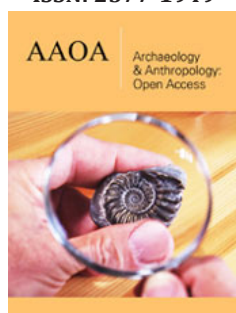


VIC, Sant Peter Cathedral: The Discover of the Burning Crypt and Its Urban Dimension

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ISSN: 2577-1949



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Submission: 📅 February 14, 2021

Published: 📅 March 30, 2021

Volume 4 - Issue 2

How to cite this article: Navarro Gausa Manuel. VIC, Sant Peter Cathedral: The Discover of the Burning Crypt and Its Urban Dimension. Arch & Anthropol Open Acc. 4(2). AAOA. 000600. 2021.
DOI: [10.31031/AAOA.2021.04.000600](https://doi.org/10.31031/AAOA.2021.04.000600)

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The Burning Crypt

In the middle of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and during the bombardments carried out on the catalan city of Vic (January 20, 1939) the Romanic bell tower of the Cathedral, the roof and the columns of the Temple and the paintings that covered it inside (an iconic work of the famous painter and muralist Josep Maria Sert, 1874-1945, already partially deteriorated by the fighting fires) were severely affected.

At the end of the war the bricked-up doors of the cathedral were opened again, and the damage could be assessed in all its magnitude. An official "reconstruction board" made up of political personalities of the time, architects of the administration, related to the regime of General Franco winner of the war and the painter himself was established in a short time. However, the effective reconstruction of the works fell to the delegate of the bishopric, Dr Junyent [1], a full professor of Christian Architecture at the Pontifical Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana in Rome and to the architect in charge of the municipal technical services already before the war Gausa MR [2], great amateur of archeology and grandfather of the author.

After rebuilding the roof and restoring the great Romanic bell tower according to existing documents and surveys, many of the interior works remained. The painter Sert saw in that desolate space the large canvas for a monumental work he had sent sketches from New York where he lived and together with his assistant Massot was looking for new elements of inspiration to, rather than restore, remake the paintings which were transported in huge canvases: a monumental work, in reds and gold, with great costs that had largely been borne by the painter himself, of great fame in America, with good social relations and comfortable family means.

The works were already well advanced when in February 1943, in full removal of the old tiles that covered the floor of the nave, the workers suddenly found a buried wall that seemed to belong to the old Gothic-Romanic cathedral over which the most neoclassical recent extension had been built at the end of the s. XVIII, realized by the architect Josep Moretó. A sign of a door, extended remains of well-worked stones indicated elements that could have been part of a large portico or porch of the s. XI. The official decision was to remove these remains and take them to the neighboring episcopal museum, recapping the ground and reproducing the existing pavement. In the direction of the works, the architect proposed, however, to mark the perimeter of the ancient remains and change the color of the pavement in said contour, that of the old cathedral thus outlined, so that there is evidence of its ancient existence in the form of memory in the floor.

Threads and marks suddenly disappeared, possibly by a higher order. The works of the cathedral had been severely delayed, and the official instructions were not to retard them with superfluous details in view to finish as soon as possible to favor the inauguration with the presence of the new Head of State. Dr Junyent [3], however, had long sensed the existence of some element hidden under the main altar, before the known remains themselves. Both he and the architect Gausa insisted on the need to carry out archaeological surveys under the space. To find an excuse that could justify this new and strong delay was very important. On each side of the nave there were two boxes, one for the organ and the other for the choir. The latter was located on the access door to the side street, next to the bell tower, with some damages.

The workers did not stop removing archeological remains from the ground, many of them chapters and columns that were manifesting the existence of a buried structure. Little by little the evidence of the “forgotten” crypt under the cathedral emerged. Quickly, towards March 1943, photographs and drawings of the elements found were made. They were sent to the Heritage and Patrimony Department of the Diputació de Barcelona and to the press that gave them some dissemination, especially local. It was this socio-cultural diffusion that saved the work as well as the possibility of recovering the pre-Romanic crypt that today is one of the prides of the cathedral. In a short time, the entire lower space was discovered, which, almost intact, remained hidden under the ground, with enough remains to restore it to the maximum and in a short time, according to the structure of the elements found and their reasonable logical position.

However, objections of all kinds continued to appear, especially about the elevation of the altar, which was required to cover the crypt space, recovered, and restored in its primitive structure with reconstructed arches and turns, and which emerged through the pavement. This elevation seemed inadequate to some purists and to the painter Sert himself, who was afraid that it would cover part of the lower zones of his work. The obligation to reduce the dimension of the arches to reduce their elevation was significantly avoided by the technical execution, although not without great efforts. In any case, the crypt of the cathedral was already a public news and its execution could not be stopped.

The admiration that this silent and austere space caused under the great neo-baroque figures in the murals and the great neo-classical colonnades (inspired by the Paris pantheon) was undeniable. Although there was already the intuition of a primitive pre-Romanic space hidden under the cathedral, nobody could have foreseen the possibility of recovering such well-preserved archaeological remains. The work of the city architect and the bishopric archaeologist had succeeded in materializing this possibility, viewed with disgust by an administration whose budget had suddenly run into a bureaucratic unforeseen. In any case, the final merit was officialized by another institutional signature, that of the architect of the regime in charge of the Military Zone IV Monuments; and by the recognition that Madrid gave, through a large exhibition practically posthumously, to the great painter of the Barcelona and U.S. patrician classes.

Urban Considerations

The restoration of the cathedral and the discovery of the crypt, as well as the opening and viewing of the remains of the cloister from the lateral river walk, allowed a better understanding of the multi-level construction of the temple itself and its elevation with respect to the street on the main neoclassical façade.

In fact, from the urban point of view, the monumental complex forms a large compact mass that ranges from Roman and

Romanic times to Gothic, some Baroque and Neoclassical periods, lengthening with some recent interventions, until today.

The presence of its great mass profiles a diversified and varied configuration, dense and paradoxically dynamic in its oscillating levels, superimposed, and staggered at the same time, and slowly modulated towards the banks of the river, establishing an important morphological dialogue with the fluvial landscape, with its banks and the Romanesque bridge that crosses it. A resonance quite rare in this type of constructions, probably favored by the subtle evidence of its multi-strata conformation. Indeed, it was on the remains of the first cathedral destroyed by the Saracens during the 9th century that the first Romanesque work was erected in 1038, a church with a central plan and a nave with a wide transept, five apses and the slender bell tower. Of the Romanesque building are preserved the crypt whose capitals belong to the first temple - and the tower, with a square plan and various levels, with decoration of Lombard-type arches and bands separated by friezes. Completed in 1068, its 40 meters high and 8 meters wide served as a model for other similar towers in the region. The cloister dates from the 14th century, and in it, the columns and capitals stand out, in a marked Gothic style, sculpted with biblical and hagiographic themes, as well as others with vegetal decoration.

Although the chapel of San Bernardo was built during the Baroque period, the ambitious extension of the temple was carried out between 1781 and 1803 in neoclassical style (realized by the architect Josep Moretó) and involves the transformation of the cloister, being dismantled and remodeled, with dimensions more reduced; With the remaining arcades, a gallery was built in the southern wing, facing the Meder River, which is one of the great singularities of the complex, as has already been mentioned. The urban refurbishment works initiated at the restoration time (pedestrianization of the access plaza, landscaping and conditioning of the cloister, interpretation of the interior itself as a large covered transversal urban space, a profuse, twisted and unfolded dynamic scenography, unusual in Catalonia) have been accorded over the years based on the criteria traced already then by the town architect Gausa MR [2]: the planning of the side Balmes park, next to the temple, and the arrangement of the Romanic bridge, would form part, in the same period, of this urban dimension in which the cathedral would acquire a qualitative and perceptual importance of great relevance in the urban and landscape levels. More recent history has allowed the recovery of much original documentation that now serves as a study for the analysis of a reconstruction, restoration, and recreation work, made in the difficult conditions of the Spanish post-war period.

The books Gausa MR [2] and the most recent Crispí M [4], allow us to recover part of this history with great interest for post-war archeology and architectural reconstruction processes, unfortunately not always developed in the most favorable ideal, rational, economical, or cultural conditions [5] (Figures 1-10).



Figure 1: View of the remains of the cathedral roof after the bombing of 1939, shortly before the end of the war (archive: Manuel Gausa Raspall architect).



Figure 2: Interior of the cathedral during its inspection at the end of the war. In the photo the architect Manuel Gausa Raspall on one side of the upper lateral gallery (archive: Manuel Gausa Raspall architect).



Figure 3: Interior of the cathedral during its inspection at the end of the war. We can appreciate the neo-classical columns inspired by the Pantheon in Paris and the remains of the Sert murals (archive: Manuel Gausa Raspall architect).



Figure 4: Restoration of the bell tower, affected on one side by the bombardment (archive: Manuel Gausa Raspall architect)

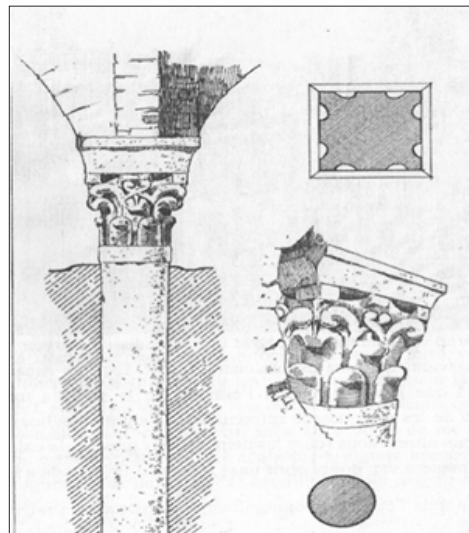


Figure 5A: Restoration of the bell tower, affected on one side by the bombardment (archive: Manuel Gausa Raspall architect)



Figure 5B: Drawings of the discovered capitals (archive: Manuel Gausa Raspall architect).

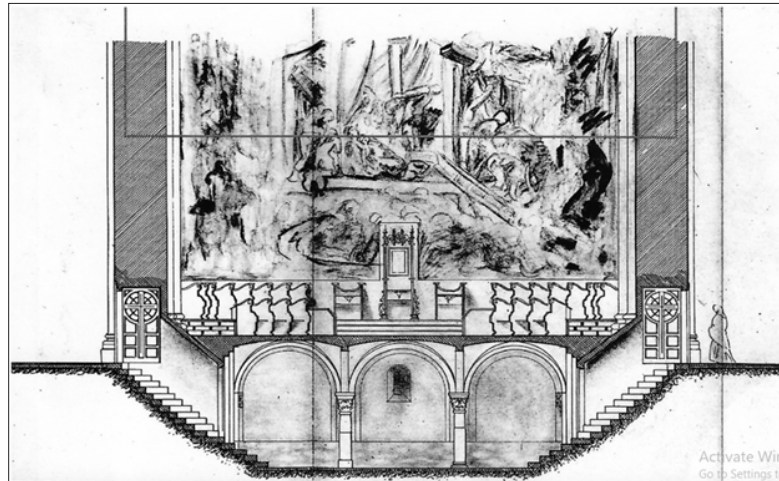


Figure 6: The new arches and vaults, rebuilt according to the hypotheses of the founded remains, rise above the pavement of the cathedral (archive: Manuel Gausa Raspall architect).

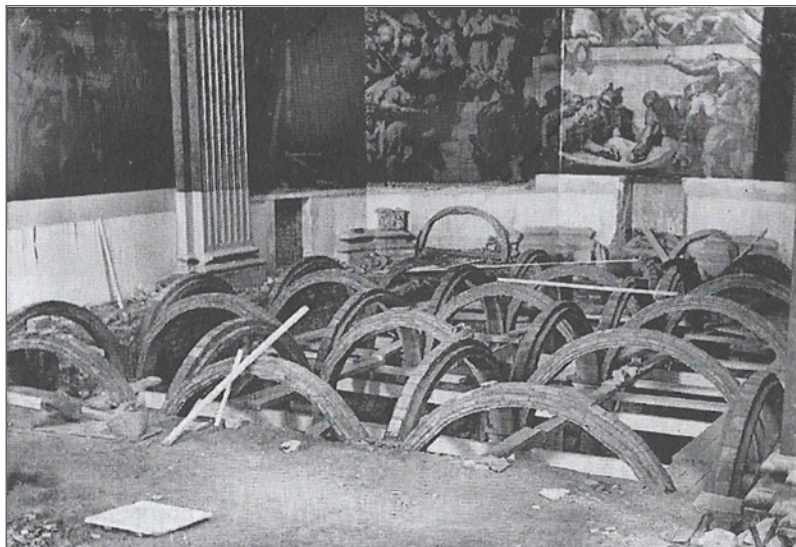


Figure 6B: Architect's drawing for the section solution adopted (archive: Manuel Gausa Raspall architect).



Figure 7: Interior of the recovered and restored crypt (archive: Manuel Gausa Raspall architect).



Figure 8: Main neo-classical facade of the cathedral, with the bell tower in the background and the access square.



Figure 9: View of the Gothic cloister - with the Romanesque plinth - from the Meder river side banks walk.



Figure 10: The Profile of the mass of the cathedral and its dynamic configuration from the river, with the Romanic XIth Century bridge (Photography: Manuel Gausa de Mas).

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