CHAPTER 1

The Early Architecture of France

Travellers to France today often remark how close together and plentiful are her civic, military and ecclesiastical monuments (in comparison, for example, with Spain or even parts of Italy). This book shows that they were once much more plentiful, and that the survivals have often been mangled by 19th-century restoration. Even if ecclesiastical architecture remains plentiful, large quantities have been destroyed, many by the occupation of the French army, as we shall see. As for Roman architecture, the following chapters will demonstrate how false is the common notion that the Romans only really built anything in Provence, by detailing the inexorable march of modernisation, open towns and railways which destroyed large quantities of antique structures in the rest of the country, and continues that task almost to the present day. But what about laws against such destruction, and the protection provided to some monuments? With aggressive prefects (such as Baron Haussmann) and local administrations, plus litigious property owners, and the imperative of new roads and railways, it is a miracle that as much survived as it did.

Spolia and the Persistence of Re-use

Throughout the Middle Ages, and indeed to our own day, we have contemporary accounts which express enthusiasm for the prestigious materials of antiquity, especially marble (which could exude and express “power”), in the shape of columns, and squared building-blocks, some of large dimensions – an enthusiasm for the heroic age, and the older the better (perhaps), similar to Pausanias’ attitude to his material. Modern studies are also plentiful.\(^1\) Such spolia, a term referring to the systematic or casual re-use of material from previous structures, were useful over the centuries, because they might be reused again and again in a variety of locations and for a wide range of purposes.\(^{[1]}\) Columns were attractive to the Middle Ages for a host of reasons. Not only were they almost a trademark of classical architecture, but they were easy to get at and easy to transport, because they could be rolled like logs, or given wheels, when they formed an improvised axle. Usually of marble or granite, but sometimes of limestone, they were (when monolithic) long and strong,

\(^1\) Pinon 1978 & 1985 for re-use of theatres, amphitheatres etc. in France.
and beautiful as well, gleaming because highly polished. In at least one 12th-century French account of rebuilding of the Abbey at Ardres, near Boulogne, c. 1172 by the Abbot Peter, the spolia may be antique, but taken from a ruined church.\(^2\) The Romans themselves reused materials, and so, routinely, did the early Church. Thus it is not surprising that the Middle Ages in the West, France included, shared Cassiodorus’ enthusiasm about the qualities of spolia.\(^3\) Today, the market for spolia continues unabated.\(^2\)

Marble reliefs and veneers, and large building blocks, were also prized in later centuries, and like columns became the building elements of much long-lasting mediaeval religious architecture, as well as of that of later centuries. Louis XIV did make efforts to quarry marble at S. Béat, but getting it thither to Paris and Versailles was tedious, and digging for spolia very much easier, some of it imported on French vessels from around the Mediterranean. Of course, there was so much building activity during the Middle Ages and later, civil, ecclesiastical as well as military, that quarrying was essential,\(^3\) and sometimes took place under the town itself, as at Bourges (Cher).\(^4\) But if ruins were available, as at Vaison, they were used. In the later 18th century the Abbé de Saint-Véran comments on the locals’ desire for materials, the local château being treated

\[\text{à peu près par eux comme le fut autrefois le collissée de Rome. C’est un inconvénient auquel notre police pouvoit bien aisément remedier, en punissant avec sévérité ces destructeurs d’ouvrages publics.}\(^4\)]

And one look at the town shows why the château went before the Roman ruins: it was at the top of the hill, so blocks were easily rolled down from it – whereas plundering the Roman ruins would have required lifting equipment.

Because of the enormous costs of quarrying and (especially) transporting new stone, a large proportion of architecture anywhere is based on reuse. Technological competence through the centuries was also variable.\(^5\) The build-

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2 Il Messagero, Monday 12 February 1996, 4: a porphyry column shaft weighing five tons was stolen from the Baths of Caracalla. This was obviously for slicing into table tops, for the going rate for Corinthian capitals (Hellenistic, Roman, or Byzantine) for use as table pedestals was up to 10m lire.

3 Bayrou 2013, 28–9 for quarrying at Peyrepertuse in 1250; 137–148 for repair work at Carcassonne in 1120 etc.; 167–171 for the Palais Vieux at Narbonne, newly built and renamed in the 14th century, and much reworked in 17–18th century.

4 Narboux 2003, 45–68: Un sous-sol gallo-romain, including the walls, and quarries.

5 Scheidegger 1991 I, 132–140 for Techniques 400-Romanesque