The Use of Coloured Stonework in Romanesque Churches

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Introduction

From ancient times the use of colour to decorate both the exteriors and interiors of buildings was widely used. The Byzantine Empire, developing techniques that were extensively used by both the Greeks and Romans, created artistic masterpieces in mosaic form that are to be seen still today in Istanbul, Greece and in Ravenna. These skills were copied by the Carolingians and used in a relatively small number of churches; in Western Europe in Romanesque times the mosaic was not exploited as an artistic and decorative medium on the same scale that it had in the Byzantine Empire.

Ravenna, Arians Baptistery – detail of dome (Vc) (left) & Germigny des Prés (41) – Mosaic on choir vault (right)

Much more extensively used were paints. In most cases, the passage of time, restoration and vandalism have left us with only tempting fragments of the originals that decorated
the exteriors of churches in the XI and XII centuries. But the blaze of colour that must have greeted many worshipers was truly astonishing. In 2007 we were able to see a possible example at Notre Dame la Grande, Poitiers (86). Here, making use of the tiny residual traces of polychrome that was for the most part to be found in the corners and crevices of the façade, art historians recreated using lasers an image of what the façade might have looked like in the XII century.

Poitiers - Facade of Notre Dame la Grande coloured using lasers

Protected from the elements and, in many cases saved from destruction by being covered over with plaster, a significant number of frescos that embellished the interiors have survived.

St Savin sur Gartempe (86) – Nave vaults

This article does not concern itself with either mosaics or frescos. It examines the use of coloured stonework to enhance the architectural features of Romanesque churches. At this early stage it should be noted that such uses were by no means confined to churches;
the walls at Le Mans (72) and Angers (49) are evidence of a wider use; the former are of Gallo-Roman origin.

Le Mans town walls                               Angers town walls

The churches were built using a variety of materials. In France these were usually from local resources, unlike England where several of the great Norman buildings were constructed using stone that was shipped over from the quarries in the lower valley of the Seine. The availability of suitable stone in large measure dictated whether a polychrome effect was possible and, depending on the characteristics and quality of the stone, how it would be employed within the building. Thus, it was inevitable that in some areas there would no examples where coloured stonework would be used; whilst in other areas polychrome stonework would be widely used.

It is unsurprising that almost few church buildings that have coloured stonework have survived from pre-Carolingian times. However, there is one charming example in Brittany at Langon (35). This is a former Gallo-Roman bath that was converted to Christian usage as the Chapelle Ste Agathe. Here we can see the typically Gallo-Roman small even stones used with bands of thin red bricks to provide both colour and added strength.
Langon – Ste Agathe from south and detail of South wall

A second example is provided by the Vc baptistery at Fréjus (83). This has certainly been restored and it is possible that some of the restoration of the upper parts, especially of the cupola, may not be entirely authentic. However, from the evidence available there was considerable use of coloured stone around the arches and within the stonework of the walls. This selection of stone of various colours would not have been accidental.

Fréjus - Baptistery

In Carolingian times there were a few somewhat tentative attempts in France at using coloured stones. Perhaps the best examples are to be seen at the Baptistery of St Jean, in Poitiers (86) and in the crypt at Jouarre (77). The former seems to have been restored and it may be that little is original but, hopefully reflects the original stonework.
Auvergne and Velay.

It was probably in the region of Velay and the Auvergne that the use of coloured stone work reached its peak in France. There is a common thread between many of them that runs from churches around Clermont Ferrand (63) in the North to the Cathedral and chapel of St Michel d’Aiguilhe at Le Puy en Velay (43) and Le Monastier sur Gazeille (43) in the South. They all have encrusted decorative patterns. In most cases these are on the apse, side chapels and the apex of the transept walls. On some of the larger churches the decoration is also present on the façade. The region is blessed with basalt, a reddish and a yellowish arkose (a form of sandstone) and limestone.
Chauriat (63) provides a fine example of the creation of what is almost a mosaic of geometric patterns that is broken by ribs of limestone. This was restored in the XIX century and not by a true representation of the original. The decoration on the tympanum and above the South doorway at Ennezat (63) is neo-Romanesque, being the result of over-ambitious ‘restoration’ in the XIX century. That at Notre Dame du Port, Clermont Ferrand, also restored, is thought to be a true representation of the original. At Brioude (43) the patterns are more sophisticated and ambitious. These are very similar to those on the apse of Issoire (63) and of St Nectaire (63), to the north; no doubt one was inspired by the others. In all there are about a dozen in the area that have or had similar decoration. At Billom (63) only very small fragments remain. It is probably from the late XI century and has a pattern that we will see at St Michel d’Aiguilhe (43).
Brioude – detail of apse  

St Nectaire – detail of South transept

Billom – surviving fragment of decoration on apse

It may be somewhat surprising that the patterns of geometric stonework are less common on the interiors. However there is a fine example at Notre Dame du Port, Clermont Ferrand where high up in the cupola over the crossing, an area that in mediaeval times must have been rarely visible in the absence of good light, there are small areas that have been surfaced with encrusted decoration.
But it is at Le Puy en Velay (43) that we see the effect at its most extravagant. The façade not only has geometric patterns created with black, red, orange and white stones but pilasters are made using black basalt to contrast with the white capitals and arches are of alternating colours. Some attribute this ‘zebra’ patterning to Moorish influence brought back by pilgrims to Compostela.

On a nearby volcanic plug stands the chapel of St Michel d’Aiguilhe. The same concept of geometric pattern is to be seen over the North doorway. We see the same range of colour but, perhaps because of the smaller scale of the façade the execution of the patterns is more varied and adventurous. It has been carefully integrated with the sculptures of the lobed arches above the door and the bays within the Lombard bands.
St Michel d’Aiguilhe – detail of façade

To the South is Le Monastier de Gazeille (43). The decorators of this church were doubtless influenced by the nearby Cathedral and chapel at Le Puy en Velay, but the work here has nothing of the scale or the imaginative execution that we saw at Le Puy.

Le Monastier sur Gazeille

There has been much learned discussion about the original source for the form of decoration. E Male saw an Arab influence and detected the origins as being in Cordoba. Others have looked to Burgundy and Lyon and thence towards Germany. If either of these were correct it should be wondered that the style does not occur elsewhere in France. Certainly, as we shall see, the examples towards the Rhone valley are few and much less striking than the examples of the Auvergne. If, on the other hand, it was a development that occurred locally because of the availability of appropriate raw materials that would provide a plausible explanation as to why it is largely confined to the area.

The Auvergnat builders did not restrict their use of the local coloured stone to the creation of geometric pattern. We have already seen that they employed contrasting black and white stones in the construction of the arches over doors and windows. This, as we shall see, was a practice that was used frequently across France where there was suitable material. At St Dier d’Auvergne, just East of Clermont Ferrand (63) the colour contrast
was effected in a more dramatic manner. The West door has startlingly contrasti
ging red and white bands and the pilasters to the sides are also in two colours. The red stone is used on all sides of the exterior; despite its somewhat haphazard distribution it has a striking effect. It is also used inside, for example to highlight the capital on a column.

St Dier d’Auvergne – West doorway and column and capital in nave

At Chatelperron (03), to the North-east of Vichy, the contrasts of red and white have been further developed; the masons have made use of different shades of red and pink around the door. Making full use of the abundant red volcanic stone, it has been used to dramatic effect in and around the porch of St Remy, in the Velay (43).
Burgundy and Forez.

We have already commented that the area to the west of the Auvergne does not have the numbers of examples of churches with coloured stonework that we have seen in the Auvergne. The region lacks the accessible coloured stone of suitable quality for building. In the Forez there are just two significant examples. The church of St Romain le Puy (42) is set dramatically on an isolated rocky outcrop. The apse of this church is particularly interesting, having a series of rectangular sculptured plaques that depict interlace, animals and symbols. Much of the surface of the walls to the apse and chapels is covered by small coloured stones that are set in a rough pattern. The stones lack the sharp contrasts that we saw in the Auvergne; but the builders have made the best use of what was available.

A few kilometres to the North-east lies the small town of Moingt (42). The church has a tall tower that has very similar stonework, though on a smaller scale. At St Rambert (42), to the south, the North door to the abbey and the South door to the chapel of St Jean, which stands in front of the abbey North door, both have similar stonework over the doors.
Moingt – bell-tower  St Rambert abbey – North door

Although Burgundy probably has more churches of Romanesque origin than any other region of France, apart from two churches in Tournus (71), there are few examples of the use of coloured stonework. The abbey church at Tournus provides us with a superb example. Most of the abbey is built using small, evenly shaped golden limestone blocks. In contrast, the upper part of the North tower is built in a soft pink and white stone.

Tournus, St Philbert – tower

In the Auvergne, where there is suitable contrasting stone, there is an example of its use on the arch of a doorway or on the ribs of vaults. In Tournus, there is a disaffected church that is now an antiques shop, the church of St Valerin; the arch is an attractive mix of golden and white stone. The church at Montceaux l’Etoile (71) has similar contrasting stone at the south door. This same effect is used elsewhere in France where suitable contrasting stone was available, as we shall see.
In its day the great abbey of Cluny was one of the outstanding examples of Romanesque art. Only a fragment remains. However in that element there is evidence that the builders had tried to introduce coloured stonework. It does not seem to have been in the form of a systematic pattern, but was haphazard.

We have already alluded to the proposal that Lyon might have been part of the route by which the concept of the encrusted stone work reached the Auvergne. There is little evidence there today to support that contention. The door to the treasury of the Old
Cathedral does have some coloured stonework, but it is on a relatively small scale; there may once have been more.

The Mediterranean coast.

This section includes the coastal area between the Italian and Spanish frontiers and the island of Corsica. The modern political borders do not represent the cultural borders of the XII century. In the east, the department of Alpes-Maritimes would have looked towards the Genoese hinterland for its cultural links, whilst Roussillon was part of Catalonia. This coastal area became highly developed in Roman times. Towns such as Aix-en-Provence, Nimes, Orange and Arles provide evidence of sophisticated buildings with a highly developed artistic style. These might have provided models for subsequent generations of builders and sculptors. At the Eastern end there were few natural materials to enable them to carry out the decorative work involving the use of coloured stone. The Romans used imported marble mostly from the Eastern Mediterranean. But at the western end, towards the Pyrenees there was readily accessible volcanic stone near Sète, Agde and in the Beziers to Narbonne area; on the Northern slopes of the Pyrenees, there were quarries producing good quality marble. These resources provided the materials necessary for the decoration of XII century churches. Churches were not decorated on a grand scale like those in the Auvergne; nor were the numbers of churches that were decorated very large.

In the Hautes Alpes, the North door of the church of Notre Dame d’Embrun (05) has, above the porch, a fine arch constructed using bands of white limestone contrasting with blocks of black shale.
In Alpes de Haute Provence (04), at Ganagobie, the priory church has, each side of the West door, a slim pink stone that has been inserted over the line of capitals. However, the church has been partially rebuilt on several occasions and the West façade has been reconstructed; it is not certain that the present state is a true reflection of the original XII century façade.

Ganagobie – West door and detail

Arles today still has a Roman heritage that makes it one of the great tourist destinations in France. In mediaeval times the remains must have been far more extensive and the condition of those remains would have made them attractive to builders looking for ready-made decoration. So it is of no surprise that the façade of the Cathedral of St Trophime should include re-used antique columns. They were doubtless selected with care because they are polychrome and break up the line of statues by adding a dark frame between them.
Across the West side of the Languedoc there are twelve churches where black basalt has been incorporated above the arches of windows and doors. In addition, it has been used to decorate the tympanum.

Ouveillan (34) – detail of apse (left) & St Père de Rhedes (34) – tympanum over South door (right)
Dio (34) – arch over West door

At St Julien d’Olargues (34), which lies within the area where the black basalt has been used extensively, the builders have employed red basalt both on the window arches and Lombard bands of the apse; to decorate the tympanum they have combined the red basalt and a cream coloured marble.

St Julien d’Olargues – apse and South doorway

Somewhat strangely, the use of black or red basalt to enhance the appearance of buildings did not extend to Roussillon to any great extent. There is basalt on the arches of the tower at Elne and there is one small village church that has a usage of coloured stone that is anything resembling that seen in Languedoc. It is the badly damaged church of Cameilles (66). Elne cathedral does have diamond shaped coloured stone on the apse. On an isolated hill, in the commune of Vinca (66), is the Romanesque chapel of St Père de Belloc which has alternating ashlar and orange coloured volcanic stones around the doorway.

Cameilles – apse from South-east
Roussillon is famed for the quality of the marble sculpture to be seen at the Romanesque churches. The availability of marble of suitable quality and the skills to work it had been known in the area since the XI century. On the Northern slopes of the Pyrenees in Roussillon there are several distinct colours of marble. Probably the variety that is best known and most frequently seen is that from the quarries around Villefranche-de-Conflent. This is described as being ‘Rouge, sang des martyrs…’ It is red or pink with streaks of white that vary in width. From the same commune is a slightly different variety that is red or pink but with white nodules – ‘œil de perdix’ (partridge eyes). From Céret comes a marble that is almost uniformly white and is similar in composition to that from the famous Carrara quarries, in Italy. The third locality that produced marble is near Baixas. This is predominantly white but with grey or green veining.

Marble was used for sculptures for both the churches and, more importantly, in their cloisters. In general, there was no attempt to exploit the variations of colour except for the construction of doorways. But at St Gènis des Fontaines the sculptors appear to have not only used several varieties of local marble for the capitals but also to position the capitals of different colours in different parts of the cloisters. The predominant colour is pink, of which there are 24, 6 to each aisle; there are 8 capitals in white marble with strong grey veining and four white capitals, one at each corner.
The variation in the colour of the marbles was employed in an entirely different manner at Espira de l’Angly. Here on the tower, the North wall of the nave and on the apse bands of grey marble alternate with white.

Espira de l’Angly from East

This use of colour was replicated in the Pyrenees in Catalonia. The Cathedral at La Seu d’Urgell uses both pale granite and a red volcanic stone to create both bands of colour and to pick out decorative strips. Probably using the Cathedral as a model, the use of bands of different colours was repeated in small village churches such as that at Alynia.

La Seu d’Urgell – North-west corner (left) and top of West façade (right)
On the island of Corsica, the church of St Michel, at Murato, adds a bit of drama to this form of decoration. The bands of black and white on this church are very typical of the decoration of churches to the east across the sea to Italy, particularly at Pisa and at Siena, though the latter was built somewhat later.
Toulouse (31) can not be described as being a coastal city, but it is part of the Languedoc. Described as ‘la ville rose’ on account of the widespread use of brick in the construction of most buildings of the old city, it had, in mediaeval times, three churches of outstanding quality. Of these, St Sernin is the only one to have survived largely unaltered. For a building of such quality it is almost inevitable that it should display the decorative feature of contrasting stonework. This is to be found on the west façade, the apse and on the magnificent tower that is so quintessentially Toulousian.
But coloured stones were used in unusual ways; for example on the upper walls of the nave red stone was placed beside the red brick, giving just sufficient contrast to be effective.

St Sernin, Toulouse – North wall of nave (detail)

Inside the builders used a mixture of brick-work and ashlar when constructing many of the pillars.

St Sernin, Toulouse – nave pillar (detail)

Central France.

We saw at the beginning of this article how the use of coloured stone was highly developed as a form of decoration in the Auvergne. It is, therefore unsurprising that areas that bordered the Auvergne should not be influenced accordingly. In the Bourbonais, to the North, the church of Huriel (03) has a grey granite frame around the door and within the tympanum above it there is a pattern of bluish, cobble-sized stones similar to the work
to be found over the door of the Chapel of St Clair in the Cathedral of Le Puy en Velay and at St Julien d’Orlargues in the Languedoc. But the stone lacks the comparable contrast.

At Yezeure, the builders made use of the local red arkose interspersed with blocks of white limestone.

Still within the Bourbonnais but near the Loire valley is a church that shows considerable Burgundian influence. This is the church of St Leger sur Vouzance (03) in which the builders have used arkose to highlight the bays and windows of the choir.
To the West of the Auvergne in Haute Auvergne, the local stone is volcanic, black basalt. Doorways, as so frequently, provide the position where the builders make the most positive use of contrasting stones. Particularly good examples are at Chalvignac and Grignols (both 16). At Ydes (16) is a very attractive church with fine sculptures. Those on the apse have been further enhanced by the use of white limestone that introduces a vein of light into the otherwise very sombre appearance of the apse.
At St Urcize (16) the local coloured stone is used on the exterior, at a window on the apse, and inside, with capitals and the vault ribs.

The Berry has few areas with good quality coloured stone that is suitable for building. However, the church at Charost (18) is one of the few; it glows with colour. (It should be noted that the South door to the nave is not Romanesque, but dates from the XIX century).
In the Aveyron, to the South of Cantal stands the former abbey church of St Foy, Conques. This, with St Sernin at Toulouse, was one of the great centres of pilgrimage in mediaeval France. On the South side of the church stood the cloisters; these were destroyed in the 1830s; only fragments remain. But there is evidence that the builders were aware of the effect of the use of coloured stonework when they used reds and yellows for the columns and pale grey limestone for the capitals.
The West of France.

The West of France has comparatively few churches where the builders have added coloured stone to enhance the decoration. This is particularly true of Aquitaine. There are a number of Gallo-Roman buildings that survive today and which show such use of stone; these could have provided models and yet the Romanesque builders do not appear to have followed up the idea.

You have to go further North, to the valley of the Loire, to find similar stonework. St Philbert de Grandlieu (44) is an abbey that dates from the XI century. The nave is divided from the side aisles by substantial rectangular pillars constructed from limestone blocks that are separated by two thin bands of bricks. This is modelled on the earlier Gallo-Roman style. The supporting arch at the crossing has pairs of bricks set to break up the starkness of the white limestone. This is repeated round the arches of the ambulatory.

Inland, at Anjou, there is a church that shares the same conceptual use of red brick with St Philbert de Grandlieu. It is Savennières (49) which lies just outside the South-west edge of Angers. Here the bricks have been used in broad bands in a manner that not only adds colour but probably gave added strength to walls that, being constructed using small
stones and a lot of mortar, needed further consolidation. The window arches have blocks of red arkose alternating with limestone. This we will see in Angers itself, in St Martin.

Savennières – from South-west and detail of stonework on South wall

Angers, St Martin – crossing and South transept

Some one hundred and eighty million years ago a meteorite struck Earth in the south east corner of what is now the Charente. The impact amongst other things created sufficient heat to melt rock and stone and to create a particularly hard form of rock. When quarried it lends itself to being polished to produce stones of reds and yellows. In the II and III centuries the Romans exploited this source, using the stone to build a centre with baths, temples and an amphitheatre.
Chassenon – Gallo-Roman baths

In the middle ages builders looted the site for stone to embellish the churches that were under construction. The church nearest to the site, in the modern village of Chassenon (16), shows the greatest evidence of this reused stone; but Rochechouart (16) also provides an example of the reuse of stone from the Gallo-Roman site.

Chassenon – from the South-west and the West door
On the South-west edge of the Limousin and just North of the Dordogne River is an area that has several churches built in red stone. One, Collonges-la-Rouge (19), is the only one where the builders have introduced a second colour of stone. It has been done with almost dramatic effect with a doorway of sculptured white marble.
The final example in the west is at Sorde L’Abbaye, in Les Landes, where the West door has been constructed using a pinkish stone that was enhanced by the addition of yellow and pink polychrome.

Sorde L’Abbaye – West door

The tomb of St Front which had stood in the Cathedral in Périgueux was shattered after the Revolution. Three fragments are now held in the local museum. One, depicting an angel, has part of the halo picked out in black stone. This is one of the few examples where coloured stone has been used to enhance sculpture rather than the architecture.

Tomb of St Front, Périgueux - Detail
Northern France.

There are few Romanesque churches in the north of France that possess coloured stonework. At the beginning of this article there is an illustration of the ancient town wall at Le Mans (72). The cathedral has, on the South wall of the nave, unusual coloured stone. It is not stone where there are distinct bands of colour. But the haphazard variations do create a pleasing effect. On the North wall this is enhanced by the use of coloured stones over the window arches.

Le Mans Cathedral – North wall of the nave and detail of South wall

Normandy is famed for the quality of its limestone; it is from quarries on the right bank of the Seine below Rouen (76) that huge quantities of stone were sent to England to meet the building plans of the new Norman authorities in the XI century. So it is almost inevitable that there should be very few examples of coloured stonework being used. But in the Orne there is one church that does have a little around the doorway; this is Soligny-la-Trappe (61).
Conclusions

There are few churches where coloured stone has been used on the scale that is to be found in Northern Italy. But, none-the-less builders and sculptors showed a good eye for making best use of the resources that were available to them. In some areas where there was both the suitable stone and the new churches that had been sufficiently well funded to allow the builders to employ artisans with the necessary skills the results could be very striking; in these we see the well trained eye that employs the available coloured stones to best effect. Even where the resources were meagre, the effect could still be startling. In the central areas of France around the Auvergne the 'zebra' effects created are thought to owe their inspiration to Moorish influences brought back by returning pilgrims.

References:

Géraldine Mallet. 'Origines et emplois des matériaux de l’ensemble funéraire de la Rodona’. Cahiers des Amis du Veil Ille No 176, pages 40- 53
Annex

Romanesque and Pre-Romanesque Churches in France with Coloured Stonework

Anjou

Angers, St Martin
Le Lion d’Angers
Savennières

Auvergne (including Velay)

Billom
Blèse
Brioude
Châtelperron
Chauriat
Chambon sur Lac
Clermont-Ferrand, Notre Dame du Port
Cournon
Cunhaut
Ebreuil
Ennezet
Issoire
Le Monastier sur Gazeille
Montet
Mozat
Orcival
Perbéc
Le Puy en Velay, Cathedral
Le Puy en Velay, St Michel d’Aiguilhe
St Dier d’Auvergne
St Nectaire
St Rémy
St Saturnin
Volvic

Berry
Charost  
Châteaumeillant

Bourbonnais

Autry-Issards  
Domerat  
Huriel  
St Leger sur Vouzance  
Yzeure

Brittany

Guer  
Langon  
Pletchâtel  
St Philbert de Grandlieu

Burgundy

Cluny Abbey  
Montceaux l’Etoile  
Tournus, Abbey St Philbert  
Tournus, St Valerin  
Lyon, St Jean Cathedral treasury

Corsica

Murato  
St Parteo

Forèz

Moingt  
Pouilly les Fleurs  
St Rambert, Abbey  
St Rambert, Chapelle St Jean  
St Romain le Puy

Gevaudan/Vivarais
Champagne
Cruas
Thines

Guyenne
Lialores

Haute Auvergne
Andelat
Chalvignac
Grigols
Riom les Montagnes
St Rémy de Salers
St Urcize
Ydes

Ile de France
Jouarre

Les Landes
Sordes L’Abbaye

Languedoc
Caunes-Minervois
La Caunette
Cavirac
Cesseras
Dio
Escales
Narbonne Cathedral
Ouveillan
Paders
Pouzols
Puiscalion
Quarante
St Guilhem le Désert
St Julian d’Olargues
St Pierre de Rhêdes
Toulouse, St Sernin
Villeneuve les Eglises

Limousin

Bénévent
La Celle Dunoise
Collonges la Rouge

Maine

Le Mans Cathedral

Normandie

Soligny la Trappe

Poitou-Charente

Chassenon
Poitiers, Baptistery of St Jean
Rochechouart
Secondigny

Provence

Arles, St Trophime
Embrun
Fréjus
Ganagobie

Rouergue

Bozouls
Conques
Nasbinals
St Grégoire
St Saturnin de Lenne
Théondels

Roussillon

Cameilles
Elne
Espirà de l’Angly
St Gènis des Fontaines
St Père de Belloc, Vinça

Rhône-Alpes

Valence Cathedral

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