ART
FORMS
AND
CIVIC LIFE
IN THE
LATE ROMAN EMPIRE

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FOREWORD

At an early point in my studies of Late Antiquity I was struck by the marked similarity between the way in which the late antique state was organized and the predominating types of composition in both the figurative art and the architecture of that period. In my writings over the approximately thirty years I have devoted to the study of Late Antiquity, I have repeatedly drawn attention to the fact that the disintegration of the traditional society of the earlier empire—the Principate—and the consequent establishment of a new order during the late antique empire—the Dominate—were accompanied in the realm of art around A.D. 300 by a corresponding disintegration of classical tradition and the emergence of a new form of expression. The same “system” expressed itself with the same structural patterns in the life of practical organization and in art.

In order to examine this problem on a broader basis and to undertake a comparative structural analysis as indicated above, I was granted in 1952 the Hoff-Farmand Scholarship by the University of Oslo. Circumstances led to interruptions and postponements which prevented me from completing the research until 1958. The work was published in Norwegian in 1958 with a grant from the Svenska Humanistiska Förbundet by P. A. Norstedt & Söners Förlag (Stockholm) and by H. Aschehoug & Co. (Oslo).

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H. P. L.
STRUCTURAL CHANGES
IN LATE ANTIQUITY
I. CIVIC LIFE AND THE STATE

THE everyday life of the average man—his whole political, economic, and social life—was transformed during Late Antiquity. The free and natural forms of the early Empire, the multiplicity and the variation of life under a decentralized administration, was replaced by homogeneity and uniformity under an ever-present and increasingly more centralized hierarchy of civil officials. Characteristic of the earliest period of the Principate was the infinite variety in the modes of life on the local level, the vigorous natural growth of the towns, the provinces, and the land districts of the enormous Empire, the self-development and natural rounding-off of civic life in individual urban communities (municipia), each with its own municipal government and administration. Late Antiquity leveled and regulated these forms of free growth, the community organizations were absorbed into the compact, all-powerful state.

The equalization, standardization, and centralization had already begun under Trajan. Jurisdictionally, the provinces arose to the level of Italy, which gradually lost its preeminence. The development tended towards a complete equalization of all the Roman provinces. The imperial idea won out over the old city-state of Rome and the old national state of Italy. As early as Hadrian, the Roman army had been recruited from all the provinces of the realm, and simultaneous with this provincialization of the army, the border districts were Romanized, again a step toward uniformity. The Constitutio Antoniniana of Caracalla from A.D. 212, which gave Roman citizenship to all free subjects of the Empire, is a confirmation of this new situation.

In the field of practical organization this advancing equalization of powers, this leveling, and this massive
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consolidation of all elements, becomes apparent above all in the relations between the state and the municipalities. The great wars of Trajan had been an economic strain which had disrupted the finances of the cities; the central administration, therefore, placed imperial commissars in many municipalities to correct these disorders. Furthermore, ten-man committees were appointed by the city councils—decemprimi—in the West, δεκάπριμοι in the East—in order to enable the central power through such committees to intervene more quickly in the internal affairs of the municipality. It was characteristic of the whole subsequent development that public offices in the municipalities—for example, the city councils and the ten-man committees—were burdened with state responsibilities, taking thereby the form of compulsory state service (what Romans called munus and Greeks, λειτουργία). This change in the character of the municipal office struck at the organic expression of the particular way of life in the world of classical antiquity—city government. At the beginning of the third century A.D., great juris such as Papinianus, Callistratus, Ulpianus, put into practice the theory of the municipal munera and gave this system its legal foundation. City officials

1 E. Kornemann, Weltgeschichte des Mittelmeerraumes, II, Munich, 1949, p. 117.
2 F. Oertel, CAR, XI, p. 259.
3 In the vita of Antoninus Pius we read that the Emperor deprived a number of people who did not work of their wages, saying that there was nothing meaner and more heartless than the man who lived off the state without giving anything in return (dicens nihil esse sordidius, immo crudelius, quam si rem publicam adroderet qui nihil in eam suo labore conferret). Script. hist. aug., vita Pii, 7. Here for the first time in world history is proclaimed the officially controlled duty of all citizens to work (Kornemann, op.cit., p. 158). This is a step in the direction of state socialism, in sharp contrast to the individualism in economic theory of earlier times. The replacement of one economic system by the other, and the substitution of a new civilization and

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and wealthy council members now became personally responsible, in a way hitherto unknown, for the state revenue. Above all they were responsible with their personal fortunes for the collection of the taxes assessed in their city. Eventually, all who were not exempt in order to perform other state duties, such as military duty, had to take on municipal munera—financial, intellectual, physical, etc.—each according to his capacity and ability. Both the wealth and those who possessed it were bound to specific local munera, thereby becoming immovable.

In so far as the free guilds (collegia) performed a vital task for the state, they too were encroached upon by the central authorities. They were now organized into corporations (corpora) and were obliged to render specific services to the state. The ship-owners (navicularii) and the corn-merchants thus were, for example, required to supply Rome with provisions, and the building trade had also to assume the duties of the fire brigade. Freedom of work was thus replaced by the obligation to work for the state and, through the transformation of the free trades into hereditary munus, people became bound to their professions and to their dwelling places. A similar immobilization occurred also in the social and economic life of the rural population. On the large estates (latifundia) and on the enormous imperial domains, there emerged a new class of small tenant farmers (coloni), who became ascripted leaseholders under the landowners (possessores) or their vassals.

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attitude toward life for the old took more than a century and a half. It was completed by the end of the III century, but the beginnings go back to the earliest years of the II century” (Oertel, op.cit., p. 256).

4 Kornemann, op.cit., p. 158.
5 Ibid., p. 159.
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The individual no longer lived independently but within the state. He was no longer seen in his natural environment within life's organic groupings, in lively harmony with his surroundings, but as a firmly incorporated immovable part in the cadre of the state. As with the individual, so also with the communities. The municipalities no longer lived within themselves, but in the state; we no longer see them in vigorous self-growth, but firmly incorporated into the great symmetrical order of the state. In contrast to the organic expansion based on the concrete and individual life, so to speak, along an elementary growth line reaching upward from below, we now find an orientation directed downward from above, a higher order descends and is implanted into the elements—"an orientation is imposed from above upon the whole social and economic order." The characteristic feature of this higher order is the uniform simplification, the coordination of equal elements and the crystalline consolidation of the whole. Everywhere the finer social differentiations disappear and the sharp edges and the broad planes of the blocklike mass of the state break through. The rich articulation which distinguished the life of the Principate had been lost forever. The individuals and the natural civic organisms in which they were grouped, more and more seemed to disappear into the massive and monotonous formations envisioned by the central administration as supporting walls for the Dominate's state structure.

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The increasing standardization and equalization of life, the blocklife fusion of the civic organisms, was revealed characteristically in the increasing militarization of society—indeed in the whole way of life. The soldier-emperors' simplification of the government according to a military pattern was followed by a general militarization of the civil service and an assimilation of the civil into martial law (castrensis jurisdictio). The whole administration of the state was increasingly organized and conceived according to military categories. Civil service was regarded as military service. Every civil servant, from the highest to the lowest, counted as an officer or a soldier. In all officia (public office), there are, according to Lactantius, milites (soldiers), and their service is a militia (war service). The wages for civil officials are stipendia (soldier's pay). Subordinate civil servants are cohortales, i.e., belonging to a cohors (a military detachment). As the civil service was commonly called militia, a new name—militia armata—had to be invented to distinguish military service.

Such a martial conception regarding civil servants demonstrates that the state demanded the same discipline and obedience of its civil administration as that which was required of the army. Before the highest authority, the dominus, every form of protest is silenced. His bidding is a command to be obeyed blindly. The people subordinate themselves, each and every one without exception, en bloc to this command. It is this unconditional, mass obedience which suggests the associations with the soldier, the military unit, and thereby with the whole militaristic

6 Oertel, op.cit., p. 268.
7 Ibid., pp. 254 ff.
8 S. L. Miller, CAH, xii, pp. 28 ff.
9 De mort. pers., 31.
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terminology. Even Christian obedience of the period expresses itself, characteristically enough, in this style; God's servants are milites Christi.

This military way of life, which also becomes apparent in the imperial art and architecture of the period, is in the strictest accord with the peculiar pattern of the Dominate. The military aspect of man, that is, exactly the aspect which binds him to rank and file, letting him disappear as a person into a number within a unit, into a solid block, into a sum of uniform elements. Militarization, therefore, marks the basic characteristic in the form structure of the Dominate, in sharp contrast to the earlier Empire. The contrast between the military and the civil orders is just the contrast between mechanical coordination and organic grouping, between the natural formations in free life and a massive alignment in rank and square, between individual, natural motions and movements en bloc. Both in community life and in art the large block formations and mass movements now appeared ever more clearly behind the continually thinning veil of traditional antique forms.

II. ARCHITECTURAL FORMS

THE same profound contrast between the Principate and the Dominate which we have found in organized society is also apparent in art. In this chapter we shall limit our comparisons to architecture, and the transformation of form, which takes place here, may be described briefly in the following way.

As the classical orders disintegrate during the Roman Empire, buildings lose their organic corporality, the clear articulation of their parts, and the functional relationships among them; they are gradually dissolved into a system of plain, simple walls. Here again, we see the characteristic transition from organic articulation of a well-differentiated structure to an abstract simplification in great planes and lines. To make this transformation clear it is first necessary to characterize the classical conception of architecture.

When the classical Greek fashioned something, he required of the form that it give the clearest possible expression of the object's particular function. A vase, for instance, is a container which has the special ability to enclose a liquid and hold its mass in balance. This function is physically expressed in the form of a Greek vase and is reflected in its decoration. No column is found in which the column's function—that of being a support—and no capital is found in which the capital's function—that of absorbing and transmuting pressure between the architrave and the column—is stamped with such objective clarity as in Greek architecture. One might say that the plastic form is brought forth from deep within the object itself. The form is organic, immanent.

Thus, the classical artist does not bring the form to an object from without or above, but brings it forth from
within the object itself. It is, therefore, characteristic of classical art that it is guided by the idea of a natural beauty inherent in the object; of a perfection which pervades the very smallest detail of it and which the artist, the architect, or the craftsman himself can bring forth from the object, and indeed can measure and determine numerically. Plutarch speaks of exactness of the beautiful: κάλλους ἀκρίβεια. The classical architectural ornament can illustrate this conception (Figs. 1, 2).

Thus the constitution of ideal systems of proportion is a typical expression of classical art and architecture. From a given measure in the plan—for example, the distance from column to column—a number of other measurements can be determined: the proportions of the rafter system and thereby of the roof—even the proportions of sections of the building which are neither seen together with, nor are directly dependent on the columns. In the same way that the individual type of a

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1 Plutarch, Perikles, 13.

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living being determines the form of each single part of it, so the principle for the whole structure of the classical building is contained within each single element of it. In each of the three classical orders—the Doric, the Ionic, and the Corinthian—the building grows and unfolds in accordance with an organic law analogous to that which reigns in living nature.

It is precisely because the classical building is such an organic and self-sustained, such an autarchical, entity that it refuses to submit to larger architectural compositions. Often on sacred sites the classical temples stand with peculiar recalcitrance beside one another, each with its own orientation determined by its god or cult, by sacred portents and signs in the temple ground (Fig. 3). Each building defies superior order of axially, symmetry, or unity of direction.
This organic and autonomous life, this supreme development from within of each part, of each ornament of the building, was lost during the Hellenistic-Roman evolution which followed. The individual building was continually subordinated to a dominating, all-embracing architectural plan in which each structure is coordinated in relation to the axis of the whole, thus becoming a dependent part of a larger complex.\(^1\) The axiality of the layout, for instance of the imperial fora of Rome (Fig. 4), forces one into the central axis of the square where

one is faced by the towering temple façade.\(^2\) The final goal of this whole development was not reached until Late Antiquity. We shall soon see how the Dominate standardized, subordinated, and symmetrized all the single building organisms in accordance with large and strict axes of the whole architectural composition.

But with the subordination of the buildings to these axes, the individual structural units dissolve and disappear into the total architectural design; they lose their firm inner organization, their vivid proportionality, and the clear articulation of their separate parts. Characteristic of the whole development is the assimilation and mixing together of the three classical building orders. Architectural decoration no longer depends upon an order that is an organic system of ornament encompassing the whole building.

Antiquity's sensitivity to the inner life of the architectural detail, its plastic beauty and expressiveness, gives way (Fig. 13). The traditional décor, friezes and architec-

\(^1\) H. Kähler, *Wandlungen der antiken Form*, Munich, 1949, pp. 13 f.

\(^2\) H. Kähler, *op. cit.*, pp. 15 ff.
5. Market of Trajan, Rome

The massive wall. The eye is no longer fixed upon the separate building parts. This is the reason why the flood of antique spolia, i.e., building parts taken from earlier monuments, are admitted into the architecture of Late Antiquity, where they may be reemployed for essentially different architectural purposes, unhampered by their original tectonic function. From around A.D. 300, and on into the Middle Ages, are thus put side by side building elements taken from utterly dissimilar monuments, belonging to the most diverse systems of ornamentation and having had widely different functions. It even happens, for example, that the bases of columns are used as capitals. And it must be emphasized that this did not occur during a period of technical falling-off, but during one of the most glorious epochs in the history of ancient architecture. The extensive use of spolia has, with good reason, been compared with the contemporary trend towards the use of prefabricated building parts, especially capitals, which are mass-produced without having originally been intended for any particular building. Like the spolia, these prefabricated parts also often have to be cut or trimmed before they can be placed in architectural bond. The point of the matter is that the clearly defined form and function of each separate building element is no longer felt. Undisturbed by arbitrarily cut elements or a helter-skelter of undigested spolia, the eye glides over the architectural forms, follows the great movements of the masses, the grandiose rise of the vaults and the endless flights of monotonously divided walls. Characteristically abstract, peculiarly far-seeing and therefore summary, the glance skips over detail and articulation in order to rest with mass and dimension.

It is well known that during the Roman period—
and particularly evident in the western world—a new system of construction came into use. In place of the traditional column-architrave architecture appears the new archivolt- or arcade-architecture. Characteristic of this architecture, until the end of the third century A.D., is the breaking up and articulation of the archivolt façade by the elements of the classical building orders, thus the arcades are enclosed in a frame-work of column-architrave architecture. This is the well-known system of which we have an early example in the Roman Tabularium (78 B.C.) and which is infinitely repeated in both monumental and utilitarian architecture; for example, in the brick façade of the Market di Trajan in Rome (Fig. 5). Where constructions in opus quadratum are concerned, the elements of this décor are generally incorporated into the wall itself with the half-columns and the flat beams projecting only in low relief from the wall surface. However, especially in the second and the third century A.D., this architectural décor is separated from the walls with detached columns supporting an entablature returned back to the wall, thus appearing as a magnificent screen in front of the building, as can be seen, for example, in Roman triumphal arches. At the end of the third century there was a strong reaction against this traditional system of decoration. Especially in the West the splendid column decoration vanishes and the classical articulation by column and architrave more or less disappears from the archivolt construction.
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Typical of the new architectural style are thus the large continuous wall surfaces, interrupted only by the functional wall-supports which, by more frequent repetition, give a firm, monotonous division of the wall through the regular and uniform passage along it of large arches and flat pilaster strips. In the Senate building of Diocletian at the Forum Romanum (Fig. 6), the great wall surface of the façade, crowned by a simple gable, is broken only by the portal and three large windows; strong corner pillars support the high walls. In Constantine’s Basilica in Trier (Fig. 7, cf. Fig. 8), the outer walls are strengthened by arcadelike projections, which—as regular as the archivolts of an aqueduct and unrestrained by traditional decoration—run along the plain walls.

Exactly as the architecture here throws off the traditional column-architrave decoration, the contemporary figurative art, as we shall see, drops the traditional patterns of composition. In contemporary portraiture the individual modeling sinks into the surface and the whole physiognomical complex is simplified into a crystalline regular totality, just as the plastic articulation of the building structure disappears into the great continuous wall surfaces.

An important innovation which presumably first becomes common in the architecture of the third and fourth century—seen, for example, in the Christian basilica—is a continuous stretch of wall which now rises above the row of columns (Fig. 10). Such a construction is in conflict with the fundamental principles of classical archi-

III. THE SPIRITUAL BACKGROUND

In our comments upon architecture in the previous chapter the transformation of form appears mainly in a rather negative light: namely, the dissolution of the classical building structure. A positive side of this transformation is a new experience of space, a new feeling for the interior itself, which is an expression of the new spirit of the time. An appreciation of this positive side makes it possible for us to meet with a better understanding the peculiarly abstract—as it were, the distant glance which we have continually encountered in Late Antiquity.

It is of decisive importance that the large and simple wall surfaces of the new architectural style act as clearly defined space-enclosing boundaries in quite a different way from the much divided structural forms which they displace, thus in a new way making the unified interior manifest (Fig. 9). As the plastic decoration disappears into smooth walls, simple planes now enclose a clear and unified interior. It is in this interior that the eye now becomes immersed. Architecture becomes introspective. The building structure is reduced to a mere shell surrounding what is encompassed. It becomes no more than the enclosure of space.¹ Let us illustrate this with an example.

The classical principle is to indicate the equilibrium of forces in the interaction between the supporting column and the heavy load of the architrave. A further construction above the rows of columns can, according to the classical rule, only repeat this interplay between column and entablature, as seen, for instance, in the two-story rows of columns in the interior of the classical temple (Fig. 11). Now, with the massive wall replacing the organically muscular system of rows of columns and entablature recurring over one another, the classically organized building structure disappears behind a merely space-enclosing wall. The columns are withdrawn into the wall they support and are subordinated to the new crystalline totality of space. Everything now serves this interior. Above all, light is the space-creating element and models in its various intensities the different parts of the interior. In the Christian basilica, for example, the superstructure appears with radiant luminosity in contrast to the twilight of the lower zone which becomes even dimmer in the aisles.

In this transformation of the architectural forms during the Roman Empire we study in reality the profound human conversion from the "corporal beauty" of classical tradition to the transcendent contemplation indicative of the Middle Ages. One renounces the whole corporeal building—the columns, friezes, architectural ornament, the whole décor which Vitruvius still considered the dignitas of architecture—in order to immerse oneself in incorporeal space, in the insubstantial, intangible interior filled with light and shadow. From the clear, plastic definition of form one turns toward the realm of the abstract: a turning which, better than anything else, characterizes the whole attitude toward life in Late Antiquity.

Plastic art too is marked by this new attitude. It is thus significant that sculpture toward Late Antiquity adopts a technique that abolishes plastic form as such. While in classical times the whole modeling was accomplished by the chisel, one now finds a decidedly wider use of the
running drill. What does not such a change signify for the whole creative process! The chisel works out the tangible form, it follows flexibly all the ridges and hollows, all the ripples of the plastic surface (for example, Fig. 14). The drill on the other hand, works illusionally, it does not follow the tangible form but leaves a glimmer of lighted marble edges between sharp, shadow-dark drill grooves (for example, Figs. 22, 33, 34). With this technique the body loses its substantiality, it disintegrates: we are anxious lest it shrink to nothing and vanish. Also in architectural ornamentation we find this profound transformation of form. Examine, side by side (Figs. 12 and 13), an antae-capital from Didymaion by Milet, and a piece of a cornice, from the palace of Diocletian in Spalato; compare the wonderful plastic, full-bodied egg-and-dart motif in the classical capital with the bodiless \textit{clair-obscure} of the same ornament in the late antique cornice.

At the same time that the form thereby becomes increasingly insubstantial, it gradually loses its individual nature and becomes steadily more standardized, but with an ever more firmly crystallized significance. There is a

\*Kähler, \textit{op.cit.}, pl. 27a, pp. 60 ff.

movement away from lifelike nature to abstract types, from plastic articulation to conceptual generalization, from the corporeal to the symbolic. A higher meaning is implanted in the object, which more and more is reduced to a shell enclosing this meaningful core, more and more becomes a sign referring to a thought—and, as a sign, always identical, formula-like, stereotype.

Choose as an example such a central ornamental motif as the spiral rinceau of Late Antiquity and early medieval times (Fig. 15). It is now no longer a natural growth as it was in the classical tradition (Fig. 14): the stalk has become a lifeless band twining up into abstract, uniform circles, the whole plant an ornament without growth and lifelike nature. But this ornament encloses a new "interior," a new content, it has a life outside the order of nature; the rinceau blossoms forth into crosses, or it grows out of a chalice, or something similar, and thus becomes filled with new meaning. "I am the vine, ye are the branches" (John 5:15). As the vine loses its individual "object-nature," it becomes condensed to a symbol. It is precisely this which is characteristic of the transformation from Antiquity to the Middle Ages: the
objects lose their natural substance, their bodily volume, their concrete lifelike reality, but in return enclose a new “interior,” a meaningful core, they become symbols and conceptual expressions. It is as if the natural objects flee from living perception and as if in their flight they are contracted to increasingly summary and simplified figures until, in the end, they remain only as fixed points of meaning in the distance. These distant points of meaning, this multitude of stars in the sky of abstraction, is what Late Antiquity’s distant glance is contemplating.

Look at the portrayal of man in the Middle Ages. Face and body are simplified to certain significant types; they become vehicles of certain symbols and signs, of certain fixed formulae of expression, of certain sacred attributes or certain insignia of state, all adhering to a higher and perpetual order into which the fleeting human being has entered. We choose as an example one of the well-known processions of saints represented on the nave walls of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna (Figs. 17, 67), and compare them with the famous imperial procession on the Ara Pacis from the time of Augustus (Fig. 16). Spiritlike and seemingly bodiless, the saints float past our eyes against a homogeneous background of symbolic palms of victory, each as a uniform element in an endless row: equal in height, with the same figure and with the same step, in the same venerable pallium costume, varied only in its detail, bearing the wreath of martyrdom, haloed, each of a singularly solemn, wide-eyed type which, for the beholder in Antiquity, was associated with the idea of man become divine (pp. 123 f.). Thus, the natural individuality recedes before a meaningful stereotype which characterizes the essence of the saints and indicates their place in an eternal hierarchical order. In the same way, the individualistic portraits of the emperors disappear, as we shall see (pp. 121 f.), in such depersonalized images, in a “sacred type” (τύπος ἵπόσ), representing the Imperial Majesty itself. The emperors therefore become “alike” in the same way as the saints: the very idea of the divina maiestas penetrates and transforms the facial features. Man’s image is formed according to suggestive formulas of expression, which

3 τύπος ἵπόσ, in late antique literature and art: L’Orange, Studien zur Geschichte des spätantiken Porträts, Oslo, 1933, pp. 91 f.
are associated with something higher and more essential than the individual himself. One may compare the stereotype character-masks of the antique theater, which "depict" the role played by the actor, and at the same time conceal the actor's personal features. We see men, not as lifelike individuals but in the role they play upon the stage of eternity. One's thoughts go to the late antique priests of the Eleusinian mysteries who, upon entering their office, gave up their names.

The inner meaning pierces through the natural exterior of an object and creates new formulas of expression and new patterns of composition. Instead of grouping the figures according to their natural order, they are now placed according to a pattern that allows their inner significance and their inner reciprocal relationship to be revealed. Especially characteristic of this trend, as we shall see, is the **Maiestas Domini** composition with all elements—men, architecture, etc.—placed symmetrically around God or emperor (pp. 101 ff.). Like the grouping of figures, their dimensions are also divorced from their natural relations to one another: the relative size of the figures does not correspond to their real measurements, but to their inner import and significance. Thus the form and action, the grouping and dimensions of the figures correspond to a reality in the realm of ideas, a function and a dignity in an eternal unchanging hierarchy of powers and orders.

The same shift of emphasis from the external to the internal appears at the same time in aesthetic theory. In the classical period, beauty is defined as proportionality: a proportionality which can be expressed in measures and numbers and thus is based upon the proportions of the human body (Polycitus' Canon). This ideal of beauty applies to all fields of classical art, in sculpture as well as in architecture (pp. 21 ff.). A completely new aesthetic was developed during the third century: beauty does not re-
16. Procession of figures. Detail of a relief on the Ara Pacis, Rome

side in the proportions of the body, but in the soul which penetrates and illuminates it, that is, in expression (the Enneads of Plotinus). Beauty is a function of the inner being (τὸ ἐνδον εἴδος).

Also on the ethical level we are dealing with a revaluation and transformation of the classical attitude to life, an Umwertung aller Werte. And again the change is marked by a turning away from the external towards the internal world. The ideal is no longer what one could call proportionality of the soul, the harmonic organization of its natural energies with acceptance also of the instinctive and sensual life—the whole state of mind which is defined in the term σωφροσύνη. The goal is now a pure spiritual existence in faith and wisdom, an overcoming of the impulsive and sensual life, the body—

indeed, the whole outer world—consequently a concentration upon the inner life which shatters the traditional organic ethic of “a sound mind in a sound body.” The hero of Late Antiquity is the martyr and the ascetic—the legends of martyrdom replace the heroic myths of classical times.⁴

The philosophy of Late Antiquity teaches that the natural sensual life—all life in the “flesh”—belongs to a lower form of existence. The aim is to free one’s spirit, one’s pneuma, from the natural man. The last great unifying religion of antique paganism, Neo-Platonism, systematizes this view. The soul, untouched by the material, is a celestial being; but through “a downfall into matter” it has materialized in a body and has been cast down into this world. In our natural existence here on earth the soul is therefore chained to a lower principle

⁴ E. Lucius, Die Anfänge des Heiligenkults, Tübingen, 1904, passim.
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and left to the deceitful perceptions of the senses. The object is to liberate this heavenly being from matter and make it independent of the corporeal nature and sensuous apprehension. We must fight our way out of the chaos of feeling and imagination in which our senses ensnare us and strive for a higher reality, the eternal order behind the things of nature. Still in the middle of the third century A.D., Plotinus saw in the tangible reality of nature a beautiful reflection of the Ideas. However, at the beginning of the fourth century things of nature have lost this luster, they are now considered only a jungle of confusion where humans lose their way. One withdraws from the external and changeable world of illusions, from the things of nature, from “the body beautiful,” and concentrates upon the abstractions of the inner life, upon symbols, ideas, and conceptions, upon contemplation of the unchangeable sky of a higher reality.

It is, as we have seen, precisely this withdrawal into the realm of abstraction which characterizes art at the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages. Immediate sensory perception has lost its strength and joy. The overflowing richness of form in nature in all its tangible beauty and abundance, no longer moves the artist. The whole outer world, according to the language of the time, is a confusion in his senses, a deceitful illusion, a misty dream. Behind the fleeting world of nature, art perceives the large regular contours in an unchangeable, supernatural hierarchy of forces and ideas, of substances and beings, and attempts to capture this eternal order by new abstract means of expression, by a system of fixed formulas of types and of compositions. Such a stereotype has, however, a negative side, namely, schematization which, as we shall see, corresponds to a peculiar a priori

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formation of concepts and a summary way of thinking both in the legislation and in the practical organization of the life of the period.

A striking parallel to that which occurs in art is the remarkable new reinterpretation and revaluation of the whole classical mythology during the Roman Empire. The god and the hero are thought of in the abstract: instead of the mythical beings in their concrete situations, one searches for the internal truth, the hidden meaning behind the figure and its action. Divinity, myth, and legend lose their substance, but receive a new content in allegory and symbol. The myth is a lie, we learn, but “a lie which depicts the truth.” Like a shell the myth encloses this truth which is its new core and “interior.”

Everywhere there is the same negation of what is concrete, plastically delimited and determined, the same turning towards simplifying concepts and symbolic absolutes. In an imperial triumph it is no longer the historical victor who is celebrated, the victor who conquered a specific enemy at a particular time and place; rather, the historical victor is elevated to the absolute victor, the ubique victor, the victor omnium gentium; his historical victory becomes the victoria perpetua—thus the emperor and his imperial victory are named on late antique coins and thus he is represented in triumphal art. On the Arch of Constantine, it is not only the representatives of the nations Constantine actually conquered who are laid at his feet, but representatives of the sum of Rome’s enemies; and in a similar way the river gods depicted on the Arch no longer represent a specific geographical locality, but the totality of orbis Romanus.

Abstract man with eyes immersed in a transcendent world: is it not just this man whose own living self

For the much discussed late classical transcendentalism, the central factor of late classical art, see G. Rodenwaldt, CAH, xi, p. 563.

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stands before us embodied in late antique portraits (for example, Fig. 18). In the great picture gallery of the Empire a change in the whole physiognomical typology takes place towards the end of the third century: a change that eloquently accompanies the change in mentality mentioned above. The eye is now directed towards a new goal: it looks past the things surrounding man, through time and space—indeed, through the whole tangible reality—and rests upon a point at an endless distance (compare Figs. 61 and 66). "The eye is the mirror of the soul"—and the eye we here describe has been pointed out by students of antique portraiture as the most profound physiognomical characteristic of the human image during Late Antiquity: this distant glance which gives such a distinctive expression not only to the artistic portrait but also to man himself as we see him in the spiritual life and behind the whole state and civic life of the Dominate. It looks through our elusive, changing, discordant, physical world and immerses itself in the higher absolutes, the unchangeable symmetry, in the realm of eternity.