
H-France Review Vol. 16 (November 2016), No. 253

Christian Sapin, *Les cryptes en France. Pour une approche archéologique, IV^e-XII^e siècle*. Paris: Éditions A. et J. Picard, 2014. 320 pp. Illustrations, index, and bibliography. 76 € (cl.) ISBN 978-2-7084-0965-1

Review by Bonnie Effros, University of Florida.

In this lavishly illustrated survey, the product of decades of research, the medieval archaeologist Christian Sapin explores the phenomenon of crypts in France. He makes the case that these subterranean spaces were not dark and hidden as might be assumed popularly, but, at least until the early thirteenth century, were active spaces that fulfilled a variety of functions for different constituencies. Rather than depending mainly upon written documentation, much of which is significantly later than the developments in which he is interested, Sapin offers a timely reading of the recent archaeological research that of late has revolutionized understanding of the history and evolution of medieval crypts between the fourth and twelfth centuries. In all, he provides a corpus of 375 crypts in France, which he compares on occasion with both continental and English examples.

Medieval crypts have attracted scholarly attention since at least the eighteenth century. Sapin attributes interest in these subterranean spaces to romantic fascination with the earliest Christians who sought refuge in catacombs or caves in order to pursue their faith. For nineteenth-century antiquarians like Henri Baudot in Dijon, crypts offered evidence of the spread of Christianity in imperial Gaul. Some late nineteenth-century studies, in the absence of reliable stratigraphical studies and influenced most famously by the work of Giovanni Battista de Rossi in the Roman catacombs, erred by dating the crypts they studied to centuries earlier than is thought today. The work of the Jesuit archaeologist Camille de la Croix, who made the extraordinary discovery of the Hypogée des Dunes in the suburbs of Poitiers in 1879, sparked a contentious debate about the presence of heretofore unknown martyrs in southwestern Gaul during the Great Persecutions.

Borrowing from Peter Brown, Sapin argues that when medieval Christians descended into crypts, they entered into a space in which a holy body or relics offered a conduit to heaven. However, he acknowledges that significant ambiguity exists in defining the nature of a crypt, derived from the Greek *crypta* (hidden), and for which early medieval authors like Gregory of Tours alternatively used the term *cella*, *crypta*, *cellula*, and *oratorium*, suggesting a range of functions that occurred around holy tombs. Archaeologists likewise have a sizeable vocabulary for these underground spaces, including mausolea, *memoriae*, hypogea, and funerary chapels. For Sapin, the multiplicity of terms for crypts stemmed from their evolving role. From the fourth century, underground mausolea for holy remains frequently included space for an altar or a *mensa* (table) for liturgical meals, where it is thought that ritual activities like the Eucharistic sacrifice were celebrated. The practice of *incubatio*, during which pilgrims might spend nights in a sanctuary or in proximity to a holy tomb so that miracles could occur, was derived from pagan temples and existed at sites like Saint-Martin in Tours from an early date.

In the Merovingian period, these mausolea were expanded into larger spaces under the *chevet* (head) of the basilical structure at the churches of Saint-Laurent in Grenoble, Saint-Seurin in Bordeaux, and

Saint-Martial in Limoges. Sapin argues that the tensions that then existed between liturgical requirements of the undisturbed celebration of Masses and the demands of the sick who sought healing at holy tombs took architectural form. Cultic spaces were typically accessible via one, or, if heavily patronized, two staircases, facilitating access for pilgrims. Adaptation led to the creation of upper and lower churches, with the latter mirroring more visible manifestations of the church above. The crypt of Saint-Martin in Luxeuil was a vaulted space 3.6 meters by 3.6 meters with interior pillars, whereas the free-standing Hypogée des Dunes had an altar, inscriptions, frescoes, and space for burials.

In the Carolingian period, although sometimes free-standing mausolea-*memoria* were constructed outside of basilicas, far more common was the location of the crypt under the main church's altar, which contained relics bound to liturgical activities. In monastic centers, although such spaces resembled chapels, concerted efforts were made to keep monks' and nuns' liturgical activities separate from devotional practices associated with holy tombs such as at Sainte-Gertrude of Nivelles. In synods of the early to mid-ninth century, backed by papal legislation of roughly the same era, clerics banned the presence of laymen during the Mass in the presbyterium of the church. Not just pilgrimage but also monks' and nuns' religious functions and duties shaped and normalized these spaces.

In this period, Sapin observes that the architecture of crypts became more complex, with some taking the form of galleries or vaults connected by long hallways such as at Saint-Médard in Soissons. Others borrowed their vocabulary and configuration from Saint Peter's in Rome, taking the shape of a semi-circular hallway. Crypts like Saint-Quentin might undergo multiple modifications over time depending upon the needs of their congregations as they acquired more relics, adopted more complex processional traditions with psalmody, and oversaw growing cultic sites that required improved ease of circulation and additional altars for the divine office, as was the case in the ninth century at Auxerre, Flavigny, and Saint-Philbert de Grand-Lieu.

Despite investing significant resources in the expansion of crypts and the creation of *xenodochia* (hostels) to house growing numbers of pilgrims, Sapin notes that in the Carolingian period it was not always easy to approach the saints' remains. During the translation of Germanus of Auxerre in 859, for instance, clerics sought to stop anyone but the king and bishops from touching even the fabric around holy relics. Access was limited to fixed days and times and such restrictions affected monks, lay faithful, and the elite. Efforts were also made to restrict the number of individuals who might be buried *ad sanctos*, in the desirable spaces in the intimate company of the saints. Restricted access might mean having to peer at the holy tomb via a *fenestella* (small window) rather than entering directly in contact with the saint's remains. Sapin also observes how little we know about women's circulation in these underground spaces, and suggests that as clausturation became the rule, nuns' segregation may have made it increasingly difficult for them to gain access to holy tombs.

In the course of his discussion, Sapin raises intriguing questions about the sensory experience of moving through subterranean sacred spaces in the Carolingian period. While some pilgrims may have been able to touch holy tombs, in many cases it appears from architectural remains that they could only see them via a *fenestella* or perhaps a grill as at Saint-Julien in Brioude. A grill might allow them to pass a *brandea* (cloth) to reach what they could not touch personally, with the benefit of creating a tertiary relic they might take home with them. These openings not only allowed additional light to supplement the oil lamps that burned in subterranean crypts, but also permitted the sound of the psalmody of the monks or canons to permeate these spaces. The decoration of crypts with faux marble, acanthus leaves, wall paintings, mosaics, inscriptions, and capitals served to reinforce the importance of crypts and their holy relics.

The eleventh and twelfth centuries were decisive for the development of crypts, which became part of a more elaborate conception of space and function. For Sapin, the crypt represented a church within the church, and the consecration or re-consecration of such spaces occurred with considerable ceremony.

During this period, the construction of crypts multiplied and their dimensions were at times vast. At Chateau-Landon (Seine-et-Marne), there were rooms for prayer that could accommodate clerics or monks around the relics. At Cluny, there were multiple apses in the space of the crypt, a space far more elaborate than a hall or single gallery. Although the altar of the churches in which they were built became increasingly important as the site of transubstantiation, crypts were by no means abandoned but instead matched the developments overhead with their own vaulted spaces, decorated columns, and galleries. Although their complexity was limited by the dimensions afforded by the churches they supported, their configuration reflected the aspirations of the church and its congregation, in addition to the importance of its cult of relics, a tradition that continued to expand in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Pilgrims' graffiti offer an important source for measuring the continuing popularity of many of these cults.

In the Capetian period, Sapin notes that the Romanesque crypt-hall became quite popular in France, Italy, and Norman England. These spaces were adorned with two sets of columns down their length. Sapin offers a variety of possible explanations for their function, suggesting that the separate aisles perhaps served different constituencies, whether clerics or pilgrims, and that circulation around the tomb may have no longer been possible in some cases. Another layout was the rounded crypt, often situated on the lower level of a monumental structure in an ancient or Carolingian structure. Many of these did not survive the period, being updated in subsequent phases of church developments. Whereas some crypts had deambulatories like at Saint-Pierre d'Uzerche (Creuse), others had radiating chapels like at Saint-Pierre-le-Vif (Sens). Some crypts, however, were more idiosyncratic in shape, with asymmetrical wings and multiple altars. These spaces, some more modest and others less so, revealed the individual priorities and resources of their congregations. In this period, the principal places of pilgrimage in France were Mont-Saint-Michel, Puy-en-Velay, and Chartres, with Saint-Martin in Tours having lost some of its luster from the early Middle Ages.

However, by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Sapin observes that it became increasingly common to elevate holy relics to the altar, which lessened the necessity and attraction of a crypt. Cluny offers a good example of such an evolution with regard to the conception of sacred space. Relics, placed within lavish receptacles, became the focal point of ceremony and spectacle of which they were the object. And, crypts could not compete with the liturgy of cathedrals, being located less visibly in the public eye and thus facing more constraints, such as limited space and light, in reproducing this experience. Consequently, from the mid-thirteenth century, the creation of new crypts became rarer, and those that existed tended to disappear or lose their purpose because greater attention went to the presentation of relics in buildings above ground. Late medieval crypts thus became somewhat redundant, although fervent cults continued around exceptional tombs as late as the nineteenth century (and even today) such as in the case of Radegund of Poitiers. Others crypts were converted in the early modern or modern period to more mundane functions like municipal halls (Lille) and family chapels (Ajaccio in Corsica).

The last section of Sapin's book, roughly eighty pages, is a detailed inventory of 372 crypts in France, a list that he modestly acknowledges is not perfect since some may have been missed and others no doubt remain to be found. Each entry includes a brief paragraph with a description of its chief details and an assortment of photographs, maps, diagrams, and key bibliography. This final section of the survey also offers Sapin the opportunity to make some interesting general observations: medieval crypts tend to be more common in areas situated on Jurassic lands than on primary geological stone, and they appear more commonly in the Île de France than in Aquitaine. However, much remains to be done, and Sapin notes that it would be desirable to know more about how the distribution of crypts reflected contemporary political developments, such as in the Carolingian period, when more crypts appeared in the north of France (in contrast to an earlier period when they were more equally distributed throughout Gaul).

In the last thirty years, research on crypts has expanded our understanding of these sites considerably, and Sapin's expansive knowledge of hard-to-find archaeological publications and unpublished archaeological reports is a welcome resource especially for those working outside of France. As he observes, however, many medieval crypts long ago lost their painted decoration, inscriptions, and even the wall coating in poorly conceived conservation efforts in past decades. Indeed, it is only when we see ones that were not lost that it is possible to imagine how rich the décor of crypts could be. Some have vivid colors like at Tavante (Indre-et-Loire), a crypt that once contained important iconography in frescoes. Others had carved capitals that encouraged pilgrims to move through the space in a manner conducive to penance, liturgical demands, and healing ceremonies. Sapin argues that the design programs of crypts were less uniform than for contemporary cloisters, for example, and tended to be more regional in style than the latter, perhaps because there were no dedicated workshops invested in designing them.

In concluding, Sapin effectively makes the case that even when crypts no longer contain their original relics, they continue to offer great interest to scholars and the public, in part but not exclusively because of the mystery of their location below ground and their quasi-natural presentation of the sacred. For Sapin, crypts effectively symbolized for nearly a millennium the stability of the church and its rootedness in the martyrs and saints honored there. As the physical base of the church—and located at its head—crypts offered a space in which the faithful could celebrate the glory of the afterlife in physical proximity to the *virtus* and strength of its most holy representatives.

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ISSN 1553-9172