

Romanesque churches in the south west of France and their relation to architecture, art and music

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It is with regret that the editor has to announce that Daniel Geldenhuys passed away on 24 December 2009 at the age of 61.

This article deals with the three disciplines of architecture, sculptural art and music in relation to the cultural-historical presence of the medieval Romanesque churches in the Dordogne region in the south west of France. It is pointed out that these buildings and their accompanying artworks resulted from a cultural transformation that changed every aspect of life, allowing us to redirect our attention from these encompassing artistic monuments to the methods and mental processes as applied by the anonymous individuals who created them. The change in the value attributed to these Romanesque churches as cultural objects surviving in the twenty-first century, with differing sociological and spatial uses, is examined.

Keywords: Romanesque, medieval, Dordogne, architecture, sculpture, music

Romaanse kerke in die suid-weste van Frankryk en hulle verhouding tot argitektuur, kuns en musiek

Die artikel handel oor die drie dissiplines van argitektuur, beeldhoukuns en musiek, in verhouding tot die kultuur-historiese teenwoordigheid van die middeleeuse Romaanse kerke in die Dordogne gebied in die suidweste van Frankryk. Daar word aangetoon dat hierdie geboue, en hulle meegaande kunswerke, die gevolg was van 'n kulturele transformasie wat elke aspek van die samelewing aangeraak het en ons toelaat om ons aandag te herlei vanaf hierdie allesomvattende kunsmonumente na die metodes en denkprosesse van die anonieme individue wat die skeppers daarvan was. Die veranderde waardes waarin hierdie Romaanse kerke met verskillende sosiologiese en ruimtelike gebruike in die een-en-twintigste eeu as kulturele aspekte bly voortbestaan, word ondersoek.

Sleutelwoorde: Romaans, Middeleeus, Dordogne, argitektuur, beeldhouwerk, musiek

In the definition of the most basic elements of the disciplines of architecture, art and music, the following features emerge: Architecture consists of the elements of formal construction and space, sculptural art of formal construction and light, and music of formal construction and sound. Clearly, the unifying factor is formal construction. Considering the medieval roots of the Romanesque churches, most of which date from around the eleventh to the twelfth century, all these elements have been preserved in the intellectual cultural heritage, and are still reflected and relevant in their presence and employment up to the present time.

In this article we will be paying attention to the historical presence of these churches in Europe, and particularly in the south west of France. Our focus is restricted to those churches constructed during a specific hundred years during the medieval period. These buildings resulted from a cultural transformation that left no aspect of life unchanged, while the ensuing works of art produced did more than simply reflect the characteristics of medieval culture as a whole. The value of the surviving buildings as cultural artefacts of architecture and plastic art, as well as the more ephemeral acoustical features, which are still discernible in the twenty-first century, will be considered. Attention will be paid to the completely differing sociological and spatial circumstances of new uses in a different époque.

Historical presence

According to George Zarnecki, the years 1050 to 1150 constitute the truly creative period of Romanesque art, with the preceding half century being the period of preparation and the subsequent half century being the gradual decline or transition to the Gothic.¹ Romanesque style is not easily defined, and in order to understand its genesis and development,² it is necessary to

look at Romanesque Europe as a conglomeration of feudal states, old and new, with differing traditions, all of which owed their allegiance to Rome. Latin, the language of the educated, was common to them all. One thus tends to agree with the poet T.S. Elliot, who observed that the civilization of Western Europe is a single civilization descended from Rome via the Church of Rome and the Holy Roman Empire.³ During the eleventh century, France was still a conglomeration of large and small feudal units, but by the twelfth century, a central royal authority had been imposed over most of them, and France emerged as a political entity of the first order.⁴

In the Dordogne region in the south west of France, furtive religious-cultural activities took place during the Romanesque period. The results can still be observed today in the clusters of Romanesque churches, with their characteristic artistic features, that survive in the area. Virtually every village, down to the smallest, had its own church building, many of which were obviously planned, constructed and decorated by itinerant communities of expert builders and master masons, as well as artists. Most often these artefacts were constructed from material from the surrounding district.

Disciplines and cognition

As stated earlier, the two main elements of architecture are formal construction and space, but during the period under discussion the discipline underwent a drastic cultural transformation. Similar transformations took place in other fields such as art and music, and it would be easy to assume that these works, all created at the same historical moment and all breaking sharply with earlier traditions, are somehow related. Owing to a lack of sources, however, it has been difficult to state with any precision what the exact relationship between them is, as the names of their creators have not come down to us. To overcome this problem we shall examine the scholarship involved in the disciplines, and the way in which the intellectual challenges of the different professions were approached, thus demonstrating that during the eleventh and twelfth centuries these specialists became more intellectually distinct, developing specialized knowledge and mental skills.⁵

A redirection of attention away from the monuments or artworks and to the individuals who created them reveals two levels; one is the level of the disciplines involved, while the other is the level of the cognitive processes of the individuals. Cognitive processes relate to an ability to impose order on materials, to shape several variables into a whole, and to take account of potential differences in viewpoint. These skills matter, irrespective of whether it is space, sound or light that is being manipulated in a framework of formal construction. What changed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was that these specialists developed methods for solving new problems. Instead of seeing their role as one of preserving ancient knowledge, they expected both to solve new problems and to create new forms, having the intellectual means to attain these objectives.⁶

By studying the processes by which these artworks were produced, attention is focused more on the problems posed and the methods used than on the specific ideas or forms created. Through the formulation of a three-stage process of discipline formation arising from the way in which specialists conceived of and attempted to solve problems during the period under discussion, comparisons can be drawn in spite of the differences in media involved. In the eleventh century, the first stage of the process was mirrored in the growing mastery of both a body of relevant expertise and of the analytical methods by which that expertise could be brought to bear on different problems. The second stage came into being when certain specialists ceased applying their methods to specific issues and began instead to construct coherent systems

of ideas. During the last half of the twelfth century, the third and last stage occurred, when, with established disciplines and the ability and desire to deal with systems of ideas, it became possible to evaluate all the practitioners of a discipline by means of a standard that had been created in the process.⁷

Church buildings

The most prominent feature of the Dordogne churches is their interior rounded domes, constructed from cut limestone, based on top of a relatively simple plan of very often a single rectangular nave. Of the roughly six hundred churches in Romanesque or partially Romanesque style, almost two hundred domes have survived. The region boasting the greatest density of these churches lies to the north west of the province; the diameter of the domes ranges from 15 to 2 metre. Measurement of the surviving domes reveals the following: 8 measure 12 to 15 metres in diameter; 7 measure 8 to 12 metres in diameter; 8 measure 7 metres; 12 measure 6 metres; 27 measure 5 metres; 70 measure 4 metres; 29 measure 3 metres; and 7 measure 2 metres.⁸

Although the existence of builders or master masons able to oversee the work on a church building site certainly dates back to well before the eleventh century, what was innovative during this century was the ambition and originality of the designs that these builders conceived. For the most part, the masons copied stone buildings with which they were already familiar, the most popular being the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. These masons discovered the means of delineating the spatial units and volumes within buildings rather than thinking of design in terms of flat, undifferentiated planes of walls and ceilings. Designing volumes posed problems that were cognitively more complex than designing flat surfaces, as seen, for instance, in the rounded domes so prevalent in many of these churches. The principal dome of a Romanesque church was usually placed at the intersection of the central nave and the transept, which had a marked influence on the acoustical qualities of the building, as the choir from which the music was performed was right behind it. A good example is the church of Cherval, where the original twelfth century rectangular construction is divided into four bays of archways, each topped by a rounded dome, the one on the eastern side situated above the choir. The inside dimensions of this church are 27 metres by 5 meters 30 centimetres, which provides an indication of the compactness of most of these buildings.⁹

Articulation of spatial volumes was central to the architecture of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, not only involving more than a new style and direction in architecture, but serving increasingly to make builders members of a distinct discipline,¹⁰ although in this instance most of these individuals are anonymous. By paying careful attention to chronology, building techniques and historical context it is possible to infer from the buildings the mental processes according to which the builder worked. We should also endeavour to consider both the buildings a builder knew, and those that he built, as they existed at the time. It therefore enables us to understand how a builder came to choose a particular element of design, or how an artist chose or developed a particular style instead of another. This approach allows us to share in the intellectual excitement of this period, one of the most original and important in the history of our civilization.¹¹



Figure 1
The church of Notre-Dame de Bourg-du-Bost
with its sparsely decorated rounded Roman arch
side-entrance (photo: Alain de La Ville).

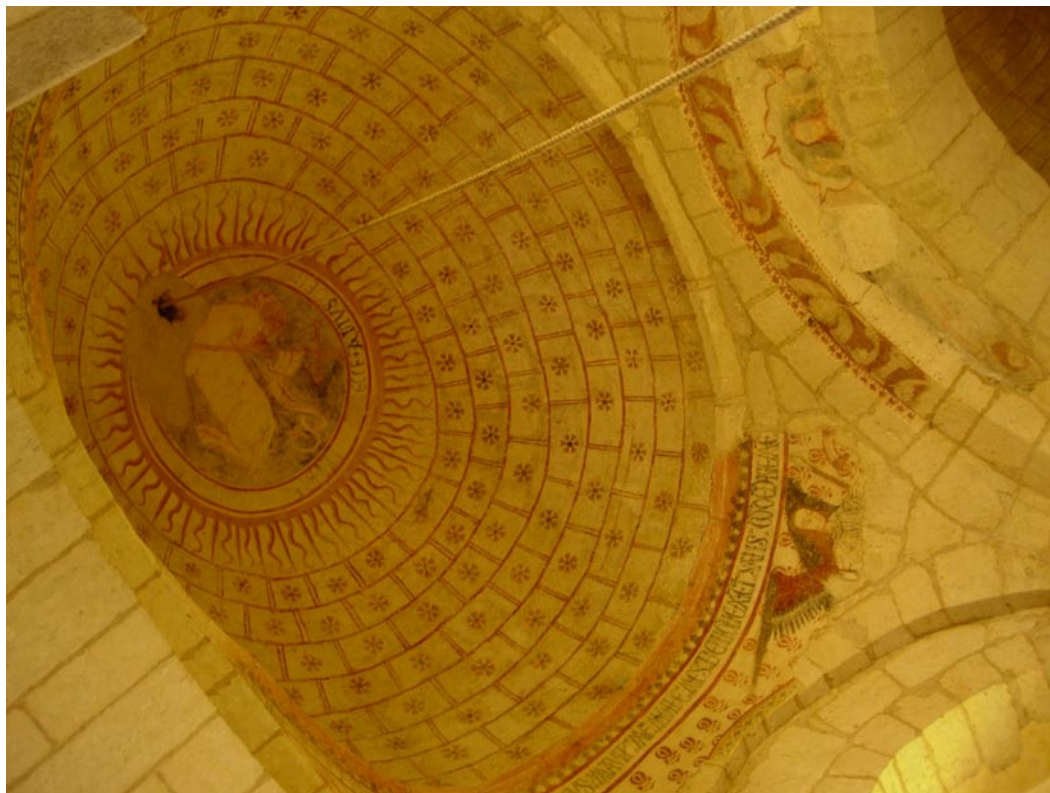


Figure 2
One of the domes of l'église Notre-Dame de Bourg-du-Bost,
with an example of the richly decorated wall
paintings added on later during the 14th to the 16th century (photo: Alain de La Ville).



Figure 3

The interior of the church of Saint Martial de Viveyrol, showing the succession of domes so typical of many of the Romanesque churches in the Dordogne area (photo: Alain de La Ville).

Romanesque sculpture

Working in collaboration with the builders, the sculptors did not have an entirely free hand. Because of the rather simple style of many of these Dordogne churches, the rounded Roman arch entrances were often sparsely decorated, and habitually left without a tympanum. Another reason was that the local limestone, although soft but durable, was not suitable for quarrying in large blocks.¹² On the interior and portals of the western entrances, however, many examples of capitals at the pilaster strips on which they rest remain. The builders customarily decided how many capitals were needed, and what size they would be. Within those rather general requirements, almost any subject or style of sculpture served the purpose of marking the edges of spatial modules, leaving the sculptors considerable freedom. They responded by producing sculpture that in its variety and imaginativeness can be considered one of the glories of late eleventh and early twelfth century art.¹³

The sculptors who decorated the capitals made use of figural motifs, single figures, or even scenes; their aim was to preserve the logical and harmonious structure of the Corinthian capitals, but to this they added a certain animation and new meaning. The figure, whether human, animal or imaginary, often had to be distorted to fit the required architectural shape and function. In keeping with the contemporary fascination with the miraculous and fabulous, the sculptors began to delight in these distortions, and to depart from the forms found in nature.¹⁴ Examples of decorated capitals in this style can be found at La Chapelle Saint-Robert, in the north of the Dordogne, where a particular capital features the bared torso of a man lifting his arms, the nude torso of another man framed by two horses, which he leads by a bridle, and two saddled elephants

facing each other.¹⁵ In most of the capitals a strong vertical axis underscores the symmetry of the compositions, while the arrangement of the decoration around the lower edges emphasizes the transition to the main face and, hence, to the central axis. The actual working out of the solution within the framework produces innumerable variations, although the abstract sense of how the design should accomplish the transition is limited to a few possibilities. Perhaps more than any other single feature, Romanesque sculpture is distinguished by these variations.¹⁶



Figure 4

The richly decorated rounded arch entrance of the church of Saint-Sulpice de Mareuil, depicting examples of human and animal figures (photo: Alain de La Ville).



Figure 5

South-eastern viewpoint of l'église Notre-Dame de l'Assumption de Venduire with the original Romanesque bell tower, and an upper portion rebuilt around the 17th century, sitting atop the transept, pierced by twin windows centered on each façade (photo: Alain de La Ville).



Figure 6
Capitals decorated with figural motifs and animal figures at the western façade and entrance of the church Notre-Dame de l'Assumption de Venduire (photo: Alain de La Ville).

Music in the Romanesque era

The Romanesque falls within the period during which Western music was starting to be written down. The music that was notated for the first time during the eighth and ninth centuries was not only sacred but liturgical, set to the official Latin texts associated with Western Christian worship. This signalled a significant watershed in musical development, and although not a single contemporary witness recorded this innovation, it allows us to trace the evolution of music with our own eyes and ears. The history of recording music in writing is the story of a complex and fascinating interaction of internal and external influences. We have already observed that not a single literary reference from this period exists documenting the invention of the *neumes* that tracked the relative rise and fall of the melodies, as well as the placement within them of the text syllables. No actual basis exists to rule out the possibility that the *neumes* were independently invented, as a type of shorthand notation, to serve the immediate musical purpose at hand.¹⁷ That purpose, serving as a method of developing a form of notation as a mnemonic device, was devised by the cantors to partially replace the oral transmission of the Western liturgical repertory to other dioceses. The music conveyed in this way was music for the divine service, serving a divine purpose, while the music practised in all these little churches can be considered as a human activity. The music that both accompanied this activity and gave it shape was a music that functioned in symbiosis with a social framework, which at the time was yet undivorced from daily life.¹⁸ By imagining ourselves in the position of this music's contemporaries, the *Francisc* musicians of about a thousand years ago, we allow ourselves a distanced perspective and critical awareness of our own contemporary world.¹⁹

During the Romanesque era there was a search for musical processes and metaphors within the context of a medieval language philosophy. These metaphors were derived not only from the main disciplines of the period, namely grammar, rhetoric and poetry, but also from another discipline, architecture. This discipline engaged in a close relationship to the design of the new rounded volumes of the Romanesque churches, and the acoustical properties of the venue for which the music had been designed. During the eleventh to twelfth centuries it is thus not without reason that some of the important notated polyphonic works were created in the south-western region of France.²⁰ The direct relationship as to the development of individual languages created between architecture and music developed as a result of the revaluation of the *artes mechanicae* in direct contrast to the *artes liberales*, as described circa 1127 in the *Didascalicon* of Hugo von Saint-Victor.²¹

Rendition in other époques

For centuries medieval architecture had been regarded as having lost touch with or degenerated from the Antique ideal. The term 'Romanesque' and its French equivalent *romane* were not definitively established until the early nineteenth century, when the earlier broader use of the term 'Gothic' was associated with a number of attitudes ranging from hostile condemnation to genuine admiration. In the seventeenth century the spirit of medieval architecture became extinct, and it was either revitalized or categorically rejected in favour of Italian ideals of architecture. There is no consensus of opinion regarding seventeenth century attitudes toward medieval architecture. The eighteenth century again marked a watershed in terms of the eleventh and twelfth century so-called round style of architecture, and was philosophically linked to the aesthetic categories of the sublime and picturesque. Certain qualities of this medieval architecture, namely dimness, gloom, massiveness, solidity and profuse ornamentation, together with the dilapidating effect of time, again became aesthetically acceptable.²²

During the twentieth century the value of the Romanesque churches as cultural objects was recognized anew, and many became the subject of restoration projects. The restorers had to grasp the basic organizing scheme that transcends regional variation, which was in general use as a modular system among the master builders of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. Modular conception of space was developed in the first half of the eleventh century, and because transepts, side chapels, aisles and naves could all be treated modularly, this conception provided builders with a means of designing buildings to meet a variety of commissions.²³ Similar marking and establishing of boundaries between modules also provided opportunities for sculptors and composers to experiment during the Romanesque period.

For the execution of restoration projects from the twentieth century onwards it was realized that the cultural-historical and architectural qualities of the buildings had to be preserved by all means, even though the social functions and role of the church building would and could never again serve the same purpose as during the medieval period. During the European summer a myriad of music festivals take place all over France, adding up to more than two thousand events.²⁴ An exceptional choice of music is presented to an enthusiastic, attentive and supportive public, covering a wide spectrum from opera to chamber and solo music. In some instances the little Romanesque churches are being used as venues. The music for which these buildings were conceived is rarely performed in these spaces, however, as a repertoire from later centuries is chosen because of its greater popular appeal. Because many of these churches are situated in isolated locations or villages, such activities promote cultural and commercial opportunities for the local communities. Audiences are attracted by the historical importance of the buildings, and thus a wider public is made aware of and receptive to the architectural, artistic and acoustical

ambiance of the venues. An example of such a festival is the Itinéraire Baroque, presented by Ton Koopman, harpsichord player, organist and conductor of the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra and Choir in different Romanesque churches in the Ribérac area of the Dordogne, of which the churches of Grand Brassac, Cercles and Bourg du Bost can be regarded as the most beautiful restored representative examples.

Using original baroque instruments or copies of them in these venues, which were not originally designed or conceived for this, has certain disadvantages. Many of the instruments do not function optimally in the extremely humid conditions present in these churches. Stable tuning of the instruments remains the most difficult problem to overcome, as both the body and, where relevant, strings of the instrument respond violently to the humidity. The domes present in many of these churches are acoustically not ideal for the performance of music from the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, as the reverberation of the sound is too prolonged, making contact between the musicians themselves, as well as with the listeners, difficult. Spectators do not find the flat floor surfaces of the churches entirely suitable, as they are not able to see the performers properly. To counteract this problem makeshift podiums are sometimes erected, which inconvenience the musicians because of the instability created by the uneven floors. In spite of these obstacles, the attendance of baroque music concerts performed by highly professional musicians in intimate venues remains a breathtaking experience for the audience, who have the opportunity to be in close and even direct contact with the performers, in the most beautiful and inspiring settings. The musicians are trained to cope with these problems without making the public aware of them, affording members of the public the opportunity to enjoy the music surrounded by the particular historical and artistic ambiance offered by these venues.

In the twenty-first century approaches to art products of the distant and recent past can-not simply be taken for granted; however, they can be more clearly observed if we allow our values to be challenged by different ones.²⁵

Notes

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| 1 | George Zarnecki. 1989. <i>Romanesque</i> , p. 5. | 14 | Zarnecki, p. 58. |
| 2 | <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 5. | 15 | Secret, p. 133. |
| 3 | Thomas S. Eliot. 1945. <i>What Is a Classic?</i>
Quoted in J.M. Coetzee. 2001. <i>Stranger Shores,
Literary Essays</i> . Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 1. | 16 | Radding & Clark, p. 51. |
| 4 | Zarnecki, p. 6. | 17 | Richard Taruskin. 2005. <i>The Oxford History of
Western Music</i> , Vol. 1, p. 14. |
| 5 | Charles M. Radding and William W. Clark.
1992. <i>Medieval Architecture, Medieval
Learning: Builders and Masters in the Age of
Romanesque and Gothic</i> , p. 1. | 18 | <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 65. |
| 6 | <i>Ibid.</i> , pp. 3 and 4. | 19 | <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 67. |
| 7 | <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 5. | 20 | Max Haas. 1997. <i>Mittelalter. Die Musik in
Geschichte und Gegenwart</i> , Vol. 6, p. 348. |
| 8 | Jean Secret. 1968. <i>Périgord Roman</i> , pp. 12–13. | 21 | Hugo von Saint-Victor. Circa 1127.
<i>Didascalicon. De studio legendi</i> . Quoted in Max
Haas, p. 347. |
| 9 | <i>Ibid.</i> , pp. 97–101. | 22 | Tina Waldeier Bizarro. 1992. <i>Romanesque
Architectural Criticism</i> , pp. 14–17; 106. |
| 10 | Radding & Clark, p. 12. | 23 | Radding & Clark, pp. 47; 36. |
| 11 | <i>Ibid.</i> , pp. 7–8. | 24 | <i>La Place des festivals 2009</i> (Brochure), p. 1. |
| 12 | Zarnecki, p. 82. | 25 | Taruskin, p. 66. |
| 13 | Radding & Clark, p. 48. | | |

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