

The Cathedral of Saints Eulalie and Julie

The first recorded mention of a Bishop of Elne dating from 571 refers to the original cathedral the remains of whose foundations can still be seen a short distance to the north-east of the present-day building. The current cathedral replaced this earlier church at the end of the 10th century.

The main structure of this cathedral was built throughout the 11th century and its altar was consecrated in 1069. At the end of the 14th century plans were made to transform it into a Gothic cathedral. The foundations of the intended new apse can still be seen in the garden of the cloister.

In keeping with the principles of Catalan Romanesque architecture the cathedral has a basilica plan with a central nave and two side aisles but no transept. Its west facade was originally flanked by two imposing towers which served both as bell towers and defensive structures.

The north tower was probably destroyed or too badly damaged to be rebuilt following the powerful earthquake that struck the region at the end of the 14th century. It was replaced in the early 20th century by the present tower built of solid brick and of much smaller dimensions.

The upper part of the apse was considerably altered during the restoration work carried out in the early 20th century. At that time the crenellated parapet that crowned it was removed as it used to be characteristic of the fortified churches of Catalonia in the 12th century.

The cathedral measures are: 49.5 metres long and 20.5 wide (excluding the chapels on the south side). The central nave is 8 metres wide.

The nave is covered by a semi circular barrel wick rests on transverse arches. The side aisles are covered by quarter circle vaults that provide counter-support for the central vault. One notable feature is that the vertical faces of the pillars flanking the side aisles bulge out very pronouncedly towards the nave, giving the impression that the pillars are spreading apart as they rise. This contributes to a deliberate optical effect that alters the perception of the building's proportions.

It appears that the cathedral' original roof was made of timber without a roof framework which was later replaced by the present vaulted ceiling.

The gothic gallery

It stands on the site of the former choir where the cathedral's canons gathered five times a day to celebrate the canonical religious service. These choir stalls went missing during the French Revolution. It now houses the organ which dates from 1869.

The south aisle

It has been completely transformed by the addition of six projecting gothic chapels built onto the original Romanesque structure. Our visit begins with the chapel nearest the apsidiole.

The **first chapel** was built at the request of Ramon Costa, Bishop of Elne from 1289 to 1310. His white marble recumbent effigy portrays him wearing his episcopal vestments.

Ramon Costa presided over the trial of the Knights Templar with fairness and impartiality. As Roussillon remained part of Catalonia until 1659 the Templars of this region were treated far more humanely than those under the authority of the King of France at the north of the *Corbières* frontier.

The **second chapel** contains two painted altarpiece panels. The panel on the left depicts Saint Martha taming a dragon while the one on the right illustrates the miracle of Saint Eligius. Both paintings are believed to be the work of the 14th-century Perpignan artist *Arnau Gassies*.

The Recumbent Christ dates from the 16th century.

The **third chapel** is dedicated to Saint Michael shown defeating the dragon. The artwork is dated 1431.

The **last three chapels** date from the 15th century. It is noticeable that the architectural style has become more refined compared with the first three as the ribs of the rib-vaulting intersections blend elegantly into the walls replacing the former corbels.

The North Aisle

The **baptistry chapel** reveals wall paintings dating from the 14th century.

In this aisle visitors can also admire a multi-lobed stone basin believed to date from the Roman period as well as the *Creu dels Improperis* or Cross of indignities which bears the instruments of Christ's Passion. This cross was traditionally carried at the head of the *Sanch* procession.

The High Altar Canopy

Built in 1724 by the sculptor *Pere Navarra* the canopy reflects the Parisian Baroque style in contrast to the monumental gilded wooden altarpieces traditionally found in Catalonia. It was funded by melting down the cathedral's original silver *repoussé* altarpiece.

The Altar Table

It stands on an ancient Roman cippus. It belongs to a group of altar tables dating from the 10th and 11th centuries similar examples of which can also be seen at *Saint-André* and *Girona*.

The Crypt

The apse contained a semi-underground crypt which was filled in to make way of the baldachin. Only the apsidiole on the exterior which projects outwards now bears witness to its existence.

The lighting

Designed in 1997 by the Architect of the Historic Buildings of France the luminaires were inspired by Guarrazar Treasure discovered in 1859 near Toledo which was most likely buried by the Visigothic clergy in 711.