

# THE PRINCIPAL CATALAN GOTHIC BUILDINGS



THE BELLVER CASTLE

© KONIC



WITH DETAILED DESCRIPTIONS, THE AUTHOR TAKES US ON A FASCINATING JOURNEY ROUND THE PRINCIPAL CATALAN GOTHIC BUILDINGS: THE PALACE OF THE KINGS OF MALLORCA –OR PERPINYÀ CASTLE–, BELLVER CASTLE IN PALMA DE MALLORCA, THE EXCHANGE IN VALENCIA, THE “CASTELLNOU” IN NAPLES AND THE ROYAL SHIPYARDS AND THE CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA DEL MAR IN BARCELONA.

JOSEP M. MUÑOZ I LLORET HISTORIAN





THE VALENCIA EXCHANGE

© ELOI BONJOCH

## **E**l Palau dels Reis de Mallorca (The Palace of the Kings of Mallorca) (Perpinyà)

Perpinyà Castle, or the Palace of the Kings of Mallorca, is situated on a hill overlooking the old city from the south. It was built at the end of the thirteenth century as a royal residence, when Perpinyà became the mainland capital of the short-lived kingdom of Mallorca (1276-1344).

The construction, which was begun in 1274, is a vast quadrilateral formed by four buildings surrounding a large courtyard. The whole, surrounded by a moat, is further strengthened by six quadrangular towers (originally there were eight, one at each corner and one halfway along each side). Access to the courtyard is via the keep, in the middle of the western wall.

On the opposite wall is the Torre Major, where there are the superimposed chapels of la Santa Creu and of Santa Magdalena, probably the work of Ponç Descoll (1295-1309).

The location of the two palatine chapels in a fortified tower follows the typical

Southern French model (Episcopal Palace of Narbona, 1273-1276), but is a unique case in the Països Catalans, which can only in part be related to the castle-palace of Bellcaire d'Empordà, of the same period. The characteristics of the two chapels of Perpinyà Castle are identical, though the lower one is smaller. In both cases, the nave is rectangular, in two sections covered with ribbed vaults resting on brackets, and the apse polygonal. The change to the five-sided floor-plan of the apse is resolved by means of the construction of a funnel in each corner below the line of brackets. This solution, which is reminiscent of Romanesque architecture, clashes slightly with the fully Gothic configuration of the chapels, visible in the roof structure, the trceries of the windows or the keystones of the upper chapel. In the façade, which alternates rows of white and red marble, there is a gate in the Romanesque tradition.

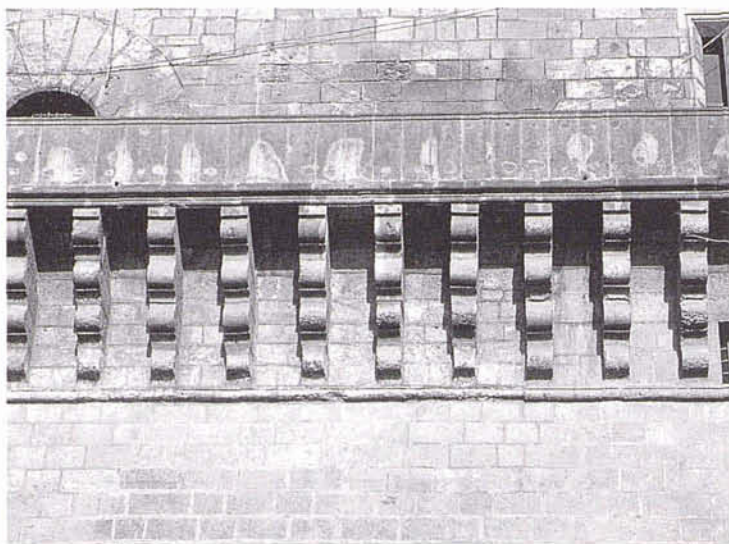
Two open staircases lead to the first floor, where they give onto a porticoed gallery with pointed arches on the right and square pillars on the left. This floor,

built well into the fourteenth century, contains the king and queen's quarters, which communicate with the chapel.

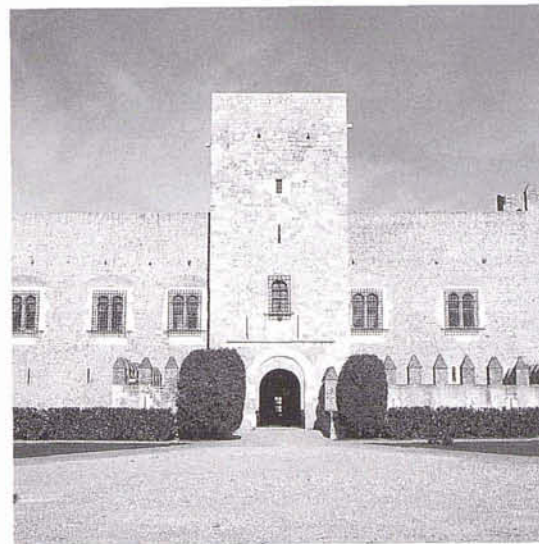
The castle was the residence of the Kings and Queens of Mallorca until the occupation by Peter II of Catalonia-Aragon in 1344. Peter ordered the construction of a large ceremonial hall, now called the Sala de Mallorca, in the castle's southern wing. Its construction made it necessary to destroy almost the whole of the upper floor on this side of the castle, including the defensive towers. The hall is constructed with a ridged wooden ceiling supported on arches resting on corbels placed halfway up the wall. The double windows to be found throughout the palace were replaced here by the present neo-Gothic windows in 1850.

Ruled by a governor from the end of the fifteenth century, the castle formed part of the Ciutadella de Perpinyà and took on military functions which it has still not entirely given up today. In 1948 it was purchased by the Department of the Eastern Pyrenees and has been partly restored.





THE CASTELLNOU IN NAPLES



PERPINYÀ CASTLE

### El Castell de Bellver (Palma de Mallorca)

Bellver Castle stands on a pine-covered hill dominating the city and bay of Palma. It was built in 1300 by the architect Ponç Descoll, by order of King James II of Mallorca, as a fortress and royal residence.

It is a building of vast proportions, surrounded by an impressive system of moats. Its circular floor-plan and the elegance of its lines make it an exceptional construction. Set on two concentric walls, its perimeter is broken by three semicircular towers joined to the principal structure. At the fourth corner, the circular keep stands by itself, connected to the rest of the building by a bridge.

The large parade ground is surrounded by a gallery on two levels, with semicircular arches below and interlaced pointed arches above. Outstanding amongst the different rooms leading off the galleries is the chapel.

The exterior stands out for its arched double windows, similar to those of the Palau dels Reis de Mallorca (Perpinyà) or the Almudaina (Palau de Mallorca), buildings to which it is obviously related.

By 1314 the castle was practically complete and was the occasional residence of King Sanç. Following the fall of the Kingdom of Mallorca, the castle was given to the Carthusian monastery of Valldemossa by Martin I. Following the occupation of the island by the Bourbons (1717), it had a military garrison and was turned into a prison. In 1931 the state gave it to the Palma City Council, who in 1932 installed the municipal museum of art and local history there.

### La Llotja de Valencia (The Valencia Exchange)

The Exchange in Valencia, with the adjoining building of the Consolat de Mar, is the last of the great constructions of Catalan Gothic architecture. The Exchange was raised by order of the Valencia City Council (1480), which in this way was fulfilling previous agreements (1469). The Exchange was built between 1482 and 1498 by the Girona architect Pere Comte, who based himself on the Mallorca Exchange, the work of Guillem Sagrera (1426-1447). Pere Comte had settled in Valencia, where he worked on the extension to the nave of the cathedral and on the Palau de la

Generalitat. His best-known work is the Llotja, begun in partnership with the master Joan Ivarra (d. 1486).

The Exchange in Valencia follows the same concept as that of Palma, although the decoration is richer because it dates from a later period and belongs to late Gothic. The hall is conceived as a single space, with three naves covered with a ribbed vault, in this case in five sections, resting on eight helicoid pillars. The cylindrical pillars, with fluted shafts that twist from the base to the point where the arch begins, are enriched with grooves lined with beading, instead of the plain fluting of the Exchange of Palma. The idea of continuity, of upward movement, is stressed by the absence of capitals, so that the pillars are directly attached to the arches which merge to form the vault.

The vaults are more complex than those of Palma, with the introduction of additional ribs and secondary keystones. Another novelty is the use of half columns set against the interior of the perimeter walls, which gather the ribs of the vaults and avoid exterior buttresses.

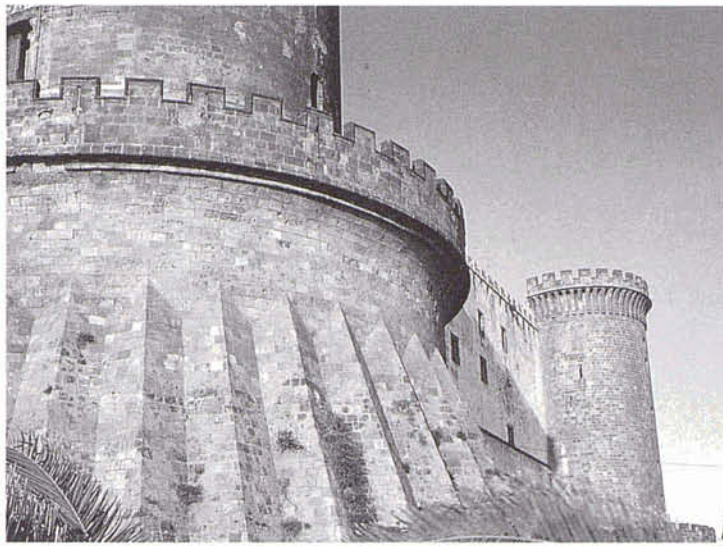
The smooth walls are embellished with a sculptural design that emphasises the





PERPINYÀ CASTLE

© EIOI BONJOCH



THE CASTELLNOU IN NAPLES

© KONIC

value of the doors (one at either end of the axis and two more in the lateral walls) and of the large windows, which are linked by moulding. The composition of the doorways is reminiscent of religious buildings, though as well as religious motifs the decoration contains highly erotic elements.

In one corner of the hall there stands a square tower which housed the chapel. This tower now occupies a central position following the construction of the adjoining building of the Consolat de Mar, with which, in fact, it forms a single unit.

The building of the Consolat de Mar was begun in 1500 by the same Pere Comte, who raised the walls of the hall and the staircase in the "pati dels tarongers", or court of the orange trees. Following his death in 1506, Joan Corbera took charge of the continuation of the work, which was not completed until 1548.

It is a rectangular construction with a ground floor and two upper floors with wooden-beamed ceilings. The composition of the walls faithfully follows Catalan Gothic models, but the decorative elements belong to a late Gothic style,

with ogee arches, flamboyant tracery, etc. The Renaissance influence is only clearly visible in the parapet on the façade, with clypeus surrounded by crowns of leaves containing paired busts. The cornice of the façade, with its curious merlons bearing the royal crown, is a continuation of that of the Exchange.

#### The Castellnou in Naples

The Castellnou in Naples was built by King Alfons IV the Magnanimous in the mid-fifteenth century. In 1442, Alfons IV of Catalonia and Aragon conquered Naples, where he established his definitive residence. The king made the city a brilliant Renaissance court and the centre of an empire extending throughout the Mediterranean.

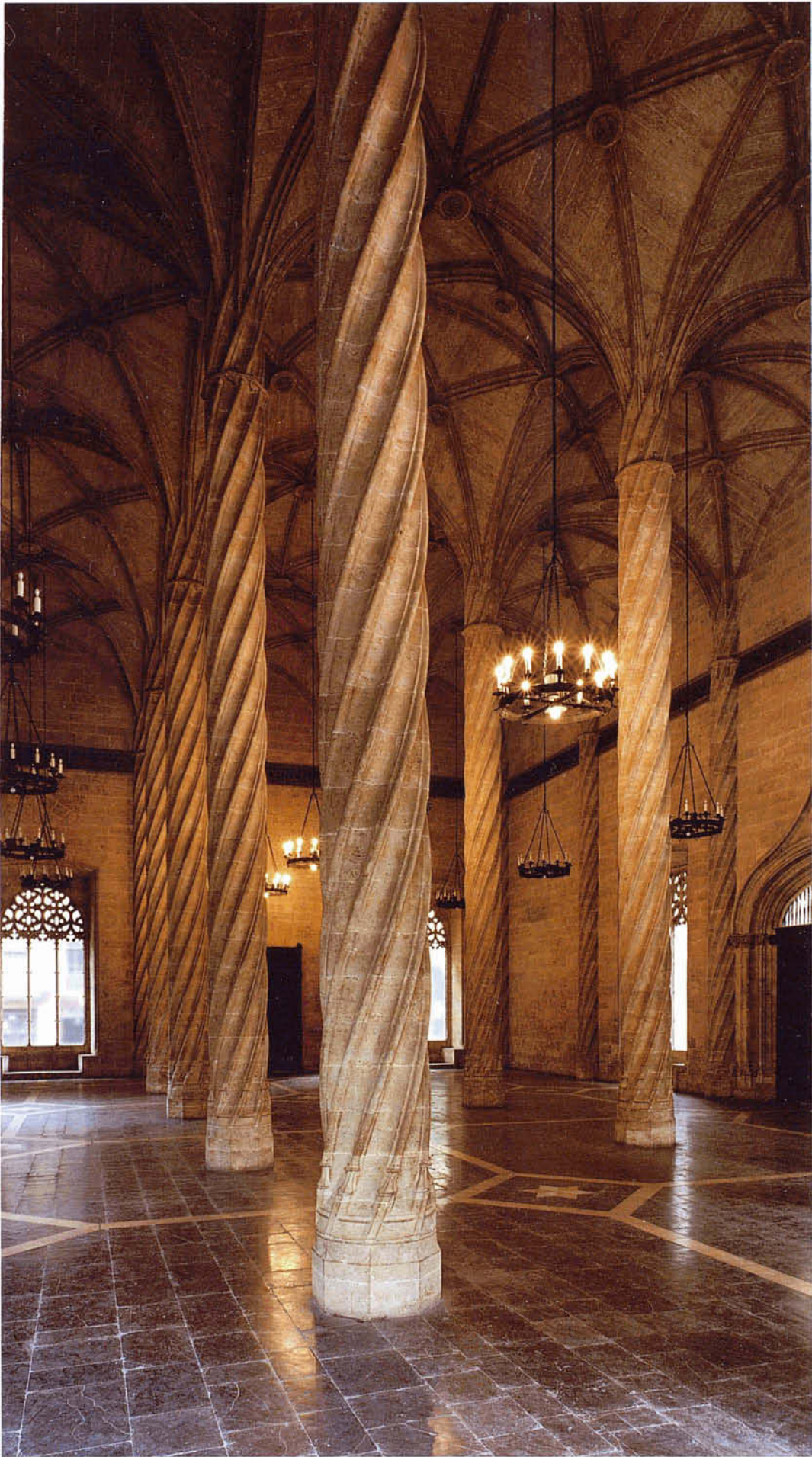
Work on the castle started in 1443 on the site of the old ruined Angevin castle and without a fixed plan. There are written references to Catalan experts in the works from the very first moment, such as the Majorcan stone-mason Bartomeu Vilasclar, who, along with Bartomeu Prats, was responsible for the star-shaped vault in the hall leading to the courtyard (1446).

In 1447 the king called for the presence in Naples of the Majorcan architect Guillem Sagrera. His appointment as master of the works of the castle (1448) involved the adoption of a new plan designed by the Majorcan master builder. In 1451 the works of the castle received a new boost, and on 1 January 1453 Guillem Sagrera embarked on the construction of the Sala dels Barons, which was not finished until 1457, after his death (1454).

The king also called for the sculptor Pere Joan, who was active in Naples between 1450 and 1458, the year of the king's death. The work then stopped and was not taken up again until 1465, this time with a majority presence of Italian experts. Between 1471 and 1474, though, the master of the works was the Majorcan stone-mason Mateu Forcimanya.

The building doubles as a military fortification and royal residence. Built in stone from Santanyí, it is a solid, massive construction, with walls and five circular towers with battlements. The triumphal entrance arch, with reliefs alluding to the entrance of the King of Naples, leads onto a large courtyard,





© ELOI BONJOCH

THE VALENCIA EXCHANGE





SANTA MARIA DEL MAR



© ELOI BONJOCH

around which are distributed the different rooms. An open staircase, in the Catalan style, leads to the main floor, where there are a series of rooms, amongst them the Sala dels Barons.

The Sala dels Barons was conceived by Guillem Sagrera as a large space, 26 metres square, and is possibly the largest vaulted square space in European Gothic architecture. The vault is a daring construction forming an eight-pointed star, a development of the simple cross with the addition of chains and secondary ribs. As in the chapter houses of the cathedrals of Barcelona and Valencia, the transition from the square floor-plan to the octagonal vault is achieved with corner vaults, in this case placed at the bottom of the arch. The corners of the resulting polygon are the starting point for the four arches forming the basic network, which is complemented with chains that go from the central oculus to the secondary keystones and by secondary ribs that go from these to the starting point of the arches.

Halfway up the walls there are galleries for the musicians, with flattened arches, whose rich decoration disappeared as

a result of a fire in 1919. A columned gallery runs round the octagon at the point where the vault starts. At the top of the vault, at a height of 28 metres, a circular oculus, which has caused the hall to be compared to the Pantheon of Rome, lets the light in from the exterior. Finally, Sagrera's contributions in the field of defence are materialized in the steep bases of the walls and towers, which we have already seen in the castle of Bellver, but this time treated with new textures, and in the presence of the ravelin, which was used for placing the artillery pieces.

#### **Les Drassanes de Barcelona (The Barcelona Shipyards)**

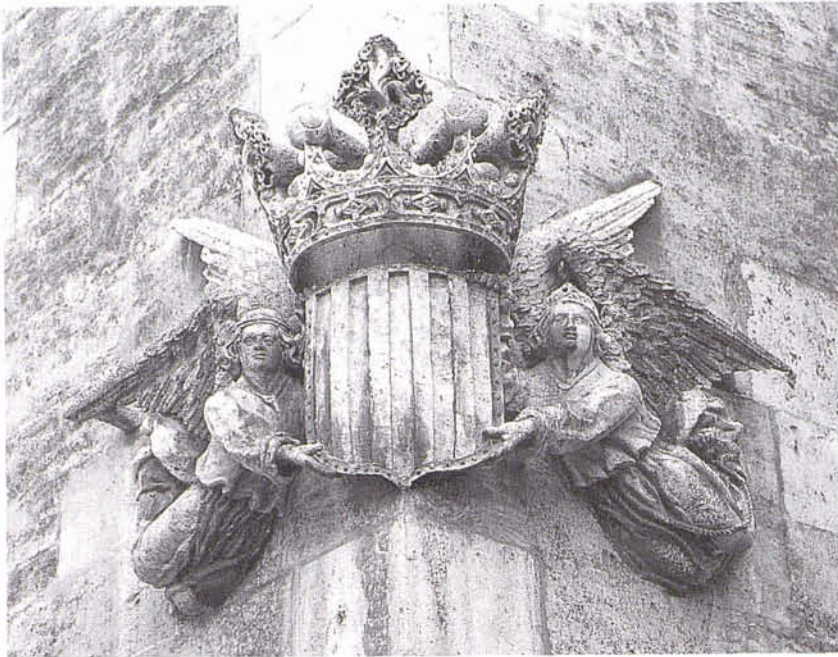
The Barcelona Shipyards, located at one end of the old, fourteenth-century walled enclosure, almost on the shore, are the largest medieval building for the construction of seagoing craft still standing today in the Western world. They are also one of the finest examples of civil Gothic architecture in the Països Catalans.

Their present appearance is the result of various stages of construction, in which, in spite of the long time-span,

the same system of building was maintained, thanks to its functional and structural rationality.

Begun during the reign of Peter the Great (1276-1285), their construction was promoted by Peter III with the collaboration of the city of Barcelona and the Generalitat. By 1381, under the direction of the master of works Arnau Ferrer, eight large parallel naves had been built (later extended with the addition of eight further naves), with semi-circular diaphragm arches resting on quadrangular pillars and covered with a ridged roof on wooden beams. Following the death of Martin I, responsibility for the upkeep passed to the city of Barcelona, then to the Consolat de Mar (1470) and, from the sixteenth century, to the Diputació del General, which between 1612 and 1618 added three large naves on the side nearest the Rambla. Following the "Guerra dels Segadors", it was taken over by the crown (1663). In 1681 John of Austria fortified the eastern bastion. After the War of Succession (1714), naval construction in Barcelona declined and the shipyards became a barracks (1792). The main work carried out on this occasion was to





© ELOI BONJOCH



© KONIC

join the two central naves to make a single, taller nave. In 1935 the army abandoned the Drassanes, which were returned to the city the following year. In 1941 they became the home of the Maritime Museum of Barcelona, at the same time as work continued on their restoration, which was completed in 1966 under the direction of the architect Adolf Florensa.

The remains of the large architectural complex still standing today consist of two of the towers, some sections of the walls, with the gate of Santa Madrona, and the ten principal naves, corresponding to the eight fourteenth century

naves (converted to three in the eighteenth century) and the three seventeenth century naves.

#### **Santa Maria del Mar (Barcelona)**

The church of Santa Maria del Mar, built in the fourteenth century, is the most noteworthy example of Catalan Gothic religious architecture, which is characterized by the predominance of mass over void, a marked horizontalism, severe lines, harmony of proportions, simplicity of structure and the absence of superfluous ornamentation.

The work of the new church was started in 1329 by the master-builders Beren-

guer de Montagut and Ramon Despuig on the site of the old church of Santa Maria de les Arenes or de la Mar, which appears in records dating back to 998 and which stood in the suburb of Vilanova de la Mar, close to the old port. The growing importance of this district, La Ribera, thanks to the commercial development of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, gave rise to the urbanization of the Carrer de Montcada as a centre of the new merchant aristocracy, and favoured the erection of the new church of Santa Maria, known as the "cathedral of the sea". Indeed, in the same way that Barcelona cathedral was the centre of the old county city, the church of Santa Maria was the centre of the new city, that of the creators of an empire of merchants and ship-owners extending throughout the Mediterranean.

Built in a very short time, the last stone being laid in 1383, the new church shows great unity of style. It is formed by three naves of almost equal height, covered with a groined vault. The central nave, which is thirteen metres in width, and the lateral naves, each of six and a half metres in width, are separated by slender octagonal pillars, which are eighteen metres high. This configures an open and unified interior space in which all reference to the transept has been eliminated and the number and thickness of the supports of the vault have been reduced. The apse has an ambulatory with nine radial chapels, which are continued between the buttresses of the lateral naves.

On the exterior, which is predominated by horizontal lines and full spaces, the chief element is the principal façade, flanked by two octagonal towers (finished in 1496 and 1902, respectively), with an ornamental porch with gable and carvings, and with a large rose window, destroyed by the earthquake of 1428 and reconstructed in a florid Gothic style in 1459.

The interior decoration, damaged during the siege of 1714, disappeared completely as a result of the fire the church suffered in 1936, which destroyed the Baroque altarpiece (1772-83) and the late-eighteenth-century presbytery. The restoration undertaken after the civil war was completed in 1967 with the construction of a crypt and the new presbytery. At present, the Generalitat de Catalunya is carrying out further restoration work. ●