

IMPRESSIONS OF A STUDY TOUR IN BURGUNDY, 13th to 18th April, 1982.

by Ian Curry

The Easter Week study tour of Burgundy started from Paris, travelling south east through the Forest of Fontainebleau, and then across the high plateau of the Morvan, from which the rivers Loire, Yonne and Seine flow to the north and west, and the tributaries of the Saône flow east and south. The eastern scarps of the Morvan facing the broad Saône valley form the Côte d'Or, the vineyards of which have made Burgundy famous for more than a thousand years. The small town of Beaune is the historic centre of the Côte d'Or wine trade, and was excellently placed as a base for our exploration of the region.

After pausing in the upper Rhineland for a time, the German tribes of the Burgondes had moved into this part of the Roman Gaul early in the 5th century, and it was the Burgundian princess, Clothilde, who married Clovis, king of the Franks and persuaded him to be baptised. In the 'dark ages' the region suffered Norse, Saracen and Hungarian raids and incursions, and the division of Charlemagne's empire led to the Duchy of Burgundy being confined to the area west of the Saône, and linked to France, while the Franche Comté east of the Saône was long to remain part of the Empire. Burgundy was at the 'crossroads of western mediaeval Europe' and in our visit we concentrated on the art and architecture of two distinct phases—the great abbeys and churches of the Romanesque period, Benedictine, Cluniac and Cistercian—and in contrast, the dynasty of the four great Valois Dukes of Burgundy, 1364 to 1477, whose lands stretched from Flanders in the north to Savoy in the south.

Digressing from the Autoroute du Soleil on our way to Beaune, our first visit was to the famous Pilgrimage Church of Ste-Madeleine at Vézelay, rising high on its hill above the valley of the Cune. A monastery had existed in the valley at St-Père-sous-Vézelay in 859, but this was sacked by the Normans in 887, after which the Benedictine monks took refuge on the hill top. Their new church was dedicated to St. Mary Magdalen in 1050, and her relics were venerated here from the 11th to 13th centuries. Vézelay was the starting point for the pilgrim route to Santiago via Limoges, Perigueux and Burgos. The second Crusade was preached here in 1146 by St. Bernard, and it was the meeting place for King Philip Augustus and Richard Coeur de Lion on their way to the Third Crusade.

A great rebuilding of the abbey church had been started in 1096 with a dedication in 1104, but the immensely long nave was built after the disastrous fire of 1120, the inner west portals 1122 to 1132 and the narthex 1140. The groined high vault was the first in France, divided by semi-circular transverse arches,

alternate voussoirs in dark and light stone being a memorable feature of the interior. Even more remarkable is the sculpture—of the capitals in the nave, and above all in the tympana of the west portals, dominated by the elongated and majestic figure of Christ. Beyond the crossing is the early Gothic apse with ambulatory and radiating chapels, very reminiscent of Sens which is not far to the north. Vandalism, neglect and fire wreaked havoc after the Revolution, and what we see of the church today owes much to Viollet-le-Duc's restoration of 1840 to 1859. But it is the memory of the view from inside the narthex of the great sculptured portal, and through into the nave, that one will always treasure.

The next morning, bright and cool again, was spent in Beaune where the old centre is encircled by 15th and 16th century ramparts. The Hotel-Dieu is a hospice for the poor founded in 1443 by Nicolas Rolin, who was Chancellor of Burgundy under Duke Phillippe the Good. The Grande Salle des Pauvres, the 15th century ward of the hospital, retains its twenty eight canopied and curtained beds, where each occupant could see the chapel in the eastern end of the hall. The hospital is still served by an order of nursing sisters, Flemish in origin, and one occasionally glimpsed them going about their duties in high white headdresses. The Cour d'Honneur with timbered galleries, gable dormers and multi-coloured tiled roofs is perhaps the finest monument to the 15th century Golden Age in Burgundy, and at one end beyond the tapestry-hung reception chamber, the recently added museum houses the great treasure of the Hospices, Roger van der Weyden's polyptich of the Last Judgment. It was commissioned by Nicolas Rolin and his wife Guigonne de Salins, as the altar piece for the chapel, and is the finest painting to be seen in Burgundy.

The Collegiate Church of Notre-Dame-de-Beaune was begun in 1120-1130, and proved a suitable preparation for our visit to Autun, with classical flutings to the pilasters incorporated into the Romanesque work. The ambulatory and three radiating chapels at the eastern end are highly effective both internally and externally and good examples of Burgundian Romanesque. However, the slightly pointed forms of the nave arcades and vaults come as a surprise in what is a thoroughly Romanesque building both in date and style, until one realises that as a daughter church of Cluny, Beaune was subject to the immense influence which the mother house exercised in so much Burgundian design.

The Cathedral of St-Lazare at Autun was also directly influenced by Cluny: started 1120, a consecration in 1130, west portal 1140, and open narthex and west towers 1178. The approach to the city by the Roman Gateway, with its upper

arcading and fluted pilasters, provides a clear model for much of the detailing in the cathedral. For once, however, the triple apse-*échelon* plan of Cluny II was followed, rather than an ambulatory, and the regular planning of the crossing, transepts, nave and aisles produce a well-ordered effect. This sense of orderly proportion is carried up into the internal elevational design of tall nave arcade, narrow triforium and clerestory stages, and boldly pointed tunnel vaults. Round headed window and door openings are accepted alongside pointed arches to the tower crossing and main arcades—the immediate descendant of Cluny III and a splendid example of Burgundian ‘half-Gothic’, before ‘structural Gothic’ had been invented in the *Île-de-France*. But again, the richness of Autun is its Romanesque sculpture, in the nave arcade capitals, some displayed in the upper chapter room; the ‘Eve’ of Giselbertus in the *Musée Rolin* nearby; and above all the tympanum of the great west portal. It is signed by Giselbertus, who is thought to have come from Cluny via *Vézelay*. The subject is the Last Judgment, Christ in the centre surrounded by apostles, prophets and saints, with the elect and damned on the lintel, and signs of the Zodiac and labours of the months round the arch—the High Romanesque at its richest.

Our return from Autun took us by the *Château of La Rochepot*, set high on its hill above the village. It had belonged to *Regnier Pot* in the 14th century, and was rebuilt by his grandson *Philippe* in the 15th century. Seriously damaged after the Revolution, it was studiously restored early in this century in 15th century style and as such is a fascinating period piece in its own right, with round and polygonal towers, and brightly coloured steeply tiled roofs. Back through the vineyards, with gnarled black stumps of ancient vines in serried ranks all freshly tended before springing into leaf. Then a tour of the deep cool cellars of the *Cave Delagrance*, once owned by the Cistercians, and finally a “*dégustation*”—a wine tasting—in the late afternoon sun.

Thursday morning took us north along the *Côte d’Or* by *Aloxe-Corton* and *Nuits St-George* to *Clos de Vougeot*. The Renaissance *château* has been restored by and is the meeting place of the “*Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin*”. The 13th century ‘*Clos*’ behind the *château* still contains the four giant wine presses built in oak from the forest of *Citeaux*. The *château* and its vineyards, some of which had first been planted in the time of *Charlemagne*, remained in Cistercian ownership until the Revolution, and it is from this area that some of the most famous wines are still produced. Most of the remainder of the day was devoted to the city of *Dijon*, starting with the *Cathedral de St-Bénigne*. The saint had been martyred near *Dijon* in the second century, and a monastic community became established near his tomb. The abbey was placed under Benedictine rule in the 9th

century, then followed Cluniac reforms at the end of the 10th century when Guillaume de Volpiano became abbot. Of his immense Romanesque basilica and three storeyed eastern rotunda (1001-1012) based on the Holy Sepulchre, only the lower crypt of the rotunda survives, re-excavated in the mid 19th century after its vandalistic demolition at the Revolution. Even so, to enter this dimly lit and subterranean space, encircled by countless columns under low groin vaults, and still housing as it does the tomb of the apostle of the Burgundians, is a most moving experience.

The main abbey church came to be rebuilt in the 13th century in Burgundian Gothic, low western towers nestling into the big roof, and a fine copper green *flèche* surmounting the crossing. The immense abbey dormitory to the north now houses the Archaeological Museum with some splendid Romanesque sculptures. Also in fully developed Burgundian Gothic is the church of Notre-Dame-de-Dijon, but these buildings did not come within our strict study-period and we passed on quickly to the 14th and 15th centuries and the Palais des Ducs.

Here, in the Salle des Gardes built for Philippe the Good (ruled 1419 to 1467), had been brought from the Chartreuse after the Revolution the tombs of his grandfather, Philippe the Bold, and his father, John the Fearless. The superb portrait effigies are in full colour, contrasting with the black marble tomb slabs and bases, and the translucent white alabaster procession of mourners in arcading all round each sarcophagus. They make a fascinating comparison with the two slightly later Burgundian tombs in Bruges. Almost finer in execution are the two gilt altarpieces saved from the Chartreuse and commissioned in 1390 by Philippe the Bold, miracles of three dimensional Gothic art and architecture, all in miniature form. The Chartreuse de Champmol, just outside Dijon, was founded in 1383 by Philippe the Bold as the mausoleum of his ducal dynasty. It survived until the French Revolution, but now only the sculptured portal of the chapel remains, incorporated into the psychiatric hospital, and the Well of Mosès, made by Claus Sluter in 1393, with life-sized figures of Moses, David, Isaiah, Zachariah, Jeremiah and Daniel.

Finally that day we made our way from the Chartreuse across the plain towards the Saône, and the site of the Abbey of Citeaux. In 1098 the aged Robert of Molesme settled in this wooded swampy solitude with twenty one devoted companions, intending to follow a reformed and simplified monastic rule, much more austere than that of the Cluniacs. Robert was succeeded in 1098 by Albéric, and from 1109 to 1134 the saintly Englishman, Stephen Harding, was abbot, and from this community Bernard set out to found Clairvaux, in 1115. Of the great monastery of Citeaux, mother of 742 Cistercian houses, only fragments

survived the Revolution and these have been incorporated into the monastic buildings of the present small community. Late on a warm Spring afternoon, it retains something of the peace and tranquillity its founders intended, but at the same time a great sense of sadness for what has been forever lost.

Roughly half way between Citeaux and Clairvaux is Fontenay, founded by St. Bernard in 1118, and the oldest Cistercian monastic group of buildings still surviving in France. It occupies the classic ideal of a Cistercian site, a secluded wooded valley, well watered, so that the waters could be impounded upstream and diverted as required to the conventual buildings (the waters still serve as a trout farm). The present church was built between 1139 and 1147 through the generosity of Everard, Bishop of Norwich. Following the strict earlier Cistercian rules it is without tower, crypt, or elaborate decoration and sculpture. The nave has neither triforium nor clerestory, the pointed tunnel vault with transverse arches abutted by the lateral tunnel vaults which extend back across each aisle bay from the pointed nave arches. Even the transept vaults are subservient to the nave vault which continues east to the sanctuary arch. The sanctuary bay and transept chapels all have square eastern terminations, no apses being permitted by St. Bernard. The whole ensemble is a serene example of Burgundian 'half Gothic' with pointed tunnel vaults and arches used where needed structurally, in conjunction with round headed window and door openings. Light filters in through the side aisle windows, and through the symbolic groupings of windows at the ends—seven at the west end of the nave for the seven sacraments. The night stair in the south transept takes one straight up to the dormitory with its immense timber roof, and below is the chapter house leading off the cloister, the oldest part of the monastery, continuing its rhythm of round arches. Of the claustral buildings, only the refectory has been lost, and we have the compensation of the forge range further to the south, said to be the earliest purpose-built industrial structure surviving. Would that all industry could be so beautifully housed!

A journey into southern Burgundy took us to Tournus on the Saône, and its ancient abbey of St-Philibert. The monastery had been founded in 875, but was destroyed in the Hungarian invasion of 937. The new church with crypt and ambulatory was begun in 950, and the main body of the church was built between 979 and 1019. The upper chapel over the narthex was tunnel vaulted in 1020, and the lateral tunnel vaults carried on transverse arches over each bay of the nave date from 1066, with a fresh dedication of the sanctuary 1120. Such bald facts do little justice to a unique Romanesque monument, just as the photographs of the nave interior with which we are all so familiar

cannot convey the beauty of the delicate pink local limestone used in the tall cylindrical columns. In the low narthex and its upper chapel, the design takes on a rude barbarity, and this is all the more startling in the eastern crypt where elegant monolith columns and little acanthus capitals (antique reused?) contrast with the earliest attempts at rough-shuttered lime mortar bedded groin vaults we had seen.

Only a few miles to the west in the village church of St-Martin at Chapaize, one felt that the masons of Tournus had come here in 1050 and continued with the same pink rubble stone in the round columns of the nave. The aisles were groin vaulted, and the nave tunnel vaulted, though it was easy to see how the original semi-circular barrel vault had pushed the clerestory walls out to an alarming extent, and been replaced by a pointed tunnel vault, under the direct influence of Cluny. After pausing at that modern spiritual resting place, Taizé, we at last reached one of the principal goals of our journey, Cluny, one of the greatest of spiritual centres in mediaeval Christendom.

The influence of Cluny had been with us all through our tour, and one might have been apprehensive that the fragments of the once mighty monastery which survived the Huguenot and Revolutionary onslaughts would prove a disappointment. But not so, for the abbey buildings extend into and are embraced by the town, with the hospice and stables serving as the civic theatre, and the outer court now the main town square and overlooked by the former abbot's palace. Behind are the cloister buildings rebuilt in the 18th century, and if one searches to the west one finds the outer abbey gate, the western towers or Barbarans, and the site of the narthex. The nave, choir, and eastern transepts have gone, as well as the north and central crossing towers, but the south transept and its tower and blunt spire remain.

Cluny was founded in 910 and the first church (Cluny I) was dedicated in 927. The larger Cluny II was started to the south in 955 and dedicated in 981, and had triple apses, crossing and western towers, a narthex Galilee, and the nave was tunnel vaulted in about 1000. This church was to have a marked effect on Romanesque design through the 11th century, as Cluniac influence spread across Europe and the abbey built up an empire of over a thousand daughter houses. Abbot Hugh of Semur ruled from 1049 to 1109, and under him many abbeys were reformed to follow Cluniac discipline, and new abbeys founded. The Spanish King Alfonso VI became a patron of the Order, with a large donation to Cluny to mark the capture of Toledo from the Moors in 1085, and soon after, the great new abbey church was commissioned, to be built on the site of Cluny I, to the north of Cluny II. Cluny III was designed by Gunzo, Abbot of Baume, scholar, musician and architect, familiar with Vitruvius, and the

Pythagorean series of 'musical numbers' (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 12) applied to modular design. The foundation stone was laid in 1088 and five altars in the chevet were dedicated in 1095, while the eastern and central transepts were finished by 1100. The west front of the nave was built between 1107 and 1115 and the interior of the nave with its double aisles was completed and vaulted by 1121, with a general consecration in 1130 by Pope Innocent II.

The surviving fragment of the church, the south transept and its octagonal tower, displays the important elements of the main design—pointed arches to the nave and choir arcades, tripartite triforium and clerestory stages, and slightly pointed tunnel vaults. The scale was immense, by Romanesque standards, 100 feet to the crown of the nave vault, and rarely equalled in later Gothic buildings, though as so often happens in well proportioned structures, it is not easy to appreciate the real scale whilst standing under the soaring height of the south transept tower pendentives and dome. What must it have been like to stand at the centre of the church with five such towers and domes above you, linked together by the high vaults, and leading the eye eastwards to the frescoed semi-dome of the apse? What the apse and chevet were like can be studied in model form in the 13th century abbey granary out beyond the claustral buildings. But most important, here are displayed the beautiful sculptured capitals of the eight free standing columns and two responds from the sanctuary apse, set out in an approximation of their correct relationship to each other.

Towards the end of his life Abbot Hugh used to go for repose to Berzé-la-Ville, where the frescoes in the Chapelle des Moines, particularly the Christ in Majesty in the apse, are unequalled in Burgundy, and give some idea of what must have adorned the sanctuary of Cluny itself. The little fortified priory of Berzé had guarded the southern approaches to Cluny, and is splendidly placed on a rocky spur amongst vineyards and steep meadows dotted with white cattle.

It has been suggested that Cluny's early use of the pointed arch, before 'Gothic' had been invented, was due to oriental influence. If so, the nearest contact would have been Moorish Spain, the reconquest of which was proceeding, and one might speculate that the direct links arose from King Alfonso's patronage of Cluny, and Abbot Hugh's visits to him in Burgos. Certainly in Cluny III we had the pointed arch being used for the first time in large numbers in a western church.

We have already seen that the third Cluny's proto-Gothic influenced Autun, Beaune and Fontenay in varying degrees, but perhaps in the nave of Saulieu St-Andoche we were to experience most directly something of its spatial design. Saulieu was a staging

post on the Roman road from Autun to Auxerre, the missionary Andoche and his companions were martyred here, and their tomb was attracting pilgrims by the fifth century, and an abbey had been established by the 8th century. The Carolingian nave was replaced by the present one, completed in 1119, of three storeys surmounted by a pointed tunnel vault and pointed transverse arches carried on full-height demi shafts. Nave and aisle capitals are richly carved, basically acanthus foliage, but with animals and birds, and five biblical scenes including a Flight into Egypt, masterpieces of Romanesque sculpture.

Finally our tour took us to the mediaeval fortress of Châteauneuf rebuilt by Philippe Pot in the 15th century, and fortuitously giving the impression that nothing much has been done to it since. It is strikingly situated above the valley with moat, drawbridge and five massive towers, overlooking the auto-route leading back towards Auxerre and Paris. The city of Auxerre rises above the east bank of the River Yonne with the apses of three major churches crowning the heights; the cathedral of St-Etienne in the centre, flanked by the abbey of St-Germain and church of St-Pierre. The abbey had been founded in the 6th century and a crypt of Carolingian date survives. The cathedral's crypt is Romanesque, of about 1025, and in its detailing of the shafts and groin vaults of the central space is already beginning to look forwards towards Northern France rather than Burgundy. The 'nave' of the crypt is surrounded by a vaulted ambulatory with further chapels off it and striking frescoes. The main choir of the cathedral was rebuilt in the 13th century in the High Gothic of the Île-de-France, though with subtle Burgundian inflections.

In a short concentrated study tour one's overall impressions take some time to emerge. The countryside of Burgundy is richly varied, high meadows carpeted in pale yellow cowslips, and dotted with white Charolais cattle, and masses of blackthorn blossom. The forests were just coming into leaf, and the poplars in the valleys so thick with mistletoe clusters that they looked like rookeries. And everywhere that the rich-red to chalky-white earths permitted, the black stocks of the vines.

The splendid range of Romanesque buildings which we had seen stretched in one stream of development combining Carolingian and Lombardic influences from the early crypts at Auxerre and St-Bénigne, and the unique St-Philibert, to the marvellous spaces of La Madeleine at Vézelay. The other more peculiarly Burgundian stream started with the third and greatest church at Cluny, and led to Autun and Fontenay.

The tremendous flowering of late mediaeval romance and chivalry in Burgundy's Golden Age was cut all too short by the death of Duke Charles the Rash in the siege of Nancy. The ducal tombs in Dijon, and the Rolin family's benefactions to the

Hospices in Beaune remain as the most memorable artistic contributions to survive from this Golden Age. The next most startling impression is the devastating effect of the religious wars and above all the French Revolution, particularly on the monastic houses. Perhaps in England we have had more time to come to terms with the effects of our Reformation, Commonwealth, and Restoration where our abbeys and cathedrals are concerned. In France, the secularising effect of the great churches being State Monuments, or the responsibility of the municipal authorities, occasionally results in their interiors seeming unloved, however well maintained the structures might be. This is a sombre thought for those who seek to undermine the authority of those responsible for the care of English churches and cathedrals.

Leaving Auxerre, and after a splendid French Sunday lunch at Appoigny, we made our way back to Paris, then home.

Throughout our time in Burgundy we had been gently guided by Elizabeth Cooper whose knowledge and enthusiasm for this region of France is immense. She was always ready with fascinating information about the places we were visiting, and eager to ensure that we made the most of every opportunity, whether artistic, historic or gastronomic. In this she was ably abetted by Susan Gold who, as ever, made certain that our worldly needs were met, and that the organisation of the whole study tour ran so smoothly.