

The Sublime Wonders of Gothic Architecture

Background Notes

Dr Sally Dormer – 2 October 2024



Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod.1459,
late 15th century, fol.164, construction of Gothic
churches

“Gothic”, a term coined in the 17th century to describe Western European medieval architecture between c. 1200 and c. 1500, has persisted into the present day. It conjures soaring spires, pointed arches, vertiginous vaults, and streams of coloured light filtered through multiple expansive windows. The startling difference between 11th and 12th century Romanesque churches and their successors led to the latter being referred to as the “New Style” (*Novum opus*), a style traditionally said to have emerged c.1140-1144, at St Denis, the Benedictine abbey to the north of Paris, where the French kings were buried. (Fig. 1) The pointed arch and rib vault, two of the main characteristics of the “New Style” had been employed in Western Europe at an earlier date, but it was at St Denis, under the patronage of Abbot Suger (d. 1151), and his anonymous master mason, that the structural potential of combining these two elements was, it seems, first fully understood in the reconstructed choir. Thereafter, an enthusiasm for the new aesthetic caught on, and spread rapidly, communicated by various means, throughout France, and then further afield, to England, Germany and the Czech Republic (both part of the Holy Roman Empire), and the Christian Kingdoms of Spain. Abbeys, cathedrals (this was a period of rapid economic growth and concomitant urbanization) and a myriad of humble parish churches were built, or rebuilt, in the popular style. Native building traditions persisted in some areas, leading to regional variations in what became an international style. In England, linear decoration dominated, in the Empire, a preference for colossal scale, and in the Italian peninsula, traditions reaching back to the 4th century were retained into the late 14th century.

Inspired by the WAHG lecture series title, three aspects of Gothic architecture justifiably described by the adjectives “sublime” and “wondrous” will be considered: aesthetic beauty; technical virtuosity; and immaterial symbolism.



Figure 1. Paris, St Denis, West front and interior of choir looking east, c. 1140 -1144

1. Aesthetic beauty

The lofty height, structural elegance and bountiful levels of interior light in Gothic churches rarely fail to impress modern viewers, and medieval audiences were equally appreciative; contemporary chroniclers praised the beauty of the “New Style”. A visual comparison of two fine medieval churches, each important in their own way, the Benedictine abbey of Sainte Foi, Conques (Aveyron), constructed in the mid-11th century, and the urban, collegiate, St Urbain, Troyes (Champagne), built two centuries later in the second half of the 13th century, helps to account for such a reaction.

Sainte Foi is solid and monumental, comprised of a great deal more wall than window and therefore relatively dimly lit. (Fig. 2) St Urbain is comprised of far more window than wall and the interior is bathed in light from substantial windows subdivided by slender tracery patterns. (Fig. 3) Patrons, who paid for, and masons, who designed and constructed, Early Gothic, High Gothic, Rayonnant and Flamboyant buildings in France and Early English, Decorated and

Perpendicular buildings in England (all relatively modern terms devised by architectural historians to chart the evolution of Gothic style from 12th to the 15th centuries), sought to refine the beauty of their expensive creations by ever more daring structural economy, enhanced levels of light and refined decoration.



Figure 2. Sainte Foi, Conques (Aveyron), c. 1050, looking east



Figure 3. St Urbain, Troyes, (Champagne), 1250-1300, looking east

2. Technical virtuosity

The design of pointed arches, rib vaults and flying buttresses, the three main structural components of northern Gothic architecture, demanded considerable technical expertise, yet relatively little is known about the master masons responsible for their construction. By the mid-13th century their names occur in building accounts and chronicles; men like Henry of Reins who worked for Henry III at Westminster Abbey in the mid-13th century. Some masons travelled considerable distances to work on architectural projects, and they were held in high regard occasionally commemorated in tomb monuments that celebrated their professional skills. They possessed no formal academic training but thanks to a thorough grasp of geometry, passed on by educated ecclesiastical patrons (12th-

century cathedral schools, such as those in Paris, Chartres and Laon, and universities in Oxford, Paris and Bologna, which evolved from the early 13th century onwards, encouraged a knowledge of texts such as Euclid's *Elements*), plus practical experience gained by training on the job, they created increasingly audacious, lofty, thin-walled structures lit by vast expanses of fenestration. Amiens Cathedral's nave vault, c. 1220, is 42 meters high (almost 138 feet); the choir vault at Beauvais Cathedral, c. 1260, an astonishing 48.5m (159 feet)! Impressive Gothic churches survive in large numbers to provide eloquent testimony of their designers' competence, accuracy and supreme technical confidence. (Fig. 4)

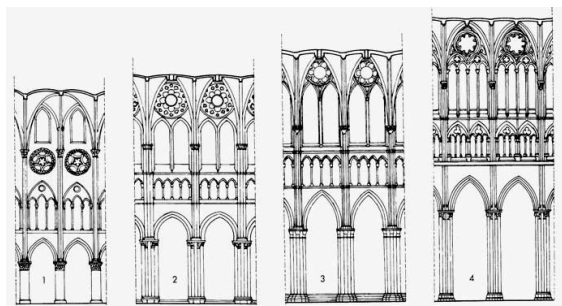


Figure 4. Comparison of nave elevations in same scale. 1)Notre-Dame, Paris; 2)Chartres Cathedral; 3)Reims Cathedral; 4)Amiens Cathedral (after Grodecki)

Masons left behind scant evidence of how they worked, but scrutiny of their buildings combined with presentation drawings, tracing floors and portfolios of architectural sketches, such as those executed c. 1225-1235 by Villard de Honnecourt, a French master mason working in the Ile de France, provide fascinating insights into working methods.(Fig. 5)

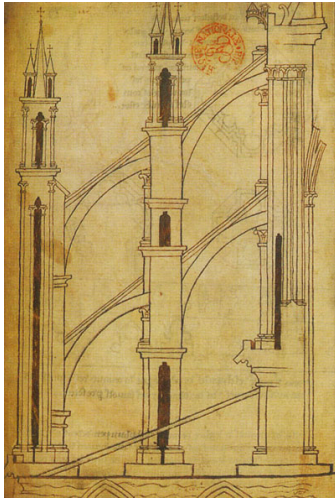


Figure 5. Paris, BN, ms fr 19093, Portfolio of Villard de Honnecourt, c.1225 -1235, drawing of flying buttresses

3.Immaterial symbolism

Texts such as *De Administratione* and *De Consecratione*, composed by Abbot Suger during his building work at St Denis, indicate that Gothic churches were intended to be more than triumphs of man-made technical skill and aesthetic beauty; they were designed to glorify God and symbolize complex spiritual ideas. Inspired by the work of the Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite (5th century), an author misunderstood as St Denis (*Dionysius*, in Latin), the 2nd-century Bishop of Paris, Suger waxed lyrically about the metaphysical qualities of light, differentiating “material” light, i.e. natural sun or moon light, or artificial candle-light, from “immaterial” light, i.e. light as a symbol of Christ, the Light of the World, as he describes himself in the Gospels. The interiors of Gothic churches filled with reflected coloured light transmitted through extensive schemes of window glass, conjured the living presence of Christ in the holy space. Beyond the emphasis on light, the entire fabric of the Gothic church was understood as an earthly representation of the “Heavenly Jerusalem”, the city of heaven described by St John in

Revelation, the final book of the New Testament. Pointed arches, streamlined elevations and lofty vaults encouraged the viewer to look up and be transported towards the heavenly realm, where God and his saints reigned in glory. Statues of the saints clustered around the entrance portals of Gothic churches welcomed the faithful into resplendent interiors bathed in colour and light and reminded the viewer of the congregation of saints in heaven; while coloured glass windows recalled John's description of heaven's walls set with chunks of translucent gemstones. Gothic churches represented heaven, on earth.



Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms fr. 247, fol. 163,
Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, mid-15th century,
Solomon building the Temple of Jerusalem

Further Reading:

- Coldstream N. Masons and Sculptors, Medieval Craftsmen Series (British Museum Press: 1991)
- Coldstream, N. Medieval Architecture (Oxford University Press: 2002)
- Frankl, P. Gothic Architecture (Pelican: Boston, 1962; revised by Paul Crossley: Yale: New Haven & London, 2000)
- Panofsky, E. Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis (2nd edition: Princeton, 1979)

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