

A Hidden Pyrenean Valley – the Vall de Boi

It was not until the mid twentieth century that the valleys of Aran and Boi were connected to the wider world. Both valleys are tucked high into the Pyrenees to the West and South-west of Andorra and were cut off from ready access to the plains of Catalonia by ridges of mountains and hills. Only when these barriers were finally breached with the construction of the tunnel of Viella did the remarkable gems in these valleys become easily accessible to tourists. Because of the geographical barriers the inhabitants of both valleys had been isolated from the influences and cultural currents that coursed through Catalunya over the centuries. In some respects life for the villagers changed little over the centuries. Because of their isolation they were not even subjected to the destruction and pillage that were so much part of the lives of those who lived in the plains to the South around the regional centre of Lleida. Their isolation kept the villages poor and therefore there was neither the money nor the need to enlarge or embellish, let alone rebuild the churches; that was to be the fate of most churches in the more accessible areas across Europe.

Both valleys are well-known for their remarkable natural beauty, the panoramas, the drama afforded by the mountains, the fascinating birdlife to be seen, the carpets of wild flowers that change colour with the seasons like a child's kaleidoscope and the legacy of Romanesque churches to be found in both valleys. It is this legacy in the Vall de Boi that we will now look at.

The Vall de Boi is particularly famous throughout Catalunya for both the quantity and quality of the Romanesque churches that have survived. It would probably be helpful to define what is meant by the term 'Romanesque'. It was a term that came into being in the late nineteenth century to describe the architecture and art that was developed in the eleventh and the first half of the twelfth centuries. It is an art form that has its roots in the inheritance derived from the Roman Empire. Roman ruins and sculpture fragments were even more commonplace across Western Europe than today. These provided inspiration and models to the artisans of the medieval period. In the valley there are at least fifteen churches from the period. Of these seven are noteworthy for their architecture. Others had painted walls and vaults of a style and form that were unique to the valley. In three of them wooden carvings from the twelfth century had survived. One church has primitive sculptures.

From 1931 there began a programme to safeguard this astonishing and valuable heritage for future generations. Because of the climatic conditions that pertained in the valley and because of the increasing risks of damage and theft as the world beyond the valley's confines became aware of the treasures to be found in the valley, a decision was made to remove the paintwork using a technique known as 'strappo' and to conserve it in the museums in Barcelona and Vic. Similarly, the sculptured wooden artefacts were removed to safety. The paintwork has been painstakingly restored and is presented in a form that resembles the form it was in when in situ. But alas, without the church around it, there is no longer a context. Because Barcelona is easily accessible, a visit to the Museu Nacional d'Arte de Catalunya offers a fine opportunity to see these wonderfully preserved paintings. Copies of them have been faithfully recreated in the churches so that the visitor can see the churches as they appeared in the early twentieth century. By 1980 most of the churches had been accorded Historic Monument status and the structures of the buildings had been consolidated and restored. Most of this work has been done to a very high standard, although one or two of the buildings look a little too 'scrubbed and

clean' and thus have lost some of the aura and 'patina' of a building that is a thousand years old.

Because space does not allow it and it would be of little general interest no attempt will be made to describe or comment on all the churches of the valley. Instead, seven have been selected. Each is different though all have characteristics in common with other churches of the valley.

If the visitor has only time to visit just one village in the valley then it must be Taüll, which has two of the best and most authentically preserved churches of the valley. The best known and most striking is the church of Sant Climent. The other is the church of Santa Maria, which stands in the centre of the village. In medieval times the pathway into the village from the lower part of the valley led first to the village centre and Santa Maria before continuing to the Eastern outskirts of the village and Sant Climent. Sant Climent church was dedicated on 10 December 1123 by Ramon Guillem de Roda, who was bishop of Barbastro; it comprises a broad triple nave; this form is derived from the early paleo-Christian basilicas that were, in turn, modelled on the form used in Roman temples. Each nave ends in a rounded choir or side chapel. To the side rises a tall square bell-tower. The very height of this tower was clearly intended to send a message to all those living within sight of it that here resided great power; the inhabitants of the village at that time would have been living lives of very great poverty and insecurity and dwelling in mean hovels. The tower has six floors, each with open bays or windows. The tower is decorated with small, semi-circular loops that are known as Lombard bands. Above these is frieze with a pattern of 'teeth' that is created by putting the rectangular stones into place at an angle. The form of the tower and the two decorative patterns are direct copies of similar towers that were built in the early eleventh century around Como, in Lombardy. Church towers of this form and with this decoration are still to be seen there today. It is known that Lombard masons travelled to Catalunya at around this time because the records for the Cathedral at nearby La Seu D'Urgell refer to the presence of 'Lombardos' in the construction of that building which has similar decoration. The apse and side chapels of Sant Climent have the same Lombard style decoration around the top of the wall.



Sant Climent de Taüll. Church from the East

On entering the church the visitor is immediately struck by the dramatic painting that fills the choir. In medieval times the interiors of most churches were painted. Most people could not read Latin in which the Bible was written. These paintings were vivid explanations of selected events or people from the Bible or from Christian history. So here at Sant Climent we see the dominant figure of Christ in what is known as a mandorla. He holds a book, the Word of God, and he blesses all who stand before him. Around him, at the four corners, is a supporting cast of four Evangelists, shown by their symbols; above them are two angels. Each side of the East window below are disciples; to the left of the window we see the name of one, 'Bartolome'. With the exception of small fragments, the remainder of the painting has been lost but it is probable that all the walls would have been covered at one time. The aisles are divided from one another by circular pillars which have a thin band of Lombard 'teeth' around them; this is almost the only example of church pillars being decorated this way. The nave has timber vaulting. Whilst it was possibly intended that it should have had stone vaults these were never known whether it was because of a lack of finance or because the task was considered to be too risky an undertaking; the vaults based on the Romanesque arch were inherently unstable; it was only when the pointed Gothic arch was developed in the mid twelfth century that parishioners no longer had to worry that the roof might come crashing down in the midst of Mass.

The church of Santa Maria at Taüll is in a small square in the middle of the village. It was dedicated just one day later than Sant Climent. Not surprisingly it shares several similar

characteristics with Sant Climent: it has three aisles that end in rounded choirs or side chapels. It has a square bell tower but this is lower and lacks the dramatic effect of that at Sant Climent. The tower and the exterior of the apse and side chapels are decorated with Lombard bands and 'teeth'. Inside, the aisles are divided by plain cylindrical pillars and the roof is vaulted in timber. Unlike Sant Climent, it is almost certain that it was never intended that this church should be given stone vaults. Similarly, the church was finely painted, in this case with an image of the Virgin Mary seated, and holding the child Christ. The original is also in Barcelona, but it has been replaced by a fine copy.



Santa Maria de Taüll. Copy of the painting from the choir

Three other churches in the valley deserve special mention: Sant Joan de Boi, Santa Eulalia d'Erill-la-Vall and the church of Nativitat de Durro. Sant Joan de Boi resembles the two churches at Taüll in its basic architectural form with one significant exception: the roof of the nave was initially timber vaulted but this was later converted to stone vaulting. This modification would have reduced the risk of the church's destruction by fire significantly. As with the churches at Taüll, there were fine frescos, now in Barcelona. Of special interest are the paintings on the exterior of the North wall. Their presence confirms how extensively even minor village churches were decorated.



Boi. The painting over the exterior of the North door

Santa Eulalia d'Erill-la-Vall is a smaller church, having a single nave; the transept arms are formed by lateral side chapels. Side chapels were an essential part of the medieval liturgical requirement, for it was in these that the holy relics were placed; the veneration of these provided greater protection to the worshiper in their troubled and dangerous lives. The six storey bell tower rises at the North-east corner of the church beyond a small gallery that runs along the North wall. The interior no longer has any paint decoration. This loss is more than compensated by the survival of a sculptured scene of Christ's descent from the cross. There are seven figures, comprising Christ, the two thieves, two figures taking down the body of Christ and to the sides, St John and Mary. The originals are divided between the museums at Vic and Barcelona, thus totally destroying their context. However, a good copy has been placed below the roof vaults at the entrance to the choir. This work is part of a genre of superb twelfth century wood carvings from the Pyrenean area of Catalunya that have survived. Also in Barcelona is part of a similar 'Descent from the Cross' from Santa Maria de Taüll and a statue from Durro, all possibly the work of the same man.



MNAC Barcelona – The head of Mary from Erill church

The last church to be mentioned is that of the Nativitat de Durro, which has the same basic style and characteristics as the churches already described. The apse and side chapels have been modified and are not Romanesque. This church has a gallery on the South side of the nave providing shelter to those entering the church through the South door. This door is one of the few in the valley to have retained its original form. It has an arch over the door with a band of 'billets' as decoration. To the sides are two slim columns each with a sculptured capital; these are rather crudely worked and depict foliage and mythical beasts.

The fact that only five of the fifteen Romanesque churches in the valley have been described does not mean that the others do not merit a visit; they do! Similarly the villages themselves are full of interest beyond their remarkable churches. Many have fine, attractive houses built in the local style with long wooden balconies. The valley is just over an hour's drive from Lleida, a town that serves well as a base from which to visit the Vall de Boi.