

Romanesque Churches of **Puglia**



Introduction

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The Romanesque churches of Puglia (Apulia) are a highlight of any visit to south Italy. These churches were constructed during a Crusade-inspired boom period under the auspices of the Normans who unified control of the area from 1031 to 1194. They are yours to discover.

What's in this guidebook

- **Architecture review.** Puglia's Romanesque architectural style uniquely blends elements of the Eastern and Western architectural traditions. To get at its unique qualities, this guidebook begins by providing a thorough review of the classic Italian Romanesque architectural style that prevailed through much of the mainland. It then lays out the unique characteristics that the style assumes in the churches of Puglia, as it was infused with the region's historical Byzantine (Eastern Orthodox) and Saracen (Islamic) building architectural traditions. To make things come alive, we have packed our review with high-resolution images.
- **Tour of the highlights.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we tour the most iconic Romanesque city churches in Puglia: Bari, Bitonto, Manfredonia, Molfetta, Ruvo di Puglia, Trani and Troia. For each, we reveal its most important architectural and decorative features and provide a discussion that ties it all together.
- **Castel del Monte.** And, as an extra, this guidebook includes a comprehensive profile of Holy Roman emperor Frederick II's masterful Castel del Monte, which is easily reached and makes for an exciting addition to this church tour.
- **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** To help you plan your visit, this guidebook supplies logistical advice, maps and links to online resources. Plus, we give our personal tips for getting the most from your experience while on location.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; and images are marked up with text that explains important features.

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We hope this cultural guidebook offers you fresh insights into Puglia's Romanesque churches and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

Have a great trip!

David Raezer

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Founders, Approach Guides
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The Romanesque Churches of Puglia

Version 1.1

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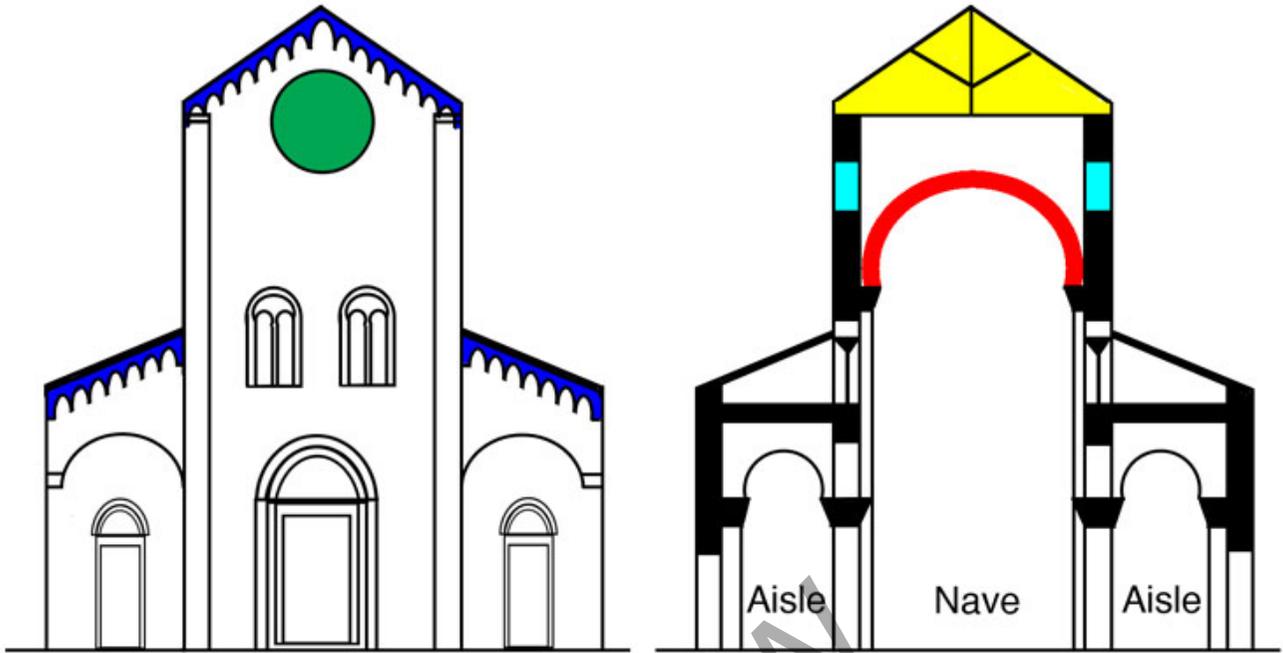


Fig. 2. Facade elevation and transverse views, typical Romanesque church. Highlights added.

- **Octagonal-shaped dome supported by squinches.** Romanesque churches' domes are typically relatively small in overall size, octagonal in plan, and employ squinches for support. Squinches, which bridge the gap from the square base to the dome itself, are designed to support smaller domes; they are simpler and less costly to implement than the Byzantine arch-pendentive solution that could support enormous domes. For a clear visual example of a squinch, see the red highlights in the dome image (**Fig. 23** in the section entitled "Molfetta : Duomo") of Molfetta's Cathedral.
- **Campaniles.** Romanesque churches often have campaniles (bell towers) that have embedded windows that grow in number on each subsequent floor as they rise.

Decoration

- **Directional lighting.** To visually emphasize the heightened spiritual importance of the altar, lighting typically intensified as it approached the apse on the east side of the church. The rose window on the southern transept and windows pierced in the walls of the apse served this purpose.
- **Exterior and interior decoration is minimal and apocalyptic in theme.** Decoration is generally **concentrated on the moldings of Romanesque churches' recessed entrance portals.** This decoration centers on the theme of the forthcoming Apocalypse and the potential for salvation under the auspices of the Church. Consistent with this agenda, there are typically foreboding, mythical animals and tortured figures positioned on the lower portions of these decorated portals; angels and evangelists inhabit the upper portions, along with Christ (or a symbol of Christ), who sits in judgment.
- **Hanging arches.** Hanging arches are decorative relief arch forms lining the cornice edges of facades and sidewalls. They are called "hanging" because they have no base support and

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The Puglian Romanesque: New Twists

Puglia's Blended Style

To best appreciate the unique features of Romanesque architecture in Puglia, it helps understand the region's history. In the Romanesque Period, there were three discrete geopolitical forces operative on the Italian peninsula:

- the German Holy Roman Emperor in North Italy;
- the Pope in Rome in Central Italy; and
- the Normans in South Italy.

The Normans in Puglia

Unlike North and Central Italy — the longstanding homes of the secular and religious heads of the Latin-speaking, Western Catholic Church, respectively — the South was far less homogenous. Since the fall of the (Western) Roman Empire in 476, Puglia's territories had been influenced significantly by two Eastern civilizations:

- **Byzantines.** Based in Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, the Byzantines spoke Greek (not Latin, the official language of the Western Catholic Church) and followed the Eastern Orthodox denomination of Christianity.
- **Saracens.** The Saracens were from North Africa and followed the Islamic faith.

The Normans vanquished the Byzantines and Saracens, unifying control of South Italy, including Sicily. This initiated a boom period for Romanesque church construction that lasted for the duration of Norman dominance, from 1031-1194.

Remember, **Norman control of Puglia coincides with the Crusades** — First Crusade (1095–1099), Second Crusade (1147–1149), and Third Crusade (1187–1192) — a series of expeditionary wars designed to retake the Holy Land from occupying Islamic forces. As Puglia was a popular launching point for sailing vessels carrying Christian fighting forces, this drove a need for bigger, more impressive churches.

Normans embrace features of earlier religious traditions

Although the Normans subscribed to the Western Catholic faith (whether for pious or geopolitical reasons is unclear), they were necessarily impacted by the region's existing traditions. Accordingly, **Puglia yielded a less conventional Romanesque church style** than prevailed in other parts of Italy. While it shares many of the standard Romanesque elements identified in the prior section, the Puglian Romanesque is **more eclectic, incorporating elements of both the Eastern Christian Byzantine and Islamic Saracen architectural traditions**. We explore each of these influences in turn.

Byzantine Influence: The Puglian Romanesque Style

The Byzantine Empire had a persistent presence in South Italy from the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 until its defeat at the hands of the Normans in the early 11th century. Puglia's historical connection to the Byzantine Empire and the Norman preference for the Eastern Orthodox design aesthetic (most evident in the Norman capital of Palermo, Sicily) introduced some uniquely Byzantine elements into what was an otherwise largely Western architectural Romanesque tradition.

Galleries

The liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church was very different from that of the Western Catholic Church. In the Western tradition, the presiding priests conducted services in the very front or apse of the church; the congregation filled the nave and aisles.

However, in the Eastern tradition, the entire area of the nave and apse was the exclusive domain of the priests; the congregation was relegated to the aisles and galleries (arcaded areas located above the aisles and below the clerestory windows). The nave had to be clear in order to facilitate the various processions that were a critical part of the Orthodox liturgy. Accordingly, in order to balance liturgical necessity and optimal viewing for the entire congregation, the Byzantines embraced a centralized church layout (often with a large central dome rising above) that incorporated wide naves and elevated seating in the galleries.

This Byzantine architectural precedent led Puglian Romanesque churches to include galleries, a feature largely absent in Romanesque churches in other parts of the mainland. They are in evidence in the cathedrals of Trani, Bari, and Bitonto. For an example of the positioning of the galleries, see the green highlights in [Fig. 3](#).

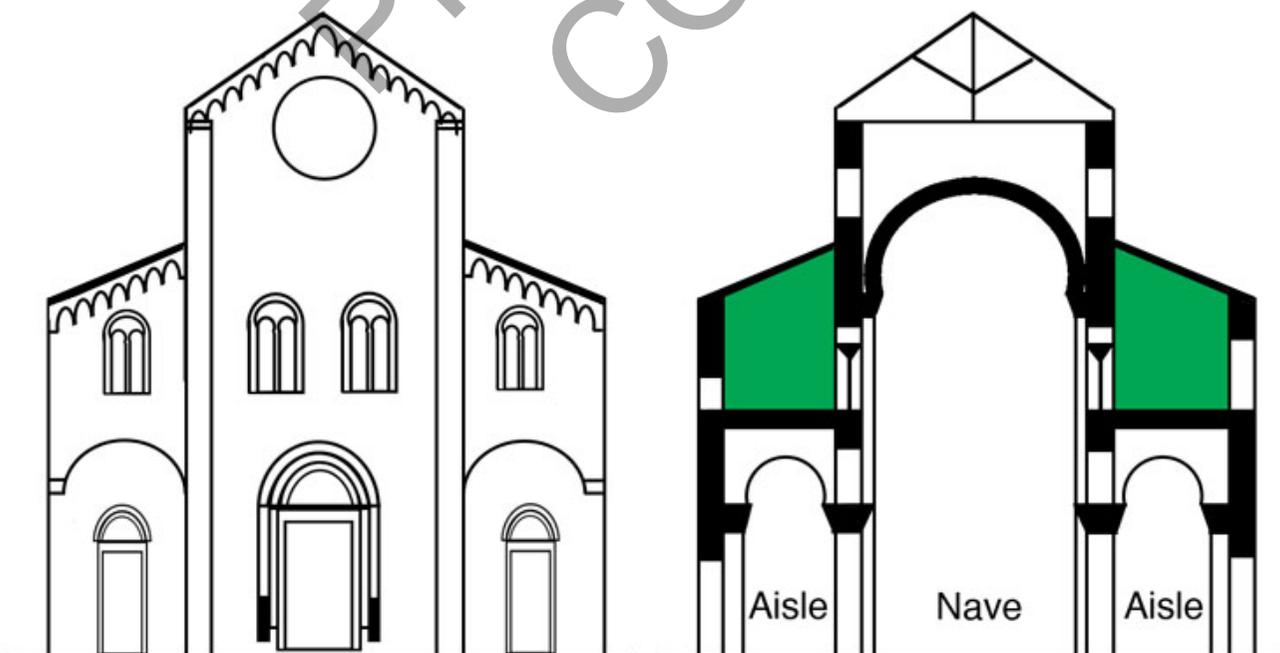


Fig. 3. Facade elevation and transverse views, Puglian Romanesque church (Duomo, Bitonto). Highlights added.

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ROMANESQUE CHURCH TOUR

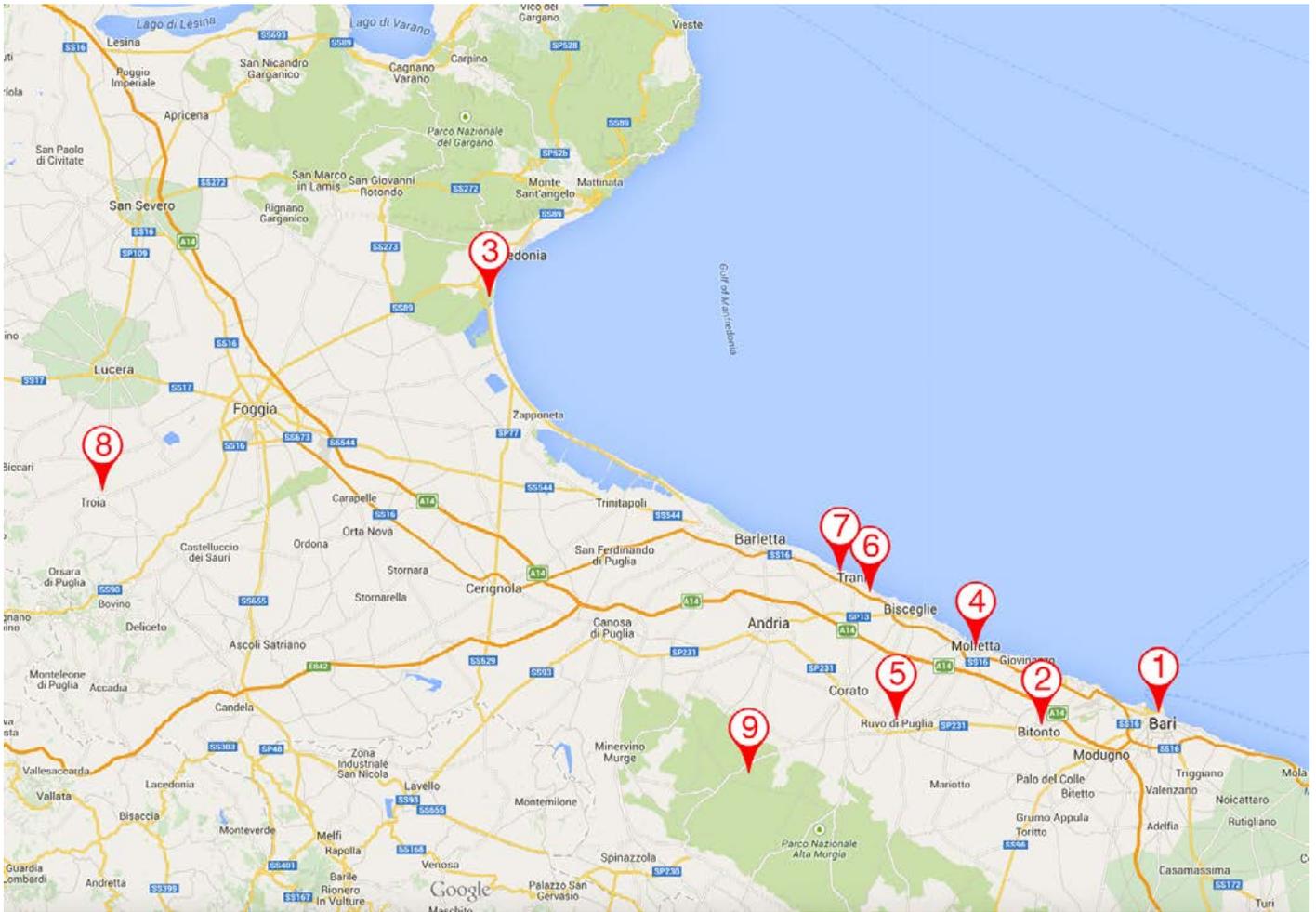
Having laid out the distinct stylistic character of the Puglian Romanesque, we now profile the region's most impressive Romanesque churches, specifically those of the following cities:

- **Bari** : Duomo
- **Bitonto** : Duomo
- **Manfredonia** : S. Maria Maggiore di Siponto
- **Molfetta** : Duomo
- **Ruvo di Puglia** : Duomo
- **Trani** : Chiesa di Ognissanti
- **Trani** : Duomo
- **Troia** : Duomo

As an extra, we have also included a detailed profile of **Castel Del Monte**. A Romanesque church it is certainly not, Castel del Monte nevertheless is a requisite stop on any tour through this area and offers a unique and rich architectural legacy as well.

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Touring Map



Romanesque church itinerary. See details in [Google Maps](#).

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Bitonto : Duomo

The City

Location and impressions

- Bitonto is located approximately 15 kilometers west of Bari.
- This is a charming, small city; it is quiet, simple, and exudes a very good feel.
- Aesthetically, the Duomo is probably **the most impressive Romanesque cathedral in Puglia.**

Duomo

- The Duomo, named Cattedrale di San Valentino e Santa Maria Assunta, was constructed from 1175 to 1200.
- It was likely **modeled in part on Bari's Duomo.**

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Fig. 11. Exterior loggia, Duomo, Bitonto.

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Fig. 15. Interior, Duomo, Bitonto. Highlights added.

Saracen-inspired elements

- **Decorative elements support structural elements.** As we see on many Romanesque church facades in Puglia, the columns (structural elements) supporting the arch over the entrance portal do not touch the ground, but rather rest on stone pedestals that project from the face of the facade (decorative elements).
- The **bas-relief tracery decoration on the moldings of the entrance portal** — consisting vine-like, circular swirls and curling leaves — is of clear Islamic inspiration.

Archaeological Area

It is also worth visiting the **Church's archaeological area** (located in its basement) for the well-rendered, eleventh century polychrome mosaic of a griffin (see Fig. 16), a mythological animal with the body of a lion and the wings and head of an eagle. The griffin was commonly used a symbol or proxy for Christ, as it has features at once both human (symbolized by the terrestrial lion) and divine (symbolized by the aerial eagle).



Fig. 16. 11th century Griffin mosaic, Bitonto Archaeological Zone.

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Trani : Duomo

The Duomo

- Trani's Duomo was built in the 11th-13th centuries; construction began in 1099. The current Church was built over the partial foundations of an earlier 5th century Byzantine church (Santa Maria della Scala), which in turn, had been built over an even earlier 4th-5th century church (Crypt of San Leucio).
- As one of the **oldest and largest of Puglia's Romanesque churches**, the Trani Cathedral served as a model and inspiration for subsequent churches in the region.

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Fig. 34. Facade, Duomo, Trani.

Classic Romanesque elements

The enormous cathedral exhibits many of the **classic elements of the Romanesque**:

- **An impressive, early 13th century campanile.** The Church exhibits a **60-meter high, square campanile**, topped by an octagonal spire. As was typical for Romanesque bell towers, the number of windows increases with each successive floor. Rather than rise from the ground, the tower is supported on a grand, pointed arch that spans between the Church and

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- **“Man, The Drinker”** The uncovering of an ancient tomb, the Midas Tumulus, in central Turkey at the ancient site of Gordion, sparks Patrick McGovern’s exploration of the origins of wine. *By Trey Popp.*
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- **The Legend of Old Befana** Just for kids! Delightful Italian Christmas legend about a busy old woman and her search for the Child King. *By Tomie dePaola.*

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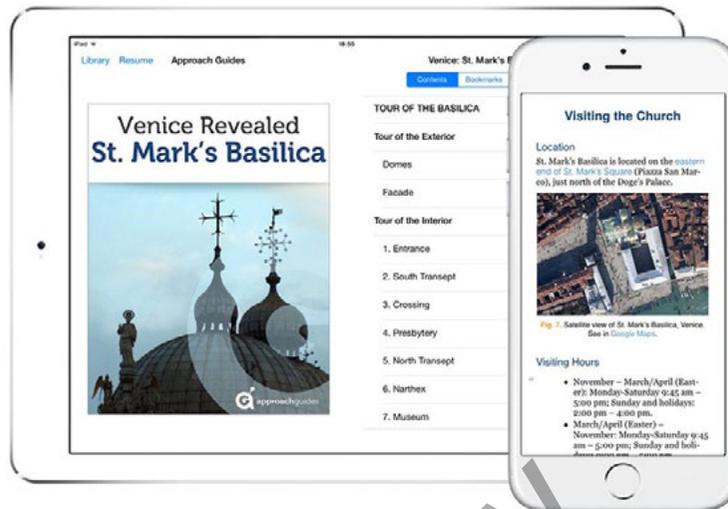
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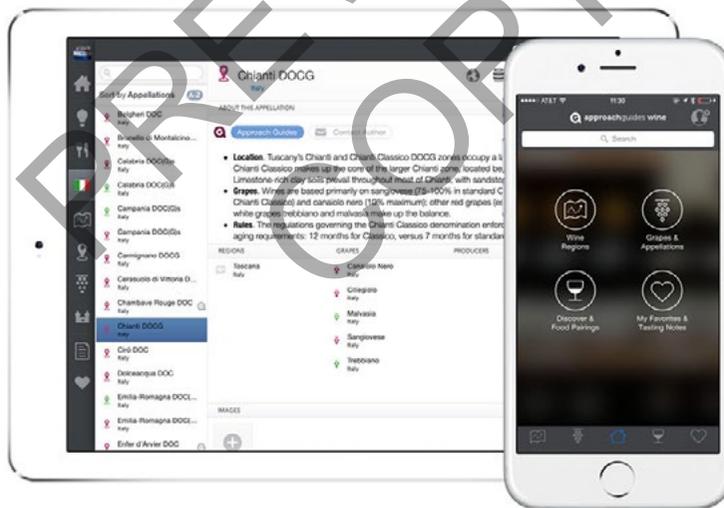
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