



CHARTRES AND THE BIRTH OF THE CATHEDRAL

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FOREWORD BY KEITH CRITCHLOW

- Levels of understanding Scripture according to Medieval exegetes – receptive degrees of transparency corresponding to levels of intellectual-contemplative states of being
 - Historical – Jerusalem is a city in Palestine
 - Allegorical or moral – Jerusalem is the Church Militant
 - Tropological – Jerusalem is the Christian soul (*tropos* = turning) – indicates a metaphorical turning the soul
 - Analogical – Jerusalem is the Heavenly City, the eternal home – summation of knowledge unifying all other levels into a profound unity from *anagogos* = to lead up
- School of Chartres - Christian doctrines successfully married to Platonic philosophy
- Pervasiveness of number in the Quadrivium supported at Chartres
 - Number as Arithmetic
 - Number of Space as Geometry
 - Number in time as Music
 - Number in space and time as Astronomy



SPIRITUAL CLIMATE IN WHICH THE GOTHIC CATHEDRAL WAS BORN

- We think of medieval people as naïve and child-like. In fact, their actions were inspired by a vision or idea
- Medieval people lived for
 - timeless truths
 - love
 - creative joy

EARLIEST MODELS OF CATHEDRALS

- All early cathedrals were Bishop's seats
 - First Latin cathedral is St. Peter's in Rome which contained the *sedes gestatoria* or *Cathedra Petri* – the chair used by the apostle Peter
 - *Cathedra* = seat
- Early basilicas can be compared to a covered street with side arcades
- Heavenly Jerusalem
 - Everything in it is made from minerals, gold, and precious stones
 - The perfect city or perfect building is the epitome of timeless perfection
 - This is present in every theocratic culture

PRELIMINARY STAGES OF THE GOTHIC

- Vaulting
 - Vaulting a church answered a need to replace roofs with wooden beams, which were prone to fire
 - Romanesque vaulting has its own beauty and gave rise to many masterpieces unsurpassed in their kind
 - Heavy pressure of the unarticulated barrel vault side walls was too great to allow them to be penetrated by windows
 - The sacred cave is one of the oldest forms of sanctuary anyway – the universe turned inward, the secret world of the heart or the soul
 - The pressure on barrel vaulting could be improved by raising its vertex to form a pointed arch
- Ambulatory served the needs of accommodating a stream of pilgrims who circumambulated a relic
 - This custom of circumambulating in a holy place goes back to time immemorial, Hindu temples, etc.
- Gothic vs. Romanesque line and space
 - In Romanesque architecture, spatial form comes first and precedes the line – lines are formed by the meeting of two surfaces.
 - Gothic architecture takes the line as its starting-point and extends it through space
 - Space is not a receptacle but an area of infinitely numerous relationships and tensions
 - Romanesque lets stone be stone. Gothic architecture introduces into stone an upward-striving life and what appears to be an imperious will of its stone.

CHURCH, KINGDOM, AND ART

- Bishops were the spiritual lords of the Kingdom of France
- The French Royal House regarded itself as the true heir to Charlemagne as the protector of the church – the German emperor increasingly lost status as leader of the Western Christian peoples
- The King received his mandate from the church
 - Bishop, in the name of God, poured the holy oil on his head
- King and princes of the church were natural allies – the bishops found in the King a protector against the encroachments of autocratic nobles
- Henry V from the German empire was excommunicated – Louis VI of France took the side of the Pope Pascall II

ST. DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE AND PLATONIST INFLUENCE ON CHARTRES

- The doctrines of the Areopagite permeate the spirit of the Chartres Cathedral School
- Great exponent of Christian symbolism
- Writings on the celestial and ecclestial hierarchies and the 'divine names' were accorded the authority of apostolic teachings
- Provided art with an intellectual basis in terms of forms whose beauty reflects truth in ways that words cannot express
 - Dionysian doctrine of symbolism
 - All degrees of reality are broken reflections of the Divine Light
 - As perfect archetype, God shines only imperfectly in creatures
 - God is everything that is, and yet is no created thing.
 - This doctrine is described as Neoplatonic because of the idea of eternal prototypes, the ideas and the hierarchical radiation of the Divine light
 - Plotinus – the contemplative intellect recognizes the divine essence of beauty
 - God cannot be grasped by the purely ratiocinative activity of the mind. This is where the function of sacred art comes in

ABBOT SUGER AND THE ROLE OF BEAUTY

- Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis was the spiritual and intellectual disciple of the Areopagite
- The order on Earth must resemble as much as possible the order in Heaven, both in the organization of human society and in art
 - Expresses a vision of the world as the art of God
 - The universe is like perfect music as with all dissonance eliminated. A well-constructed building expresses conformity to a divine principle or archetype
 - The world is the art of God so art leads us anagogically to God
 - A well-constructed building is like a beautiful song
 - Beauty as a path of anagogical ascension
 - Says Abbot Suger: When I behold the beauty of the House of God through the loveliness of many-colored jewels, I am drawn from the material into the spiritual world. perceive many holy virtues and I am lifted from the lower into the higher world.

SUGER'S REBUILDING OF THE ABBEY CHURCH OF SAINT-DENIS

- 1132 started rebuilding
- The windows on the façade announced the open countenance of the Gothic church
- Rose windows emphasize a sun-like presence on the façade
- Wheel symbolism of rose windows and Christological interpretation
- Symbolism of beautiful doors
 - The spirit may reach the true light in which Christ is the Door
 - The golden door proclaims the nature of the Inward
- The *Leitmotiv* of Gothic architecture - Just as the human soul is illumined by the divine light of grace, so the interior of a church building should be illumined by the brightness of the stained glass windows
- Gothic vaulting enabled the stained glass windows to cover the whole extent of the wall, right up to the roof

THE CULT OF MARY

- Chartres became the center for the new cult of Mary
- Traced back to Celtic times where the Druids already venerated in the spring grotto over which the cathedral stands, a virgin who will give birth
- Until the French revolution, a primitive statue of a maternal figure with a child on her lap was preserved at Chartres
- The Virgin Mary symbolizes not only an aspect of the Divinity, that the generative principle of all things is maternal, but also that in her immutable essence, she is eternally virgin
- The *sancta camisia*, the tunic of the Blessed Virgin was brought by Charlemagne to Aachen, and which Charles the Bald, in 876 presented to Chartres

THE ROYAL DOOR

- Unusually large number of female Old Testament figures points to the redemptive role of Virgin Mary, Protectress of the Church
- Door of the Virgin Tympanum – The Virgin is both the lowest and highest in creation
 - *Vergine madre, figlia del tuo figlio, umile ed alta piu che creatura* (Virgin mother, daughter of thy son, lowly and exalted more than any creature.)
- Virgin Mary by virtue of the perfection of her soul possessed all the wisdom of which man is capable – reference to this wisdom is found in the allegories of the Seven Liberal Arts, which decorates the tympanum of the Door of the Virgin
 - Expression of the many faculties of the soul, faculties which demand harmonious development
- In the tympanums and arches of the door, the whole cosmos is represented in its spiritual, psychic, and corporeal aspects. Medieval man always kept the profounder order of things in mind

THE SEVEN LIBERAL ARTS AND NUMBER AS REPRESENTED ON THE ROYAL DOOR

- Trivium and Quadrivium came into Christian culture from Greek antiquity
 - Quadrivium - arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy
 - Trivium – grammar, dialectic and rhetoric
- Thierry of Chartres says philosophy has two main instruments: intellect (quadrivium) and its expression (trivium)
- The Seven Liberal Arts
 - Grammar – language – Moon – child threatened by woman – figures of Donat and Priscian
 - Dialectic – logic – Mercury – scorpion – Aristotle
 - Rhetoric – speech as an art – Venus – Cicero
 - Arithmetic – number – Sun – represented by reckoning board
 - Music – time and harmony – Mars – represented by glockenspiel
 - Geometry – space and proportion – Jupiter – Boethius, Pythagoras, Euclid and Ptolemy

NUMBER AND PROPORTION AND PLATONISM AT CHARTRES

- Number in its qualitative rather than quantitative conception lies at the basis of medieval arithmetic
 - Less a way of reckoning than for understanding the nature of number and its properties
 - Each individual number is itself a representation of an essential unity
 - Each number can be transposed into a corresponding geometrical form (Equilateral triangle, Square, Pentagon)
- Proportion is the basis of harmony and geometry - Boethius
 - Arithmetic – 1,2,3,4,5,6
 - Geometric – $a:c = c:b$
 - Harmonic - $a:c = a-b:b-c$
- The men who taught at Chartres at the beginning of the 12th century were all Platonists: Bernard, Gilbert de la Poree, William of Conques, and Thierry
- All existence emanates hierarchically from the Divine Source



INFLUENCE OF ISLAMIC ART

- During the time of the Crusades, Islamic art, especially Persian, exerted influence on European forms
- Both have joy in the geometrical play of lines
- Islamic roots of knightly epics
- Minnesingers and troubadours were stimulated by Arabo-Persian models



BUILDING CHARTRES AFTER THE FIRE OF 1194

- July 10, 1194 the church caught fire and the camisa sancta was saved by some monks that removed it into the lower crypt
- Main building was between 1194 and 1220 where a whole army of skilled craftsmen worked
- Draymen brought stones from the quarry at Berchères

GEOMETRIC WISDOM AND MEDIEVAL CRAFTSMEN

- Guilds guarded their professional secrets and exercised jurisdiction in their fields
- Master builder had to be skilled as a stonecutter, mason, carpenter but also had to know geometry, statics, and mechanics
 - Geometrical unity for beauty as well as stability
- Often used a fixed order of geometrical relationships, building things with a continuously graduated proportion
 - Creates an aesthetic effect where all measures are related to a unity and this unity can be sensed
 - Upward transmutation of proportions
- Building like music – confers a specific mood or quality - based on a certain geometric governing pattern which remains hidden yet harmoniously unites the various parts of the work
- Says Dante: *“Le cose tutte e quante han’ ordine tra loro; e questo e forma che l’universo a Dio fa simigliante.* (All things whatsoever observe a mutual order; and this is the form that maketh the universe like unto God.)

DANTE, MEDIEVAL GEOMETRY AND SYMBOLISM

- In Convivio, Dante says of geometry that it exists between two immeasurable greatnesses: the point, which is the origin of all figures, and the circle (or sphere), the form of which cannot be exhausted by division.
- Both point and circle are symbols of Divine Unity
- At the end of Divine Comedy, Dante uses a metaphor which confers on the circle the profoundest meaning
 - As the geometer who all sets himself to measure the circle and findeth not, think as he may, the principle he lacketh; such was I at this new seen spectacle; I would perceive how the image consorteth with the circle, and how it is inscribed within it. –
 - You can never measure the circle, can never fully “see” the circle but just the forms created from within it.
- For medieval builders, the quintessence of their art was how to reduce a particular figure, through knowledge of its form, to the unity of a circle
- Late Gothic Stonemasons

THE SACRED WINDOWS

- With Gothic architecture, windows gradually took the place of walls with pictures
- Walls of a gothic cathedral with so many windows are tapestries of light
- Intended as walls of light, or luminous precious stones, like the walls of the Heavenly Jerusalem
- Colors are properties of light and thus are 'forms'
- The essential cause of things resembles physical light which, though one by nature, comprises the beauty of all colors.
- Dante talks about the refraction of Logos from one level of creation to another – the light descends into the world of the visible
- Rose window was the most beloved form of the Gothic masters for it combines geometrical symbolism and the symbolism of light
- Rose Windows at Chartres
 - Western – Last Judgment – 4 beasts of the Apocalypse - Abraham
 - Southern – Christ in Majesty – chalice in hand – 24 elders who praise him with lutes
 - Northern – Virgin Mary – fleur de lis – doves descend towards her – kings of Judah surround her