

Development of gothic architecture in relationship to medieval society

[Design](#), [Architecture](#)



The Middle Ages covered a thousand year p. The period began after the schism of the fifth century in which the Roman empire was split into east and west. It continued until the start of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. The medieval period was notable for the origins and development of Gothic architecture. Because there was so much upheaval during the Middle Ages, the one constant was the Church. At that time the only denomination was Catholic.

The Church was usually the largest structure in the medieval environment and was a main gathering place in which a variety of functions (which today would be provided by civic buildings), occurred. (The Middle Ages, 1). Since the holy Catholic Church had already been a powerful institution at the conclusion of the Roman Empire, it continued to be the unifying force among the many small kingdoms that would develop into Europe. Replete with its own laws and large coffers, it wielded much influence during this time (Enter the Middle Ages, 1).

In addition, it had kept much from the ruins of the ancient world and became one of the centers of learning during during the Middle Ages. Not only did the Church preserve much of classical Latin knowledge, but it also maintained the art of writing.

The cathedrals developed learning specialties such as rhetoric or logic in schools named cathedral schools. (Middle Ages, Learners. Org, 1). Whether one's station was that of lowly peasant or of noble lord, the Church touched everyone's life. Rank or class did not matter. Within towns , with the exception of a small amount of Jews, everyone in Europe was Christian.

However, beyond the core areas of western Europe, there remained many people with little or no contact with either Christianity or classical culture.

Outside the deurbanized remnants of cities the power of the central government was greatly lessened and governmental authority was delegated to local lords who supported themselves directly from the territories over which they held power. This was the beginning of the feudal system (Enter the Middle Ages, 1). For safety and defense people in the Middle Ages formed small communities around a central lord or master, living on a manor, which consisted of the castle, the church, the village, and outlying farmland. In exchange for living on his land, the lord gave protection to his serfs. Manors were isolated with occasional visits from peddlers, pilgrims on their way to the Crusades, or soldiers from other fiefdoms. (Sobol, 22).

Bishops, who were frequently wealthy, and came from noble families, ruled over a group of parishes called a diocese. Parish priests, however, came from humbler backgrounds and often had little education. The village priest tended the poor and sick, and if he was capable, taught Latin and the Bible to the youth of the village. (Enter the Middle Ages, 2). Medieval cathedrals sometimes functioned as marketplaces with the different portals of the marketplaces containing sellers with their produce: items such as textiles might be at one end, while fuel, vegetables, and meat at another. Sometimes the clergy tried to put a stop to the marketers. They tried to block access to the cathedral. But it was in vain.

The sellers were not taxed on the items they sold inside the church; while the items they sold outside were. (Chartres, 1). The Church was all in all during medieval times. From the moment of its baptism a few days after birth, a child began its life of service to the Lord and to His Church. As the child developed, it would be taught basic prayers- and unless ill- would go to church every week. Every person was required to pay heavy taxes to support the Church.

The reward for this was being shown the way to everlasting life and happiness- a great trade off for lives that were often short and difficult. In addition to collecting taxes, the Church also granted special favors for people who wanted assurance of a place in heaven. Gifts in the form of land, crops, flocks, and even serfs scrambled into the coffers. All this largess allowed the Church to become very powerful. As a result, it often employed this power to influence kings and do as they wanted. (Enter the Middle Ages, 2). The power continued with the Pope who was considered to be God's representative on earth. If someone went against the Church, the Pope could excommunicate them.

This meant that the person could not attend any more church services or receive the sacrament, thus ensuring that they would go straight to hell when they died. At a time when everyone believed in heaven and hell, and all belonged to the Church, this excommunication was an unbearable horror. (Ibid, 2). The population increased throughout the Middle Ages. As it expanded in the 12th century, the type of church that had previously been used for worship; the ones built in the Roman or Romanesque style, with

round arched roofs, became too small. Some of the grand cathedrals became maxed to their structural limits.

Although they built more mightily, going ever higher and larger, it appeared to be too much and these grander edifices collapsed within a century or less of their construction (Enter the Middle Ages, 3). Enter a man who was about to change the style of these Middle Age churches and with it, bring forth a whole new field of architecture- gothic. Abbe Suger had been affiliated with the Church of Saint Denis in Paris for a good part of his life. The building needed repairs, so he took on thereconstruction, bringing in the finest of workers from the Low countries and from Italy.

For his inspiration, Abbe Suger looked to Canterbury Cathedral. Pilgrimages had been an important part of religious life in the Middle Ages as people journeyed to visit religious shrines. Suger particularly admired Canterbury Cathedral for its stained glass windows. Desirous of creating a physical representation of the the Heavenly Jerusalem, Suger aimed for a place of light that would speak of the positive aspects of the religious life: Redemption as opposed to the hellfire and damnation that was constantly being sermonized in the dark and dank Romanesque churches.

Suger conceived of the idea “ lux continua” - this theory would transform his church into one of radiance and splendor, magnifying the spirit. He and his team gave themselves to the reconstruction of the church. After a four year renovation, the choir was completed in 1144. In a magnificent ceremony, complete with King Louis VI and Eleanor, and other notables, the church was dedicated to the Lord. With its thin columns, stained glass windows, and a

sense of verticality, the choir of Saint Denis originated the elements that would be developed further during the Gothic period. Now architects were able to expand Saint Denis upward to more than twice the height of the earlier cathedral and free the walls to be filled with stained glass.

The great expanse of glass helped Abbe Suger with his goal of “lux continua”. These brightly colored stained glass windows were decorated with parables and stories of the Bible that would help inform the illiterate in their faith. Trade guilds funded other windows and the decorations contained within demonstrated what life was like during this medieval time. Saint Denis was designed along the lines of sacred geometry: the use of number angles, shapes that mirror the principle of the faithful believer, and flying buttresses that would support those higher ceilings and slender columns; the verticality suggesting aspirations to heaven. Additionally, Saint Denis contained a golden cross and a golden altar where kings and nobles donated their precious jewels (Gothic Art and Abbe Suger, 1)

The influence this church had over French architecture was profound because it was also a political symbol. Suger virtually ran the kingdom while Louis VI was away on the Crusade. Yet for Suger, the Church was neither political symbol nor an architectural one, but solely a religious symbol. His main goal in its design was to honor God and Saint Denis. Suger had become fascinated by the religious implications of the light. He had inscribed on the main doors, which are representative of the passion and resurrection of Christ: The noble work is bright, but being nobly bright; That work should brighten the minds, allowing

Them to travel through the light. To the truth where Christianity is the true door (Simson, 111). The Gothic style had emerged. It would give rise to the development of many other buildings and cathedrals who copied its characteristics, the most visible of which was its verticality. A skeletal stone structure, pointed arches using the ovoid shape, ribbed vaults, clustered columns, sharply pointed spires, flying buttresses and sculptural gargoyles became part of the Gothic look. (The History of Art, 255).

One of the most superlative examples of Gothic architecture can be found in Chartres Cathedral. Chartres, fifty miles from Paris, is considered to be extremely outstanding in its use of the Gothic elements. It was rebuilt in the Gothic style after a fire had decimated the building. Called a miracle of stained glass and stone, it was created in the form of a cruciform and dedicated in 1260. Chartres contains one of the most complete collections of medieval stained glass in the world. The Rose Window contains a sun and a rose.

Jesus Christ, the Son, represents the sun, while Mary is the rose without thorns. Also there are depictions of kings and lords in additional stained glass, but their lower elevation connotes submission to the Lord. Along with many stained glass windows containing biblical stories which are typological allegories between the Old Testament prophecies and the New Testament, there is much statuary. Rows of arches and niches within the arches contain the statues. (Chartres, Online 1). Within the confines of the Cathedral is a sacred relic that was given by King Charlemagne. It is called the " Sancta Camisia," and is said to be clothing worn by Mary.

Charlemagne received it on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. This clothing, also called the cloak of the Virgin, was the source of much pilgrimage during the medieval times. The Cathedral was the life of the town and these pilgrimages brought in much revenue that the town depended upon. These pilgrimages occurred four times a year. Chartres, Wikipedia, 1). Although Raphael despised the Gothic style and named it derisively after the savage Goths who had ransacked Rome, the style survived and is an everlasting style of beauty and majesty. It is a wonderful contribution from the Middle Ages.