

Identity Theft: Romano-Celtic Temples

Roman temples in western Gaul exhibit distinctive aspects of Celtic culture. Many scholars emphasize the adoption of Roman architecture and urban systems as sure signs that these colonies were fully adopting a “Roman” identity (King 141). The persistence of local Celtic tradition, however, indicates that the cultural identity of Roman Gaul cannot be assessed strictly by the presence of Roman material culture. In this paper, I argue that the architecture of the Tour de Vésone (Temple of Vesunna) from *Vesunna Petrucoriorum* demonstrates the retention of native Celtic culture in the face of “Romanization.”

A noticeable rebirth of Celtic culture occurred in the latter half of the second century. Place names reverted to their older forms, and there was a resurgence of the druid social class, native gods and goddesses, and Celtic art and architecture (MacMullen 98). Ramsay MacMullen list several reasons for the return of Celtic culture, including stimulation by contact with kindred (less Romanized) cultures, economic decline, and the rise of nationalism or Celtic “spirit” (MacMullen 103). Then notion of the rebirth of Celtic identity assumes that it had been lost as a result of Roman colonization. The Tour de Vésone, however, was built in the early part of the second century before this “renaissance.” The architecture of this Romano-Celtic temple indicates that Celtic culture was still a prominent factor of Gallic society. Sir Mortimer Wheeler suggests that Romano-Celtic temples reflect the adoption of essentially Roman elements by native architects and have no correlation to pre-conquest Gallic culture (Wright 68). Yet, the architecture of the Temple of Vesunna, particularly the round *cella*, tells a different story.

Round temples and *cellae* are not strangers in Roman imperial architecture, as seen in the Pantheon and the Temple of Vesta in Rome. According to Vitruvius, the height of the rotunda of a peripteral round temple should equal one-half the diameter of the whole work (Vitruvius 92).

The Tour de Vésone does not conform to this Vitruvian proportion, with the *cella* standing taller than the pediment and *pronaos*, representing a tower rather than a rotunda and being independent of the peristyle ambulatory. This architectural design draws its influence from pre-Roman Celtic tradition and was widely used in western Gaul. The Romans noticed the difference in the Gallic *cellae* and called them *fani* (*fanum*), defining them as sacred areas (Bromwich, 119). The *fanum* was used in ancient Celtic temples and was consistent in form, circular or polygonal, several stories high, with the ambulatory being a simple, one-story structure around the *cella* (Ward-Perkins 227). The basic layout of the *fanum* precedes the Roman conquest, as evidenced by archaeological excavations of pre-Roman Gallic sites at Pesch and Gournay-sur-Aronde (Lauffray 114,119). Furthermore, the architectural sculpture is not Roman in design, with fragments from the columns and pyramidion displaying a nested leaf pattern (Lauffray 124-129).

The exterior of the Temple of Vesunna exhibits typical imperial architecture, with a high podium, axial alignment, Corinthian capitals, and a monumental staircase and *pronaos*. Nevertheless, the *cella*, columnar ambulatory, and architectural sculpture indicate that the design is anything but Roman. In addition to being dedicated to a local Celtic divinity, the architecture of this temple reflects prominent features of Celtic culture. The Gallic architects of this temple consciously placed the Roman architectural elements on the exterior and retained the Celtic features within the *cella*, the most important space in the temple. Exclusively “Virtruvian” Roman temples exist in Gaul, such as the Maison Caerée in Nimes and the Temple of Augustus and Livia in Vienne. These temples make the existence of a *fanum* temple more noteworthy and demonstrate the retention of Celtic identity in Roman Gaul.

Bibliography

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