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. 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.’ 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, and on whether there was an initial project promoted by Ramiro I (1035–64) and carried out using First Romanesque formulas.

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, 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

Architecture, Ritual and Urban Context

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## CONTENTS

Romanesque Cathedrals in Mediterranean Europe: 
**Balance and Perspectives**

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1

### I. Shaping Cathedrals in the Pre-Romanesque Era

- **The Cathedrals of Early Medieval Italy:**
  - The Impact of the Cult of the Saints and the Liturgy on Italian Cathedrals from 300 to 1200
  *Beat Breuk*

9

- **French Cathedrals around the Year 1000:**
  - Forms and Functions, Antecedents, and Future
  *Jean-Pierre Caillet*

29

### II. Building Romanesque Cathedrals on Older Substrates

- **Between ‘Church Families’ and Monumental Architecture:**
  - German Eleventh-Century Cathedrals and Mediterranean Traditions
  *Matthias Untermann*

47

- **Aosta Cathedral from Bishop Anselm’s Project to the Romanesque Church, 998-1200**
  *Mauro Corteolazzo & Renato Perinetti*

71

- **Inter primas Hispaniarum urbes, Tarraconensis sedis insignissima:**
  - Morphogenesis and Spatial Organization of Tarragona Cathedral (1150-1225)
  *Gerardo Boto Varela*

85

### III. Romanesque Cathedrals in Urban Contexts

- **The Cathedral of Toulouse (1070-1120): An Ecclesiastical, Political, and Artistic Manifesto**
  *Quitterie Cazes*

109
The Renovation of Northern Italian Cathedrals during the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries: The State of Current Research and Some Unanswered Questions
Saverio Lonartire

Medieval Cathedral Architecture as an Episcopal Instrument of Ideology and Urban Policy: The Example of Venice
Xavier Barral i Altet

The Architecture of Jaca Cathedral: The Project and its Impact
Javier Martínez de Aguirre

The Portuguese Cathedrals and the Birth of a Kingdom: Braga, Oporto, Coimbra, and the Historical Arrival at Lisbon — Capital City and Shrine of St Vincent
Jorge [Manuel de Oliveira] Rodrigues

IV. Liturgical Layout and Spatial Organization

The Mise-en-Scène of the Holy in the Lateran Church in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries
Michele Bacci

Liturgical Installations in the Cathedral of Salerno: The Double Ambo in its Regional Context between Sicilian Models and Local Liturgy
Elisabetta Scirocco

Romanesque Cathedrals in Catalonia as Liturgical Systems: A Functional and Symbolical Approach to the Cathedrals of Vic, Girona, and Tarragona (Eleventh–Fourteenth Centuries)
Marc Sureda i Jurbany

V. Visual Discourses and Iconographic Programmes

A New Interpretation of the Thirteenth-Century Capitals of the Ancient Cathedral of Lleida (‘Seu Vella’)
Francesc Fité i Llevot

The Iconography of the Cloister of Gerona Cathedral and the Functionalist Interpretation of Romanesque Historiated Cloisters: Possibilities and Limitations
Peter K. Klein

The Cloistral Sculpture at La Seu d’Urgell and the Problem of its Visual Repertoire
Marta Serrano Coll & Esther Lozano López

Romanesque Sculpture in Zamora and Salamanca and its Connections to Santiago de Compostela
José Luis Hernando Garrido

List of Contributors and Editors
Index of Monuments
Color Plates