

**RENOVATION OF THE ROMANESQUE CATHEDRAL  
OF RODA DE ISABENA IN THE PYRENEES (PROVINCE OF HUESCA)  
AND OF ITS URBAN SETTING**

*Architect : Francisco Pons-Sorolla Y Arnau.*

Roda de Isabena is a small and extremely beautiful town standing on a rocky height not far from the river from which it derives its name. It is about nineteen miles from Graus, in the region between the valleys of the Cinca and the Noguera Ribagorzana above which towers the Turbon mountain peak; at this point on the southern side of the Pyrenees the Aragonese section of the range comes to an end and the Catalan Pyrenees begin.

The major building in its typical and picturesque group of ancient monuments is the great church which was formerly a cathedral, parts of which are even earlier than the eleventh century. The diocese was a rich one and one of its 12th-century bishops was St. Ramon; his sacramental objects and unusually fine romanesque furniture have been treated as sacred relics right down to our day, and the members of a devout congregation have preserved them, sometimes at the cost of their

Fig. 1. — The Bishop's Palace with the area west of the Cathedral, after the renovation work.

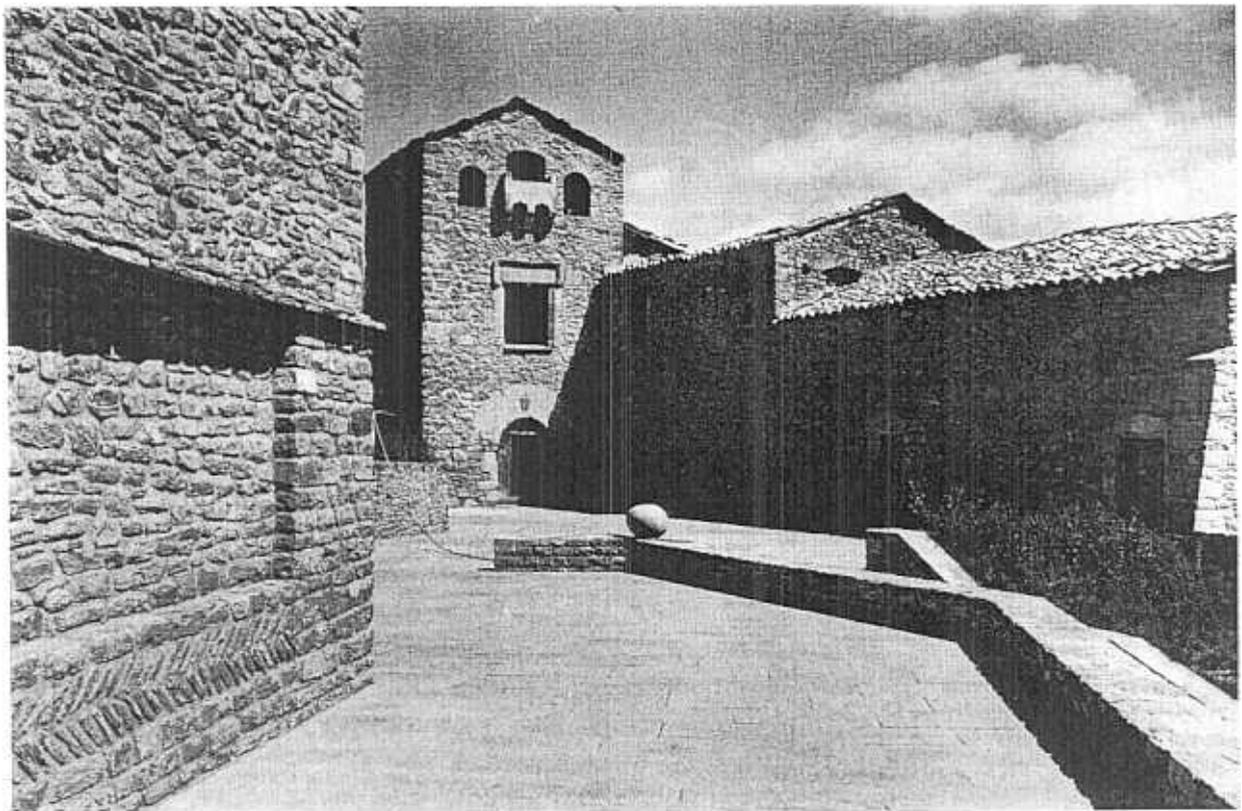
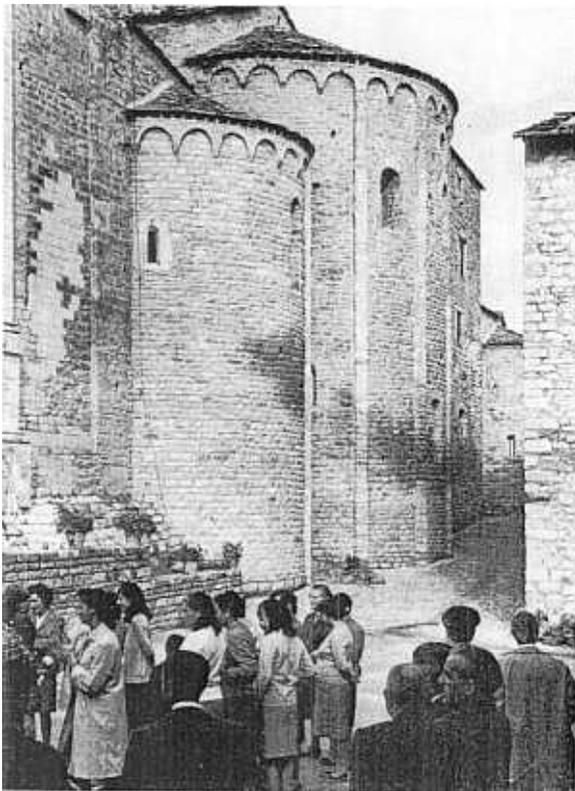




Fig. 2. — The Plaza de San Pedro. In the background, the archway giving access to the Cathedral precinct.

Fig. 3. — The entrance to the cemetery.

Fig. 4. — The Cathedral apses, restored.



very lives, through all the wars, pillaging and other vicissitudes of eight centuries. All are priceless romanesque work; they are humbly housed in a small museum in the cloister buildings.

The ancient centre of the town was in a state of complete neglect and was being progressively abandoned, only 70 inhabitants remaining when work started in 1963. But as a result of the renovation programme undertaken by the Spanish General Directorate of Architecture the position has altered radically. The actual restoration work was coordinated with the building of an access road for traffic, previously lacking, and arrangements were made with the appropriate authorities for the provision of a water-supply and sewerage. Confidence in the future has been restored for the local population, which for centuries had been dependent for its water-supply on the tank in the Cathedral cloister, left constantly uncovered and not infrequently to be found dry.

The Cathedral had been considerably altered owing to the addition of a tower and various other structures in the 17th century. The romanesque church, which is a large one, is the building reconstructed by King Sancho Ramirez on earlier foundations and consecrated in 1067 by Bishop Arnulfo. It consists of three naves and three semi-circular apses, with no transept. Next to the apses, towards the rear of the ancient Chapter House, is a further romanesque chapel with a vaulted ceiling covered with remarkable 12th-century paintings; these required rescuing from complete disintegration.

Below the high altar runs a crypt with a groin-vaulted roof resting on pillars. It has two large vaulted aisles extending below the northern apse — once the “treasure” — likewise decorated by the painters of its time.

The naves of the Cathedral have barrel-vaulted ceilings.

The cloister is a delightful place with low roofs and round arches resting on inverted pyramid capitals, with sturdy cylindrical arches without ornament or moulding in the corners. On the soffits of the arches of the cloister are to be found magnificent carved sepulchral inscriptions, some of them with ornamental lettering. In the centre stands the ancient water-tank.

The Cathedral, perched aloft like an eagle's eyrie, is surrounded by look-out posts in the form of small and neatly-planned open spaces, shut in by rows of dwellings built for the lesser townsfolk and by farm outhouses; the one aristocratic building of the group is the Bishop's Palace, of which all that remains is the body of the entrance tower.

A work of fine vernacular craftsmanship is the oil-press adjoining the cloister on the north side; this was buried beneath a mass of unsightly structures but is now preserved in a completely uncovered state.

All the building materials originally used for the group of structures were of local origin; they include wood, ashlar, brick, Arab tiles and rock roof-slates, river-pebbles for cobbling and stone paving slabs, with hand-made terracotta tiles for inside flooring.

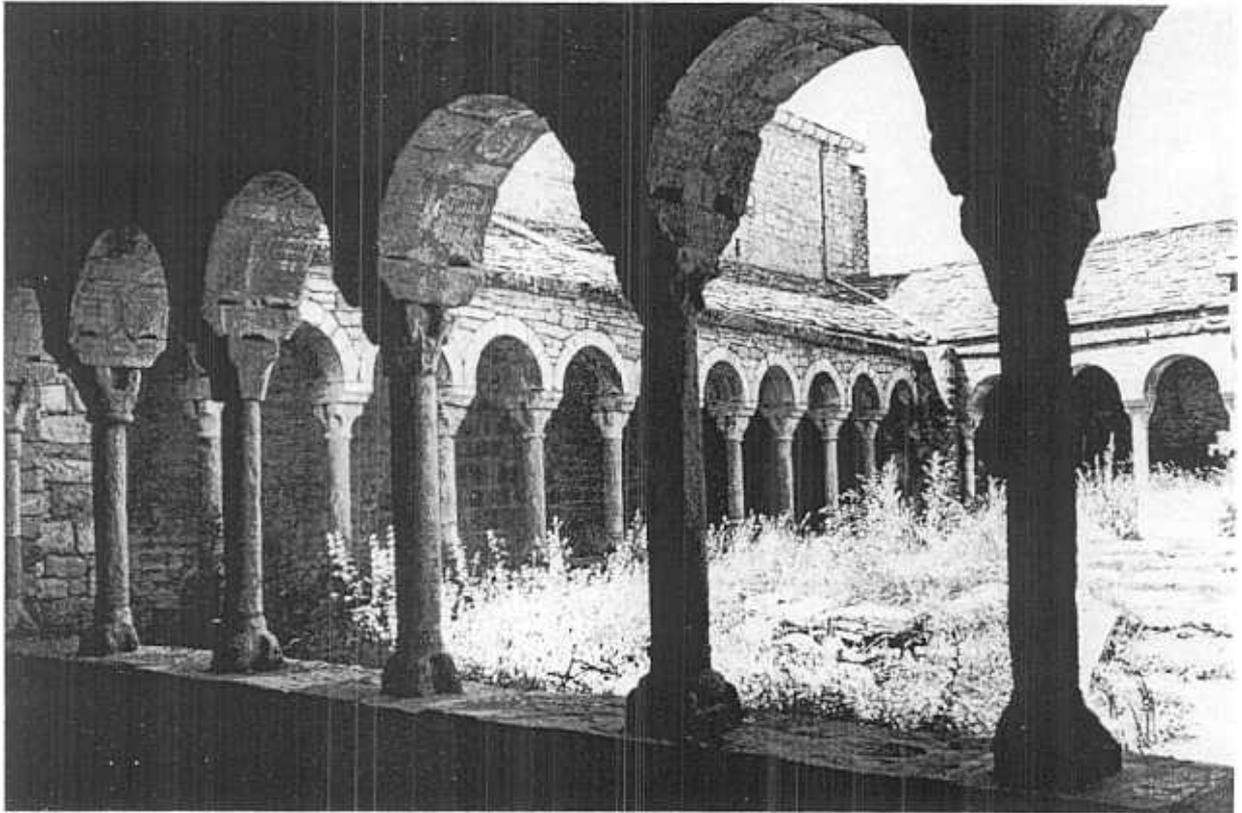


Fig. 5. — The cloister.

Fig. 6. — Detail of the cloister arcades, showing the mediaeval funerary inscriptions.

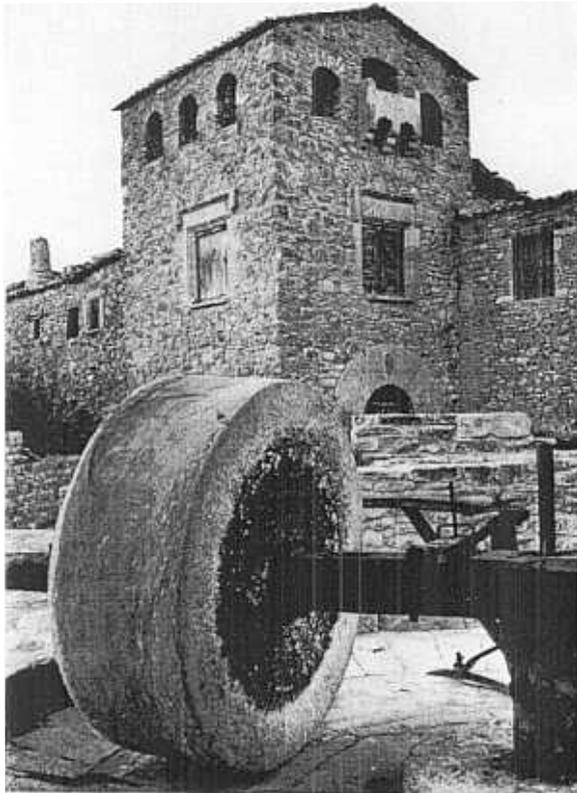
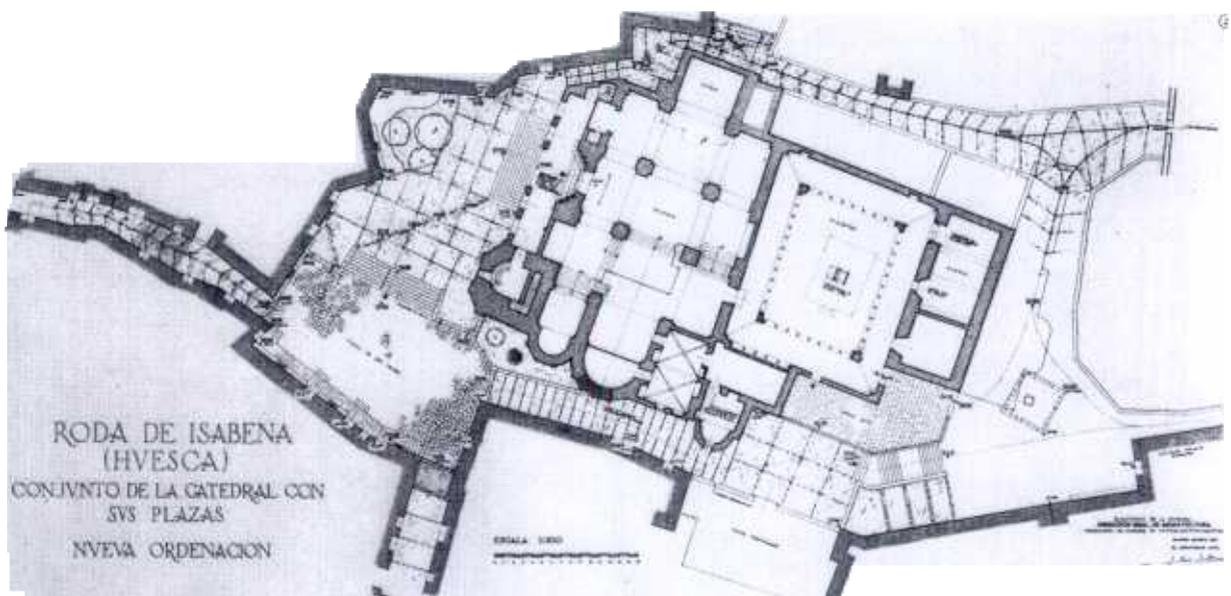


Fig. 7. — Area to the north of the Cathedral after renovation, with detail of the oil-press.

Fig. 8. Overall plan of the renovation scheme.



#### *Conservation work and urban re-planning*

The renovation scheme covered the central nucleus of the town, consisting of the Cathedral with the buildings adjacent to it, the surrounding streets and squares with the houses in them, and the Bishop's Palace. The work was done with an eye to the unity of the whole, as the strongly homogeneous character of the area demanded. Operations lasted from 1962 to 1967, the total amount invested being five million pesetas.

#### *Restoration work on the Cathedral*

Work on the structural level involved thorough consolidation of the romanesque chapel inside the Chapter House, which was effected under difficult conditions. What remained of its wall-paintings were then secured and protected. Consolidation of the church's great pillar on the north side of the presbytery, likewise essential, involved partial demolition, shoring up and the introduction of a reinforced concrete core. The vaults also needed repairing, and there was partial restoration of the roofing, consisting in waterproofing followed by the re-laying of irregular-shaped slates, though the original timbers were retained. The roofing of the 18th-century porch was transformed, so as to reveal the romanesque porch, and this was given a new ceiling with a plain whitewashed surface and half-timbering. In general appearance the church has once again become sober and functional, thanks to the removal of the coats of wash applied at a recent date and of the artistically valueless Renaissance paintings which concealed the fine ashlar walls and the bonded stonework of the early romanesque vaulting.

The modern additions to the northern part of the cloister have been removed, so that the facings of the

walls are once more visible, and these have been consolidated and repointed. The arcading has been preserved in its original condition.

#### *Urban renovation*

We believe this renovation work has served to give the area its rightful setting and made community life in the little town far pleasanter.

The basic idea behind the whole scheme was to differentiate between the Cathedral triangle itself with its porch and stairway and the Plaza de San Pedro below it, which should serve as a pedestrian area accessible to light motor traffic. It is here that the traffic going in an upward direction to take passengers to the Cathedral meets the vehicles travelling within the town, between its lowest limits and the level of the Bishop's Palace. The overall plan gives a clear idea of the arrangement and the levels of the buildings in the group covered by the renovation scheme; it also shows the layout and

appearance of the pavings, the stone stairways, the high kerbstones in front of the lowest façade and the small patch of greenery at the foot of the trees and the tower where a small gable wall has been demolished. The plots of land to the east, north and west of the Cathedral have been remodelled to fit more conveniently in with the entrances to the building, thus enhancing the look-out points on the western side and the entrance to the cemetery, handsome in its simplicity.

Restoration work on the great tower of the Bishop's Palace has been confined to structural consolidation, cleaning and repointing; worthy additions dating from different periods — such as the 14th-century ashlar machicolations and the 16th-century window surrounds — have been retained.

Francisco PONS-SOROLLA Y ARNAU  
Spanish National Committee of ICOMOS

## RESUME

*La petite et belle ville de Roda de Isabena se dresse sur un rocher du versant sud des Pyrénées de l'Aragon aux confins de ceux de Catalogne.*

*Elle est dominée par son ancienne Cathédrale romane entourée de constructions antérieures au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Elle a été siège d'un évêché qui, au XII<sup>e</sup> siècle, eut comme évêque Saint Ramon, de qui on possède encore les objets du culte et un mobilier roman d'exceptionnel intérêt, le tout étant conservé dans un petit musée situé dans le bâtiment du Cloître.*

*Jusqu'au commencement des travaux d'aménagement et de restauration réalisés par la Direction Générale de l'Architecture d'Espagne, les 70 habitants qui restaient au village s'approvisionnaient en eau à la seule citerne du Cloître, datant du XI<sup>e</sup> siècle.*

*Aujourd'hui, ils disposent de l'adduction d'eau et des*

*égouts. Les habitants montrent, avec satisfaction, à leurs visiteurs, l'ensemble des travaux réalisés pour ce petit ensemble du XI<sup>e</sup> siècle et qui ont affecté : l'église, consacrée en 1067 par l'évêque Arnulfo, et ses chapelles absidiales aux peintures romanes, la crypte et la grande sépulture de l'Evêque Ramon, le Cloître, le Palais Episcopal datant du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle avec des parties ajoutées aux XV<sup>e</sup> et XVI<sup>e</sup> siècles; les places à plusieurs niveaux et bordées de maisons médiévales et, enfin, un moulin à huile.*

*Les travaux de restauration et de réaménagement urbain ont été rendus difficiles par l'éloignement du site et les difficultés de transport qui en découlent.*

*Ils ont été réalisés entre 1962 et 1967 pour une dépense de 5 millions de pesetas, soit 90.000 dollars.*

*Fig. 1. — Ensemble du Palais épiscopal et des zones situées à l'est de la Cathédrale, rénové.*

*Fig. 2. — Place St-Pierre avec, au fond, l'arc d'accès à la Cathédrale.*

*Fig. 3. — Entrée du cimetière.*

*Fig. 4. — Absides de la Cathédrale, restaurées.*

*Fig. 5. — Le cloître.*

*Fig. 6. — Détail de l'arcature du cloître; à noter les inscriptions funéraires médiévales.*

*Fig. 7. — Aménagement des zones situées au nord de la Cathédrale et détail du moulin à huile.*

*Fig. 8. — Plan général de l'aménagement de l'ensemble.*