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Claremont Mckenna College

Mysteries of the Gothic

Submitted to
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and
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By
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Reverberating off the thick columns of the Naples Cathedral in Southern Italy is the unmistakable sound of small, clumsy feet running across stone. The building is magical, and magnifies the young girl's sounds to four times her size. Entranced by the patterned ceiling, she twirls and tumbles, and while lying on the cool floor, pauses a moment to gaze at the heavens. She shuffles her small body so that her eyes are directly below a vault. The rhythmic sound of slow steps and gentle murmurs are permeated with sharp creaks from ancient wooden pews. The air smells smoky-sweet. The young girl wonders, how many others have peacefully admired this room, as she is doing? How long have candles and gifts been left under these pictures? The multitudes of shadowed patterns continue past her sight. Time slips away.

My parents love to travel. My grandparents loved to travel. When I was young and everyone was fairly spry, Europe was the chosen destination for our little family to convene. While my father and his father enjoyed hiking to zip-line courses, kayaking into dangerous ocean caves, and otherwise finding what extreme explorations of the flora they could access with a local guide, my grandmother and mother relished locating the oldest sectors of the city and ambulating down the streets while reciting history from their chosen guidebook. Of course, the common interest here was immersion, and enjoying each other's company. The rest and conversation, in a cobbled courtyard long after dusk, with a full belly and a glass of wine or cappuccino in hand, was the time I now know was most savored. I learned only recently upon announcing my chosen topic for this thesis that in college my grandmother studied medieval history, specifically the French Gothic cathedral. I knew she spoke French and smoked cigarettes before my aunt was born, but I had no idea that the many cathedrals she marched us into inspired her so profoundly. We stayed so long in Notre-Dame in Paris that I fell asleep on a pew, only to wake up to her sitting next to me, quietly staring upwards with tears in her eyes (Fig. 1).

As hypothesized by psychologists, architects, and theological thinkers from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, there are different experiences of the divine that an individual encounters when entering a cathedral. Upon stepping through the narthex, the marvel of engineering can be almost jarring as the eye is drawn up from the columns framing the space, past stacked arcades to the impossibly high vaults. Bread, wine, and fabric are exchanged in cathedral fairs, the social transactions that occurred over eight hundred years ago permanently represented in cathedral windows. One may also partake or witness a mass where bread and wine are offered as a communion, both social and spiritual, that intimates the possibility of transcendence. Iconographic images of the divine natural and supernatural worlds meld into the walls, interacting and playing with our unconscious minds. The enquiring visitor is enchanted by the space, as a quiet falls across their mind, and there is nothing pressing to do but experience.

The tragic burning of the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris on April 15, 2019 has served to increase public interest in Gothic architecture. In this blazing structural fire the upper walls were severely damaged while the wooden roof and spire collapsed and were completely destroyed. In the ensuing conversations of rebuilding and restoration, the complex history of the church was raised and had to be considered in order to move forward. With access to more sophisticated building materials, new questions arose. Should twenty-first century engineers and architects modernize Notre-Dame? What were aspects of the original construction, and were the relatively recent additions based on different visions of the medieval high Gothic style? Should renovations be made to fit the essence of Notre-Dame buildings in the twelfth century, the nineteenth century, or the present day? By examining the histories of the Notre-Dame and Chartres cathedrals, I will consider three academic schools of thought regarding the high Gothic Cathedrals: the balanced and rational feat of engineering, the communal and social rituals that

bond humans to this space, and the iconographic manifestation of the supernatural. Functionalist engineering paradoxically lays at the heart of these cathedrals' capacity to open the human consciousness to the sacred by using recurrent symbolic patterns from nature, music and mathematics to create divine ratios that transport us. Integrated into these larger architectural designs the repeating visual patterns exalting both biblical and supernatural icons further bridges and opens the worlds of the sacred and the mystical to congregations past and present. And finally, the divinely sanctioned code imposed by the church, and backed by the king's court in 1193, to lift taxation within the cloisters for merchants, tradesmen and serfs enhanced the power of the divine in daily secular life. These three approaches reveal different ways that one is able to experience these sacred spaces and allow us to imagine how the universe was known to humans in the Middle Ages.

The Feat Of Engineering

In discussions of the rebuilding of the Notre-Dame, a primary concern was what material should be used to replace the destroyed segments, and the resulting implications of possibly modernizing the cathedral. The eight hundred year old trees that composed the support beams hidden within the roof could not be replaced, but would replicating them with a man-made material alter the purpose and essence of the space? While employing a less flammable material like modeled thermoplastics would ensure durability and protection from another fire, would the “historic imagination” of the building be compromised¹? Living materials of such an ancient nature were always considered a component of the wonderful marvel of this space, and using natural materials certainly served to reinforce the cathedral's connection between humans and the

¹ Mark A. Hewitt, *The Restoration Argument: Respecting Viollet-Le-Duc at Notre-Dame*, 2019.

natural divine. On the other hand, from a rationalist perspective, the Gothic cathedral was and is a feat of engineering, a demonstration of man's ingenuity to employ and manipulate God's gifts. Could thermoplastics be just another variant of this divine connection? It seemed impossible to say what intention was best for this treasured building.

The question "to improve, or not to improve" the Notre-Dame is an issue that has been raised before. During the French revolution in 1789, Notre-Dame was nearly desecrated by a public furious at the vast power structure of the church and royal nobility; Notre-Dame stood as a symbol for both. The new state abolished Catholicism, bringing about the looting of the art and religious items from cathedrals all over France and leaving Notre-Dame in disrepair. The 1830 "People's Revolution" saw a transition of power from monarchical rule to popular sovereignty, and conflicting ideas of what defined French nationalism were being hotly disputed². Debates on what aesthetics defined the new republic versus the fallen crown thrust these clashing ideas surrounding antiquity, the classical, and the renaissance into the public gaze. The publishing of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* by Victor Hugo in 1831 further piqued interest in romanticism and the Gothic (Fig. 2). The unrequited love of Quasimodo for beautiful Esméralda mimics the longing that the expert medievalist restorer, Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, had for the architecture of the building on which the book was based. However, unlike many Neoclassical and Gothic revivalists, Viollet-le-Duc's interest did not stem from a sentiment to return to antiquity. He was, in fact, an outspoken critic of the Neoclassical, calling the architecture "unintelligent", "lazy", and "unimaginative". The "Age of Enlightenment," in his eyes, did not necessitate a return to an ancient aesthetic, rather that the architecture and its function should reflect the spirit of this new era.

² Jeremy D. Popkin, *A History of Modern France*, 2020, 94.

Viollet-le-Duc was a major figure in nineteenth century Gothic revivalism, and is often considered the first modernist architect, due to his doctrine on the unity of form to function. He followed a rational fundamentalism, wherein the fabricated parts of society each had a particular utility, so the organization and body of each part perfectly aligned with the due process of said utility. Reflecting this organization of society, he believed that materials should be used “honestly”, and the outward appearance of a building should reflect the rational construction behind it. In his 1863 publication *Entretiens sur l'architecture* (Discourses on Architecture), Viollet-le-Duc praised the Greek temple for its rational representation of its construction, in operating as an open and public place of worship³. Viollet-Le-Duc's interest in revitalizing the Gothic movement was due to his belief in the structural ingenuity of Gothic cathedrals. He saw their construction as a quest to discover “practical solutions to structural problems”, and the building’s form was truly beautifully designed to express the function of the space. In his eyes, the rib of the vaults functionally supported the structure and aesthetically balanced the space in perfect geometric terms (Fig. 3). In this way, Viollet-le-Duc’s Gothic reinterpretation was a rationalistic, modern design, and in the years to come Notre-Dame cathedral became the jewel of the capital city and the embodiment of the contemporary national style that is part of French heritage today⁴.

Just past the sesquicentennial of the completion of Viollet-le-Duc’s renovations, surprising discoveries emerged from the ashes of Notre-Dame. The French people that witnessed its second burning in 2019 had forgotten the original cathedral and could no longer distinguish between the original medieval features of the building, and the new additions completed during

³ Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, *Discourses on Architecture*, 1875, 336.

⁴ Viollet-le-Duc, *Discourses on Architecture*, 242.

the nineteenth century Gothic Revival. Exploring these distinctions offers a new view of Viollet-le-Duc's reconstruction that bridges new perspectives of the High Gothic.

Viollet-le-Duc had a particular view on what was permitted during restoration: "To restore a building is not to preserve it, to repair, or rebuild it; it is to reinstate it in a condition of completeness which could never have existed at any given time"⁵. Ultimately, he planned to "improve" on these structures in the spirit he believed the original architects would possess. He was permitted to restore Notre-Dame in 1834, and over a period of twenty years he renovated and made palpable additions to the building: the iconic spire, lead gutters and leaders, and gargoyle scuppers were nineteenth century additions carved from Viollet-le-Duc's functionalist thinking and yet also a vision of the medieval period (Fig. 4). His marriage of form to function through geometric principles was supplemented by a vision of the medieval as an ethereal and mystical time, wherein infinity was more pervasive and potent. Containing no structural necessity, the spouts simply redirected falling rain in controlled cascades to descend the one hundred feet to the courtyard below. The 225 foot spire, reaching to the heavens, demarcated Notre-Dame's silhouette from the surrounding skyline connecting Parisians to a sense of infinity⁶. His ideas of the Gothic included a natural beauty, and the cathedral he rebuilt exercises an ingenious level of control over its surroundings.

Despite appearing secular, architectural functionalism is closely associated with a vision of the sacred. In his text *Discourses on Architecture*, Viollet-le-Duc described architecture as a "form given to ideas"; the design of the building must embody the spirit in which it was created⁷. Therefore a religious edifice must invite divinity into the space to be received by the

⁵ Olimpia Lira, *Armería en Park Avenue, por Herzog & De Meuron*, 2014. From *Discourses on Architecture*.

⁶ *The Majestic Layout of Notre-Dame, Friends of Notre Dame De Paris*, 2023.

⁷ Viollet-le-Duc, *Discourses on Architecture*, 338.

congregation. The argument stands on a philosophic conundrum - *is* a space sacred by simply existing, or does it *become* sacred through the experiences that it generates. I believe that some places have the ability to act on and even transform a person. A forest path, an empty baseball field, a crepuscular ray, or perhaps a very tall and symmetrical cathedral. If that individual allows their mind to quiet and opens their senses to the space, they add to the sacred quality of that space. Rituals, of course, aid in this concentration of opening to the divine: Christian prayer, Buddhist meditation, the dancing whirl of the Dervish Sufi, Wiccan apothecary practices - all are enacted to connect with a higher power. Viollet-le-Duc, as a student of architecture, aligned with God through mathematical composition. In the functionalist school of thought, man's reasonability is associated with divine truth, thus sacred architecture is made so based on perfectly balanced material composition. The separate forms of a Gothic structure: the flying buttresses, the ribbed vaults, even the support foundations, are interconnected parts of a rationally perfect whole. This mathematically perfect, marvelous feat of engineering is the manifestation of human ingenuity, the functionalist embodiment of divine truth on the terrestrial plane.

The ideas of the aesthetics of structure, and the use of windows and architecture to create iconography is prevalent in other areas of study surrounding the Gothic. The text *De musica* by Saint Augustine offers the first guide to music theory by comparing elevated musical knowledge to the science of mathematics. Without the science of "good modulation", the practical art of music is as simple as the instinct in which a bird sings⁸. The four acoustic syllables echo the metaphysical perfection of Pythagorean mathematics. The aesthetic values of Gothic style are essentially linear and defined in geometric terms, they too follow this cosmologically harmonic

⁸ Otto Georg Von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order*, 1988, 21.

formula. The ribbed vaults express in divine order the ornamentation and framework of the building they support. The geometric functionalism that Viollet-le-Duc was so taken by also achieves a new aesthetic: geometric “graphism” that values the dignity of numbers. Iconographic images become secondary to the pattern produced by the structure of the building, and images are kept to the walls to further define the central architecture. The windows that contain these images flood the space with light, which, in turn, interact with the intersecting lines that support the cathedral. The Gothic cathedral was developed according to geometric principles, but even more than its strict design was the *spirit* of geometry.

Gothic design is an homage to the art of geometry, and blueprints of the buildings often did not have units of measurement attached to them (Fig. 5). Mathematics was not an intuitive science; instead of units of measurement, the ground plan would be derived from a single proportion. This geometric application was named *ad quadratum* by medieval architects. Beginning with a polygon, usually a square or triangle, the proportions were derived from the relation of the dimensions to each other that increase or decrease in a geometric progression. These proportions attained by a single square are considered to be “according to true measure”, and every width of a wall or buttress was in accordance with this principle. Geometrically and spiritually intact buildings with these proportions go beyond a simple reference to an actual embodiment of divine truth. The principle of “according to true measure” is the sacred measurement that is so often found in God’s creations, in nature. During the twelfth century, there was a shift from a mystical to a rational approach to divine truth; the Gothic applied the laws of true measure and in doing so embodied the vision of heaven and earth.

Access to God from the terrestrial plane was not rationally achievable by the disciplines of math and science alone. In the beginning of the Gothic period, from the twelfth to thirteenth

centuries, there was a perception of geometric principle as artistic rather than practical. During the heated 1391 conference regarding construction of the Milan cathedral, French expert Jean Mignot argued that geometry was the marriage of art and science, and for the time, art and science were not separate disciplines, rather they were different ways of approaching a problem, a means to an end⁹. Art was the practical knowledge gained from experience, while science was the ability to account for the architectural integrity of a structure through rationally geometric means. A mason and an architect must both know the properties of stone, but the architect must master the mathematical science of construction using the stone. Without art, science is nothing¹⁰.

Near the end of the twelfth century, the theological school of Chartres understood God to be the master builder of the universe; the architect of a sprawling “natural palace” created in a symphonic orchestra of perfect proportion and stability. A famous representation within a Moralized Bible made for French nobility in the thirteenth century illustrates Proverbs 8:27: “When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass [circle] upon the face of the depth” (Fig. 6)¹¹. These academic writings from Chartres were dispersed just as the first Gothic cathedrals were being constructed, and it is evident that architects were profoundly influenced by this concept. By perfecting the terrestrial disciplines of art and science, architects could access the composition of the ‘divine palace’. Sound and good creations of man were considered art, and all art was made in the image of nature. Nature is constructed according to the laws of the universe and “according to true measure”; in order to be true, art must follow these natural laws. These perfect, rational proportions necessary for stability and beauty are only determined

⁹ Von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 19.

¹⁰ James S. Ackerman, *Distance points: Essays in Theory and Renaissance Art and Architecture*, Cambridge, 1991, 237.

¹¹ Von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 35.

through geometry. In order for a creation to be considered ‘divine’, it must be created rationally by applying geometric principles and abiding by the laws of nature.

The tool used to compose perfect geometry and the symbol of rationality in so many Renaissance paintings was the compass. The compass is more than a symbol, it imitates God’s work and through it heaven is brought to earth, and the comprehensive whole of the church is created. Similarly, the church is not a “symbol” of the universe, it is a “model” created by the laws of the universe. A new experience of God was found through patterns in nature, and access to this new religious experience required a new vehicle of transportation, a complex liturgical space that wove together God’s patterns.

The Gothic cathedral has been compared to a cosmic symphony that, like a choir, has harmonic and true measure. Suger, a French abbot born in 1081, built the first truly Gothic building in 1135, the Basilica of Saint Denis¹². The remodeled eastern end was constructed using *ad quadratum*, and Suger described it as the visual equivalent to music, as the ratios correspond to musical proportions (Fig. 7). The distance of the arched overhang between the columns in the crypt is shallower by exactly half that of the arches in the upper chapel, despite the columns being equally spaced. The measurements of the church are the same ratios used in composing symphonies; the transept is located in the ratio of the fifth (2:3) along the length of the church, the length and width of the transept are in the octave ratio (1:2), the ratio of the choir contains the fourth (3:4) (Fig. 8)¹³. Ratios “according to true measure” that are utilized in song are present in the cathedral, further denoting the space as divinely sanctioned. As the congregation crosses into the Gothic space it is designed to shift or transform their consciousness into the sublime.

¹² Von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 92.

¹³ Von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 132.

Engaging sound through the use of choirs whose music has the same structure as the cathedral furthers this transformation and the manifestation of divine truth.

So as not to upset the symmetry of the visual and auditory space, figurative statues must be integrated into the architecture of the Gothic cathedral. Statues of biblical and supernatural figures are partially merged into the frame of the central façade. The golden section, derived from the geometry of nature, was applied to the open façades that were then grafted with images to represent and exalt the sacred and the mystical. This application, to be discussed in depth later, represents the metaphysical and cosmological views of the time that culminated into a psychological dissonance that benefited oligarchical structures.

Gothic cathedrals, built according to the laws of the universe and thereby according to the “laws of true measure”, perfected a sense of rational proportionality creating both beauty and stability through geometry. The Gothic cathedral awes and transports; and when subject to these laws of rationality transcend the spheres of the senses, and opens a window to the divine.

Liturgical Power Over the Political Sphere

Social and political life of the high Gothic was similarly dictated by ecclesiastical laws of rationality, and is reflected in the “Good Samaritan” trade windows of the Chartres Cathedral. Despite common belief, the images are more than an example of the responsibilities Christians must uphold in daily feudal life. The political tension between the Chartres cathedral chapter and the court informed the depiction of merchants, nobles, and clergymen within the stained glass windows (Fig. 10)¹⁴. This offers a new look at the Gothic cathedral as not just being a house of worship, but also grounds for 12th-13th century socio-political art. Depicted in the windows are

¹⁴ Jane Welch Williams, *Bread, Wine & Money: The Windows of the Trades at Chartres Cathedral*, 1993, 19.

eight different tradesmen conducting their work in maintenance of the church. The painted glass windows reflect judicial laws created by the cathedral chapter that guided the activities within the church and the surrounding cloisters. Sculptures and windows convey both the religious ideology and the everyday reality of social relationships during its construction. The highly venerated positionality of the tradesmen within the painted windows documents the prevailing Christian values of honesty, hard work and community despite political and economic tensions within Chartres.

Political and economic power of the Chartres nobility became heavily contested in 930, when the French king gifted the region to a new count, and the specific divisions of power were not specified. The bishop, subsequently, lost religious and secular power to the new count and to the ecclesiastical chapter. Division within the clerics arose when the chapter gained new rights over the bishop, and when a new bishop was sworn in, the oaths he was required to give limited his power by swearing to honor the count's authority, respect the chapter's customs, and to support the chapter in business against the count¹⁵. As the bridge between the ecclesiastic and local court, the bishop's oaths reflected fears of disloyalty to the chapter's prerogatives that could weaken their economic privileges and social power¹⁶. Part of the Bishop's job was to ensure the churches conservation, and when the cathedral was destroyed by fire in 1020, Bishop Fulbert built a new cathedral that expanded upon the previous foundations to accommodate more pilgrims (Fig. 9)¹⁷. The original altar associated with the priests that occupied a Pre-Christian Chartres were sealed in a crypt below the new main altar¹⁸.

¹⁵ Jane Welch Williams, *Bread, Wine & Money*, 20.

¹⁶ Jane Welch Williams, *Bread, Wine & Money*, 21.

¹⁷ Robert Branner, *Chartres cathedral: Illustrations, Introductory Essay, Documents, Analysis, Criticism*, 1969, 72.

¹⁸ Cecil Headlam, *The Story of Chartres*, 1902, 161.

In 1194, Fulbert's church burned and construction on the Chartres Cathedral began immediately on its foundations¹⁹. Jurisdiction of the church and cloisters was highly contested within the Chartres nobility. Widowed countesses left economically destitute from their husbands' fateful crusades grappled for economic rights²⁰. Without their husband's support, they would have to rely on the taxes leveled on tradesmen and merchants within Chartres. The largest source of contention was the exception from taxes of the cathedral cloister within the count's jurisdiction. The cloister held the living spaces for the clergy and their serfs, as well as the grounds for the cathedral fairs. Any trading conducted within the private area was exempt from sales taxes, allowing merchants and artists to make more of a profit. Both merchants and members of the chapter, therefore, had economic incentive to do business within the church grounds. Enjoying the convenient cheap labor, clergymen began inviting and hiring town tradesmen into the cloister to live with and serve them²¹. Prior to this, individual clergy members would typically hire a personal guard or baker, but to have an entire entourage of artists and merchants living and working in the same space was more uncommon. By maintaining power over the area within the cloisters, the tradesmen living within the cloisters were now protected by the church. The products bought by the chapter, including the labor to build and maintain the cathedral, were completed outside the count-accredited sales tax.

Count ministers tried to continue taxing the tradesmen living in the cloisters, and went so far as to jail or execute them. The dispute was brought to the king's court in 1193, one year before the building of the cathedral, and it was ruled that the chapter would maintain their jurisdiction within the cloisters. The pope was resolute in his decision that divine code was

¹⁹ Margot Elsbeth Fassler, *The Virgin of Chartres: Making History through Liturgy and the Arts*, 2010, 341.

²⁰ Cecil Headlam, *Story of Chartres*, 58.

²¹ Jane Welch Williams, *Bread, Wine & Money*, 22.

lawfully protected within church grounds and therefore, the townspeople may cross over and enjoy the same liberties that the canons received. During cathedral fairs, merchants were permitted to buy and sell wheat, wine and cloth without paying sales tax. Fifty-two serfs legally lived and worked in the Chartres cloister. Some of their occupations were stated as being previous officers of nobles, potters, a barrel-maker, a fuller, a money-changer, a wood-worker, a shield-maker, and an iron-worker. These trades are represented in the stained “trade windows” within the cathedral along with wine merchants, fabric weavers and fabric merchants, a butcher, baker, and the masons and sculptors (Fig. 11 and 12).

The placement of serfs within the painted windows documents the victory of religious power over the secular state which allowed the church to guide and shape social relations. The judicially sanctioned trade of wine and communal breaking of bread within the cloister courtyard mirrors the sacramental exchange of the eucharist. This is not only a documentation of social, political, and economic victory, but of the supremacy of the church and divine law. The enclosure of the church provided protection from secular law and helped to demarcate divine space as socially and economically safe for the congregation. The divine law present within this constructed Eden embraces the values of honesty, hard work and community that are rooted in functionalist thinking. A functionalist town would have a variety of artisans and merchants to contribute to the economic welfare and religious vigor of the community. Like a symphony, all parts provide structure and harmonize to enhance the whole. Additionally, architectural functionalism necessitates that the form of a structure follows its function and spirit. Judicial laws functionally shield the church and its cloisters from secular influence that would hinder the spirit of a religious retreat. A question that a functionalist rooted in religion might ask is, if the church is the connection that humans have to the divine, and the divine is above everything, why

should the construction of a divine temple be subject to secular laws? Although the seeds of this argument are heavily religious, the philosophy behind the thought process reflects the rationality that so influenced Viollet-le-Duc's vision of the Gothic period.

The Manifestation of the Supernatural

The late Middle Ages are characterized as being the beginnings of an 'age of reason' for humanity, wherein philosophy and studies of the universe circulated among academics²². However, the medieval period, as a whole, is one systemically rooted in often delirious faith. As evident in Chartres, widespread belief in a higher power was so passionately accepted by the medieval population that the churches' perceived harmony with God allowed it to dominate earthly affairs. Enacted by the church and the throne, the bleeding of divine law into the real world joined an escalating effect of forging the supernatural as visceral on the earthly plane. Repeating visual and spatial patterns constructed complex liturgical spaces that delivered the sacred to the congregation in labyrinthine ways²³. Enigmatic psychological systems were woven into an individual's mind that indicated unexplainable events, unsanctioned actions, and natural human whim to divine powers of forceful good and base evil.

Venerative references to the natural and supernatural world exist on nearly every façade of major Gothic cathedrals from the 12-13th centuries²⁴. The Chartres Cathedral, built around 1150, was aligned with the Chartres Cathedral School, from which the theological ideas that sparked the twelfth century renaissance originated. The sculptures and bas-reliefs on the façade of the cathedral reflect the theology of sacramental messages being embodied through the natural

²² Charles Haskins, *Studies in Mediaeval Culture*, 1958, 94.

²³ Gerald B. Guest, *Narrative Cartographies: Mapping the Sacred in Gothic Stained Glass*, 2008, 121.

²⁴ Emile Mâle, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art In France Of The Thirteenth Century*, 1972, 356.

world, the “central miracle of the creation of form”. Carved in relief on the front façade of the Chartres Cathedral are a lion, sheep, goat and heifer, both as a reference to the creation story, and as a pointed homage to nature. Carved into the central West tympanum of Chartres Cathedral are symbols for the four Evangelists, among them a winged lion (Mark) and oxen (Luke) (Fig. 13)²⁵. These two fantastic creatures are almost as large as the statue of Christ that they frame, and very visible from the courtyard below. The combination of nature and the sacred was represented through these mystical and supernatural figures. More often than not, the supernatural was represented as corrupt and evil. Pictured on the south portal of Chartres Cathedral is the “Last Judgment”, a vividly contrasted scene where Saint Michael, overlooked by Christ, weighs souls to be separated to heaven or hell (Fig. 14)²⁶. Gleeeful demons tug the damned downward, and framing the façade are columns of grotesque gargoyles tempting and entrapping Christians (Fig. 15)²⁷.

The repeated imagery of the devil in the artwork of the Middle Ages has been interpreted differently by audiences across the centuries. These depictions have led to contemporary imaginings of the Middle Ages as existing on a different mystical plane than that of today, a place where otherworldly and unnatural beings hold power and influence over humanity. Modern media depicts a feudal-era fairytale with dragons and talking creatures, furthering the mystical and fantastical lore introduced by Viollet-le-Duc’s nineteenth century gargoyle scuppers lining the roof of Notre Dame (Fig. 16). Today, the spirits depicted are generally viewed as religious iconography of the inherent evil of human nature, and not as a memorandum of real beliefs. However, this representation of the supernatural actually does reflect a fear of what lurks below

²⁵ Margot Fassler, *Liturgy and Sacred History in the Twelfth-Century Tympana at Chartres*, 1993, 516.

²⁶ Cecil Headlam, *Story of Chartres*, 224.

²⁷ Emile Mâle, *Gothic Image*, 140.

consciousness. The constant presence of inordinate religious belief led to a desperate need for protection against omnipresent evil. Fear was leveraged in the chronic power struggle among the echelons of church and court, resulting in violent extremism and paradoxical superstition.

With the political and economic struggles between church and court, it was in the churches best interest to remain influential over the public by blurring the lines between the sacred and the secular. Instead of devotional iconography, images of the supernatural appeared in sacred spaces solidifying the bridge between the spiritual and the physical world. Anxiety was sown through polarizing sermons that preached forgiveness and love alongside the threat of eternal damnation. An unyielding obsession with piety became the norm, and the Trinity and salvation grew to influence the reasoning behind daily actions and decisions. Yet, by seeing the same images at every mass and devoutly following every repeated superstition, the thought behind the physical manifestation loses its ethereal and vague qualities²⁸. The eleventh century Cistercian abbot Saint Bernard of Clairvaux admonished the use of fantastical animals in ecclesiastical imagery, stating that they would distract from prayer²⁹. The cathedrals that Bernard commissioned were technically and stylistically equivalent to other edifices, but it was the spirit of them that were different. Rigidly adhering to Augustinian aesthetics, the Cistercian architecture was strictly nonobjective, and acted almost as a reaction against the “expressionism” that was gaining popularity in twelve century styles. Cathedrals were soberly stripped of all figurative sculpture and painting in favor of the pure form of the structure (Fig. 17)³⁰. Founded by Bernard in 1118, the Abbey of Fontenay is a Cistercian monastery located deep within Le

²⁸ John Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages : A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought and Art in France and the Netherlands in the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, 1948, 131.

²⁹ Emile Mâle, *Gothic Image*, 49.

³⁰ Von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 48.

Petit-Jailly forest³¹. The isolated road that follows the Fontenay stream is a pilgrimage to its gardened cathedral. The sound of the forest stream can be heard from open courtyards surrounded by vaulted halls, where the interaction of sunlight upon harmonic numerical proportions ‘of true measure’ create both a natural and austere space (Fig 18.). The theatricality of the “miraculous” luminosity dancing upon the sacred geometry was a worthy medium to bring transcendence to the space³². While sobering, Saint Bernard’s cathedrals embodied spiritual functionalism in that they utilized heavenly light to illuminate the architectural forms. He believed monstrous imagery divorced religious intent from holy spaces and distracted from God’s divine gifts.

A theological tension resulted from the saturation of religion into everyday life; on the one hand the ordinary may ascend to a sacred level, or conversely the divine may fall to the mundane³³. By allowing religion to penetrate every thought, action and decision made in one's life, piousness lost its potency; the holy was so pervasive and saturated that it was no longer special and significant³⁴. In this grappling with the balance of religion permeating temporal action, the sins of pride and rivalry entered holy thought, and the political division of cathedral chapters transpired. Too many orders and too many clergymen resulted in a divisiveness that weakened the church in its entirety. Clergy were not immune to the sin of pride, and psychological fissures cracked as panic and Macbethian obsession set in. To remain in power, extreme and despotic responses were deemed necessary for the slightest provocation. With life so saturated by religion there was the danger of not differentiating things profane and things divine, and little difference was made between common crime, tragedy, or death and the ravaging

³¹ Lucien Bégule, Hubert Aynard, *The Abbey of Fontenay*, 1986, 12.

³² Von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 120.

³³ John Huizinga, *Waning of the Middle Ages*, 134.

³⁴ John Huizinga, *Waning of the Middle Ages*, 132.

agony of the devil's office. In the end, the public relished the resulting judiciary public torture and execution, often considering the meted punishment as on par with offense committed against this pious culture.

With holiness pervading every aspect of the world and its functions, people were terrified of the unknown, and became terribly superstitious. For example, there were beliefs that the process of aging stopped while attending mass, or that no injury could be suffered on a day one attended mass³⁵. Mistrust surrounded the useful practices of alchemy and apothecary medicine; attempting to decipher the human body, the night sky, or the earth's minerals flew dangerously close to human pride and demonic influence. Of all the trades that worked in the cloisters at Chartres, only apothecaries and leather workers were not mentioned in the stained glass windows. I can only postulate that these trades were not represented due to associations with heresy. Leather workers were associated with death and the disquieting process of 'purifying' an animal after its demise. Apothecaries, the archaic form of doctors, also associated with death, using herbs and herbal antimicrobials as ways to treat illnesses and infections that were often fatal. Manipulation of spiritual powers for earthly advantage was a theological and criminal offense, and medicine was often seen as practicing a dark pagan magic bestowed by the devil and limited by God. While the church hoped to convert followers of "false prophets", heterodoxy was punishable by the same torture found in both Testaments and in Roman criminal law³⁶. Scrutinized also was the ritual worship of images, for example, blessing a wax figure by baptizing it was seen as image magic, and potentially idolatrous. Texts on "image magic" stem from Arabia, and involve astronomy, astrology, and medicine, all investigations into making use

³⁵ John Huizinga, *Waning of the Middle Ages*, 133.

³⁶ Anders Winroth, John C. Wei, *The Cambridge history of Medieval Canon Law*, 2022, 512.

of natural objects and celestial bodies³⁷. Belief in monsters, sorcery, and the influence of supernatural powers manifested as a result of an acute fear of the unknown. The church both fed into these fallacies while trying to prevent them, reassuring the public of the holy rite of the church, while not claiming that these superstitious beliefs were actually true. In short, the beliefs of the masses in the Middle Ages were turning to fanatic extremism.

Pagan Origins

A sharp rejection of paganism occurred at Chartres, during the rebuilding of the cathedral in 1194, as the clergy saw an opportunity to disassociate from the local non-Roman past³⁸. In spite of the church's rejection of paganism, the pagan proto-Christian origins of the town remain undeniably present. A Druidic cult occupied Chartres before they were disseminated by the Roman emperor Diocletian in the early fourth century, and their original altar idol is sealed within a crypt beneath Chartres' main altar (Fig. 19)³⁹.

Seventeenth century Chartrain historian Sebastian Roulliard identified in his text *Parthénie* that, like the prophets of the Old Testaments, these "priests of idols" foretold the coming of Christ⁴⁰. The early Medieval text *Vieille Chronique* describes the Druids who revered a pregnant virgin and adored the cross under the form of a chestnut tree. Their century ended on the thirtieth moon - with the foreknowledge that the son of the virgin died to proclaim the gospel at age thirty. They also sacrificed bread and wine and wore white cloaks as a sign of purity as servers of the Virgin⁴¹. The customs and rituals surrounding their pagan practice are

³⁷ Sophie Page, *Magic in the Cloister: Pious Motives, Illicit Interests, and Occult Approaches to the Medieval Universe*, 2021, 74.

³⁸ Margot Elsbeth Fassler, *Virgin of Chartres*, 342.

³⁹ Cecil Headlam, *Story of Chartres*, 31.

⁴⁰ Margot Elsbeth Fassler, *Virgin of Chartres*, 352, 55.

⁴¹ Margot Elsbeth Fassler, *Virgin of Chartres*, 352.

iconographically identical to Christian practices occurring centuries later. Throughout the politically tumultuous liturgical times, Chartrain folktales about the Cult of the Virgin kept the the revered image of the virgin within the towns history of origins⁴². The search for antiquity in Chartres led to the veneration of an image of a powerful mother with paganistic origins, turning towards the images of patron saints led to a profound devotion that had pagan origins.

As a divinely exalted being who also exists on the physical plane, the veneration of an image is effective for tapping into the divine unconsciousness that followers of spirituality seek. The practice of honoring a patron saint within a ‘cult’ of smaller gatherings allowed a familiarity with the divine that can only be found in intimate communities. An individual’s personal relationship with God is as unexplored as the world of monsters and demons, and the search for divine individuality may be aided by a religious guide and the physical presence of the image. The thousands of patron saints recognized by the church mirror the divine “agents of action” in polytheistic religions⁴³. Meditating on the narrative that placed the image where it rests makes exploring celestial bodies hidden from the conscious mind less impossible. The darkness shrouding the supernatural realm that is represented through occult-associated symbols allowed the mind's eye to imagine unbound monsters and demons, but in reality all religions aim for the same depth of thought and emotional connection. The multitude of saints within Christianity, the deities within polytheistic religions, and symbols within occult practices similarly reflect unconscious and unexplored relationships with divinity. Exemplifying access to the supernatural, these patron saints established that journeymen from both the material and the supernatural worlds were capable of crossing the threshold into the other. Engaging with the unconscious

⁴² George Zarniecki, *Art of the Medieval World: Architecture, Sculpture, Painting, the Sacred Arts*, 1975, 366.

⁴³ Iveta Leitane, *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions*, Dordrecht, 2013, 1796.

mind is the same quest of searching for the gate to the divine realm that religions universally encounter.

Medieval scholars turned toward this divine search of the unconscious through schools of philosophy. In the early twelfth century, philosophers in Bath produced *De eodem et diverso*, a text examining the notion of free will and introducing the innovative view of the human condition as a rational, divinely-sanctioned exploration of self. Theologians in the Chartres school closely followed the text's dialogue between the personifications of 'The Love of Worldly Things' and 'Philosophy', who argue for the affections of man. Philosophy begins her argument with a description of the human condition that recalls the Medieval rhetoric of a spiritually rational approach to life:

“The creator of things, supremely good, drawing all creatures into his own likeness...has endowed the soul with that mental power...this power she freely enjoys...she examines not only things in themselves but their causes as well, and the principles of their causes, and from things present has knowledge of the distant future. She understands what she is herself, what the mind is by which she knows, and what the power of reason by which she seeks to know.”⁴⁴

The self existing on earth is established as a replica of divinity, tasked with seeking ultimate truth. Divine truth is discovered through using the gift of “mental power”: self-reflection of the human experience. Gaining principal knowledge of the world through an openness to experience requires a foundation of rationality and benevolent observation, which is fostered through the love of everything around us. The duality of love and reason that empowers humans to learn about the universe is of divine origin. Philosophy states that this exploration allows one to see that a human is not only god's creation, but a creation of god. Finding the divine does not change the physicality of the world and nature, but the found meaning and experience of it alters

⁴⁴ Winthrop Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century: the Literary Influence of the School of Chartres*, 2015, 21.

it into something worth living for⁴⁵. Humans acting out of divine free will is a functionalist wherein the best creative and intellectual freedom of man is in God's image.

The struggle between religious belief and superstitions aligned with paganism and the occult is seen in the production of images based on natural symbolism in Gothic art and architecture. All religions contain coded rituals that use nature and symbolism as an access to conscious and unconscious experiences that can open a perspective of the world as divine. The symbol expresses the unknown truth that is only imagined as existing, such as wholeness or heaven⁴⁶. The 20th century philosopher Carl Jung stated that all symbols found in different religious cultures, including the geometric forms found in Gothic cathedrals, draw upon ratios found in nature. In his book *Man and His Symbols*, Jung writes that symbols themselves represent the relationship between man and nature, and the ultimate wholeness that man seeks⁴⁷. Jung hypothesized that divine truth is found in the acceptance of opposites, the union of the temporal ego with the non-personal, unconscious ego that culminates in the wholeness of one self. Symbols express this intuitive perception of the unconsciousness, and are meant to be an instrument of thought for the conception of ideas⁴⁸. Similarly, the occult is characterized as the exploration of one's darkness (the unconscious) to complement one's light (the conscious). The tension between experiencing the outer world and navigating the inner is a dynamic process of creation and coming into wholeness⁴⁹. This experience of the break of the individual consciousness from the collective unconscious is the divine experiencing itself through man, a highly individual exploration is the goal in all faiths⁵⁰.

⁴⁵ John Huizinga, *Waning of the Middle Ages*, 173.

⁴⁶ Morris Philipson, *Outline of a Jungian aesthetics*, 1963, 38,9.

⁴⁷ Carl G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, 1964, 266.

⁴⁸ Morris Philipson, *Jungian Aesthetics*, 34.

⁴⁹ Carl G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, 268.

⁵⁰ Morris Philipson, *Jungian Aesthetics*, 37.

There were two approaches to occult images: “could this be sorcery?” and “how do celestial bodies empower the image?” Visions, dissociative meditations, or religious trances are the goal in the use of symbols and rituals. When psychic energy or concentrated thought focuses on the inner consciousness, symbols come to life and describe the effects of contents of the existential unconscious and religion. Rituals involving blessing an image through the use of nature and natural symbolic imagery are attempts to access the unconscious world through the conscious senses; the seeking of truth through the exploration of nature. Symbols like the circle or sphere, the Buddha’s eight-rayed lotus, or the Mandala represent the cosmos in relation to divine powers⁵¹. The involvement of multiple sensory inputs (such as symphonic chanting and the burning of incense), geometric symbolism, and the incorporation of natural materials within rituals are widely associated with the occult, however these practices are also employed by Christian denominations like Catholicism. The presence of an interpreter, spiritual guide, or priest within spiritual gatherings is necessary to sway one's balance of the conscious and unconscious towards the progressive path⁵². Occult symbolism in cathedral architecture is an example of a collective consciousness, a patterned symmetry that is universally recognized as natural and rationally correct. The functionalist architecture that rose as perfect geometric proportions is the symbolic embodiment of the collective consciousness of the time.

Triggered by Viollet-le-Duc’s proposed restorations to the Notre Dame in Paris, nineteenth and twentieth century historians and psychologists circulated ideas of the symbol of the Gothic and the allegory of the ruin. Behind many historians' rationales was a nostalgia for an antiquity that extended past the Gothic into the Classical, but Viollet-le-Duc’s contemporary John Ruskin had a different view of the Gothic ruin. Ruskin opposed the maintenance of

⁵¹ Carl G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, 267.

⁵² Carl G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, 272.

Medieval cathedrals, stating that the ruins of the building are a visual aid in understanding the abstract notion of the impermeable⁵³. The interplay of light and shadow on the wearing sculptural form of the stone renders an allegory for the effects of time. Its final existence is as a reminder that all great empires will eventually fall and rot. Ruskin's motivations were not to preserve the ancient sacred ideology of the Gothic, rather to create new meaning through the collapse of the symbol: a monument to lost meaning. To make creative choices in the restorations of a building would be disrespectful to the architect, and rob future generations from visiting this grave of humanity⁵⁴.

Supported by the religious history of the symbol, Viollet-le-Duc spiritually believed that the consistent use of sacred geometry in all aspects of the Gothic binds the location to the mystical. The perfect ratios occurring between vault and wall that echo the symphonic ratios in hymns and repeated patterns in nature would be meaningless if it were in ruin. The symbol is the unity of the metaphysical and the material object, and if the material object is in ruin, the metaphysical cannot be present, rendering the structure no longer a symbol at all⁵⁵. The most important quality of the Gothic cathedral is the ability to experience the divine by simply being within its living halls. The symbol enduring in architecture through the ages, Viollet-le-Duc argued, would be a greater gift to future generations than crumbling walls. Rather than the ephemeral, restorations by Viollet-le-Duc imagine the timeless, the unity of the object with its origins, and the unity of the symbol with the mind.

Psychological patterns of the medieval 'age of reason' that led into the Renaissance can be compared to patterns of collective imagination that have resurfaced in the past century as a

⁵³ David Spurr, *Chora 5 : Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*, 2007, 288.

⁵⁴ David Spurr, *Philosophy of Architecture*, 303.

⁵⁵ David Spurr, *Philosophy of Architecture*, 286.

result of globalization. While the Medieval ecclesiastical, monarchal and noble classes relied on the staunch religious belief of a nation of serfs, the influence of modern power structures depended on the global population's dutiful participation in economic circulation. The second industrial revolution during the late nineteenth to early twentieth century in Europe and the United States led to the expansion of the white-collar middle class through the automation of many blue-collar professions. Machines that truly made everyday life easier became available to the public, and many individuals fortunately could now afford to buy them. The further advancement of science and technology as a result of the Cold War introduced more opportunities for individuals to become self-reliant. Automated machines were found in every home, and commercial planes physically linked the world while radio and television delivered information to the masses. At this point in history, the greatest percentage of the human population in any point of history have their basic needs of survival met. Of course, there are places caught in the crossfire between nations warring over oil or democratic ideals, but as a whole, antiquated religious beliefs are no longer effective as a means to hold power over the masses. The ubiquitous level of control found in the medieval via divine power is now exercised over the greater population through the credence of buying power in tandem with the instantaneous distribution of information. The pressure that surrounded the supernatural and the image of piety in medieval times is repeated through paranoia of not having enough money to climb economic and social classes. Today, social classes are less determined by lineage and more by one's ability to take advantage of capitalism. Like religion, capitalism is faith-based and success depends not on the product but on one's ability to convince buyers and investors of its effectiveness. The American Dream is a notion based on an ideology comparable to religion, wherein the faith-based effort exerted by an individual can lead to salvation. Like nonbelievers,

impoverished citizens are deemed unsuccessful due to their lack of faith and unwillingness to work within the system. The reality, however, is much more stark. Deeply rooted in the psychology of families and communities, the systems of poverty were built to keep impoverished people indigent. The structures with the most power are no longer ecclesiastical, but corporate. Even while access to health, education, and sought-after natural resources is known to deepen the confines of the poverty trap, profitable global powers incongruously and intentionally convert these human resources into cheap labor, continuing the subjugation of the laborers. Like unethical modern systems controlling global economics, the medieval churches' rejection of paganism and the paranoia surrounding images of the occult was paradoxical. The images and doctrines that capture religious congregations originate from pagan cults, and the people that are the most subjugated do not have access to the basic security available in the twenty-first century. The influential few preserve a state of dependance while selling the idea that individuality and free will still exist. Both religion and capitalism could have the same consequence of maintaining structures of control that divide class, wealth, and labor.

In the psychologies of both the Medieval and modern times, human existence is staged as a fallen state. The metaphor of pilgrimage is life, and we live in a dark world searching for the light. The ability to live in a divine state of love and wonder of the world is a privilege that not everyone can experience in this lifetime. Religious ideals and the complexity of artistic freedom are based on the human capacity to love with abandon. True joy in creating art comes from within - it is a divine exploration of self, and arms humans with determination. Historian Joseph Cambell quotes the English poet William Blake in his text *The Mythic Dimension*:

“‘If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite’... simultaneously, [art] is the rapture of recognizing in a single hair ‘a thousand golden lions.’”⁵⁶

Coded within nature are three approaches to the divine self. Exploration of the natural world reveals repeated geometric proportions that are made concrete through the Gothic Cathedral. Through Augustinian principles, the engineering of a space by use of universal mathematics functionally sets the intentions of the building as divine. The patterned structure opens the unconscious to the imagery of the divine supernatural. With the guidance of earthly holy figures and spiritual guides, the darkness of individual divinity can be explored. The expression of individuality and of human relationships with the divine culminates in symbols. It is through the connection of these natural symbols with the sacred that the natural divinity of the world appears. Stepping through the portal of the Gothic cathedral transports the visitor to a perfectly rational paradise. Exiting the space with the patterns of sacred geometry imprinted on the unconscious allows the sacred of the world to be revealed.

⁵⁶ Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Dimension*.

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Illustrations

Figure 1. Notre-Dame Cathedral Ambulatory, Jean de Chelles and Pierre de Montreuil, 1250, Paris.



Figure 2. Notre-Dame de Paris, Luc-Olivier Merson, 1881, France.



Figure 3. Notre-Dame Southern façade, Viollet-le-Duc, Jean de Chelles and Pierre de Montreuil, 1864, Paris.

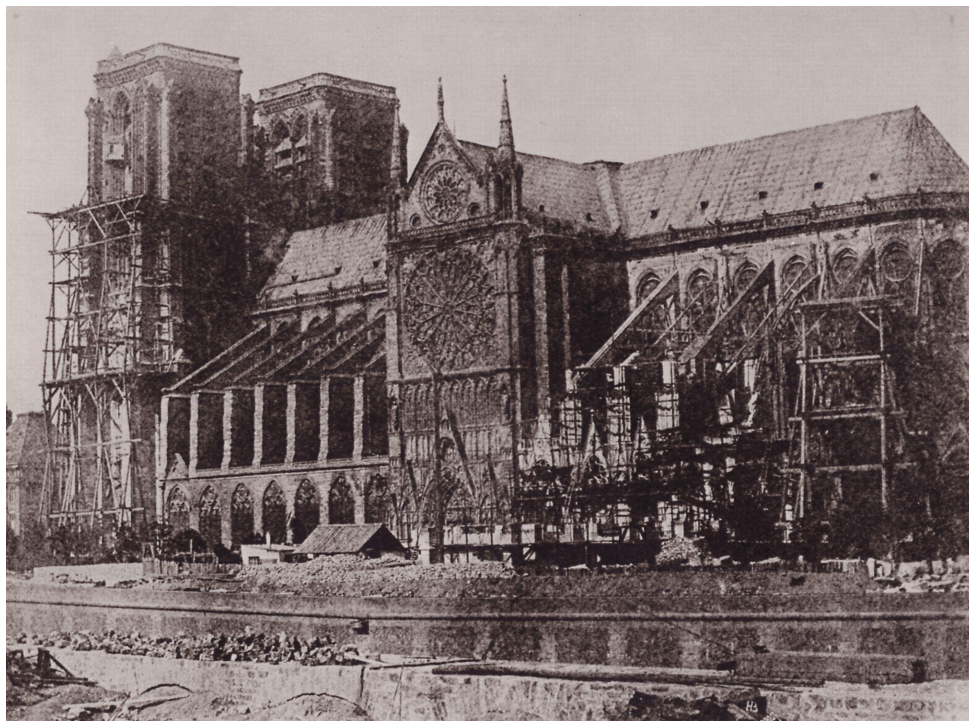


Figure 4. Notre-Dame Southern façade, Jean de Chelles and Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, 1847, Paris.

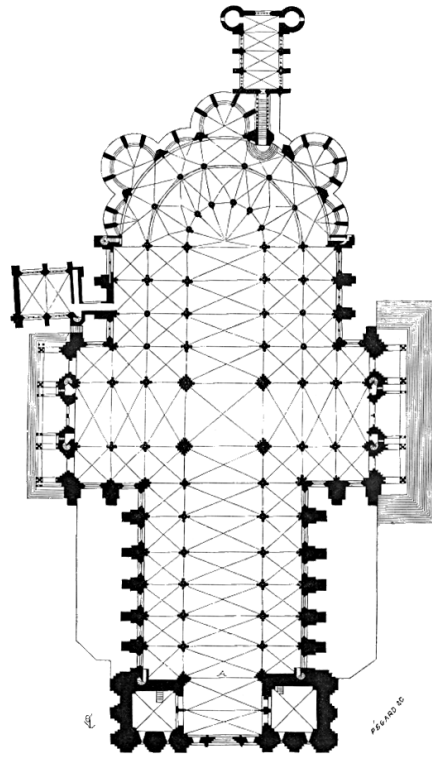


Figure 5. Chartres Cathedral floorplan, Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, 1856, Chartres.



Figure 6. Bible Moralisée, Artist unknown, 13th century, Vienna.



Figure 7. Basilica of Saint Denis, Abbot Suger, 1137, Saint-Denis.

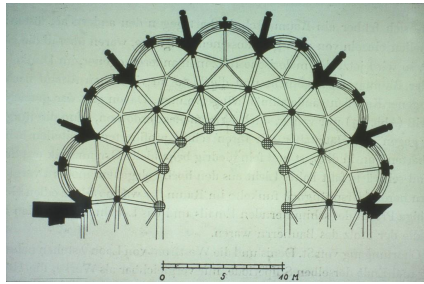


Figure 8. Saint Denis choir plan, Abbot Suger, 1137, Saint-Denis.



Figure 9. Cathédral de Chartres: view of choir, apse, transept, , 1194, Chartres.

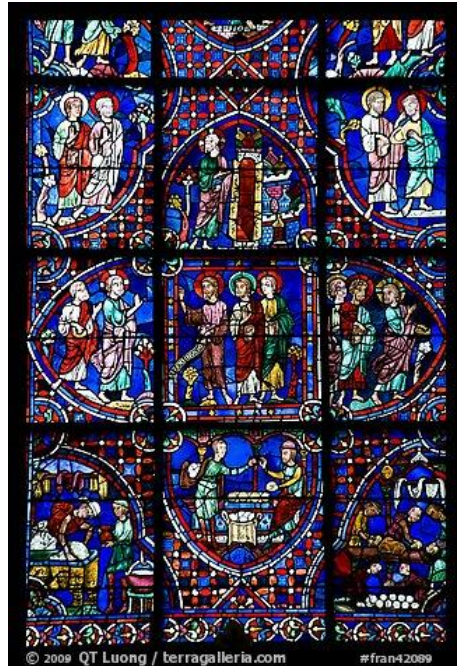


Figure 10. “Trade Windows” of Chartres, Chartres chapter, 1194, Chartres.



Figure 11. Merchant selling cloth, Chartres “Trade Windows”, 1194, Chartres.



Figure 12. Bakers shaping loaves, Chartres “Trade Windows”, 1194, Chartres.



Figure 13. Central West portal of Chartres Cathedral "Royal Portal", 1194, Chartres.

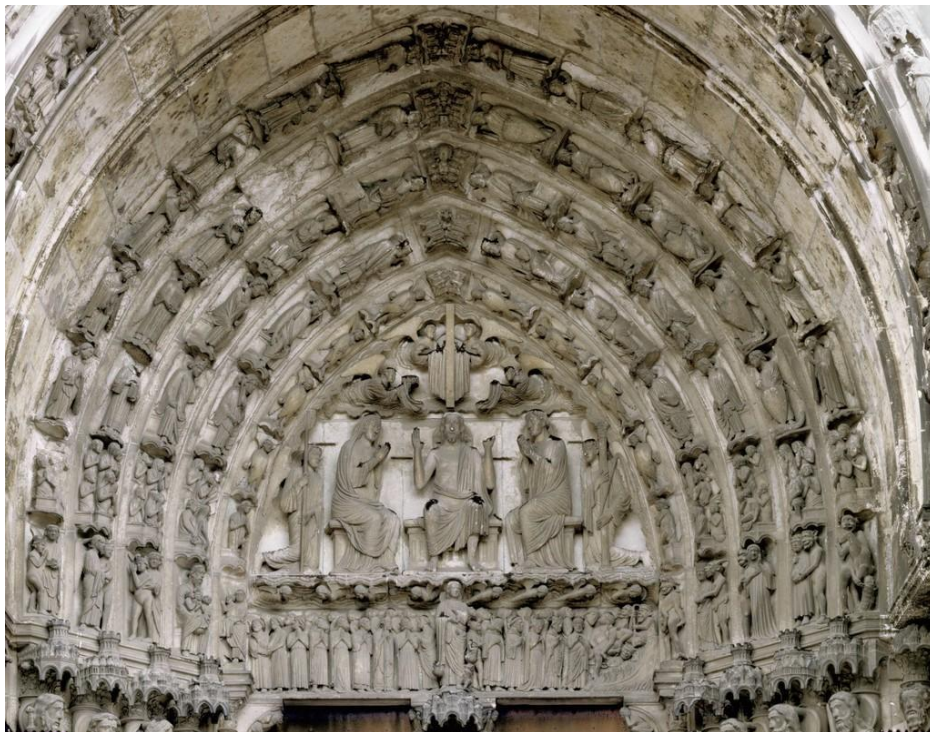


Figure 14. Central South portal of Chartres Cathedral "Last Judgment", 1194, Chartres.



Figure 15. Detail of Central South portal of Chartres "The Damned", 1194, Chartres.



Figure 16. Gargoyles of Notre-Dame, Josef Breitenbach, 1864, Paris.

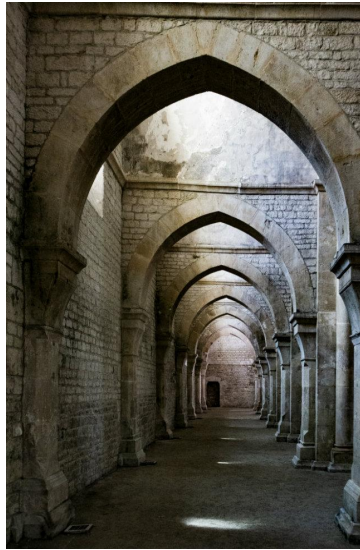


Figure 17. South aisle of Fontenay Abbey, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, 1118, Fontenay Abbey.



Figure 18. Vaulted hall of Fontenay Abbey, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, 1118, Fontenay Abbey.



Figure 14. Crypt of the Cult of the Virgin, 1st century, Chartres.