TEMPLES IN THE WEST
TEMPTLES IN LATE ANTIQUE GAUL

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Abstract

Literary sources emphasise the role of Christian iconoclasts and church-builders in the demise of Gaul’s pagan temples. But the picture from archaeology is different, since excavated remains suggest that the main story is one of voluntary abandonment from the late 3rd c. A.D. onwards. This may be linked with the military upheavals of the period, but indirectly, due to factors such as financial difficulties and the changing priorities of the elite. Meanwhile, the imperial adoption of Christianity and the beginnings of official hostility towards pagan religion had little impact, because by the time they came into effect, the heyday of pagan sacred architecture in Gaul had passed.

INTRODUCTION: THE GALLO-ROMAN SACRED LANDSCAPE

Gaul in the Roman era was rich in temples, and its temples were rich in variety. In southern Gaul, and particularly Narbonensis, temples in the Vitruvian classical tradition predominated: over forty are known, mostly located in towns and cities.¹ But the three northerly provinces—Aquitania, Belgica and Lugdunensis—were characterised instead by a local variant, known as the Romano-Celtic temple, Gallo-Roman temple or *fanum*. These have traditionally been defined in terms of their concentric ground-plans, in which a tall *cella* of roughly square, circular or polygonal shape is surrounded on all sides by a gallery approximately half its width, either porticoed or enclosed.² But the local temple tradition was distinguished above all by its variety: small single-celled temples without a surrounding gallery; temples with a porch only; and temples of great size and complexity whose decoration

¹ Figure from references in Grenier (1958), Bedon (2001) and van Andringa (2002).
² Fauduet (1993a) 11.