

## AN ARCHITECTURAL PILGRIMAGE TO SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

8th to 20th April 1984

*Arranged for members of the Ancient Monuments Society and the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain, and led by Susan Gold and Elizabeth Cooper.*

The intrepid party of would-be pilgrims embarked at Southampton and crossed the Channel to Le Havre aboard the MV Leopard. Of the four mediaeval Pilgrimage Ways through France leading towards Santiago, we joined the western route at Chartres, briefly visiting the cathedral to admire its sculpture and its deep-hued windows.

Passing, reluctantly, the marvellous Loire chateaux, some sought out the tantalisingly few surviving fragments of the former great pilgrimage church of St. Martin, Tours, which was comparable in design and scale to the present Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Poitiers gave us a further introduction to the tremendous series of Romanesque pilgrimage churches we were to visit in the next ten days: firstly the atmospheric Notre-Dame-la-Grande, and then the unique St. Hilaire, with double aisles and double arcades to provide ample room for pilgrims.

We paused at the port of Bordeaux on the River Garonne where many mediaeval pilgrims from England joined the Way of Saint James, and we continued south across the flat coastal plain of Gascony towards the distant Pyrenees. St. Jean-Pied-de-Port was the principal town of French Navarre, and the gateway to the Pass of Roncesvalles. Up and up we climbed through the pass, the way twisting and turning between grey crags and misty trees, with the Song of Roland and his oliphant ringing in the ears of our imaginations. At the summit stands the ancient shrine founded by the Emperor Charlemagne in 778 to commemorate the valiant deaths of Roland and his companions, and visited over the centuries by countless pilgrims making their way into Spain. Snow still covered the mountain tops in April, and filled the cloister, while corrugated iron sheeting on the monastery roofs fended off the worst of the weather. Here we were able to appreciate something of the dilemma of the three surviving canons in maintaining their church, and which had just led them to abandon the Augustinian Order which had served the shrine for centuries.

Pamplona, the capital of Spanish Navarre, is a bustling city surrounded by acres of massive apartment houses, and only the old city centre, with its cathedral set over the ramparts, maintains its individual character with narrow streets. The present cathedral is mainly of the 14th and 15th centuries, its exterior plain with weed-encrusted flying buttresses, but it has a highly

original interior deriving especially from the unusual plan of the chevet. Before the high altar stands the alabaster tomb of Charles III of Navarre, commissioned in 1416, and carved by Janin Lomme of Tournai. Charles the Noble and his queen are surrounded by carved weepers, of the same Flemish inspiration as the Burgundy tombs of Dijon.

The Rio Arga flows down from Pamplona, and is crossed by the Camino de Santiago (the Pilgrim's Way) at Puente la Reina. The two mediaeval routes across the Pyrenees by the Roncesvalles and the Somport Passes met here, and the bridge was given by Sancho the Great's queen, early in the 11th century, to help pilgrims. This narrow mediaeval bridge still spans the river and its flood plain in six graceful arches, with a bridge gate guarding one end, and the narrow main street of the little town leading straight to it.

A few miles away, quite isolated, stands the octagonal and domed late Romanesque chapel of Eunate. It is surrounded by an enigmatic colonnade, detached from the chapel, which may have been for sheltering pilgrims, or equally well may have been for funerary purposes. Next on the route stands the market town of Estella, known as 'Estella la Bella', and built on the rising slopes at either side of the fast flowing Rio Ega. The main square is overlooked by the massive bulk of the 12th century Palace of the Kings of Navarre, and the church of San Miguel across the river has a fine series of Romanesque portal sculptures in its north porch. The old monastery church of San Pedro de la Rua has triple Romanesque apses, where one of the wall arcade columns is in the form of twisted serpents. But the greatest delights of the church are to be found in the two surviving walks of its cloister, the first of a whole sequence of marvellous Romanesque cloisters we were to see. Low arcades of small round-headed arches are carried on pairs of columns and exuberantly sculptured capitals.

Soon we started to cross the plains of Old Castile and luncheon was taken in the great pilgrim hospice at Santo Domingo de la Calzada, now a Spanish Parador (State Tourist Hotel). This Saint Dominic created the town when he built a causeway (calzada) across the wide Rio Oja, and his tomb is venerated in the cathedral here. Though small, the cathedral introduced us to the subtleties of late Spanish Gothic in the nave, now largely filled by the massive Renaissance Coro—the arrangement of screens, walls, and choir stalls occupied by the chapter during the daily offices and services. The high altar in the Capilla Mayor is set within the fine late Romanesque chevet with apsidal chapels to the east. Unusual, if not unique, are the live cock and hen caged behind a wrought iron grille in the south

transept and commemorating an early miracle associated with the saint.

The city of Burgos, often called the city of 'El Cid', is the capital of Old Castile and has its splendid cathedral set on rising ground between the Rio Arlanzón and the Castillo on the crags above. The site of the cathedral had been that of Alfonso VI's palace, and was donated by him in 1075. Again the Coro fills the nave, with immense wrought iron grilles separating the crossing and high altar in the Capilla Mayor from the transepts and ambulatory. To the east is the late Gothic Capilla del Condestable, an octagon rising to a stellar vault, pierced and set with stained glass. The exterior of the cathedral presents a rare unity of design. The western spires are of open tracery-work, in the Rhineland fashion of their designer, Hans of Cologne, or Juan de Colonia, who came to Burgos in 1442. His son, Simon de Colonia, built the Constable's Chapel with its pinnacles between 1482 and 1494, and finally the grandson, Francisco de Colonia, completed the octagonal lantern at the crossing with its coronet of pinnacles, early in the 16th century.

Just outside Burgos is the Convent of Las Huelgas Reales. It had been a summer palace of the Kings of Castile, and was founded in 1180 as a Cistercian nunnery for ladies of high lineage by Alfonso VIII and his wife Eleanor, daughter of Henry II of England. The church was built between 1180 and 1230 in a plain Gothic appropriate to the Cistercian Order, and the tombs of the founders stand before the altar of the Nuns Choir, while the aisles are filled with the royal and princely tombs of mediaeval Castile. South is the Great Cloister with extensive remains of richly polychromed stucco-work in the tunnel vaults, carried out by Moorish craftsmen in 1275. Beyond is the smaller Romanesque cloister with another fine display of richly sculptured capitals, and to the east remain some of the apartments of Alfonso's old palace, again with fascinating Moorish or Mudejar decoration.

A diversion to the south east of Burgos carried us through dramatic and rugged scenery to the Benedictine abbey of Santo Domingo de Silos. The present church is of the 18th century, but beside it stands the grandest of Romanesque two-storied cloisters. The corner piers have sculptured panels of the most delicate detail, whilst the capitals of the arcades illustrate a fantastic bestiary with harpies, combats between eagles and lions, birds in courtship display, and animals in foliage or enmeshed in plant tendrils.

The return to Burgos in the evening was punctuated with a short visit to Covarrubias, a small but ancient town in the Arlanza valley, with vineyards on the slopes, and almond trees in full

blossom. The poplars by the water's edge are overshadowed by Dona Urraca's tower where the 10th century princess was immured by Count Fernán González. The late Gothic colegiata to the east is dedicated to S.S. Cosmas and Damian, filled with mediaeval tombs including that of Fernán and his wife. The church is now subtly presented by the Spanish Tourist Board, as is the whole town, preserving the partly timbered houses which are a feature of the district.

In Covarrubias the timber framing consists of poles used as horizontal and vertical binding timbers to the rubble and brick walls, and a whole treatise could be written on the changes in vernacular architecture we were seeing in the different regions of northern Spain. West of Burgos the bare hot plain takes one to the 'Brick Town' of Sahagún, where the lesser buildings have mud and straw walls, and only the churches and more important domestic buildings are of burned brickwork. Sahagún was the retiring-place of the Kings of León, and is the site of the principal Cluniac abbey on the Pilgrims' Way, but only fragments of the immense Proto- or Early Gothic abbey church remain. The earlier surviving churches, of San Juan, San Tirso and San Lorenzo, show how effective the Romanesque and Mozarabic use of brickwork could be.

Modern León is a flourishing city with boulevards and parks beside the wide Rio Bernesga. Ancient León, as capital of the Kingdom of Asturias and León, is still set within the extensive rectangle of its Roman city walls, long bastioned stretches of which survive. Its cathedral was eventually rebuilt in the 13th and 14th centuries, and presents an array of jewel-like mediaeval stained glass windows rivalling Chartres. But it was to the Romanesque church of San Isidoro el Real, founded in the 10th century, that we were drawn that afternoon. The monastic and collegiate church itself is of the 12th century, with tunnel-vaulted nave and aisles, remarkably resembling the Cluniac Romanesque and Proto-Gothic we had seen in Burgundy (not entirely surprising, for Cluny had been so influential in establishing the Pilgrims' Way to Santiago). The upper chamber of the narthex had become the chapter room, and now displays the ancient treasures of this royal foundation; but the greatest architectural treasure is the lower narthex of the church, the Panteón de Reyes. From before 1060 it had served as the burial place of the kings and queens of León, and is vaulted in nine square bays, all boldly painted in ochre, red, yellow and black tempera on a white stucco ground. Executed in the 12th century, the theme is the Revelation of St. John, with the Passion and Glorification of Christ, all bordered with floral and geometrical decoration. They are regarded as amongst the most important Romanesque

paintings to survive as a complete series and, though one suspects they have been over-painted in the past, they were undergoing further careful conservation work at the time of our visit.

The Pilgrim Hostel of San Marco in León, another Parador, provided a sumptuous evening meal, and the following day we continued west on the Camino Santo with an early morning visit to Astorga. This city is also set within its Roman ramparts, and the mediaeval cathedral's western towers were only completed in the past thirty years. Adjacent is the fantastic episcopal palace dreamed up by Antonio Gaudi in 1889, all in grey granite. Then commenced our long climb into the heights of Galicia, with the hills a purple mist of giant spring heathers, and glowing with the yellows of gorse and broom. The vernacular building materials also changed, to grey stone walls, and slated roofs, so rough that they almost looked like scree slopes.

At the approach to the pass, the town of Villafranca de Bierzo was the place where pilgrims who were unable to complete the journey to Compostela due to failing health could receive indulgences and absolution. The ancient citadel of the Dukes of Alba brooded from its hill top over the town but the narrow streets and market place were bustling with activity, and churches, chapels and seminaries are scattered along the length of the Pilgrims' Way through the town.

Finally we crossed into Galicia through the Piedrafita Pass and then, leaving the main road, followed the old route of the Camino Santo, climbing up winding tracks to the mountain-top village of El Cerbrero. Here the houses took on an amazing and primaeval form, each an irregular oval in plan, with low stone walls, and a straw-thatch tent-like roof. Descending by even more twisting and precipitous roads we eventually reached Santiago, after a pause by the lake formed by the dammed Rio Mino, glad to attain our pilgrimage goal in safety, on the evening of the seventh day since leaving home.

Santiago de Compostela on Palm Sunday morning was the fulfilment of a dream. The Plaza de la Quinta east of the cathedral was thronged for the Blessing of the Palms by the Archbishop surrounded by his mitred senior clergy and the Cathedral Chapter all vested in red. Then the whole procession and congregation moved into the cathedral for High Mass, after which the great silver censor, the Botafumeiro, was swung, filling the crossing and transepts with smoke and flying sparks. The 13th century silver-gilt statue of Saint James, all bejewelled, stands behind the high altar, above the tomb and shrine of the Saint, and the whole group is canopied by the stupendous Baroque baldachino borne aloft by eight giant flying angels. The site of

the Coro in the nave is flanked by a pair of Baroque organs, but the remainder of the main vessel of the church is serenely clear of later additions, leaving the great Romanesque building to be appreciated for the beauty of its proportions, all in the pale grey local granite.

Legend tells us that the Apostle Saint James the Great preached in Spain, and when eventually he died in Judea his body was returned to Spain in a stone coffin. Knowledge of its site had been lost during the Moorish invasions and then, in the Christian Reconquest, the tomb was re-discovered in a field, pointed out by a star (*Campus stellal*)—so one version of the legend continues. A church was built over the newly found tomb in the 9th century, soon followed by the first cathedral as pilgrims were drawn to the shrine in rapidly increasing numbers. The present and third Cathedral on the site was started in 1075 on as grand a scale as the other great churches on the Pilgrimage Route: Tours, Limoges Conques and Toulouse. The designer was Bernardo and the chief stonemason Roberto, both probably French, while Bishop Diego Peláez promoted the rebuilding of the cathedral, providing it with an establishment of seventy two Augustinian canons. His successor, Archbishop Diego Gelmírez, continued the work to its near-completion in 1128, and his palace just to the north of the cathedral had been finished before his death in 1140.

The great cruciform church has a nave of eleven bays, 160 feet long excluding the west porches, and a total vista to the eastern apse of 250 feet; while the transepts are each of five bays and 180 feet wide including the crossing. The triforium gallery is unique in running right round the nave and transepts including across the west, north and south porches, and continuing round the shorter eastern limb and its apsed ambulatory. The main arcades are tall, with slightly stilted round arches, and with the principal attached shaftings carried up past the triforium stage to the foliage-carved caps at the springings of the semi-circular transverse ribs of the tunnel vault. In this form of Romanesque structure there is no clerestory, and natural light filters through from windows in the half barrel vaults of the galleries and the windows round the semi-dome of the apse. The main light, however, floods in from the porches of the transepts and the octagonal lantern dome of the crossing, and most of all from the west porch when the great west doors are flung open.

Parts of the original western portal sculptures are now incorporated into the South Transept portal, the *Puerta de las Platerías*, for between 1168 and 1188 the mason Master Matthew (*Maestro Mateo*) carved the new triple western portals, the *Pórtico de la Gloria*. This is a late and beautiful flowering of



Romanesque Pilgrimage sculpture, reminiscent of Vézelay and Autun, with the jamb-figures, tympana, carved lintels and enriched arches, all still touched with colour. Monsters at the bases, and delicately carved shafts, support the figure of Saint James with his pilgrim's staff on the pier between the central pair of doors. Above in the tympanum, is the seated figure of Christ displaying His wounds, flanked by the four Evangelists and surrounded in the arch by the twenty-four Old Men of the Apocalypse—talking, singing and playing upon harps and other instruments.

The porch is flanked by the Romanesque western towers, but these and the whole West Front, the *Fachada del Obradoiro*, were encrusted in Churrigueresque forms between 1738 and 1750 under the direction of Fernando Casas y Nóvoa. The composition displays the richness of Spanish Baroque at its best, and dominates the vast expanse of the Plaza de Espana. Indeed the whole exterior of the cathedral is overlaid with later additions and it is only from the triforium galleries and the inner court of the Gelmirez Palace that one can glimpse the original bold Romanesque external treatment, with double buttresses and high-level arcading designed to resist the thrusts from the tunnel vaults of the church.

The northern part of the Plaza de Espana is filled by the facade of the vast *Hostal Reale de Reyes Catolicos*, the ancient pilgrims' hostel refounded by Isabella and Ferdinand, and largely completed under their grandson, Charles V. Four Renaissance two-storied patios or cloisters surround the chapel and are themselves enclosed by extensive ranges of dormitories. The *Hostal Reale* is now one of the most sumptuous *Paradores* in Spain, and our supper in the majestically vaulted cellars was appropriately memorable.

Santiago is a relatively small granite city, and through its charmingly winding streets it was easy to reach the other principal churches of interest: San Martin, San Francisco, San Domingo, together with the University and the granite market ranges. Then just out of the city is the Romanesque church of Santa Maria del Sar, founded as another Augustinian community in 1136. Its tunnel vaulted nave and aisles lean outwards alarmingly, and are now supported by massive 17th century buttresses cutting through the remnants of the delightful Romanesque cloister.

From the rugged heights of Galicia we descended to the luxuriant west coast, palm trees fringing the deep inlets from the Atlantic. Then north through the city of Lugo to the Bay of Biscay, and the aptly named *Costa Verde* protected from the heat of central Spain by the Cantabrian Mountains, and the snow-

capped Picos de Europa. More twisting roads lead to Oviedo, the 9th and 10th century capital of the Kingdom of Asturias. From this time dates the Camera Santa of the cathedral, and on the mountain side overlooking the city the churches of San Miguel de Lillo (c.848) and Sta Maria de Navanco (c.842), the latter built as the audience hall of the royal summer palace.

Before returning to France by Santander, Bilbao and San Sebastian our final visits were to the Caves of Altamira with their marvellous prehistoric wall paintings, and the small town of Santillana del Mar. The monastery and later collegiate church of Sta Juliana has yet another of the marvellous series of Romanesque cloisters we had seen in Spain, the capitals rich in carvings of foliage, animals and biblical scenes. The whole village is protected as the Spanish equivalent of a conservation area, but not so far with the stultifying effect of a museum. Though there will be many tourists on occasions, the villagers go about their work without concern, cows being brought to water in the main street, with milk and gingerbread offered to visitors. Balconies filled with plants and flowers, a restaurant for lunch tucked away down an alley, and good Spanish wine is not an inappropriate note on which to end this account of our Pilgrimage.

### Camino de Santiago

*Whan that April with his showres soote  
The droughte of March hath percèd to the roote,  
From Englande, Irelande, Wales and eke Scotlande  
There gathered pilgrims, ah, a happy bande,  
Who would to Santiago wend theyre waye,  
With Michelin and Zodiaque alsua,  
To gaze at divers kirkes Romanesque,  
And seke shrines auncien and pittoresque.*

*With Lisabeth and Susanne fair and wyse  
They found delites to plesse theyre myndes and eyes;  
Oft-tymes Diana smoothèd theyre passage  
For in Espagne men spoke a strange laungage;  
And faithful Daniel—était magnifique  
When bends were tyght or parts were far to seke.  
Lyke Roland's Oliphant his horn would calle  
to summon strays from choro, apse or halle.*