

THE CLAUSTRAL «FONS VITAE» IN SPAIN AND PORTUGAL

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(1) V. CORREIA, *Obras* (Coimbra, 1946), I, 241.

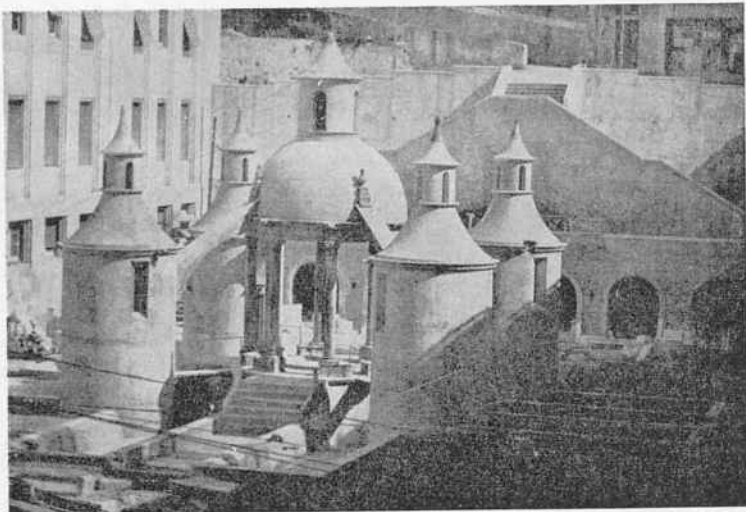
(2) The basins, the turrets, and the arched buttresses were built by Pero de Evora, Diogo Fernandes and Fernão Luis; the conduits were by Jeronimo Affonso; and the sculpture and ornaments by João de Ruão. The contracts and payments are republished in *Boletim da direcção geral dos edificios e monumentos nacionais*, 89, 1957. The towers are called cubelos, a military term meaning square, round, or octagonal turrets. NICOLAU DE SANTA MARIA (*Chronica da Ordem dos Co-negos regrantes do patriarcha S. Agostinho*), writing before 1668, and using a description of Santa Cruz first published in 1541, attributed the entire work in the cloister garden to João de Ruão. The passage is reprinted in *Boletim*, 89 (1957), 26-28. The entire assembly won extravagant admiration from Fray Jerónimo de San Román in Spain, in 1589 (*ibid.*, 28-29). See also V. CORREIA and N. GONÇALVES, *Inventário artístico de Portugal. Cidade de Coimbra*, II, 1947, 56-58.

JACQUES LE LIEUR (*Le Livre enchainé*, Rouen, 1911) described and mapped the entire water supply of the city as of 1524-1525. The most remarkable, the Lisieux fountain, was erected in 1518, as a mount Parnassus of stone where Philosophy's breasts, like the hoof of Pegasus and the instruments of the nine muses all spouted water. A

In 1533-34, the fountain in the garth of the Manga cloister at S. Cruz in Coimbra was erected (1). It stands in an ornamental water basin for the cloister garden, divided into eight rectangular pools all united at the circular center, and divided by walks between the pairs of pools, walks which rise by stairs over arches to the central domed pavilion. The four inner angles of this cruciform arrangement of pools are enriched by cylindrical chapels connected to the center temple by flying buttresses and, originally, by drawbridges serving when closed as the chapel doors. Other Portuguese garden pools of the same century still survive at Bacalhoa and at the Quinta das Tôrres near Azeitão.

Jean de Rouen may been the designer (2). He came to Coimbra about 1521 from Rouen, a city already famous for an elaborate water supply and many ornate fountains. He perhaps remembered the crowning element on the roof of Chambord castle, where flying buttresses rise to a cylindrical turret of classical reminiscences. At Coimbra the effect also recalls salt-cellars or pepper-shakers at a huge scale, as well as fortified turrets and sentry-boxes. The predilection for small, perfectly geometrical architectural forms is recognizable as a distinct Portuguese trait as early as the sixteenth century. It recalls military architecture, and at Coimbra, the cross-play of convex and concave roof profiles produces the allied effect of silver canisters or pepper-boxes. Either way, the small geometric form evokes rich associations, whether of Indian and African forts or of dainty table settings.

Like Philip II of Spain, John III was an ardent amateur of architecture, for whose most striking efforts there exist more legends than reliable reports. The Manga cloister is an example. Tradition says that the Manga



later replica of this extraordinary desing appears in SALOMON DE CAUS, *Raisons des Forces Mouvantes*, Frankfurt, 1615, II, pl. 13.

- (3) V. CORREIA, *Obras*, I, 230-1; 264-5. Correia first mentioned the connection with the fountain in the Cloister of the Evangelists at the Escorial (p. 271).

Coimbra. - Jardim da Manga. Phot. Direcção dos Serviços dos Monumentos Nacionais.

refers to a plan drawn on the King's sleeve, which guided his constant supervision of the work. The truth is that he was rarely at Coimbra, and that the term *manga* can also be taken to mean a supplemental strip of land.

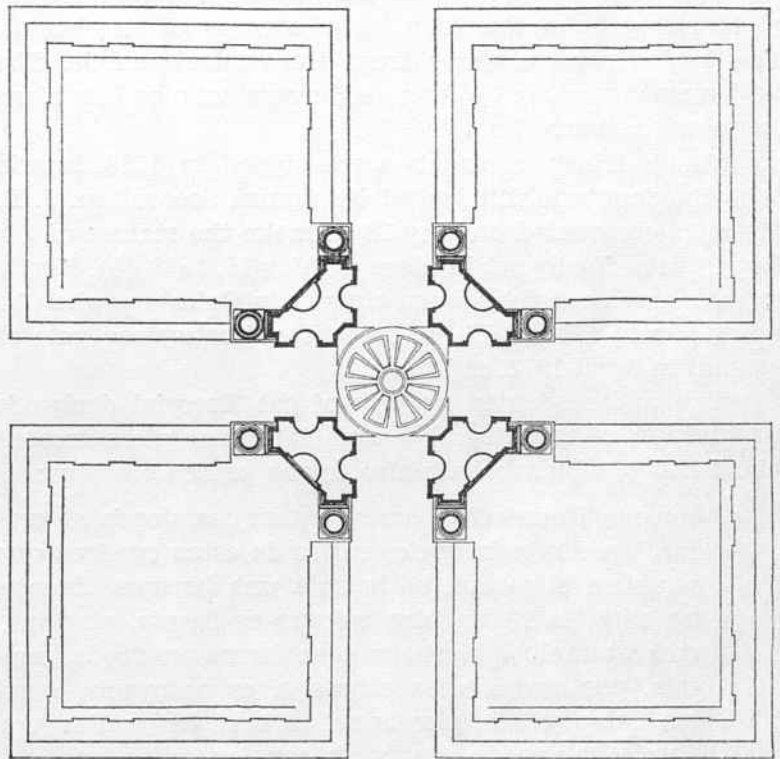
It is far more likely that Frei Brás de Barros, the Jeronymite reformer of the Augustinian community 1527-1554, devised its program himself, and that its pools were meant to represent the four rivers of Paradise emerging from a *Fons Vitae*, sheltered within a Temple of Victory. Fr. Jerónimo Román described the «rivers» as being the whole patio in 1589 and he marveled at the constant, secret circulation from rivers to basin. Fr. Nicolau de Santa Maria wrote in 1541 that the fountain had two basins upon a stem seven palmos tall (1.54 m.), from which the water passed unseen into four spouts feeding the «rivers» (3).

The description written in the sixteenth century make it clear that the four turret oratories were dedicated to saints in the life of solitude and that the friars used the doors as drawbridges to enter the oratories for their devotions. The reliefs over the altars, by Jean de Rouen and assistants showed: St. John Baptist wearing the hair shirt in contemplation in the desert; St. Jerome nearly nude in the desert; St. Paul, the first hermit, wearing palm leaves; and St. Anthony tempted by the devil in the form

(4) Frei Bras, the Jeronymite friar and Bishop of Leiria, was educated at Paris Louvain, and remained in charge of the Augustinian community at Coimbra until 1554.

of a maiden. The placing of the turrets in a common water suggests the unity of ascetic contemplation. The buttresses signify the interaction of the Holy Spirit with the bridging and sustaining action of the saints in eremitic solitude. The significance to the religious community is obvious. Frei Brás de Barros was commissioned to reform the loose life of the friars of Santa Cruz by John III in 1527. His reform received in the garden fountain a permanent sermon and example (4), set among «lemons, limes, apples and other delightful fruits and herbs», in the words of the chronicler of 1540.

The whole design probably alludes to the purification of sinners in the blood of Christ, as on the mystic fountain carved at St. Nicholas in Troyes (1553), bearing the inscription:



Plan of temple and basins. Courtyard of the Evangelists at The Escorial (Ruiz de Arcaute)

En la fontaine te viens diligemment
 Laver, pêcheur, pour te mondifier,
 Car elle est plaine du pur sang present
 Du Jésuschrist qui fut crucifié (5).

Usually these representations of the Fons Vitae in France show holy sinners in repentance at the well, and at Chinon, the spouts are the evangelical animals (6). Perhaps distant reflections of both ideas appear in the turret oratories and the balustrade figures of birds and lions at the stair-heads in Coimbra.

The immediate descendant of this extraordinary design, so unusual that Fr. Jeronimo Román found it difficult to describe in 1589, is the building in the courtyard of the Evangelists at the Escorial, completed in 1593. The fountain consists of four square basins (**estanquillos**) separated by intersecting walks which pass as at Coimbra, through the domed temple. The dome is supported on piers rising from the four inner corners of the basins. The basins receive water from the central temple. The design was probably by Juan de Herrera, who had its plans engraved by Perret in 1539 (7).

The builder's contracts were signed in 1586, but in 1589 the fountain still lacked its figural decoration. J. B. Monegro contracted on May 18 to make the statues of the Evangelists, finally set in place on May 15, 1593 (8). Herrera may have seen the Manga cloister in Coimbra, when he accompanied Philip II to meet the Portuguese estates general in April 1581, at Tomar.

The unprecedented novelty of the Escorial design is its division of an integral temple into four piers treated like facades, which belong also to the separate basins:

«en medio de estos cuatro estanques, donde se cruzan las dos principales calles de estos cuadros que reparten el jardín, se levanta una hermosa fuente, no sé si la llamo bien así; no es fuente, sino uno como templo o cimborrio, en forma cuadrada, aunque, por cortarle las esquinas, es ochavado; y así los estanquillos, por aquellas mismas puntas por donde habían de cuadrarse con las calles que cruzan, están también cortados, y dejaron plaza para asentar esta fábrica y recibir ellos cómodamente el

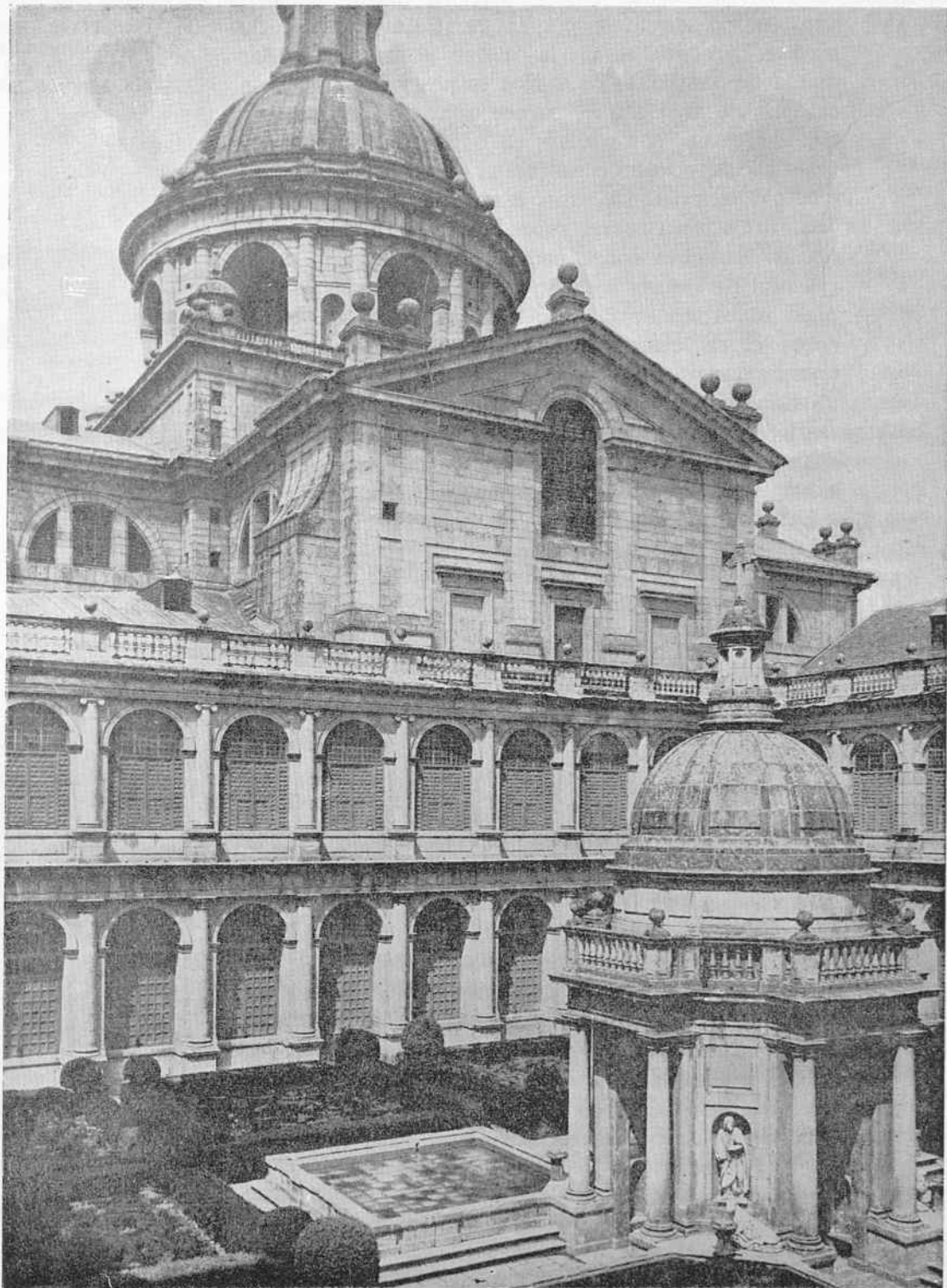
(5) R. KOECHLIN and MARQUET DE VASSELOT, *La sculpture à Troyes*, 1900, 364.

(6) On Fons Vitae as symbol of the custodia in the church see KARL JUSTI, *Miscellaneen*, I, 1905, 296. E. MÅLE, *Art religieux de la fin du Moyen Age*, 1925, 108-116, holds that the fountain filled with Christ's blood purifies sinners, according to the fifteenth-century cult of the Precious Blood.

(7) *Sumario y breve declaracion de los diseños... del Escorial... por Juan de Herrera*, Madrid, 1589 (facsim. repr. accompanying L. CERVERA VERA, *Las Estampas y el sumario de el Escorial* (Madrid, 1954), 10v-11. «Aquí esta hecho un edificio a manera de Templo en forma ochavada, es por la parte de piedra barroqueña fina, y por de dentro es todo de varios y hermosos jaspes, a los 4 angulos tiene quatro nichos adonde estan algunas figuras por donde sale agua que cae en quatro estanquillos que estan a los quatro angulos, y por el medio de este templete passa la calle principal del jardin.»

(8) The documents are published by LUCIANO RUBIO, «El monasterio de El Escorial, sus arquitectos y artifices,» *Ciudad de Dios*, 162 (1950), 116-7.

El Escorial,
Court of the
Evangelists.
Phot. Mas, by
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agua, como veremos: por la parte de fuera, es de piedra berroqueña, de la mejor y más escogida; por la de dentro, es de varios jaspes y mármoles de colores, de suerte que, parece una joya con su funda. La forma, como digo, es ochavada y cuadrada (lo digo así porque cada forma de éstas hace así su efecto): la cuadrada son cuatro portadas cuadradas, que vuelan fuera, sobre dos columnas enteras, que se levantan sobre pedestales despegados de la pilastra de detrás todo lo que pide la basa y algo mas; el orden es dórico, labrado como de plata; sobre él se levanta un pedestal redondo, con sus compartimentos, y luego una cúpula o cimborrio partido, con sus fajas: encima otra linternilla cerrada, adornada de nichos pequeños; luego su media naranja, y encima, por remate, la cruz: pasadas estas cuatro portadas se hacen cuatro arcos triunfales, que tienen 10 pies de ancho y 23 de alto» (9).

(9) FR. JOSE DE SIGÜENZA:
**Historia primitiva y exacta del
Monasterio del Escorial**, 323-
324. Madrid 1881.

The supports of the temple therefore work in two contexts: each basin is both separate and conjoined; each cupola support belongs both to the background and to the figure. The double function of each member appears most clearly in the plan and in the view from a distance: the parts sustain the whole, from which the parts resolve as members of another context. At Coimbra this relationship of simultaneous integrity and independence was stated less elegantly and with more parts, such as flying buttresses, stairs, doubled basins, and the eight-columned temple. The Escorial fountain achieves the whole program with fewer parts in a figure-ground interplay.

Padre Sigüenza, the Jeronymite chronicler of the Escorial, complained in 1602 that the whole fountain and temple were too big and that they were uselees, being a place for chatter in a house vowed to silence. Sigüenza, however, took credit for having resolved the King's question about what the statues were to represent. The program of Sigüenza defined the cloister garth as a mystical Garden of Eden, source of the four rivers of Paradise watering the continents with the Gospel of Christ, beneath the crowning figure of the Savior, whose live water of doctrine instructed the apostles and the evangelists. The King, never-

theless, preferred to limit the figures to the Evangelists, and to crown the temple with a simple cross of white marble:

«Preguntó S.M., que sea en gloria, qué sería bien poner en aquellos nichos de fuera, y cómo caería el agua en los estanques, pues todo el fin de esta fábrica era hacer una fuente extraordinaria. Unos dijeron que las cuatro virtudes cardinales; otros,, los cuatro tiempos del año; otros, que los cuatro doctores de la Iglesia, y otros daban en otras buenas imaginaciones; yo también dije la mía, y aunque no en todo, en parte le contentó a S.M., y así se puso en ejecución».

«Imaginé este claustro como un místico paraíso terreno, y que de él, como de aquel que plantó Dios, salían cuatro fuentes o ríos que regaban toda la tierra, y mirando ahora el mundo con sus cuatro partes, Asia, Africa, Europa y la nueva América, hallaba que en todas, debajo del nombre e imperio del Rey Felipe II, se predica la ley divina y Evangelio de Cristo, y aunque en unas más y en otras menos, al fin en todas tiene vasallos fieles y cristianos debajo de su corona. Para significar todo esto, ponía en el remate y cúpula de este templete la figura de nuestro Salvador, fuente y principio de todo nuestro bien; de allí se comunicó su doctrina a los Apóstoles y Evangelistas, y así ponía éstos en los cuatro nichos, y en la peana grande que tienen debajo en el corte de las esquinas de los estanquillos, la figura de cada uno de los Evangelistas, águila, león, becerro y hombre, para que desde ellos, se recibiese el agua en unas tazas o vasos que habían de tener en las manos derechas cuatro ninfas, puestas dentro de los estanques, figuras de las cuatro partes del mundo, estribando con la mano izquierda en el escudo de las armas Reales: de allí había de caer el agua en la alberca y estanque y después salir a regar los jardines del contorno. Aunque le contentó al Rey el pensamiento, no quiso se ejecutase en todo por su gran modestia sino que en lo alto de la cúpula y por remate se pusiese una cruz

de mármol blanco, los cuatro Evangelistas en los nichos, con sus cuatro figuras en los pedestales, y que delante de ellas se pusiesen unos términos por donde saliese el agua» (10).

Sigüenza's program recalls the Fountain of Life in early medieval manuscript illuminations (11), but the architectural reality may owe its scheme to the unique **fons vitae** in the Manga cloister at Coimbra.

(10) FR. JOSE DE SIGÜENZA: Ob. cit. 325-326.

(11) PAUL A. UNDERWOOD, «The Fountain of Life in the Manuscripts of the Gospels,» **Dumbarton Oak Papers** 5 (1950), 41-138 No sepulchral meaning for the octagon is present in Sigüenza's remarks, nor did he say anything to betray awareness of a baptismal meaning for the **fons vitae**, but his suggestion that the fountain be crowned with the figure of the Savior surrounded below by the four continents, recalls the Early Christian sense as expressed in the inscription at the Lateran baptistry in Rome: **Fons hic est vitae, qui totum diluit orbem sumens de Christi vulnere principium**. The restraint of Philip II shows his customary taste for ultimate simplicity in the richest material expressions. His stated preference recalls the minimal schemes shown in the Nancy Gospels of Gauzelin (**Quatuor hic rutilant uno de fonte fluentes**), where the four Gospels surrounded the chrism in the scheme of the Escorial fountain.

Nota de agradecimiento: Expresamos nuestro reconocimiento tanto al ilustre hispanista, el Prof. Kubler, autor de este trabajo, como a la Editorial Castalia, ambos nos permitieron amablemente su reproducción. El artículo apareció primero en el **Homenaje a Rodríguez-Moñino**. Estudios de erudición que le ofrecen sus amigos o discípulos hispanistas norteamericanos). I, 291-295. Madrid 1966.