

Cathedral of Saint-Trophime, Arles

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Arles and Christianity

Arles is a very important city in the history of Christianity. Arles was the first city to have a bishop, in 254, as well as the first to have a church council in 314, under Constantine I. A second council was later set up under Constance II in 353. (Heijman, 2006, p. 42) Arles notably had conflicts with the cities of Vienne and Marseilles, over its autonomy. (Heijman, 2006, p. 43)

The first bishop of Arles was Trophime, sent to Arles by the Holy See, according to pope Zosimus, (Patr. Lat. 20.645, 667) allegedly a disciple of Saint Paul. The cathedral in Arles was later dedicated to him. During the construction of the cathedral, the Kingdom of Arles was under the authority of the Holy Roman Empire (fig. 1)

Arles was also an area in which the Cathar heresy of the 10th and 11th Century was very prominent, as will be discussed in a separate section.

Romanesque Architecture

The term 'Romanesque' usually refers to the art and architecture of Western Europe between the years 1050 and 1200, particularly in the area under the influence of the Holy Roman Empire. (Petzold, 1995, p.p. 7,17) One of the innovations of the time was the use of the stone ceiling vault, (fig. 2) which protected churches from fire and improved acoustics. The main form of vault in Provence was the barrel vault, a design previously used in the Roman period. (Petzold, 1995, p. 46; Zarnecki, 1989, p. 52) The acoustic properties were of particular importance, due to the use of chanting in Cluniac liturgy, with the stone vault allowing sound waves to travel the distance of the nave without being absorbed by acoustically dampening materials. (Petzold, 1995, p. 102)

Romanesque art also assimilated influences from classical sources. In Provence, it is debated whether these influences derived from remains from antiquity in the area directly, (Zarnecki, 1989, p. 52; Virnich, 2000, p. 292) or came indirectly from Carolingian and early 11th Century German art, rather than from antique remains themselves. (Petzold, 1995, p. 144) In regards to Arles, Virnich hypothesises that the reuse of classical materials and forms are dedicated to the memory of the founders of the church in Arles, particularly Saint Trophime himself. (Virnich, 2000, p.p. 290-292)



Fig. 2: Nave of Cathedral of St. Trophime, Arles, showing the barrel ceiling vault.



Fig. 3: entrance portal of Cathedral of Saint-Trophime, Arles.

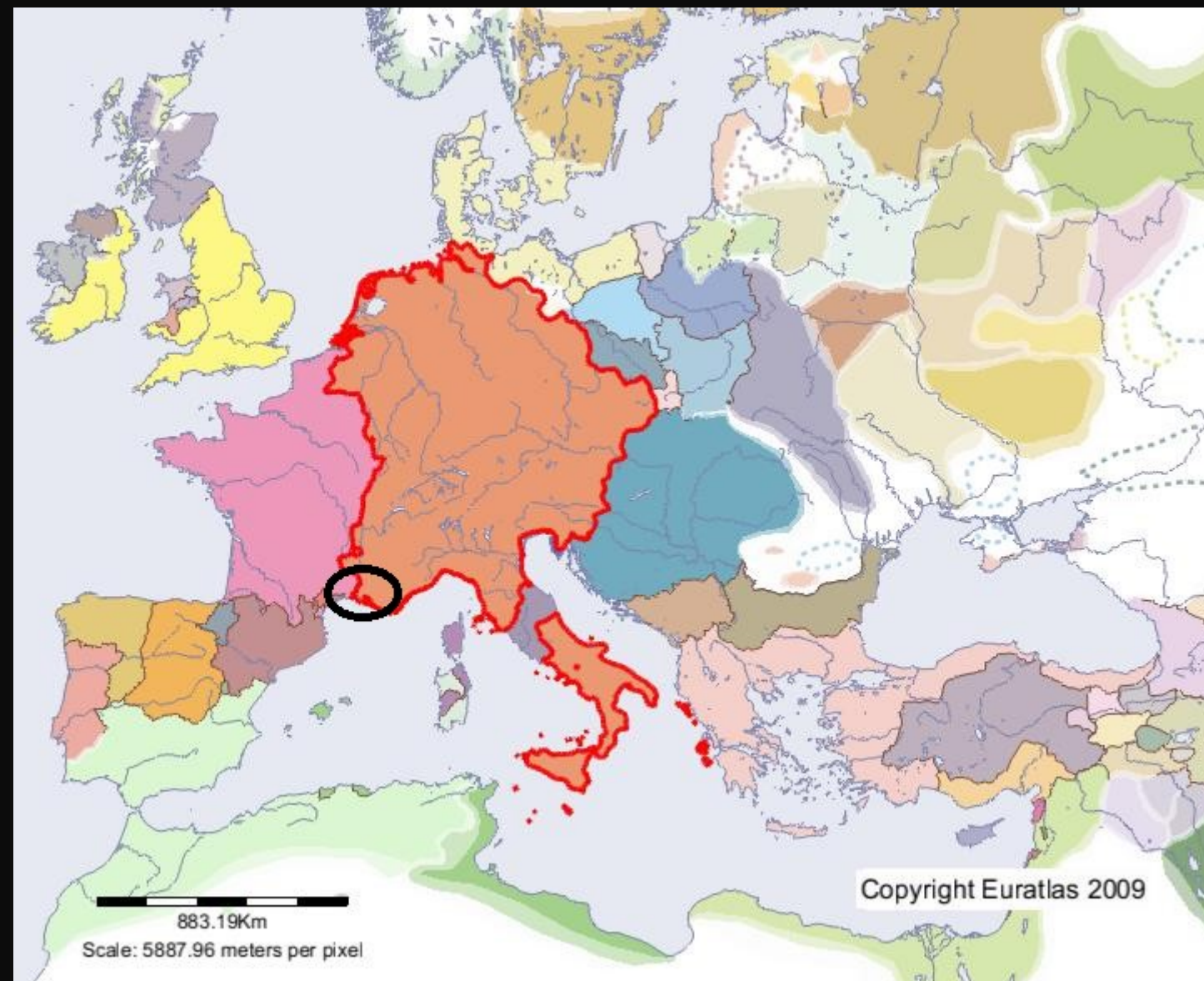


Fig. 1: map of the Holy Roman Empire in 1200, with the approximate location of Arles circled

Entrance portal

The entrance portal to the cathedral shows a representation of the Last Judgement, with Christ sitting in the central tympanum, with the souls of chosen Christians ascending to heaven below on the left, and the damned being cast into hell on the right. (fig. 3) Petzold attributes these images of the damned to a breakdown in the division between social classes caused by the importance of towns as trade centres, with the church associating towns with greed and lust. (Petzold, 1995, p. 72) This imagery would therefore give the viewer a reminder of the fates which await those who give in to the temptation of greed, as well as the reward for those who do not, reinforcing the church's doctrine.

The portal could also be argued as having a resemblance to a Roman triumphal arch, with the triumphal imagery transported to a Christian context to show Christ and the church triumphant over sinners. (Petzold, 1995, p.p. 15, 51) The imagery of the souls being taken in chains to hell could be interpreted in a similar way to a representation of the spoils of war from a Triumphal Arch. (fig. 4) However, Thiron believes the influence of Roman triumphal arches to be over-rated, stating the variation in the design of portals in Provence to be too wide to say for certain that they are based on such arches. (Thiron, 1991, p.p. 385, 392)



Fig. 4: relief of triumphal arch, Orange, showing captured weapons

Representation of Heresy

During the cathedral's construction, a particularly important cultural phenomenon was that of the Cathar heresy. The Cathars were a sect which rejected the idea of Christ as a human form, calling for the cleansing of the church. This attracted much support from the local aristocracy in the area, due to the increasing power of the archbishop undermining the aristocracy's own authority. (Segal, 2010, p.p. 45, 56) To respond to this, the cathedral has many references to the incarnation of Christ, with Barsch believing the portal to be a particularly important example. (Barsch, 1971, p. 127)

Another possible indicator of a response to heresy is the representation of Judas as the flagellation, (fig. 5) taken out of its biblical context, highlighting the crime of betraying Christ, as the church believed the Cathars to have done. (Segal, 2010, p. 63) The representation of the flagellation also further illustrates the incarnation of Christ and the suffering he is said to have endured, a response to the denial of Christian doctrine. (Segal, 2010, p. 67) Another interesting addition is the representation of King Herod holding a fleur-de-lis, (Fig. 6) a symbol of both France and of Provence, possibly portraying the local aristocracy through the metaphor of Herod, highlighting their betrayal of the church. (Segal, 2010, p. 69)



Fig. 5: Representation of Judas, from *The Flagellation*, Cathedral of Saint-Trophime, Arles.



Fig. 6: *Magi before Herod*, Cathedral of Saint-Trophime, Arles

Conclusion

The Cathedral of Saint-Trophime is a very important part of the history of the city of Arles and the south of France in general. By analysing aspects of the cathedral's architecture, iconography and materials, we can gain an understanding of how classical influences, as well as contemporary events and themes influenced the design of the cathedral and, therefore, how they affected the wider population.

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