Apt

Reading an Antique City as Palimpsest

Lying buried like some deep, richly endowed level of human consciousness, the vaulted cellars and subterranean passageways of an antique city often preserve the memory of an otherwise obliterated existence. Such is the case with Apt. Roman to its roots, medieval to modern in its every outward manifestation, Apt exists in an inherent dichotomy of its own. The modern city as if floats—perfectly oblivious—over the antique. Indeed, much of the city's population, today, is scarcely aware that just beneath the level of its bakeries and newsstands, its workshops and toolsheds, lie the eloquent voids of another age, another civilization. One can walk down the rue Sainte-Anne, for instance, passing on one side Céramique Viguier, Coiffeur Élisabeth, Boucherie Gaudin without for a moment realizing that one is walking down the full length of a Roman forum that will end, 140 meters later, with the Établissement Montagard *(plomberie*, *sanitaire*, *chauffage)* and the Pompes Funèbres Amic. Beneath these small shops and services run, in vaulted chambers, the substructures of what was once the very

center of all Roman public life. In fact, throughout the heart of the city these substructures—be they readily accessible at the base of medieval stairways or hopelessly confounded within the dense urban magma—preserve the original plan (call it the "skeletal outlines") of this lost Roman colony, *Apta Julia Vulgientium*.

I'd have to ask myself, however, why I found Apt more evocative of classicism than cities within the immediate area endowed with far richer monuments. Why, that is, these cellars "spoke" in a way that the great oval amphitheaters of Arles and Nîmes or the windblown colonnades in the excavated ruins of Vaison-la-Romaine simply didn't. Why, in short, as the trace grows fainter, the vestige—following the inverse logic, say, of homeopathic pharmacology—grows more and more poignant.

Quite clearly, the city was laid out according to a rigorous, preestablished plan. Typical of Roman urbanism, this plan, gridlike in character, imposed a network of streets running either parallel or perpendicular one to the next. First of these streets, the *decumanus maximus*, founded upon an east-west axis, served as the city's main thoroughfare. This, in turn, was intersected at right angles by the *cardo maximus*, running north to south. The intersection of these two streets (rue des Marchands and rue Sainte-Delphine in the case of present-day Apt) served as the city's center (today the nondescript place du Postel). Within this rigorously geometric program, specific areas were assigned for the various public monuments, such as the forum and basilica, the theater and the city baths. If, with time, a certain urban development far less formal in nature extended past the city itself, there is little or nothing *intra muros* that

doesn't testify, today, to that original, originating act: the city preconceived as a single, inseparable, organic entity.

Apta means very much what it suggests: apt, suitable, well disposed. This might have originally referred to its harmonious composition as a city or, perhaps, its strategic position along the *Via Domitia*, the all-important transalpine trade route between Italy and Gaul. Indeed, the *Via Domitia* once ran clear through the heart of the city, forming as it did a section of the aforementioned *decumanus maximus*. As to its second nominative, *Julia* suggests that the city was founded at either the time of Caesar or that of Augustus at the outset of his reign: before, that is, 27 b.c.[1] Lastly, *Vulgientium* draws its origin from the name of an indigenous Celtic tribe, the Vulgientes, whom the Romans had come to subdue and, in the process, "Romanize." Indeed, the very reason for establishing the colony of Apt altogether, situated as it was between the pacified plains below and the still hostile hinterlands beyond, lay in Rome's need to consolidate the region as an integral part of its empire. *Vulgientium* served, undoubtedly, as an invitation to that indigenous population to enter into its protectorate. For Rome as a colonizing power didn't merely subjugate; it drew, seduced, integrated the innumerable tribes of Gaul into its ever-expanding realm.

One has, then, enough material evidence from the given vestiges themselves and enough documentation beginning with Pliny the Elder to reconstitute the general outlines, at least, of this lost city. A recently discovered cellar, here; an embedded section of fluted column, there; the blue *tesserae* of a once sumptuous mosaic floor, yet there again: all testify for that long-vanished colony. For otherwise one would be hard pressed, today, standing in the midst of the Apt marketplace on a bright Saturday morning, to believe

that such a world ever existed. That such an underworld *still did exist*. Caught in the wafted odors of flowers and diesel fuel, the shouts of fishmongers and rag-dealers, it would be hard to believe, indeed, in any world but one's own, any moment in time but that—all too precarious—in which one stood.

The past draws. It draws, I feel, to the extent that the present, the cultural and ultimately the spiritual present, has failed to generate generative image: the kind, that is, in which societies might come to recognize their veritable identity. In default of such image—such eloquent mirror—one turns backward. Goes under. For certainly one is never searching for anything except oneself. Be it among the blown detrital particles of some vanished galaxy or the thrashing tails of some microscopic protozoan, one is always in search of the kind of phenomena that might, potentially, confer sense upon one's own existence. This is especially true, of course, with the cultural. For never do those inherent identities find fuller expression than in the glissando of an aria, the floating gaze of a saint on some pitted fresco, than—yes—in these choked cellars, blind corridors, the interrupted running of so much finely molded plinth. Curiously enough, the relative inaccessibility of these *caves* only adds to their attraction. Against the cultural poverty of one's own times, it seems befitting, I feel, to travel under. Examine vestige. Explore the subterranean chambers of an antique city as if they constituted, as suggested, some deep, richly endowed level of human consciousness.

One soon realizes, however, that in such cities one is confronted by *two* histories: that of its construction and development, then

that of its effacement. If I'd grown somewhat familiar with the former (I'd read all the relevant documentation, traced the outlines of the city's monuments with the aid of historic survey maps, and visited every accessible cellar), I gradually came to realize that this second history—dealing with the antique city's obliteration—was every bit as informative as the first. If the city's construction and development read like a single uninterrupted lesson in logic, civic order, and imperial glorification spanning a full five centuries in time, its second history expressed itself in one sporadic, destructive event after another. This second history would come to a close ten centuries later in the deliberate dismantling of whatever vestiges still remained of that once radiant colony.

Apt, if anything, is a palimpsest. One need only enter its households, peer just beneath its tufted carpets and richly waxed ceramic tiles, and examine its vaulted substructures, below, to draw such an analogy. For there, one quickly comes to recognize not only the "text" itself but the innumerable layers of its effacement. Of that effacement, there seem to have been four distinct factors or agencies at work. Two of those agencies might be considered strictly natural. Water, as one of them, repeatedly came to flood the city. Lying alongside a river, Apt has traditionally been subject to violent, unpredictable inundations. Each would leave an unmistakable deposit of sand and gravel, still visible today in the excavated cross sections of certain subterranean chambers (e.g., the cellar of the Musée Archéologique). Only may safely assume that in a time of efficient public administration such as that of the Roman Empire, these alluvial deposits were immediately removed by maintenance workers. Following the collapse of the Empire in the fifth century, however, they were left—apparently—to accumulate. Today, as part of the archeological

record, they lie concentrated in stratigraphic ribbons of various widths, testimony to that historic abandon.[2]

A far greater factor of effacement would be soil erosion: what seeped, bit by bit, into the city from the facing hillsides to the south. Often called colluvium, these deposits took on dramatic proportions. Given that the Roman city, according to modern historians, was more or less flat, it's astonishing to find today that the ground level of its buildings differs in depth from an average of four meters in the heart of the city (the theater, basilica, and capitol) to as much as ten meters to the south (the southern extremities of the forum). If alluvial river deposits never amounted to more than forty centimeters, these aggradations that invaded the city from the surrounding hillsides accounted for all the rest.

Several hypotheses have been advanced for this phenomenon. It's quite possible that Apt, in expanding, began terracing those hillsides for the sake of both garden cultivation and house construction. The disrupted topsoil then began trickling downward—slowly, inexorably—in the direction of the city itself. Here again, one can be assured that during the Empire this colluvium was removed at the very same rate it accumulated. With the Empire's collapse, however, one is left—once again—with an image of unmitigated disorder, desolation. Apt as a functioning civic entity no longer existed. Suffering from the first waves of barbaric invasions, it had already entered—within a brief period of time—the Dark Ages.

One historian attributes the marked difference in depth between the colluvial deposits in the southern part of the antique city and those at the center to the presence of ramparts.[3] These ramparts might well have served as a buffer throughout the early Middle Ages. Rather than invading the heart of the city, the

colluvium simply collected, bit by bit, against their exterior facades. This is still apparent, today, in the sudden difference in elevation (the *dénivellement*) of certain buildings that once abutted those very structures. Another historian suggests the possibility that Apt was abandoned altogether toward the end of the sixth century.[4] Its inhabitants, fleeing the successive invasions of Lombards and Saxons, sought refuge in perched sites within the immediate area. The desertion of Apt might well have lasted as long as two centuries, time enough for an entire section of the city to vanish under the mass of so much uninhibited sedimentation.

Of all the agencies of effacement, none left a trace thinner yet more incriminating than fire. It is the very signature of the invasions themselves. "Between the Lower Empire and the end of the tenth century," writes Guy Barruol, "there is archeological and documentary evidence (*Cartulaire d'Apt*) that the city underwent, at least partially, five separate destructions."[5] A thin carbonaceous layer (the result of some violent conflagration) will lie directly beneath a thicker, looser stratification composed of gray ash, scorched iron, and charred ceramic. These "documents," as the archeologists call them, speak for themselves. If Apt escaped the first precocious waves of Germanic invasions (255–270), it certainly fell prey to the Burgundians (456–457), the Visigoths (470), and, soon after that, the Franks. This would be followed by the Lombards and Saxons (569–575), and a period of such obscurity that only the ruins, the rubble, the calcinated deposits would be left to testify for history itself. The last wave of invasions—that of the Saracens—Moorish tribesmen emerging out of Spain—"destroyed everything that the Lombards and Saxons somehow managed to spare."[6] Their sporadic raiding parties would reduce the city to near ruins for two successive centuries, most notably

in 725, 730, and 869. Here again, only the rubble would be left to testify; only the cinder, to speak.

One may safely say, then, that the lost Roman city of Apt underwent obliteration by water (river flooding), by earth (soil erosion), and by fire (the result of five successive centuries of vandalization). The remaining element, air, can't be held responsible for any such effacement except, perhaps, as a passive quantity. For it's the vestigial remainders of those Roman monuments—lying out in full view—that became the object, in late antiquity, of a particular form of public appropriation. If those monuments had already undergone partial destruction at the hands of invaders, far more were deliberately dismantled by the inhabitants themselves. The stones were needed—and urgently—for reassembling the city's defense system. A second rampart, constructed out of whatever stones were near at hand, came to surround a so-called "reduced city." Apt had begun shrinking, withering about its very center like some degenerated organ. As a bastion of *romanité*, the end was near.

Throughout Gaul, Roman monuments were being converted into quarries, into open-air warehouses of readily available building materials. The magnificent edifices of one culture were reemerging as the hastily assembled keeps, watchtowers, bulwarks of another. Apt would be no exception. It had begun squatting in the midst of its own past, borrowing here, pilfering there, improvising everywhere. A vision of the provisional—the makeshift—had come to replace that of the everlasting. The dismantling of antique monuments would continue, what's more, well past the Dark Ages. In fact, once western Europe had emerged out of that ponderous obscurity, dressing itself—as Rodulfus Glaber once put it—"in a white gown of churches," the process of demolition

would not only continue but accelerate. For those immediately available materials were needed for that vast program of reconstruction we've come to call the Romanesque. The twelfth century cathedral of Apt would literally rise out of both the substructures of a Roman basilica, just beneath, and the hewn blocks, columns, architraves of the Roman theater lying immediately alongside. As the cathedral expanded between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, that adjoining Roman theater would steadily, inexorably vanish. "Les chrétiens sappèrent l'amphithéâtre," one contemporary exclaimed.[7] Now, as the city entered the Renaissance, excavating its subsoils for the sake of fresh constructions, more and more vestige came to light. In 1685 Marmet de Valcroissant would remark: "Every day, everywhere in Apt, one finds columns, figurines, tombs in marble, some perfectly plain, others richly inscribed and decorated."[8] In 1780, another observer, Abbé Giffon, would marvel at the remainders of a Roman bath *(thermae)* recently unearthed behind the present-day Sous-Préfecture. Along with the baths were discovered fragments of a sculpture, a bas-relief depicting a woman sodomized by a donkey, and no less than twelve marble-lined dressing rooms.[9] As for the last standing antique monuments, they would vanish from sight altogether in 1870. Until that date, many of the massive stone tiers of the Roman theater had remained visible, as had parts of the stage itself. So, too, had an immense stone archway and a series of arcades in the present-day place Carnot.

All in all, it had taken medieval-to-modern Apt a millennium and a half to bury its antique counterpart. Across that vast expanse of time, the "text," gradually, had been relegated to "subtext"; the founding vision, to that of suppressed recollection. Indeed, in working my own way through all the relevant documentation or,

quite simply, exploring the city, I've often asked myself whether I hadn't inadvertently fallen onto a metaphor for civilization itself. For here, in this urban palimpsest, all the elements for such a metaphor can readily be found, be it in the antique city's edification or in its ensuing demolition. Isn't it this, this metaphor, finally, that draws, attracts? Far more than the monuments per se, isn't it the successive strata, the compilations inherent to history itself that intrigue? They are similar in so many ways to our own psychic composition; one is always drawn to some suppressed level of intent: the long embedded trace, say, of some instigating vision. Uninhibited, here, by the monuments themselves, by fluted columns and massive entablatures, one willingly goes under. Apt, in this sense, is privileged by default. Yes, one willingly goes under, especially now, in the "aging of the world"—in the *mundus senescit*—peering into each of those vaulted, subterranean chambers as if a certain lost promise, therein, lay waiting.

Desolate Treasure

> Treasure hoards serve as an index of sorts to the violence of human history.
>
> Aline Rousselle

Bronze coins, dating from late antiquity, still occasionally come trickling out of the mouths of caves, grottoes, rock overhangs. Worn, often obliterated, they're found only a few meters from the very places in which—nearly two thousand years earlier—they'd been hastily buried. Scarcely bigger than chickpeas and no thicker, for the most part, than the head of a thumbtack, they bear singular witness to a violent moment in human history. For they constitute—one comes to learn—the scattered remains of some personal treasure, buried against the first waves of barbaric invasion that would decimate, eventually, all of Gaul, setting its cities ablaze and laying low its countrysides.[1]

The coins themselves aren't dated but bear both the name and the effigy of the emperor reigning during the period in which they'd been issued. They thus provide specialists with an infallible