

CATHEDRALS AND CHURCHES OF EUROPE

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From Lübeck to Gdańsk

Brick Gothic (and Romanesque) in the Baltic Sea Region

During the Middle Ages the Baltic Sea region developed into one of the most important trading areas of Europe. Towns with lively markets and ports for shipping goods sprang up along the coast and the banks of navigable rivers, and a new social class established itself in such areas: a stratum of rich merchants and townsfolk, who now had the self-confidence to prove a match for the nobility and the clergy. In order to safeguard their economic interests, businesspeople and local communities came together to form trading organizations. The German Hanseatic League was the foremost of these: from the 12th century to the middle of the 17th, it protected the markets and trade routes of its members across Northern Europe.

The Hanseatic League commanded immense economic, political, and cultural influence. In the wake of valuable wares, including furs and cloth, cultural goods also began to spread, from arts, crafts, and sculpture to construction techniques and styles. Profane and religious buildings alike thus bear extraordinarily similar features from Lübeck to Gdańsk, Stockholm to Brandenburg.

This impressive level of uniformity is undoubtedly due to the use of brick. There was a lack of natural stone in these areas, so in the High and Late Middle Ages brick was the construction material of choice for a long period. Brick building also led to the creation of a distinctive decorative style: the kiln-fired

clinker bricks, processed in layers, had quite different material properties from ashlar. Necessity led to virtue: the façades of the brick churches are notable for their characteristic, markedly structural decoration: glazed bricks are often used as colorful markers to highlight this structure.

The inclusion of Gothic decorative forms presented a particular challenge: while capitals, tracery, and friezes could be carved relatively smoothly in ashlar, the brittleness of brick placed clear limits on craftsmanship.

Ratzeburg Cathedral was one of the earliest major buildings to be constructed of brick. Its structure is traditional, but its color contrasts and rich façade decoration, ledges, pilaster strips, and braid-like friezes are impressive. Brick-building techniques mostly came from Lombardy, with the result that the earliest Romanesque brick churches followed northern Italian models. As Gothic architecture spread from northern France, new styles emerged in the Baltic Sea region and within the territory dominated by the Hanseatic League. One formative example was St Mary's Church in Lübeck, rebuilt in the second half of the 13th century to conform precisely to the models provided by French cathedrals. This parish church was thus a fierce rival to the city's cathedral, and provided the blueprint for countless other parish and episcopal churches in northern Germany, Scandinavia, and Poland.

Meissen, Cathedral

Meissen Castle is a striking sight, towering over the bank of the Elbe, of which the eastern side is occupied by the cathedral, the present version built from 1250. Views: the west front, dating from the 14th or 15th century, with towers from the 19th century; statues of the founders in the choir, dating from 1265; the interior.

The bishopric of Meissen was founded by the Holy Roman Emperor Otto I in 968 and was one of the most important in Saxony. The complex containing the cathedral, bishop's palace, and canons' residences testifies to this power, standing proudly beside the buildings for the margraves and other nobles. The Gothic episcopal church was repeatedly altered and extended; the width of the three-aisled hall is impressive, and leads into the east inner choir, located behind a stately rood screen, where larger-than-life-size statues of the founders are displayed on the walls, and are considered to be masterpieces of German Gothic sculpture. They show Emperor Otto I and his wife, Adelheid, along with the dedicatory saints of the church, St John the Evangelist and St Donatus.





Verona, St Zeno

The Romanesque basilica was built 1118–37. Views: below, the interior; right, exterior seen from the west, with the façade, the tower of the 12th-century former Benedictine abbey, and the campanile, begun in 1045; overleaf, the 48 bronze reliefs on door wings are unique and were probably produced around 1100 and around 1200.

From left to right and above to below, the scenes on the door wings are:

Page 168

God Questions Adam and Eve

Banishment from Paradise

Shame of Noah

Abraham and the Three Angels, and Repudiation of Hagar

Sacrifice of Isaac

Last of the Egyptian Plagues, and Moses before Pharaoh

Page 169

St Zeno Healing the Princess

Archangel Michael Fighting the Dragon

Annunciation to the Virgin Mary

Deposition from the Cross

Christ in Limbo

Judge of the World

No fewer than five buildings preceded the Romanesque Basilica of St Zeno that can be seen today. Earthquakes and wars have left their mark, yet a number of unique works of art can still be seen in the awe-inspiring church of the patron saint of Verona. Master Nicholas, in 1135–8, created the elegant portal area, with a porch rising from red marble lions. The most remarkable work, however, can be found on the doors leading into the church: on their wooden wings are 48 large-scale bronze reliefs, depicting scenes from the Old and New Testaments, as well as the miracle performed by St Zeno. On closer inspection, at least two different styles can be identified, indicating that the panels were probably made at different times, and possibly in different places.



Montepulciano, Madonna of St Blaise

The striking yet isolated location of the Church of the Madonna of St Blaise (S. Biagio) removes it from the activity of everyday life. It was designed by Antonio da Sangallo the Elder and built 1518–c. 1540. Views: the exterior; the interior looking towards the southeast.

This pilgrimage church on the edge of the town of Montepulciano has a special place among the centrally planned buildings of the Renaissance. Due to its proximity to the models of Antiquity and the systematic way in which the space is divided, it is considered to be the most “intellectual” church of its kind. Built on a Greek cross plan, the Doric structure defined the austere yet refined nature of the church. A tall campanile – a second was not completed – stands beside the northwest arm of the transept. The plans for the Marian shrine were provided by Antonio da Sangallo the Elder. The church is considered to be one of the finest examples of Tuscan Renaissance architecture, not least due to the unique way in which it is integrated into the landscape.





From Rome to Perugia

Key Sites in Church History

Where would a journey to the roots of Western Christianity begin, if not in Rome? The “Eternal City” was the location of the martyrdoms of the Apostles Peter and Paul. After the Edict of Toleration in 311, St Peter’s Basilica and the Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls were erected over their graves. This was followed by the foundation of countless other churches in remembrance of Christian martyrs.

Of all these venerable buildings, a few are of special importance: St Peter’s Basilica, as the principal church of the Pope, who lives in the Vatican; the Archbasilica of St John Lateran – the seat of the bishop of Rome; three other patriarchal basilicas, including St Mary Major; and the seven Pilgrim Churches, visited devotedly.

All of these churches were magnificently decorated, mostly with extensive mosaic cycles. Over the centuries, however, many of them were extensively renovated: Old St Peter’s Basilica, for instance, is known to us only from descriptions and pictures, as Pope Julius II had the foundation stone for a vast new church laid in 1506, and had the almost 1,200-year-old basilica demolished as part of the project. The conversion of the Lateran Basilica to Baroque style was somewhat more sensitive: the architect in charge of the work, Francesco Borromini, was commissioned to retain the early Christian nave at the core of the church, but to adapt it to 17th-century tastes.

The monastic orders gained ever greater power and importance in the Middle Ages and the early modern age: ultimately, it was they who introduced the Christian faith to the wider world, cultivated knowledge and disseminated it further, and – last but not least – sought out contact with the common people and their daily lives. The activities of the Benedictines, and Cluny Abbey, will be covered in the next chapter; here, we turn our attention first to the Franciscans, whose founder, St Francis, is venerated in his home town of Assisi. The son of a rich cloth merchant, he renounced all worldly wealth and devoted himself to a life of poverty. He was canonized soon after his death in 1226, and the Pope himself laid the foundation stone for the double church in Assisi, richly adorned with frescoes, to which St Francis’ remains were transferred in 1230. For its part, Perugia venerated St Bernardino of Siena, who healed many people stricken with the plague.

The members of the Jesuit Order, founded in 1534, saw themselves as missionaries and as the intermediaries of faith based on learning and spiritual insight. Their “mother house” in Rome, Il Gesù, was soon followed by a second building, St Ignatius of Loyola, which was also an innovative example of Baroque sacred art. These churches in Rome came to serve as models in the New World.

Toulouse, St-Sernin

Like Conques, St-Sernin (St Saturnin) in Toulouse is one of the great pilgrimage churches along the route to Santiago de Compostela. It was begun in 1080 and largely completed around the mid-12th century. Views: the exterior, from the east; the Porte de Miègeville (tympanum and exterior); the interior.

The churches along the pilgrimage route had to offer space for a great multitude of believers and therefore tended to be of a specific type: projecting extensively, with a transept extended with apses, and a choir ambulatory with radiating chapels. In St-Sernin the nave, with its five aisles and eleven bays, has massive dimensions. The Porte de Miègeville forms the southern entrance to the church. Its tympanum bears an unusual depiction of the Ascension, with Christ borne upwards by angels. The twelve Apostles look on, making gestures of astonishment.



Laon, Notre-Dame

The Cathedral of Laon embodies the power and status of French episcopal churches like almost no other building. Set on a hill and with beautiful towers soaring heavenwards, it dominates the town and the surrounding landscape. Notre-Dame de Laon, begun around 1160, is the most beautiful of the Early Gothic churches, most of which had four stories. The proportional look of the church is based on the balance between the flat wall and the profiled "framework," which clearly showcases the layered nature of the space. It is evident that the builders were aware of this harmony inside the church: when the vast new choir was built in the 13th century, its structure was adapted to that of the older components. The façade of Laon Cathedral is also an exception to the rule: the deep hollows that accommodate the portals and windows, towers and tabernacles, create a contrasting play of light and shadow, material and empty space, which in this perfection makes it quite unlike any other building of its time. Despite its utterly unconventional appearance and sculptural approach, the façade is clearly aligned with the interior, where a three-aisled nave opens up behind the frontage.

The foundation stone of the multi-towered cathedral was laid in 1160 but, when the west façade was completed in 1200, the canons ordered the construction of a new, even more lavish, long choir. Views: the nave; the exterior from the southwest; overleaf, the three deep, sculpted portals.



Winchester, Cathedral

Holy Trinity has the longest Gothic cathedral nave in Europe. The original Norman cathedral was modified and extended several times. Views: the exterior; the nave (late 14th century); the retrochoir (space behind the high altar), built from 1320.

In the second half of the 14th century Canterbury and Winchester Cathedrals acquired new naves in the Perpendicular style. Winchester, however, is a special case. Here in 1360 work began on the façade, which – rather unusually for England – reproduces the basilican elevation of the interior. Six years later work on the new building ceased and was only continued in 1394 under Bishop William Wykeham. His daring master builder, William Wynford, preserved, presumably on cost grounds, the old nave and virtually “carved” the modern profiles and cluster pillars out of the thick Romanesque walls. The size of the previous building can still be felt despite all this delicacy.





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