

A BYZANTINE CENTURY

Political, Colonial, and National Uses of
Neo-Byzantine Architecture, 1820s–1920s

CONVIVIUM
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edited by
Adrien Palladino

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Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of the Premodern World

Seminarium Kondakovianum, Series Nova

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HOW BYZANTINE WAS ROMANO-BYZANTINE ARCHITECTURE?

Abstract / Within the wider panorama of nineteenth-century historicist architecture, the allure of Byzantium inspired a small yet influential corpus of monuments that defy easy categorization. Owing to a limited and fragmentary knowledge of Byzantine architecture, mediated above all through the writings of Albert Lenoir, André Couchaud, and Charles Texier, French architects developed a distinctive Romano-Byzantine idiom in which the boundaries between Byzantine, Neo-Byzantine, and Romanesque were intentionally blurred. Yet when examined closely, the genuinely “Byzantine” component of these projects proves elusive, their relationship to the monuments of the Byzantine Empire tenuous at best. Through an analysis of key case studies, from Léon Vaudoyer’s and Henri Espérandieu’s churches in Marseille to Paul Abadie’s Sacré-Cœur in Paris and Albert Ballu’s projects in North Africa, this article investigates what “Byzantine” meant to nineteenth-century architects and how they reimagined its forms within the cultural and ideological contexts of their time.

Keywords / byzantinism, France, historicism, Neo-Byzantine, North Africa, orientalism, Romano-Byzantine

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FRANCESCO LOVINO

For a discipline that has, in recent years, been so strenuously engaged in redefining its own identity, it is striking, if not ironic, to note how broad and elusive the adjective “Byzantine” remains.¹ Byzantine architecture is no exception to this vagueness: how can one precisely determine what makes a building authentically Byzantine, given that its empire spanned over a millennium of history, from Asia Minor to Italy?² It is for this reason that the pairing of the term Byzantine with another equally broad and inclusive label such as “Neo-Byzantine” seems at least paradoxical. Although it contributed significantly to the vibrant wave of medieval revivals throughout the nineteenth century,³ Neo-Byzantine architecture, as well as its “Romano-Byzantine” variation, exhibits a fleeting character. The aim of this article is thus to shed some light on this aspect, investigating what “Byzantine” meant for nineteenth-century architects and how it was reinterpreted into a form that was both ancient and modern.

THE FRENCH INVENTION OF A ROMANO-BYZANTINE STYLE

Some preliminary clarifications are necessary: first, of a lexical nature, concerning the way in which terms such as Neo-Byzantine and Romano-Byzantine have been conceived and used in the nineteenth century; and second, regarding the idea that French architects and scholars of that period had of Byzantium and its architecture. The use of the adjective *Neo-Byzantine* throughout the nineteenth century encompassed an indeterminate historical span. The term “Neo-Byzantine” may technically include monuments erected in the Eastern Roman Empire after Hagia Sophia, as well as later constructions such as St Mark’s Basilica in Venice, built under Doge Domenico I Contarini in the eleventh century, or even the Romanesque cathedral of Notre-Dame-et-Saint-Castor in Nîmes.⁴ Within this historiographical framework, the categories of Byzantine and Neo-Byzantine merge with those of “Roman, Lombard, Saxon, whatever names we give them,” as Prosper Mérimée observed in the late 1830s.⁵ Similarly, the adjective “Romano-Byzantine” developed in the same historiographical context, although with a less vague meaning. As Aymon-Gilbert Mallay stated

in his *Essai sur les églises romanes et romano-byzantines du département du Puy-de-Dôme*, “By Romano-Byzantine style, I mean buildings where the architecture of Byzantium penetrated with force and blended with the style that had originated as a memory of the Roman domination.”⁶ On the same page, Mallay explained how he used Roman for the most ancient monuments, which are distinguished by the simplicity of the plan and the heaviness of the ornamentation, and Byzantine for the monuments where Greek rules predominate.⁷ In a recent article, Adrien Palladino has stressed how the juxtaposition of “Romano” and “Byzantine” leaned on the positivist

- 1 Among the numerous studies published in recent years: Averil Cameron, *Byzantine Matters*, Oxford/Princeton 2014; *The Invention of Byzantium in Early Modern Europe*, Nathanael Aschenbrenner, Jake Ransohoff eds, Washington, D.C. 2021; *Is Byzantine Studies a Colonialist Discipline? Towards a Critical Historiography*, Benjamin Anderson, Mirela Ivanova eds, University Park, PA, 2023; Claudia Rapp, *Zerrspiegel, Streiflichter und Seitenblicke. Perspektiven der Byzantinistik heute*, Göttingen 2023.
- 2 Robert Ousterhout defined it a “responsive architecture,” that easily adapted to the special necessities of location, function, and this responsiveness often led to new formulations. Robert Ousterhout, *Master Builders of Byzantium*, Philadelphia 2008, p. 11.
- 3 Here too, within an almost boundless bibliography, at least the principal references may be noted: Simona Talenti, *L’histoire de l’architecture en France. Émergence d’une discipline (1863–1914)*, Paris 2000; *L’architecture religieuse au XIX^e siècle: entre éclectisme et rationalisme*, Bruno Foucart, Françoise Hamon eds, Paris 2006; Luciano Patetta, *L’architettura dell’Eclettismo. Fonti, teorie, modelli*, Sant’Arcangelo di Romagna 2007.
- 4 James Fergusson, *A History of Architecture in All Countries, from the Earliest Time to the Present Day*, vol. 2: *Christian Architecture*, London 1867, pp. 323–325; Camillo Boito, *La basilique de St. Marc à Venise étudiée au double point de vue de l’art et de l’histoire*, Venice 1890, p. 395; Théophile Gautier, *Les beaux-arts en Europe*, Paris 1855, p. 242. Yet “Neo-Byzantine” also designates the nineteenth-century frescoes by Romain Cazes in the church of Bagnères-de-Luchon, which today we might rather describe as Neoclassical: Eugène de Buchère de Lépinos, *L’art dans la rue et l’art au salon*, Paris 1859, p. 88.
- 5 “[...] roman, lombard, saxon, quels que soient les noms qu’on donne.” Prosper Mérimée, “Essai sur l’architecture religieuse du Moyen Âge”, *Annuaire historique pour l’année 1838*, p. 293. A similar formulation can be found in Arcisse de Caumont, *Histoire sommaire de l’architecture religieuse, civile et militaire au Moyen Âge*, Caen et al. 1836, p. 25.
- 6 “Par le style romano-byzantin, j’ai voulu parler des édifices où l’architecture de Byzance a pénétré avec force et s’est mêlée au style qui avait pris naissance dans les souvenirs de la domination romaine.” Aymon-Gilbert Mallay, *Essai sur les églises romanes et romano-byzantines du département du Puy-de-Dôme*, Moulins 1838, p. xxiv.
- 7 *Ibidem*.

idea of a “local” and a “foreign” style merged.⁸ The decisive impulse for this merger is traced back to the Crusades, which fostered relations and exchanges between East and West; such, at any rate, is the view expressed by Arcisse de Caumont in the early 1830s,⁹ when he reiterated a historiographical *topos* that can be traced as far back as Charles Du Cange in the seventeenth century.¹⁰

Nineteenth-century scholarship is divided on the actual contribution of Byzantium to the formation of medieval French architecture: while as early as 1816 scholars such as Alexandre de Laborde maintained that all architectural traditions derived from Constantinople, a view later followed in the 1830s by Prosper Mérimée and Ludovic Vitet, by contrast Félix de Verneilh, in the 1850s, strongly asserted the foreignness of Byzantine architecture in relation to French culture, describing it as “foreign to our climate, isolated from our national art.”¹¹

Meanwhile, while French scholars were debating the degree of Byzantineness in the medieval monuments of France, knowledge of Byzantine architecture in the former territories of the Byzantine Empire was shaped almost exclusively by a small group of travelers who journeyed across the Mediterranean, the likes of Charles Texier, Albert Lenoir, and André Couchaud. Their writings are characterized by a formalist approach to the subject, focusing primarily on three key elements: the plan, the dome, and interior decoration. The theoretical framework within which they operate was not so different from that of the French colleagues just mentioned: in his writings, mostly unpublished, Lenoir theorizes the existence of a Byzantine style and a Latin style, whose synthesis would constitute the ultimate achievement of future architects. It was this conviction, first expressed in the manuscript *Études historiques sur l'architecture des temps compris entre la chute de l'Empire romain et le XIV^e siècle*, with which in 1834 he won the prestigious prize of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, that led him to travel across the Mediterranean, in search of the model for the development of medieval architecture from its ancient roots.¹² The writings of Lenoir, as well as the *Choix d'églises byzantines en Grèce* by André Couchaud, had a profound impact on the architectural imagination of their contemporaries.¹³ Lenoir, in

particular, maintained close personal and intellectual ties with key figures for historicist architecture in these decades, including Léon Vaudoyer, with whom he shared a strong interest in medieval and non-classical architectural forms.¹⁴ The two authored the “*Études sur l'architecture en France*,” published in

- 8 Adrien Palladino, “Byzance à Conques? An Unrealized Dream of ‘Neo-Byzantine’ Architecture in Nineteenth-Century France”, in *Contextualizing Conques. Imaginaries, Narratives & Geographies*, Ivan Foletti et al. eds (= *Convivium Supplementum*, 3 [2023]), pp. 21–41, esp. pp. 28–31. On this, see also Jean-Michel Spieser, “Art byzantin et influence: pour l’histoire d’une construction”, in *Byzance et le monde extérieur. Contacts, relations, échanges*, Michel Balard et al. eds, Paris 2005, pp. 271–288; Jean Nayrolles, *L’invention de l’art roman à l’époque moderne (XVIII^e–XIX^e siècles)*, Rennes 2005, p. 285; Dominique Jarrassé, “L’Orientalisme architectural et l’église”, in *L’architecture religieuse* (n. 3), pp. 57–67.
- 9 Arcisse de Caumont, *Cours d’antiquités monumentales professées à Caen. Histoire de l’art dans l’ouest de la France depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu’au XVII^e siècle*. Vol. 4: *Moyen Âge. Architecture religieuse*, Paris/Caen 1831, p. 161.
- 10 Charles Du Fresne Du Cange, *Histoire de l’Empire de Constantinople sous les empereurs françois*, Paris 1657.
- 11 “[...] étrangère à notre climat, isolée de notre art national.” The quotation is from Félix de Verneilh, *L’architecture byzantine en France. Saint-Front de Périgueux et les églises à coupoles de l’Aquitaine*, Paris 1851, p. 8. Alexandre de Laborde, *Les Monuments de la France classés chronologiquement et considérés sous le rapport des faits historiques et de l’étude des arts*, 2 vols, Paris 1816–1836, vol. 1, pp. 11–111; Ludovic Vitet, “De l’architecture lombarde”, *Revue française*, 15 (1830), pp. 151–173; Prosper Mérimée, *Notes d’un voyage dans le Midi de la France*, Paris 1835; Ludovic Vitet, “L’Architecture byzantine en France”, *Journal des savants*, (1853), pp. 5–16, 80–93, 261–279. For a critical investigation, see Jean Nayrolles, *L’invention de l’art roman à l’époque moderne (XVIII^e–XIX^e siècles)*, Rennes 2005, pp. 281–311; Alice Thomine-Berrada, “Art d’Orient / Art d’Occident. Les débats sur l’apport oriental dans l’architecture médiévale française au XIX^e siècle”, in *Histoire de l’histoire de l’art en France au XIX^e siècle*, Roland Recht et al. eds, Paris 2008, pp. 321–338; Nikolaos Magouliotis, “French architects and ‘églises grecques’: the discovery of Byzantine architecture in Greece, 1820s–1840s”, *The Journal of Architecture*, 25 (2020), pp. 1028–1054; Francesco Lovino, “East or West? Byzantine Architecture and the Origins of French Medieval Architecture in the Scholarly Debate, Nineteenth Century”, in *Byzantium in the Popular Imagination. The Modern Reception of the Byzantine Empire*, Markéta Kulhánková, Przemysław Marciniak eds, London 2023, pp. 33–44.
- 12 Francesco Lovino, “Albert Lenoir e la scoperta dell’architettura bizantina in Francia”, in *Medioevo europeo e mediterraneo: scambi, circolazione e mobilità artistica*, Roberta Cerone, Manuela Gianandrea eds, Rome 2024, pp. 109–123.
- 13 Albert Lenoir, “De l’architecture byzantine”, *Revue générale de l’architecture et des travaux publics*, 1 (1840), pp. 7–16, 66–76; André Couchaud, *Choix d’églises byzantines en Grèce*, Paris 1842. On this, see Nayrolles, *L’invention* (n. 8), pp. 287–288; Lovino, “East or West?” (n. 11), pp. 110–112.
- 14 David Van Zanten, *Designing Paris: the Architecture of Duban, Labrousse, Duc, and Vaudoyer*, Cambridge, MA, 1987.

the *Le magasin pittoresque* from 1839 to 1852,¹⁵ shortly before Vaudoyer was commissioned to design the first Romano-Byzantine church of nineteenth-century France: the Cathedral of Sainte-Marie-Majeure in Marseille.

AN ARCHITECTURAL STYLE IN MARSEILLE

So far, we have seen what meaning is ascribed to a medieval “Romano-Byzantine” church; but what does a nineteenth-century Romano-Byzantine church look like? As already mentioned, Vaudoyer was close to Lenoir, with whom he shared a strong support for Saint-Simonian ideas, particularly the heterodox interpretations promoted by Pierre Leroux and Augustin Thierry which held that every transformation arose from the dialectical interplay of tradition and innovation.¹⁶ Vaudoyer rejected the notion of a fixed, prescriptive canon: it was the historical, social, and political context that defined the style and typology of a monument.¹⁷ This concept of “type” resurfaces in a letter he wrote to his friend Hippolyte Fortoul, written shortly after the commission of the Sainte-Marie-Majeure Cathedral in 1845: here Vaudoyer (ironically) confessed to trembling at the prospect of confronting the “the notorious problem of the Catholic type.”¹⁸ This very concern explains why Vaudoyer’s initial proposals for the new cathedral in Marseille were limited to the floor plan: he opted for a Latin cross, following the French Catholic tradition, and only began working on the elevations in 1848.¹⁹ The plan already signals a clear departure from the “authentic” Byzantine model, at least as described by Lenoir and Couchaud, but at the same time, his design diverges from the dominant Gothic Revival style of the period. Vaudoyer had never concealed his aversion to Gothic architecture, which he saw as a stylistic cliché lacking sensitivity to the monument’s specific context. In Marseille, a historic crossroads between East and West, the monument required an eclectic language capable of synthesizing those cultural and architectural influences.

The design process was long and complex, with a final synthesis only reached in the 1857 plan. This version combined a three-aisled basilican nave with a transept resembling a Greek-cross *katholikon*, featuring a central dome and four smaller domes,

though these were aligned along the longitudinal axis rather than at the four corners. The eastern end followed a Gothic model, with an ambulatory and radiating chapels.²⁰ In keeping with this hybrid vocabulary, Vaudoyer also made striking material and decorative choices: the mosaic floor evokes early Christian pavement fragments, dated to around the fifth century, which were rediscovered during the demolition of the old cathedral to make way for the new Sainte-Marie-Majeure. The façades were clad in alternating bands of white Calissane limestone and green Florentine stone, a bichromatic scheme rooted in Tuscan Romanesque tradition [fig. 1].

Vaudoyer died in 1872, without seeing his project completed. In the two years that followed, the construction site was overseen by Henri-Jacques Espérandieu, his collaborator and the architect of Marseille’s other major Neo-Byzantine church, Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde. In fact, Espérandieu had already been appointed inspector of the cathedral works in 1854, when Vaudoyer had asked him to represent him on site. The cathedral and Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde are clearly in dialogue: Espérandieu blends Mediterranean influences with historicist vocabulary, employing a bichromatic façade of white limestone and greenish-grey stone. He designed a central dome resting on a tall drum and a monumental entrance bell tower topped by a colossal statue of the Virgin, known locally as the *Bonne Mère*.

15 Albert Lenoir, Léon Vaudoyer, “Études sur l’architecture en France”, *Le magasin pittoresque*, 1839–1852.

16 On Leroux and Thierry, see François-André Isambert, “Époques critiques et époques organiques. Une contribution de Buchez à l’élaboration de la théorie sociale des saint-simoniens”, n.s., 27 (1959), pp. 131–152; Jean-Jacques Goblot, *Aux origines du socialisme français : Pierre Leroux et ses premiers écrits (1824–1830)*, Lyon 1977; Philippe Régner, “Thierry et Saint-Simon : micro-histoire d’une collaboration”, in *Augustin Thierry. L’histoire pour mémoire*, Aude Déruelle, Yann Potin eds, Rennes 2018, pp. 23–38.

17 Barry Bergdoll, “La cathédrale de Marseille : fonctions politiques d’un monument éclectique”, *Bulletin de la Société d’Histoire de l’Art français*, 1986 (1988), pp. 129–143 and *Idem*, *Léon Vaudoyer : Historicism in the Age of Industry*, New York 1994.

18 “[...] fameux problème du type catholique.” Léon Vaudoyer to Hippolyte Fortoul, May 14, 1845. Paris, Archives nationales, Fonds Fortoul, 246 AP14. The letter is mentioned in Bergdoll, “La cathédrale” (n. 17), p. 130.

19 *Ibidem*, p. 131.

20 *Ibidem*, pp. 136–140.

The effect is that of a church-fortress dominating the city from its highest hill, a site that had served a defensive function since the sixteenth century, when a fort shared the summit with a small chapel dedicated to the Virgin.²¹

The choice of the Romano-Byzantine style also reflects a specific preference over the prominent Neo-Gothic. The decisive vote to assign the project to Espérandieu came from Monsignor Eugène de Mazenod, who had also championed the construction of the Majeure, and who favored Espérandieu over other candidates proposing designs in the Gothic Revival style. The polemic against the uncritical adoption of the Gothic Revival in nineteenth-century French ecclesiastical architecture had already been articulated by Vaudoyer and Lenoir in the pages of the *Le magasin pittoresque*. Adopting an unusually polemical tone, the two attacked the notion of Gothic as the national style, reiterating that “art in general, and architecture in particular, are subject to the influence of the ideas that dominate the era in which they are produced.”²² Their statement was prompted by an article published in the first issue of the *Annales archéologiques* by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, in which he argued that the Gothic style represented the apex of French architecture, after which it fell into a long period of cultural decline.²³ A few years later, Viollet-le-Duc himself showed a partial reconsideration, and in the report he drafted on Vaudoyer’s project he asserted that the Romano-Byzantine style was the only one appropriate for the *Midi*.²⁴

This convergence of views finds a partial echo in a curious article published by Espérandieu in 1872 in the *Revue générale de l’architecture et des travaux publics* titled “Le sentiment et l’architecture. De la forme et de la coloration des édifices.”²⁵ The article underscores the same Saint-Simonian vision already noted in the cases of Vaudoyer, highlighting the connections between the geographical environment and the racial traits of its inhabitants, their traditional attire, and architectural forms. The influence of the landscape, in particular, appears to determine the stylistic outcome: “if the sky is clear, the shape of buildings is calm and pure [...]. If the terrain is rugged, we like right angles and cubic shapes that contrast with the sloping lines of the ground.”²⁶ This schema, clear sky/simple forms, mountainous

terrain/right angles, is accompanied by other, more general (and today ethically questionable) reflections, such as the rejection of convex forms in Islamic architecture, which Espérandieu links to an alleged aesthetic preference among Arabs for fuller female body types.²⁷ Espérandieu’s reflections in this article offer a revealing synthesis of the ideological framework underpinning the use of the Romano-Byzantine style in southern France. By associating form and color with landscape, climate, and perceived racial and cultural characteristics, he reinforces the view that architecture must emerge from its environment rather than adhere to fixed historical canons. In this light, the Romano-Byzantine style appears not merely as an aesthetic choice but as a natural and even necessary expression of the geographical and cultural identity of the *Midi*.

This organic conception of style helps explain the persistent appeal of the Romano-Byzantine idiom in Marseille during the second half of the century. It is within this intellectual and cultural context that Henri Révoil took over the construction of both the cathedral and Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde in 1874, following the untimely death of Espérandieu. When Révoil assumed responsibility, both projects were already well advanced; in fact, Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde had been consecrated ten years earlier, in 1864. Under his direction, the interior decoration of

21 Régis Bertrand, Laurent Noet, Jean-Michel Sanchez, *La Bonne Mère de Marseille. Effigies de Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde*, Marseille 2023, pp. 7–11.

22 “[...] l’art en général, et l’architecture particulièrement, sont soumis à l’impulsion des idées qui dominent à l’époque de leur production.” Albert Lenoir, Léon Vaudoyer, “Études sur l’architecture en France”, *Le magasin pittoresque*, 12 (1844), p. 262.

23 Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, “De la construction des édifices religieux en France depuis le christianisme jusqu’au xvi^e siècle”, *Annales archéologiques*, 1 (1844), pp. 179–185. On this, see Bergdoll, “La cathédrale” (n. 17), pp. 128–130.

24 *Ibidem*, p. 134.

25 Henry Espérandieu, “Le sentiment et l’architecture: De la forme et de la coloration des édifices”, *Revue générale de l’architecture et des travaux publics*, 29 (1872), pp. 12–18, 51–55, 107–110.

26 “si le ciel est pur, la forme des édifices est calme et pure [...]. Si le terrain est tourmenté, on aime l’angle droit et les formes cubiques qui contrastent avec les lignes obliques du sol.” *Ibidem*, pp. 13–14.

27 The same concept is expressed, though with an inverted meaning, in reference to the upward-curving forms of Chinese architecture, where instead “[...] on y aime l’homme gras et la femme svelte.” *Ibidem*, p. 108.

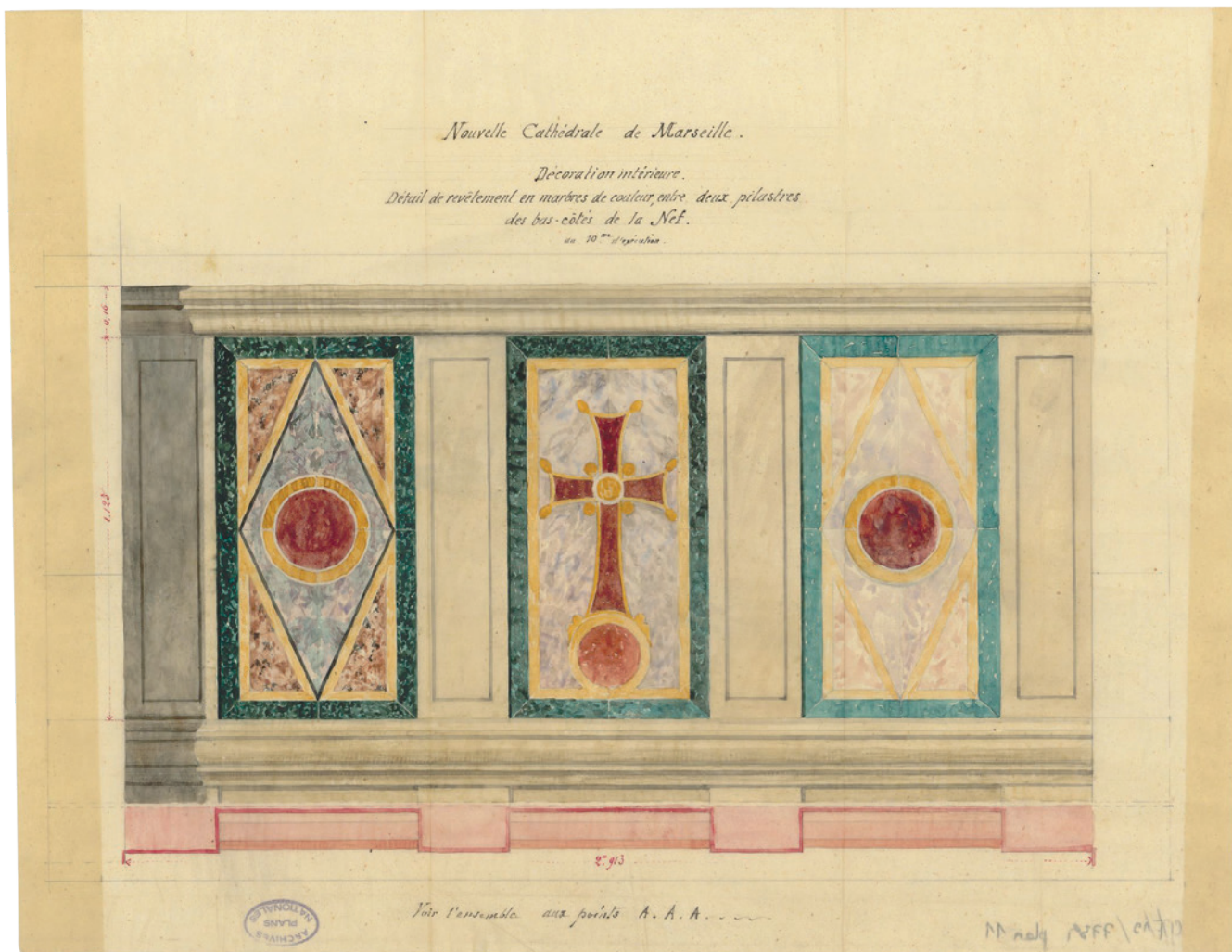


[fig. 1] Léon Vaudoyer, Henry Espérandieu, Henry Révoil, Cathedral of Sainte-Marie-Majeure, Marseille, built 1852–1893

both churches was completed: an aspect that today clearly evokes a more “Byzantine” than “Romano” atmosphere. Révoil’s understanding of Byzantine was largely derivative: his entire career unfolded in the Midi, between his native Aix-en-Provence and Nîmes, without study trips to Italy or Greece. Even in his major work on Romanesque architecture in southern France, published in two volumes in 1873, Révoil echoed what Prosper Mérimée had written some thirty years earlier about the abbey of

Saint-Gilles-du-Gard: that in the façade’s sculpted reliefs, “all the whimsicality, all the luxury of Byzantine ornamentation has been exhausted,” forcing the viewer to come closer and examine every detail to appreciate the richness of execution.²⁸

28 “[...] *tout le caprice, tout le luxe de l’ornementation byzantine s’est épuisé*,” Prosper Mérimée, *Notes d’un voyage dans le Midi de la France*, Paris 1988 [1835], pp. 184–185. The sentence is mentioned in Henry Révoil, *Architecture romane du Midi de la France. Edifices religieux: abbayes, églises et cloîtres*, Paris 1873, p. 56.



[fig. 2] Henry Révoil, *Projet pour la décoration intérieure de la cathédrale de Marseille*, ca 1880 / Archives nationales (Paris)

[fig. 3] → Marseille, cathedral of Sainte-Marie-Majeure, view towards the dome

The decorative schemes of both churches can be described as Byzantine in the most didactic sense of the term. Nevertheless, many of Henri Révoil's envisioned additions to the cathedral were never brought to completion, most notably his plan to adorn the exterior perimeter with marble slabs inlaid with lozenges and crosses [fig. 2]. At Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde, by contrast, several of Révoil's designs were implemented. Red Verona marble was used for the slender colonnettes, which appear to echo ancient porphyry, both in the crypt and along the nave arcades. From 1884 onward, Révoil entrusted Charles Errard, who had collaborated with him on

the *Architecture romane du Midi* and had spent extensive periods abroad studying Byzantine art, with the supervision of the mosaic programs in both the cathedral and the basilica.²⁹ It is particularly interesting to examine how the mosaics revive ornamental motifs characteristic of the Byzantine world. In the cathedral, the pendentives of the central dome are decorated with a *Blütenblatt* pattern and vegetal scrolls emerging from an amphora [fig. 3]; in the radial chapels, a frieze of Sasanian-style palmettes

29 Jorge Coly, "Henry Révoil et les mosaïques néo-byzantines", *Monuments Historiques*, 125 (1983), pp. 63–67.





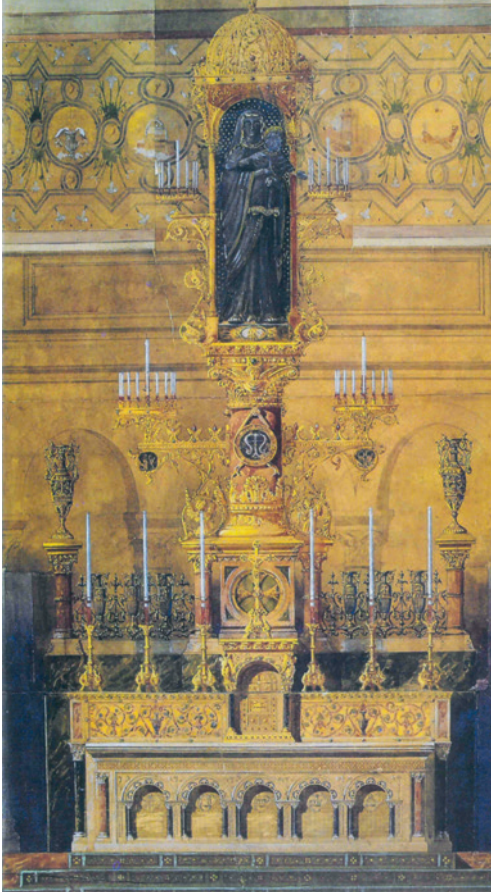
[fig. 4] Apse mosaic, Basilica of Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde, Marseille

runs along the arcades. At Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde, similar vine scrolls in the apse are inhabited by peacocks and other birds, while Greek-lettered monograms such as $\text{MP } \Theta\Upsilon$ (Mother of God) also appear. At the same time, the choices made by Révoil and Errard demonstrate the remarkable versatility of mosaic as a medium, which, in nineteenth-century ecclesiastical contexts, took on innovative forms previously unseen in sacred architecture. One striking example is found in the apse of the basilica, where a boat is depicted leaving the harbor of Marseille [fig. 4]; this monumental ex-voto reflects the devotion of local seafarers, who entrusted themselves to the Virgin's protection against the perils of the sea.³⁰

Révoil was also responsible for the design and execution of the high altar at Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde, completed in the 1890s [fig. 5]. This composition exemplifies his Byzantine aesthetic, blending architectural symmetry with elaborate ornamental richness. The central niche enshrines a statue of the Virgin Mary, set beneath an ornate baldachin crowned by a gilded hemispherical dome that evokes the form

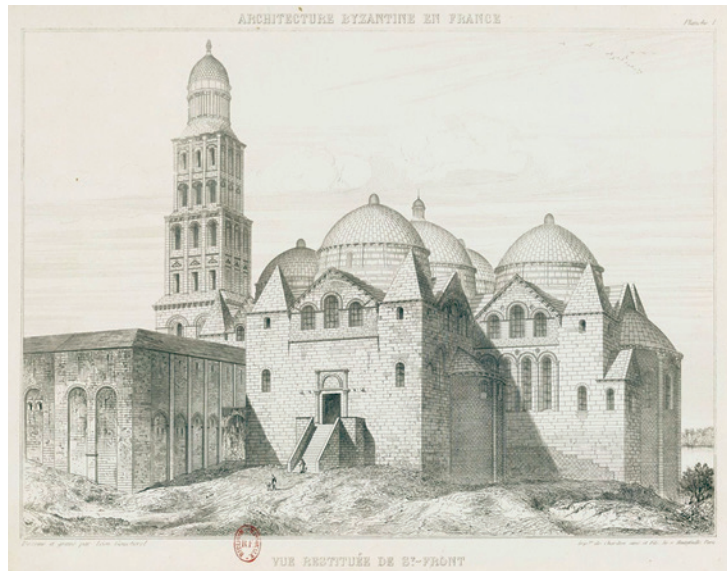
of a Byzantine ciborium. The design is lavishly embellished with gilded vegetal motifs, in particular intricate vine scrolls that unfold across the altar's horizontal friezes and vertical supports. These stylized vines, punctuated by leaves and blossoms, clearly draw inspiration from early Christian and Byzantine decorative repertoires, here reinterpreted with the precision and sumptuousness typical of nineteenth-century revivalist design. The lower register of the altar features a series of blind arcades with multicolored inlays and stylized capitals, reinforcing the historicist vocabulary of the entire ensemble.

30 The deep connection between the basilica and Marseille's maritime vocation remains evident today: model ships hang from the ceiling along the nave, many of the ex-votos adorning the walls are maritime in theme, and one of the most iconic (and widely circulated) representations of the statue of the *Bonne Mère* throughout the twentieth century is based on a grisaille painting, signed G. Laporte and dated around 1900. The image depicts the Virgin and Child as protectors of sailors, watching over ships as they leave the port of Marseille. On these topics, see Félix Reynaud, *Ex-voto marins de Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde*, Marseille 1996; Bertrand/Noet/Sanchez, *La Bonne Mère* (n. 21), p. 67.



[fig. 5] Henry Révoil, Project for the main altar of Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde / Musée des Beaux-Arts (Marseille)

[fig. 6] Félix de Verneilh, *Reconstruction of the Cathedral of Saint-Front, Périgueux*, from *L'architecture byzantine en France. Saint-Front de Périgueux et les églises à coupoles de l'Aquitaine*, Paris 1851, pl. 4



The result is one of solemn liturgical grandeur, in which ornament and symbolism are meticulously harmonized within a structured yet luxuriantly detailed decorative program.

The scholarly debate surrounding Byzantine architecture and its relationship with French medieval forms, together with the impact generated by the two major construction sites in Marseille, inaugurated a fertile period for the development of Romano-Byzantine churches. Palladino has described in detail the unrealized project by Jean-Camille Formigé for the restoration of the abbey of Sainte-Foy in Conques, which was in part modeled on the winning design by Paul Abadie for the Basilica of the Sacré-Cœur on the hill of Montmartre in Paris.³¹ The latter is undoubtedly one of the most celebrated and extensively studied examples, and it merits at least a brief mention here.³² The genesis of the Sacré-Cœur can be traced back to a text that strongly asserts the foreignness of Byzantine architecture in relation to French culture, the aforementioned *L'architecture*

byzantine en France by Félix de Verneilh. As recalled above, the author describes Byzantine architecture as “foreign” and “isolated” from French national art,³³ emphasizing the exceptional nature of the basilica of Saint-Front in Périgueux, a Byzantine structure modeled on San Marco in Venice, albeit with several modifications stemming from the use of local materials and measurement systems.³⁴ In the 1850s, the domes of Saint-Front were externally concealed beneath pitched roofs. To support his thesis, de Verneilh included in his volume reconstructed drawings of the basilica’s original state [fig. 6] and proposed a radical

31 Palladino, “Byzance à Conques?” (n. 8), pp. 22–24.

32 Here too, I mention only a selection of the numerous contributions on Paul Abadie and the Basilica of the Sacré-Cœur of Montmartre: Claude Laroche, “L’œuvre d’architecture de Paul Abadie (1812–1884) : situation culturelle et inventaire raisonné”, *Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire de l’Art Français*, (1981–1983), pp. 219–238; Paul Abadie : *architecte (1812–1884). Entre archéologie et modernité*, cat. exh. (Angoulême, 1984), Marcel Durlot ed., Angoulême 1984; Paul Abadie, *architecte (1812–1884)*, cat. exh. (Paris, 1988–1989), Claude Laroche ed., Paris 1988.

33 De Verneilh, *L’architecture byzantine* (n. 11), p. 8.

34 *Ibidem*, p. 18.

restoration of the cathedral to expose the domes and thus validate his hypotheses.³⁵

Within months, Paul Abadie was appointed by the local diocese to lead the restoration of Saint-Front. His first intervention focused on the southern dome, rising to a height of 49 meters. According to a report written by Abadie in 1877, the dome's instability, marked by large cracks, forced him to hastily construct a buttress to stabilize the structure and prevent its collapse. When confronted with a similar situation at the northern dome, the Comité des Inspecteurs généraux, which oversaw the works, recommended its demolition and reconstruction.³⁶ A photograph of the western dome taken prior to demolition reveals an almost conical extrados, quite different from the idealized forms Abadie ultimately imposed during the restoration at Périgueux. A similar logic guided his intervention at the cathedral of Saint-Pierre in Angoulême. There, Abadie pursued the same agenda of geometrical regularization and monumentalization: he added domes, standardized the facades, and reinterpreted the Romanesque vocabulary through the speculative lens of an imagined Eastern lineage. These projects reflect the theory of restoration articulated by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, with whom Abadie collaborated in the 1840s for the restoration of Notre-Dame in Paris: not as a mere repair or reproduction, but a restoration "to a complete state that may never have existed at any given time."³⁷

The Byzantine character of Saint-Front would echo in Abadie's design for the Basilica of the Sacré-Cœur in Paris [fig. 7]. Commissioned in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War and the trauma of the Paris Commune, the basilica was conceived as both an act of national penance and a symbol of spiritual regeneration. In this context, Abadie's architectural language operated as a powerful visual metaphor: it evoked a timeless Christianity capable of transcending internal divisions and contemporary crises in the Third Republic. This idealized archetype was once again based on what the nineteenth-century French understanding considered authentic Byzantine elements: a domed structure, richly adorned with interior mosaics — an element Abadie had already attempted to realize at Périgueux, where he had commissioned Charles Joseph Lameire to execute mosaics in the domes and along the nave.³⁸ Abadie

also revived an architectural motif that, in his view, had traveled from Constantinople to Venice and from there to Périgueux, ultimately entering the French architectural canon: the entrance portico crowned with equestrian statues. In the elevation published in 1854, Wilhelm Salzenberg reconstructs Hagia Sophia with the equestrian statue of Justinian erroneously placed in front of the western façade [fig. 8].³⁹ But even earlier, in 1836, Albert Lenoir had drawn Hagia Sophia's façade articulated by four monumental pedestals, each supporting a colossal equestrian statue [fig. 9].⁴⁰ Abadie thus considered this element original and essential, to the extent that he even envisioned a similar equestrian portico for the cathedral of Saint-Front. In 1872, he communicated this idea in a letter to the Minister of Finance Pierre Magne, and a drawing illustrating this proposal is still preserved in the diocesan archives of Périgueux [fig. 10].⁴¹

NEO-BYZANTINE ARCHITECTURE ACROSS THE MEDITERRANEAN

The decades spanning from the 1860s to the end of the nineteenth century witnessed a widespread

35 Kerstin Wittmann-Englert, "Konstruiertes Mittelalter: Paul Abadie restauriert", *In situ. Zeitschrift für Architekturgeschichte*, 3 (2011), pp. 87–104. Classified as a *Monument historique* in 1838, the urgency of restoring the basilica of Saint-Front had already been raised in two public reports published in 1842, one by Maximilien Lion for the *Commission des Monuments historiques*, and the other by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc for the *Ministère de la Justice et des Cultes*. See Paul Abadie, *architecte* (n. 32), p. 121.

36 Paul Abadie, *Cathédrale de Périgueux, rapport sur la situation des travaux, 24 janvier 1877*, mentioned in Paul Abadie, *architecte* (n. 29), p. 112. The *Comité* was composed of Léonce Reynaud, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, and Léon Vaudoyer.

37 "[...] rétablir dans un état complet qui peut n'avoir jamais existé à un moment donné." Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, "Restauration", in *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XI^e au XVI^e siècle. Tome huitième*, Paris 1866, p. 14.

38 Emmanuelle Amiot-Saulnier, *La peinture religieuse en France: 1873–1879*, Paris 2007, esp. pp. 82–86.

39 Wilhelm Salzenberg, *Alt-christliche Baudenkmale von Constantinopel vom v. bis XII. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 1854, pl. 5. See also Robert S. Nelson, *Hagia Sophia, 1850–1950. Holy Wisdom Modern Monument*, London / New York 2004, p. 33.

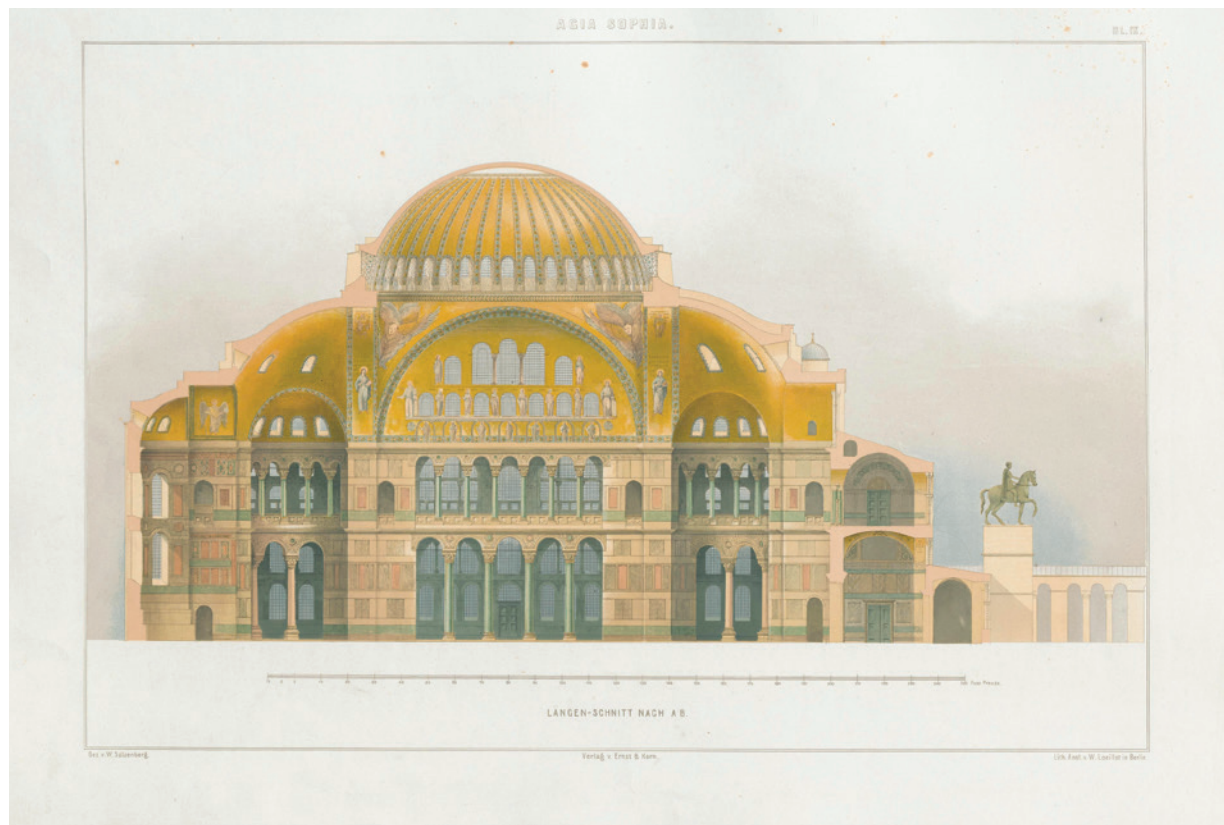
40 Lovino, "East or West?" (n. 11). In the short volume *De la décoration appliquée aux édifices*, published posthumously in 1880, Viollet-le-Duc also included a similar reconstruction of the entrance portico leading to the esonarthex of Hagia Sophia. Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, *De la décoration appliquée aux édifices*, Paris 1880, p. 38.

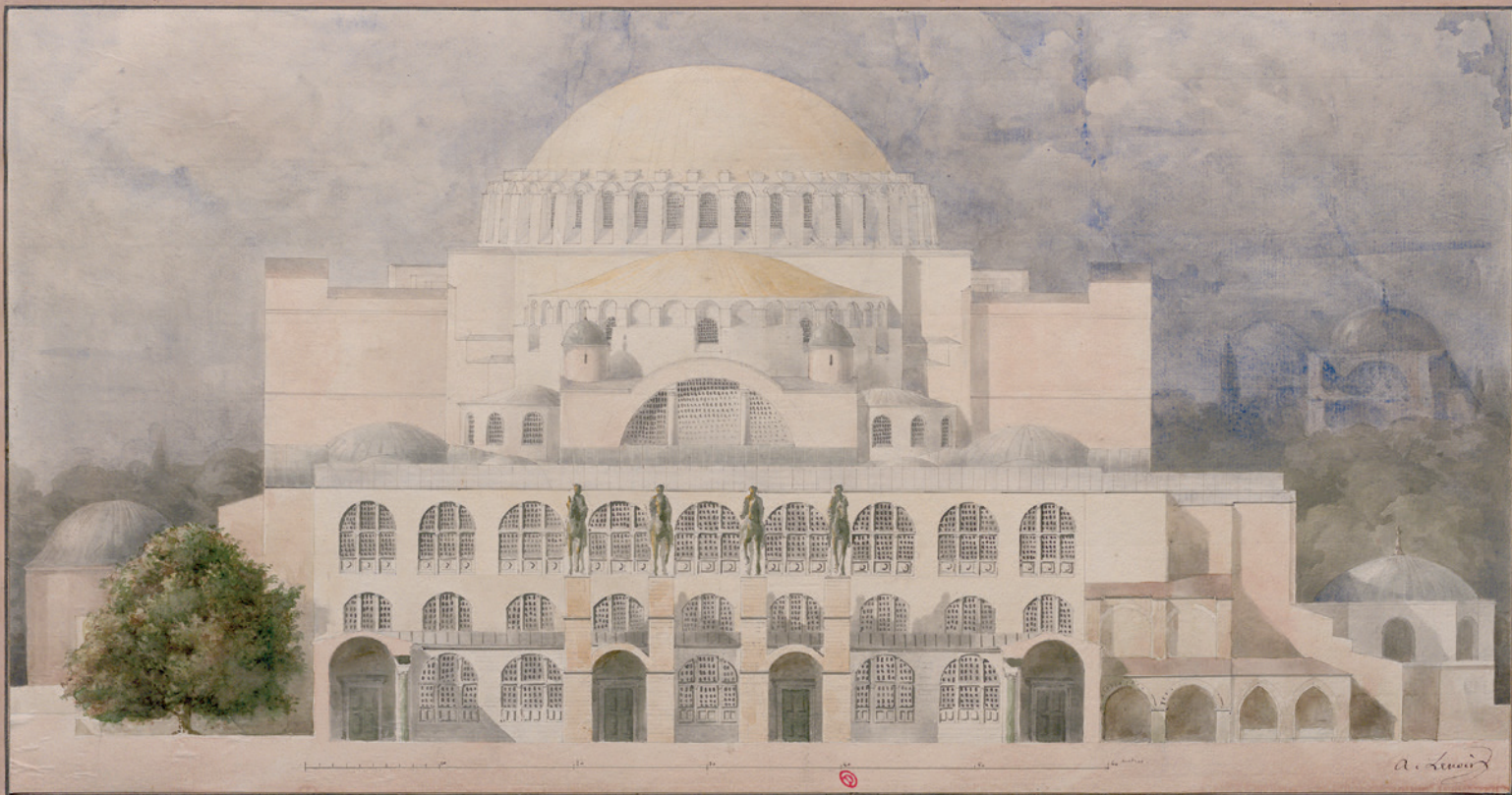
41 The letter is mentioned in Paul Abadie, *architecte* (n. 32), p. 231.



[fig. 7] Paul Abadie,
Project for the Basilica
of the Sacré-Cœur, 1874

[fig. 8] Wilhelm Salzen-
berg, Reconstruction of
Hagia Sophia, Constan-
tinople, from *Alt-christliche
Baudenkmale von
Constantinopel vom
v. bis xii. Jahrhundert*,
Berlin 1854, pl. 5





FAÇADE DE L'ÉGLISE DE SAINTE SOPHIE.

[fig. 9] Albert Lenoir, *Façade of Hagia Sophia, Constantinople* / Bibliothèque de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art (Paris), Jacques Doucet Collection, OA 716 (18, 98)

dissemination of the Neo-Byzantine architectural repertoire beyond metropolitan France and into its overseas colonies. In cities such as Algiers, Tunis, and Oran, new cathedrals were commissioned to accommodate the spiritual needs of the increasing population of French Catholic settlers. In this colonial context, sacred architecture became a powerful instrument of political authority, asserting the French presence by occupying prominent urban sites and reshaping the visual and symbolic identity of North African cities to resemble that of Marseille and Paris.⁴²

This architectural phenomenon unfolded across multiple and intersecting dimensions. Politically, it served as a visual assertion of imperial power; stylistically, it promoted a Mediterranean and transnational

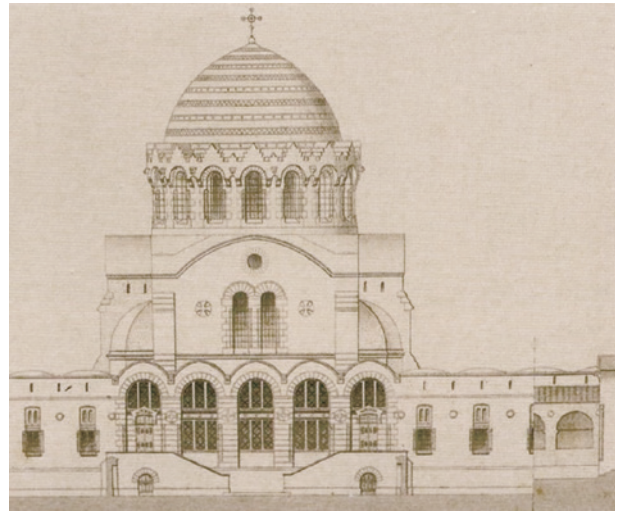
aesthetic that echoed the hybrid formal language of the Cathedral of Sainte-Marie-Majeure in Marseille. Religiously, the initiative was imbued with a desire to construct a narrative of historical and spiritual continuity between contemporary French Catholicism and the early Christian heritage of Roman Africa. This ideological framework is exemplified by

42 Nabila Oulebsir, *Les Usages du patrimoine. Monuments, musées et politique coloniale en Algérie (1830–1930)*, Paris 2004, pp. 159–161; Anissa Mami, “Le bâti colonial algérien, un patrimoine affirmé ou nié?”, *Revue d'histoire culturelle*, 9 (2024), pp. 1–12; Francesco Lovino, “Bisanzio colonialista. Architettura neobizantina nell'Africa française du Nord (1867–1912)”, in *Territori e culture. Lettere contemporanee del mondo bizantino, Atti del IX Congresso Nazionale dell'Associazione Italiana di Studi Bizantini* (Palermo, 2024), forthcoming.



[fig. 10] Paul Abadie, *Drawing of the north side of the Cathedral of Saint-Front, Périgueux*, restoration campaign begun 1852

[fig. 11] Jean-Eugène Fromageau, Pierre-Honoré Féraud, *Grand Séminaire de Kouba*, from Pierre-Honoré Féraud, "Le Grand Séminaire de Kouba", *Revue générale de l'architecture et des travaux publics*, 17/12 (1859), pp. 180–185



the dedications of major colonial churches, such as the basilica of Saint Augustine in Annaba (ancient Hippo Regius, where the saint served as bishop in the fourth century) and the church of Saint Louis in Carthage, built in memory of the French king who died there during the Eighth Crusade.⁴³

In some cases, architectural solutions trialed in the colonies appear to have anticipated those later implemented in major projects within France. One such example is the central chapel of the Grand Seminary of Kouba, designed by Jean-Eugène Fromageau and revised by Pierre-Honoré Féraud. Published in the *Revue générale de l'architecture et des travaux publics* in 1859 [fig. 11], the design followed the rejection of two earlier proposals and featured a

prominent central dome whose profile closely anticipates that used by Paul Abadie at Montmartre a few years later.⁴⁴ More distinctive, however, is the case of Albert Ballu, appointed in the 1880s as Head of the Historical Monuments of Algeria (*Monuments historiques de l'Algérie*). In addition to overseeing the conservation and maintenance of built heritage,⁴⁵ Ballu engaged in extensive archeological

43 Karima Dirèche, "Les écoles catholiques dans la Kabylie du XIX^e siècle. Entre évangélisation et assimilation", *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, 75 (2007), pp. 17–27.

44 Pierre-Honoré Féraud, "Le Grand Séminaire de Kouba", *Revue générale de l'architecture et des travaux publics*, 17/12 (1859), pp. 180–185.

45 Ahmed Koumas, Chéhrzade Nafa, *L'Algérie et son patrimoine. Dessins français du XIX^e siècle*, Paris 2003, pp. 79–84.

and architectural research, with a particular focus on the structural and historical dimensions of Algerian ancient sites.⁴⁶ Among his most significant undertakings was the excavation of the Byzantine monastery at Tebessa [fig. 12], carried out between 1889 and 1892 and published in 1897.⁴⁷ In his analysis of the remains, Ballu identified three successive construction phases, each corresponding to distinct stylistic developments. The earliest, which he dated to the fourth century, reflected the architectural homogeneity typical of the Latin period, during which the building functioned exclusively as a cathedral. A second phase, attributed to the fifth century, introduced sculptural decoration exhibiting clearly Byzantine features. The third phase, dating to the Byzantine reconquest of the sixth century, was characterized by pragmatic construction techniques: walls and structures were assembled using spolia from local Roman buildings and executed by military personnel with minimal artistic ambition. Ballu emphasized the stylistic rupture between these phases, arguing for a lack of evolutionary continuity. He echoed the views of Henri Saladin, who in 1890 had proposed that the fifth-century Byzantine style in North Africa had developed into an autonomous regional idiom.⁴⁸ While it drew on Eastern prototypes, this style had evolved into what Ballu termed “roman-africain,” shaped by local visual traditions — such as Kabyle vegetal ornamentation — which he saw as paralleling the ecclesiastical architecture of central Syria and Visigothic monuments like the church of San Juan Bautista in Baños, Spain.⁴⁹

Elsewhere, Ballu showed less sensitivity toward the Byzantine layer of North African history. At Timgad, for instance, the reconstruction of the urban historical landscape was heavily skewed toward the Roman period, while the Christian, Vandal, Byzantine, and Moorish strata were neglected or, in some cases, actively destroyed.⁵⁰ What this article seeks to investigate, however, is whether Ballu’s archaeological engagement with Byzantine architecture meaningfully informed his work as an architect. The answer, at least with regard to Byzantine influence, appears to be negative. A close analysis of his major architectural projects suggests that his primary points of reference were not North African remains such as the basilica at Tebessa, but rather the

Romano-Byzantine architecture developed in France itself. Ballu was responsible for the reconfiguration of the façade of the Ketchaoua Mosque in Algiers, renamed Saint-Philippe, which he completed between 1886 and 1890, as well as the design of the Cathedral of the Sacré-Cœur in Oran. At Ketchaoua, his intervention was largely conservative: he reused columns from the mosque’s original ablution courtyard and others recovered from the Roman temple of Jupiter Olympius in ChercHELL. He retained the “Arab-style” façade initially proposed by Ravoisié in 1839, particularly the twin entrance towers, but he altered them by adding a fourth, narrower level and replacing the original domes with tiled octagonal pyramids adorned with floral and geometric ornament. The triple-arched portico also revealed clear affinities with Paul Abadie’s works, as well as with the basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière in Lyon, especially in its use of ogival arches and a lavishly decorated entablature that synthesized Arabic and Byzantine elements in bright polychromy and gilding.

In the cathedral of the Sacré-Cœur in Oran [fig. 13], today repurposed as the public library, the design process spanned several years because of financial limitations and shifting stylistic agendas. Ballu presented at least three different designs between 1898 and 1900, all articulated in a Romano-Byzantine style which included radiating chapels

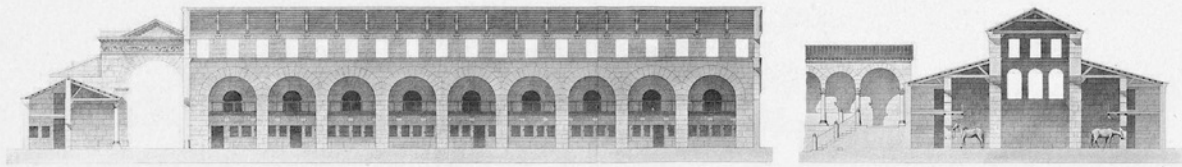
46 The archeological report by Ballu have been collected in: Agnès Gros Lambert, *L’archéologie algérienne de 1895 à 1915 : les rapports d’Albert Ballu publiés au Journal officiel de la République française de 1896 à 1916*, Paris 1997. On his archaeological excavations, see also Oulebsir, *Les Usages du patrimoine* (n. 42), pp. 205–215; Soumia Alliche, Tsouria Kassab, “La contribution d’Albert Ballu dans la sauvegarde du patrimoine algérien durant l’époque coloniale française”, *Ikosim*, 7/1 (2018), pp. 153–160; Anissa Yelles, “Stratigraphie d’une fouille en Afrique du Nord. Les relevés photographiques d’Albert Ballu à Timgad”, *Cahiers du CAP*, 9 (2021), pp. 257–287.

47 Albert Ballu, *Le monastère byzantin de Tébessa*, Paris 1897.

48 Henri Saladin, *Recherche des antiquités dans le Nord de l’Afrique: conseils aux archéologues et aux voyageurs*, Paris 1890, p. 155. See also Marie-Laure Crosnier Leconte, “Oriental ou colonial? Questions de styles dans les concours de l’École des beaux-arts au XIX^e siècle”, in *L’Orientalisme architectural, entre imaginaires et savoirs*, Nabila Oulebsir, Mercedes Volait eds, Paris 2017, pp. 43–67.

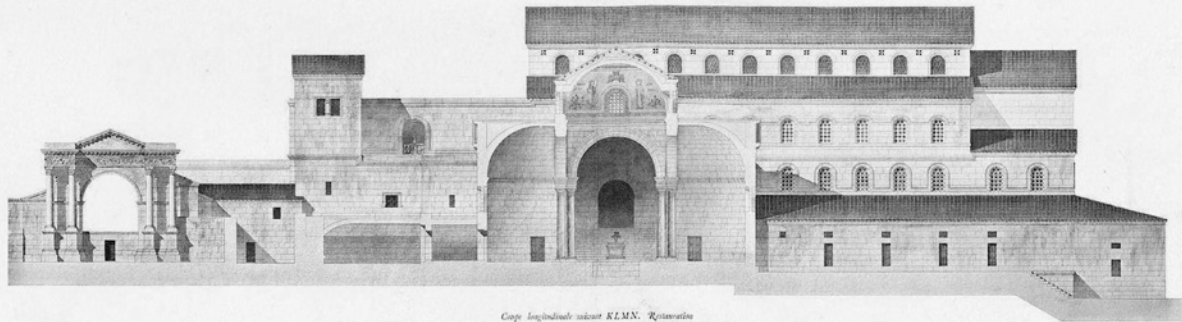
49 Ballu, *Le monastère byzantin*, (n. 47), p. 9.

50 Albert Ballu, “Les fouilles de Timgad”, *Bulletin Monumental*, 65 (1901), pp. 415–433. On this, see Anissa Yelles, “Archives croisées d’Albert Ballu à Timgad : étude spatiale de la ville et de ses fouilles”, *Frontières*, 10 (2024), [online: doi.org/10.4000/13506, last accessed on May 16, 2025].



Coupe longitudinale suivant G.H. Restauration

Coupe transversale suivant I.J. Restauration



Coupe longitudinale suivant K.L.M.N. Restauration

Échelle de 0 m. à 30 m.



[fig. 12] Albert Ballu, *Reconstruction of the basilica of Tebessa*, from *Le monastère byzantin de Tébessa*, Paris 1897, pl. 12

[fig. 13] Albert Ballu, *Cathedral of the Sacré-Cœur, Oran*, built 1903–1913

and a crypt.⁵¹ Despite their adherence to architectural tradition, Ballu's proposals encountered opposition from the Bishop of Oran, Monsignor Cantel, who instead promoted an Arabizing approach to ecclesiastical architecture. Cantel explicitly invoked Cardinal Lavigerie's maxim: "the ideal for Latin missionaries in the East would therefore be, if they could, to become Orientals themselves."⁵² Ultimately, Cantel commissioned a revised design from the architect Vincent Aymé, who nonetheless retained several key elements from Ballu, such as the twin bell towers, the mosaic-clad gable, and the arched fenestration. At the same time, Aymé introduced a more overtly Arabesque vocabulary, particularly evident in the bulbous dome over the crossing and the pseudo-minarets flanking the façade. These features were intended to suggest a more "indigenous" aesthetic, even though they lacked any functional purpose. While in the realm of public architecture the colonial administration actively promoted greater stylistic syncretism, embodied in the "style *Jon-nart*," such innovations were not equally welcomed in religious architecture. In this domain, the Romanesque-Byzantine style remained the privileged visual language of Catholicism, even in the colonial territories of North Africa.⁵³

CONCLUSION

By the early twentieth century, the widespread appeal of the Romano-Byzantine style, once celebrated as the architectural language of Catholic revival and colonial ambition, began to wane. This shift can be understood in relation to broader cultural and intellectual developments, particularly the transformation of architectural historiography and the rise of a more rigorous, source-based approach to historical styles. The speculative eclecticism that had defined the works of Vaudoyer, Abadie, Ballu, and many others, gradually gave way to more philological investigations, informed by archaeology, comparative

art history, and increasing access to Byzantine sites across the Eastern Mediterranean.

Simultaneously, the aesthetic ideals that had fueled the Romano-Byzantine revival were beginning to appear outdated. The experience of colonial architecture, while influential in shaping the stylistic vocabulary of the previous decades, no longer served as a credible model for modern ecclesiastical or civic design: as nationalist discourses were redefined in both metropolitan and colonial contexts, the Romano-Byzantine idiom came to be seen as historically remote and politically ambiguous. In this changing climate, a new generation of architects and scholars turned toward Byzantine architecture not as a symbolic reservoir for ideological projection, but as a field of serious historical inquiry. Projects such as the Greek Pavilion at the *Exposition Universelle* of 1900, and even more notably the Church of Saint-Esprit designed by Paul Tournon in the late 1920s, epitomize this transition.⁵⁴ Drawing from genuine Byzantine models, these works marked a departure from earlier abstraction and rhetorical eclecticism, instead embracing archaeological accuracy and stylistic coherence. The early twentieth century marked not a rejection, but a reframing of Byzantine architectural heritage: the legacy of the Romano-Byzantine style, once emblematic of the spiritual and imperial aspirations of France, was thereby reabsorbed into a broader, more critical discourse on the historicity and meaning of architectural form.

51 Dalila Senhadji, "La cathédrale du Sacré-Cœur d'Oran (1898–1913)", *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez*, 44/2 (2014), pp. 249–278.

52 "[...] la perfection pour les missionnaires latins en Orient serait donc, s'ils le pouvaient, de se faire orientaux eux-mêmes." The sentence is quoted in Joseph Perrier, *Vent d'avenir. Le cardinal Lavigerie (1825–1892)*, Paris 1992, p. 98.

53 Senhadji, "La cathédrale" (n. 51), pp. 276–278.

54 Giorgio Pigafetta, Antonella Mastroianni, *Paul Tournon architecte (1881–1964). Le "moderniste sage"*, Sprimont 2004; Nikolaos Magouliotis, "Byzantium, To and From: The *Pavillon de la Grèce* from the Paris 1900 Expo to Athens", *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation History, Theory, and Criticism*, 15 (2018), pp. 46–60.