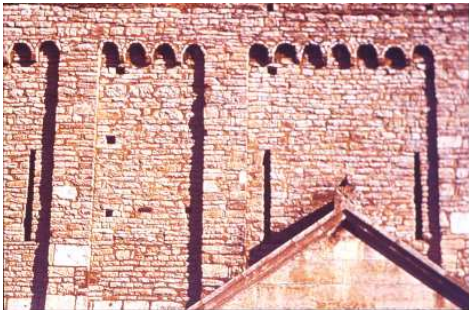


The Cusped Arch on Romanesque Churches

Much has been written concerning the impact of the mediaeval pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. In particular, articles and books have referred to the spread of ideas and cultural designs both up and down the various routes. Such ideas and designs affected the decoration of Romanesque churches across Western Europe. This diffusion was in two general directions: masons and sculptors, monks and clerics moved from the North and North-east towards the South West of Europe. They brought with them skills and experiences from their cultural heritage. Meanwhile returning pilgrims from Santiago would have seen and noted concepts that were new to them; these they would have been keen to display and incorporate in churches in their domains or homelands, partly as a token or proof of the epic journey they had recently completed. Some of these designs from Spain would have shown Moorish influences. There was nothing new about this interchange and flow of ideas. The Eastern Empire had long been a source of ideas that were adopted in Western Europe; many such ideas had their origins far to the east in Asia. Decorative patterns that were used in Italy were later to be employed throughout areas to the north and west. An example of this is the so called 'Lombard band', a form of decorative arch that also acted as a buttress was developed, as the name implies, in the north of Italy during the early X century. Within two hundred years the decoration was to be found in Switzerland, the Rhone valley up into Burgundy and across Southern France and over into Catalonia; from there it spread West across Northern Spain.



Tournus (71) Façade



Chapaize (71) Tower



Caunes-Minervois (11) Apse



Mollo (Catalonia) Tower

Later, Crusaders returning from the Holy Land, caused the construction of churches that were modelled on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.



Neuvy St Sepulcre (36)

Of the four main pilgrim routes that crossed France to Spain and Santiago (as described by Aimery Picaud in the Codex Calixtinus), the route that was most used was that which ran from Tours through Poitiers, Saintes and Bordeaux and then on down to the Pyrenees south of St Jean Pied de Port. This route was used by pilgrims and those accompanying the pilgrimage who came from the north of Germany, Scandinavia, the Benelux and Britain in addition to those who started in North-east France. There were other important routes that began further east, with one starting at Arles near the Rhone estuary.



Pilgrim Routes to Santiago de Compostela

From the Pyrenees the route turned west towards Santiago. It ran clear of the coast so as to avoid the depredations of pirates, but north of the Spanish plains to escape the attentions of the Moors.

These notes will now address the impact of the pilgrimage on the spread of the cusped arch. This arch is described as 'having projecting points formed at the meeting of curves of tracery or other elements of stonework'. (Shaver-Crandell & Gerson).

The Moors had invaded Southern Spain in AD 711 and, in so doing, they destroyed the Visigoth kingdom and secured most of Spain except the north. The Moors developed an exhilarating and vibrant culture. Remnants of their structures may be seen today especially in Cordoba and in the palace gardens of the Alhambra, Granada. Amongst the structural designs that they employed was the cusped arch.



Alhambra, Granada

Most references imply that this arch was of Moorish origin or that they brought it with them from North Africa. Neither is necessarily so. Of the dozen or so Visigoth buildings that have come down to us at least two have doors, windows or archways that use the precursor to the cusped arch, the Horse shoe arch; here the arch continues so that the final tips are at a narrower place than the widest point of the arch. These predate the Moorish invasion. Examples are the church of Santa Maria, Quintanilla de las Vinas (Burgos), which dates from the late VII/early VIII century, and San Juan de Banos (Palencia), which was consecrated in AD 661. So the style was already known and in use in Spain before the arrival of the Moors.



Sta Lucia de Alcuéscar, Caceres - Interior



San Juan de Banos, Palencia – West facade

However, it is equally plausible that the Moors did know of the arch and used it in Africa before the invasion. There is evidence that it was used in India in the I century AD and in Syria from the III century. It could easily have been brought West through Egypt and Libya to North Africa by Muslim pilgrims or traders.

After their defeat by the Moors, the Christian population was permitted to remain, retaining most property rights and the freedom of religious worship. It has already been stated that the Moors adopted and employed the cusped arch. Their Christian subjects similarly made greater use of it. There are several examples around Toledo and elsewhere in what was 'occupied' Spain.

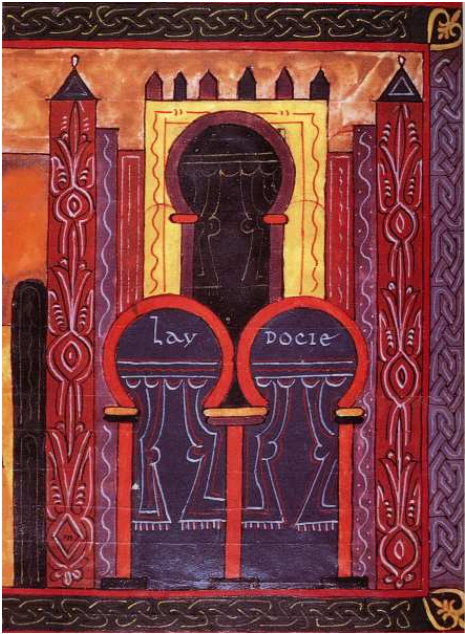


Sta Maria de Melque, Toledo - Interior



Santo Tome, Toledo - Tower

From AD 756 the Moors became less tolerant and gradually forced their Christian subjects to convert to Islam or flee. The Christian (or 'Mozarabs' as they are frequently called) fled North to the Asturian kingdom that had survived and resisted the Moors. These Mozarabs brought with them their cultural heritage that included the cusped arch. This was to be increasingly incorporated into the northern buildings and works of art.



Beatus Facundus – Church of Laodicea (detail)



San Isidoro, Leon - Transepts

At the IX century church of San Salvador, Valdedios (Asturias) the Mozarab influences may be seen on the apse window and the interior. Arches such as these were the forerunners for the cusps on the arches over doorways and windows.



San Salvador, Valdedios, Asturias – Apse window

From Leon across to Aragon there are churches with cusped arches; most are over an entry door; a few cover a window. All date from after the end of the XI century. Whether there had been earlier cusped door arches is not known. The transition from the architectural arch to this decorative cusped arch does not appear to have passed through any intermediate stage. It remained a decorative feature on into the XIIc in Catalonia. The south of Catalonia, including Lleida, remained in the hands of the Moors until around 1185. Parts of the Old Cathedral, known as Seu Vella, are Romanesque; these include the attractive south door by the transept. Above this door and to the right is a small niche that has the familiar Moorish cusped arch.



Lleida, Seu Vella, Catalonia – Niche over south door

Across France there are at least 50 Romanesque churches that have cusped arches. With only a few exceptions, the arches are over doorways. Their distribution across France is uneven. Just nine are in the region of the Auvergne and areas to the east into the Rhone valley. Three are in the general area north of Poitiers and Tours. The greatest number is concentrated in Poitou-Charente and the Gironde, with a further ten in the Limousin area of Correze and Creuse. This distribution might have supported the notion that the decorative and architectural feature was spread by returning pilgrims. It does not explain

why, however, they are absent from Les Landes, Lot-et-Garonne, Gers and Pyrenees-Atlantiques, an area through which three of the four main pilgrimage routes passed. Nor does it explain the group of arches present in the North of the Limousin.

The arches are fairly uniform in style and character. Those in Spain tend to have somewhat smaller lobes; there are few of these small lobed arches in France.



Cirauqui, Navarre – west door



Collonges-la-Rouge (19) – West door



Petit Palais (33) – Window on façade



Chatres (16) – West façade



Montmoreau (16) – detail of West door

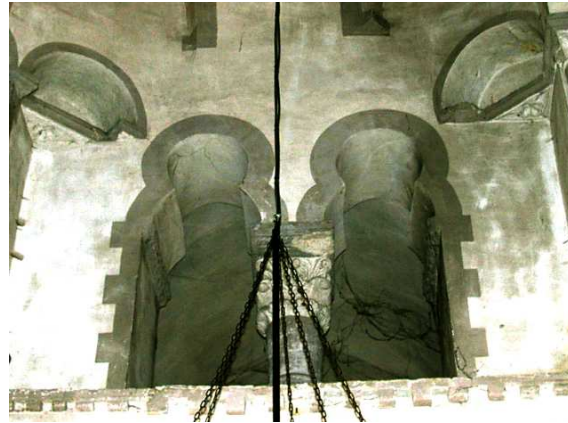
The lobes of the arch over the west door at Montmoreau (16) are decorated with a small motif. The cusped arch at Esnandes (17) is a XIX century creation of the restorer, Ballu.



Esnandes (17) – West door

In the Auvergne there are three churches that have tri-lobed arches in the interior – Notre Dame du Port, at Clermont-Ferrand, Issoire and Espirat (all 63); there is a fourth church with very similar arches at nearby St Pierre de Champagne en Vivarais (07). In three cases the arches are set in the tribunes and are, thus, easily overlooked. At Espirat the arches are in pairs on the sides of the cupola. Architecturally they appear to be closely related, possibly using the same planning drawings. Notre Dame du Port and Espirat were both being built at about the same time; Issoire is somewhat later. E Male, the great French authority on Romanesque art in an article published in 1911 saw a direct link between the arches of the tribunes at Notre Dame du Port and the mosque at Cordoba. Subsequent researchers failed to establish the link between these lobed arches and Islamic influences. If there was not this stylistic link then we should look for a structural requirement that called for the lobed arches. But this is unlikely. At Issoire, all but one of the bays on the south side of the nave have lobed arches in the tribunes; there is only one bay on the north side; it is opposite the bay on the south side that lacks the lobed arches.

This imbalance indicates that there was no architectural or structural requirement for the arches to be lobed.



Issoire (63) – tribune arches in nave Espirat (63) – arches at cupola

Beyond Spain and France the Romanesque cusped arch is rare. An example with small cusps is to be found in County Clare, Ireland.



Dysert O'Dea, Co Clare

The mozarab style of arch was used on both sides of the Eastern Pyrenees. In Catalonia there is an example at the little church of San Julia de Boada. This church, which may be of Visigoth origin, has the arch over the south door and over the entry from the nave to the choir. At St Michel de Cuxa (66) the arch is used between the main nave and side aisles of the church.



Sant Julia de Boada, Catalonia – South wall and interior



St Michel de Cuxa (66) – Arch from nave to side aisle

It has been suggested that the Mozarab influences extended much further East across the Languedoc, reaching St Guilhem-le-Desert (34) and into the lower valley of the Rhone. It is, therefore, noteworthy that there are no churches along this wide coastal band that have cusped arches over the doors or windows. Yet there was a very significant pilgrimage route that passed from Arles through Toulouse to Spain through the region. With this in mind and given their absence from the South-west corner of France where the other three routes to Santiago passed, may be the importance of the pilgrimage in transmitting the design of the cusped arch has been greatly overstated. Furthermore, the suggested linkage between the cusped or lobed arches of Romanesque churches and the Moorish arches of southern Spain may be little more than wishful thinking.

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