

The Architecture of Jaca Cathedral

The Project and its Impact

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Abstract

In recent decades, the architectural project of Jaca Cathedral, a crucial work of Spanish Romanesque, has not received the attention it deserves. The cathedral's architectural innovations prompted responses in Aragon, Navarre, Castile, and France. This article relies upon little-exploited documentation, reveals hitherto unknown building elements and draws its conclusions within the context of a hypothetical restoration of the cathedral around 1100, viewed in plan, elevation and longitudinal section. Examining the architectural composition supports reflecting on the process of construction and its chronology. The design and construction of the whole Romanesque fabric (except the addition of the tower portico) followed a consistent impulse that must have advanced during the 1080s and 1090s. The undertaking can be qualified as ambitious, refined, magnificent, and meaningful, and honours the creativity of the architect and the objectives of its patrons.

During the last fifty years, the sculpture of Jaca Cathedral has attracted the attention of art historians, especially as regards epigraphic and iconographic aspects of its famous west façade, and stylistic components of its capitals and corbels.¹ By contrast, the church's architecture, a crucial work of Spanish Romanesque art, has not attracted equal interest, in spite of the line of investigation opened by David L. Simon with his presentation of certain forms of construction as, 'the physical manifestation of Sancho Ramírez's political vision'.² It seems advisable to follow this line of research in greater depth because of its implications for the relationship between Romanesque art, the political context, and the Gregorian Reform. Also, exploring the architecture expands a debate too focused on the potential acceptance of Ubieto's arguments concerning the chronology of the church,³ and on whether there was an initial project promoted by Ramiro I (1035–64) and carried out using First Romanesque formulas.⁴

One of the reasons for the paucity of studies on the cathedral's architecture may lie in the doubts about the original church project details. A fire in 1440 and the subsequent addition of chapels and vaults obscured key elements pertaining to the composition of the central apse and the original covering of the naves,⁵ both of which are fundamental to establishing the filiation of the church vis-à-vis the major constructions of the period.

New arguments will permit significant advances based on little-exploited documentation and the investigation of hitherto unknown elements, such as the springing point of the naves' transverse arches, the high windows over the original choir, and the hidden corbels and putlog holes over the later vaults. For other architectural components, such as the western façade's intramural stairway or the particular distribution of windows and oculi, I will propose novel interpretations that address the planning and development of the work. My conclusions will take form by means of a

Romanesque Cathedrals in Mediterranean Europe

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Architecture, Ritual and Urban Context



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