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THE CHURCH MILITANT

The twelfth century

Dates are indispensable pegs on which to hang the tapestry of history, and since everybody knows the date 1066, that may serve us as a convenient peg. No complete buildings have survived in England from the Saxon period, and there are very few churches of the period before that date still existing anywhere in Europe. But the Normans who landed in England brought with them a developed style of building, which had taken shape within their generation in Normandy and elsewhere. The bishops and nobles who were the new feudal lords of England soon began to assert their power by founding abbeys and minsters. The style in which these buildings were erected is known as the Norman style in England, and as the Romanesque style on the Continent. It flourished for a hundred years and more after the Norman invasion.

Today it is not easy to imagine what a church meant to the people of that period. Only in some old villages in the countryside can we still get a glimpse of its importance. The church was often the only stone building anywhere in the neighbourhood; it was the only considerable structure for miles around, and its steeple was a landmark to all who approached from afar. On Sundays and during services all the inhabitants of the town might meet there, and the contrast between the lofty building and the primitive and humble dwellings in which these people spent their lives must have been overwhelming. Small wonder that the whole community was interested in the building of these churches and took pride in their decoration. Even from the economic point of view the building of a minster, which took years, must have transformed a whole town. The quarrying and transport of stone, the erection of suitable scaffolding, the employment of itinerant craftsmen, who brought tales from distant lands, all this was a real event in those far-off days.

The Dark Ages had by no means blotted out the memory of the first churches, the basilicas, and the forms which the Romans had used in their building. The ground-plan was usually the same – a central nave leading to an apse or choir, and two or four aisles at the side. Sometimes this simple plan was enriched by a number of additions. Some architects liked the idea of building churches in the form of a cross, and they thus added what is



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*Benedictine church of
Murbach, Alsace,*

c. 1160

A Romanesque church

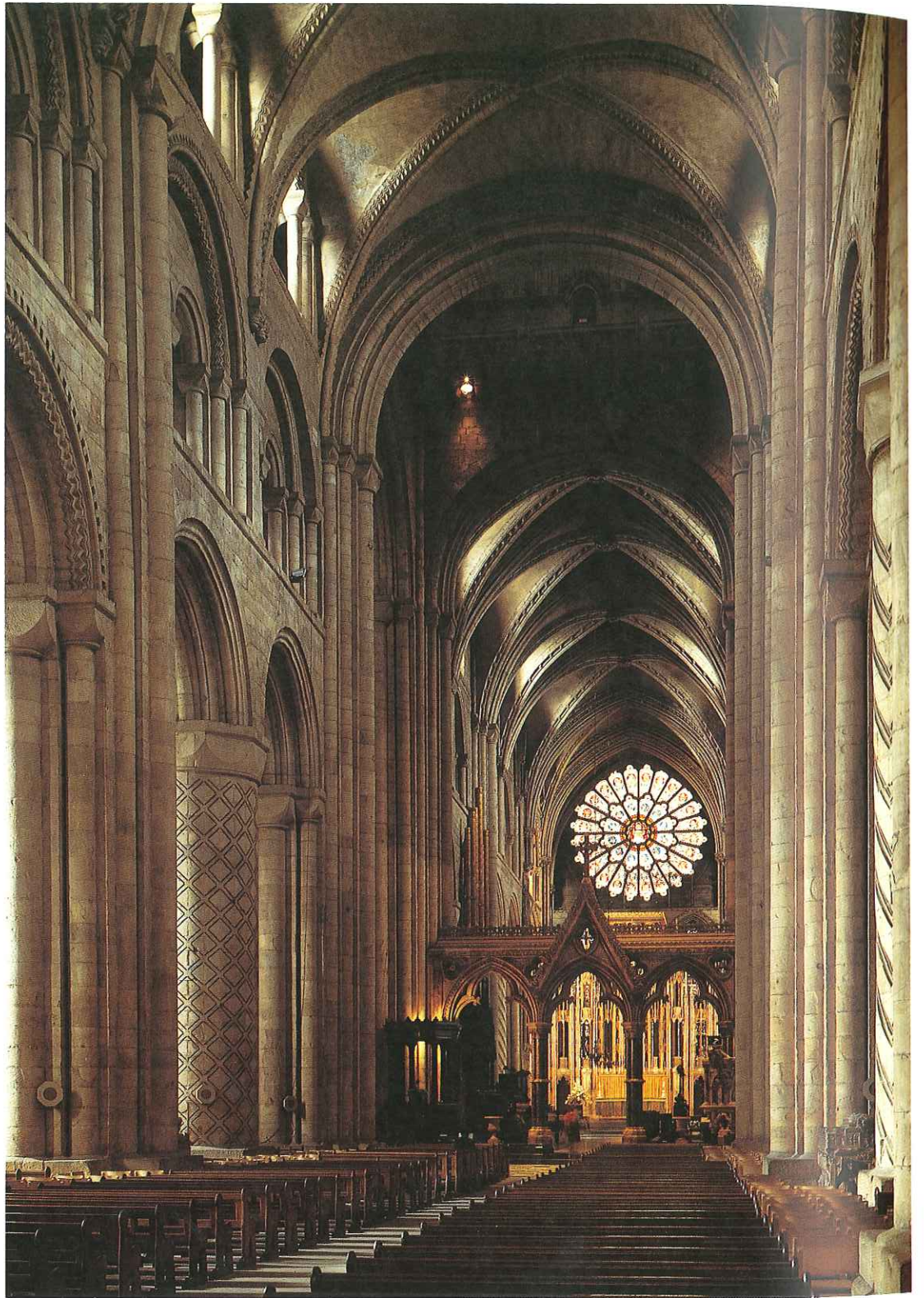
112

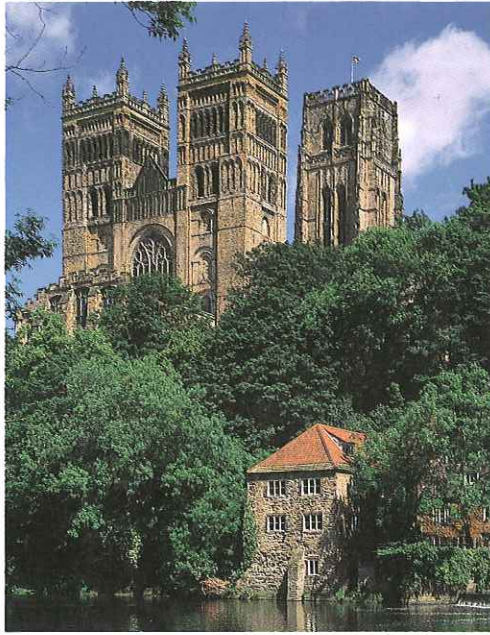
*Tournai Cathedral,
Belgium, 1171–1213*

The church in the
medieval city



called a transept between the choir and the nave. The general impression made by these Norman or Romanesque churches is nevertheless very different from that of the old basilicas. In the earliest basilicas classical columns carrying straight 'entablatures' had been used. In Romanesque and Norman churches we generally find round arches resting on massive piers. The whole impression which these churches make, both inside and outside, is one of massive strength. There are few decorations, even few windows, but firm unbroken walls and towers which remind one of medieval fastnesses, *figure 111*. These powerful and almost defiant piles of stone erected by the Church in lands of peasants and warriors who had only recently been converted from their heathen way of life seem to express the very idea of the Church Militant – the idea, that is, that here on earth it is the task of the Church to fight the powers of darkness till the hour of triumph dawns on doomsday, *figure 112*.





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*Nave and west front of
Durham Cathedral,
1093–1128*

A Norman cathedral

There was one problem in connection with the building of churches that engaged the minds of all good architects. It was the task of giving these impressive stone buildings a worthy roof of stone. The timber roofs which had been usual for basilicas lacked dignity, and were dangerous because they easily caught fire. The Roman art of vaulting such large buildings demanded a great amount of technical knowledge and calculation which had largely been lost. Thus the eleventh and twelfth centuries became a period of ceaseless experiment. It was no small matter to span the whole breadth of the main nave by a vault. The simplest solution, it would seem, was to bridge the distance as one throws a bridge across a river. Tremendous pillars were built up on both sides, which were to carry the arches of those bridges. But it soon became clear that a vault of this kind had to be very firmly joined if it was not to crash, and that the weight of the necessary stones was very great. To carry this enormous load the walls and pillars had to be made even stronger. Huge masses of stone were needed for these early 'tunnel'-vaults.

Norman architects therefore began to try out a different method. They saw that it was not really necessary to make the whole roof so heavy. It was sufficient to have a number of firm arches spanning the distance and to fill in the intervals with lighter material. It was found that the best method of doing this was by spanning the arches or 'ribs' crosswise between the pillars and then filling in the triangular sections between them. This idea, which was soon to revolutionize building methods, can be traced as far back as the Norman cathedral of Durham, *figure 114*, though the architect who, after the Conquest, designed the first 'rib-vault' for its mighty interior, *figure 113*, was hardly aware of its technical possibilities.



It was in France that Romanesque churches began to be decorated with sculptures, though here again the word ‘decorate’ is rather misleading. Everything that belonged to the church had its definite function and expressed a definite idea connected with the teaching of the Church. The porch of the late twelfth-century church of St-Trophime at Arles, in southern France, is one of the most complete examples of this style, *figure 115*. Its shape recalls the principle of the Roman triumphal arch, *page 119*, *figure 74*. In the field above the lintel – called the tympanum, *figure 116* – we see Christ in His glory, surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists. These symbols, the lion for St Mark, the angel for St Matthew, the ox for St Luke and the eagle for St John, were derived from the Bible. In the Old Testament we read of the vision of Ezekiel (Ezek. i. 4–12), in which he describes the throne of the Lord, carried by four creatures with the heads of a lion, a man, an ox and an eagle.

Christian theologians thought the supporters of God’s throne signified the four evangelists, and such a vision was a fitting subject for the entrance to the church. On the lintel below we see twelve seated figures, the twelve apostles, and we can discern, on Christ’s left, a row of naked figures in chains – they are lost souls being dragged off to hell – while on Christ’s right we see the blessed, their faces turned towards Him in eternal bliss. Below, we see the rigid figures of saints, each marked by his emblem,

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*Façade of the church of
St-Trophime, Arles,
c. 1180*



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Christ in glory

Detail of figure 115

reminding the faithful of those who can intercede for them when their souls stand before the ultimate Judge. Thus the teachings of the Church about the final goal of our life here below were embodied in these sculptures on the portal of the church. These images lived on in the minds of the people even more powerfully than did the words of the preacher's sermon. A late medieval French poet, François Villon, has described this effect in the moving verses he wrote for his mother:

*I am a woman, poor and old,
Quite ignorant, I cannot read.
They showed me at my village church
A painted Paradise with harps
And Hell where the damned souls are boiled,
One gives me joy, the other frightens me ...*

We must not expect such sculptures to look as natural, graceful and light as classical works. They are all the more impressive because of their massive solemnity. It becomes much easier to see at a glance what is represented, and they fit in much better with the grandeur of the whole building.

Every detail inside the church was just as carefully thought out to fit its purpose and its message. *Figure 117* shows a candlestick made for



Gloucester Cathedral about the year 1110. The intertwined monsters and dragons of which it is formed remind us of the work of the Dark Ages, *page 159, figure 101; page 161, figure 103*. But now a more definite meaning is given to these uncanny shapes. A Latin inscription round its crown says roughly: 'This bearer of light is the work of virtue – with its shine it preaches the doctrine, so that man should not be darkened by vice.' And really, as we penetrate with our eyes into the jungle of strange creatures we not only find once more (round the knob in the middle) the symbols of the Evangelists, who stand for the doctrine, but also naked figures of men. Like Laocoön and his sons, *page 110, figure 69*, they are assailed by snakes and monsters; but theirs is not a hopeless struggle. 'The light that shineth in the darkness' can make them triumph over the power of evil.

The font of a church in Liège (Belgium), made about 1113, provides another example of the part taken by the theologians in advising the artists, *figure 118*. It is made of brass and shows in the middle a relief of the baptism of Christ – the most appropriate subject for a font. There are Latin inscriptions explaining the meaning of every figure; for instance, we read 'Angelis ministrantes' (ministering angels) over the two figures waiting at

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*The Gloucester
Candlestick,*
c. 1104–13

Gilt bronze, height
58.4 cm, 23 in; Victoria
and Albert Museum,
London



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Reiner van Huy
Font, 1107–18

Brass, height 87 cm, 34½
in; church of St-
Barthélemy, Liège

the side of the River Jordan to receive Christ. But it is not only these inscriptions that underline the importance attached to the meaning of every detail. Again, the whole font was given such a meaning. Even the figures of oxen on which it stands are not there merely for the sake of ornament or decoration. We read in the Bible (2 Chronicles iv) how King Solomon engaged a cunning workman from Tyre in Phoenicia who was an expert in brass foundry. Among the things he made for the temple in Jerusalem the Bible describes:

A molten sea of ten cubits from brim to brim, round in compass. . . . It stood upon twelve oxen, three looking towards the north, and three looking towards the west, and three looking towards the south, and three looking towards the east: and the sea was set upon them, and all their hinder parts were inward.

It was this sacred model, then, which the artist of Liège, another expert in brass foundry, was asked to keep in mind two thousand years or more after the time of Solomon.

The forms which the artist uses for his images of Christ, of the angels and of St John, look more natural and at the same time more calm and majestic than those of the bronze doors of Hildesheim, *page 167, figure 108*. We remember that the twelfth century is the century of the Crusades. There was naturally more contact than formerly with the art of Byzantium, and many artists of the twelfth century tried to imitate and emulate the majestic sacred images of the Eastern Church, *pages 139-40, figures 88, 89*.



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The Annunciation,
c. 1150

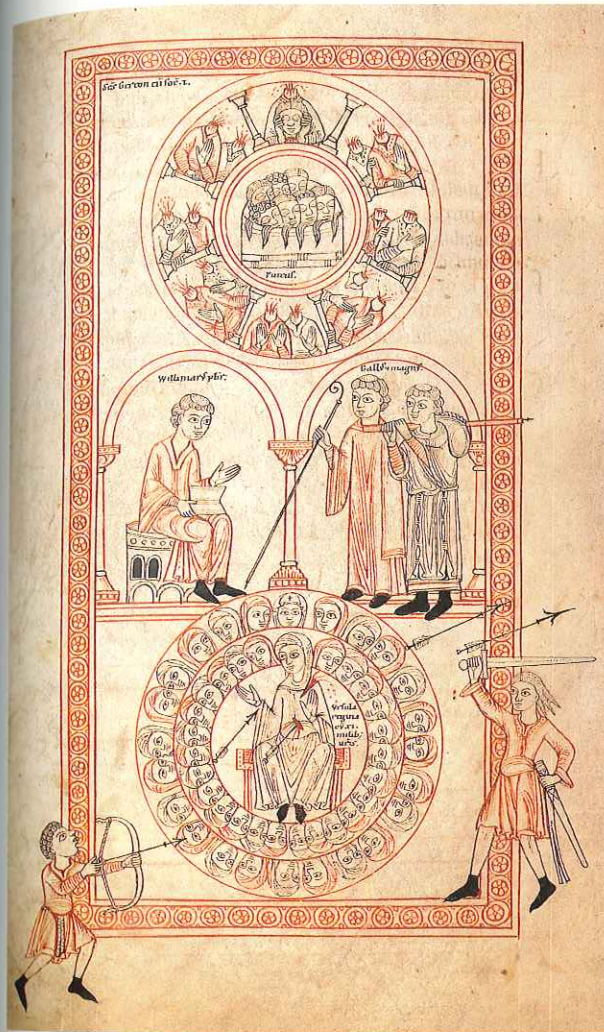
From a Swabian gospel
manuscript;
Württembergische
Landesbibliothek, Stuttgart

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*Saints Gereon,
Willmarus, Gall and
the martyrdom of
St Ursula with her
11,000 maidens,*
1137-47

From a calendar
manuscript;
Württembergische
Landesbibliothek, Stuttgart

At no other time, in fact, did European art approach the ideals of this kind of Eastern art more closely than at the height of the Romanesque style. We have seen the rigid and solemn arrangement of the sculptures of Arles, *figures 115-16*, and we see the same spirit in many illuminated manuscripts of the twelfth century. *Figure 119*, for instance, represents the Annunciation. It looks almost as stiff and motionless as an Egyptian relief. The Virgin is seen from in front, her hands raised as in astonishment, while the dove of the Holy Spirit descends on her from on high. The Angel is seen half in profile, his right hand extended in a gesture which in medieval art signifies the act of speaking. If, looking at such a page, we expect a



vivid illustration of a real scene, we may well find it disappointing. But if we remember once more that the artist was not concerned with an imitation of natural forms, but rather with the arrangement of traditional sacred symbols, which were all he needed to illustrate the mystery of the Annunciation, we shall no longer feel the lack of what he never intended to give us.

For we must realize how great the possibilities were that opened up before the artists as soon as they finally discarded all ambition to represent things as we see them. *Figure 120* shows a page from a calendar for the use of a German monastery. It marks the principal feasts of saints to be commemorated in the month of October, but, unlike our own calendars, it marks them not only in words but also by illustrations. In the middle, under the arches, we see St Willmarus the priest and St Gall with the bishop's crozier and a companion who carries the luggage of the wandering missionary. The curious pictures on top and below

illustrate the story of two martyrdoms which are remembered in October. In later times, when art had returned to the detailed representation of nature, such cruel scenes were often painted with a profusion of horrible detail. Our artist was able to avoid all this. To remind us of St Gereon and his companions, whose heads were cut off and thrown into a well, he arranged the beheaded trunks in a neat circle around the image of the well. St Ursula who, according to the legend, had been massacred with her eleven thousand maidens by the heathens, is seen enthroned, literally surrounded by her followers. An ugly savage with bow and arrows and a man brandishing his sword are placed outside the frame and aiming at the Saint. We are able to read the story off the page without being forced to



visualize it. And as the artist could dispense with any illusion of space or any dramatic action he could arrange his figures and forms on purely ornamental lines. Painting was indeed on the way to becoming a form of writing in pictures; but this return to more simplified methods of representation gave the artist of the Middle Ages a new freedom to experiment with more complex forms of composition (composition = putting together). Without these methods the teachings of the Church could never have been translated into visible shapes.

As with forms so with colours. As the artists no longer felt obliged to study and imitate the real gradations of shades that occur in nature they were free to choose any colour they liked for their illustrations. The bright gold and luminous blues of their goldsmiths' works, the intense colours of their book illuminations, the glowing red and deep greens of their stained-glass windows, *figure 121*, show that these masters put their independence of nature to good use. It was this freedom from the need to imitate the natural world that was to enable them to convey the idea of the supernatural.

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The Annunciation,
mid-12th century
Stained-glass window;
Chartres Cathedral

*Artists at work on a
manuscript and a panel
painting, c. 1200*

From the pattern book
of Reun Monastery;
Österreichische
Nationalbibliothek,
Vienna

