THE HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL ARCHITECTURE
FROM CAROLINGIAN TO ROMANESQUE:
CRITERIA AND DEFINITIONS
FROM 1925 TO THE PRESENT DAY

This paper is divided into two parts. The first examines the changing definitions of the Romanesque period in architectural terms and the various explanations which have been put forward for its origins and development; the second discusses the historiography of Anglo-Saxon studies. Underlying this analysis is a belief that there are useful parallels to be drawn between the work of the pioneers of the study of Western medieval architecture (in particular that of the Anglo-Saxons) and Creswell's work in the field of Islamic architecture, leading to the conclusion that there is less of a difference between the recent historiographies of the two areas than might have been thought.

DEFINING THE ROMANESQUE

In the fifteenth century, within the Gothic age itself in Northern Europe, a distinction was already drawn between what we now call the Romanesque and the Gothic style. In the Master of Flemalle's painting of the Betrothal of the Virgin in the Prado, for example, the Old Law is represented by a building with round arches and capitals, bases and moldings of twelfth-century character and the New Law by an unfinished one with pointed arches and architectural details of the fifteenth-century type. In the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries writers such as Vasari and Wren characterized the earlier style as Tuscan, Saxon, or Norman, depending on location, and the later as German, Gothic, or Saracenic. In 1819 William Gunn applied the linguistic term "Romanesque" to the architecture of the earlier period, just as Arcisse de Caumont introduced the label Roman as an extension of Romain, both the English and French terms defining the architecture of all the centuries between antiquity and the Gothic as a late, late antiquity, as a sub-Roman or Roman-like architecture. In the first half of the twentieth century scholars such as de Lasteyrie and Focillon further refined the term by restricting it to the late tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries and characterizing it as the geometrical articulation of mass and space, turning it into a purely stylistic label. The earlier part of the old overall period was subdivided into Merovingian, Carolingian, and so on.

It is interesting to note, in passing, that with its new definition "Romanesque" marks a great divide in the periods of Western art: the earlier labels (with the exceptions of "classical" and "antique") are tribal, racial, or dynastic, e.g., Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Merovingian, Carolingian; the later ones are stylistic, e.g., Romanesque, Gothic (now of course nothing to do with the Goths), Renaissance, Manierist, Baroque. The new, refined definition of Romanesque naturally engendered arguments about where to draw the line between it and the periods which preceded it, so that at one stage the Carolingian palace chapel at Aachen of around 800 was considered the earliest Romanesque building, then buildings such as the mid-tenth-century abbey church at Gernrode, built in the time of the Ottonian dynasty of 919 to 1024, then buildings of the 1020's like St-Benoît-sur-Loire, and (the latest reported sighting) the cathedral of Speyer in the 1030's.

In Kenneth Conant's volume on Carolingian and Romanesque architecture in the Pelican series, the Ottonian period is described as in part German early Romanesque, paralleling Puig i Cadafalch's First Romanesque of Catalonia, Burgundy, and northern Italy, and removing the misleading impression of the Romanesque being in origin an unequivocally southern style. This broad interpretation of the start of the Romanesque acknowledges the fact that the material itself does not permit any greater precision, as might be achieved by making the presence or absence of a particular feature such as the half-shaft into a determining
A crucial distinction needs to be drawn between two kinds of periods: those recognized by contemporaries (by whatever name) and those imposed later with hindsight. The Gothic and the Renaissance both fall into the first category (despite the inaccuracy of the first label), but the Romanesque belongs in the second, so that very detailed analysis can look like an exercise more in aid of Wölfflin and Morelli than of the buildings of the tenth and eleventh centuries themselves.

Turning from the definition of the Romanesque to its development as a style, the most popular explanation for its rise is the effect on church design of an intention to vault in stone. Sir Alfred Clapham, writing in the 1930’s, put the case succinctly.11 According to his thesis the devastations of the Viking raids of the ninth century brought about a demand for greater security, so that from the start the Normans (that is, the Christianized, settled Normans of Normandy) envisaged a church of this vaulted type. Wall shafts, Clapham argued, are meaningless unless they imply an intention to cover the main span in stone; therefore the many early Norman churches with vertical shafts and without vaults are the result of planned vaults being abandoned for lack of confidence or funds; at the very least they imply the existence of diaphragm arches as a means of preventing the spread of fire. This perfect example of utilitarianism can easily be disproved, as follows.

The eleventh-century church of St-Vigor at Bayeux, Clapham’s own example of a building with diaphragm arches, has no gables above the diaphragms, which would therefore not in any way have contained a fire in the roof. In the contemporary church of St. Mary at Lomello in Lombardy the spandrels of the diaphragm arches are pierced with decorative arches, pointing to the same conclusion.

Concerning vaults, the argument ignores the fact that the Normans built buildings with shafts and without vaults for well over a century, conjuring up the absurd image of their builders starting with good intentions and succumbing, time and again, to a failure of nerve; it makes more sense to argue that the shaft is an aesthetic device used to articulate space and divide up wall surfaces (as well as, on occasions, support vaults). At Bernay for instance the choir has shafts while the nave has none, suggesting that the forms are intended to set off the eastern arm containing the sanctuary by making it more richly articulated.

ANGLO-SAXON STUDIES

After Clapham’s volumes of 1930 and 1934, work on the Anglo-Saxon period, the equivalent in England of the Carolingian and Ottonian periods on the Continent, sank into the doldrums.12 In 1965 Harold and Joan Taylor published their two-volume gazetteer of every building which in their view contained Anglo-Saxon fabric, dated on a system of periods labeled A, B and C.13 This, with its remorseless logic and clarity of exposition, revitalized the study of Anglo-Saxon architecture. Yet its very clarity represents a shortcoming, every building being treated as a separate entity, as an island, with neither cross-referencing nor discursive narrative. One might have expected this aspect to be supplied by the third volume of the set, but when it appeared, in 1978, it dealt with the material entirely in typological terms. Cutting the cake in a different way of course produced interesting results, but it still failed to provide a context: with the Taylors’ intervention, wider concepts such as “Carolingian” and “Romanesque” ceased to be considered and the individual building took center stage.

The Taylors’ work led more or less directly to the development of what has come to be called above-ground archaeology, with the application of scientific techniques such as mortar sampling and radiocarbon dating (involving the stripping of plaster) to the study of medieval churches. This generated a great deal of enthusiasm and added to the quantity of information available, but it has also led some scholars to assume that this kind of evidence is virtually incontrovertible, despite the fact that such evidence can very easily mislead. Thus such “value-free” analysis (as it is sometimes called) can lead to the subdivision of even the smallest building into a large number of phases which are then equated with separate historical periods, providing the structure with a very long building history and taking its origins with little justification back to the earliest centuries.

One other noteworthy characteristic of this approach is its lack of interest in architectural quality. At Hadstock, for instance, the plinths have been left by the investigators in a state which implies they were never meant to be enjoyed, only analyzed.14 Harold Taylor has himself said that he studies the buildings as the remains of Anglo-Saxon faith and not as architectural monuments. The problem in this regard is exacerbated by the paucity of standing buildings, and by the fact that even if we had all the monuments complete none would compare with the splendors of, for example, early