

Vall de Boí (Spain)

No 988

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The Romanesque Catalan Ensemble of the Vall de Boí
<i>Location</i>	Autonomous Community of Catalonia, Alta Ribagorça Region, Municipality of La Vall de Boí
<i>State Party</i>	Spain
<i>Date</i>	28 July 1999; revised 14 June 2000

Justification by State Party

The largest concentration of Romanesque art in Europe is to be found in the Vall de Boí. The group of exceptionally well preserved rural churches constitute a unique example of the cultural tradition which flourished in 12th century Catalonia. The Romanesque churches and the villages in which they are located form an excellent example of a cultural landscape which bloomed in a harmonious way in a natural setting in which the wealth of the environment has remained intact.

The nine Romanesque churches of the Vall de Boí are a masterpiece of their period and result from the human creative faculty. The Lombard Romanesque style in these Pyrenean churches took on an indigenous form of expression in which the rural spirit manifests itself in remarkable ways, such as the chain of elegant bell-towers which stretch throughout the Valley. **Criterion i**

The Romanesque Catalan ensemble of the Vall de Boí furnishes unique evidence of the manifestation of an international artistic style (Lombard Romanesque or Early Romanesque) which, adapted to an isolated mountain environment and lying outside the great medieval religious routes, reflects an individual artistic personality and great powers of expression.

The Vall de Boí is the cradle of Catalan Romanesque art and bears unique witness to an indigenous cultural tradition which has survived since the 11th century. The churches of Sant Climent de Taüll, Santa Maria de Taüll, Sant Joan de Boí, Santa Eulàlia d'Erill la Vall, La Nativity de Durro, Santa Maria de Cardet, and Santa Maria de Còll have remained open for religious use since they were consecrated during the 11th and 12th centuries.

The rural centres in which they are located have continued in activity since the Middle Ages. From generation to generation the inhabitants of the valley have worshipped in

their country churches, which where they met not only for religious but also for cultural and community matters.

It should be added that, as well as the indisputable architectural Value of the group in the Vall de Boí itself, the National Museum of Catalan Art (MNAC) in Barcelona (the capital of Catalonia) contains wall paintings that once decorated the main churches. The decoration of the apse of Sant Climent de Taüll is acknowledged to be one of the masterpieces of Romanesque art.

The nomination to the World Heritage List of the architectural group of Romanesque churches in the Vall de Boí is completed with the inclusion of the wall paintings from Sant Climent de Taüll, Santa Maria de Taüll, and Sant Joan de Boí now in the MNAC in Barcelona. The exceptional nature of this nomination of properties that are distant in geographical terms is justified for historical reasons of the highest order. During the 1920s the Catalan cultural authorities removed these paintings from the Boí churches because of the danger of their being exported abroad at a time when there was no legal control of the cultural heritage in Spain. As a result of this rescue operation, which is unique in the annals of European art, the paintings are now on permanent display in the Barcelona museum, which has been recently renovated. **Criterion iii**

The group of Romanesque churches in the Vall de Boí is a remarkable example of an important constructional style in human history, like that of Romanesque art, to which it contributes characteristics that are appropriate to both its religious and its secular aspects. The churches constitute the cultural elements that are essential and distinctive of this region.

The Vall de Boí illustrates the continuous occupation of an area of land. The churches that were built in the Middle Ages at the instigation of a single family symbolize the affirmation and geographical settlement at the time that historical Catalonia was created. **Criterion iv**

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a group of *monuments*.

History and Description

History

The Arab invasion and occupation of the Iberian peninsula never penetrated the valleys of the high Pyrenees. Despite their inaccessibility, these valleys were exposed around the beginning of the 2nd millennium to ideas and cultural influences, brought there by merchants, by itinerant monks and by Christian pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem and Santiago de Compostela.

Moreover, of the three Christian territories in Spain at that period, Catalonia was in better contact with outside influences than the kingdoms of Navarre or León. It was a mosaic of the small fiefs of counts, who paid little heed to their Frankish nominal overlords. In the 11th century Ramon Borrell II established the hegemony of Barcelona and created a dynasty which survived until the early 15th century. New cultural styles were brought into Catalonia from Italy,

particularly Lombardy, and their fruits are to be seen in the religious ensembles of Vic, Cuixà, and Ripoll. Many craftsmen and artists came to Catalonia from this region of Italy, and testimony to their influence is given by the fact that the word *lombard* became synonymous with "stonemason" or "supervisor" in Catalonia. It was from here that Romanesque architectural and artistic influences were diffused throughout the Iberian peninsula in the 13th–15th centuries.

This new cultural movement was late in reaching the remote Vall de Boí. The exceptional number of Romanesque churches in the valley, which has supported a relatively low population since the end of the Middle Ages, is attributed to the fact that large quantities of silver came into the region, especially in the first decades of the 12th century, during the campaign to recover Barbastro and Saragossa. The counts of Erill took part in this campaign and drew handsome profits from it. They devoted considerable portions of their gains to embellishing their villages with handsome churches in the new style.

Description

The Vall de Boí is situated in the high Pyrenees in the Alta Ribagorça region, some 120km due north of Lleida. The deep valley is screened by the high peaks of the Beciberri/Punta Alta massif. Its scenery is one of woodland and meadows, adjoining and surrounding the small villages with their Romanesque churches. There is little industry - no more than two flour mills, a sawmill, some woollen weaving, and lead mining near Durro. The sulphur and mineral content of the waters of the area is the source of the small thermal establishments in the valley.

The layouts of the villages follow the feudal pattern of individual houses grouped around a main central building (church or castle) or main road (usually on Roman roads). Each has a small open space for meetings and festivals, their shape being determined by the alignments of the buildings that form them. Some of the villages rise steeply up the mountainsides, the houses being connected by ramps (*pujadors*). Only at Boí has a medieval gateway been preserved.

The tall towers of the churches served both to house the bells and to act as lookouts in case of attack. Alongside each of them is the walled village cemetery. The streets are paved with stone slabs or cobbles, their settings varying according to the local topography. They are now being replaced with modern materials (eg in Taüll and Boí).

Brief notes follow on churches that make up this nomination.

- Sant Feliú, Barruera

Barruera is located at a strategic point, where the Vall de Boí widens out. The village extends along the single main street (on the route of a Roman road), with narrow streets leading to the remaining older part of the village and small blind alleys opening off it. In the Middle Ages the settlement was much larger, linked with a now disappeared abbey. Its parish church of Sant Feliú lies outside the village immediately above the river flood plain. It has a single nave (the only survivor of the three in its original design) with a semi-circular apse, decorated on the outside with arches and pilasters. There is a square transept on the south side; two square chapels were added in Gothic style to the main nave. The church is entered through the western facade, also

Gothic; the bell-tower must have been renovated at around the same time, probably in the 16th century.

- Sant Joan, Boí

The fortified centre of Boí is also on the route of an ancient road, leading to a Roman thermal establishment. It is situated on the right bank of the Sant Martí river, between two high rocky outcrops in the centre of the Valley. The three bell-towers of Boí, Taüll, and Erill la Vall are intervisible, a notable defensive feature.

The church of Sant Joan is situated at the entrance to the village. It underwent considerable alteration in the 18th century; however, it retains its original basilical layout of three naves with apses at the eastern ends of the two flanking ones. The naves are separated by vaulted arcades supported on stout columns. There are windows in all the walls and access is through a doorway in the western end; there are traces of a no longer extant porch.

- Santa Maria, Taüll

The village of Taüll, on a medieval route, has two centres, one around the square and the church of Santa Maria, with a number of medieval houses surviving relatively intact, and the other an elongated space along the old route (now a modern road flanked by new buildings) leading to Sant Climent. However, the importance of Taüll lies in its churches, acknowledged to be archetypes of the Vall de Boí Romanesque style.

The parish church of Santa Maria dominates the village. It has three naves, each with a terminal apse. Its construction shows that strict orthogonality was not always respected. The apses are elaborately decorated in Lombard style, with false arcading separated by pilasters and saw-tooth friezes. The main door on the west facade is a plain semicircular arch. The masonry is very carefully dressed and laid. The masonry of the bell-tower, by contrast, is rough and less carefully laid; the tower itself clearly antedates the main church, which is attributable to a major restoration project in the 18th century. Archaeological excavations demonstrated the former existence of a cemetery beneath modern paving immediately outside the church's south wall and have made it possible to define the layout of the original church.

- Sant Climent, Taüll

The church of Sant Climent is located on a slight eminence on the ancient route between Taüll and Boí. It is the largest, best preserved, and most outstanding architecturally of the churches in the Vall de Boí. Moreover, its characteristic Lombard Romanesque architecture and interior decoration make it the symbol of Catalan Romanesque architecture. It is basilican in plan, with three naves, each with a terminal apse. The side naves are separated by arcades of large columns. The doorway opens on the west facade, where vestiges of a porch can be discerned. The only windows that survive are at the east and west ends respectively.

The most imposing feature of Sant Climent is its bell-tower, at the south-east corner of the church. This is square in plan and soars from a simulated solid base to six storeys, each with wide bilobate windows (those on the third level are trilobate). The facades are decorated with vaulted friezes and pilasters.

The masonry of the church and bell-tower is composed of carefully laid granite blocks, with pumice for decorative

elements and the window arches and columns. In places there is evidence remaining of the less meticulous masonry of the earlier church that stood here. The present structure is that of the building consecrated in 1123, replacing a late 11th century church.

- The Church of the Assumption, Coll

The late 12th century church of the Assumption lies outside this small village. It is basically Romanesque, with Gothic and later additions and modifications. It consists of a single nave with an apse. The semi-ruinous Gothic bell-tower is on the south side and four storeys high. Accessed by external steps to first floor level, its shell has preserved unweathered gargoyles on the earlier church, not otherwise present on the existing fabric.

- Santa Maria, Cardet

Cardet is built on a rocky eminence dominating the entrance to the Vall de Boí which is just large enough to accommodate the score of houses that make up the village. The little parish church of Santa Maria lies at the extreme eastern end of the village, on the edge of a steep slope. However, despite its small size, the layout and development of the church are complex. It has a single nave with apse, as at Coll. Uniquely in this valley, a crypt occupies the space beneath the apse created by the need to keep the latter horizontal as the rock falls away. There is a small bell-frame at the west end; the facade contains some interesting elements that span a relatively long period of medieval design. It appears to have been founded in the 11th century, remodelled in the 12th or early 13th century, and then again in the 17th–18th centuries. The interior is untouched, retaining its Baroque and later fittings and furnishings.

- Church of the Nativity, Durro

The buildings of this small village, built on a south-facing mountainside, extend up from the parish church of the Nativitat de la Mare de Déu along the single main street, which is on a medieval route. The church is a substantial structure with a long narrow single nave. However, it has undergone many transformations since the first Romanesque building was erected in the 12th century so that much of its original external appearance is masked or removed; its interior, however, has not been renovated in modern times, retaining Baroque and later features.

- The Hermitage of Sant Quirc, Durro

A winding path leads to the hermitage of Sant Quirc de Durro, on a low peak at an altitude of 1500m. It is a tiny church with a single nave and apse; there is a stone bell-frame on the west facade. There is a roof space accessible only from the outside which probably served as a granary and storeroom. It is very typical of small medieval hermitages in the Pyrenean region. Each village in the Vall de Boí had its own hermitage, characteristically high on one of the tracks leading into the mountains above it. This one has recently been renovated, its roof restored to its original height.

- Santa Eulàlia, Erill la Vall

This is a very small settlement, with four domestic ensembles of characteristic form. The church of Santa Eulàlia has a single long nave with a timber roof, which replaced a former barrel vault, the substantial supports for which are still visible. On the east end the nave terminates in a triple apse,

the centre element of which was replaced at the beginning of the 20th century. Entrance is gained by a doorway in the north wall, protected by a porch. The 12th century bell-tower is on the north side and rises to six storeys. It is interesting to note that the care given to the stonework decreases with each successive storey. It was originally faced with stone which has now disappeared, and so there is no evidence of what decoration may have existed.

As at Santa Maria de Taüll, restoration work has permitted archaeological excavations to take place at Santa Eulàlia, and these have revealed its successive transformations since the first building was erected in the 11th century.

Management and Protection

Legal status

All the churches enjoy full protection under state, regional, and local heritage laws and other provisions. The villages and individual buildings are covered by strict town and country planning provisions, regulating such matters as the siting, height, roof-line, and building materials of new constructions and renovations, which ensures that the settings of the churches are preserved intact. In general, provision seems to be about as all-embracing as possible or desirable.

The relevant statute is the Cultural Heritage Law (No 9/93) of the Generalitat of Catalunya, which protects both historic monuments and ensembles and historic and archaeological areas. Part of the valley, six of the villages (including the defences of Boí but not the village of Taüll), and all the churches are protected in this way. The historic and artistic heritage of the valley has been catalogued: the documentation and record of the architecture and art are excellent.

In addition, provisions are in place not merely to try to prevent bad consequences of tourism but positively to promote "good tourism." The main agreement is the Programme of Tourist Excellence in the Vall de Boí. It is recognized in the nomination that the single most serious threat to the integrity of the valley would be the release of mass visiting, and the intention is to prevent this happening. A document on tourism development strategies states that these must be compatible with the objectives of the protection and conservation of natural and cultural resources.

Management

The Mayor of the Vall de Boí is the all-important local figure in terms of decision-taking, implementation, and monitoring. Both the regional government and the Generalitat of Catalunya, particularly its Department of Culture, also play a direct role in terms of policy generation and implementation, finance, planning, and tourism.

Within the surrounding landscape management of the countryside is on the whole by the local farmers continuing to farm their land in the traditional manner. Planning control is strict outside the villages, in effect prohibiting new development, and land there is not available for sale.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

All the churches have received some conservation attention, but some much more than others. Several were the subject of major programmes of restoration and renovation in the second half of the 20th century, and it is intended that work of modern standard and scope will be carried out on the remainder in what is, in effect, a continuous programme of maintenance. The main works of mural art, and many of the older fittings and furnishings, have been removed for security reasons to the MNAC at Barcelona

Authenticity

There can be no question about the basic authenticity of the churches, the villages or the surrounding landscape. All have, however, experienced recent changes which might, to a greater or lesser extent, be seen as modifying that basic authenticity. However, this is a phenomenon to be observed in all cult buildings that have been in continuous use for spiritual purposes since their construction. None of the interventions, with the exception of the regrettable, but entirely justifiable, removal of much of the art treasures to Barcelona, has been such as to reduce the authenticity of any of the churches to an unacceptable extent.

Conservation of the churches' fabric has extended to removal, renovation, replacement, and new construction. Now, only Santa Maria at Durro to some extent, and otherwise only Santa Maria, Cardet, which are distinctive in several other respects also, provide in their unconserved state a good idea of church development and an interior in late- and post-medieval times.

The rescue of the mural art in the 1920s was a remarkable achievement and it has produced remarkable results, which can be seen at the MNAC, Barcelona. However, that achievement cannot alter the stark facts that the paintings are now out of the context in which they were meant to be seen, and that that context now lacks its crowning glory. While this does not undermine the churches' claim on the world's attention, it could be argued to diminish their authenticity to some extent. In their present location they cannot, of course, be considered for inscription on the World Heritage List.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the Vall de Boí on 28 February–4 March 2000. Following discussions between the two Advisory Bodies on the nature of the property (which had been nominated originally as a cultural landscape), it had been agreed that IUCN would not be represented on this mission.

A second ICOMOS expert mission visited the Vall de Boí in October 2000, following the provision of a revised nomination by the State Party.

Qualities

The churches of the Val de Boí as a group represent an especially pure and consistent example of Romanesque art. Moreover, they preserve in their village centres to a remarkable degree the quality of daily life in medieval rural communities. It is crucial to their distinctiveness that each

church is an integral part of a village. Characteristically most of them stand immediately outside the medieval centre (because they were added to an existing village). The spatial and functional relationships between the churches and the villages are at the core of this application.

It is also legitimate to assert that the purity of the way of life in medieval Catalonia as expressed in this group of churches and their villages is of considerable significance in the recognition of Catalan cultural identity. The art of the Pyrenean village churches played a vital role in the movement for the re-establishment of Catalan nationality in the early years of the 20th century.

Comparative analysis

Europe contains many Romanesque churches, and many more important buildings, quite as fine architecturally as those in the Vall de Boí – in neighbouring Provence and Languedoc, for example, as well as in their "homeland," northern Italy. However, the importance of the churches in the Vall de Boí lies in their group value: there is no similar cluster of outstanding churches from the same relatively brief period to be found elsewhere. There is also no group which so graphically illustrates the transmission of a cultural movement across a mountain barrier into a region hitherto dominated by another and much different culture, that of the Arab conquerors of the Iberian peninsula.

ICOMOS comments and recommendations for future action

The active conservation and promotion of the Vall de Boí is a relatively recent phenomenon. It is very important that there should be absolute respect for the original materials and techniques in all restoration projects relating to the churches, and also to the historic buildings that surround or adjoin them. It is essential therefore that every effort should be made to ensure that training is provided to maintain the knowledge and practice of traditional crafts in the valley.

ICOMOS is conscious of the need to ensure that the Romanesque art from the Vall de Boí churches is conserved and curated in conditions of complete security, as provided in the MNAC, Barcelona. It hopes, however, that the responsible authorities will keep the situation under constant review, in the hope that some of these artistic treasures may one day be restored to their original settings.

Brief description

The steep-sided, narrow Vall de Boí is surrounded by mountains. Each of the villages in the valley contains a Romanesque church, which as a group represent an especially pure and consistent example of Romanesque art.

Recommendation

This property was originally nominated as a cultural landscape. At the meeting of the Bureau in June 2000 further nomination of this nomination was deferred, to enable the State Party to consider the preparation of a revised submission relating only to the architectural significance of the area, as represented by its Romanesque churches. Having studied the revised nomination and evaluated it on site, ICOMOS recommends that this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii and iv*:

Criterion ii The significant developments in Romanesque art and architecture in the churches of the Vall de Boí testify to profound cultural interchange across medieval Europe, and in particular across the mountain barrier of the Pyrenees.

Criterion iv The churches of the Vall de Boí are an especially pure and consistent example of Romanesque art in a virtually untouched rural setting.

ICOMOS also proposes a slight modification to the name of the property, so as to make it more representative of its exact nature: "The Catalan Romanesque Churches of the Vall de Boí."

ICOMOS, November 2000