

ST. AUGUSTINE AND THE RECENT EXCAVATIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN MONUMENTS OF HIPPO

At the end of his report on the findings of the recent excavations of the Christian monuments of Hippo,¹ M. Erwan Marec, the Director of Excavations of Hippo, says: "Here [i.e., what is variously called 'the Christian City,' 'the Christian Quarter,' 'the Christian Island,' etc.] was indeed the heart of the religious life of Hippo and this most particularly so at the time when, because of its eminent Bishop, the city . . . was, in the face of the barbarians, one of the last ramparts of Christianity."² The "eminent Bishop" was, of course, St. Augustine, Father and Doctor of the Church.

Augustine was born on Nov. 13, 354, at Thagaste, a small town in the Roman province of Numidia, now known as Souk-Ahras in Algeria. The story of his youth, his foibles, his early Manicheism, his travels, his professorships, his conversion in Milan, and his eventual return at thirty-four to Africa where he organized a lay monastic community at Thagaste, is well known.

Prof. Henri Marrou, who occupies the Chair of the History of Christianity at the Sorbonne, carries on the story:

Renunciation of the world, as Augustine and all primitive monasticism understood it, implied also avoiding both the honours and the cares of the priesthood. In fact, as he tells us, whenever he left Thagaste, he used to be careful not to go to a town where the episcopal see was vacant, and there was a risk of its being offered to him. But one day the hand of God led him to Hippo—Hippo Regius, now Bona—where he went into the church and heard Valerius the Bishop exhorting his flock to choose a priest, able to help him, particularly in his preaching ministry. (Valerius was old, and being of Greek origin could not preach well in Latin.) No doubt Augustine's arrival had not passed unnoticed: the people cried as one man, 'Augustine for priest!' He was seized and pushed forward up to the chancel, and despite his protests and tears he was commanded to be ordained.³

Augustine became a priest at thirty-six. At forty-one he was consecrated coadjutor bishop to Valerius. In the following year, 396, Augustine succeeded to the See of Hippo, which he was to rule with such distinction until his death in 430.

Hippo Regius, the modern Bona in Algeria, was the second town of

¹ Erwan Marec, *Monuments chrétiens d'Hippone ville épiscopale de saint Augustin* (Paris, 1958).

² *Ibid.*, p. 234.

³ Henri Marrou, *St. Augustine and His Influence through the Ages*, tr. Patrick Hepburne-Scott (New York-London, 1957) p. 33.

Africa, second only to Carthage. It was located on the northern coast of the Roman province of Numidia, about 140 miles due west of Carthage. Under siege by the conquering Vandals as Augustine lay dying, it succumbed to Genseric in 431. It was partly restored by Belesarius a hundred years later, but sacked by the Arabs in the seventh century. The forerunner of the modern city of Bona was begun by the Arabs in the eleventh century.

On a visit to Bona in 1924, Erwan Marec, then a young naval officer, decided, in the words of M. Jean Lassus, who wrote the Preface to the recent report of M. Marec's findings, "that the site of ancient Hippo merited systematic excavation."⁴ Following up this conviction, Marec returned to Bona upon his retirement and nearby rediscovered ancient Hippo. This rediscovery, which is just beginning to be exploited, may prove as important to the student of classical and Christian archeology as the celebrated excavations at Dura-Europos on the Euphrates and Salona in Dalmatia.

In his report on the Christian monuments of Hippo, Marec bares his findings in the Christian City or Christian Quarter of Hippo and attempts to reconcile his findings with references to his episcopal city and its buildings found in the writings of St. Augustine. Let us, first of all, summarize the findings.

The Christian Quarter of Hippo is a more or less five-sided block surrounded by streets and footpaths. On the southern side there is a base running almost directly east and west. There is a point on the north, somewhat to the northeast. Dominating the Quarter is a huge basilica with its façade facing the street on the southeast and its principal axis running from southeast to northwest. Towards the façade on the right side of the basilica is a baptistery and baptistery chapel. Further up the right side is a private dwelling, which is identified by Marec as being the house of Julianus. Behind the basilica and somewhat to the right is another private dwelling. To the left of this dwelling is an industrial plant. Along the upper left side of the basilica is a garden and passageway bordering from left to right on the secretariate, a trefoil chapel with its dependencies and another dwelling. To the left of the façade of the basilica is a final dwelling or, probably, dependencies of the last-mentioned dwelling. Outside the block, on the other side of the street, to the northeast there is another basilica and a connecting dwelling. We will summarize the findings of Marec on each of these units in the order we have presented them in this description.

The great basilica faces, as we have said, on the southwest border of the Christian Quarter. Its principal axis runs from southeast to northwest. It is a huge rectangle, approximately 60 feet wide and 129 feet long, with a

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 5.

rounded apse, approximately 25 feet wide and 22 feet deep, adjoined to the center of the northwest end of the basilica. The façade probably had a portico, though traces of the façade and portico foundations are almost indiscernible. Parallel rows of probably ten pillars divided the basilica into three naves (and probably carried the walls of a clerestory). The three naves were approximately $15\frac{1}{2}$, 29, and $15\frac{1}{2}$ feet wide, the center nave being the widest.

The presbyterium was located in the apse, with the bishop's chair in the center near the wall and the bench of the priests adjoining it on either side.⁵ The choir continued the presbyterium out into the nave in the classic pattern of the fourth-century basilica. There are indications that there was never a lateral gallery on the right side of the basilica but there was probably one on the left. High-placed windows undoubtedly pierced the wall of the clerestory, the façade, and the left wall. There would have been fewer windows in the right wall because of the adjoining baptistery and dwelling. Perhaps three doors opened into the church on the façade end, and there were also doors to connect with the baptistery and the house of Julianus.

Marec devotes a considerable section of his report to a study of the floor mosaics and epitaphs of the great basilica. One of the first things revealed by this study is the existence of what was probably an earlier rectangular church with an atrium or large portico and a square apse which occupied the ground later contained in the center and right naves of the great basilica, from near the façade of the latter to near the eighth pillar from the façade, and which had a slightly more east-to-west orientation. This helped to explain the existence of off-angle foundations in the right front corner of the basilica, and was perhaps responsible for the fact that the right wall of the great basilica is not exactly parallel to the left wall but draws in slightly towards the façade end. The oldest mosaics, dating from the third century A.D., rich in design and color, occupy this floor section of the great basilica, suggesting that the earlier church was in existence before the Constantinian "Edict of Milan." The earlier church, belonging to a period when a certain clandestineness was necessary, is, therefore, a rare find.

The mosaics of the second period are to be found in the left nave especially, and also in the front of the right nave. They begin to date from the period when the great basilica was built, probably as an enlargement of the primitive church. Constantine had ordered, in 324, that old sanctuaries be enlarged or rebuilt and new churches built. The name which Marec later

⁵ The bench of the priests is extant, though the bishop's chair is no longer to be found. An opening in the center of the priests' bench exists for the bishop's chair.

identifies with the great basilica, "The Basilica of Peace," suggests that it was built sometime shortly after the temporary reunion of Catholics and Donatists which was ordered in 347.

The third period is the first period of tombs. Tombs are to be found in all three naves. There are also tombs of this third period in all three naves. In the central nave was found the so-called "tombs of the cistern," "the tomb of the peacocks," and "the tomb of the 'priestess.'" On the right there is "the tomb of the doves" and "the vandal tomb." On the left are eight tombs, orientated exactly with the church, two by two, identified usually by their epitaphs. We know that tombs were not dug in Catholic churches until it had first been done in the churches of the Donatists and that even when they started to be dug in Catholic shrines they were for a long time reserved exclusively for bishops. Marec conjectures that Augustine may have found his first hastily made (because of the Vandal attack) tomb in the great basilica and may have been, in fact, the first so honored. If this were true, it would place the beginning of this third period in the year 430, the year of Augustine's death. The author goes even further and suggests that one of the tombs in the cistern towards the front of the center nave may have at first received Augustine's remains.

The fourth period, which is somewhat concomitant with the third, covers the years from the first-third of the fifth century to the Byzantine conquest in 533. It is delineated to include tombs of a much poorer preservation, quality, and interest. A final, fifth period covers the Byzantine period up to the abandonment of the great basilica.

We turn now to the annexes of the great basilica. The first and earliest of these is the group of baptistery rooms which are joined to the great basilica on its right side near the façade. It is probable that these rooms were built before the enlargement of the earlier church to the proportions of the great basilica. Included in the baptistery rooms is a chapel, flanked on the left by three rooms and on the right by the baptistery proper and its anteroom.

The baptistery chapel is a long, narrow, rectangular room with a rounded apse at the end opposite the door leading into it from the great basilica. It was the chapel in which the newly baptized would have been confirmed. The baptistery itself was reached via the anteroom or catechumeneum, a square room to the right of the chapel where the catechumens gathered before their initiation. It was a relatively small room with straight walls bordering the anteroom and the chapel and a circular wall surrounding the rest. The font was in the center and was covered by a ciborium supported by pillars.

Passing around the great basilica to the left, we come to two separate

private dwellings. The first was obviously a very fine home. There was a series of rooms bordering on a central court which had a covered walk around its four sides. The room of the so-called "mosaic of the Muses" (so called because the nine Muses were pictured in octagonal and circular panels set into the handsome floor) became apparently a diaconicon when the house, which had belonged to one Julianus, was acquired by the church after his death, during the reign of Augustine, and a door was made in the wall shared by the house and the great basilica. The other was probably the house built by the priest Eraclius for his mother and later given to the church for its uses.

The extensive industrial plant to the left (looked at from the south) of the second dwelling was, in Marec's opinion, a dye plant dating from the very early years of the Christian era.

Adjoining the great basilica on the left towards the apse end was a garden and passageway connecting the basilica with the various units of the southern half of the Christian Quarter. The first of these units was apparently an open-air secretariate where the bishop (who was, even at this early period, a judge in civil as well as ecclesiastical matters) sat in an apse at the west end of the court and dispensed justice. The open-air secretariate was bordered on its outer sides by a covered walk. At the east end, opposite the apse, were several rooms; here, it seems to Marec, must have been located the episcopal library.

Chief building of the unit directly south of the secretariate is a cloverleaf-shaped chapel or memoria. This chapel was entered from the covered walk around the secretariate on its north and bounded on its west and south by its dependencies, a group of rooms which Marec thinks may have housed one of the monastic communities begun at Hippo by Augustine.

Completing the block of the Christian Quarter was a dwelling to the east of the monastery which was probably the episcopal dwelling with its various dependencies further to the east, bordering on the street which passed before the façade of the great basilica.

Outside the block of the Christian Quarter to the northeast Marec has discovered what was apparently a five-nave church with a connecting dwelling. This church had a forecourt or atrium which was open to the sky in the middle. A porch led into a large, almost square room divided by four parallel rows of three columns into five naves. Beyond this nave was what appears to have been a very large, square apse, the presbyterium. The north wall of this five-nave church was not straight but had a pronounced bulge in the middle. The connecting dwelling was built on the north side of the apse.

In the writings of Augustine are to be found an impressive number of references to the Christian monuments of his see city of Hippo. Msgr. Othmar Perler, the distinguished professor of the Swiss University of Fribourg, after a visit to the excavations in 1954 gathered together these references and published a first attempt to reconcile them with the findings.⁶ Marec, in the fourth and final section of his report on the Christian monuments of Hippo, draws heavily on Perler's efforts.

At the start of this final section Marec lists the churches and chapels of Hippo, as inferred from the writings of Augustine, in their chronological order as follows:

a first, modest oratory, dating from the time of the first known Bishop of Hippo, St. Theogenes, who was martyred in January, 259. This building has either disappeared or been incorporated in one of the later buildings;

the chapel (or memoria) of St. Theogenes, built after his martyrdom to honor his memory;

the Leontine basilica built by Bishop Leontius, who was martyred in 303;

the chapel of the twenty martyrs, erected to the memory of Bishop St. Fidentius and his fellow martyrs of the second persecution of Diocletian in 304;

the great basilica or the "Basilica of Peace," which was the cathedral church of Hippo at the time of Augustine's arrival in 391;

the basilica of the Donatists;

the chapel of St. Stephen, built in the annexes of the great basilica by the deacon Eraclius to house a relic of the protomartyr, and dedicated in 425;

the basilica of eight martyrs, built in 425-26 by the priest Leporius, probably to replace an earlier, more modest chapel dedicated to these martyrs.

Perler notes that references to an "ecclesia antiqua" and an "ecclesia maior" can probably be identified with the basilica of St. Leontius and the Basilica of Peace.

Ignoring the primitive oratory, which may be the earlier church enlarged to become the great basilica, or the presbyterium of the five-nave basilica, or may have become part of another church, or disappeared completely, there are then four basilicas and three chapels to deal with. Marec dismisses two of these chapels, those of St. Theogenes and the twenty martyrs, and one of these basilicas, that of the eight martyrs, as being outside the Christian Quarter in the countryside around.

⁶ O. Perler, "L'Eglise principale et les autres sanctuaires chrétiens d'Hippone-la-Royale d'après les textes de saint Augustin," *Revue des études augustiniennes* 1 (1955) 299-343.

The basilica of the Donatists, however, poses a more difficult problem. Marec considers three possibilities: that it was the great basilica which dominated the Christian Quarter, that it was the five-nave basilica discovered across the street on the northeast side of the Christian Quarter, or that it was, like the two chapels and the basilica of the eight martyrs, outside the Christian Quarter in the surrounding countryside. Though no absolute conclusion is drawn, it is clear that Marec, at the time of the writing of this report, favored the outside-the-Christian-Quarter point of view.

The problem of the location of the basilica of the Donatists hinges largely on a reference in the writings of Augustine. In a letter which he wrote to his friend, Alypius, Bishop of Thagaste, he comments: "Et quoniam in haereticorum basilica audiebamus ab eis solita convivia celebrata cum adhuc etiam eo ipso tempore, quo a nobis ista gerebantur, illi in poculis perdurarent, dixi diei pulchritudinem noctis comparatione decorari et colorem candidum nigri vicinitate gratiorem. . . ." ⁷ Up to the present, the authors, commenting on this text, have assumed that the church of the Catholics and that of the Donatists were located nearby, so that Augustine would have been able to actually "hear" the celebrations going on in the church of the Donatists. But Perler made the suggestion to Marec that there may be some question concerning the word "audiebamus" in the text. This opened the way to the suggestion by Marec that Augustine had not actually "heard" the Donatists in a nearby church but that he had "heard it said" that the Donatists celebrate in such a manner.

This reading of the text would allow the church of the Donatists to be located outside the Christian Quarter. Marec, as we have said, seems to think this likely. He does not, however, immediately dismiss the possibility that it could have been either the great basilica or the five-nave church. But he does point out that the great basilica would probably not have been kept by the Catholics as their cathedral, as there is every indication that it was, if it were constantly passing back and forth between themselves and the Donatists during the years at the beginning of the fifth century when the fortunes of the latter were going up and down as the sect was in turn proscribed, set free, and proscribed again. Likewise, the fact that the great basilica seems always to have borne the name, "basilica pacis," precludes the usage by the Donatists, who caused the garment of unity to be rent.⁸ A final argument against the great basilica as the church of the Donatists is that the epitaphs of all periods found in this church never read "fidelis in

⁷ *Ep.* 29, 11.

⁸ "Peace" at this time is synonymous with the unity of all Christians.

fide evangelii" as was the Donatist custom, but always "*fidelis in pace*," the Catholic form. Concerning the five-nave church as the church of the Donatists, one may ask, among other things, if the relatively small nave could have housed the Donatists, who were, during the early years of Augustine's episcopacy, larger in number than the Catholics.

We are now left to discuss the Leontine basilica, the Basilica of Peace and its dependencies, and the chapel of St. Stephen, which, we will see, is included among the dependencies of the great basilica.

Before the church had come into the possession of the house of Julianus at his death, Augustine had written to him proposing that he might be willing to exchange a house adjoined to an older church for his house, which, because of its proximity to the great basilica, would be a great asset for the church.⁹ The suggestion is made by Marec that Augustine was asking Julianus to move across the street to the house adjoining the church of the five naves. And both Perler and Marec consider that this "old church," the church of the five naves, was the Leontine basilica.

That the Leontine basilica was the church of the five naves is suggested by the fact that the Synod of Hippo of Sept. 24, 427 was held in the Leontine basilica. A synod the size of this one would require a presbyterium the size of the one found in the basilica of the five naves. The principal references to the Leontine basilica found in the writings of Augustine are the letter to Julianus, and sermons 260 and 262, which were preached there. These sermons mention St. Leontius as founder of the church¹⁰ and speak of it as being a large church¹¹ where banquets were held in honor of the Saint-founder.¹²

Marec, of course, considers the great basilica which dominates the Christian Quarter of Hippo to be the basilica always referred to as the "Basilica of Peace" and the cathedral church of Augustine. According to Augustine, the Basilica of Peace, his cathedral, was a large church.¹³ It had a raised apse with a bench for the clergy¹⁴ and the bishop's chair in the middle.¹⁵ The altar was between the apse and the nave, somewhat into the nave, with a choir in front surrounded by a chancel rail.¹⁶ There were places in the nave for the various divisions of the people.¹⁷ There was a baptistery in a connecting dependency.¹⁸

The dependencies of the Basilica of Peace as described in the writings of

⁹ *Ep.* 99, 3.

¹⁰ *Serm.* 262.

¹¹ *Ep.* 29, 3,6,8.

¹² *Ep.* 29, 2,6.

¹³ *Serm.* 219; *Ep.* 29.

¹⁴ *Ep.* 126, 1.

¹⁵ *De civitate Dei* 22, 8.

¹⁶ Cf. ecclesiastical acts of the controversy of 404 with the Manichee priest, Felix (CSEL 25, 826); also *Epp.* 125, 126, 213.

¹⁷ *De civitate Dei* 2, 28.

¹⁸ *De cura pro mortuis* 12, 15.

Augustine merely strengthen the theory that the great basilica of the Christian Quarter of Hippo was indeed the Basilica of Peace. There is the house of Julianus already mentioned which Augustine tried to obtain during the lifetime of the wealthy man and which he finally acquired after his death. A house of such splendor is in fact connected with the great basilica.

The great basilica also possesses a secretariate which could have housed the Plenary Council of Hippo which brought together all the bishops of Africa in the secretariate of the Basilica of Peace in 393. Here would have been held in December, 404 the three conferences with the Manichee Felix and, later, the election of Eraclius. It contained a library which is mentioned as being in the secretariate by Possidius, Augustine's biographer.

Alongside the secretariate to the south is the monastery which would have been built up after Valerius, Augustine's predecessor in the See of Hippo, gave him a garden for this purpose when he had been ordained priest on his chance presence in Hippo.¹⁹ Possidius tells us that the monastery was "intra ecclesiam," but "intra" was interpreted at this time as including all the dependencies of a church. This was a monastery for lay monks.

The monastery of clerks established by Augustine at the time of his succession to the bishopric of Hippo is the house located alongside the monastery and its dependencies still further to the east.

We are left now with only the chapel of St. Stephen to discuss. From the excavations there is but one building to explain also, the trefoil chapel off the secretariate which forms part of the monastery of lay monks. We know that Hippo acquired a relic of the protomartyr towards the end of 424 or the beginning of 425.²⁰ Augustine instructed the deacon Eraclius to construct a memoria or chapel to house it.²¹

That the memoria of St. Stephen is the clover-leaf chapel off the secretariate and near the Basilica of Peace is inferred from the story of the miraculous cures of a brother and sister, Paul and Palladia, related by Augustine in his *City of God*.²² Their cures, one on Easter and the other on Tuesday of Easter Week, are related as occurring at the shrine of the Saint. Upon these cures a great clamor arose among the people who attended them—a clamor Augustine heard in the church as he was preparing for the celebration of the Liturgy. The fact that Augustine heard the clamor, and the further fact that the cured were in each instance brought immediately into the church where Augustine ordered them brought up to the chancel and greeted them and spoke to the people about the miracle, indicate the proximity of the

¹⁹ *Serm.* 355.

²⁰ *De civitate Dei* 22, 8.

²¹ *Serm.* 319; 356.

²² *De civitate Dei* 22, 8.

shrine to the Basilica of Peace. It is thus inferred that the trefoil chapel was the memoria of St. Stephen referred to in the writings of the Saint.

And so we get some picture of the relationships of Augustine to the excavated monuments of Hippo. Apparently Marec has truly uncovered the episcopal city of the great Bishop. Apparently, too, Augustine ruled the church of Hippo when it was, in spite of the successive heresies of Manicheism, Donatism, and Pelagianism which plagued his reign, at the peak of its physical development.

We learn a great deal about the life of Augustine from a study of the monuments. Or perhaps it would be better to say that we draw a much more vivid picture of his life from this study. We see him every inch a bishop, yet living the simple, ascetical life of a monk with his clergy in the episcopal house separated from the cathedral church on its left by a small garden. We picture him presiding daily at the celebration of the Liturgy in the great basilica. He preaches from his elevated chair in the apse or from the pulpit in the choir. He instructs the catechumens and on the vigils of Easter and Pentecost leads them into the baptistery to the right of the basilica, there to put on the "new man in Christ." From the baptistery the neophytes are led into the small baptistery chapel to receive the fulness of the Christian life in confirmation. We see him every morning, coming out from the church after the celebration of the Liturgy, to take his place on the bench in the secretariate to greet his people, to decide their disputes, and to render justice when necessary. In a word, our pictorial image of Augustine is in every way enhanced by this study.

One is tempted to ask if this study can do more than enhance our knowledge and pictorial image of Augustine's life. It seems to me that it can. As with any archeological endeavor, a period of the past has been uncovered for our scrutiny. Among the findings of the excavations of the Christian Quarter of Hippo, there are several churches and chapels. There is the indication of the early, pre-Constantinian church which was later enlarged to become the Basilica of Peace. There is the great Basilica of Peace itself, with its group of baptistery rooms. There is the interesting trefoil chapel of St. Stephen. There is, finally, the unusual five-nave basilica of St. Leontius with its atrium and outsized presbyterium. It might prove worthwhile to study the Liturgy as we know from the writings of St. Augustine it was celebrated in the fourth- and early-fifth-century Hippo in relation to these edifices.