

SHAPE AND SIZE OF ALTAR

Many of the ancient altars were upright in form, *i.e.*, they were higher than they were broad. This was also the shape of the Roman *cippi*, many of which were converted by the early Christians into altars, especially in the fifth century. In the Capitoline Museum at Rome is an upright stone altar, the whole of the front of which is covered with the original pagan inscription; to Christianise it, a Greek cross has been rudely cut in the centre; three similar examples occur in the Lateran Museum, Rome; others at Bagnols, Béziers, Digne, and elsewhere. Sometimes, however, the inscription was effaced, as at Loja, in Spain; sometimes the altar was turned round with the ancient inscription to the wall, as at S. Zacharias, Venice. In 1703 Pope Clement XI. had the following inscription carved on a pagan altar in use at S. Teodoro, Rome:—

"IN HOC MARMORE GENTILIUM OLIM INCENSA FUMABANT," *i.e.*, "On this marble altar once smoked the incense of the Gentiles." At S. Maria Traspontina is an altar with the original dedication to

"DEO SOLI, INVICTO MITHRA,"

i.e., "To him who alone is God, Mithras invincible."

It may have been because of the precedent set by the Roman *cippi* and altars that the normal form of the early Christian stone altars was a cube. Other forms, however, occur, *e.g.*, circular and semicircular altars are found.

In England also the square altar was the earlier type. In the illustrations given in the Alcuin Club tractate on the English altar, all the altars are shown square up to the fourteenth century. Small altars, four-square, are constantly seen in the drawings and pictures of the early Middle Ages. Such are those still seen round the ruined Romanesque apse of the abbey of Montmajour, near Arles. At Peterhausen, in the diocese of Constance, the high altar up to about 1134 was "parvulum, tantum ex quinque lapidibus compaginaturn"; the abbot accordingly built another "majus et sublimius." In 1253 Abbot Herman substituted two big altars in the abbey of Lower Altaich, Bavaria, for six small ones standing in the Lady chapel, because they were "nimis contigua et valde parva, et propter hoc essent multum despectui."¹ Square altars had Scriptural precedent in the injunction of Exod. xxvii. 1: "Thou shalt make an altar five cubits long and five cubits broad: the altar shall be four-square."

¹ Edward Bishop in *Downside Review*, July 1905.