

RELIGIOUS GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE



SANTA MARIA DEL MAR (BARCELONA)

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AS FROM THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY, BUT ESPECIALLY DURING THE FIFTEENTH, CATALAN GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE SPREAD NOT ONLY TO THE BALEARICS AND VALENCIA BUT ALSO TO SARDINIA, SICILY AND NAPLES. IN THE SPHERE OF RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE, THOUGH, THE CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA DEL MAR IN BARCELONA IS THE MOST OUTSTANDING EXAMPLE.

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Gothic architecture in Catalonia was implanted in a number of religious buildings with widely differing characteristics.

After the construction of the Romanesque cathedrals of Girona, Barcelona and Seu d'Urgell, the new cathedrals of Tarragona and Lleida and the collegiate church of Sant Feliu, in Girona, still indicate adherence to the Romanesque layout, while introducing new forms in the construction.

Parallel to this, the great Cistercian monastic churches of Poblet, Santes Creus and Vallbona de les Monges, with their highly coherent structure, bear witness to the presence of other formulas.

During the thirteenth century, new religious orders –Dominicans, Franciscans, Carmelites and Mercedarians– frequently adopted a mixed system for their churches, in which the chancel is covered with a ribbed vault and the single nave has a wooden ceiling in sections separated by large diaphragm arches.

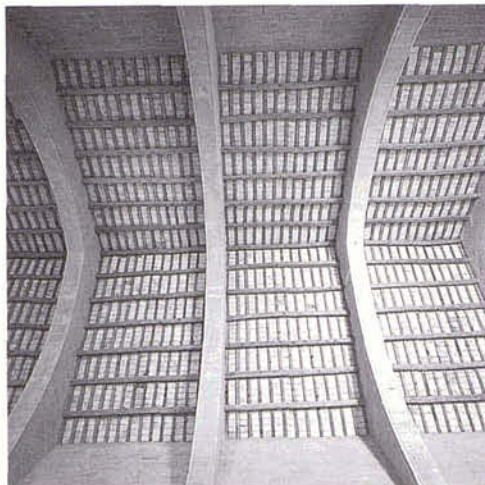
This system combines the pure Gothic chancels with the rectangular naves already in use in Cistercian constructions and also found in religious buildings with flat chancels which were common in all parts of the Mediterranean.

From specific texts we know that the use of the mixed formula was not due to an ignorance of full Gothic architecture, so much as to a principle of austerity and economy which even came to limit the height allowed for the walls.

Even so, an exception in Barcelona was the large church of the convent of Santa Caterina, the Dominicans' first stable church.

Founded towards the year 1223, we know that the church of 1252 already reached the level from which the vaults started, and that when the general Chapter of the Dominicans was held in Barcelona in 1261 there was criticism of the fact that the church exceeded the height allowed, though this disapproval did not lead to any limitation. The last section of the nave of the church was completed with a large rose window thanks to a bequest by Ponç d'Alest, who died in 1275.

One important feature of Santa Caterina and of other large Catalan churches



ROOF OF THE DORMITORY OF THE POBLET MONASTERY

of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is the existence of lateral chapels built between the buttresses. These buttresses were incorporated into them and included in a single perimeter wall as far as the height of the chapel roof. As well as giving the impression of uniformity to the base of the structure, the procedure was a very practical way of financing the building, since the sale of chapels to patrons or guilds provided all the funds necessary for the construction up to the beginning of the roof of the nave or naves, requiring just one last period of fund-raising for their completion.

The success of the end façade of Santa Caterina was such that all the rose windows we know of in the Catalan churches of the end of the thirteenth century and the whole of the fourteenth are a faithful reproduction of this feature, which derives from French models like the western rose window of the cathedral of Rheims or the southern one of Nôtre Dame in Paris. Thus we find them once again in Tarragona cathedral, in the monastery of Sant Cugat del Vallès and in the church of Santa Maria del Pi, and we know that there were identical versions in two other Barcelona churches, that of the convent of Sant Agustí and that of Santa Maria del Mar in its original design.

The impulse of the cathedrals of Lleida and Tarragona and the convents of the

thirteenth century can be explained by the prosperity deriving from the great expansionist enterprises of the reign of James I, which led to the conquest of Mallorca, Eivissa and Valencia. A second period took the Catalans to Sicily, Sardinia and even the Byzantine Empire, although the great plague of 1348 initiated a period of crisis which was not easily overcome.

This creative period was undoubtedly one of the most interesting moments for Catalan Gothic architecture, spurred on at the same time by the monarchy and by the merchants, who formed a very powerful social group and the most dynamic of the time.

A series of elements contributed to a very valuable style of Gothic architecture dominated by horizontal lines and large flat walls perforated by large windows. Some years ago Josep Lluís Sert praised its balance and simplicity, and Alexandre Cirici has since analysed its square-based modulation.

Obviously, these formulas were not arrived at without first going through a series of trials and approximations. In the case of Barcelona Cathedral, begun in 1298, we have traces of a construction with a continuous pointed vault and of corbels that must have corresponded to flat wooden ceilings. The present chancel with its ambulatory with nine radial chapels is fully resolved and must have formed the model for Girona cathedral (begun in 1312), the first stage of Tortosa cathedral and the church of Santa Maria del Mar (contracted in 1329 by Berenguer de Montagut and Ramon Despuig and consecrated in 1384).

Manresa cathedral, which Berenguer de Montagut contracted in 1322, the chancel of Santa Maria de Cervera and the definitive plan for Tortosa cathedral represent different forms within a very extensive repertory with numerous examples.

First, amongst the single-nave buildings, we can pick out the royal chapel of Santa Àgueda, in Barcelona, begun in 1294, with its apse with ribbed vault and nave with wooden ceiling and slender diaphragm arches, a construction completed with an octagonal bell-tower. But the most widespread formula, from

the first half of the fourteenth century on, were the single-nave churches covered with vaulted sections, not unlike those to be found in several parts of southern France. Amongst the examples with the largest span are the parish church of Santa Maria del Pi in Barcelona and the church of Santa Maria de Montblanc. Throughout the fourteenth century, both in the principality of Catalonia and in Roussillon, Mallorca, Menorca and Eivissa, many churches that initially had wooden ceilings were now covered with vaults, though others survived that used the older formula. The cloisters can be summed up in three main types. The most solemn are partly a continuation of the Romanesque galleries, in Ripoll, Poblet, Vallbona and Lleida Cathedral. In the same tradition, with rich and complex traceries, we find the cloisters of Vic cathedral, begun by Ramon Despuig in 1324, five years before he intervened in the contract for Santa Maria del Mar.

We could also add to these the cloisters of Santes Creus and of Barcelona cathedral, although these are incomplete or damaged examples.

The cloister of the convent of Santa Caterina, in Barcelona, and that of Sant Agustí, in the same city, which derives from the first, had a very different rhythm, with double arches with an oculus above.

In contrast, there are two types with highly simplified, uniform arches. A first model is to be found, for example, in the churches of Sant Domènec, in Balaguer, and Sant Francesc, in Palma de Mallorca.

The most widespread, probably originating in Sant Domènec in Girona, tends towards a simplification based on prefabricated pillars with decorated or plain shafts, worked principally in the quarries of Girona, in nummulitic limestone, a fossil-bearing stone well suited for production in series. This explains the abundance and the speed of execution of the great cloister of Pedralbes, and also of many other monuments in Girona (Sant Daniel, Sant Francesc), Barcelona (Santa Anna, Santa Clara, Jonqueres, Sant Pere de les Puelles, Montsió) and many other places (Sant Joan de les Abadesses, Santa Clara de Puigcerdà), without including the parallel examples for lay or quasi-lay use (the abbot's palace of Vilabertran). This type of gallery is also repeated around the top of the courtyard in many civil buildings, show-

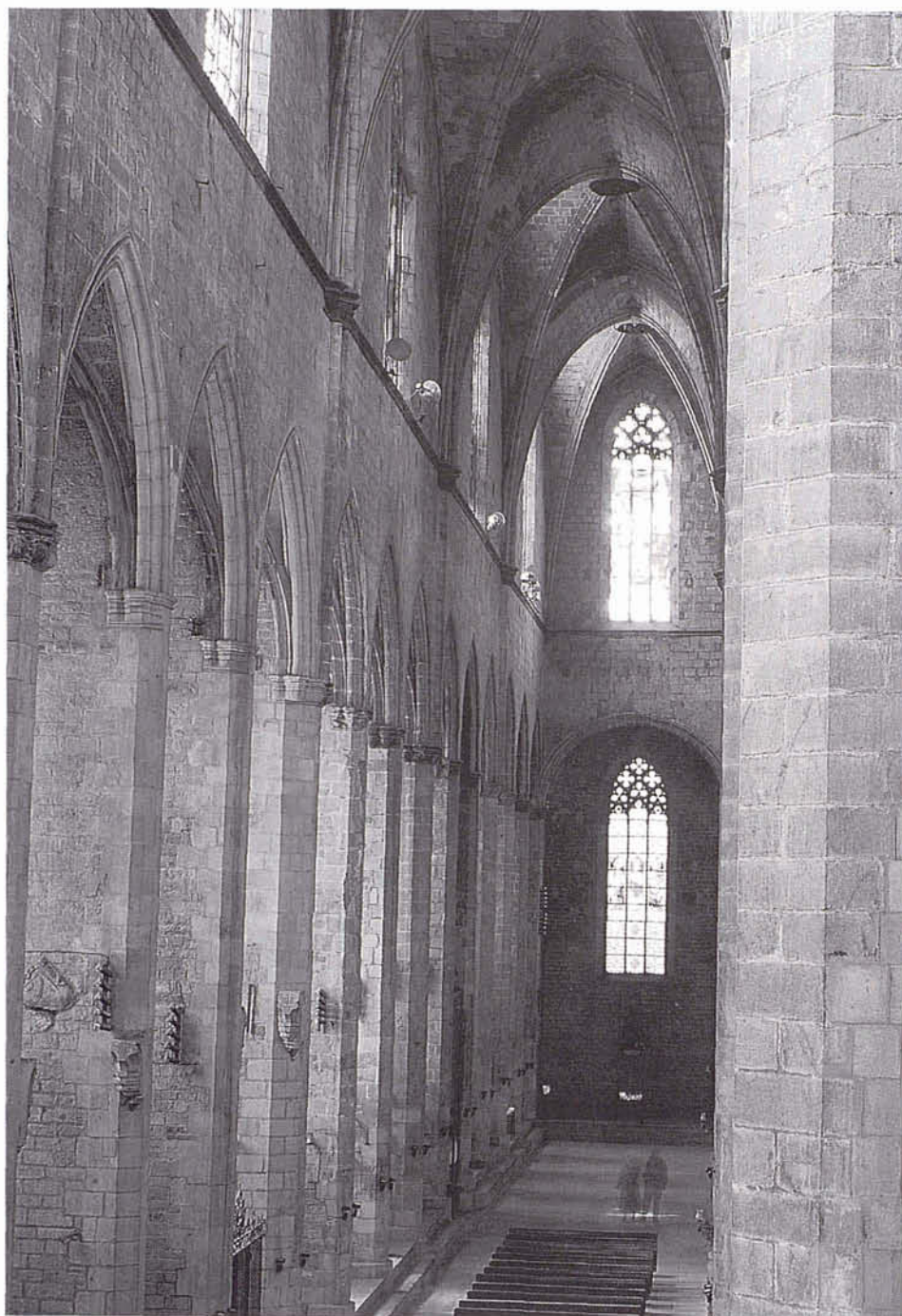


SANTA MARIA DEL MAR



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THE CENTRAL NAVE OF THE SANTA MARIA DEL MAR



SANTA MARIA DEL MAR

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ing the high degree of unity that existed between religious and lay architecture. In some cathedrals, considerable changes took place in the floor plan or construction during the fourteenth century. Thus in Barcelona, having arrived in 1346 at the limit of the area foreseen initially, there was an important modification in the roof system: while the central and lateral naves were given vaults we could describe as normal, on either side, above each pair of lateral chapels, a vault was raised in the form of a large tribune completely open towards the lateral nave and closed externally by a wall which extended the

exterior ambit of the chapels vertically, so that the light reaches the naves indirectly.

In Girona, in the mid-fourteenth century, there was some controversy over the work in the cathedral. While some of the experts were in favour of the construction of three naves, others preferred a single nave. After an initial suspension of the work on the single nave, there was an official consultation of master builders of Girona and Barcelona, at which the opinions of experts and canons were divided, and the supporters of the single nave said that if it did not go ahead some other work should

be carried out in the same church through whose excellence and beauty the cathedral could acquire renown and be honoured and fully decorated –in other words, a dome or bell-tower or other element (*ut saltem fiat in ipsa ecclesia aliquod pulcherrimum opus, et per excellentiam, puta cimborium, campanile vel aliud per quod dicta ecclesia sit nominata, honorata et totaliter decorata*).

This helps to explain the reason behind the construction of the two great domes added to no purpose to the Cistercian churches of Poblet and Vallbona, or the enormous mass of the dome –also an addition– on the cathedral at Valencia. As regards the bell-towers, these are also obvious additions, as we can see in the case of the simple monastery of Pedralbes or the monumental churches of El Pi, in Barcelona, of Lleida cathedral and of the immediate consequence of the latter, the “Miquelet” of Valencia cathedral.

In Girona, after the controversy of 1386, the work of the cathedral was resumed on three naves, but in 1416 there was a further, larger meeting, in which the master builders of Tortosa, Tarragona, Barcelona, Seu d’Urgell, Manresa, Castelló d’Empúries, Perpinyà and Narbona took part, and at which they all stuck to the principle of continuing the work on three naves except for the last three –Joan Antigó, the great Majorcan architect Guillem Sagrera, who was at that time directing the work of the cathedral of Perpinyà, and Joan de Guingamps, resident in Narbona. In 1417, the favourable and admiring opinion was added of the person who seems to have been behind this last phase of the controversy, the master of the see of Girona, Guillem Bofill. So the work was finally continued with one nave, which with its 23-metre span was the widest in Europe. One of Bofill’s arguments was that the single nave would be more solemn, more noteworthy and more in proportion with the chancel of the cathedral (*fore solemnius, notabilium et proporcionabilis*), valid arguments –except perhaps for the question of the proportions–, and he also added that it would shine with much greater light, which is happier and more joyous (*quia etiam multo maiori claritate fulgebit, quod est laetius et jocundum*). It is worth noting the presence of aesthetic arguments and judgments of value, alongside minutely spe-



SANTA MARIA DEL MAR

cified technical and economic arguments.

The meetings of architects held in Milan on the occasion of the work of the Duomo took place at approximately the same time (1392 and 1400, amongst others) and questions of materials and proportions were debated. One doubt (1392) was whether the dome should be raised on a square or triangular base, an issue resolved in favour of the triangle, though Ackerman pointed out that the floor plan seemed to have been projected with a square module, unlike the equilateral triangle module used in the elevation. As late as 1500, an Italian mathematician, Cesare di Lorenzo Cesariano, a commentator of Vitruvius, continues to refer *ad trigono et quadrato*.

From around 1400, a name to be remembered is that of Arnau Bagès, a Catalan architect of note, better known for his civil works (Palau del Rei Martí, in Poblet; façade of the Casa de la Ciutat, in Barcelona; Palau dels Cabrera, in Blanes), but to whom is also attributed the design of the final section of Barcelona cathedral, with the base of the dome, and the large star-shaped vault of the chapter house, forerunner of the Sala dels Barons in the Castellnou in Naples, the work of Guillem Sagrera. We must not forget that in the fourteenth century the half-star shape appeared in buildings such as the chapel of the Bishop's Palace in Tortosa or the Tailors' Chapel in Tarragona cathedral. As from the fourteenth century, but especially during the fifteenth, Catalan Gothic architecture spread not only to the Balearics and Valencia but also to Sardinia, Sicily and Naples. The architects had to travel frequently from one end to the other of the territories united by the monarchy, the economy or the language. This is why it is natural to find Guillem Sagrera of Mallorca or Pere Comte of Girona, who was active in Barcelona, turning up in so many different places. Leaving aside the doubtful attribution to an English architect of the flamboyant traceries of the cloister of Santes Creus –where there are also others, quite within the classic Catalan Gothic style–, we find them once more in the fifteenth century, on the façade of the chapel of Sant Jordi of the Generalitat, in Barcelona, the work of Marc Safont towards 1433, or the new rose window of Santa Maria del Mar, contracted in 1459. ●