

Galic

Situated at the western tip of Europe, France covers a surface area of 550 000 sq km (215 000 sq mi) and has a total population of 55 million inhabitants. With the settling of its eastern frontier at the end of World War I, the country came close to the ideal France, or ancient Gaul, with which it identifies itself – stretching between the seas, the mountains and the Rhine.

Structurally, the country contains the three basic elements of Europe's relief: a monotonous plain in the north, a succession of low-lying ancient massifs in the centre, and high Alpine and Pyrenean mountains in the south. Plains and hills, which occupy two-thirds of its territory, provide fertile agricultural lands. Such varied relief results in great geological diversity. Crystalline rock (in the Armorican massif, the Massif Central, and the Vosges), limestone rock (in Normandy, the Paris basin, and the northern Aquitaine basin) and glacial-era deposits ensure an abundant supply of various building materials.

Because of the narrowness of the country between the Golfe de Gascogne and the Golfe du Lion (the 'French isthmus'), France is at a crossroads of climatic influences: oceanic from Brittany to Flanders, continental from the Paris basin to Alsace, Mediterranean on the Mediterranean cornice, and mountain type in Alpine regions. There is thus a wide range of agricultural crops.

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France has witnessed profound changes in its natural environment (notably its soils and landscapes) over the centuries. The climatic contrast between the Mediterranean sea and the Atlantic ocean is reflected in the typology of the soils: red soils in the cultivated basins of the Mediterranean regions, derived from decalcified limestone; and brown soils in the oceanic regions, derived from forest soils and providing good agricultural land.

French rural landscapes fall into three major types. The areas of open fields (*champagnes*), predominate in northern and northeastern France; they correspond with the old community practice of crop rotation in cereal-growing areas and with the right of grazing and are associated with clustered housing in large villages. Secondly, there are the areas of hedged fields (*bocages*) typical of western and northwestern France. They are an expression of agrarian individualism encroaching on communal practices and are associated mostly with scattered housing in isolated hamlets and farms. Finally, there is the Mediterranean agrarian landscape of Languedoc and Provence, in which are reflected the natural differences in relief and soil: pasture-land on the *garrigues*, cultivated land in the plains, and closely built villages. Aquitaine is a separate case, with fields sheltered by windbreak hedges, clustered housing in the plains and dispersed housing in the hills.

While demographically and economically the years 1800–60 were the golden age of rural France, the following decades and the first half of the 20th century witnessed its gradual decline with the phylloxera disaster (where vine pests destroyed vines on a massive scale), the flight of the agricultural proletariat to the towns and the human losses of World War I. In 1931, the urban population exceeded the population of the countryside for the first time. Agriculture, which still employed over 3 million people in 1968, was employing not more than 2 million workers in 1977. The transformation of the country into a major industrial and technological power has resulted in the spreading of the French *désert* with its deserted farms and hamlets, its dwindling villages and small towns, and its houses renovated as 'second homes' for city dwellers.

The recent division of the country into 22 administrative regions, each made up by joining several of the *départements* created by the Revolution, coincides more or less with the mosaic of the major ethnolinguistic or historical provinces of the 16th to 18th centuries, still alive in the minds of contemporary French people.

These traditional provinces may serve as a convenient framework to describe the country's vernacular architecture. In the northern half are found Ile-de-France, Picardy, Normandy, the