ENGLISH ROMANESQUE ART
1066-1200
Rodney Hilton

For those who are not specialists in art history, the 'Romanesque', from 1066 to 1200, will principally mean buildings, and above all, churches, often referred to as 'Norman'. As compared with the many-windowed and delicate Gothic constructions of the 13th to the early 16th centuries, Romanesque churches impress by their solidity and fortress-like character; and indeed their replacement of timber roofs by stone vaulting was an important innovation, a safeguard against fire and other forms of destruction. The great cathedral and abbey churches, of which Durham and Gloucester are outstanding examples, convey to us some idea of the wealth and power of the Norman ruling class, bishops and abbots as well as barons, who almost totally replaced their Anglo-Saxon counterparts after 1066.

But these churches are not only massive, even menacing. Their carved doorways, internal arches, capitals and corbels show a richness of artistic imagination which still gives a thrill of pleasure to the 20th century observer. Nor should it be thought that this art was entirely an expression of ruling class taste. The carvers, skilled members of the craft of masons, obviously worked to please the 20th century. The carvings, especially on small churches in the parish churches, with their grotesque and sometimes extremely bawdy imagery, cannot avoid the impression that the masons were expressing themselves in fact, part of the general economic, social and political upsurge at this time in Europe. Because of its connections, first with Normandy, then with Anjou, Maine and Aquitaine, it had very close ties with many of the provinces of France and especially the vineyards of Gascony. It continued to speak and especially to write French until the end of the 14th century. Nevertheless, by 1200, it had become consciously Anglo-Norman and the English middling and lesser landowners - precursors of the 'gentry' - were integrated with it. The Romanesque art and culture in England was Anglo-Norman not Norman. It was, of course, the culture of a confident and burgeoning ruling class (apart from those symptoms of a popular imagery which have already been mentioned), but its splendours can still be recognised and enjoyed.

The current exhibition at the Hayward Gallery1 pays little attention to the social context of Romanesque art just outlined. Indeed, G Zarncke, in his introduction to the splendidly produced and illustrated catalogue (£9.95), repeats the hoary old social theory of a well-balanced social hierarchy, 'all bound together by ties of loyalty and mutual interest'; a harmony which, he suggests is reflected in the Romanesque buildings. Unfortunately, the exhibition is, as one might expect, unable fully to illustrate the art of the masons-architects of these buildings. An attempt is made to convey the atmosphere of Romanesque churches by setting the exhibits under rounded, boarded and plastered arches and by keeping out as much light as possible, presumably to imitate the supposed gloom of churches. This is not a success because it emphasises, more than is usual (and to some extent inevitable) in exhibitions, a lack of connection between the objects shown. However, a film which is part of the exhibition helps a good deal to capture the context of the art in the buildings themselves.

Stone carving is mainly represented by fragments - some very striking - from various sources. Most of these, inevitably, are detached from the buildings of which they were part. There is a beautifully carved tympanum from Billesley, showing a man fleeing through a tangle of wood

1 An Arts Council Exhibition, Hayward Gallery, South Bank, London until 8 July.
from the forces of evil; some striking carved capitals from Winchester and Old Sarum; and an extraordinary Keynsham keystone, showing Samson killing the lion, but looking more like an elegant and well dressed woman opening the beast's mouth.

Perhaps the most important part of the exhibition is of written and illustrated manuscripts. They are not immediately as striking as the sculpture and the other carvings. This is partly because the language in the writings is almost entirely Latin and the illustrations are on a small scale compared with the sculpture. The subject matter is largely concerned with Biblical texts, homilies, lives of saints, church liturgy, monastic chronicles and cartularies and so on. There are other more unusual topics - comedies by the classical Latin writer Terence, from the Benedictine Abbey of St Albans, astrological, scientific and astrological treaties, herbals, mostly again from monastic libraries; a book on canon (that is, church) law from Canterbury Cathedral. Almost all of these texts are illustrated, vividly, with both plain line drawings and paintings. The subject matter is mostly religious, as one would expect illustrating various Biblical episodes. One of the most effective is an illustration of the betrayal and flagellation of Christ, from a Winchester psalter, a depiction of sadistic expression on the faces of Christ's persecutors which the artist must have seen in his own time. Another is an illustration in a Worcester cathedral chronicle of King Henry I dreaming about being visited by angry peasants, knights and bishops (in separate delegations, of course) all complaining about heavy taxation. The execution of all these drawings and paintings is of the most precise and meticulous quality, combined, where relevant, with extremely vivid paint work.

Much of this writing and manuscript illustration carried on a pre-conquest tradition. It must be said again that it represents a cultural and intellectual efflorescence which was not due to conquest but to the great forward movement of feudal civilisation in Europe as a whole. It was necessarily a narrowly based culture. The vast majority of the population was illiterate, especially those whose toll made possible the creation of these artifacts. At this time, the only way to literacy and to learning was through the church. All scribes would at least be in minor orders. Many would be monks, some nuns. The clergy and especially those in the monasteries, were recruited almost entirely from the landowning class. Nevertheless, this period, especially after 1100, was one in which important intellectual foundations were laid for the future. Although not represented in the exhibition, this period saw the beginning of those schools which eventually became the universities, the home then of a critical scholastic philosophy whose constricting role was yet to come. It is not a negligible period in our history, though perhaps for other reasons than those which appear in the textbooks.

A prominent feature of the exhibition is something which is both familiar and unfamiliar - a reproduction of the misnamed Bayeux tapestry. The original is under glass in the Bayeux municipal museum and understandably could not be borrowed because of its fragility. It is 70 metres long and 50 centimetres wide and is not, in fact, a tapestry, but a series of embroidered themes on a linen background. It is generally accepted that it was made in England by English embroideresses commissioned by Odo, bishop of Bayeux, brother of William the Conqueror (also known contemporaneously as William the Bastard). It is beautiful to look at, with its still vivid colours and its striking manipulation, alternately, of crowd scenes and depictions of individuals, not to speak of grotesqueries, occasionally bawdy, in the margins, which recall other minor aspects of Anglo-Norman art. It is also a manipulation in another sense, a heavily slanted justification of the Norman invasion. No doubt the embroideresses did not know the real facts behind the story. It begins a fairly consistent pattern of historiographical justification for the events of 1066. We do not now have to pass moral judgements either way. Feudal society can certainly be interpreted as one organised for war and plunder by the few at the expense of the many. This exhibition shows that there was more to it than that (or, as well as that). Even out of an oppressive society a satisfying art can emerge.

Whatever its deficiencies, avoidable or unavoidable, this is an exhibition worth visiting, both for the interest and beauty of individual items and for the light which it throws on a remote and often misunderstood period in English history. Those who visit it and have not yet looked at Romanesque churches, great or small, either from the inside or the outside are urged to do so, so as to put much of the exhibition into context. And for those who can afford holidays abroad, a visit to Normandy, to Bayeux and the little Romanesque churches around, might be more interesting, and possibly cheaper than to the Costa Brava.