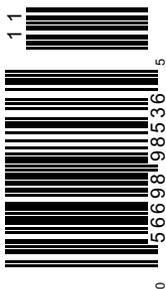
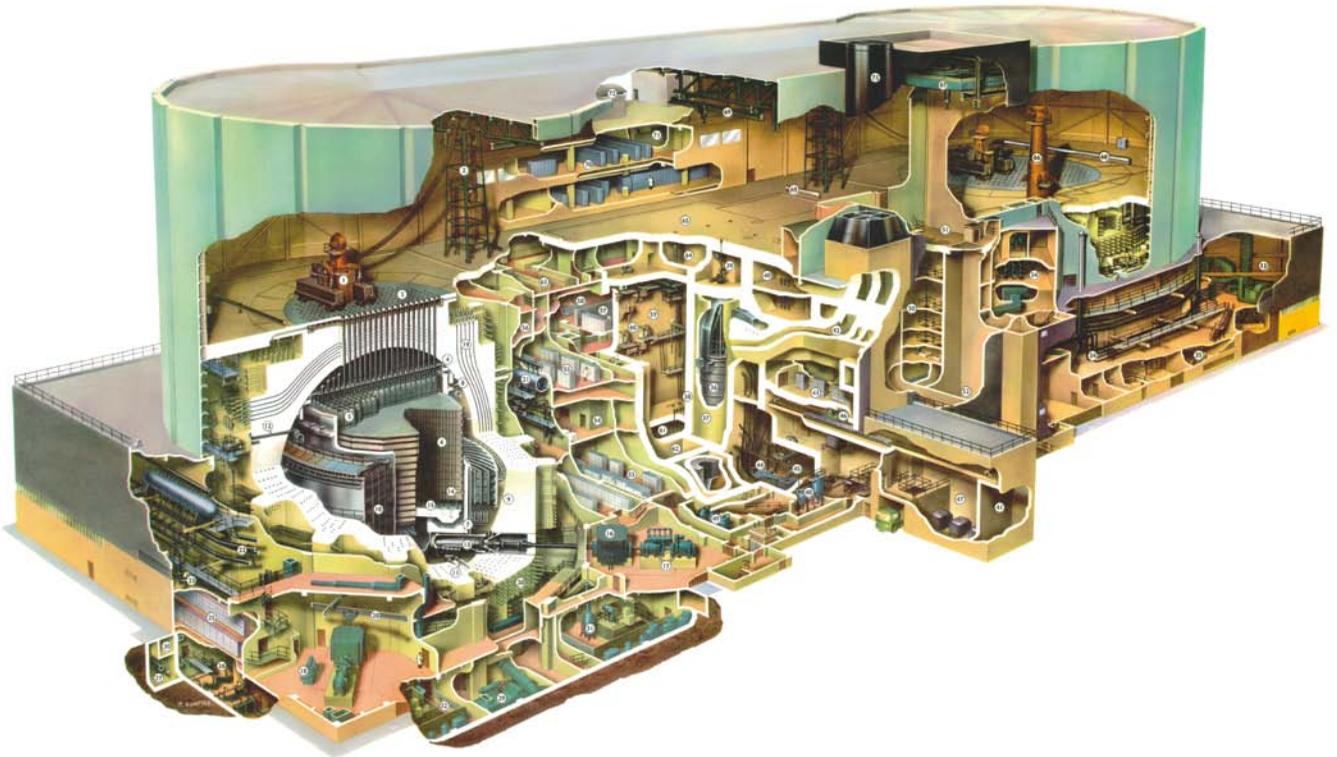


# Cabinet

A QUARTERLY OF ART AND CULTURE  
ISSUE 41 **INFRASTRUCTURE**





Piscina in All Saints Church of England, North Moreton, Oxfordshire. Dating from ca. 1270, the piscina's unusual cinquofoiled basin forms the capital of a small shaft containing the drain. Courtesy John Ward.

## DRAIN PIPES, DREAM PIPES, PIPE DREAMS YARA FLORES

The good king Oswald of Northumbria fell to the forces of the pagan Penda of Mercia on the 5th of August 642, not far from the Welsh border. Dismembered, his bits were skewered on pikes and left on the battlefield for a full year—an expression of pagan distaste for Christianizing Bernicians. A unified England would have to wait. But Oswald's faithful followers eventually retrieved his remains, and bore them to the monastery at Bardney, where, as Oswald's chronicler tells it, the monks carefully washed his bones and

*ipsam aquam in qua laverunt ossa in angulo sacrarii fuderunt.*

[this water, in which they had washed the bones, they poured out in a corner of the presbytery.]

The line amounts to little more than a mortuarial postscript on the convert son of Aethelfrith the Ravager, but it counts as a major find for historians of ecclesiastical architecture. The brothers poured this solemn dishwater *in a corner of the presbytery*? But this can only mean one thing: that there was, in the presbytery, a *drain*. A

drain? In a church? Interior plumbing in the Dark Ages?

We have here come upon a small hole that opens onto a large story, since this brief aside in the writings of the Venerable Bede appears to be the earliest existing reference to that most mysterious detail of spiritual architecture: the *piscina*—the sacred sink found in every Catholic church in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Former altar boys may recall this priestly appliance, now usually installed in the vesting rooms where the elements of the mass are stored, prepared, and cleaned after use. Often set apart under an ornate lid and sealed under lock and key, the *piscina* has the air of a tabernacle but the appearance of a hooded washbasin. Indeed, its cover opened, the modern *piscina* tends to look like a very ordinary little sink. The deep difference lies not in its exposed hardware (an enamel basin, common chrome or brass fittings, etc.) but rather in its hidden plumbing, since the drainpipe of a *piscina*, rather than running into the sewer system, instead passes in pristine segregation down through the floor and foundation of the church and there vents into a small, sepulchral cave sunk in consecrated ground. The *piscina* is a sink that leads to a grave. What we have here is less a *drainpipe* than a *burial chute*.

...

The evolution of this distinctive bit of ecclesiastical furniture traces one of the great debates in the history of (ir)rationality: the vexed matter of the "real presence" of Christ in the Eucharist. Theological thinkers have had, for several thousand years, a fiendish time coming to consensus on the precise meaning of Jesus of Nazareth's recorded departures from the standard text of the Passover seder he celebrated one fateful night in Jerusalem in the sixteenth or nineteenth year of the rule of Tiberius. At this gathering, the popular young rabbi apparently said, while holding the bread, and later the wine, "This is my body," and "This is my blood," which utterances—taken in the context of his general preaching and subsequent death—some construed, polemically, as a suggestive crossing of the Jewish traditions of the paschal lamb (to be sacrificed) and the ancient Hebrew messianic prophecies (for a king). Efforts to sort out all the implications eventually gave rise to some major deflections from Jewish orthodoxy, together later known as Christianity.

But even among those who basically came to agree about the epochal/providential/salvific/apocalyptic nature of this particular seder there was (and remains) much disagreement about whether the words of that charismatic and disruptive populist-prophetizer were

to be taken figuratively (body=bread=metaphor) or *literally* (body=bread). The latter camp has always had a much tougher argument, since—even putting aside the awkward cannibalistic implications of their position—there is much evidence that the bread in question remained perfectly ordinary bread (it looked like bread, it smelled like bread, it tasted like bread, etc.). The mental gymnastics called forth by this physico-theological challenge gave rise to great nimbleness, over the years, of mind and some stimulatingly counterintuitive analyses of reality (e.g., “Who says sense-data is a reliable indicator of the essential nature of an object?”).

Not everyone, however, could be persuaded by the fancy philosophical footwork involved, and this precipitated a variety of fractious controversies, schisms, and heresies, along with a litany of helpful Papal directives and Episcopal declarations. After the Fourth Lateran Council defined the principle of “Transubstantiation” in 1216 (reinforcing the doctrine of real presence that emerged out of the Berengarian controversies of the eleventh century), it was a bad idea to raise questions about the matter in polite company in western Europe. The host, elevated by the priest at the altar during the mass, “was” the body of Christ. For real. End of discussion.

The age-old dream of a conjurable god-man had become the central dogma of Christian belief.

...

But the firming up of this potent doctrine across the Middle Ages raised various practical problems. If the priest was handling the *body of Christ*—which was, of course, the “body” of God Himself—extraordinary precautions were called for. He needed to wash his hands, certainly, both before and after. Before, fine, he could just give them a ritual rinse. But after? What about the *crumbs*? He was presumably here washing away *tiny bits of the Almighty*, and it clearly would not do to have such fragments, however minute, sloughed to the straw-strewn flagstones, or carried out by charwomen in the bilge. One was here disposing of *sacred remains*, indeed the most sacred remains possible to conceive.

It was this problem that led to the formalization and gradual institutionalization of the *piscina*, which appears to have arisen, practically speaking, from sequential modifications to early baptismal fonts. The provision of a built-in tube linking the sacristy directly to a hollow in sacred earth eventually afforded a suitably sacrosanct means of managing the wash water and inevitable effluvia of the divine presence. By 1412, the actual specifications of a recognizable *piscina*

appear in the building contract of Catterick church in York. And little wonder: by then it was not uncommon for this feature—filagreed in stone, set in a recess of the credence, or in a pillar beside the altar—to be “the most elaborate structural detail of a church.”<sup>2</sup>

This decorative structure, however, represented only the visible portion of the system in its totality; the stonework *lavatorie* (as it was sometimes called) secreted the all-important passage to that invisible and essential *infra*-structure: the underground sepulcher over which the church had been raised, the hidden tomb out of which the Church itself was understood, in some sense, to have arisen. Thus what can look a little like a wash basin with a bonnet was, for the faithful, a veritable conduit between life and death; a tunnel, if you like, between Easter and Good Friday; a little stent, closing the circuit on the resurrection.

An early twentieth-century handbook for church design in the neo-Gothic style calls for a pipe an inch and a half in diameter, and recommends that it terminate in a “dry well,” ideally of faience or stoneware, perhaps partially filled with small stones (optional).<sup>3</sup>

...

We tend to think of the “drain,” unproblematically, as a mechanism of sanitary *evacuation*—indeed, as the primary and primordial technology of waste-removal. Interestingly, however, for most of European history the device appears to have had little or no currency in the built environment in this capacity—open sewers and cesspools were the norm; waste was carried out of buildings and thrown in the street or the creek.

Strikingly, then, it would seem that, at least between the fall of Rome and the rise of the modern sewer system, the drain *per se* was preserved in Western Europe as, above all, an instrument of sacred *preservation*. Not yet the cloaca of the modern architectural organism, the premodern drain pipe served as nothing less than a prosthetic mouth for the holy of holies—its slender stem a prop for the dream of a man-god who fed us with his flesh.

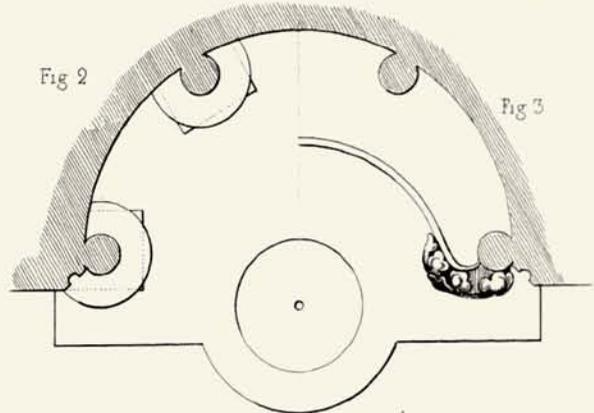
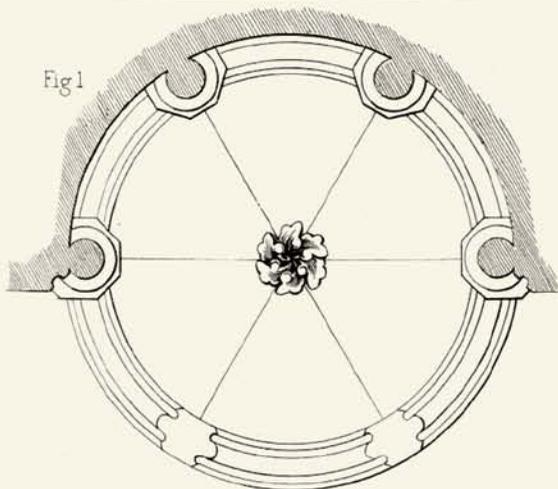
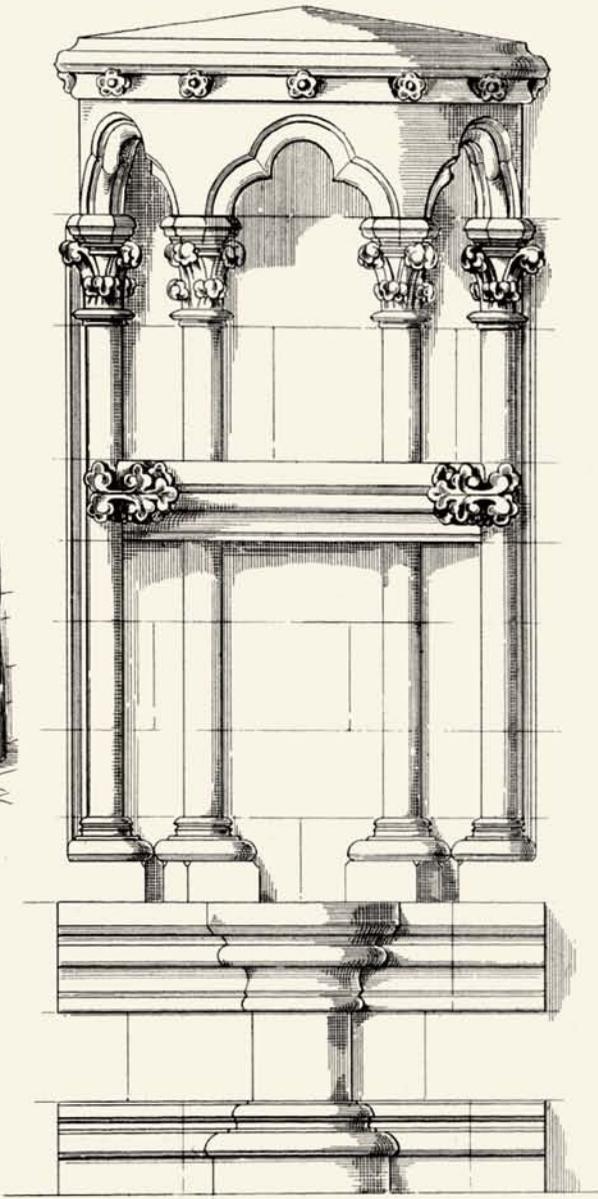
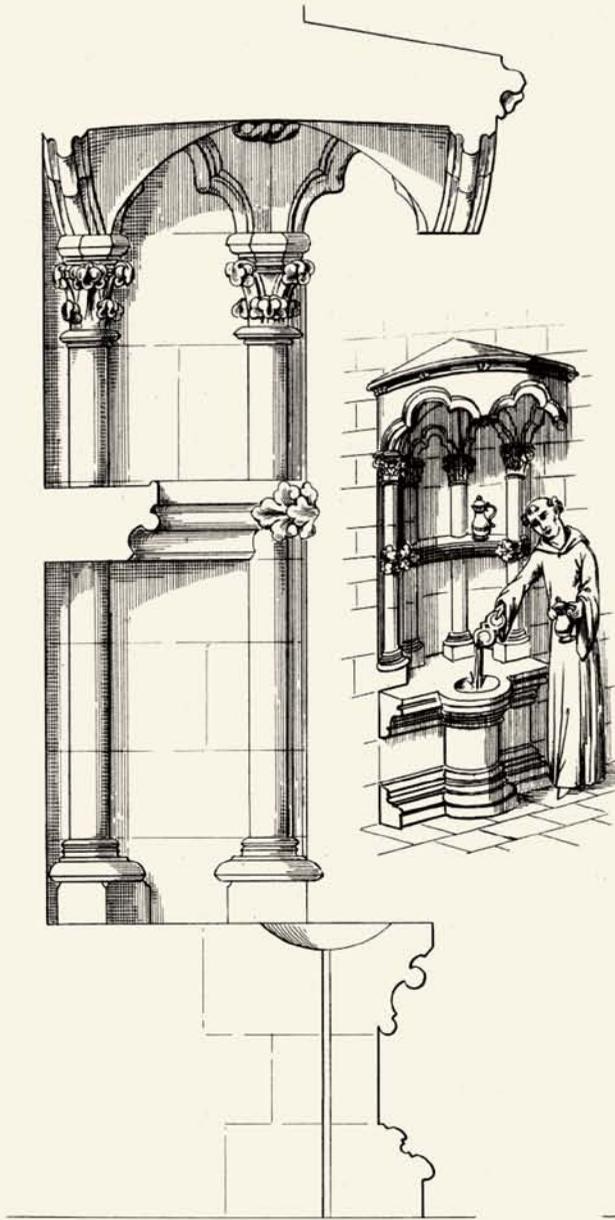
1 This reading of the passage hails from Francis Bond, *The Chancel of English Churches* (London: Oxford University Press, 1916), p. 148.

2 Ian McD. Jessiman, “The Piscina in the English Medieval Church,” *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, third series, vol. 21–22 (1957–1958), pp. 53–71, at p. 59.

3 Edward Joseph Weber, *Catholic Ecclesiology* (Pittsburgh: by the author, 1927).

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opposite: Plate showing piscina from an eleventh-century church in Semur, France. From Thomas H. King, *The Study-Book of Mediaeval Architecture and Art*, 1893.



$\frac{1}{10}$  de l'exécution.

$\frac{1}{10}$  real size.