



XII TH CENTURY PARISH CHURCH

Saint-Paul-Lès-Dax Church was built at the end of a natural shelf, in the very place where the aqueduct bringing cold water to the city of Aquae Tarbellicae (Dax) used to start flowing.

Unfortunately, we haven't got any historic information about the origins or the past of the building itself, but we assume that such an imposing church had been erected there as far back as in the XIth century. It was replaced in the XII th century and nowadays there only remains the richly ornamented pise as the unique testimony of the whole building. More precisely, the aisle dates back from the mid XIX th, when it replaced the old nave which had become too small and too derelict.

INSIDE THE APSE

A recent restoration got rid of the plastering and whitewash which had covered it since the destruction of the XIVth and XVth c. paintings that could be seen until around 1920. The lower part of the apse is decorated with 11 niches dug in the stonework and displayed above a protruding basement.

THE BAS-RELIEF FRIEZE

Above the adorned arcade, we can see three windows ornamented with simple capitals and diamond pointed archivolts like inside. Above the mediane cornice, there is the most interesting part of the building: a bas relief frieze with different themes sculpted in independent sheets (certainly ancient remains being re-used).

Contrary to the capitals of the arcade, most bas-reliefs rely on the same iconographic design.

From North to South, we can distinguish :

- A heavenly allegory about the Celestial Jerusalem.
- A horrible beast.
- Santa veronica.
- On the buttress Samson sitting on a lion.
- Crucifixion.
- Judas 'betrayal and Jesus 'arrest.
- The Last Supper.
- Two superimposed long legged lions.
- On the second buttress, three sitting apostles.
- The Sainly Women next to the tomb.
- Finally, enormous animals from the Apocalypse.

The whole frieze describes the Salvation theme, from the Last Supper to Jesus 'final triumph.

It looks confusing, and we are led to think that some details that should have linked the deferent themes haven't been carried out.

After a deeper analysis of this uncompleted cycle, we can guess it had been made by two separate sculptors under the influence of North-Western Spain artists, as well as of the Languedoc artists.

On top of these niches three high windows have been opened under large star adorned arches and sustained by leafy capitals ornamented with spheres.

OUTSIDE THE APSE

A semi-circular blind arcade stands on a stone basement corresponding to the inside one. Quite usual in the South-West of France as well as in other areas inside a building, this detail is very unusual outside the apses.

This arcature includes 16 arcades carried by 21 small columns. Several marble pillars are from classical antiquity and the capitals are all different shape, proportion and theme.

From North to South, we can successively distinguish:

- Volute wrapped leaves.
- Siren like birds, encircled with lions.
- Stem intertwined branches with heads of hook nosed birds.
- An ordinary capital from the sixties whose master copy can be seen in the AGEN Museum.
- Some eagles.
- Some Corinthian foliage.
- Another Corinthian capital, as funny as the previous one.
- Some acrobats hanging from a woman's hair.
- Two other acrobats, the former upside down, the latter dancing while playing the viol.
- Two lions looking down.
- Some birds surrounded by nine grapes.
- Masks in the middle of stem intertwined imbels.
- Some bearded masks around a lion's head devouring its prey.
- Two felines stretching their hands into the lion's mouths.
- Volute-ending foliage.
- Long-legged birds packing at grapes.
- Some other men pulling two women's hair.
- Sorts of big horses with enormous legs, biting their own tail.

All these various mythological or secular motives are believed to be from Spanish sculptors as we can find the same ones in several buildings in Aragon, Navarre or Compostella.

Booklet made from J.CABANOT's book "The Roman Gascogne" published by "Zodiaque Editions" (series: "La nuit des temps") which you are advised to read for further details.