

Roots of the Roman Empire Visible in France

By Patricia Arrigoni

PARIS, France – I have long been fascinated by the antiquities left by the Roman Empire and the influence of its civilization on modern Europe. Major cities of southern and western Europe founded by the Romans include Paris, Lyon, Luxembourg, Brussels, Strasbourg, Annecy, Geneva, and every major city in Italy.

Rome ruled Gaul (France) for several hundred years. If you are a student of archeology, or have a curiosity for the roots of civilization and have an opportunity to visit France, you need not journey on to Rome to find fascinating ruins of their vast civilization. There is ample evidence right in Paris as well as Lyon.

Some years ago, a parking lot was being built in front of the Notre Dame Cathedral. To official astonishment, evidence was uncovered that not only had this area been heavily populated during the Middle Ages, but the Romans had lived there also.

Visitors may now tour these archeological findings. Officially they are known as “The Archaeological Crypt under the Parvis of Notre Dame of Paris.”

The crypt is entered by climbing down a flight of stairs in front of the cathedral. Before reaching the ticket office, the remains of two Gallo-Roman rooms dating from the end of the 3rd century A.D. are visible. Beyond that is the residue of 17 centuries of history, approximately 80 generations of the people of Paris.

The display has been attractively designed with a low white ceiling, orange walls, and dim lights. Glass surrounds and protects the ruins up to waist level. The exhibits are well labeled, and some have speakers with explanations in several languages. Visitors walk along a rubber-matted ramp that allows them to look down and across the ruins.

The first think the visitor is told is that Paris was founded on this very spot by a Celtic tribe of fishermen and hunters called the “Parisii” about 300 years before Christ. Caesar invaded Gaul and took over Paris in 52 B.C. He built a Roman-style city that lasted three centuries, until a German invasion laid the town waste.

The ruins are lit up with blue spotlights giving a mysterious feeling. You are suddenly back in the Middle Ages, then even further back to the time of the Romans.

What you are seeing are passageways leading in and out of brick arches that lead to stairways that go up and down to other levels. There are also display cases with bowls, vases, carvings, a horse's head, Gallo-Roman miniature olive jars, bronze bells, and crudely minted coins.

What makes one pause, or at least it did me, was the minute size of the arches and the rooms, indicating a race of people of much smaller stature than the present.

As Gaul was a land of cold winters, the Romans built a system of heating called "hypocaust," which is still on display after 700 years. Heat came out of a furnace room, circulated under the floor through brick piles, and escaped into the house through square-shaped terra cotta tubes.

The history of the Romans in Lyon, 265 miles southeast of Paris, began as a result of Julius Caesar's murder. The heads of his army were revolting against the Senate. Two Roman leaders already stationed in Gaul were ordered by the Senate to build a settlement on the strategic hill above the confluence of the Rhone and Saone Rivers. The result was that the city of Lugdunum (the forerunner of Lyon) was founded on October 9, 43 B.C. (Lukos means "the crow," and Dunum, "the hill.")

The city soon became an important central meeting place of the Mediterranean, Alpine, Celtic, and Gallic civilizations. As capital of Gaul, Lugdunum was governed by the emperors Augustus, Caligula, and Hadrian, who all lived in the city.

One amphitheater was the annual meeting place of 60 Gallic nations. Today it is used for summer festivals. As you climb the steps, examine the ancient columns, the brick arches and splendid marbles on the stages where ancient productions were once performed.

Next to the carefully preserved archeological diggings at Lyon is the "Museum de La Civilization, Gallo-Romaine A. Lyon," designed by Bernard Zehrfuss and opened in November 1975. Moving through the building, you will find yourself circling down, down, down as you examine the displays, each artistically placed on

a plain black background. Exquisite Roman mosaic tiles, located on a lower level, are visible to visitors in their entirety.

There is a full model of the city in the 2nd century, silver cups, a goddess head, sarcophagi, weapons, helmets, coats of mail, a model of the stage of Hadrian's theater, and a model of Augustus' theater.

Chariot races were popular in Lugdunum, and there are evidences of these games, as well as artifacts from the potters, ironmongers, glassmakers, mosaic manufacturers and weavers. All left samples of their arts for future generations to appreciate and to remember with solemnity the vast Roman civilization.