

# The Romanesque heritage of the Vall de Boí

World Heritage Site





# A little history



**A**s from 9th century, the land to the south of the Pyrenees became organised into counties that depended on the Frankish kingdom and were part of the “Marca Hispánica” (Hispanic Mark). However, in the 10th century the Catalan counties gradually removed themselves from the Carolingian Empire and eventually achieved political and religious independence

The Vall de Boí, or Boí Valley, formed part of one of these counties: that of Pallars-Ribagorça, belonging to the house of Toulouse until the end of the 9th century. When the county became independent, there started a complex process of political and religious control over the territory, ending up with the original county being divided into three new independent counties: Ribagorça, Pallars Jussà and Pallars Sobirà, as well as creating a new diocese of the bishopric of Roda.

La Vall de Boí was in the midst of the process. In the initial division it had remained in the territory of Ribagorça but, as from 1064, it became part of Pallars Jussà and, for a lot of the 11th century, was immersed in the fights between the two Pallars regions.





At the same time, in the middle of the 10th century, the churches in the valley which had originally belonged to the bishopric of Urgell, became part of the bishopric of Roda. The creation of this new diocese signalled a period of disputes between both bishoprics.

The Vall de Boí was also in the middle of this conflict, as shown by the act of consecration which Ramon Guillem, bishop of Roda-Barbastro, ordered to be painted on a column of the church of Sant Climent in Taüll in 1123, as symbol of the territory's control.

A few years later, in 1140, a pact was signed by both bishoprics. Most of the parishes in the Vall de Boí became part of the Urgell bishopric, with only the church of l'Assumpció in Còll continuing to belong to Roda-Barbastro.

At the same time as this re-structuring of the territory, was happening a new social order was also taking shape: feudalism. Peasants were losing their freedom and becoming tied to the land under the rule of feudal lords, who benefited from the fights between counties and the feudalisation process, increasing their wealth and power.







In the Vall de Boí these lords were the Erill family from the village of Erillcastell, their place of origin, at the end of the 11th century they started to rise quickly in society, taking place in the campaigns to repopulate and reconquer land under the orders of Alfonso the Warrior, King of Aragon.

This was at the start of the 12th century, just before the churches of Sant Climent and Santa Maria in Taüll were consecrated. The lords of Erill used resources obtained from war booties to promote the building of churches in the Vall de Boí, a way of showing their power and of acquiring social prestige.

## Everyday life

The different towns and villages in the Vall de Boí, with their corresponding administrative areas, have been documented since the 11th century. These communities were made up of peasant families who usually settled in high sunny locations, these were easier to defend and to take better advantage of their own and the common land, as well as access pastures higher up the mountains and in the forests.

Their homes were simple structures with one fireplace, often comprising of a single area shared by people and animals alike. If there was a second floor, it was used for sleeping and storing food and fodder.

Day to day life was ruled by the light of the sun and followed a cyclical conception of time. Work and holidays went hand in hand with the agricultural calendar. A large part of basic diet was made up of cereals, wine and apples.







## The protagonists

### Ramon Guillem, the bishop

Originally from the south of France, Ramon Guillem was the prior at Sant Sernin in Toulouse before Alfonso the Warrior appointed him bishop of Roda-Barbastro from where he carried out his pastoral duties intensively, particularly in terms of consecrating churches.

He was confessor to the King of Aragon and kept in close contact with the lords of Erill.

His trips to France and Italy put him in touch with the best artists of the time

### The Erill, feudal lords

Originally from Erillcastell, their possessions extended along the valleys of Boí, Barravés, Llevata and Sas.

With Alfonso the Warrior, they took part in re-conquering Barbastro (1101), Tudela, Daroca and Zaragoza (1118), and Calatayud (1120) as well in repopulating new domains to the West (Alfarrás, Almenar, Fraga, etc..).

They promoted a large number of the churches of the Vall de Boí.





# The Romanesque heritage of the Vall de Boí



**T**he Vall de Boí's Romanesque heritage is made up of churches of Sant Climent and Santa Maria in Taüll, Sant Joan in Boí, Santa Eulàlia in Erill la Vall, Sant Feliu in Barruera, la Nativitat in Durro, Santa Maria in Cardet, la Assumpció in Còll and Sant Quirc Hermitage in Durro.

One of their main characteristics is the unity of architectural style. They were all built during the 11th and 12th centuries following models from northern Italy, Lombard Romanesque, characterized by functional buildings, skilled stonework, slim belltowers and the external decoration of rounded arcading and pilaster strips.

The Romanesque churches in the Vall de Boí are the artistic reflection of a society structured around the hierarchies of lords and clergy, in this case personified in the lords of Erill and the bishopric of Roda de Isábena, promoters of the churches in the Vall de Boí. In this medieval society, the Church not only fulfilled a religious function but also played an important social role as a place for the people to meet and seek refuge. In the case of the Vall de Boí, this social function of churches

was further underlined by the use of its slim belltowers for communication and protection.

Of particular note are the murals that used to be found in the churches of Sant Climent and Santa Maria in Taüll and Sant Joan in Boí, currently kept at the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (MNAC), as well as the carvings produced by the Erill Workshop, particularly the Descent from the Cross in the church of Santa Eulàlia d'Erill la Vall.

The Vall de Boí's Romanesque architecture is exceptional thanks to the concentration of such a high number of churches in a limited area with the same architectural style, preserved over time with few modifications that have significantly altered their initial design.





# Romanesque architecture in Catalonia

Romanesque architecture started around 1000 AD in the north of Italy and spread rapidly throughout Europe. In spite of some local variations, it was the first international art movement with a unified style. In Catalonia, this new artistic style arrived through Abbot Oliba who, in the towns of Ripoll, Cuixà and Vic, was the driving force behind the architectural renovation of the Catalan counties in the 11th century.

Early Romanesque has elements from the classical world, local traditions and Lombard designs brought by itinerant craftsmen. The buildings are practical, only external decoration being rounded arcading and pilaster strips, with thick walls capable of withstanding the weight of the **barrel vaults**. There are few windows or doors and the naves are usually separated by columns or pillars joined by **semicircular arches**.

In the 12th century improvements in techniques illustrate how the art of stonemasonry had been perfected. Architectural resources diversified and more sculptural elements were added to the decoration. By the 13th century Romanesque shapes had started to exist side by side with the arrival of Gothic architecture, as we can see in the buildings of the “Lleida School” (L’Escola de Lleida”).



## Techniques and materials

### Construction

The churches were built using local materials: stone, limestone, wood and slate. Stone was worked into an ashlar, joined together using limestone mortar to make the walls and vaults. Wooden beams and slates were used for the rooves.

### Frescoes

A mix limestone mortar made with sand, limestone and water was applied to the walls and a preliminary sketch or “sinopia” was then drawn on top. Finally, with the mortar still fresh, the coloured pigments were applied, diluted with water.

### Tempera painting

Used to paint on wood or to apply the final touches to murals. In this case, the pigments were mixed with egg yolk.



# Rediscovering romanesque



Interest in medieval world in Catalonia began in the 19th century with the “Renaixença” cultural movement following the trend that began throughout Europe with Romanticism.

The first exhibitions of Romanesque and Gothic art were being held by the end of the 19th century and the first museums and collections were created.

With the aim of discovering and studying the Romanesque monuments in the country, the architect and historian Lluís Domènech i Montaner made several expeditions to the Pyrenees between 1904 and 1905 to study the Romanesque monuments, including the Romanesque ensemble of the Vall de Boí. His are the first descriptions, plans, drawings and photographs we have of the churches in the valley.

Three years later, in 1907, the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (Institute for Catalan Studies), led by Puig i Cadafalch, organised the “Missió arqueològico-jurídica a la ratlla d'Aragó”(Archeological-Juridical Mission to the Aragon Border Area) visiting the Vall de Boí during the first days of September. The documentation from this trip would be

the basis for the Institute's subsequent publications, including the third fascicle of the work “Les pintures murals romàniques”(Romanesque mural paintings), published in 1911, which included, among others, the ensembles of the Vall Boí.

A few years later, in the summer 1919, la Junta de Museus (the Museums Board) discovered that the frescoes of Santa Maria de Mur (Pallars Jussà) had been bought and removed, but was unable stop them being sold to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. To prevent a repetition of such serious events, a campaign was organized to remove the Romanesque paintings from de Catalan Pyrenees and transfer them to the Museu d'Art i Arqueologia de Barcelona. The first removal began in the Vall de Boí in December de 1919.





## Strappo

Strappo is the technique used to remove wall paintings.

It consists of applying several layers of cloth dampened with water-soluble organic glue to the painting. When the canvases are dry, they are removed from the wall with a chisel and hammer. Together with the canvas, the pictorial layers are removed. When the canvases reach the museum, the paint is transferred to a new support and the glue is diluted with hot water to separate the canvas from the paint.

## Protection and recognition

The first institutional recognition of the historical and artistic value of the churches of the Vall de Boí was given to the churches of Sant Climent and Santa Maria in Taüll in 1931 with the declaration of Historical and Artistic Monument. In 1962 the declaration was extended to Sant Joan in Boí and Santa Eulàlia in Erill la Vall.

In 1992 the Generalitat de Catalunya declared the entire group of Romanesque churches in the Vall de Boí an Asset of Cultural Interest and in 2000, UNESCO included them on the World Heritage List.



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



Catalan Romanesque  
Churches of the Vall de Boí  
inscribed on the World  
Heritage List in 2000

On 30th November 2000 the World Heritage Committee of UNESCO approved the inscription of the “Catalan Romanesque Churches of the Vall de Boí” on the World Heritage List on the basis of two exceptional criteria:

**Criterion(ii):** The significant developments in Romanesque art and architecture in the churches of the Vall de Boí testify to profound cultural interchange across the mountain barrier of the Pyrenees.

**Criterion(iv):** The Churches of the Vall de Boí are an specially pure and consistent example of Romanesque art in virtually untouched rural setting.

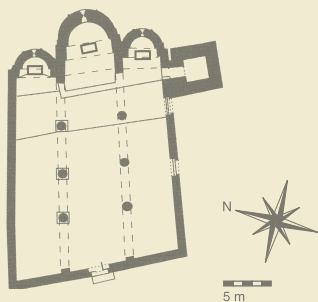


# Sant Climent de Taüll



Consecrated on the 10th of December 1123 by Ramon Guillem, bishop of Roda-Barbastro, the church of Sant Climent de Taüll was built on an earlier church dating from the 11th century.

It is a prototype of a **basilical plan** Romanesque church, with three naves separated by columns and covered with a wooden gable roof, the **chevet** of the church with three apses and a **bell tower**.







La figure of **Christ in Majesty** of Taüll has been the most frequently used emblematic image to represent Catalan Romanesque art. The original is kept in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya.

In the church there have recovered recently important fragments of original Romanesque painting preserved in situ and a new museographic project has implemented that includes the projection by video mapping of the paintings of the central apse. This is an innovative way that takes advantage of the technical possibilities of reproduction of the video mapping that show how it would the church in the 12th century featuring paintings integrated into the architecture of the building.

Three Romanesque carvings complete the movable assets preserved inside the church.



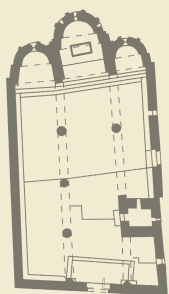
11th century	12th century	1920/1923	Early's 70's	2000/2001	2013
First building work	Church consecration	Paintings removed	First restoration work	Second restoration New paintings discovered	Restoration, new paintings and new museography



# Santa Maria de Taüll



**T**he church of Santa Maria was consecrated on the 11th of December 1123, one day after Sant Climent, showing the extent of the funds provided by the lords of Erill to the Vall de Boí at the beginning of the 12th century.







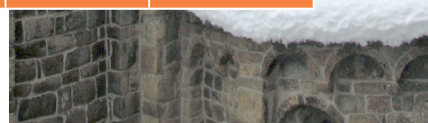
Located in the middle of the village, this is the only church in the valley that seems to have resulted in houses being built around it.

Like those in the rest of the Vall de Boí, most of the mural paintings inside the church were removed and taken to Barcelona between 1919 and 1923.

The church currently has reproductions from the central **apse** and from the south wall. Central apse presided over by a scene from the **Epiphany**, with Jesus sitting on the lap of the Virgin Mary and the Three Wise Men offering their gifts. On the south wall emphasize the scene of the Magi stands out adoring Christ Child and visiting Herod.



11th century	12th century	18th century	1920/1923	1960	1971	2013
First building work	Church consecration	Baroque reforms	First paintings removed	Second paintings removed	Last paintings removed and restoration	New paintings copies on the south wall

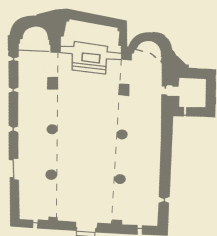




# Sant Joan de Boí



The church of Sant Joan in Boí has the largest number of architectural elements from the early building work that took place in the Vall de Boí in the 11th century.





Of particular note in the church of Sant Joan, with its basilical layout (like Sant Climent and Santa Maria) are the mural paintings decorating the interior of the naves with scenes such as The Stoning of Saint Stephen, The Minstrels and The **Bestiary**.

The last restoration aimed, as far as possible, to restore the church to what it must have looked like in the 12th century. With this aim in mind, the interior was darkened and copies were made of all the fragments of frescoes currently conserved at the MNAC.

This is where we can best understand the function of these paintings and the original appearance of the churches.



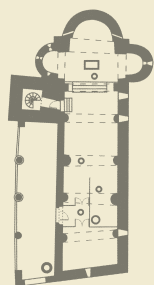
11th century	12th century	16th-19th century	1919/1923	1976/1978	1997/1998
First building work	Belltower reformed	Several reforms affecting the original appearance	First painting removed	Second paintings removed and restoration work	Restoration work and frescoes copied



# Santa Eulàlia de Erill la Vall



**S**anta Eulàlia has one of the best belltowers in the Vall de Boí. It is slender, square in plan and six storeys high and is decorated in the Lombard Romanesque style with **rounded arcading** and **sawtooth friezes**.





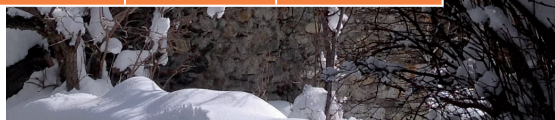


Aligned with the belltower of Sant Joan in Boí and that of Sant Climent in Taüll, it was used for communications and as a watchtower over the area.

Inside the church there is a copy of the sculpture of the **Descent from the Cross**, the only whole sculpture remaining from the Erill Workshop. The originals are kept in two museums: the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya in Barcelona and the Museu Episcopal de Vic.



11th century	12th century		60's	1994/1997
First building work	Nave extended and the belltower and porch were built.	Accidental collapse of the vaulted roof and facades and reconstruction work	Belltower restored	Archaeological excavations and restoration work

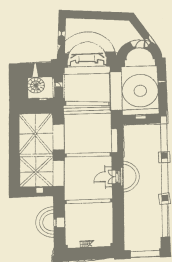




# La Nativitat de Durro



The size of this church is testimony to the importance of the village of Durro in the Middle Ages. Particularly of note are the large dimensions of the nave, the belltower, carved **portal** and **porch**.







The Romanesque church was renovated on several occasions between the 16th and the 18th century. These transformations provided the church with new areas, such as the two Gothic chapels and the Baroque **sacristy**.

Inside the church is the Romanesque image of Nicodemus that originally formed part of a scene from the **Descent from the Cross**.



12th century	16th-17th century	18th century	1983	1993	2000/2002
First building work	Opening of two lateral chapels	Chevet of church and porch renovated	Roofs restoration and chapel removed	Belltower restoration	Last restoration

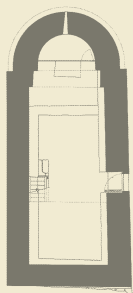




# Sant Quirc de Durro



**T**he Sant Quirc Hermitage is in a privileged location on the Durro mountain at a height of 1,500 metres. Its setting is not by chance, however, but is a territorial marker, connected to the social area used by the community and to the pagan tradition of “correr las fallas”, when the local people descend the mountain at night by the light of flaming torches.







This small building is from the 12th century with Baroque additions.

Inside there is harmony between its different artistic styles, with a copy of the Romanesque **altar frontal**, the Gothic style image of Saint Quirc and Santa Julita and the Baroque altarpiece.



12th century	17th-18th century	1996
First building work	The nave vault and belfry wall were added	Restoration

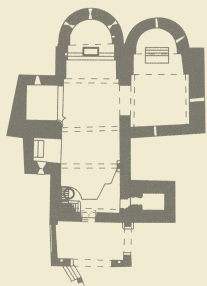




# Sant Feliu de Barruera



**T**he church of Sant Feliu in Barruera contains architectural elements from the two great periods of construction in the Vall de Boí: the 11th and the 12th century.





The different kinds of building work in each century are evident in the two apses conserved at the church: the 11th century apse decorated with **rounded arcading** and **pilaster strips** and with irregular **stonework** that is very different from the **ashlars** from the 12th century apse.

The renovations carried out on the church and its furnishings reveal how the valley's churches were gradually adapted to the tastes and needs of the community that has used them uninterruptedly since the 12th century.



11th century	12th century		17th-18th century	70's
First building work	Nave, south arm of the transept and base of the belltower	Two new chapels, belltower and door renovated	Baroque additions	Restoration and removal of baroque elements

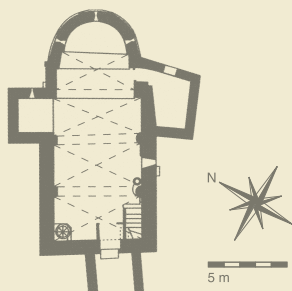




# Santa Maria de Cardet



The church of Santa Maria in Cardet has one of the most spectacular apses in the Vall de Boí. It was built on the steep mountainside, taking advantage of the slope to construct a small **crypt** inside, the only one of all the churches in the area.

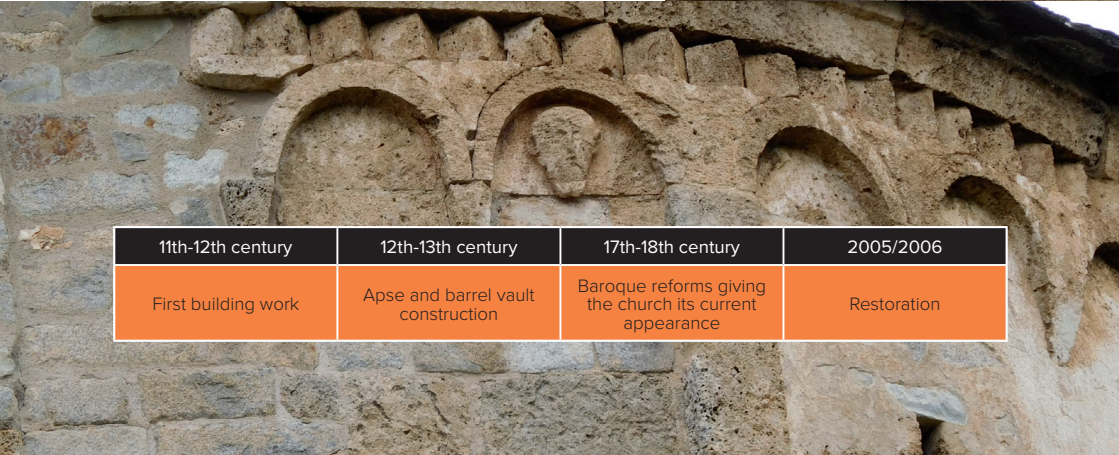






Unlike the rest of the churches in the Vall de Boí, in this case the belltower is a **belfry wall**, the result of Baroque renovations to the church.

The last renovation aimed to restore the inside of the church to its appearance at the beginning of the 20th century.



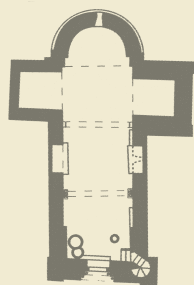
11th-12th century	12th-13th century	17th-18th century	2005/2006
First building work	Apse and barrel vault construction	Baroque reforms giving the church its current appearance	Restoration



# La Assumpció de Còll



**T**his church is quite different from the other churches in the Vall de Boí in terms of its building materials, the size of the ashlar and the decorative work in the **portal**, the most interesting part of the church. Of particular note are the **Chrismon** (Christ monogram) and the carved capitals representing struggles between men and animals.







As in the other churches in the valley, guarding the entrance is a wrought iron bolt of Romanesque style, finished in the shape of an animal's head.

Inside the church we can still see the three Romanesque fonts: the baptismal font, the font for holy water and the oil font.



12th century			70's	2012/2016
First building work	Side chapel opened in the north wall	Gothic reforms on the belltower	Roof reconstruction	Last restoration



# El Centre del Romànic de la Vall de Boí



**E**l Centre del Romànic (The Romanesque Center) is the headquarters of the Consorci Patrimoni Mundial de la Vall de Boí (Vall de Boí World Heritage Consortium), the entity that was created to manage the ensemble of the Romanesque churches of the Vall de Boí inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The space open to visitors provides the initial keys to know and understand the ensemble of Romanesque churches in the Vall de Boí. You can discover in a pleasant way how the Romanesque reached the Vall de Boí, where the iconography came from, how medieval society was, what techniques were used in the construction and decoration of the churches, the appearance of these temples at the beginning of the 20th century and finally, the voices of the past explain their relationship with the Romanesque heritage of the Vall de Boí.

## El Centre del Romànic de la Vall de Boí offers:

- Practical information for visiting the churches: information leaflets of the Romanesque ensemble, opening times, combined tickets sales.
- Guided tour service all year around by prior reservation (Catalan, Spanish, French and English).
- Guided tours service for the general public at predetermined times during the summer months, Easter week, some bank holidays and weekends.
- Shop with specialised publications on Romanesque and cultural heritage, gift items: postcards, bookmarks...

## Centre del Romànic de la Vall de Boí

C/ del Batalló, 5 - Erill la Vall  
Tel. **973 69 67 15**  
**centreromantic.com**



# Much more than Romanesque



**T**he Vall de Boí is located in a practically untouched natural environment surrounded by mountains, rivers, lakes (estanys) and with an exceptional cultural and natural heritage. In addition to the Romanesque World Heritage Site, the Vall de Boí has two other recognitions: Las Falles, the Fire Festival in the Pyrenees inscribed on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the National Park of Aigüestortes and Estany de Sant Maurici and the Starlight Reserve and Tourism Destination.

In Aigüestortes National Park, we find peaks of more than three thousand meters height; rivers, ravines, waterfalls and marshes, nearly 300 lakes (estanys) varying in shape and colour; a great diversity of animal and vegetal species. But moreover in the Vall de Boí we have the spa of Caldes de Boí, which is included in the Guinness Book of Records for its mineral-medicinal waters, the highest ski resort in Pyrenees, an extensive network of trails with over 100 kilometres of signposted paths and all the tourist and gastronomy activity.

## Patronat Vall de Boí

Passeig de Sant Feliu, 43 - Barruera

Tel. **973 69 40 00**

**vallboi.com**



# Vocabulary

**Altar frontal:** Rectangular structure located in front of the altar, generally made of wood and decorated with colours and/or carvings.

**Apse:** Part of a church, usually semi-circular, where the altar is located.

**Ashlar:** Cut and polished stone used to build a wall.

**Barrel vault:** Semi-cylindrical structure covering the space between two parallel walls.

**Basilical plan:** Rectangular perimeter with one or three semi-circular shapes (apses) at one end. Based on the layout of a Roman basilica.

**Belfry wall:** A bell wall made by raising the façade, with openings for the bells.

**Belltower:** Tower made up of a prism shaped structure with openings.

**Bestiary:** Natural history of animals, real or imaginary, with an allegorical meaning. In medieval times, zoomorphic representations were used that often acquired a symbolic or moralistic meaning.

**Chevet:** End of the nave of the church, where services are held.

**Chrismon:** Symbol of Christ made up of the first two letters - X (ji), P (ro) – of the Greek name Xrestos.

**Christ in Majesty:** Representation of God the all-powerful, Christ on the throne, blessing with his right hand and holding the Book in his left.

**Crypt:** Chapel located under the main altar where relics are usually kept.

**Descent from the Cross:** Scene representing the moment when Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus lower Jesus Christ from the Cross after his death.

**Epiphany:** Adoration of Jesus by the Wise Men from the East.

**Plaster strips:** Narrow vertical strips that divide the face of a wall, joined at the top by rounded arches

**Porch:** External area attached to a façade with side openings and covered at the top. It protects the entrance to the church.

**Portal:** Decorated entrance

**Rounded arcading:** Small ornamental arches applied to a wall.

**Semicircular arch:** a crescent shaped arc

**Sacristy:** Area used to prepare the mass and also to hold liturgical garments and valuable objects.

**Sawtooth frieze:** Horizontal frieze with v-shaped edging carved into the wall.  
**Stonework:** Way in which the stones are placed to make a wall

**Stonework:** Way in which the stones are placed to make a wall.

## Recommended bibliography

- AA.VV. *El Valle de Boí, Mil años de arte románico*, Editorial Llibres de Matricula, 2009. Coordinación científica: Centre del Romànic de la Vall de Boí.
- *Romanesque Art*. Petzold, Andreas. Pearson Education, 1995.
- *Romanesque. Wolf*, Norbert.Taschen, 2007.
- Castiñeriras Manuel; Camps, Jordi. *Romanesque Art in the MNAC collections*, Editorial Lunweg, 2008

# The Romanesque heritage of the Vall de Boí







United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



**Catalan Romanesque  
Churches of the Vall de Boí**  
Inscribed on the World  
Heritage List in 2000



CONSORCI  
PATRIMONI MUNDIAL  
DE LA VALL DE BOÍ  
CENTRE DEL ROMÀNIC

C/ del Batalló, 5 - 25528 Erill la Vall

Tel. 973 69 67 15

**centreromanic.com**

Photo credits: Imagen M.A.S., Josep Barbero, Nano Cañas, Ò. Rodbad i Playmodes: Arxiu Centre del Romànic de la Vall de Boí  
Rafael López Monné, Ò. Rodbad i Sergi Ricard: Arxiu Patronat de la Vall de Boí  
Francesc Tur: Arxiu Ara Lleida / Institut Amatller d'Art Hispànic: Arxiu Mas