles; hence the remarkable abundance of carved sarcophagi preserved there. But this belief was erroneous. As Fernand Benoît has shown, these stone coffins came from Italy ready-carved. Historical circumstances explain why they were imported in such large numbers. About 395, Trier being threatened by the barbarians, the imperial court was transferred to Arles, with a consequent influx of civil servants and high-ranking officials into the new capital. Arles thus became the centre of an active courtly art which influenced even the burial of the dead. Nonetheless, the carvings made in Italian workshops continued to play an important part in the artistic life, first of Gaul, then of France. They were admired, attempts were made to copy them, and, from Carolingian times on, the handsomest sarcophagi were re-employed, either to bury persons of rank or as reliquary shrines.



17 - NARBONNE. RELIQUARY OF THE HOLY SEPULCHRE. MUSÉE LAPIDAIRE, NARBONNE. — 18 - PILASTER, DETAIL. MUSÉE LAPIDAIRE CHRÉTIEN, ARIENS

The occupation of Gaul by the barbarians changed the fortunes of this region. The evidence provided by excavations enables us to gauge the scope and consequences of this event in the domain of material culture.

Our early archaeologists, working at a time when knowledge of the period was still rudimentary, were led to believe that the invaders had brought with them a rich, entirely new civilization. Excavations were carried out in barbarian cemeteries chiefly with a view to enriching local museums and private collections with the jewellery found in the graves. The beautiful objects of personal adornment discovered in the tombs were thought to have belonged to the early invaders, the Goths, Burgundians and Franks of the fifth century. More systematic methods of excavation and archaeological research have enabled the finds to be fitted into a precise chronological sequence, and this has brought into prominence a fact of the highest importance. The grave goods of the fifth century, other than those of the royal tombs, tend to be inferior. An abundance of high-quality artifacts made in local workshops is found only in tombs dating from the middle of the sixth century on. Stylistic analysis shows that this production of finer work resulted from a progressive fusion between the descendants of the invaders and the indigenous peoples; and history tells us that it was promoted by an economic revival and an increased volume of



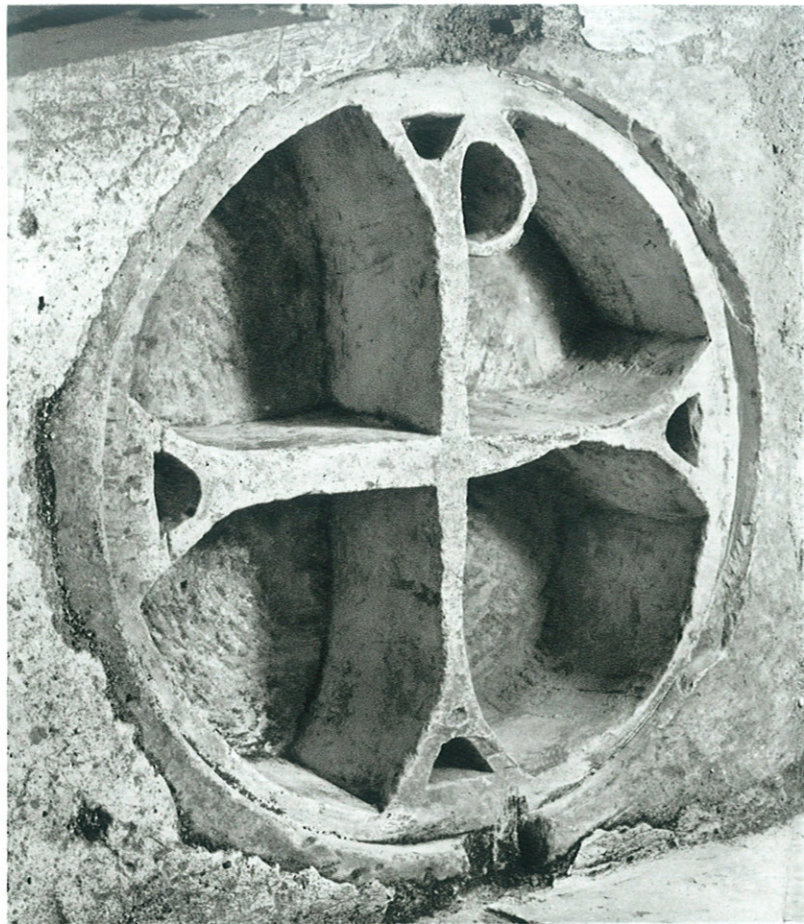
19 - SAINT-MAXIMIN, BASILICA OF SAINTE-MADELEINE. ENGRAVED SLAB: THE VIRGIN AS A YOUNG GIRL.



20 - SAINT-MAXIMIN, BASILICA OF SAINTE-MADELEINE. ENGRAVED SLAB: THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC.



19 - SAINT-MAXIMIN, BASILICA OF SAINTE-MADELEINE. ENGRAVED SLAB: DANIEL IN THE LIONS' DEN.



22 - SLAB WITH THE SACRED MONOGRAM. CHURCH OF SAINT-GERMAIN, AUXERRE.

trade, which becomes perceptible in Gaul at just this time. It was now that the new barbarian world began to acquire the refinements of civilization, not only in Gaul but also in Spain and Great Britain. In the lands north of the Loire, despite the upheavals of the eighth century, living conditions steadily improved until the advent of the Carolingians.

The early barbarian invaders cannot be credited with any particular skill as builders or stone carvers. It is common knowledge that the Germanic peoples did not build in stone, and they do not even seem to have had any marked influence on timber construction. Real proficiency in the art of building with wood can never be acquired by semi-nomadic tribes, for that art is bound up with a knowledge of forestry and a settled way of life, just as the art of stone-carving is bound up with quarrying. That this knowledge existed in Gaul several centuries before the invasions is a fact borne out by many discoveries.

Scholars today no longer refer to the early medieval churches of Spain as monuments of 'Visigothic art'; they speak of them as belonging to the Visigothic period. This distinction also applies to the Franks of Gaul and the Lombards of Italy. It may be said to the credit of the new overlords, first, that they took pains to improve their standard of life by adopting the language, religion and some of the basic



23 - READING-DESK ATTRIBUTED TO ST RADEGUND. ABBEY OF SAINTE-CROIX, POITIERS.

institutions of the peoples they had conquered; and, secondly, that they encouraged art by their patronage.

It is a significant fact that the two pieces of sculpture which there are grounds for associating with the name of a barbarian ruler are both works in the Mediterranean tradition: the altar cross set up in the basilica of Saint-Germain at Auxerre by order of Queen Clotilda (died 545) and the wooden lectern of Queen St Radegund (died 587) preserved by the nuns of the abbey of Sainte-Croix at Poitiers.

Contemporary chronicles leave no doubt as to the havoc wrought by the barbarians in the early phase of their occupation of the ancient Roman provinces of northern Gaul and northern Italy. Yet they already had behind them a long familiarity with the amenities of Mediterranean civilization. Under the Empire large numbers of them had already been permitted to settle in Gaul. Land had been given to them to clear and bring under cultivation, and thus whole colonies of Germani settled in the midst of the Gallo-Roman population. The *foederati*, mercenaries recruited



24 - CHARENTON-SUR-CHER, ABBEY. SARCOPHAGUS. MUSÉE DU BERRY, BOURGES.

among the barbarians, were authorized to occupy a third of the houses and lands as a reward for their services. In 418 the Visigoths were permitted to establish themselves in south-western Gaul between Toulouse and the Atlantic coast, and about 443 the Burgundians peacefully occupied Savoy. Attila himself, reputed the most savage of the barbarian chiefs, maintained friendly relations with Byzantium and had had stone *thermae* built beside his wooden palace.

The new masters of Gaul were content for the most part to live in palaces and *villae* dating from the Gallo-Roman period. The so-called 'Burgundian palace' discovered by Louis Blondel in Geneva reveals a makeshift adaptation, in quite a small area, of a complex of ancient buildings grouped round a small courtyard. The new owner did no more than add an oratory to the existing group. About 565 the poet Fortunatus published an enthusiastic description of a fortified estate not far from Koblenz which was owned by Nicetus, bishop of Trier. His long account of the place is worth citing in full, for it is striking evidence of the persistence of Roman culture under the barbarian kings. Nicetus was a native of Auvergne or the Limousin. He had been a monk before being appointed to the important see of Trier by the Austrasian king Theodoric I. Gregory of Tours commends his asceticism. All the same, a bishop at that time was expected to 'live like a lord,' for the



CHARENTON-SUR-CHER, ABBEY. SARCOPHAGUS, DETAIL. MUSÉE DU BERRY, BOURGES.



26 - GÉMIGNY. FRAGMENT OF A DISK. M. HISTORIQUE, ORLÉANS.

new masters found it expedient to make the head of each cathedral church a kind of high provincial functionary. Here is a translation of this interesting text. 'A defensive wall flanked by thirty towers surrounds the mountain on which stands a building occupying the site formerly covered by a forest; prolonged on either side, the wall runs down to the bottom of the valley, all the way to the Moselle, whose waters bound the estate on this side. At the summit of the rock is built a magnificent palace, like a second mountain placed on top of the first. Its walls enclose a vast area, and the house itself forms a kind of fortress. Marble columns sustain the majestic building, from the top of which, on summer days, boats can be seen gliding along the river. It has three storeys and when one has reached the highest, one gets the impression that the edifice covers up all the fields below. The tower that overlooks the ramp leading up to the castle contains a chapel consecrated to the saints, as well as the weapons kept there for the use of the warriors. There is also a double ballista whence projectiles fly forth, spreading death and havoc on their course. Water is brought in by channels following the slopes of the mountain, and the stream serves to turn a mill which grinds the corn that goes to feed the people of the region. On these once barren hills Nicetus has planted vines bursting with sap, and the rock which once was covered with brambles is now carpeted with green vineshoots. Orchards of fruit-bearing trees grow here and there, filling the air with the fragrance of their blossoms.'

In barbarian society it was a point of honour for the king to show an interest in the arts; it was a matter of prestige. The royal treasury was made up not only of the reserves of gold and silver needed for the administration of the realm. It also contained the 'collection' which elevated the monarch in the esteem of cultivated men. Chilperic proudly showed Gregory of Tours the medallions sent him by the emperor Tiberius II, bearing on one side the emperor's effigy and on the other a quadriga with the motto *Gloria Romanorum*. He was even prouder of the pieces which he himself had struck. He would not have it thought that the artists in his service were inferior to those of the Byzantine emperor. Pointing to a large *missorium* (i.e. a gold dish) which had been wrought and enriched with precious stones at his command, he told Gregory: 'I had this made to add lustre and distinction to the nation of the Franks. If God grants me life, I will make many more still.' In the same spirit Queen Brunhilda had commissioned a large golden shield encrusted with gems, which she sent to the king of the Visigoths with two wooden paterae plated with gold and studded with rare stones.

Kings, queens and nobles erected basilicas—the only public monuments of the period—with a zeal in which pride counted for at least as much as piety. Fortunatus wrote a poem in honour of Duke Launebolde who built in Toulouse (c. 570) a basilica dedicated to St Saturninus, praising 'this man of barbarian blood' for having done what no 'Roman' before him had thought of doing. In a rather curious passage, Gregory of Tours relates that Queen Clotilda, in her eagerness to bring about the conversion of Clovis, decorated the church, where their son Ingomer was baptized, with precious veils and hangings, hoping to win him over to the faith by glamour where exhortations had failed.



27 - TOULOUSE, CHURCH OF SAINT-SERNIN. SARCOPHAGUS, DETAIL. MUSÉE DES AUGUSTINS, TOULOUSE



28 - TOULOUSE. CAPITAL. MUSÉE DES AUGUSTINS, TOULOUSE.



29 - TOULOUSE. COLUMN, DETAIL. LOUVRE, PARIS.

For, like the Romans, the barbarians realized that art could be a potent instrument of propaganda. In the days when Rome was extending her conquests over the known world, the colonial cities were built on a more lavish scale than those of Italy. Similarly, three or four centuries later, in Gaul at least, the Frankish kings seem to have devoted more care and effort to church-building than to improving their own residences. Contemporary accounts extol the churches but say nothing of the palaces.



At Auxerre Queen Clotilda had erected a basilica on the tomb of St Germanus. After his conversion, King Clovis had another built in Paris as a shrine for his own tomb; it was dedicated to the Holy Apostles. It also served as the last resting place of St Genevieve, so that something of the royal lustre was reflected on the patron saint of the Parisians. Preceded by an atrium with porticoes on each side of it, this church was probably adorned with mosaics. Like the Byzantine emperors, the Frankish kings were not content to fill their treasury with rare coins, they also 'collected' relics from which they hoped to get protection and prestige. After his return from an expedition against the Visigoths of Spain, Childebert had a basilica erected on the left bank of the Seine to house the relics of the Holy Cross and those of St Vincent, the martyr hallowed at Saragossa. This church became the royal necropolis before taking the name of an illustrious churchman subsequently interred there, Germanus, bishop of Paris; its popular appellation, Saint-Germain-le-Doré, suggests that it was built with a certain magnificence.

In the closing years of the sixth century the basilica of Saint-Martin was erected on the outskirts of Autun by Queen Brunhilda and Bishop Syagrius. Its fine marble columns, timbered ceiling and mosaics were much admired in the Middle Ages. The ground plan is known from a drawing made in the seventeenth century, and descriptions of the same period give us an idea of the general appearance of this church after a partial restoration carried out in the eleventh century.

It was too readily assumed by scholars of an older generation that the basilicas of barbarian Gaul must have been in all respects similar to those still extant at Ravenna and Rome. We still have a sadly imperfect knowledge of Christian architecture in the West under the Later Empire. But in all probability that architecture strongly influenced building practices in Gaul for centuries to come, for in the religious architecture of this region certain features can be distinguished which unquestionably antedate those introduced in the sixth century by the master-builders of the Byzantine provinces.

The basilica of Saint-Martin at Tours was described only briefly by Gregory of Tours. It was not a very large building and measured only some 160 feet in length. Yet it had 120 columns, 8 doors and 52 windows. From this it has been inferred that it must have been an elaborate structure with double aisles and galleries. I do not share this view. The old basilica of Saint-Pierre built at Vienne, in Dauphiné, in the fifth century, has undergone many modifications since then, but it has preserved one feature which must date from its original foundation: two superimposed orders of marble columns lining the side walls. The interior of this timber-roofed basilica thus recalled the stately internal disposition of the great edifices of the Gallo-Roman period. Now the number of columns here is almost the same as in the basilica of Saint-Martin as described by Gregory of Tours. And as the interior of Saint-Laurent of Grenoble and Germigny-des-Prés was later lined with columns in the same manner, rather to adorn the wall than to strengthen it, this feature must be regarded as a widely generalized survival of the architectural methods of the Late Empire.



31 - VIENNE, CHURCH OF SAINT-PIERRE. SARCOPHAGUS WITH ENGRAVED DESIGNS AND MEDIEVAL INSCRIPTION.



32 - LANGEAIS. STELE. MUSÉE ARCHÉOLOGIQUE, TOURS.



33 - SELLES-SUR-CHER. EARLIER COLONNETTES AND CAPITALS RE-USED AS FAÇADE DECORATION.

To these examples must be added that of Selles-sur-Cher, which is still more significant. Before 558 a basilica had been erected there by order of King Childbert to glorify the memory of the hermit Eusicius, who had predicted the king's successes on the battlefield.

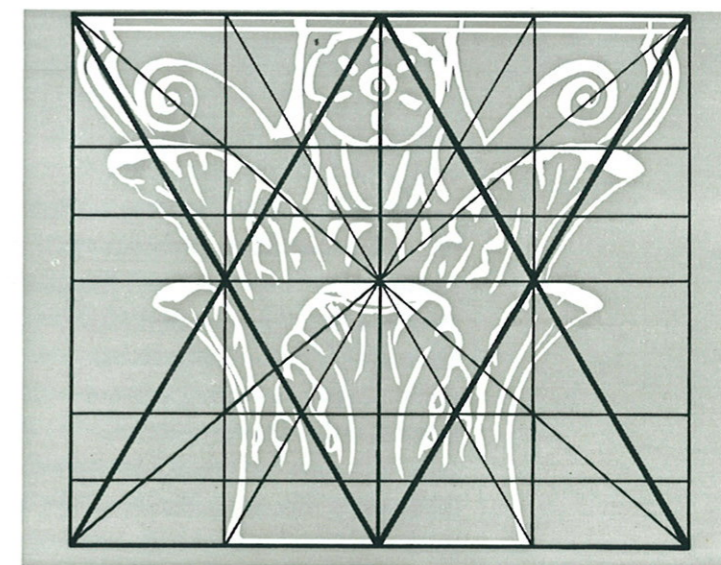
When this Merovingian basilica was rebuilt in the Romanesque period, care was taken to imitate one of its original features by reinstalling several of its finest marble capitals in a colonnade set flush with the wall at the foot of the façade. Here good use could be made of the columns of marble or hard stone salvaged from ancient monuments falling into ruin. The same use could not be made of capitals of



34-35 - SELLES-SUR-CHER. EARLIER CAPITALS RE-USED.

the classical epoch: the capital was too fragile an element not to be damaged in the course of demolitions, and this was certainly one of the reasons for the activity of the workshops of marble masons in Aquitaine, who carved capitals and exported them to the whole of Gaul in the sixth and seventh centuries. Considering the obscurity that shrouds the material culture of the Merovingian period, a clue of this kind is of exceptional value. It does not tell us what the determining principles of that architecture were, but it vouches for a fidelity to ancient practices which can only be explained by an unbroken continuity of building methods from antiquity onwards.

Further evidence of this is provided by the constant recourse to geometry for



36-37 - SELLES-SUR-CHER. CAPITAL AND SCHEMA OF TRIANGLES ON WHICH ITS DESIGN IS BASED.

the working out of proportions. Pattern-books compiled from Vitruvius and the 'geometers' have been preserved. Small monastery churches of the seventh century found at Saint-Denis, Jouarre, Nivelles and Echternach show the simplest ground plan that can be adopted for a sacred edifice: a plain rectangle, but a rectangle which in fact is exactly equal to two squares. Here is proof that the builders of these churches were deliberately applying geometric principles so as to safeguard the harmony of the proportions. A subtler use of geometry was made by Aquitanian stone-carvers: the ornamentation of marble capitals of the seventh century is often based on a schema of equilateral triangles, and the decoration of tombs on a checker-work of squares.

Some Merovingian basilicas, as we know from contemporary descriptions, had a dome or a bell-tower; it stood over that part of the church which separates the nave from the apse. Such was the case at Saint-Julien of Brioude, built about 476, and at Saint-Antolien of Clermont, which was at least as old a church as Saint-Julien, for it was already in ruins in the time of Gregory of Tours. The same feature may have existed in Saint-Martin of Tours, and certainly did in the cathedral of Nantes, consecrated about 567. In the latter church, according to Fortunatus, the lower storey of the tower was pierced with arcades which let in so much light that reflections from the metal roof mingled their colours with those of the vault mosaics. At Clermont there were also marble arcades, but the dome was decorated only with paintings.

The church of Notre-Dame at Manglieu, in Auvergne, as it was described shortly after 700, was surmounted by a pentagonal tower with a square base. The bell-tower at Brioude was close to the apse and must have stood directly over the altar, like the tower at Clermont.

An examination of the plans of Saint-Pierre of Vienne and the basilica built by Queen Brunhilda near the monastery of Saint-Martin of Autun reveals that these two churches were also crowned with a light tower, for in both the last bay of the nave, just before the apse, is much wider than the others. Since this feature appears only very rarely in the churches of Italy, some archaeologists have seen it as convincing proof of the direct importation into Gaul of the Oriental type of domed basilica. Here the 'Oriental mirage' is easily dispelled, for in fact the domed church appears in the West earlier than in the East and it certainly derived from the martyria of the Later Empire. A few years ago, at Lyons, the earliest form of the church of Saint-Irénée was brought to light: it comprised a dome based on a square structure by means of pseudo-squinches composed of ordinary stone lintels. The upper part of the Fréjus baptistery, with its dome and its drum pierced with windows, probably gives a fairly accurate idea of what the dome-shaped towers of Merovingian churches were like. These towers had something of a sacred character. More effectively than the ciboria of Latin churches, they provided protection for the altar and the saint's tomb by means of a vault forming an integral part of the church roof. They were the symbol of Heaven. Of them it might have been said what a sixth-century poet wrote of the church of St Sophia at Edessa:

'Its lofty dome is comparable with the Heaven of Heavens and it is like a helmet. As the golden stars shine in the firmament, so it glows with golden mosaics. Its arches call to mind both the angles of the world below and the arch of the clouds.'

In the West these towers, destined to have a long line of descendants, were built as yet only on a very modest scale. But they must have given the martyria-churches of Frankish Gaul a quite distinctive aspect. Through the windows in the drum streamed in a flood of light focused on the most sacred place in the church. The church roof, covered with tiles of tin or gilt bronze, could be seen gleaming in the sun from a long way off and seemed to invite men to 'lift up their eyes to Heaven'; these were the words used in one of the inscriptions in the basilica of Saint-Martin at Tours.



III - SCHOOL OF REIMS. UTRECHT PSALTER, DETAIL. UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, UTRECHT.

Excavations have brought to light another peculiarity of early medieval churches. In classical times there was no large building of any kind but had porticoes either in front of it or all round it. Covered walks, sheltered from sun and bad weather, were so much appreciated in antiquity as an added amenity in large architectural complexes that they came to figure even in modest country *villae*. From quite early times, both in the West and in the East, Christian architects adopted these outer porticoes, and they became standard elements of the sacred edifice. In North Italy, Gaul, Spain and England, the covered walks on three or even all four sides of the church (as in the baptisteries of Fréjus and Riez in the early fifth century) had none of the imposing monumental character they were given in Armenia in the sixth century, particularly at Tokor and Ereruk, but they seem to have been more highly developed than in Syria. The reason is that Western architects took to using these porches flanking the north and south sides of the church as shelters for the privileged dead who were buried in the sacred precinct; excavations have shown this to be the case at Veurey-Voroize, Saint-Romain-d'Albon, Saint-Martin of Angers and Saint-Laurent of Lyons. At Canterbury St Augustine, who in 597 had founded the monastery on the east side of the town, was entombed in the north porch of its main church in 613, while the south porch was reserved for royal tombs. The term 'cloistered church' has been wrongly given to this composite type of edifice whose historical development is perfectly clear. If, on the plan, the side porticoes give the illusion of forming an organic whole, it is only because they adjoin a cruciform church and because they extend from the nave exactly in line with the projecting arms of the transept, of which they appear (on the plan) to be a



39 - SOISSONS. SARCOPHAGUS OF ST DRAUSIUS. LOUVRE, PARIS.

prolongation. Moreover, these porches were not originally intended to house altars; these were set up only when the tombs located in them became an object of such veneration as to make them necessary. The history of these side porticoes is an example of the changes that came over religious architecture in the barbarian kingdoms. To the plans, structures and formulas bequeathed by the builders of the Later Empire, nothing essential was added, but ingenious improvements of a utilitarian character were made by the Franks in the designs transmitted to them by tradition. Thus architecture kept pace with the evolution of religious usage.

On the strength of the discoveries made in tombs, maps have been drawn showing the distribution of objects of personal adornment over the territory of Gaul. Two regions are shown to have excelled in the number and quality of their workshops: Aquitaine, from the upper Garonne to the lower Loire, and north-eastern Gaul, from the mouth of the Seine to Switzerland.

Aquitaine had greatly prospered in the Gallo-Roman period, and became prosperous again from the second half of the sixth century on. A surprising number of the court officials, churchmen and missionaries of the period hailed from Aquitaine. The circulation of currency testifies to a marked increase in the volume of trade and to a revival of urban life. At Cahors Bishop Desiderius girdled the town with defensive walls and built aqueducts, but he did not confine himself to utilitarian constructions. He saw to it that his cathedral city was given new houses, a monas-



40 - SOISSONS. SARCOPHAGUS OF ST DRAUSIUS, CENTRAL DETAIL. LOUVRE, PARIS.

tery and several churches. One of the export industries of Aquitaine was that of marble carvings—capitals and sarcophagi—which were made not far from the quarries at the foot of the Pyrenees, in the Toulouse area, and then sent eastward as far as the Rhone Valley and northward to the valley of the Seine.

In this conveyance of heavy objects over long distances we see an extension of the sea, river and land transport which had been so ably organized in Gaul under the Romans. The working of the marble quarries was itself a survival of the old industrial activities of Gaul.

The capitals carved in the sixth and seventh centuries derive from classical models, but their ornamentation, in which a direct study of nature can often be detected, shows a variety, an elegance and an inventive faculty which rival the virtuoso carving of the last workshops of Romanesque sculptors centuries later. The Aquitanian sarcophagi are very different from those of other Christian lands, and their technique is much closer to that of Syro-Egyptian art of the sixth or seventh century than to classical art. This fact is all the more significant since the capitals carved in the sixth century for the basilica of Selles-sur-Cher were still very similar to the antique types. Figures continued to be carved in low relief on the sides of sarcophagi, but it was only in the purely ornamental designs that these artists excelled. In this respect Gaul followed an evolution very similar to that of the workshops in the Eastern Mediterranean.



41 - NANTES, CATHEDRAL. CAPITAL. MUSÉE DOBRÉE, NANTES.



43 - VERTOU, ABBEY. CAPITAL. MUSÉE DOBRÉE, NANTES.



42 - NANTES, CATHEDRAL. CAPITAL. MUSÉE DOBRÉE, NANTES.



44 - VERTOU, ABBEY. CAPITAL. MUSÉE DOBRÉE, NANTES.



45 - POITIERS, BAPTISTERY OF SAINT-JEAN. VIEW FROM THE SOUTH-EAST.

From the late sixth to the early eighth century, the conditions of life in Poitou were favourable to art. This is clear from the flourishing state of tomb sculpture. The tombs of this period that can be positively dated, either from inscriptions engraved on them or by the level at which they were found in the cemeteries, have high artistic qualities. Some carvings skilfully imitate the embroidered textiles with which the dead were clad. The most characteristic of them have been preserved and can still be seen at Poitiers in the baptistery of Saint-Jean, a famous monument which, like the tombs, dates to the seventh century.

This dating has been contested—on insufficient grounds—by local archaeologists; for them, this fine old building symbolizes the ancient civilization of this part of France, and they would push back its foundation into the remotest past. But apart from the Gallo-Roman vestiges on which it rests and the Romanesque modifications of the entrance and the whole interior, what we have here is a cruciform edifice, with apses originally square, whose ground plan is at once very different from that of the fifth- and sixth-century baptisteries with corner niches, and quite



46 - POITIERS, BAPTISTERY OF SAINT-JEAN. VIEW FROM THE NORTH-EAST.

close to the layout of the Venasque baptistery which dates back only to the early Middle Ages. Above the apse roofs, the outer masonry of the walls has remained unchanged since the seventh century except for the insertion of round windows. The triangular pediments of the façades have been likened to those of pagan temples and of the mausoleum of Galla Placidia at Ravenna. But the Poitiers pediments are supported by tall pilasters embedded in the masonry, and this arrangement has more in common with another piece of architecture typical of the Later Empire: the façade of the Salvatore basilica at Spoleto. The layout of the two buildings is too similar for them not to have a common origin. But at Poitiers the forms have degenerated so much that the triangular pediments of the windows are replaced by flat slabs of stone devoid of any relief, and their ornamentation recalls the simulated embroideries on the stone tombs of this region mentioned on the previous page. In the chronology of forms the Poitiers baptistery comes long after the Spoleto basilica and shortly before the decoration of pilasters and mitre arches which once existed at Saint-Ursanne and can still be seen on the façades of the monumental gate of the atrium



47 - POITIERS, BAPTISTERY OF SAINT-JEAN. NORTH FRONT.

of the abbey of Lorsch. Stress must be laid on this point. For it suggests that Merovingian Gaul practised a religious architecture whose forms continued or imitated, with varying success, those of the Later Empire. Too often it aimed at trivial 'effects'; there was no logical connection between the ornamentation and the structure. This art form owes its historical significance to the fact that by the seventh century it had spread over a large part of Gaul, as is proved by the carved slabs like those of the baptistery which have been found at Poitiers itself in the ancient church of Saint-Pierre-lé-Puellier and by the slabs which still exist at Saint-Jouin-de-Marnes (one of the foundations of St Martin, abbot of Vertou, who died early in the seventh century) and at Mazerolles, an ancient monastery rebuilt by Bishop Ansoald of Poitiers at the end of the seventh century. We find further links with the vestiges of other early medieval buildings of this region. The upper register and ponderous cornices of the Poitiers baptistery contain modillions and large decorations in terracotta. In Nantes Museum there are similar pieces, some coming from monasteries founded by St Martin of Vertou, others found in the vicinity of Nantes. To be sure, not all



48 - POITIERS, BAPTISTERY OF SAINT-JEAN. SOUTH FRONT, DETAIL



49 - POITIERS, BAPTISTERY OF SAINT-JEAN. EARLIER CAPITAL RE-USED.

these fragments of figured terracotta went to adorn façades; some of them undoubtedly served as brackets supporting decorated ceilings in the antique manner. Here we have yet another proof of the survival in Gaul, throughout the Merovingian period, of the architecture of the Later Empire.

In France the coffered ceiling disappeared from religious architecture towards the end of the Carolingian period, while, in the Loire Valley and neighbouring regions,



50 - POITIERS, BAPTISTERY OF SAINT-JEAN. EARLIER CAPITALS RE-USED.



51A - ANTIGNY. SARCOPHAGUS. — 51B - POITIERS, CEMETERY OF SAINT-LAZARE. SARCOPHAGUS. BAPTISTERY OF SAINT-JEAN, POITIERS.

51C - POITIERS, SAINTE-CATHERINE CEMETERY. SARCOPHAGUS. — 51D - POITIERS, SAINT-LAZARE CEMETERY. SARCOPHAGUS. BAPTISTERY OF SAINT-JEAN.



POITIERS, BAPTISTERY OF SAINT-JEAN. CARVED SLAB (CAST).



54 - MAZEROLLES, CHURCH. CARVED SLAB (CAST).

church fronts of the early Romanesque continued to be adorned with alternate courses of brick and stone, and with triangular inserts of masonry decorated with billet mouldings. Here the frieze of figured stonework took the place of terracotta. A century ago two Touraine archaeologists, Abbé Bourrassé and Abbé Chevalier, published a large book in which they sought to demonstrate that these early Romanesque churches were Merovingian. The mistake they made hardly deserves the ridicule some critics have heaped upon them, for these churches with their elaborately adorned façades manifestly represent the last phase of an architecture rich in colour and visual effects whose principles had been formulated in Italy under the Later Empire, and which found enthusiastic exponents in Gaul during the seventh century, as is proved by the handsome façades of the Poitiers baptistery and the traces of ornamentation we have drawn attention to. Nothing of the kind is to be found in the early Middle Ages in Italy, Spain or the British Isles. It may justly be concluded, therefore, that Gaul (and Aquitaine in particular) played an essential role as an intermediary between antique and Romanesque art, between the decorative reliefs

POITIERS, BAPTISTERY OF SAINT-JEAN. PILASTERS DECORATING THE EXTERIOR (CASTS).



55 - TUNISIA. PANEL: ADAM AND EVE TEMPTED BY THE SERPENT. MUSÉE DU BARDO, TUNIS.



56 - VERTOU. PANEL: ADAM AND EVE TEMPTED BY THE SERPENT. MUSÉE DOBRÉE, NANTES.

of the Later Empire and the architectural sculpture of France in the early twelfth century. A similar observation may be made with respect to the sculptured marble capitals of the sixth and seventh centuries in the Toulouse area. Fine examples of them can be seen in the interior of the Poitiers baptistery, but they were placed there only in the Romanesque period. Not everything in this art is the outcome of a long tradition or a true survival.

The terracotta bas-reliefs from churches or mausolea in the Loire Valley carry vine-patterns and figures which undoubtedly were copied from antique carvings then still extant. Here we may justly speak of a renaissance.

On the other hand, the terracotta panels with Christian imagery and the 'Holy Faces' certainly derive from models created under the Later Empire, for there are striking similarities between these works of seventh-century Gaul and those of early sixth-century Africa—similarities which can be accounted for only as stemming from a common 'art language' current throughout a large part of the Christian world before the great invasions of the mid-fifth century.



57 - TUNISIA. CHRIST (?). MUSÉE DU BARDO, TUNIS.



58 - PARIS. HEAD WITH A CROSS. PARIS.



59 - NANTES. FIGURED PANEL IN IMITATION OF THE ANTIQUE. MUSÉE DOBRÉE, NANTES.



61 - VERTOU. FRAGMENT OF A PEDIMENT. MUSÉE DOBRÉE, NANTES.



60 - VERTOU. FRAGMENT OF A PEDIMENT. MUSÉE DOBRÉE, NANTES.



62 - NANTES. FRAGMENT OF A CORNICE. MUSÉE DOBRÉE, NANTES.



63 - NANTES. PANEL WITH THE SACRED MONOGRAM. MUSÉE DOBRÉE, NANTES.



64 - VERTOU. FRAGMENT OF A PEDIMENT. MUSÉE DOBRÉE, NANTES.



65 - NANTES. ARCH-STONE WITH A FIGURE. MUSÉE DOBRÉE, NANTES.