

Jaca Monuments

The history and highlights of Jaca



The History of Jaca

Over the centuries, Celtic, Roman, Carolingian, Arabic, Jewish and Christian influences have gradually shaped the unique personality of this mountain area, explaining its role in the history of Aragon.

The history of Jaca really began in the 3rd century BC, when the Iberian Iacetani people settled here and minted coins named Iacca. This was a cattle-raising community that lived for warfare and inhabited these lands until 195 BC when the invading Romans under Marcus Pontius Caton expelled them. During the Roman and Visigothic periods, Jaca must have been an important town considering its strategic location between the Iberian Peninsula and France on the route across the Pyrenees. After subsequent invasions by Suevians, Suessetanians and Visigoths, some Muslim military outposts were set up to collect taxes for Islam.

Though it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between history and legend, the Muslims were driven out in 760 as a result of a battle won by Count Aznar Galíndez. It was this victory that placed the four Moorish heads on the Jaca coat of arms. Today, this battle is commemorated on the first Friday of May, one of the town's most traditional festivities. Legend also has it that this was the time of the martyrdom of Saint Orosia, who then became the town's patron saint.

The county of Aragon, founded officially around 830 in Hecho Valley, fell under the power of Sancho III the Great of Navarre in the early years of the 11th century. When he died in 1035, he passed it on to his son Ramiro I, who then gained control also of the counties of Sobrarbe and Ribagorza and founded the kingdom of Aragon. His intention was to

make Jaca its capital, converting it from a small farming settlement into a large regal city.

But it was his son, Sancho Ramírez, who gave the final impetus to the development of Jaca by granting it a Charter in 1077. This was a set of laws to promote peaceful coexistence which converted the town into the Capital of the Kingdom of Aragon with the title of 'City'. And the bishopric of Aragon was transferred there. Many new residents were attracted by the possibilities of taking up the royal privileges and developing trade.

The Aragonese monarchs also granted Jaca other privileges such as the possibility of holding a weekly market and organising fairs. Jaca's splendour was reaffirmed by its location on the Pilgrims' Road to Santiago. The European pilgrims who chose to cross the Pyrenees via Somport had to pass through Jaca, an added advantage for the city. The first Romanesque also arrived via the Pyrenees – one of the first examples is Jaca Cathedral. And the fact that Jaca held a royal authorisation to collect certain taxes and to mint coins led to great development of the city and to the establishment of a large Jewish colony. Proof of this can be found in the two synagogues that existed in Jaca until well into the 15th century.

The 11th and 12th centuries were a time of particular splendour for the city. In the 11th century, Jaca started building a wall to defend itself from constant invasions and, in the 16th century, fear of reformist ideas led Philip II to protect the Aragonese Pyrenees by building forts, one of the most important being the Ciudadela. That was when the city became an important military base.

In the 18th century, during the War of Spanish Succession Jaca remained loyal to the future Philip V, thus being proclaimed Very Noble, Very Loyal and Very Victorious. And, during the 18th and 19th centuries, the city continued to be strategically important as a military town and head of its administrative area.

In the early 20th century, the city walls were demolished, an event that was very significant for the town, allowing it to grow and undergo a process of urban transformation, with the construction of new buildings. In 1930 the city took its place in history when a group of soldiers from the Jaca garrison rebelled, under the leadership of Captains Galán and García, with the intention of proclaiming the 2nd Republic.

The Civil War was a time of great suffering for this part of Spain, and real urban development within the old medieval city only began as from 1950.

The consolidation of ski resorts, the arrival of mass tourism, insistent Olympic aspirations, events such as the Pyrenees Folklore Festival and the European Young People's Olympic Festival, the inauguration of new sports facilities such as the Ice Pavilion and the change from farming to a service-based economy have all helped shape the present situation of Jaca and its district and point to a promising future.

The city of Jaca, capital of the district of Jacetania, is located in the north-west of the province of Huesca, on a plain along the left bank of the River Aragon.

This location at the foot of the Pyrenees makes it a meeting-point between the mountains and the valley. It is dominated by the mythical Oroel Mountain, which drew the interest of writers such as Unamuno and Ramón y Cajal.

Surrounded by high, snow-capped mountains to which Cervantes referred in his Quixote, Jaca is located at an altitude of 820 metres above sea level, 72 km from Huesca and 31 km from the French frontier town of Somport.

Its climate supports abundant vegetation in all directions and allows for all sorts of nature-related activities and snow sports. The image of this colourful landscape, one that is full of aromas, is determined by two seasons – long winters, and short summers with night-time breezes.

Jaca is a unique city whose praises have been sung by a multitude of authors. Historians, too, find much of interest here and in the surroundings.

Today Jaca is a city that is open to the future. It proclaimed its interest in developing tourism back in 1917 when the city started growing and is now a modern, cosmopolitan city with a varied cultural life, luring thousands of visitors every year.



The Cathedral

Jaca Cathedral, declared a National Monument in 1931 and a Property of Cultural Interest in 1985, is considered one of Spain's most important Romanesque monuments. Construction began in the late 11th century during the reign of Sancho Ramírez.

Over the years, the initial structure was subject to alterations, extensions and demolitions but the layout has always preserved a close connection with the town and its inhabitants.

The main decorative elements, which were to influence all subsequent Romanesque architecture, are the chrismon over the western portal, and the Jaca checkering, a type of blocked decoration used throughout the building, both inside and out, and which was subsequently adopted by other Romanesque churches along the Pilgrim's Road to Santiago.

The floor plan is that of a basilica with a crossing and three naves. The central one is the highest and is separated from the aisles by alternating cruciform piers and columns with very thick shafts, all with richly decorated capitals. Above the crossing is a barrel vault with a ribbed dome at the centre formed by crossing arches supported on conical squinches.

There are three apses on different levels. The central one was extended in the 18th century. They are decorated on the outside with capitals, columns, carved corbels and arched windows (which are wider on the inside).

1. View of the Cathedral. / 2. Trinity Chapel.





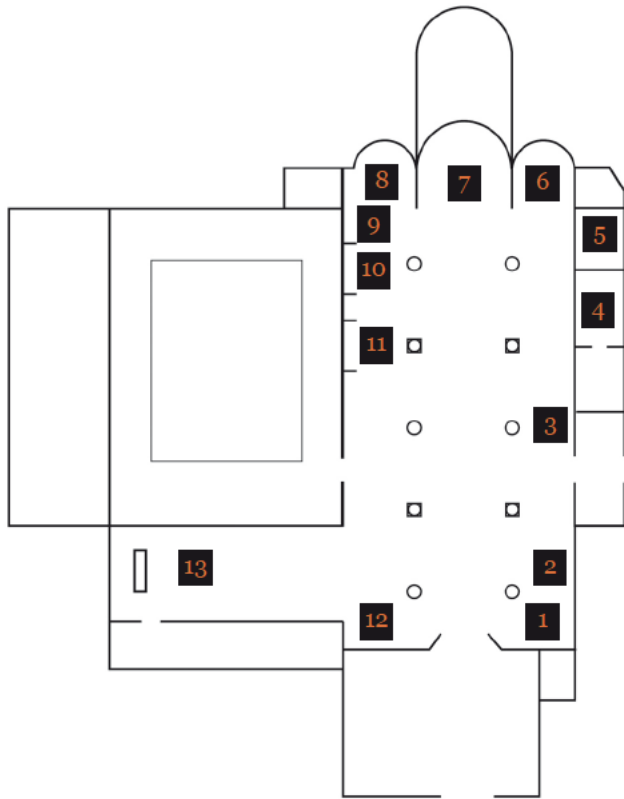
Leading off the main or western, barrel-vaulted atrium is the “Magna Porta”, decorated with archivolts and a magnificent tympanum with a Trinity chrismon at the centre, flanked by two lions.

The side or southern door dates from a later period, as do its portal and the beautiful Romanesque capitals. Note the Jaca checkering.

1. Interior of the Cathedral and the Main Altar.
2. Tympanum with the chrismon.



Ground Plan of the Cathedral



1. St. Anne's Chapel. Gothic-Renaissance altarpiece (1521).
2. Altarpiece of the Annunciation (16th century), attributed to Pedro Lasaos. Next to it is the "Christ of Health", sculptured in Madrid and donated in the late 19th century by Victoriano Biscós, the Jaca priest.
3. Altarpiece of Our Lady of Sorrows (painting).
4. St. Sebastian's Chapel, Flamboyant Gothic portal.
5. St. Michael's Chapel. Renaissance portal by the Florentine Juan de Moreto (1523), imagery by Juan de Salas. The large Plateresque altarpiece is by Gabriel Joly and Gil Morlanés "the Younger".
6. Apse of the Epistle. Image of Our Lady of the Pillar. Romanesque railing with spirals.
7. Central apse, extended in 1790. Decorated with paintings by the Carthusian Friar Manuel Bayeu. In 1919 the choir and the organ, dated 1706, were moved. Beneath the altar are silver urns: the central, largest one contains the remains of Saint Orosia, patron saint of the town and the diocese, the gilded silver one contains the remains of Saint Indaletius, one of St James's disciples, and the third contains the remains of the founders of St John of the Rock, Saint Felix and Saint Voto.
8. Apse of the Gospel. Saint Hieronymus' Chapel. Renaissance altarpiece dated 1573. Romanesque railing with spirals.
9. Renaissance tomb in alabaster of the Bishop of Alghero (Sardinia) Pedro Baguer, who was born in Jaca and died in 1573.
10. Holy Christ Chapel
11. Saint Augustine's Chapel.
12. Trinity Chapel. Renaissance portal. Spectacular, grandiose stone altarpiece, carved by Juan de Anchieta in 1572. The Eternal Father is a replica of Michelangelo's Moses.
13. Cathedral Parish church, 18th century Baroque altarpiece dedicated to Saint Orosia. The paintings and the dome painting show scenes from the martyrdom and miracles of Our Lady.



Diocesan Museum

The Diocesan Museum of religious art located in the Cathedral Cloister was set up in 1970 and displays a large collection of medieval painting from the various churches and chapels in the diocese.



These Romanesque and Gothic works formed the Museum's original collection and continue to be amongst its main attractions. They are an essential visit for international specialists in wall paintings.

The Bagüés murals, the "jewel" of the collection and often described as the Sistine Chapel of the Romanesque period, make up one of the largest and most important series of European Romanesque paintings. Also important are those from Navasa, Ruesta, Osia, etc.

Romanesque art is clearly the most important part of the Museum's collection, but alterations carried out in 2010 improved the Museum and adapted it to the needs of the 21st century. The exhibition area has now doubled in size and includes excellent examples of Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque art.

Of special interest are the Chapterhouse, the tower rooms, the library, the cloister and especially the secretum, the Cathedral's safe room where its Renaissance paintings were restored and which now houses the Museum's most important gold and silverwork.

Church of Saint James



This church was originally built inside the medieval town, then was re-built around 1088 by Bishop Pedro 1. In the 17th century, the Dominican monks reoriented it so that the new main altar faced westwards and the Romanesque belfry and tower were over the apse.

On display is the Romanesque capital from the Cathedral cloister, with its rich Christian, mythological, seasonal and astronomic carvings, as well as the Hispano-Arabic, Caliph-style baptismal font (10th century). A magnificent collection of altarpieces from different churches in the diocese is also exhibited. The dome paintings were carried out in 1993 by Juan Bautista Topete.

Holy Cross Monastery

Benedictine Nuns

In 1555 at the request of Philip II, the nuns from the Holy Cross Monastery in Serós moved to Jaca, and built the monastery which came to be known as “Las Benitas” after the regulations the order followed.

The monastery is located at the easternmost point of the old town and is attached to the last remaining section of the town’s walls, which were demolished in the early 20th century.

The monastery building has undergone many alterations. The high church was assigned to the nuns by the brotherhood of Saint Genesis in 1579. All that remains of the original construction is the Romanesque portal. Subsequent alterations and extensions were carried out in 1730.

Inside is an outstanding piece of Romanesque sculpture, the sarcophagus of the Infanta Sancha, daughter of King Ramiro of Aragon and sister of King Sancho Ramírez, which was transferred to Jaca in 1622. This is a block of stone two metres long, sculpted on all four sides and hollowed out.

1. Romanesque capital at the Church of Saint James. / 2. Exterior of “Las Benitas”. / 3. Sarcophagus of Doña Sancha.



Church of Our Lady of Carmel



This is all that remains of the former convent of Discalced Carmelites, dating from the 17th century. In 1930, the Capuchin Friars took over the church (though this was suspended from 1931 to 1937) and kept it until 1999.

Of special interest is the two-tiered Mannerist portal in carved stone, the lower level being in Tuscan order and in three sections, and the upper one being Ionic. The two are joined by an entablature bearing, on either side, a crowned coat of arms. At the centre and beneath a large oculus through which light enters the church, is the effigy of Our Lady of Carmel.

The two statues that used to stand beneath the lateral arches on the façade had to be taken inside in 1889 to prevent further damage. The statue of Saint Joseph is in the atrium.

The church's ground plan is a Latin cross with chapels on either side of the main altar in the main nave. It houses Baroque altarpieces dating from the 17th and 18th centuries. The altarpiece behind the main altar shows the presentation of the Holy Scapular by Our Lady to the beatified Carmelite monk, Simon Stock.

Sarsa Chapel



This is a small, late 12th century Romanesque chapel whose remains were transferred in 1972 from the medieval village of Villar de Sarsa, at the foot of Mount Oroel, to save them from ruin. There is a portal with three arched archivolt. The external ones are smooth and the central one is decorated with Jaca balls.

The church's original Romanesque tympanum, with a trinity chrismon sculpted at its centre, is currently inside the Town Council building, on the wall close to the staircase in the inside courtyard.

Bishop's Palace



This was built in 1606 in Renaissance style but was altered in the 18th century. Its appearance is now that of a sober, two-story building, with a very academic-style portal.

Inside is the collection of documents belonging to the town's Diocesan, Cathedral and Parish Archives, including ecclesiastical documentation dating from the 11th century. In one of the Palace's halls on the upper floor is the portrait gallery featuring all the bishops of Jaca from 1571 to today.



Clock Tower

This was built in about 1445 after the town was burnt down and as a provisional solution to the destruction of the Cathedral and of its ecclesiastical prison cells.

After ownership by several Jaca families, it became the “Merino” tower, the King’s representative whose job it was to collect taxes and administer the king’s property in the town, who used it as his residence. The council purchased it in 1599 as the town’s clock tower and to convert it into a prison. It continued to be used for this purpose until 1955.

In 1968, the spire was demolished and replaced by a pitched roof. Note the beautiful Gothic windows.

In the 1980s the building was restored and converted into the first premises of the Council of Europe’s Pyrenees Working Community.

The bells are now on display in the courtyard of the Town Council building.

Clock Tower, also known as the “Prison Tower”.

Town Council Hall

A beautiful example of Aragonese Plateresque style, this Renaissance building dating from 1544 was key in the civil architecture of the 16th century. Because of its location in the Calle Mayor, it became the focal point of local development.

It has a magnificent portal, with Tuscan elements, dated plinths, a semi-circular arch and an entablature flanked by jars and bearing the town's shield at its centre.

On the building's second level, the main floor, there are five windows bearing the bars of Aragon. One of the halls is named after the Consejo de Ciento, a group of a hundred good men who helped govern the town as from 1238. The third floor, which was added in the early 20th century, when the former eaves were demolished, has a typical Aragonese gallery of windows.

The building contains the best municipal archives of Aragon with documents dating from 1042, and including, amongst others, the famous 13th century codex, "El Libro de la Cadena".



Recently-restored façade of the City Council Hall.



The Citadel



This is a pentagonal fortification built at the end of the 16th century in the reign of Philip II. It is still complete with moat, bastions, scarps, barracks, arsenal and tunnels, as well as a beautiful entrance with a drawbridge.

The design for Saint Peter's Castle was based on the new types of military architecture at the time which required the use of artillery, with lower, thicker walls, banks and specific locations for cannons and other firearms. A Consortium comprising a group of institutions is today responsible for preserving the castle and promoting it for its cultural value.



The Castle was classified in 1951 as a historic and artistic monument, and received the Europa Nostra award in 1985.

It contains the Museum of Military Miniatures, with its collection of over 32,000 lead figures exhibited in 23 historic scenes and showing the development of weapons, uniforms and fighting tactics from the time of the Pharaohs to the early 21st century. There are also several exhibition halls.

*1. The Citadel with Mounts Rapitán and Collarada.
2,3. Museum of Military Miniatures.*

Rapitán Fort



This was built in 1884 and is an outstanding example of military architecture.

Its location, on the mount of the same name, at an altitude of 1,142 metres and at the entrance to the Aragon Valley, made it strategically important for defending the state.

Rapitán Fort offers splendid views of the town of Jaca, the San Juan de la Peña mountains, Mount Oroel and the Canal de Berdún.



Saint Michael's Bridge

Built in the Late Middle Ages over the Aragon River, the bridge was declared a historic and artistic monument in 1943 and was restored by architect Miguel Fisac in the 1950s. It is easy to get to by taking a pleasant walk from the lookout point in Constitution Park.



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