

San Pedro de la Nave, a work of Visigothic Architecture

The Visigothic Kingdom came into establishment in the fifth century AD after Spain was overthrown by local barbarians. After the fall of the Roman Empire, natives from various regions within the empire attacked the city of Rome and overthrew its local representatives to establish a new ruling domain. In the mid sixth century, the Visigoths made Toledo the capital of their Hispano-Roman power. Ruled on the basis of a dual system of government, different sects of people within these newly collected provinces were legally ruled and judged in separate ways throughout the kingdom. Indigenous inhabitants of each province were judged by a Hispano-Roman governor under Roman law, while the interests of the Visigothic population were dealt with by a Visigothic duke who primarily concerned himself with the administration of these peoples. Leovigild, who lived from 568-586, broke this legal separation. He was a ruler who sought nothing less than to consolidate and unify the Iberian Peninsula under one Visigothic kingship. He began to create a centralized state that held two royal urban centers. He revised the ancient code of laws in order to have them be applied to both Romans and Goths (Dodds, 1994). The newly imposed political unity under this king was held secure between the interests of a cultured Hispano-Roman population and the authority of a formidable military aristocracy. The Visigoths were well adapted to the region of Spain, and therefore took over the sacked land of Rome. Initially barbarians to the Romans, the Visigothic rulers of Spain later converted to Christianity (*VISIGOTHIC ART: SAN PEDRO DE LA NAVE*). These Visigoths became the dominant people of Spain from the late fifth century until the Moorish invasion and conquest of Spain in 711 ("Spain"). The longest-lasting contribution that the Visigoths had on the Spanish culture to this day was their influential architecture. These contributions are, however, not popularly recognized in scholarly works. Visigothic architecture is identified within church structures, which were a very important precedent to the early Romanesque architecture practiced throughout Europe.

By the fifth century, Rome ceased to introduce the peninsula with new architectural forms. Their workshops closed, and construction of churches was left to the local indigenous guilds. The Visigoths rose to the occasion with a robust continuation of traditional architecture. During the Visigothic period, buildings were constructed from the late sixth through early eighth centuries that encompassed the social and political fusion of Roman and Visigothic styles. The church became the division of culture and the defender of tradition in static and bold forms, while the central crossings of these churches became the focus of an artistic production. None of the early Spanish churches remain standing, but through excavations, the enduring traditions they initiated were clearly revealed. Most of the major Christian floor plan styles that would appear in Spain over the next couple centuries were mostly dominated by the evolving architectural forms of the Visigoths, which began toward the end of the fourth century (Dodds, 1994).

Visigothic architecture comprised of basilican layouts comprised of compartmentalized spaces, horseshoe arches without keystones, barrel vaults, rectangular apses, as well as columns and pillars with Corinthian capitals; sometimes it followed the Greek cross plan (Visigothic Art and Architecture, *Wikipedia*). All of these elements were stylistic contributors to Visigothic architecture. San Pedro de la Nave (San Pedro) is one of the most well-known Visigothic churches to have embodied these architectural characteristics. San Pedro is also one of the first churches known to embody the first version of cruciform-style churches, a style not seen again until the later medieval times. Cruciform churches embody distinct characteristics, ones which symbolically represent the divine aspects of Christianity. Cruciform churches principally have an east end that contains an altar, a west end that sometimes contains a baptismal font, a north and a south transept, a crossing between the nave, and

either a bell tower or a domed ceiling. Many European cruciform churches that reflected these characteristics were also very similar to churches with the Greek cross plan. The Greek cross plan in Christian churches entailed nave and transept arms equal in length, often added with a narthex or vestibule (San Pedro De La Nave, *Wikipedia*). Rare occurrences of cruciform churches reflecting the Latin cross plan were found during this early phase of basilican architecture, which have longer naves than the Greek cross plan that are intersected by a shorter transept. This rare occurrence is found at San Pedro, composed of a different layout and design from the more traditional Greek cross style of the time. San Pedro is considered one of the most outstanding examples of Visigothic architecture because of its unique combination of cruciform and basilican shape with the Latin cross plan.

San Pedro de La Nave was originally established as a monastic church that was located in a poorly inhabited zone. This church was discovered by archaeologist Gómez Moreno, where he began studying the architectural components of its structure upon successfully relocating it from its original location in 1930. The original location of San Pedro was in the reservoir of Esla, which was at risk of flooding at that time. Archaeologists insisted on moving the endangered structure to a different elevation within the surrounding area in order to preserve its historical components. In order to move it, the dismantling of stone after stone was unavoidable. Bricks replaced the original stone of the structure where nonexistent pieces were (*VISIGOTHIC ART: SAN PEDRO DE LA NAVE*). It was through this process that Moreno became deeply acquainted with the original structure of the building as well as the characteristics of Visigothic art.

The abbey church of San Pedro de la Nave, shaped in a Latin cross and inlaid within a rectangular plan, has three rectangular accessories. One faces east to form the major chapel and the other two face north and south, respectively. The church has three doors to the outside, one at the end of the central nave to the west and the other two at the end of each transept arm to the north and south (*VISIGOTHIC ART: SAN PEDRO DE LA NAVE*). The placement of these church doors is an unconventional practice seen today, where a typical entrance into these central naves had three 'trinity' doors rather than just one. This symbolic Christian reference was deliberately implemented in later Romanesque styles, such as the Old St. Peter's Basilica of Rome, and Gothic styles, such as Chartres Cathedral of France. San Pedro has a nave and side aisles that are crossed by a transept. This north-to-south transept divides the nave of the church into eastern and western sections that have similar height dimensions to the central nave. This dimensional characteristic is typically found in Romanesque church architecture, whereas Gothic church architecture typically distinguished the central nave as double the size of the transept height. In the western section of the church, two side aisles are separated from the central aisle by pillars that are unified with the support of three horseshoe arches. This design style is one of the first of its kind that produced a precursor to the interior basilican church design seen today. Windows inside the church are also horseshoe-shaped, strategically located to overlook the crossing of the transept. In the eastern section, the two side aisles from the western section continue along the sides of the apse until two chambers are introduced.

In Spain, another church similar in architectural layout and design to San Pedro is São Frutuso. Built by the saint himself to serve as his own funerary chapel, São Frutuso has survived a number of unfortunate restorations. The plan, the proportions, and the exterior of the existing monument are in good enough condition to indicate that its original form is still well-preserved. The interior of São Frutuso has triple arched screens and five cupolas that cover its crossed plan, which suggest the contemplation of Justinianic monuments (Dodds, 1994). The architectural styles of São Frutuso, linked in architectural layout and design to San Pedro, may showcase a lost form of early Byzantine church architecture that was last seen at Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.

Spanish churches of the seventh century and early eighth century confirm concerns in planning that were initially seen in the first years of the sixth century, when crossings and chancel screens were first documented in the Iberian (Dodds, 1994). The majority of these buildings were constructed in an indigenous ashlar technique. Stones were laid as times in straight courses as seen in San Pedro de la Nave. In San Pedro and its ashlar, there were slight variations in a regular coursed wall. The horseshoe arches, the colonnette, or small shaft, its convexity, and complex curvilinear design of its capital all act as a mesh of uniformity to the geometry and precision of the rest of the skin to the structure. San Pedro's apse entrance encompasses a bold triumphal arch, with rich reliefs of carved voussoirs and impostes that are etched in deep contrast of light and shadow, only to be supported by slender freestanding columns (Dodds, 1994).

At San Pedro de la Nave, clear and simple massing visually segregates the different vessels of the cross plan and its sacristies. The only deception occurs in the exterior of San Pedro, where a vaulted room without any reasonable access surmounts the apse. This allows the church to appear taller and more integrated with the general massing of the monument, externally. Internally, the space is only evident by means of a window that gives onto the crossing (Dodds, 1994). The apse is small and cavernous in the church's interior. It displays a traditional construction style that valued grand and integrated exterior massing, but more intimate and enclosed interior space. The apse of San Pedro was originally blinded from light, only to open to an empty room that is illuminated by only two windows. This division of space via alteration of light and shadow are also shown throughout the structural design. The crossing, the choir, and the apse are separated by horseshoe arches that partition each space to distinctly mark the bold transition in space from one to another. This formal preoccupation is also highly valued in the apse entrance, where the shape and size of the apse are indistinguishable through a reduced and partitioned opening. For the horseshoe arches, jambs jut out into the space of the apse entrance to create a distinctive profile as well. In San Pedro, the light of three windows illuminate the apse which appears only as a brilliant, negative shape inscribed by its horseshoe opening. It is framed by a deep shadow of the choir, an obscure zone that in turn announces a pillar of illuminated space (Dodds, 1994).

Structural analysis of San Pedro de la Nave identifies the eastern part as a similar construct to those designed in other cruciform churches, whereas the western part has a similar construct to that of a classical basilica. There are several theories on this subject regarding the unique design of the church, specifically with the crossing between the transept and nave. One theory mentions that the design and structure of the church correspond to a completely original design, a variation on earlier models (Dodds, 1994). Another more practical theory suggests that the builders of San Pedro made a mistake in the calculations of the initial construction that prevented them from finishing the work correctly, where a different group of stone workers replaced the originals to continue modifying the original design. This theory has shown to be typical behavior seen in many later cathedral projects done throughout Europe as well, specifically at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris and at Tyn Church in Prague.

The Visigothic style church gives very prominent impressions in the fragmentation found within church interior spaces. Extreme contrasts between light and shadow are emphasized to the point of exaggerated gloominess in contrast to stark light beams from small windows. The support arches within San Pedro de la Nave are horseshoe-designed, with an even number of voussoirs that bring out the triumphal arch located at the entrance of the apse. The horseshoe-shaped apse is a style used in early

Christian and late Visigothic monuments on the Iberian (Dodds, 1994). Findings from early church excavations suggest these designs created an openness of space and visual accessibility to the altar, a distinguishing characteristic from later counterparts on the Iberian. To summarize, San Pedro encompasses a bold mix of open and fragmented spaces that are distinctively divided by the controlled form of light and shadow through its windows and structural volume (*VISIGOTHIC ART: SAN PEDRO DE LA NAVE*).

The horseshoe design distinguishes a series of buildings of simple, open, and continuous space from other counterparts. These arches support simple columns that have decorated capitals that are supported by inlaid impostes in the walls. Typically, four separate horseshoe arches support their domed ceilings above these crossings with attached columns that have elaborately carved and decorated capitals. The crossing nave of these church styles usually have original foundations with semicircular barrel vaults, later enclosed by brick as the substitute to its missing parts. This brick overlay is then canted upon horseshoe arches, supported by square pillars with attached columns. The canted barrel vaults give viewers an angled perspective to the axial view of the interior, giving a natural curvature to the structure (*VISIGOTHIC ART: SAN PEDRO DE LA NAVE*). In the early middle ages, groin and barrel vaults were the two most popular vault designs used. Both styles exerted substantial lateral force on the upper walls of the building. Romanesque vaults are typically one foot thick. The main structural problem encountered in the erection of these crosses, as seen in San Pedro, was the danger of different foundation sediment. The extra load placed on the four crossing piers meant that they were liable to sink further into the ground more so than neighboring parts of their structure that could lead to a fully-collapsed structure. At the time, the best guarantee of structural stability was to ensure that the foundations laid out at the beginning of work were capable of sustaining this additional weight (Stalley, 1999). This is a problem still seen today in the crossing piers of San Pedro. The solid internal columns are bent outward, which will eventually cause the vaulted ceiling to collapse.

In conclusion, San Pedro de la Nave is a very harmonic and preserved work left by the Visigoths and their era that is well-proportioned. The greatest monuments of the Visigothic period were buildings constructed from the late sixth through early eighth century. These works are considered to be the product of the social and political fusion of Roman and Visigoth cultures, and are recognized as foundational works in the first national art forms of Spanish culture. The Spaniards as a nation were not only formed before the advent of Islam on the Iberian but were also influenced by the continuation of Western Roman culture (Dodds, 1994). The buildings of those times constitute a new monumental era of national unity that reflect the fusion of Hispano-Roman and Visigothic peoples. San Pedro de la Nave is considered one of the longest-lasting and most outstanding examples of Visigothic architecture due to its unique combination of the cruciform and basilical shapes that are based on the Latin cross plan.

Works Cited

Dodds, Jerrilynn D. *Architecture and Ideology in Early Medieval Spain*. Penn State Press, 1994. 7-22, 111-116, Illustrations. Print.

Stalley, R. A. *Early Medieval Architecture*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999. 127+. Print. "The

Archaic Period (c. 750-500 Bc)." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d. Web. 30 Oct. 2013.

"VISIGOTHIC ART: SAN PEDRO DE LA NAVE." *VISIGOTHIC ART: SAN PEDRO DE LA NAVE*. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Oct. 2013.