

The Pilgrimage Church

Will Karp



St. Etienne Cathedral, Toulouse

The Theme continues. The prime meaning, purpose, and evolution of visual art and architecture from the times of Mesopotamia all the way up to this Romanesque period, continue to be driven and centered on the concept of attaining a fruitful afterlife and complying with the religious beliefs that would assure this goal was met. During the advent of the second millennium, sacred pilgrimages were just the next step in this progression of impacting the way art and architecture were conceived and implemented.

In the time period roughly from the 400s after the fall of the Roman Empire to around 1000, much of the culture of western world was pretty much in significant transition, and even upheaval as wars and “barbarians” and changes in governments and territories forced major realignment of governments and civil structures. Feudal systems changed and the common person was given

more control over his destiny. Christianity continued to blossom and grew significantly. During this period of growth, thousands of monasteries became the primary custodians for literacy and the source for production of religious books. Other than those educated few, the population in general were pretty much illiterate. And so therefore, images were Everything to them. So the “imagery” of Christianity became the main source of their knowledge. As the year 1000 passed, it became evident that while some believed this would be the milestone marking the end of the world, and then seeing that it did not, society was now ready to settle in for the long haul. Despite the hardships of their life on earth, Life Eternal was still their primary goal.

Boosted by the Carolingians in the 800's as they tried to bring about a resurgence of Roman Christian values, many large churches were built, and the religion and its financial position flourished. On the other hand, as Christianity grew over the years, religious persecution also grew, and with it, so did the number of martyrs and saints. To the multitude, the suppressed, the believers, the idea was solidified that prayer accessed through these martyrs and saints was one of the ways to intercede for the absolution of their sins and the curing of their illnesses, and of course the assurance of eternity. And the way for churches to provide the means to do this was to collect and display “relics” which were fragments of bones or hair or clothing or other articles belonging to these martyrs, saints, members of the Holy Family, Apostles, and others reputed to be associated with holy acts. These relics were displayed, either visibly, or enclosed in sumptuous Reliquaries, highly decorated and adorned containers specially built to house the relic or set of relics.

Pilgrims, would venture forth on sometimes dangerous, hostile and lengthy journeys to see these relics and reliquaries first hand and pray at these relics for cures or absolution. Sometimes particular cures or absolution were assigned to specific saints. Not only was this big business (and source of competition) for the churches, monasteries, hostels and guides along the route, but mandatory “business” for the individual seeking divine intervention. Several major thoroughfares were established running from major churches in northern and eastern France converging in the south and then consolidating into a common route through Spain on to Santiago de Compostela on the western edge of Europe. As these routes became more highly traveled, they eventually became the routes of commerce as well. Along with this, the church's ability to finance and execute huge buildings to house the crowds of pilgrims, was also accompanied by a resurgence in awe inspiring monumental art, mostly in stone.

Toulouse was a major stop for the cult travelers. Located in the southwest of France, it was the last stop before entering Spain and continuing on the single route to Santiago de Compostela. So it was understandable that a huge and magnificent church here would be required to accommodate

the vast crowds. Saint-Sernin fit the bill. Covering the equivalent space of a football field, the stone building incorporated the Romanesque style including stone columns, piers, groin vaulted galleries, towers, and buttresses to support the outer structure. It also included monumental art to inspire the pilgrims, such as the relief in marble, *Christ in Majesty*. The layout of the church was based on the standard basics of side towers, narthex, nave, aisles and transepts, with radiating chapels in the ambulatory to accommodate the display of relics.

Old Habits don't die. Just as the Roman *Cardo Maximus* and *Decumanus Maximus* were aligned north-south/east-west with the Forum at its intersection, so was this church aligned in a similar alignment with the Nave and Transept intersecting at the "Crossing." The entrance was on west end. This directional positioning also had the added benefit of orienting the travelers in their continued journeys. From a math lover's perspective the interior dimensions provide a geometric treasure trove of simple ratios. The modular design was primarily based on multiples of 2 and 4. While the text book looks at it as defining the basic unit of measurement (module) being the Crossing, and dividing from that point on, I look at the basic unit of measurement being the Aisle space between 4 columns – where people congregate. Thus, the Crossing is 4X the area of the "aisle unit" with 4 huge columns. The nave is 2X the width of the "aisle unit." There are 4 aisles, each comprised of 12 rows. Each side of the transept is 4 aisles wide. From end to end of the transepts is 12 aisles worth accompanied by 2 sets of 10 columns. There are 8 side chapels (4 on each side of the center) containing relics plus one larger chapel in the center of the ambulatory, 2 towers, 8 smaller columns in the semi-circular ambulatory, 4 each from the center – (omitted from the text book diagram) plus another 4 major columns which make 12 total. And the list goes on. The abundance of all these 4's and 12's – a deliberate reference to the 4 Gospels and the 12 Apostles? The reference to 10, to the Stations of the Cross? In any event, Saint-Sernin as well as other Romanesque churches were dedicated to symmetry and harmony in very large scale.