Batalha as a Sacred Place

Estelle A. Maré

Associate Professor, Department History of Art and Fine Arts, University of South Africa

Before attempting to evaluate the monastic complex at Batalha, known as Mosteiro da santa Maria da Vitria, as a sacred place the author considers the expressive aim of Gothic cathedrals, of which this edifice exemplifies the late Gothic style. Because the author believes that historical research ought also to provide lessons for the present, the research is concluded with a speculation on the reasons for the almost total absence of articulations of the concept of sacredness in twentieth-century architecture.

Voordat die kloosterkompleks te Batalha wat as die Mosteiro da Santa Maria da Vitria bekend staan, bespreek word, word 'n bespreking gewy aan die ekspressiewe doel van Gotiese katedrale, waarvan die gebou onder bespreking die laat-Gotiese styl verteenwoordig. Aangesien die outeur die oortuiging huldig dat geskiedkundige navorsing ook lesse vir die hede behoort in te hou, word die navorsing afgesluit met 'n speskulasie oor die redes vir die bykans totale afwesigheid van argitektuur waarin die konsep van heiligheid geartikuleer word.

64

Jerusalem, Rome and Santiago de Compostela were first among the holy cities of the medieval world because they constituted the termini of major European pilgrimage routes. Their pre-eminence as religious centres is exemplified in the inordinate numbers and splendour of their churches. Pilgrims needed inns and trading posts en route. Towns with churches and sometimes cathedrals as well, were built at major centres. Examples of such cathedral cities were Burgos and Léon which were constructed on the route from Paris to Santiago de Compostela.

In the theocentric Christian world of the Middle Ages a church was a sacred place. Wherever people experienced an encounter with God they erected a church. But churches were built to serve as a vehicle for such encounters in that they offered an interior conducing to retreat from temporal existence and to elevation to the higher spiritual plane of religious worship.

At Aljubarotta, a place near Batalha, the Portuguese had an encounter with God which led to the construction of a cathedral. Proper interpretation of the spiritual encounter celebrated at Batalha calls for more than mere description, whether it be of the structure, the developmental history of the architectural styles displayed by — or the liturgy observed within — that sacred precinct. In this matter I agree with James's (1965: 12) contention that true understanding of a sacred place cannot be achieved unless — in addition to describing it —

the researcher finds out its original purpose as conceived by those who erected the consecratory buildings on the site. James writes: "The fundamental question is raised: why, under what circumstances, and for what purposes have these places come into being?".

The Mosteiro da Santa Maria da Vitria came into being at Batalha, referring to the place of a battle. This battle, which was critical for the continuance and independence of the Portuguese nation, was fought on 14 August 1385. The key event that led to this battle was the marriage of Beatrice, daughter of King Ferdinand and Queen Leonor of Portugal, to John of Castile. When Ferdinand died without a male heir, John of Castile assumed that he would succeed to the Portuguese throne by virtue of his marriage. The Portuguese rejected the claim of Castile and named João, a half-brother of king Ferdinand, as successor to the Portuguese throne. The ensuing conflict between the two countries led to the Spanish invasion of Portugal. The tiny Portuguese army was led by King John I, Master of the Order of Avis, and Nuno Alváres Pereira, Constable of the Realm. When the Castilians invaded Portugal, the Portuguese people rose in support of their army to fight for their freedom.

The decisive battle was fought at *Aljubarotta,* situated between Alcobaca and Batalha, fifteen kilometres south of the monastery's actual location. On Ascension Day of 1385 a superior Spanish force gathered on the battlefield. Minutes before the battle King John invoked the *Virgin's* aid, promising to build a magnificent church in her honour if the Portuguese were victorious. His soldiers and 500 supporting English bowmen

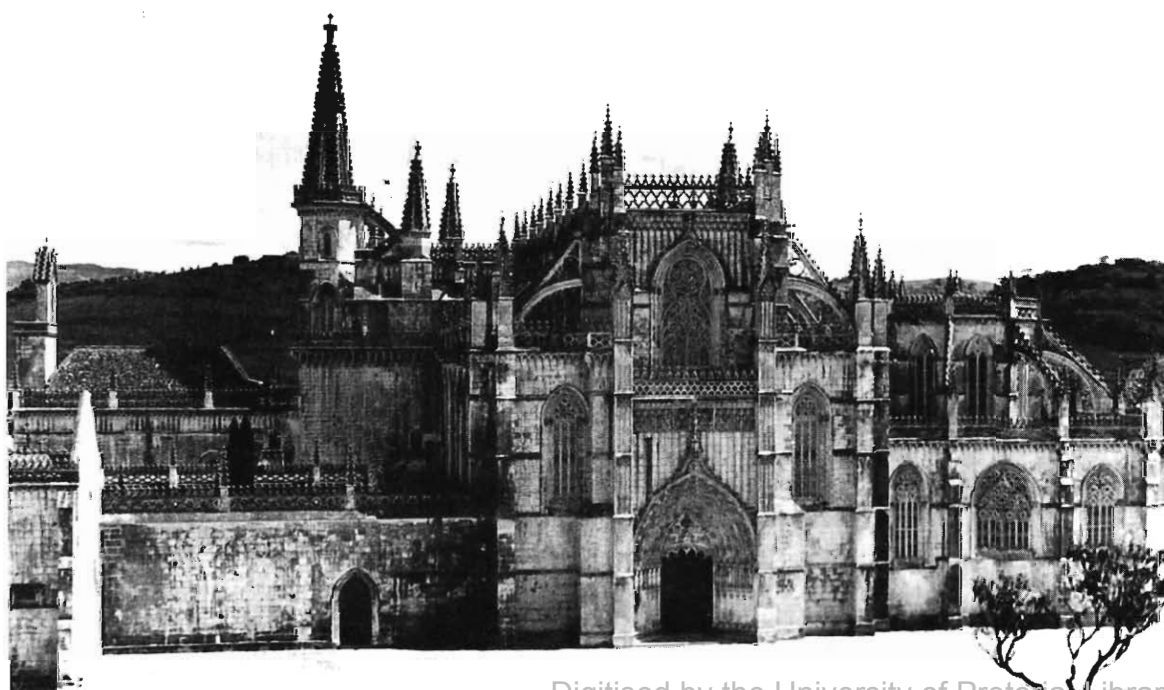*Fig. 1 View of the entrance to the cathedral of Santa Maria daVitria (Photo: E. A. Maré)*

Fig. 2 Plan
1 Cathedral (portal to wall of apse
    79,2 m; transept 32,2 m long x 6,6 m
    wide; width of nave and side isles 21,2 m)
2 Burial chapel of King John I (side walls
    22m long)
3 Cloister of King John I (54,9 x 50 m)
4 Chapterhouse (side walls 19,2 m long)
5   Refectory and workrooms
6 Cloister of King Alphonso V (43,9 x 50 m)
7 Unfinished chapels or pantheon of King
    Edward
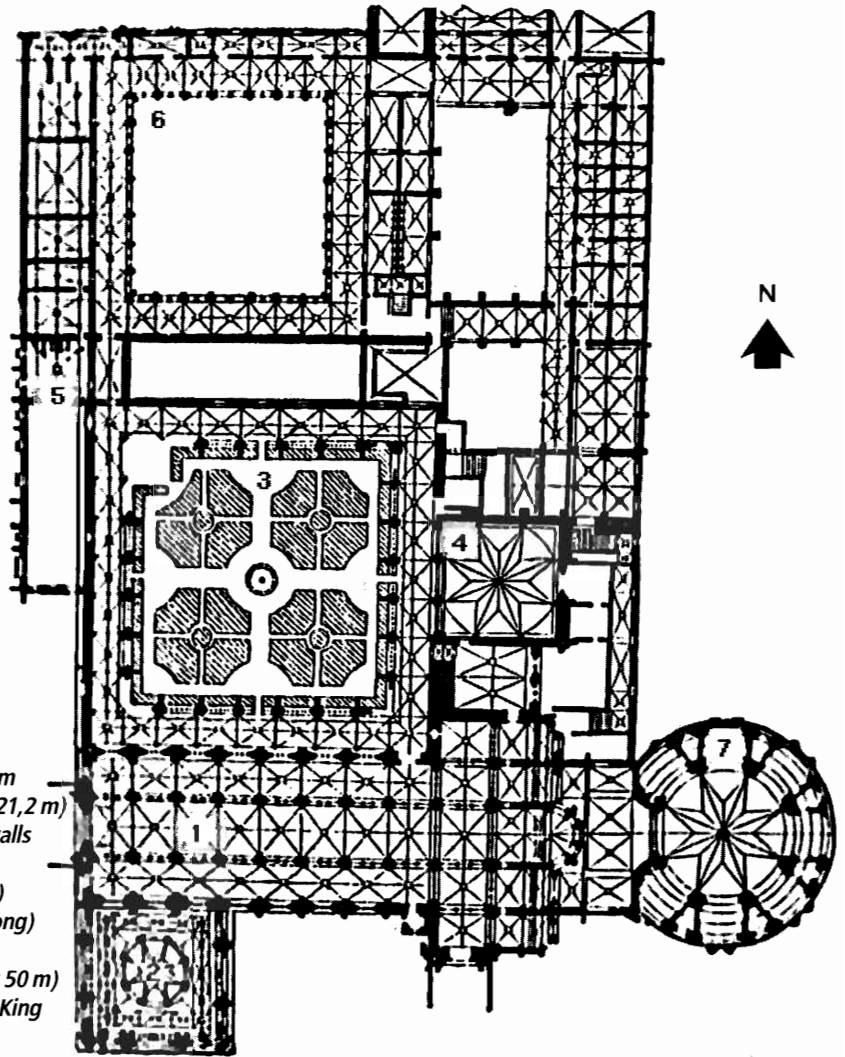
fought with heroic valour and defeated the Castilians. The events of that day can probably not be accounted for empirically, but I share Smith's (1974: 12) opinion:

> [T]he only knowledge that is accurate of the history of religion, and indeed of culture, and indeed of human history generally, is a knowledge that participates in the consciousness of those involved.

The building of the monastery of Santa Maria da Vitria (Saint Mary of the Victory) (Fig. 1) commenced in 1387, two years after the battle. At the request of the king's confessor, the Dominican Fra Lorenço Lampreira, the monastery was dedicated to his order. The building project which

was to be the architectural fulfilment of João's vow was of such magnitude that initially foreign architects were approached. Eventually Alphonso Domingues, a Portuguese, was commissioned.

The construction of Santa Maria da Vitria continued into the sixteenth century. This *late Gothic building complex* comprises a cathedral, the burial chapel and cloister of King João I, a chapter house, refectory and workrooms, the cloister of King Alphonso V, and the unfinished chapels or pantheon of King Edward (Duarte)(Fig. 2).[1]

Domingues, and the architects who worked on

---

1 For a description and structural analysis of the monastery see Sundt (1993).

the Santa Maria da Vitria after him, belonged to a long tradition of craftsmen seeking to articulate in stone what people experienced as sacred.

A sense of the numinous antedates theological reflection, for it is not an abstract idea but an experience. According to Otto's (1936) fairly detailed description of this experience — as elaborated by Eliade (1954) — an encounter with the sacred always elicits a sense of awe, even dread, which overwhelms the human intellect, inspiring profound reverence for the majesty and power of the godhead and causing the worshipper to experience its full transcendence and fascination. In this experience a person, realising that the holy is definable in neither human nor cosmic terms, is overcome by a sense of absolute dependence, which makes him or her recognise his orn her own inferiority and unworthiness. In religious terms, he or she becomes aware of his or her sinfulness.

One could argue that Christianity transcends this awareness, in that — through Christ's intervention in the human experience of the holy — the Christian shares the position of Christ himself, as decribed in John 10: 30 and 14: 11 respectively: "My Father and I are one", and "I am in the Father and the Father in me". To the Christian God is not "totally other" than himself — other, to be sure, but no longer the "totally other" ("das ganz Andere" in Otto's (1936) terminology). The striving for intimate experience of God is the essence of the Christian faith, and the atmosphere of a Gothic cathedral not only permits, but intensifies, this striving.

Most criteria for identifying sacred places are universal, yet there are some which are specific to medieval Christanity. I postulate these criteria, particularly those in the latter category, as a historian of architecture — hence from the point of view that the structures erected at sacred places embody the concept of holiness as understood by both the builders of the sacred place and the people who worship there.

Most pre-Christian religions regarded the earth itself as a sacred place, and their aim was to arrange the human habitat to harmonise with both observable reality and the invisible experience of spirituality — that is, with both natural and supernatural forces. A structure such as Stonehenge in England expresses this mundial and cosmic orientation. In later history the Romans believed that each place had its own guardian *genius loci,* which would turn vengeful if disturbed by a dissonant building.[2] This notion persisted into the post-Classical era. In fact, Eliade (1954: 17) points out the continuity between ancient and Christian conceptions of sacred places:

67

---

2 See Norberg-Schulz (1980).

The very ancient conception of the temple as the imago mundi, the idea that the sanctuary reproduces the universe in its essence, passed into the religious architecture of Christian Europe.

However, most architectural objects fail to communicate because they were designed not to communicate but to function. A sacred place is the exception, allowed by Eco (1973: 131) because it communicates symbolically. Like all architecture, a sacred building is designed to fulfil certain functions which have both explicit, measurable purposes and nonmeasurable or nonquantifiable meanings. One could say that the first set of characteristics represents physical criteria relating to the construction of a building and its functions. The nonmeasurable or aesthetic value of a building, however, is undefinable, since it pertains not so much to material attributes as to the symbolism, visual and otherwise, conveyed by the architecture — both the parts and the whole.[3] Equally undefinable is the aesthetic or artistic expressiveness of both the actual building and the works of art which in them — these being mainly experienced subjectively by visitors. Indeed, the art historian Cali described the visitor's sensation on entering a Gothic cathedral as follows: "The Cathedral is an embarrassment to Reason, which fears, on entering it, having to admit the existence of the Sacred."

This view of the physical and qualitative characteristics of architecture does not imply that the material and spiritual attributes of church architecture are separable. We may agree with Gadamer (1986: 190): "The inseparability of form and content is fully realized as the nondifferentiation in which we encounter art as something that both expresses us and speaks to us".

As a rule, the following questions about the origin and physical appearance of medieval churches can be answered with a fair degree of certainty: What group of people built it, for which government or patron? Why was it built? What functions are spatially catered for, both inside and outside? What building materials and construction methods were used, and what is the quality of the craftsmanship? What sites were chosen, and how do the buildings fit into their respective natural or urban environments? What are the physical orientations of the buildings, and do they satisfy the requirement that architecture should provide shelter from the elements?
The quantifiable attributes of buildings constituting sacred places are therefore readily identifiable. Like all architecture, they have a place and function in everyday life.

At the other end of the scale are the nonquantifiable attributes of sacred places. These are the very essence of these buildings as they are what makes the architecture communicate. As Geiger (1986: 109) puts it:

3The criteria for the evaluation of architecture were originally formulated by the author. See Maré (1986).

"Stones are laid on stones - just ordinary stones - and they fit together into the moving experience of a Gothic cathedral."

Many engineering feats incorporated in Gothic cathedrals are remarkable even by today's standards. And yet Krautheimer (1942: 1) maintains that, according to medieval sources, the main problem was not the design or construction of a building, but the artistic effects embodied in it — namely its "content".

Medieval Christians felt the need to be situated existentially at the very centre of the cosmos. Like the heavenly Jerusalem, medieval cities were often built — or so their residents believed — at the exact centre or *omphalos* of the universe. This symbolic centredness which is also embodied in Gothic cathedrals, stems from a need for contact with a spiritual dimension transcending the material plane. The material element may be directed to a connecting road or some other physical phenomenon. However, the symbolism of the building had to satisfy the expectation of transcendence felt on arrival, so that the portal, or front entrance, was extremely important. The axis running along the length of the church and its horizontal ramifications must at no point lead to a place that is forbidden to anybody. In this respect Christian churches differed from the temples of antiquity which had areas intended exclusively for initiates and off-limits to the populace. This changed at the moment of Christ's

death, when the curtain of the temple was rent from top to bottom, proclaiming the presence of God as Omnipresent.[4]

Medieval Christian churches fulfilled their function as sacred places by providing space for the enactment of special rituals that were designed to permit the experience of the holy in the midst of material reality. Thus the architecture of a sacred place, like art, is — as Geiger (1986: 23) puts it — a "representation of the infinite in the finite".

As pointed out earlier, the medieval Christian church, and the Gothic cathedral in particular, was like pre-Christian sacred places in that it constituted a symbolic portrayal of the world, and medieval man's ideal was to concretise the image of the heavenly Jerusalem. Man could dwell in heaven even while still on earth, for cathedrals were built as symbolic reflections of the celestial city. This world view required that man should turn his back on the world and aspire heavenward — an ideal encouraged mainly by the quality of *mystical light* in the cathedral, experienced as a spiritual transformation of this earth. In this sense Gothic architecture should be seen and studied as a representation of supernatural reality. Yet, according to von Simson (1956: xvii) this supernatural quality is precisely what modern people find least comprehensible.

Even if the meaning of the interior of a sacred

69

---

4 See Matthew 27: 51; Mark 15: 38 and Luke 23: 45.

precint is not really accessible to modern people, it is futile for us to try and prove that the medieval Christian world view was illusory, for in Gothic cathedrals it was given a correlate which has remained symbolically valid.

Gothic cathedrals embodied not only the Christian world view but also the cultural outlook of the people who worshipped there. As such the building was often a historical landmark as well, its iconography both religious and profane. A

Fig. 3 Gargoyles against the turrets of the cathedral (Photo: E. A. Maré).

place like Batalha is, in the first place, a national sacred place, and visitors to the monastic complex are powerfully impressed by its distinctive Portuguese identity.

In Christian cathedrals the *crucifix* occupies a key symbolic position. In the midst of death and various irrational elements this symbol offers existential security to the congregation gathered in the cathedral. Mythical elements are often present, such as the *grotesque gargoyles* in the form of water spouts affixed to the roofs, intended to deter evil spirits from entering the sacred atmosphere (Fig. 3). Medieval man was never able to avoid the thought of death for long and the cathedrals contain many *graves*, the unmistakable *memento mori*, often marked appropriately with a skull and crossbones. Despite the presence of death and certain supernatural elements, Gothic cathedrals — as Eco (1986: 117) points out — were not places of anguish or puzzlement, but could accommodate even Satan.

Von Simson (1956: xviii) maintains that medieval man, on entering a Gothic cathedral, realised that he was on the most sacred of premises since Solomon's temple. Thus, when the new choir of Canterbury Cathedral was completed, the congregation chanted: "Awesome is this place. Truly this is the house of God and the gate of Heaven, and it will be called the court of the Lord." However, awe is not to be confused with anguish.

To medieval people the cathedral was literally God's house:

> The Middle Ages lived in the presence of the supernatural, which impressed itself upon every aspect of human life. The sanctuary was the threshold of heaven (Von Simson 1956: xviii).

The mystery of a place in nature experienced as a sacred place, as at Delphi, still touches the sensibilities of twentieth-century visitors. An architectural embodiment of the supernatural also has a lasting hold on the human mind. The abiding meaning of a sacred building is unquestionably located in its symbolic value. Weiss (1974: 83) explains:

> Symbols are appearances merging into adumbratives and lucidatives, and thereby into realities. Where there are no symbols there would be no acquaintance with realities. We would know only appearances, but not know that they were appearances.

[One may add that appearance is reality, and vice versa, as attested by the fact that people have to learn to see and understand.]

A *cathedral* is dedicated not only to God, but also to man. In order to do honour to both, it had to possess exceptional architectural merit: it had to be built from the finest materials and the craftsmanship had to attest dedication and love. It also spoke of munificence, for the building not only had to be spacious enough to accommodate all its functions, but was usually aesthetically adorned with the greatest works that contemporary masters of the various arts could produce. The symbolic conception of the whole and its aesthetic expression were one. As Leake (1976: 4) points out:

> The culture of any group at any time seems to reside in its aesthetics. What a people do in their arts, their technologies and in their humanistic endeavors seems to establish their distinguishing culture.

As in the case of painting and sculpture, the most powerful aesthetic qualities of a building are visual. In the Gothic cathedral the accent was on the *main facade* and its portal. In addition to these exterior aspects, the interior was aesthetically important, for that was where the Christian congregation gathered and the rituals were enacted. In the Roman Catholic Church the liturgy has its own dramatic and visual appeal and the worshippers' senses are gratified by music and incense. Thus a medieval sacred place presents a composite image of God and man, of heaven and earth: it is a total work of art — one incorporating all the arts to render a unified meaning.

Art and architecture require a stable culture, a measure of scientific knowledge and, in their more advanced stages of sophistication, technological expertise. Medieval aesthetics was based on geometry, not because beauty is measurable, but because measurability implied an order that is sacred in that it simulates the principles of divine creation. After all, the apocryphal Book of

71

Wisdom states that God created the world according to number, weight and measure.[5] Von Simson (1965: 8) likewise maintains that the medieval designer sought to emulate the transcendental order in the microcosm of the cathedral:

> It is no longer necessary to insist on the overwhelming importance of this geometrical element in Gothic design. It constitutes the very principle of its order and aesthetic cohesion.

The *geometrical design* of Gothic cathedrals varies. Usually the floor plan is recognisably a symbolic representation of the body of Christ, but the symbolic nuances of the measurable form remain undefinable. Although partially perceptible by the senses, the beauty of a Gothic cathedral is not only sensory. Sensory stimuli have aesthetic meaning, which accounts for the ethereal beauty of the cathedral interior. However, the beholder should also contemplate the transcendental meaning of the beauty that he beholds. Adler (1981: 108) infers this total experience of beauty from the aesthetic reflections of Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant:

> The beautiful is that which pleases us upon being contemplated. It is that which pleases us when we apprehend it with our minds alone, or, if not by our minds alone, then by our minds in conjunction with our senses, but not by the sense of sight alone. We might even say that the beautiful is something that it pleases us to behold, but only if we remember that we can behold something in other ways than by sight.

[And the other ways are not always critically dependent on what we see in the first place.]

The comment of the thirteenth-century philosopher William Durandus on the value of the pictorial arts applies equally to the value that the cathedral of Batalha has for the Portuguese nation:

> [W]e worship not images, nor account them to be gods, nor put any hope of salvation in them: for that were idolatry. Yet we adore them for the memory of things done long ago... (Ross & McLaughlin 1978: 530).

The cathedral was built in order that no Portuguese should ever forget God's intervention in the life of his people.

The general design of the monestary of Batalha corresponds with that of Cistercian monasteries. Although not easy to categorise, the style of the cathedral has much in common with the flamboyant Gothic structures found in France, England and Germany. The elevations of the cathedral are generally reminiscent of French Gothic, and the *tracery* likewise follows the French pattern. The facade has a great deal in common with the English Perpendicular style, and the interior vaults formed by longitudinal and transverse ridge-ribs corresponds with English examples. According to Frankl (1963: 177) the *spire* is modelled on that of the cathedral in

---

5 See the discussion in Eco (1986: 17).

Freiburg im Breisgau.

In the fourteenth century there was as yet no Portuguese style of cathedral architecture, but through ingenious eclecticism the design of Santa Maria da Vitria represents a synthesis with a distinct Portuguese character.

The monastery was constructed according to the plans of the original architect, although alterations were later introduced in the burial chapel of King John I and the unfinished chapels. The *Manueline style*,[6] in which the building was continued from the late fifteenth century onwards contributes to the decorative opulence of the unfinished chapels, known as the *pantheon of King Edward* (Fig. 4). The monastic complex of Batalha was indubitably the main centre of the arts in fifteenth-century Portugal. In this edifice architects, sculptors and stained-glass artists expressed their Christian faith and the glory of Portugal in the era of her voyages in search of a sea route to India.

The *main facade* of the cathedral faces west, with the apse at the eastern end. This corresponds with the deeply entrenched Medieval symbolism articulated by Durandus. He took it for granted that geographic orientation in architectural design stemmed from man's deep-seated desire to find his place in the cosmos.[7] In order to symbolise the regular movement of
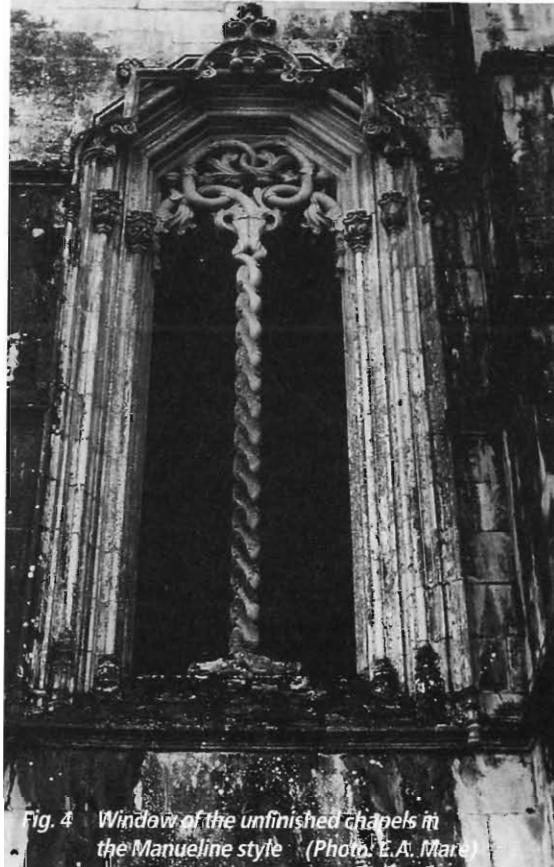
Fig. 4   Window of the unfinished chapels in the Manueline style   (Photo: E.A. Maré)

celestial bodies, the nave extends from east to west, so that the congregation therefore faced east, where the sun rises at the March and September equinoxes.

Stylistically the main facade is austere, decorated only with flamboyant columns, turrets and mouldings (Fig. 5). From this facade one can deduce that the plan allows for a nave elevated above the side aisles. Above the portal there is a rose window of exceptional beauty, the original glass of which has been preserved. As in other Gothic cathedrals, this window symbolises the Virgin, to whom the cathedral of Batalha — like most Gothic cathedrals — is dedicated. She was regarded as the intermediary between man and God, and both she and Christ are symbolically represented in the rose window. Rombach (1977: 168) explains that the rose symbolises the world, the circular rose pattern epitomising crea-

73

6 See Maré (1985).
7 See W. Durandus, *Rationale divinorum, officiorum, de ecclesia et eius partibus*, section 8, quoted by Gettings (1978: 29).

tion with unparalleled aptness as a ceaseless blossoming which, as it unfurls, reveals a succession of flowers within flowers. One circle builds on the other, each expressing the same theme but with repetition. The circle, symbol of perfect unity is celebarted with ever increasing complexity. A ring of waves, a ring of arches, a ring of circles constitute the aureole that symbol-ises Christ, the word which is creation. At the same time the rose with its innumerable petals symbolises virginity, which to the human mind represents divine mystery — hence the rose is the symbol of humanity and divinity alike.[8]

The portal, designed by Master Huguet, is monumental and the series of sculptures in which

Fig. 5 Main facade of the cathedral (Photo: E.A. Maré).

74
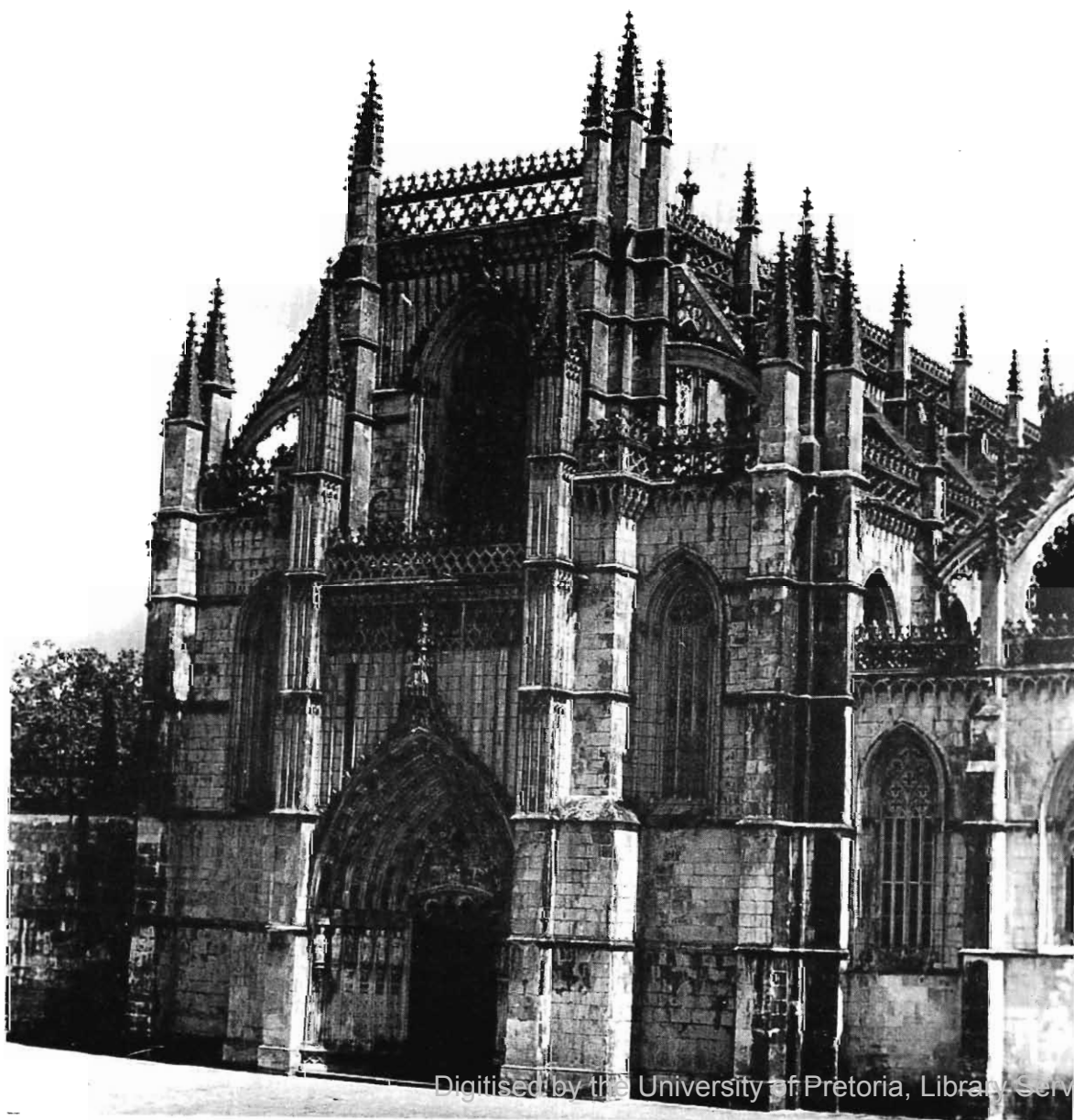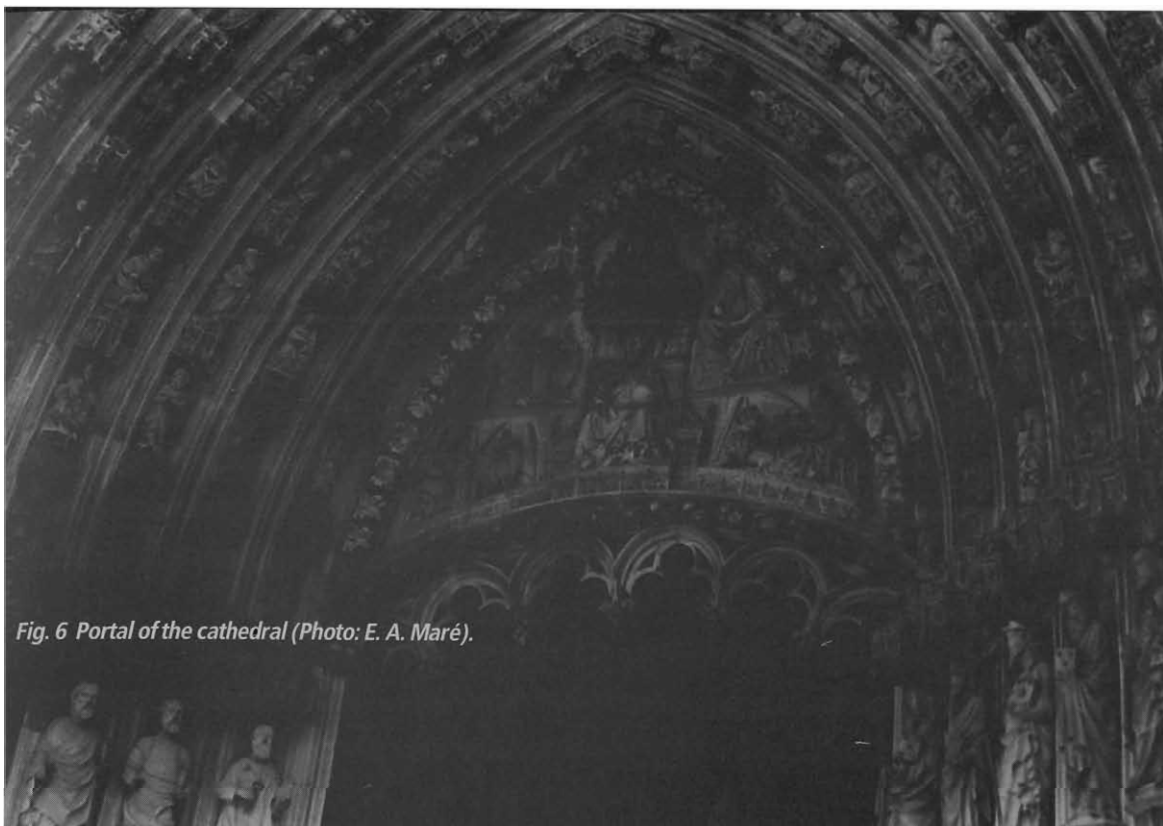
Fig. 6 Portal of the cathedral (Photo: E. A. Maré).

Christ is depicted centrally are characterised by meticulous craftsmanship, expressing the medieval symbolism of a Christ-centred world. The crowds of figures on the archivolts surrounding the main figure and those of the four evangelists indicate an artistically organised cosmology (Fig. 6). The arched portal emulates the spheric structure of the earth, the statues of prophets, kings and saints being positioned hierarchically from the ouside inwards. The portal leads to the nave of the cathedral, where, as Rombach (1977: 168) puts it, no more figures are required — the interior is all light.[9]

Visitors passing through the portal to the cathedral usually first go into the *burial chapel of the founder*, King John I, to the right of the entrance. It was commissioned by John to serve as his burial chapel and was completed in about 1434, the year when the king and his queen, Philippa of Lancaster, were buried there (Fig. 7). The chapel is a rectangular room, its superstructure octagonal and resting on eight massive columns (Fig. 8). In the centre is the shrine of John and his queen, simply sculpted and ornamented. The effigies of the deceased couple, holding hands, lie on top. John is dressed for battle and Philippa is covered with a long shroud. The coats of arms of the houses of Avis and Lancaster appear on the canopies over their heads.

Against the south wall there are four arches with canopies spread over the graves (with effigies) of the four sons of the royal couple. In one of these graves lies Prince Henry, whose efforts led to the discovery of the sea route to India. Along

8 According to Rombach (1977: 168): "Das Symbol der Welt ist die Rosette. Die Gestalt von Kreis und Rose zeigt wie keine andere das Bild der Schöpfung: eine undendliche Entblätterung, in deren aufgeblähter Form sich gleichsam Blume um Blume legt. Ein Kreis baut auf dem anderen auf, jeder gibt dasselbe wieder, ohne es jedoch zu wiederholen. Dasselbe Grundmotiv, Kreis, reinste Einheit, wird immer weiter differenziert. Wellenkreis, Bogenkreis, Kreis aus Kreisen. Insofern Christus das "Wort" der Schöpfung ist, symbolisiert der Strahlenkranz auch Christus. Zugleich symbolisiert die Rose, die sich unter unendlich vielen Blütenblättern verbirgt, die Virginitt, die das menschliche Abbild der gttlichen Tiefe und Unfassbarkeit ist. So ist die Rose zugleich Sinnbild der Menschlichkeit und der Göttlichkeit."
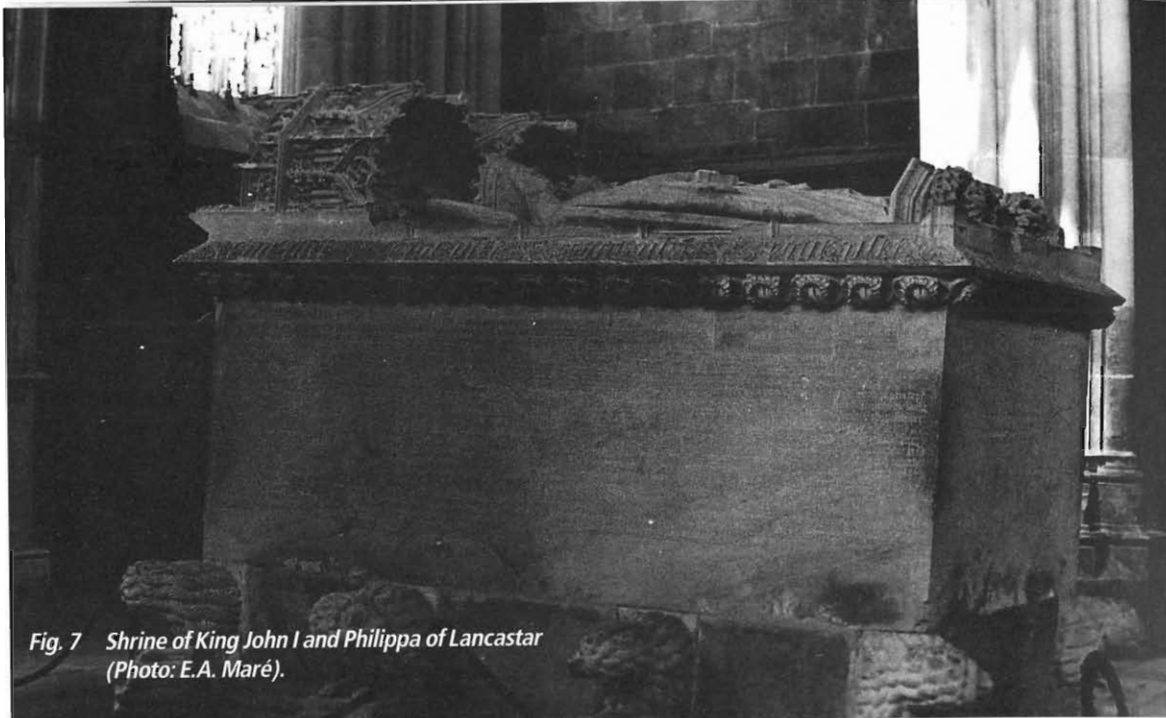9 " ... braucht es keine Gestalten mehr - von innen ist alles   Licht" (Rombach 1977: 169).

Fig. 7 *Shrine of King John I and Philippa of Lancastar (Photo: E.A. Maré).*

the west wall are the graves of later Portuguese kings.

Thus the visitor's mind is filled first of all with the death and memory of some of the greatest figures in Portuguese history. The comment of Fischer & Timmers (1971: 48) on Gothic cathedrals is equally applicable to Santa Maria da Vitria:

> *Closely associated with the royal house, they are at the same time monuments to pride. Late Gothic architecture assumes a very special role here, in that it epitomises a marginal state still struggling for independence but in fact already on its way to becoming a world power. (Own translation)*

With a vault height of 30,8 metres, the vertically oriented interior of the nave is austere in grand Gothic tradition (Fig. 9), elegantly enhanced by the pointed arches which characterise all Gothic cathedrals and permit the use of large stained glass windows. These windows represent openness and translucence, and translucence is the meaning of creation, according to Rombach

(1977: 170).[10] This translucence is only apparent, however, after a period during which the eye adjusts to the different intensity of the light in the interior and of silent meditation which Hans Jantzen explains as follows: Owing to the colours of the stained glass, a Gothic cathedral is in actual fact bathed in a deep reddish violet light which possesses a mysterious quality that is hard to describe. This light does not derive from any one source. It fluctuates in accordance with the natural world outside, brightening, declining, at times irradiating the dusky colours with an inexplicable glow.[11]

In the south wall is a monumental door, above which, on the inside, is the statue of the Madonna of Victory, patron of the cathedral. On the same side there is an enormous window that lights the transept. The windows lighting the nave are also large, but they unfortunately no longer have their original stained glass so that the effect described above has lost some of its original quality.
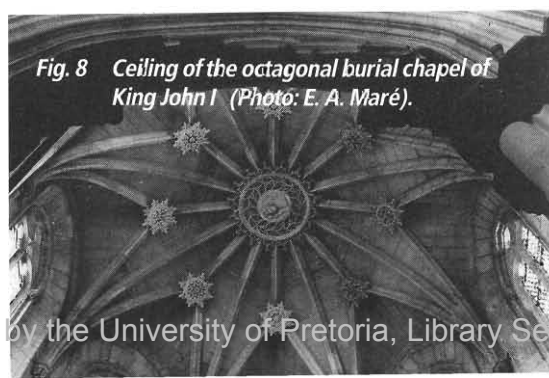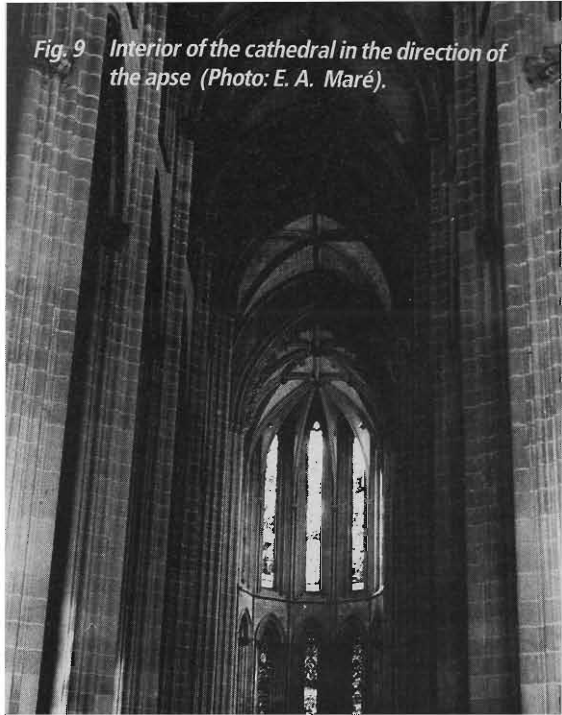
10 "Die Glaswand ist öffnung, Durchsichtigkeit. Durchsichtigkeit ist Sinn der Schöpfung" (Rombach 1977: 170).
11 See Jantzen (1962: 69).

Fig. 8 *Ceiling of the octagonal burial chapel of King John I (Photo: E. A. Maré).*

At the entrance to the cathedral, in the middle of the floor, is the grave of Mateus Fernandus the Elder, the great architect of the Manueline portal of the unfinished chapels. Further to the right are two other graves, one of them of Martin Goncalves de Macada who saved the life of King John at the battle of Aljubarotta.

The entrance to this cloister is from the side aisle of the cathedral, to the left of the altar (Figs. 10 - 11). Initially it was probably designed by Alphonso Domingues as a large chamber to be decorated quite simply. The design was modified in the reign of King Manuel I, however, when the ogival arches forming the garden facades were filled in with lintels and decorated with ornate carving (Fig. 12). The vault of the ambulatory, like that of the cathedral, consists of crossed ogives. In the north-western corner is the fountain which stands at the entrance to the refectory (now a museum to the unknown soldier), and in which the monks performed their ritual hand washing before meals (Fig. 13).

Essentially the Manueline style, which flourished between 1495 and 1535, has late Gothic roots, but it acquired a distinctively Portuguese character. Strictly speaking it is not so much an architectural style as a style of architectural and sculptural decoration. The decorations are not purely abstract, but metaphorically refer to and glorify the voyages of discovery initiated by Prince Henry. The metaphors are those of the sea, which to the Portuguese symbolise their national heroism.[12]

In the cloister one finds the following metaphorical references to the Portuguese voyages of discovery in search of a sea route to India:

- The Cross of the Order of Christ.[13] Prince Henry was the Grand Master of this order and these crosses appeared on the sails of Portuguese caravels and other vessels (Fig. 14). They testified that the voyages of discovery were undertaken in the name of Christ.

77

12 See Maré (1988).
13 See Ferreira (1988).

Fig. 11 Garden facade of the cloister of King John I
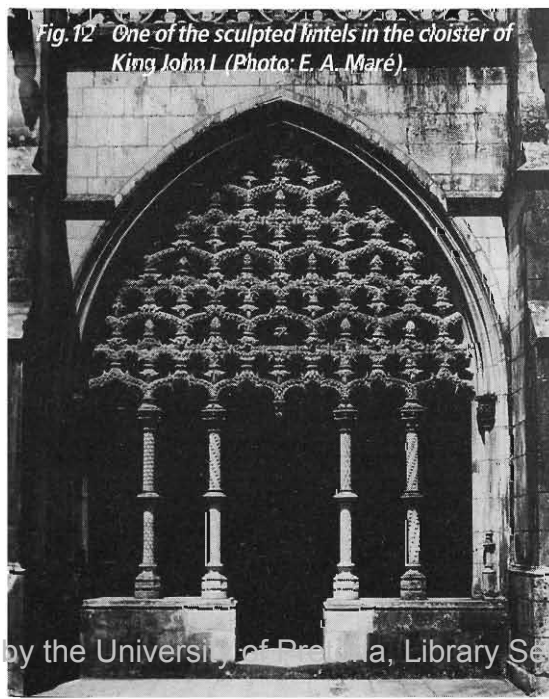(Photo: E. A. Maré).

78

- The armillary sphere was the symbol indicating that the Portuguese had become the master mariners of the world (Fig. 15).

- The stylised artichoke buds adorning the points of the arches, a reminder of the many sailors who had died of scurvy until this decorative fruit, which is rich in vitamin C, was introduced as a remedy (Fig. 15).

- The tree of life, a Hindu symbol indicating the Portuguese nation's encounter with oriental culture (Fig. 16).

The *chapterhouse*, a large rectangular room, is accessible through the door leading to the cloister of King John I. It is spanned by a vault which is universally regarded as an outstanding example of ogival architecture (Fig. 17). The statue in one corner of the room is probably that of the gifted architect who designed this chamber. The large window at the far end is made up of glass panels depicting the crucifixion and Christ's de-

scent from the cross. These panels, dating to 1514, were manufacured in the workshop of the cathedral glass workers. As a testimony to the cultural continuity of the cathedral this room today houses the grave of the unknown Portuguese soldier killed in Flanders in World War I.

From the *cloister of King John I* the visitor proceeds to the *cloister of King Alphonso V* past an area which was once the granary and wine cellar of the monastery, now known as King Ferdinand's chamber. This cloister is simpler than the other one. It was built in the latter half of the

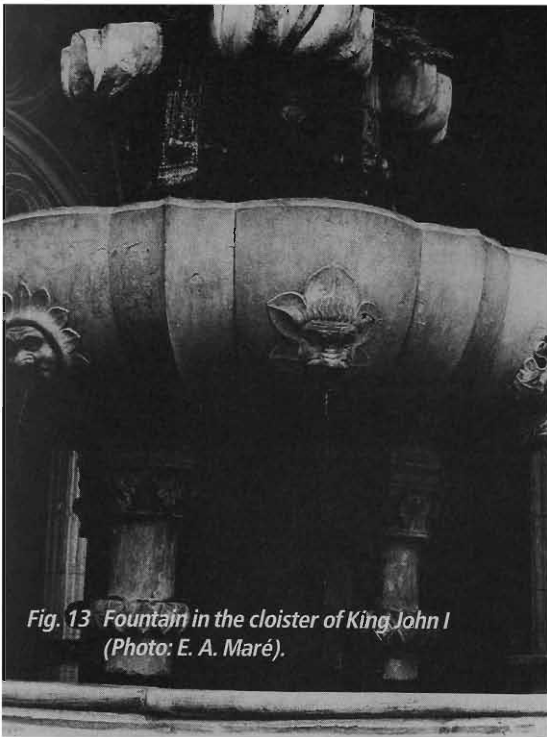Fig. 12 One of the sculpted lintels in the cloister of King John I (Photo: E. A. Maré).

Fig. 13 Fountain in the cloister of King John I
(Photo: E. A. Maré).

fifteenth century, during the reign of Alphonso, under the guidance of the architect Ferdinand of Evora (Fig. 18). The ambulatory has a simple cross vault, the only decoration being the coat of arms of Alphonso depicted on the medallions in the intersections of the arches (Fig. 19).

The chapels, known as the *Capelas Imperfeitas*, are arranged in an octagonal space behind the apse of the cathedral. They were built by King Edward, son of King John, as a burial chapel for himself and his descendants (Fig. 20). The original design was by Master Huguet, and building operations probably commenced in 1435. Frankl (1961: 177) regards this as the most significant Gothic chapel built according to a central plan, after the Karlshofkirche in Prague.

Work on the chapel progressed slowly until the Manueline period, when the architect Mateus Fernandus the Elder introduced substantial modifications and largely changed its appearance. Instead of the eighth chapel planned by Huguet, a *high portal* was introduced, considered to be the most elegant ever built in the Manueline style

(Fig. 21). This monumental portal is about 15,5 metres high and the design on it, carved from local limestone, has the appearance of lace (Fig. 22). The main arch of the portal has a trefoil shape, entwined with a curtain arch originating in a concave quarter circle at each end, continuing with a wave on each side and reaching an apex in a convex arch from which a cusp is suspended (Fig. 23). Like the cloister of King John I, this portal is decorated with sculptural references to the Portuguese voyages of discovery. Here too one finds the cross of the Order of Christ, armillary spheres and artichoke buds — the whole symbolising, one might say, the restlessness and riches of the sea.

Opposite the entrance is the shrine of King Edward and his queen, Leonor of Aragon (Fig. 24). The sculptural design is modelled on that of John and Philippa.

It is not clear why these chapels were not completed. The Renaissance had begun and the construction work on the monastery of Santa Maria
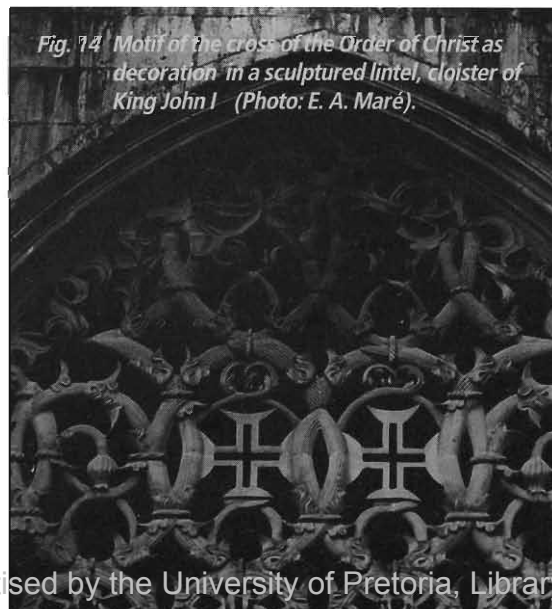
79

Fig. 14 Motif of the cross of the Order of Christ as decoration in a sculptured lintel, cloister of King John I (Photo: E. A. Maré).
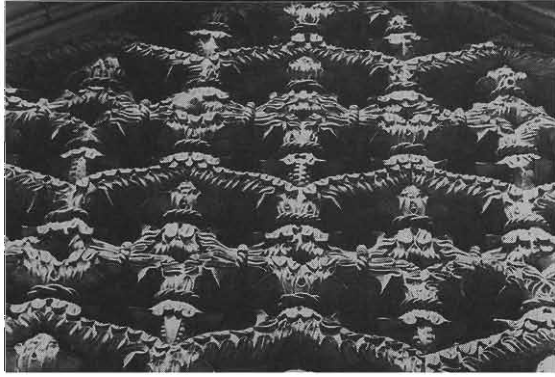
da Vitria ended with a *gallery* in the new style, the Renaissance, characterised by round arches, above the monumental portal leading to the unfinished chapels (Fig. 25).

Santa Maria da Vitria is a historical monument, a matrix of the Portuguese nation's memories of its heroic past. As such it confirms the conception of art that only the inner content of a peo-

Fig. 16 Stylised tree of life in an arch, cloister of King John I (Photo: E. A. Maré).

ple's strivings and more or less continuous ideals outlive them, to be passed to posterity in the creation of art, religion, and philosophy.

To the Portuguese Santa Maria da Vitria is a lasting proof of faith — the faith in God which their Christian forebears preserved. However mov-

Fig. 17 Ceiling of the chapter house (Photo: E. A. Maré).

ing a cultural experience, this monastic complex may be to a foreigner, he or she can never share the Portuguese's subjective experience of the significance of the cathedral, its chapels and cloisters. A foreigner can only experience the place objectively, the more so if he or she is not religious. To a non-Christian visitor Batalha is simply an architectural masterpiece, occupying an honourable place among late Gothic cathedrals, with the cloister of King John I comparing not unfavourably with the one at the cathedral of Monreale. Accordingly he or she cannot but laud the genius of the designers and builders of this monastic complex. The Christian's experience of Santa Maria da Vitria, on the other hand, is inevitably conditioned by his or her knowledge of the intention underlying Gothic cathedral architecture. Therefore, one may concur with Gadamer (1986: 52) that "something can only be called art when it requires that we construe the work by learning to understand the language of form and content so that communication really occurs". This implies that an understanding of cathedrals and medieval artworks will influence the religious experience of a visitor to Santa Maria da Vitria. Gadamer says further:

> The art of earlier ages only comes down to us filtered through time and transmitted through a tradition that both preserves it and transforms it in a living way.

The *monastic complex of Batalha* is a place of light and worship, but judging purely by the experience of the many visitors that flock to it daily,
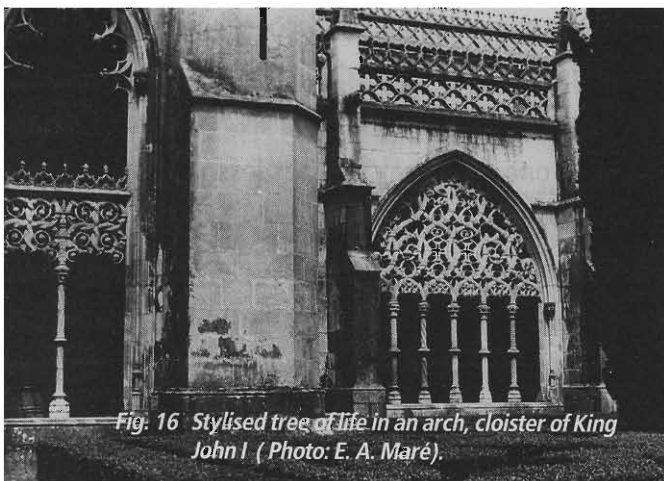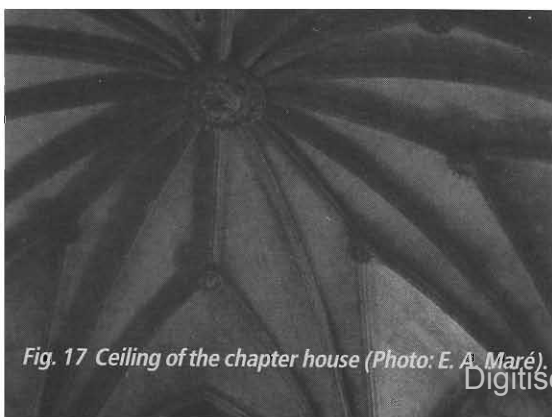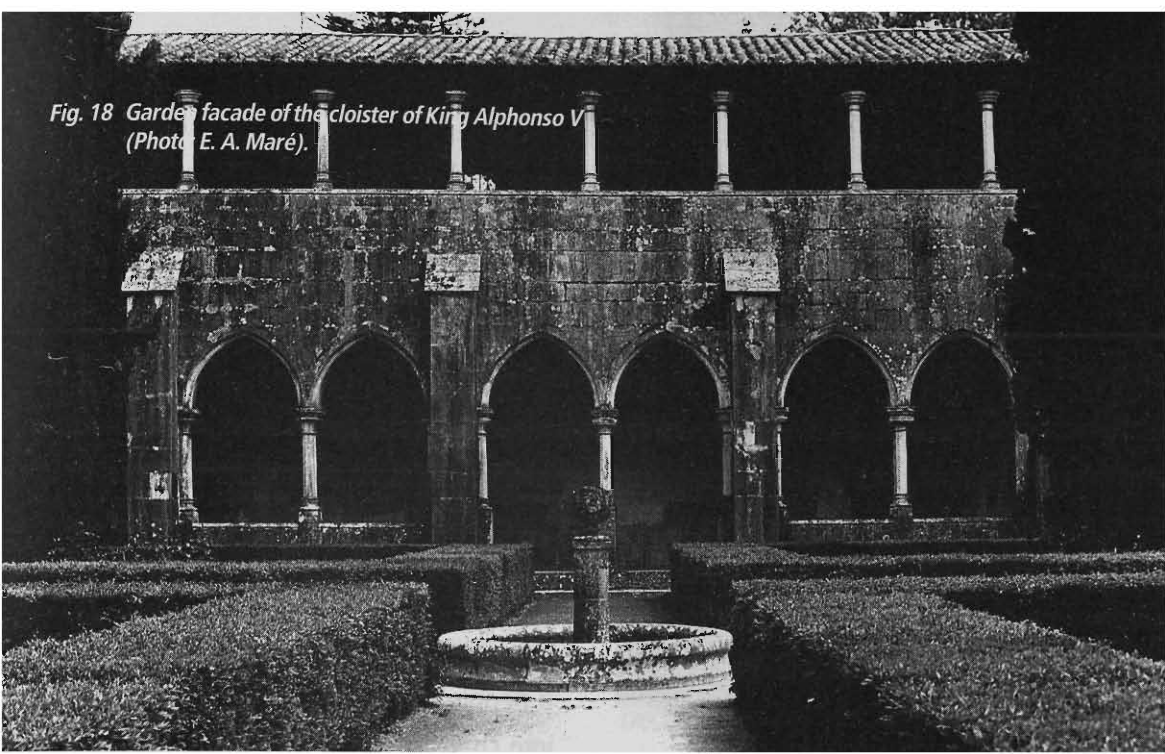
Fig. 18 Garden facade of the cloister of King Alphonso V (Photo: E. A. Maré).

one would probably conclude that to modern tourists it has become predominantly a work of art and a museum — it has therefore been what Gadamer calls "transformed". The experience of the holy has become largely unfamiliar, as will be explained in the concluding section which deals with what we should learn from the past. According to Anshen (1968: 11), modern man "is threatened by a world created by himself. He is faced with the conversion of mind to naturalism, a dogmatic secularism and an opposition to a belief in the transcendent".

During the Middle Ages, by contrast, the experience of the holy and the symbolic function of cathedrals were not distinct from everyday life, but were inseparably part of it. Modern people's daily lives are largely profane. They have banished the concept of beauty from their experience of architecture and art, and they no longer
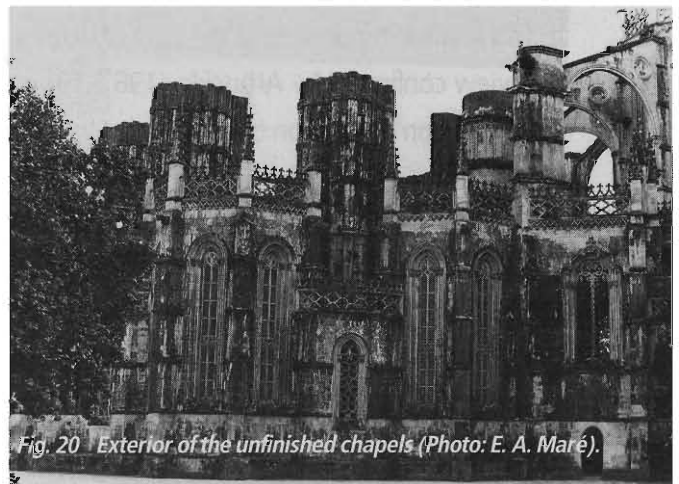
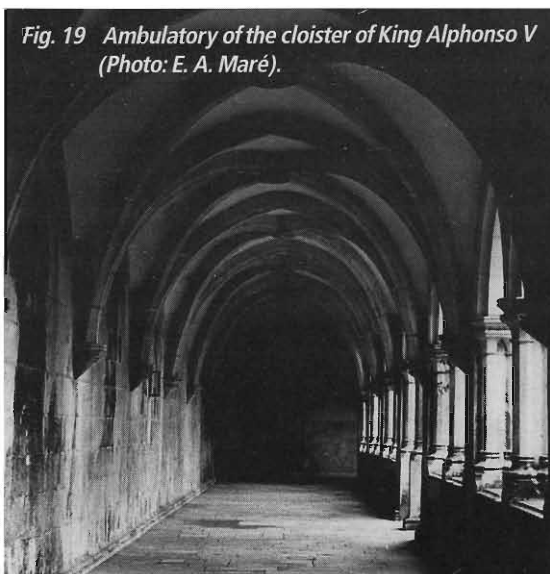Fig. 20 Exterior of the unfinished chapels (Photo: E. A. Maré).

feel a need for symbolism in architecture. Above all, they no longer believe in the value of vows such as the one made by King John I before the Battle of Aljubarotta, but regard it as myth and attach the connotation of untruth to this word. "Myth" is no longer an explanation of an ultimate, universal truth or an account of non-rational, transcendental experience.

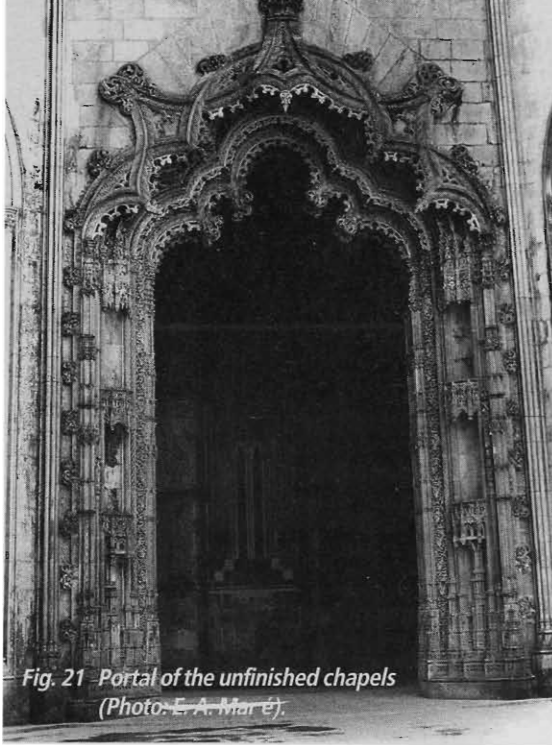Fig. 19 Ambulatory of the cloister of King Alphonso V (Photo: E. A. Maré).

Fig. 21 Portal of the unfinished chapels (Photo: E. A. Maré).

Yet in the human mind myth functions as truth, and for this reason it is almost inevitable that the origins of a sanctuary should assume mythical meaning in the psyches of the people who erect it. This is what happenend in the case of Batalha — a view confirmed by Arbuckle (1987: 19) in his exposition of a notion derived from Eliade:[

> T]here is a creation dimension behind every kind of myth. Myth, he says, is always the recital of a creation: it tells how something was accomplished, began to be. It is for this reason that myth is bound up with ontology: it speaks of realities, of what really happened. For him "reality" means "sacred reality". And the sacred reality belongs to the sacred time, the time when creation took place. In profane time people carry on the ordinary business of daily living. It is sacred time which gives meaning to life:

Fig. 22 Detail of the portal of the unfinished chapels (Photo: E. A. Maré).

> sacred time breaks into people's lives through rituals in which people re-enact, re-live the holy or the original creation, their emergence out of chaos. In short they relive the founding myths of their culture.

The reliving of the founding myth is called a regeneration ritual. It is particularly relevant when a people's cultural identity seems to be falling into chaos or is threatened with chaos. People feel the need to relive their original founding, and thus win back their identity.

In Eliade's terms Batalha would be a regeneration myth to the Portuguese, an emergence out of chaos of which the amazing order of the cathedral is the abiding proof. Rationally modern man denies the fact that profane time can be penetrated, for he has organised virtually his entire life according to profane time. Modern architecture likewise reflects the fact that in his social living he has hardly any need for expressing the holy. Bataille (1987: 11) comments thus:

> Until quite recently men were building sanctuaries, in which we still have a powerful experience of the holy. But the churches built in our day entirely fail to provide this experience. Compared to those of the Middle Ages they appear to be missing something. Modern architects build banks, warehouses, storerooms and apartment blocks: within these limits they are in their element. When it comes to a church — and a church is not less than a sacred place — hey no longer have the required mental orientation. (Own translation)

Human beings project their mental orientation in all their works. The fact that they are no longer able to construct sacred places like their medi-

eval counterparts probabaly means that they no longer have any need for the sacred and the concomitant expression of symbolism and beauty. What has filled the vacuum thus created? Contemporary people have put science and technology in the place of religion, and matter in the place of spiritual values. But, says von Goethe, all the beautiful monuments of the arts represent human nature (Cage 1980: 79). Human nature is preeminently spiritual. Man is man by virtue of being spirit, and it is from man as a spiritual being that all the many developments of the sciences and the arts proceed.

It is human to recognise the other in God and to create places for him that are unlike other places because they do not merely have a function but also communicate spiritually. Contemporary people, too, have such a need which they try to satisfy mainly by visiting the "sacred museums"

Fig. 23 Detail of the arch forms of the unfinished chapels.
(Photo: E. A. Maré).

Fig. 24 *Effigies of King Edward V and his queen on their shrine in the unfinished chapels (Photo: E. A. Maré).*
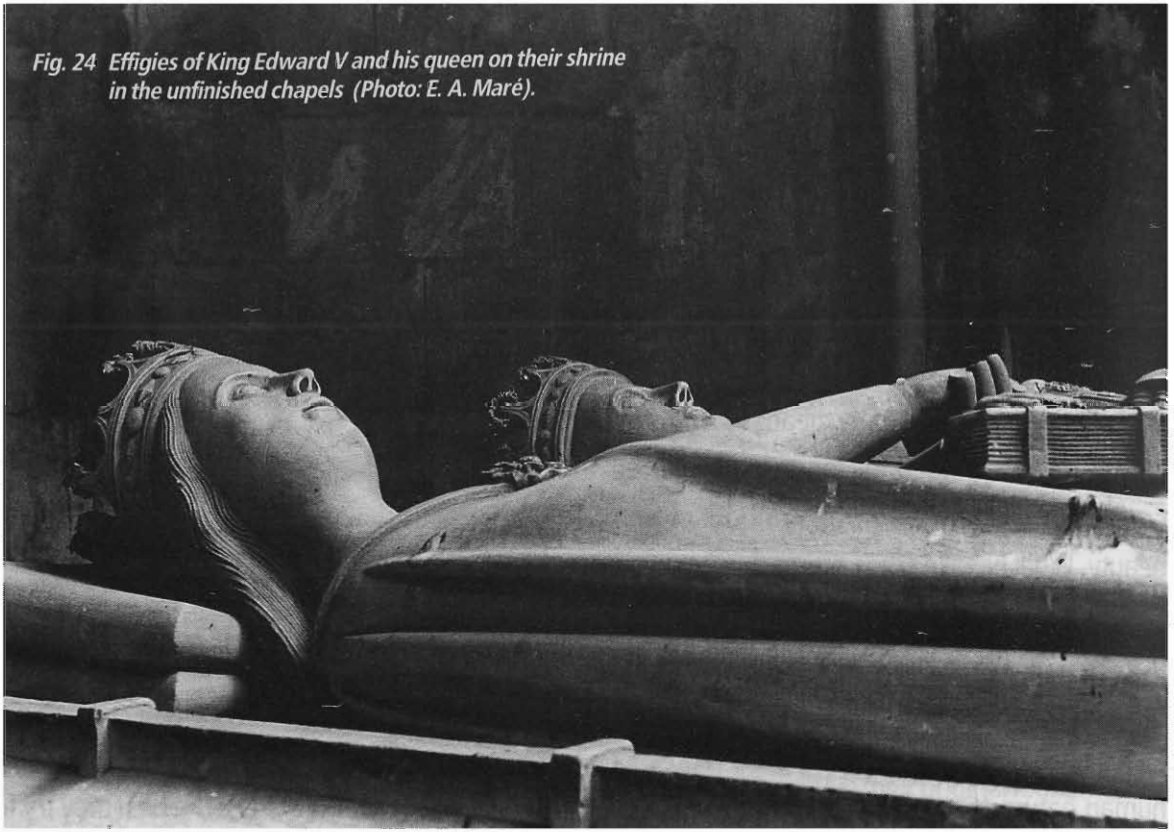
of the past, for that is where the miracle happened that Van der Leeuw (1965: 340) rates so highly, the fusion of art and religion. In the architectural symbol the two realities of God and man, heaven and earth merge together. This is clearly suggested in the etymology of *symbolon* , derived from *symballein* , to cast together. Hence modern man has a special need for symbolism in architecture.

Note

* This article is a revised and expanded version of the Camoes Lecture, entitled "Batalha as a sacred place", that I delivered on 3 November 1988 at the University of the Witwatersrand under the auspices of the Ernst Oppenheimer Institute of Portuguese Studies. The present text will also be read as a paper at the Portuguese Cultural Festival to be held in October 1996 in Pretoria and Johannesburg.

Fig.25 *Gallery in the Renaissance style above the portal of the unfinished chapels (Photo: E. A. Maré).*
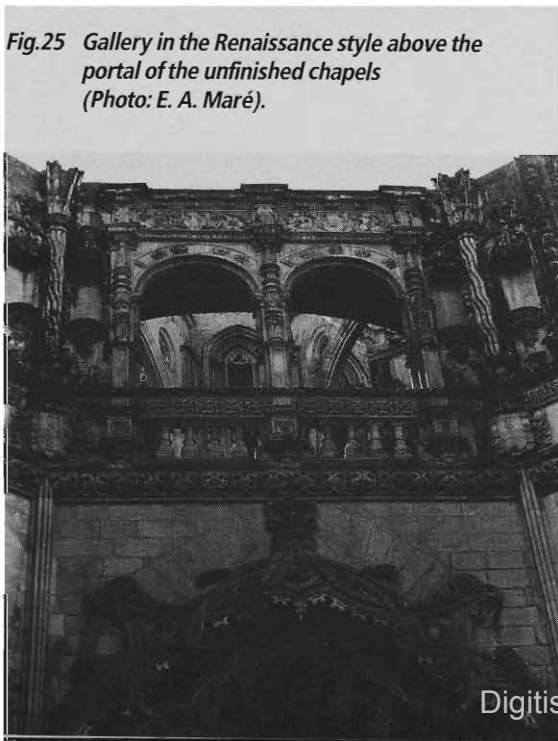
Bibliography

Adler, M.J. 1981. *Six great ideas: truth, goodness, beauty, liberty equality, justice: ideas we judge by, ideas we act on.* New York & London: Macmillan.

Arbuckle, G.A. 1987. Mythology, revitalization and the refounding of religious life. *Review for Religious* 46(1, January - February): 14-43.

Bataille, G. 1987. *Kunst, geweld en erotiek als grenservaring.* Edited by I. van den Burg & D. Meijers. Amsterdam: SUA.

Boas, G. 1968. *The limits of reason..* New York: Greenwood Press

Cage, J. (ed.) 1980. *Goethe on art.* London: Scolar Press.

Dunlop, I. 1982. *The cathedral's crusade: the rise of the Gothic style in France.* London: Hamilton.

Eco, U. 1973. Function and sign: semiotics of architecture, *Via* 2: 131-153.

Eco, U. 1986. *Art and beauty in the Middle Ages.* Translated by H. Bredin. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

Eliade, M. 1954. *The myth of the eternal return.* Translated from the French by W.R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ferreira, O.J.O. 1988. Orde van die Tempel, Orde van Christus, en die Portugese ontdekkingstogte.*Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrif vir Kultuur- en Kunsgeskiedenis/South African Journal of Cultural and Art History* 2(1, January): 7-21.

Fischer, F.W. & Timmers, J.J.M. 1971. *Spätgotik: zwischen Mystik und Reformation*, in the series *Kunst der Welt: ihre geschichtlichen, soziologischen und religiösen Grundlagen.* Baden-Baden: Holle.

Frankl,P. 1963. *Gothic architecture.* Translated from the German by D. Pevsner. Baltimore: Penguin Books.

Gadamer, H.-G. 1986. *The relevance of the beautiful and other essays.* Translated from the German by N. Walker. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Geiger, M. 1986. *The significance of art: a phenomenological approach to aesthetics.* Translated from the German by K. Berger. Washington D.C.: Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology & University Press of America.

Gettings, F. 1978. *The hidden order of art: a study in occult symbolism in art.* London: Studio Vista.

James, E.O. 1965. *From cave to cathedral: temples and shrines of prehistoric, classical and Early Christian times.* London: Thames & Hudson.

Jantzen, H. 1962 *High Gothic* Translated from the German by. London: Constable.

Krautheimer, R. 1942. Iconography of Medieval architecture. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5(5): 1-33.

Leake, C.D. 1976. *What are we living for? Practical philosophy*, Vol. III: *The esthetics.* Westbury, N.Y.: PJD Publications.

Maré, E.A. 1985. Metaphorical representation of sea motifs in Manueline architecture. *South African Journal of Cultural History/Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrif vir Kultuurgeskiedenis.* 2(2, July): 36-41.

Maré, E.A. 1986. Die stad as argitektoniese omgewing: 'n teoretiese en geskiedkundige studie. Unpublished D.Arch. thesis. Bloemfontein: University of the Orange Free State.

Maré, E.A. 1988. See en kruis as Portugese heroïese simbole tydens die ontdekkingsreise na die Ooste. *South African Journal of Cultural and Art History/Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrif vir Kultuur- en Kunsgeskiedenis.* 2(1, January): 31-43.

Norberg-Schulz, C. 1980. *'Genius loci': towards a phenomenonogy of architecture.* Translated from the Italian by. London: Academy Editions.

Otto, R. 1936. *The idea of the holy: an inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational.* Translated from the German by J.W. Harvey. London: Oxford University Press.

Rombach, H. 1977. *Leben des Geistes: Ein Buch der Bilder zur Fundamentalgeschichte der Menschheit.* Amsterdam: J.C. van Kesteren.

Ross, J.B. & McLaughlin, M.M. (eds). 1978. *The portable Medieval reader.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Smith, W.C. 1974. Objectivity and the human sciences. *Frontiers of limits of human knowledge.* Royal Society of Canada, Annual Meeting: 3-4 June.

Sundt, R.A. 1993. "Monastery of Santa Maria da Vitria, Batalha, Portugal", in: R.J. van Vynckt (ed.), *International Dictionary of Architects and Architecture*, vol. 2. Detroit: St James Press.

Von Simson, O.G. 1956. *The Gothic cathedral: origins of Gothic architecture and the Medieval concept of order.* Translated from the German by. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Van Der Leeuw, G. 1965. *Sacred and profane beauty: the holy in art.* Translated from the German by D.E. Green. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Weiss, P. 1974. *Beyond all appearances.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

86

87