

valley in which the harvest was beginning to ripen, and where some fields are already in the hands of the reapers, and saw in the distance a moving object coming from the country of the Philistines "by the straight road to Beth-Shemesh" and we remembered the dramatic recital of the return of the Ark, and its halt at Beth-Shemesh. But this time it was not a cart drawn by two oxen but a locomotive hauling the train which was to take us back to Jerusalem. So the archaeological pleasures of the day had to come to a conclusion, and we took leave of our friends who have already done so much on the historic site. Dr. Mackenzie and Mr. Newton returned to their labours, while we proceeded to Jerusalem. In conclusion, I would express my thanks to Sir Charles Watson for a most interesting day, where I have, for about the hundredth time during twenty years, visited explorations in progress, and I feel thankful that the Palestine Exploration Fund have found such excellent explorers to carry on the traditions of the Society.

THE CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY AT BETHLEHEM.

(REVIEW.)

By ARCHIBALD C. DICKIE, A.R.I.B.A.¹

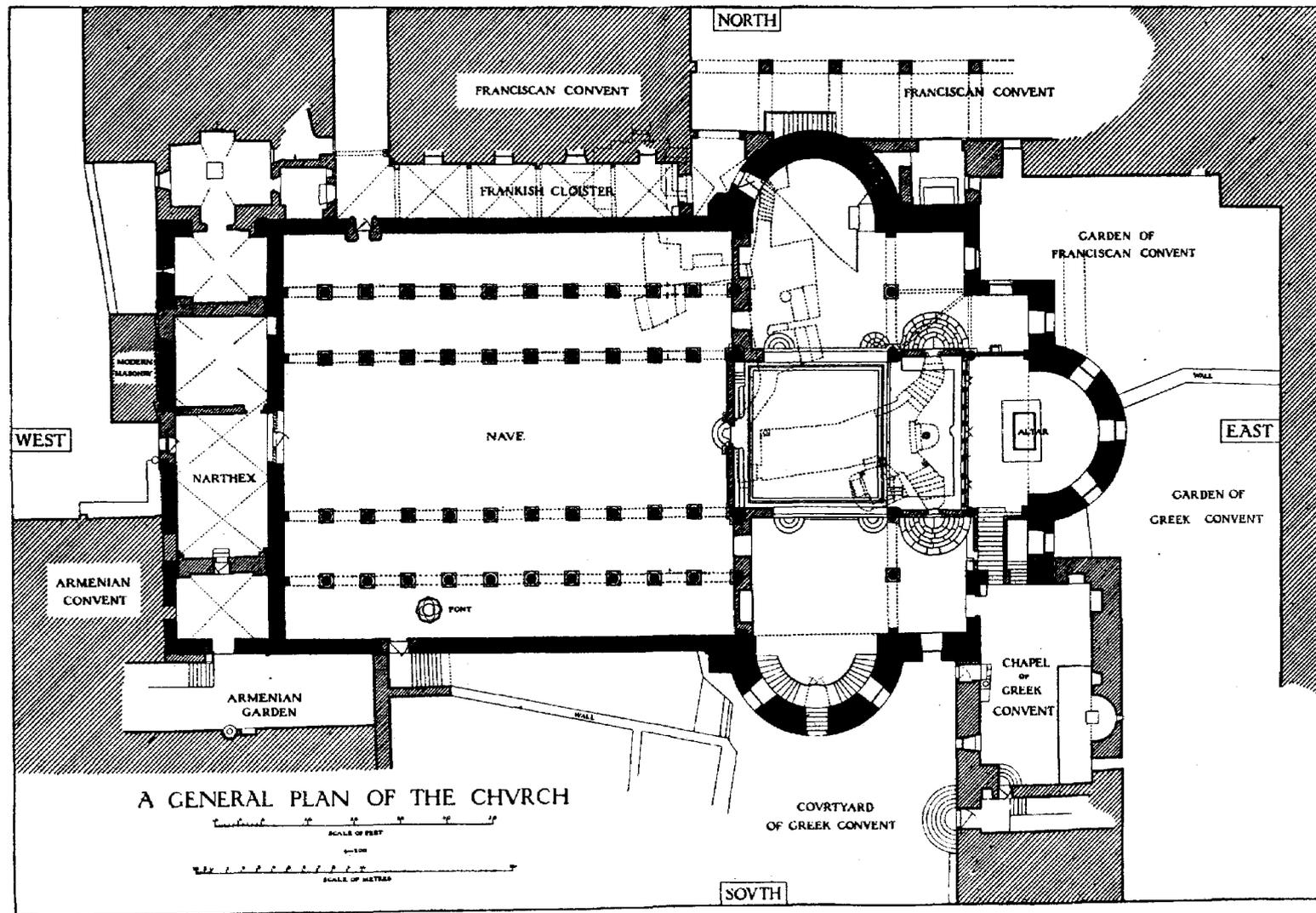
At last this most historic church has been made the subject of close investigation by a happy combination of experts. The Byzantine Research Fund is to be congratulated upon its first choice of a building marking the advent of possibility in the presentation of a latent building nature which, from lack of national opportunity, had hitherto revealed itself chiefly in the mishandling of Hellenistic forms. By the imposition of an exotic classic dogma, a desire for

¹ *The Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem.* By W. Harvey, W. C. Lethaby, O. M. Dalton, H. A. A. Cruso, and A. E. Headlam, illustrated by drawings and photos by W. Harvey and others. Edited by R. Weir Schultz, and published by B. T. Batsford on behalf of The Byzantine Research Fund. Price 30s. net. Review, reprinted from the *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 22nd April, 1911. Plan by kind permission of The Byzantine Research Fund.

architectural greatness had been kept alive, and in the adaptation of the classic style, native individualism constantly appears. The chief constructive characteristics of this individualism were plain wall surfaces and flat roofs with parapets (as demanded by the Jewish law), while the spirit of enrichment was expressed in close, flat-growing ornament. Such was the native building nature of Palestine as against the more fashionable classic treatment of column and lintel, with sloping roof and projecting eaves, enriched by a bold type of ornament which in Roman times inclined to overstep the limit of stone carving propriety.

Mr. Harvey has written Chapter I, "A Particular Description of the Church," which gives, lucidly, the results of his thorough examination of the whole structure. His most valuable conclusion is that "the whole church was designed at once and that, with the possible exception of the narthex, it is Constantinian." This conclusion ousts the theory of a later restoration by Justinian, the arguments for and against which are exhibited in the following chapter. The unusual cohesion of structure and detail is evidence of an independent work, freed from the temptation to utilise fragments from earlier buildings. Mr. Harvey writes that "the plan of the church is symmetrical and regularly set out to a degree very unusual in Byzantine buildings, the shafts in the nave colonnades being placed at approximately equal spans, and, like all the free standing shafts in the building, they are of equal girth and height. The capitals of the columns do not differ greatly from the Roman model, except that the acanthus leaves have fairly sharp serrations and that a cross upon a projected semicircular boss replaces the usual rosette in the centre of the abacus." The extent to which the carving of the capitals differs from the Roman model is greater than is here indicated, as the following chapter shows (pp. 23, 24). Although, in the main, the motif is the same, the treatment shows a desire for something more in accord with existing tradition.

Chapter II, "A General Historical and Descriptive Account," by W. R. Lethaby, quotes the testimony of early writers "that the existing Church of the Nativity was that erected by Constantine between A.D. 327 and 333." He illustrates a similar triapsidal treatment in the Church of Paulinus, *c.* A.D. 400, and in the white monastery of Sohag, Egypt, fifth century, quoting Strzygowski's statement that "the type was raised by Constantine to canonical importance, and the church which created it stands at Bethlehem."



In dealing with the tradition that Justinian rebuilt the church, which seems to have hitherto misled those whose examination had been less penetrating than that of Mr. Harvey, the author writes: "The view that Justinian rebuilt the church is based on a story given in the Arabic chronicles of Eutychius, written in the tenth century; it includes matter which is obviously legendary, such as the Emperor's execution of the architect, a story which is repeated by him of the architect of the Convent of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai." The carved crosses occurring on the abaci of the capitals served to support this tradition, as it was contended that the use of the cross did not go back to early Christian times. Recent research, however, shows that "the difficulty as to the use of the cross has disappeared, as within the last few years many early examples have been found. For instance, Constantine's Cup at the British Museum, which is earlier than the year 327, has a portrait of Christ with a cruciform nimbus, and a sarcophagus relief at Berlin, which is probably still earlier, has a similar nimbus to a figure of Christ. Mr. Crosby Butler has described several fourth-century buildings in Syria on which the cross appears." "That the cross was in general use in Asia Minor in the third century has been shown by Sir Wm. Ramsay."

Against the argument in favour of a Justinian restoration of the church, based upon the later introduction of the steps to the cave, Prof. Lethaby brings authority to prove that the cave was originally entered from the passage to the north. The argument need never have been set in favour of the Justinian theory, as an examination of the plan of the cave shows how adaptable it is to the introduction of double entrances at any time in the history of the church. Indeed, the innumerable cave dwellings and cisterns which honey-combed every inhabited area of Palestine, would have made it, on occasion, a matter of surprise if, within such a site, several openings did not occur, readily suggesting the existing arrangement. The analogy drawn from the similarity of the plans of Romanesque crypts does not appear to be of much account.

The author refers to the early use of the cruciform plan, and among other examples, cites the Church of Jacob's Well at Shechem, delineated by Arculph as a "perfect equal-armed cross." There is room for doubt as to whether this plan was that of the church, which, possibly, might have been destroyed by Chosroes before Arculph's visit, and there is some reason for the suggestion that the plan was

taken from the crypt, the form of which is nearly enough "equal-armed" to be so mistaken. No supporting evidence has been found in the church over. Arculph makes no mention of the entrance to the crypt, which has two entrances, one on either hand, as at Bethlehem. To the second-hand nature of the Arculph record may be attributed some of the difficulty of comparison.

Constantine's attachment to the triapsidal arrangement is seen in the Anastasis at Jerusalem. It is curious that the cruciform treatment does not appear to have been popular in the early churches in Palestine. Eudocia's churches, fifth century, ignore the precedent. This may still further support the author's claim for a Roman origin to the triapsidal plan.

The compound angle piers which are also found in the third century synagogues in Galilee, "point to the conclusion that Constantine's architect was a native of the country," in which case it would seem that he was instructed as to the triapsidal arrangement.

"The church at Bethlehem is to be classed rather as Early Christian than as Byzantine. That is, the architectural elements are Late Roman, modified by being adapted to a new purpose. This later Roman style, in the eastern provinces especially, already had germs of what were to develop into Byzantine characteristics, but this is so in regard to details and in feeling rather than in new structural methods. The style of stone masonry in which it is built is that of Syria, and there are certain resemblances to the later monastic churches of Egypt and to that of Sinai. An almost exactly similar capital to those of the interior of the Church of the Nativity has been found at Almas in Egypt; this also had a cross on its abacus. The schools of Roman-Christian art of Egypt and Syria seem to have had much in common, and it is to them—perhaps especially in Egypt—that we should look for so much of the new thought which was to transform Roman art into Byzantine art. Strzygowski in a series of brilliant essays has argued for the Oriental basis of the newer art to the exclusion of Rome. But a distinction will, I am confident, have to be made between the spirit and the body, between the structural and ornamental elements of the newer style. Much that has been argued as to the non-Roman origin of Byzantine *building forms* will have to be given up, and a part of Rivoira's claim for Rome and Italy will have to be conceded, although he seems to exaggerate in making too much of the metropolis and the home country, to the neglect of the Hellenistic cities of the

East. There are two great difficulties in the way of any clear statement of Byzantine origins—the tendency to identify Rome the empire with Rome the city, and the difficulty of separating the expressional content of the newer art from its structural means. The triapsidal plan of our church, for instance, Strzygowski would refer to some far-off Eastern prototype, remote in time as in place, but his only substantial argument is based on the form of the central hall in the palace of M'shatta in Moab, which he attempts to date in the fourth or fifth century A.D. As a matter of fact the date of M'shatta seems more likely to be of the sixth century at earliest, while the triconch is found in the Roman palace of Treves. The date of M'shatta is of further interest to us, as Strzygowski has pointed out the resemblance between the curious tree-like forms found in the mosaic decorations of the Church of the Nativity and others found sculptured on the façade of M'shatta. Now M'shatta, as a whole, has a close resemblance to the recently-discovered Castle of Wardan, in Syria, which is certainly dated as having been built by Justinian in the sixth century. The type of design of the richly-carved façade of M'shatta seems related to the Egypto-Syrian school of the sixth century, with some Persian mixture. These Persian elements themselves seem to belong to the sixth or seventh century. For instance, one very characteristic feature is a curious griffin with a peacock's tail; now this monster is so frequently found figured in Sassanian stuffs and silver-work of the seventh century that it would seem to be an indication of that epoch."

One reads this delightful summing-up with the appreciation due to the great knowledge of the author. It is, however, difficult to refrain from commenting upon what seems to be a too anxious desire to find chapter and verse in a polyglot book of origin, to the exclusion of the more generous acceptance of a spontaneous native building desire, long deferred, to which classic innovation never wholly appealed. A distaste for column and entablature and a liking for plain parapeted walls suggest some elements of import in constructing the "body," and these with the enrichments of Persian and Assyrian tradition which influenced Syria long before the period of the Sassanidae dynasty, to which time the author ascribes the highly developed carving of M'shatta, seem to suggest much of the "spirit." The latter development of the style grew with the force of a new demand, ridding itself effectively of classic entanglements.

Chapter III, "The Surviving Mosaics," by O. M. Dalton: "The Church of the Nativity was ornamented with mosaics from the century of its foundation, and, whatever may have been the nature of its original adornment, the restoration of the twelfth century resulted in an elaborate scheme, comparable to that of the 'illuminated' churches of Greece or Sicily." The story of the soldiers of Chosroes points to the existence of an external mosaic, including the Adoration of the Magi, upon the west front, a composition which is thought to have inspired ivory-carvings and other portable works of art in the sixth century.

In drawing the surviving mosaics Mr. Harvey explains the great difficulties under which he worked, the colours and forms being so much obliterated that they had to be inferred from the evidence of those portions which were sufficiently clear to give a key to the colours. He "found no proof of systematic restoration." "The only additions which he could detect take the form of lines roughly painted." "All that remains of the mosaic must therefore be regarded as original work." The materials used were chiefly glass, but cubes of limestone and squares of mother-of-pearl were used for the larger round and pear-shaped spots. "The principal colours used in the designs are various shades of green, red, and blue, the two former hues greatly predominating in the nave, dark blue being more conspicuous in the work of the north transept."

The nave decoration consisted of a series of busts representing the ancestors of Christ, with conventional representations of churches and architectural tables. The inscriptions relate to the General or Provincial Councils.

"The purely ornamental motives in the nave recall those of other mosaics in the Holy Land, executed by Greeks for foreign princes. The resemblances are most marked in the case of those of the Mosque El-Aksa at Jerusalem, the mosaics of which were executed for Saladin by Byzantine artists in A.D. 1187. There are also analogies to the mosaics in the Mosque of Omar." Judging from the coloured Plates 10, 11, the scheme of colour in the Mosque of Omar is, however, entirely different and much finer. Any criticism of the coloured drawings must, however, take into account the great difficulties under which Mr. Harvey worked. In reproduction also, colour drawings are not always fairly presented.

The author points out that the decorative "wings" on the

north wall of the nave have a Persian origin and are connected with the Sassanian emblem of sovereignty, and he draws a comparison with the "winged candelabra" at M'shatta. The interlacing decorative band, he points out, shows an Armenian influence.

The chapter is devoted to a searching analysis of the mosaics throughout the whole church, with the conclusion that they are the work of the eleventh or twelfth century.

Chapter IV, by H. A. A. Cruso, is devoted to "Accounts by Pilgrims and other visitors to the Church arranged in Chronological Order, commencing with the account given by the Bordeaux Pilgrim, A.D. 333, and ending with Pietro Casola, A.D. 1494." The most important statement of these writers is that made by the Bordeaux Pilgrim, who testifies to the early date of the church in the brief sentence: "There a basilica has been built by order of Constantine."

Chapter V, "The Cave of Bethlehem," by A. C. Headlam, is a short chapter dealing with the earliest references to the birth-place of Christ. He quotes Jerome's letter to Paulinus, referring to Hadrian's pagan appropriation of the sites of the birth and the resurrection: "Even my own Bethlehem, as it now is, that most venerable spot in the whole world, of which the Psalmist sings *The truth hath sprung out of the earth*, was overshadowed by a grove of Tammuz—that is, of Adonis; and in the very cave where the infant Christ had uttered his earliest cry, lamentation was made for the paramour of Venus."

The illustrations by Mr. Harvey are excellent. The plans, elevations and sections are clearly shown, and exhibit the care necessary in such work. The photographs, although sometimes not too clear, are well chosen. Mr. Batsford has produced the work in his usual good manner.
