

PALEOCHRISTIAN LYONS

TOPIC

ROOM 2: ANTIQUITY, THE PALEOCHRISTIAN ERA

The early days of Christian Lugdunum

Tensions towards Christians

During the 2nd c., the first Christian community of Gaul developed in Lugdunum under the supervision of Bishop **Pothin (Inv. 37.167)**. Christianity was more or less tolerated, but was persecuted from time to time by the Roman authorities.

Around 170, a radical Christian movement known as montanism, developed in Phrygia (Asia Minor): It announced the end of the world, advocated martyrdom and contested military service. Although rejected by the Christian elite, it was nevertheless incorporated into Christianity.

Moreover, the Roman world was in crisis from the 2nd half of the 2nd c.: The Barbarians who broke through the borders of Gaul (167) and Avidius Cassius who usurped the title of Emperor (175) disrupted the reign of Marc-Aurèle. The Christians who refused to take part in religious ceremonies to support the Empire, became the scapegoats for public discontent.

Martyrdom of 177

The “*Lettre des chrétiens de Vienne et de Lyon à leurs frères d’Asie et de Phrygie*” (letter from the Christians of Vienne and Lyons to their brothers in Asia and Phrygia) retranscribed, over a century later, by historian Eusèbe de Césarée (*Histoire ecclésiastique – Ecclesiastical History*, Book V) perpetuated the memory of this incident. In 177, the population violently attacked the Christians who were stripped of their possessions, stoned, exhibited in the forum and then imprisoned. Pothin, the first Bishop of Lyons (and Gaul) died as a result. On the order of Emperor Marc-Aurelius, the Christians (about ten according to Eusebius and around forty according to later records) were taken to the amphitheatre by the legate where they were beheaded or fed to wild animals. **Sanctus (Inv. N.499.5)**, the Deacon of

Vienne, Maturus, recently baptised (**Inv. N.499.6**), Attale de Pergame and, finally, Blandine, a former Roman slave originating from Asia Minor, all met their deaths in this way. The symbols of **Saint-Blandina (Inv. 63.5)**, who became the Patron Saint of Lyons – flounder, bull, grid, lion and bear – preserve the memory of this martyr.

Saint Irénée, man of peace

Irénée was sent to Lyons in 157 by Bishop Smyrne, Polycarpe, who supposedly knew the apostles.

He escaped the martyrdom of 177 and succeeded Pothin as Bishop of Lyons. He worked as a conciliator, primarily between the Pope and part of the Asian church. He wrote two major works: “*La démonstration de la prédication apostolique*” (*Demonstration of the apostolic preaching*) in which he recognised the pre-eminence of the Church of Rome, created by the two apostles, Peter and Paul, and “*Réfutation et renversement de la prétendue Gnose**” (*Refutation and reversal of the alleged Gnosis*)*. A major historical figure of Lyons, he died a martyr: his relics supposedly lie within the Saint-Irénée Church. (**Inv. 1324.2 - Saint Irénée**)

Miracles and wonders

Early on, the martyrs of 177 were subject to a cult. According to Grégoire de Tours (Bishop of Tours in 573), they miraculously appeared together with their ashes, one night on the waters of the Rhône, and asked for their relics to be taken out of the river. The first monument was supposedly built at the Church of the Apostles and Martyrs (which became Saint-Nizier in the 14th c.).

To commemorate martyrdom and this miracle, in the very early part of the Middle Ages and up until the 14th c., the jour des Miracles (Day of Miracles), which later became known as the Fête des Merveilles (Celebration of Wonders) was held in June: a procession initially on land and then in large boats on the Saône, surrounded by a Lyons flotilla, followed a complex itinerary, culminating in a solemn mass at Saint-Nizier.



Les Saints martyrs de l’Eglise de Lyon (The Martyred Saints of the Church of Lyons), helio-engraving with red chalk, according to Dujardin, printer J. saillard, inv. n 3426.2

Fêtes des Merveilles à la mort qui trompe (Celebration of Wonders cheating death), an imaginary view of the celebrations at the end of the Middle Ages, lithography, A. A. Gaillard, Editors Girard and Guyet, 19th c., Inv. 48.194



Adoption of Christianity in the Roman World

Legalisation of Christianity during the 4th c.

After 177, the Church of Lyons was no longer treated as a major initiative by the Popes. Other churches sprung up in Gaul: in Arles, Marseilles, Narbonne, then in Paris, Reims, Trèves and Vienne. Christianity was gradually becoming the Empire's official religion:

- in 311, the Edict of Galerius (Emperor from 293 to 311) terminated the strong repression of the Christians (initiated by Diocletian)
- in 313, the Edict of Milan, under Constantine I (emperor from 310 to 337) granted freedom of worship to all religions and allowed Christians to stop worshipping the Emperor as a deity
- in 380, the Edict of Thessalonica, under Theodosius I (emperor from 379 to 395), adopted Christianity as the religion of the Empire).

Historians believe that Gallo-Roman pagan* cults were still practised during this period.

The episcopal group

In 4th c. Lyons, the advent of Christianity saw the creation of an Episcopal group on the right bank of the Saône. This group of several churches based around the cathedral (Bishop's church) comprised:

- the baptistery, which dates from the 4th c., equipped with an octagonal tank and heated by a hypocaust*. A second room to the north, also heated by hypocaust, was probably used as reception room for the bishop;

- Bishop's ecclesia (site of the current Saint-Jean Cathedral), constructed by Bishop Patiens in the 5th c. Its splendour was described in 469 in a letter written by Sidonius Apollinaris (5th c. politician, bishop and writer, born in Lyons): *"a coating in the colours of the meadows, ensconced with small sapphire-coloured stones in green enamel"*;
- Sainte-Croix Church. Originating in the Carolingian era, it presumably became part of the overall system from the 7th c. onwards. It would have been a step on the path of conversion to christianity prior to the baptistery and entering the cathedral.

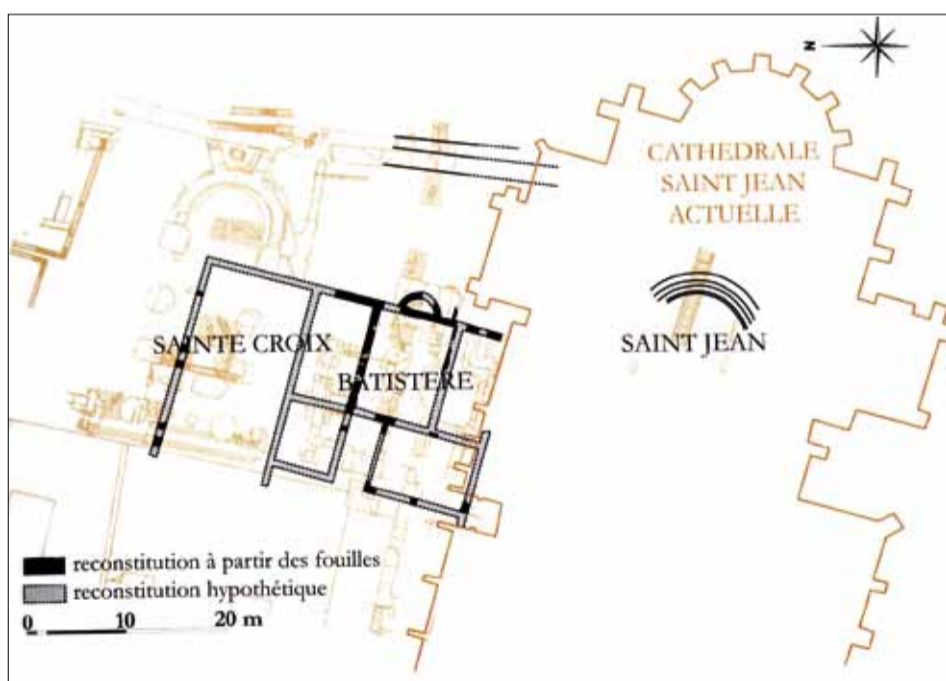
In the 5th c., the primitive Episcopal group became the first monumental centre of Lugdunum and the official headquarters of the local political authority, namely that of the bishop, faced with the continued break-down of Roman power: Its remains are still visible today in the parc archéologique de Saint-Jean (Archaeological Park).

Churches and cemeteries

In the 5th c., in the cemeteries' sector (present-day Saint-Just Hill), two funeral churches were erected on the alleged site of the tombs of Holy Bishops: the Saint-Irénée and Saint-Just (13th Bishop of Lyons during the 4th c.) churches.

Several archaeological excavations have also updated the Saint-Laurent de Choulans Basilica constructed between the 5th and 6th c. and its necropolis, which dates from the 8th c.

Lugdunum once again became a centre of christianity. No visitors could pass without "a tour of the holy places of the city"!



Plan du groupe épiscopal de Lyon au 4^e et 5^e s. (Plan of the Episcopal Group of Lyons during the 4th and 5th c.) extract from *l'atlas historique de Lyon (Historical Atlas of Lyons)* by J. Pelletier and C. Delfante, J.f. reynaud, f. Joubert, m. nivelon, 2004

glossary

Baptistery: A building designed for the baptism of Christians.

It incorporated the cathedral around the 9th c. and was gradually reduced to a baptism font.

gnosis: Philosophical, religious concept according to which the salvation of the soul passes via a direct revelation from the divinity.

hypocaust: an underfloor heating system used during the Roman and Gallo-Roman era, based on the circulation of hot air beneath flagstones.

paganism: refers to so-called heathen, polytheist, non-monotheist religions