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La Pierre-qui-Vire and Zodiaque: A Monastic Pilgrimage of Medieval Dimensions¹

By Janet T. Marquardt, Eastern Illinois University

In 1708, the Benedictine monk Edmond Martène was commissioned to travel around France and Belgium to find archival materials that would support a revised edition of the *Gallia Christiana*. After the exigencies of the first year, he was granted leave to continue with a companion, a fellow monk named Ursin Durand, in spring of 1709. After four years, they claimed to have visited eight hundred abbeys and one hundred cathedrals in order to gather information. In the process, they also documented the architecture, treasures, libraries, and ceremonies they observed in place as they visited sites where the charters they wished to consult were housed. Martène published a written account of their adventures with a few engravings of particularly impressive objects or documents.² A later expedition was launched to the Netherlands and Germany.

In 1951, monks from the abbey of La Pierre-qui-Vire in Burgundy also began traveling to religious sites in France in order to photograph Romanesque architecture, having been struck by the power of the sculptural forms and structural lines at Vézelay when their monastery was put in

¹ This essay is part of a larger study on the Zodiaque publications where I plan to consider the original context and motivations behind both the journal and book series, the selection of topics for examination in journal articles, the impact of the book series' thematic and regional divisions upon art-historical understanding of Romanesque art, the scope of the monuments photographed, the use of the term "Romanesque" across such a wide range of examples, the role of the artistic photographs in creating modern appreciation for early medieval art and architecture, the function and diversity of the accompanying texts, the practical realization of the work by the monks, and so on. Other essays are currently under consideration and I hope to eventually compile a monograph on the entire Zodiaque project.

² Edmond Martène and Ursin Durand, *Voyage littéraire de deux religieux benedictins de la Congregation de Saint Maur* (Paris: F. Delaulne, 1717).

charge of the church and parish. Three young members of the Benedictine house, Brothers Angelico, Éloi, and Yves, had formed an artistic atelier for the purpose of painting religious frescoes in nearby churches and they mounted an exhibition of Vézelay's Romanesque sculpture alongside modern art which they felt conveyed a similar "primitive" visual power. Angelico Surchamp had trained with the cubist painter, Albert Gleizes, who himself wrote widely about the spiritual power of modern art as well as the similar intensity found in medieval art of the Romanesque period.³ During the exhibition at Vézelay, Surchamp was forced to write an explanation for visitors, who were offended by this "sacrilegious" combination. He entitled it "*Note sur l'art abstrait*" and tried to elucidate spiritual and aesthetic resonances between the two forms. This text, along with photographs of the art works, were subsequently published in the first issue of a journal that the monastery launched (under Surchamp's supervision) based on the idea that art could serve as the source for spiritual renewal in the twentieth century. The other two members of the atelier were forced to drop out by 1956, but by then the journal was going strong and had spawned a series of books focused specifically on Romanesque art: *Les Travaux des mois* (beginning with *Autun*, 1953) (**fig. 1**) and *La Nuit des temps (Bourgogne romane)*, 1954) (**fig. 2**). Surchamp became the book series' energetic and determined chief editor.

When Martène, in the eighteenth century, described the great abbey of Cluny, which they visited in Burgundy, he wrote:

The third [church] which was built by St. Hugh, of a gothic order, was the most magnificent of its time. It is five hundred and fifty-five feet long, and one hundred twenty feet wide, and is proportionally as high. It has two side aisles, two crossings and two rood screens in the middle of the choir, where there are two hundred and twenty seats for the monks. One especially admires the apse. It is a very delicate octagon, sustained by eight small pillars of marble...⁴

³ Representative examples of his work can be seen at <http://www.fondationgleizes.com/albert-gleizes-work.html>. Especially apt are examples seen by clicking on the link entitled "The Inter-war period (1918-1939)."

⁴ English translation from Tina Waldeier Bizzarro, *Romanesque Architectural Criticism: A Prehistory* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1992). 124, original French p. 198 n. 65.

This is one of the longest descriptions of a building in Martène’s account, and yet it still leaves much to our conjecture, such as what they meant by “a gothic order” or how many side aisles there were. In contrast, by the time the *Zodiaque* team visited Cluny, it had been almost entirely destroyed at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, they were able to show us exactly what they saw in a series of photographs published in *Bourgogne romane*.⁵

When Surchamp first met André Malraux, they discussed the dearth of good photographs of architecture and Surchamp’s goal to make them. Malraux subsequently praised the publications and thus helped establish the great “Zodiaque

adventure,” as Surchamp termed it. Over forty-five years, from 1950 to 1995, the *Zodiaque* team would visit easily as many sites as Martène and Durand did in the early eighteenth century—of

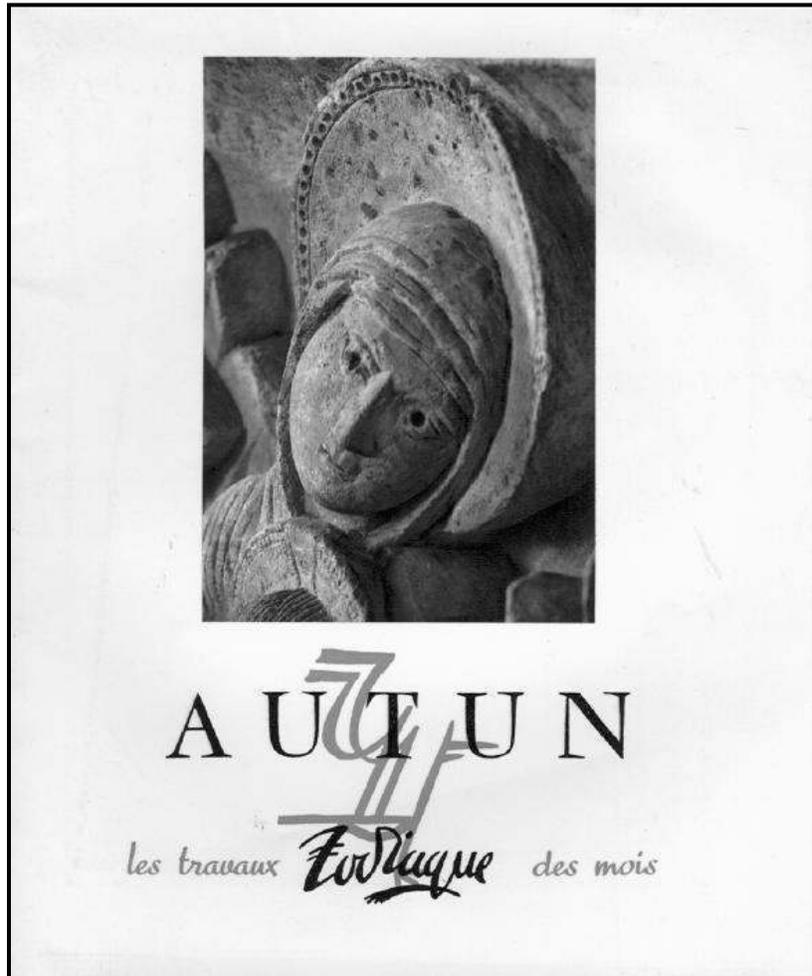


Fig. 1 Cover of *Autun*, the first issue of the series “Les Travaux des mois,” 1953 (Photo: Author)

⁵ The first edition of this volume did not include Cluny, it was only added when rewritten by Raymond Oursel in 1974.

course they were traveling in a *camionette* or small panel van, rather than on foot, but it was necessary to cover much more ground to find extant early medieval buildings by the twentieth century (**fig. 3**).

I compare these two monastic tours because they stand out among archival endeavors and both directors acknowledged their similarity to medieval pilgrimage. As Martène wrote “...the proverb which says that a monk outside his monastery is like a fish outside water who does nothing but flap around, is not true since in certain cases they may undertake voyages, even long ones. Antiquity furnishes us many examples of illustrious personages in this endeavor...”⁶ We do tend to imagine monks as captive creatures, spending all their days looking at the same cloistered walls, reading the same books and eating the same bland food. Yet we also know that, during the Middle Ages, clerics were some of the best-traveled members of society and it was their observations of buildings, ceremonies, and documents in foreign parts that helped spread knowledge, artistic styles, and liturgical standards throughout Europe. It is almost legendary among praise for tenth-century Cluny, for instance, that Classical learning only survived in the very “darkest” periods of the “Dark Ages” through the efforts of learned monks.⁷

What is special about Martène/Durand and the Zodiaque teams is their role in a sort of renaissance of this medieval model. They were traveling, like religious pilgrims, to abbeys and churches—not with the intention to merely pay homage to saints and their relics, though they acknowledged the power of such traditions, but rather to continue the monks’ traditional task of

⁶ “*le proverbe qui dit qu’un moine hors de son monastere, semblable au poisson hors de l’eau, ne fait que palpiter, n’est pas si veritable, qu’ils ne puissent en certains cas entreprendre des voyages, même assez longs. L’antiquité nous fournit plusieurs illustres personnages de cette profession...*” Edmond Martène, *Voyage Litteraire de deux religieux benedictins de la Congregation de Saint Maur* (Paris : F. Delaulne, 1717), preface.

⁷ For references to Cluny’s role in preserving Classical learning, one can consult Lavissee, Ernest, *et al, Histoire de France depuis les origines jusqu’à la révolution*. Paris: Hachette, 1910. Vol. 2, 123-132; or many of the speeches given at the thousand-year anniversary of the abbey’s founding in 1910 found in the proceedings: Académie de Mâcon. Société des arts sciences belles-lettres et agriculture de Saône-et-Loire., *Millénaire de Cluny : congrès d’histoire et d’archéologie tenu à Cluny les 10, 11, 12 Septembre 1910*, 2 vols. (Mâcon, France: Protat Frères, 1910).

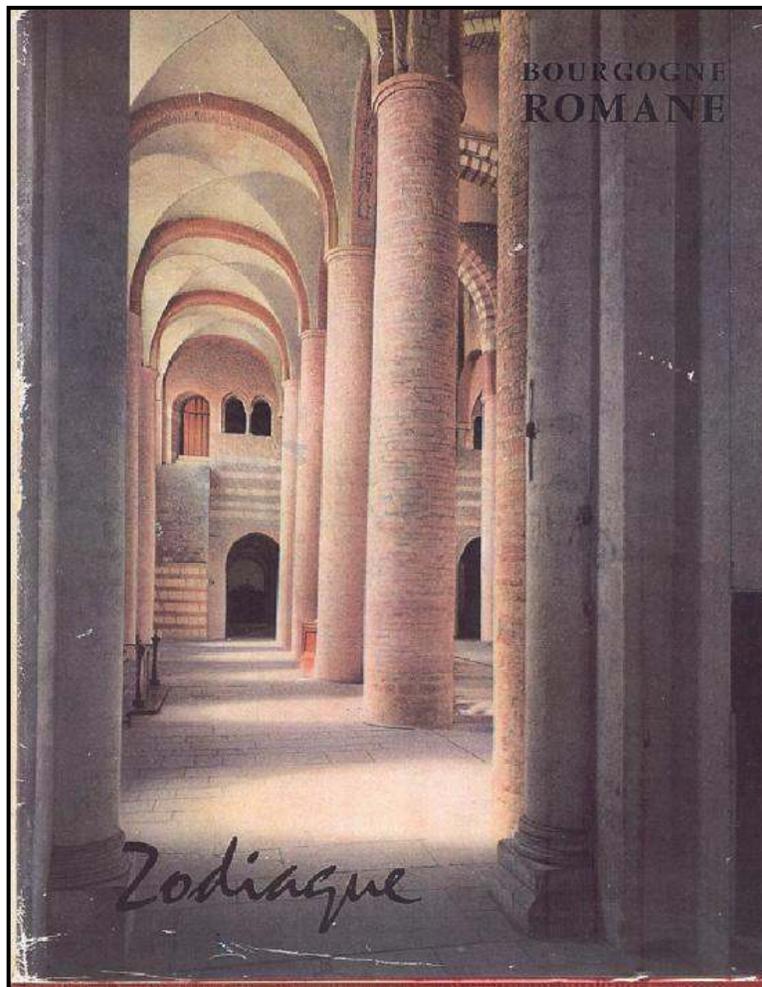


Fig. 2 Cover of *Bourgogne romane*, the first issue of the series “La Nuit des temps,” 1954 (Photo: Author)

recovering and preserving information from the past. In the case of Martène and Durand, their expedition serendipitously updated records for French-speaking ecclesiastical institutions less than a century before the Revolution would dissolve them. And the Zodiaque team, armed with modern implements of photography, set off from the isolation of their remote forest retreat to seek out and record every scrap of Romanesque art they could find in Europe. In this the latter voyagers recall another photographic project, the *Mission héliographique* of the *Monuments historiques* launched in 1851, exactly one hundred years earlier, during the first awakening to the slow demise of historical monuments in France after the Revolution. For this project a team was

also sent out to visually document the sites, both for national posterity and for review by the architects who would choose which warranted restoration. It was a venture undertaken by the secular governments of Louis-Philippe and Louis-Napoléon, however, and did not have the passionate commitment to the religious and artistic messages that Surchamp's troupe did.



Fig. 3 Frères Surchamp and Norberto photographing a church in Aragon, September 23, 1986 (Photo courtesy of *Románico*)

For Surchamp was on a sort of “mission” as well, but one seriously related to true pilgrimage. He believed fiercely in two things: that Romanesque art held a spiritual power and Christian message which, if disseminated through publications, could serve as his monastic *opus dei* much like the work of medieval monastic scriptoria, and that any viewer, religious or not, could be attracted to the “primitive” and abstract quality of Romanesque imagery if confronted

with its similarity to the popular modern aesthetic of the twentieth century.⁸ To these ends, his photography is highly charged and shaped to portray the architecture, sculpture, painting, and other arts in the sharpest “cubist” light possible.⁹ He hoped through his own travels and documentation, to take “readers” (really viewers) on armchair adventures into the world of fresh and forthright Christian imagery. That the administration of his monastery supported this enterprise, although the initial budget was begged, borrowed, and always in hock to the income from the subsequent volume, shows how well such a notion fit the ideals of La-Pierre-qui-Vire, founded in the middle of the nineteenth century as a renewal of the Benedictine life.¹⁰

Ultimately, the Zodiaque publications became a hallmark of the monastery and allowed it to increase its inhabitants as well as to build substantially larger buildings—again, not unlike its medieval antecedents. The project eventually produced over 300 books with sales of key volumes, outselling all other contemporary books on medieval art. *Bourgogne romane*, for example, sold 40,000 copies in its first edition, eventually going through nine more, totaling 140,000 copies overall.¹¹ Elsewhere I have written about how the series affected art-historical conceptions of both the style and its regional relationships, as well as how it suggested a cultural

⁸ Information about Angelico Surchamp’s conception of the Zodiaque project comes from personal interviews held with him in June 2007 and July 2008, as well as ongoing email correspondence since June 2007.

⁹ This aspect of the series will be treated more extensively in my future publications.

¹⁰ La-Pierre-qui-Vire was founded in Burgundy by Jean Baptiste Muard in 1850. The Zodiaque journal and book series venture was actually one of two experimental enterprises undertaken by Abbot Gloriès after World War II. The other was a farm, growing out of the movement for a return to the land fostered under Pétain but shared by more liberal thinkers such as Surchamp’s own teacher, Gleizes who owned and lived on a working farm in the Midi. For the latter see Peter Brooke, *Albert Gleizes: for and against the twentieth century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 259, 219.

¹¹ These figures were obtained from Angelico Surchamp and confirmed by his successor at La Pierre-qui-Vire, Mathieu Collin. They both shared copies of papers about the origins of the series. Surchamp’s was a speech given at the Académie de Mâcon on June 7, 2001 and published as “L’Aventure de Zodiaque,” *Annales de l’Académie de Mâcon*, ser. 4, vol. 13 (2001), 182 while Collin’s was a marketing flyer for the series from when he took over in 1995.

network between France and other European countries through the agency of Romanesque art.¹² I've suggested as well that these monks were essentially appropriating the Romanesque of other countries as they explored the past in the manner of modern-day French explorers. By searching out remaining Romanesque sites, recording them, and then publishing them within their series, always under French titles, those cognizant of the books could begin to consider Romanesque a French medieval development. New thematic series were regularly added and the books were popular as gifts for they quickly became attractive to collect as art objects in themselves. Certainly, as an artist, it was always one of Surchamp's goals to draw consumers into Christian messages through the beauty of the imagery, as well as its modern appeal, and this was done primarily through the black-and-white photographs which, rather ironically, are the only part of the books that was not printed at the monastery in its workshop where the covers, text pages, and color photographs were done. These photographs were nevertheless the series' primary focus and its most memorable feature, done in the process of héliogravure (called photogravure in English). This technique makes them more akin to the graphic intaglio process of aquatint than modern machine-generated photography such as rotogravure. The originals are rich and subtle monochromatic studies, suiting the linear, straightforward style of Romanesque art (**fig. 4**).

Avoiding signs of modern usage as much as possible, the photographs still record conditions after the restoration work done from the nineteenth century onwards and interior views occasionally had to include pews, wires, even vases of flowers or altar cloths or, in one exterior view on the cover of *Portugal I*, cars. Empty of people, and in this rich monochromatic medium, however, the views suggest a neutral, original, medieval condition. That is, of course, a false effect, since their original condition, environment, and usage would have been neither

¹² Forthcoming in anthology also edited by Mickey Abel and Jennifer Way for Cambridge Scholar's Publishing entitled *Common Terrain: Surveying Geography in Histories of Art, Architecture and Visual Culture*.

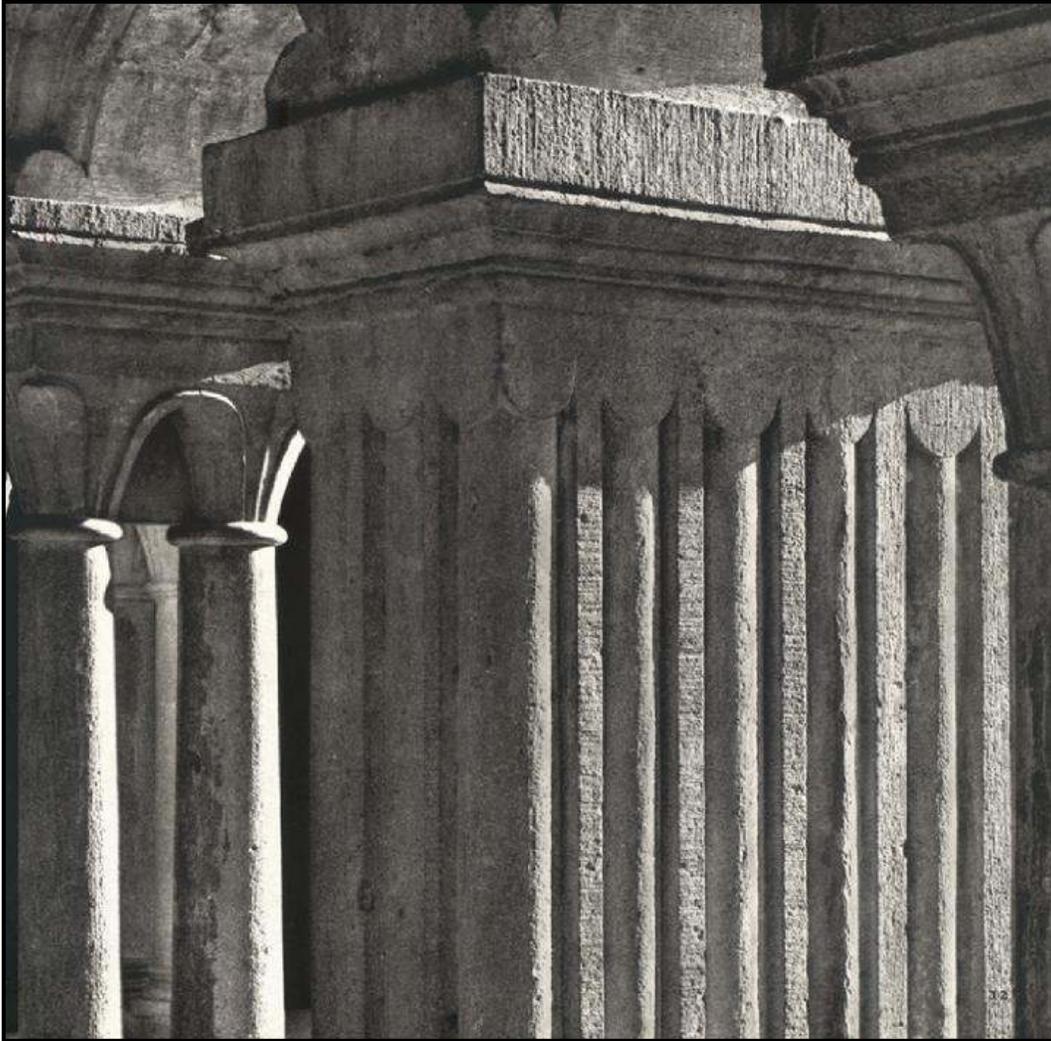


Fig. 4 Detail of a pillar in the cathedral cloister, Vaison-la-Romaine. From *Cloîtres romans de France*, Les Travaux des Mois, 1983, pl. 12 (By permission of Frère Angelico Surchamp)

empty nor neutral, but it persuasively offers a relatively blank slate for modern viewers to imagine their own idea of past usage.

Some works make the connection to pilgrimage particularly explicit. For instance three volumes from the introductory books for the *Nuits des Temps* series are entitled *Routes Romanes*. The first of the set, *La Route aux Saints* from 1982, covers sites along the four medieval pilgrimage routes to Santiago de Compostela as well as three smaller regional itineraries. It actually seems odd that it took so long for this set to appear; it would seem a natural concept for

these monks who must have often seen themselves following one path or another in their travels. On the other hand, it was a practical approach to entrepreneurship; most of the photographs are simply recycled from other volumes dedicated to each region, allowing a low cost addition of three books to the collection. Additional poetic images were included to support the travel theme; a view of the path leading into the famous ancient cemetery at Arles, for instance, underlines the “route” vision, while distance photographs of such sites as San Michele in Italy or the village of Candes from across the river Vienne in France suggest the lure of the destination; often the reader/traveler is subsequently brought up to the church porch in succeeding scenes.¹³ The text for *La Route aux Saints* was written by one of the most prolific art-historical authors for Zodiaque, Raymond Oursel from Burgundy (1921-2008). Oursel organized his commentary around the medieval *Pilgrim’s Guide to Compostela* by Aimery Picard, emphasizing that its existence proves the fact of Romanesque pilgrimage and of the routes along which Arthur Kingsley Porter later traced the major works of eleventh- and twelfth-century sculpture. He also underlined the wide variation in geographical landscape as well as the difficulties these journeys involved. Such descriptions must have resonated with the Zodiaque team, as they laboriously sought obscure and often forgotten remaining buildings, then undertook to gain entrance and obtain permission to photograph site after site.

An entire sub-series was also founded around the local and regional pilgrimage as part of the *Travaux des Mois* selections; travel guides were written by local experts for each region, narrowing the monuments into ideal itineraries for visitors to follow. In *Itineraries romans en Provence*, for example, nine routes are described with accompanying maps. At the end, the monuments are re-collated by theme, such as early Romanesque churches or houses dependent upon Cluny, so users can customize their tours.

¹³ Routes Romanes I, 1982, figs. 35, 62, 63.

The Zodiaque team went furthest afield in their travels when, after completing the volumes on Ireland in 1964, they traversed Europe to the fabled Holy Land. *Terre Sainte romane* is volume 21 of *La Nuit des Temps* (fig. 5). For Catholic monks, steeped in medieval narrative imagery, this must have been a culmination of years of dreaming exotic visual forms.

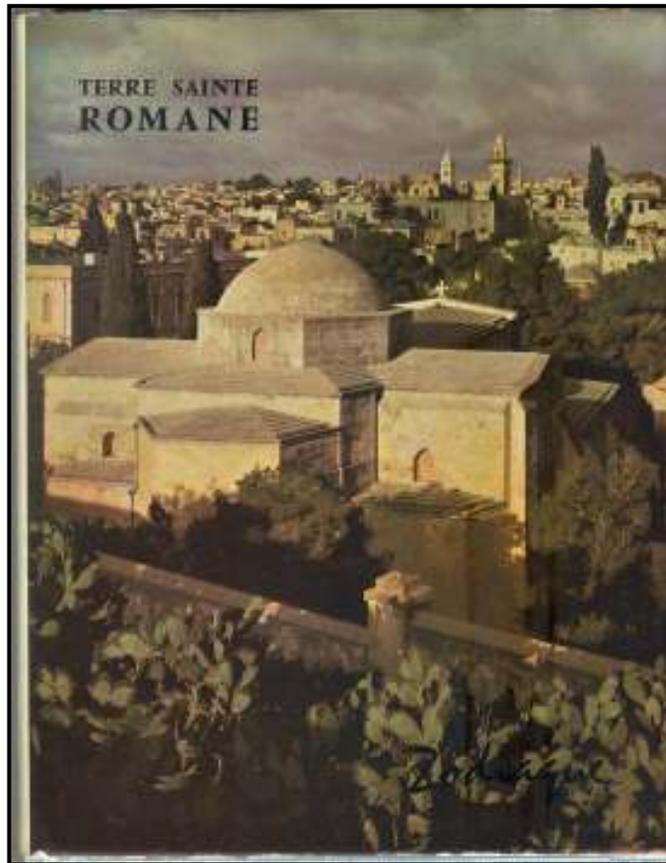


Fig. 5 Cover of *Terre Sainte Romane* from the series “La Nuit des temps,” 1964 (Photo: Author)

Romanesque art in the Holy Land is primarily the work of crusaders, members of the chivalric religious orders from the West, and, unlike the other volumes of *La Nuit des Temps*, half the monuments covered in *Terre Sainte romane* are castles. Since many of the locations continued to be active sites in later periods, finding Romanesque traces was perhaps more of an archeological endeavor on this trip than earlier ones. Surchamp was apparently fascinated by the evidence of

those who went before them; there are numerous close-up photographs which detail traces of time on the very stones.

In his introduction to this volume, Surchamp underlines the confrontation between “the extreme West and extreme East” of twelfth-century Christianity that his team found traveling between Ireland and the Holy Land. The project, however, was concerned with more than merely art and its discovery. The trip to the Holy Land demonstrates perhaps the most administrative preparation and negotiation—the long list of acknowledgements attests to the number of permissions Surchamp needed to obtain—and also reminds us of medieval pilgrimage. Fraught with discomfort and hassles like those encountered by Margery Kempe in the 1430s, the very effort was offered up to God and the saints as proof of personal discipline and piety.¹⁴ Surchamp today, at 84 years of age, constantly offers thanks for the opportunities he had in his life, but he also admits that it was a great deal of work. In this he echoes Edmond Martène, who impressed upon readers the unique experiences he encountered in his travels even as he underscored the grand scale of the effort involved. The work of both teams was initiated for religious purposes and followed their own form of pilgrimage, but proved of wider appeal and lasting value than either had imagined possible.

¹⁴ There are numerous translations of Margery Kempe’s account of her pilgrimage travels. The latest appears to be: Margery Kempe and Lynn Staley, *The book of Margery Kempe: a new translation, contexts, criticism*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 2001).