

## CHAPTER

## I

*Beginnings*

I HAVE called this book “Medieval Sculpture in France” rather than “French Medieval Sculpture” of set purpose, as it must be understood clearly at the outset that the limits adopted are arbitrary rather than rational, and have been accepted owing to the necessity of keeping the subject within reasonable bounds. A more complete treatment of medieval art would have to embrace northern Spain, Italy, England and the Rhine country, if not places even farther afield, and could hardly be compressed into a single textbook.

It must be remembered that the geographical entity we know as France is a comparatively modern growth. At the commencement of our period the modern nations of Europe were only beginning to shape themselves, and it is not much before the days of Henry V of England or Jeanne Darc that real national feeling seems to have developed. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries western Europe was divided up into a great number of small fiefs, the inhabitants of which owed personal allegiance to a noble house which in turn supported a duke, king or other overlord. The marriage of an heiress might thus easily change what we should call the nationality of the subject. The authority of the King of France was very shadowy and hardly extended beyond the region round Paris known as the *Île-de-France*. Dukes of Burgundy, Normandy or Aquitaine, Counts of Toulouse or Provence were practically independent sovereigns. The fortunes of great rival houses make the history very complicated. Henry II of England owned more territory in France than the King of France, Kings of Aragon ruled

in Provence, Counts of Anjou in Naples, and so on.<sup>1</sup> The inhabitant of northern Spain was much more akin to the citizen of Toulouse than the latter was to the dweller in Paris, and throughout the medieval period there is a broad distinction between north and south, though of course each reacts upon the other.

In all this welter of confusion the one unifying influence was that of the Church, and, as the Church was the chief patron of the arts, we are able, at any rate in the earlier part of our investigations, to ignore the minor political changes that were constantly going on, and concentrate on the more permanent tendencies. For us, therefore, the spread of monastic institutions, the development of the pilgrimage routes, the Crusades and the struggles with the Moors in Spain will be much more important than the dynastic quarrels which left a less permanent effect on the population.

The question of origins is always a fascinating one, and the causes which led up to that marvellous art movement to which we owe the great Gothic cathedrals have excited much interest and given rise to many conflicting theories. Supporters of these are very apt to ride their own hobby to death and ignore facts which tell against them, and the investigator who wishes to present a true picture must realise that he will have to cull his information from various sources, and that, in dealing with any complicated human movement, any beautifully arranged logical scheme can only be reached by suppressing facts which do not fit into the theory. Such controversial problems are extraordinarily interesting, but they make the task of reducing the art history of the eleventh and twelfth centuries to textbook order one of no small difficulty.

The revival of architecture and sculpture at the end of the eleventh century and the beginning of the twelfth is the most remarkable move-

<sup>1</sup> The famous King René was Duke of Anjou, Count of Provence, and King of Naples, Sicily and Jerusalem.

ment in the whole history of art. In a comparatively short period it filled Europe with great churches, developed a new race of artists and sculptors and paved the way for the triumphs of the thirteenth century. Such an epoch far better deserves the name of the *Renaissance* than the Classical revival of some 400 years later, to which that term is usually applied.

All authorities are agreed as to the dearth of examples of monumental sculpture in France before the end of the eleventh century. They are even scarcer than in England, and where they can be identified are of the rudest possible description and hardly merit the name of sculpture.<sup>1</sup> For some five centuries large-scale sculpture in stone seems to have been almost abandoned, and the flourishing school of Roman or Hellenistic sculpture, well represented by the sarcophagus collections in the museum at Arles, had no successor after the fifth century of our era.

The barbarian invasions of the fifth century overwhelmed what was left of the decadent Roman civilisation, and though the old populations must have greatly outnumbered their new masters, the confusion which ensued naturally proved fatal to art and education. Gradually, however, the wild Goths and Franks were converted to Christianity, and to this period belong many of the missionary saints whose mythical exploits gave them such popularity in the later medieval period, and whose relics were destined to make the fortune of many a pilgrimage

<sup>1</sup> I do not wish to go so far as to say that no examples of tenth-century sculpture exist. Some almost completely decayed figures over a window of the Basse Œuvre at Beauvais must have been carved in the tenth century, and an early relief at Charlieu (Fig. 69) may possibly go back to this period. De Lasteyrie (*L'Architecture religieuse en France à l'époque romane*, Figs. 30, 32, 33) illustrates a very primitive relief found in a seventh-century cemetery at Poitiers and a foliage scroll and flat relief of Christ found in the excavation of the seventh-century church of S. Pierre de la Citadelle, Metz, which was restored in the tenth century. Early carved capitals remain in the crypts at Grenoble and Jouarre and the Baptistery of S. John at Poitiers, and further research will no doubt identify other early works of the sort, but in any case they must be so scarce that the argument in the text can hardly be affected.

church. A new civilisation thus slowly came into being, simple and childlike in its credulity, but bearing in it the seed of the greatness that was to come. The writings of S. Gregory of Tours, especially his *History of the Franks*, with their naïve mixture of artlessness and shrewdness, give us the best notion of the state of western Europe in the second half of the sixth century.

Centuries passed and we hear of fresh invasions from the north by the Normans, and from the south by the Saracens, who in the seventh century had overwhelmed the main centres of Christian civilisation in the east, and who had spread through northern Africa into Spain, and even threatened the western nations in France itself until hurled back by Charles Martel in the famous battle of Tours in 732. We are concerned here, however, with general history only in so far as it affects the arts. Attempts were made by Charlemagne, and later by the Ottos in Germany, to revive something of the pomp and splendour of the old Roman Empire, which had become little more than a legendary memory. They imported skilled craftsmen from the east to decorate their buildings, and we find wonderful descriptions of the splendours of such churches as the imperial chapel at Aachen and its contents, but one cannot help suspecting that the reality hardly came up to the imagination of the enthusiastic monks to whom we owe such descriptions. The works of art of the Carolingian period which have survived are not what we should call sculpture but are mostly small-scale productions of what will presently be described as the cloister crafts, manuscript paintings, book covers, ivories, etc.<sup>1</sup> Architectural sculpture hardly got beyond interlacing patterns or clumsy copies of classical or Byzantine capitals, and such efforts were short lived and left little

<sup>1</sup> The remarkable bronze doors and the column with winding reliefs produced under Bishop Bernward at Hildesheim in the first half of the eleventh century are the nearest approach to what we should call sculpture, but even these belong to the church furnishing arts, or cloister crafts, and must be distinguished from the architectural sculpture with which we shall chiefly have to deal.

permanent result behind them beyond a vague preparation in the minds of men for what was to follow. It is not until the end of the eleventh century that we begin to see the signs of a real and lasting revival.

What then was it that gave the impulse to this great movement, and whence did the artists draw their inspiration? The problem is made more difficult by the scarcity of recorded dates and the disputes as to the identification with existing monuments of those which have come down to us. It will, however, be more convenient to go into the question of dates at the beginning of the next chapter, when we shall be dealing with the various schools of Romanesque sculpture and discussing their relative order of precedence. Here it is only necessary to emphasise the fact that at some time between the end of the eleventh century and the middle of the twelfth a great revival took place and manifested its activities all over western Europe within a very short period. Almost suddenly great churches began to arise in every direction, on a scale hitherto undreamt of outside the great capitals of the ancient world, such as Rome, Constantinople or Jerusalem. At the same time these churches began to be adorned with a monumental sculpture which it will be our task to investigate in the following chapters.<sup>1</sup>

Two main causes may, I think, be first established for this remarkable movement. Although the barbarian invasions had destroyed the ancient world they had brought an infusion of new blood. By this time the nations were settling down, they had learnt some of the simpler arts of life from the peoples they had overrun, and had mostly become Christians—at any rate nominally. The latest conquests—those of the Normans—had established a particularly virile and ambitious aristocracy in France, England and as far afield as Sicily and other parts of the Mediterranean coasts, and their fleets reopened the

<sup>1</sup> See Ralph Glaber's description of the outburst of church building after the fatal year A.D. 1000 had been safely passed—"Instar ac si mundus...rejecta vetustate, passim candidam ecclesiarum vestem indueret" (l. III, c. iv, § 13).

Mediterranean to western commerce and destroyed Saracen command of the sea which had always been the centre of civilisation, but had been shut off by Moslem domination for over three centuries. New hope and new ambitions arose, and king and noble, bishop and abbot vied with one another as to who could build the finest castle, church or abbey, and the nations turned to this new outlet for their enterprise with all the energy of youth.

Contact with the highly skilled artisans working for the luxurious courts of the Moorish masters of Spain must also have exercised considerable influence in the south of France.

The second main cause, and perhaps the most important of all, was the rapid development of monasticism. It first arose in the east among the hermits of the deserts of Syria and Egypt, who gradually came to band themselves into groups or communities. The first organised community of this kind was introduced into Italy by S. Benedict as early as the sixth century, and though his abbey of Monte Cassino was destroyed by the Lombards in 589, his code of rules became the model for many similar communities. For the history of art in France the most important move was the foundation of the Cluniac Order early in the tenth century, when Abbot Berno, with the help of the Duke of Aquitaine, first built his monastery at Cluny. Hitherto the Benedictine houses had been self-centred communities with very loose connexions one with another, but under the new scheme Cluny was to be the head of a vast monastic hierarchy, with dependent houses grouped round it. The abbots of the daughter houses were to be appointed not by the monks but by the Abbot of Cluny, and thus a great and powerful organisation grew up, and rapidly acquired a wealth and influence the like of which had not been seen before.

These great monasteries were the centres of art and learning and, as such, rapidly gained a position of pre-eminence amidst the ignorance round them. Kings and nobles who had not lived scrupulous lives, or



had done deeds of crime and violence, sought to make peace with Heaven by fresh endowments and new foundations, such as the two noble churches built at Caen by William the Conqueror and his queen, Matilda, in expiation for their unlawful marriage within the forbidden degrees of affinity.

The Cluniacs, especially, were great patrons of the arts and delighted in beautiful books, shrines and buildings. By the end of the eleventh century the old church at Cluny no longer sufficed to meet their needs, and in 1088 the abbot, S. Hugh, began what was then the largest church in Christendom. It is one of the tragedies of history that practically nothing is left of this famous building though it survived intact down to the French Revolution. A portion of one transept and a number of broken capitals are all that remain, and if this, together with the great pilgrimage church of S. Martin at Tours, S. Bénigne at Dijon, S. Martial at Limoges and the original S. Denis at Paris, had survived, many of the problems of art history which now trouble us might have been clearly solved.

The great abbots of Cluny were statesmen and men of the world as well as spiritual rulers, and they were quick to seize upon any opportunity of spreading the influence of their Order. Their new churches were richly decorated with painting and sculpture, and no effort was spared to impress their neighbours by sumptuous display, and to educate the unlettered in the doctrines of the Church by their pictures and sculptures.<sup>1</sup> They also encouraged the collection of relics of the saints and early missionaries of the country, and helped to organise the pilgrimages which became such an important institution during the

<sup>1</sup> Dr Frothingham, in his *Monuments of Christian Rome*, aptly quotes S. Gregory: "What writing is for those who can read, painting is for the uneducated who can only look". The continuity of the Catholic tradition is confirmed by the French prelate Durand in the thirteenth century who wrote: "In churches we pay less reverence to books than to images and pictures; pictures and ornaments in churches are the teachings and scriptures of the laity".

period we are studying. The worship of relics seems to have fulfilled the cravings of a primitive instinct in the population, and even to-day an element of the old paganism may be discerned in the crowds of peasant women kneeling before a black Virgin like her of Rocamadour, traditionally said to have been made by S. Amadour himself, who is identified for some strange reason with Zacchaeus the publican.<sup>1</sup> Every monastery or great church had its collection of relics, many of them allowed by their rivals even in those days to be spurious, and these relics were placed in gorgeous shrines of gold, silver or copper gilt, and exhibited to the pilgrims who flocked to see them. Many miracles were attributed to them, and the monasteries reaped a rich reward from the offerings of the faithful.

The most famous of the pilgrimages, after that to Jerusalem, was that to Santiago de Compostela. This was much encouraged by the Cluniac Order, which always took a leading part in stirring up the Crusades, and was always urging the more warlike of the pilgrims to help in the age-long struggle against the Moors in Spain. Houses of the Order were established at intervals along the routes followed by the pilgrims, who visited the various shrines as they passed, and left offerings according to their means at each sacred spot. A pilgrims' guide book has come down to us, a sort of medieval Baedeker, describing the routes to be followed and the shrines to be visited, with a careful description of the great church at Compostela which was the goal of the pilgrimage.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The statue itself is so smothered up in rich robes, when exhibited to the faithful, that it is difficult to say what it really is like. It is said to be of wood plated with silver, and probably dates from the twelfth century. A famous pilgrim to this shrine was Henry II of England, who visited it with his court in 1170.

<sup>2</sup> V. Mortet, in his *Recueil de Textes*, quotes the description of the great church of S. James in full in his appendix, p. 397. It was written before the alterations at the end of the twelfth century when the Portico de la Gloria was added, and some of the sculptures described elsewhere seem later to have been collected and incorporated in the Puerta de las Platerias, where they can now be recognised.



It has been recently suggested that the key to the history of early Romanesque art might be found by studying the pilgrim roads,<sup>1</sup> and that these would prove to have had more influence on the style of the monuments than mere local traditions. It is evident that the great churches at Compostela itself, of S. Sernin at Toulouse and of S. Foy at Conques in Quercy are all very much on the same plan and very similar in many details. Ideas, however, spread rapidly at a creative period, and the spread of influences is such a complex movement that it is dangerous to depend too much on any one key. Archaeologists who develop a fresh idea are very apt to ride their theory to death to the exclusion of everything else, and if we wish to take a scientific view we shall have to be careful to avoid too rigid definitions.

The great fact that we have to emphasise here is that round about the year 1100 there was a great outburst of church building on a scale hitherto unknown. Beautiful cloisters with carved capitals, like those at Moissac, Elne and later at Arles, became veritable museums of sculpture. Carved porches and façades began to grow up in all directions, and a sudden demand for sculpture had to be met. What makes this period so important is this development of stone sculpture on a monumental scale. This does not mean that there had been no sculpture before this date, but up till then it had been mainly on a smaller scale. The decoration of shrine and altar, sculpture in precious metals or ivory had been practised along with painting and the illumination of manuscripts in the monasteries themselves. It was the change over from these cloister crafts to building sculpture which gave the impetus to start the great movement which filled western Europe with statues and reliefs, and led on to the still greater developments of the thirteenth century.

<sup>1</sup> *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads*, by A. Kingsley Porter, Boston, 1923. This book with its thousands of photographs is a veritable corpus of Romanesque sculpture in France, Spain and parts of Italy and the Rhineland. It is a pity that the scale on which it has been produced puts it out of reach of all but transatlantic purses.

A very able discussion on the work of this period has recently been published by M. Paul Deschamps.<sup>1</sup> He begins by pointing out the way in which figure sculpture was abandoned from the fifth to the eleventh century, and tries to find reasons for it. He then shows that the arts were carried on in smaller works in ivory, terra-cotta, stucco, wood and metal and quotes many contemporary texts referring to such works. He goes on to trace the influence of these various crafts on the technique of the stone sculpture when it was revived in the eleventh century.

The abandonment of figure sculpture cannot have been merely due to incompetence, but must also have been caused to some extent by religious ideas and national temperament. The iconoclastic notions, endemic in parts of the east, and of which we see constant signs in the protests of Jewish prophets against graven images, not only overwhelmed the Hellenistic art of the Eastern Empire, but had their reflections in France. M. Deschamps quotes Agobard, Bishop of Lyons, who wrote a book called *De imaginibus sanctorum*, “Quicumque aliquam picturam, vel fusilem sive ductilem adorat statuam, non exhibet cultum Deo, non honorat angelos vel homines sanctos, sed simulacra veneratur”. In 825 the Council of Paris condemned the cult of images.<sup>2</sup>

Prof. Strzygowski has a theory that the pastoral and nomadic races, especially those of the north, usually favour what he calls non-representational art.<sup>3</sup> We even see it breaking out again at the time of the Reformation, and the prejudice still exists to some extent in evangelical circles in England. Christianity after all was an eastern religion at

<sup>1</sup> “Étude sur la Renaissance de la Sculpture en France à l'époque romane”, *Bulletin Monumental*, 1925.

<sup>2</sup> Bréhier, *L'Art chrétien*, Paris, 1928, p. 196.

<sup>3</sup> He has published many books, but an English translation of a course of lectures delivered in Upsala, under the title of *Origin of Christian Church Art*, gives a summary of his arguments in a convenient form for the English student.