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Cologne Cathedral as a Symbol of Unity

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Some of the most cherished buildings that still stand from the medieval period are those that have played an important role in the lives of generations of people. Often, especially in medieval Europe, these buildings carried religious significance, in particular the Gothic cathedrals of Western Europe. The world famous cathedrals in France, England, and Germany have been extremely influential in the development of religious life and thought, but also of more secular aspects of society. The cathedral served as a place where people of many backgrounds came together, from its construction through its completion, and it was a physical representation of the unity people sought both with God and among themselves. The cathedral in Cologne is an example of such a unifying structure: although it closely mirrors the French style, the grand scale of its construction imparted a sense of national identity among the Germans who united to build it. The Cologne Cathedral was begun as a symbol of German architectural and artistic splendour, intended to rival the great French churches, and after a long period of rest in construction it was completed during the Gothic revival in memory of the grand architecture of medieval Germany. The Cologne Cathedral serves as a monumental symbol of the divine on Earth, and because of the thousands of people who collaborated during its construction, it conveys both unity with God as well as unity between people.

Gothic architecture was brought to Germany from France, and it was only considered "German" once it had adopted some of the local architectural features. The first indications of the Gothic style can be seen in France the 1100s, and the men

responsible for its beginnings are the Abbots Bernard de Clairvaux and Suger of St.-Denis. Suger favoured ornate decoration, Bernard, however, shunned Suger's ornamentation as excessive, and preferred a more purist and direct approach. The compromise between these two opinions created the foundation of Gothic architecture: Bernard's tendency toward basic shapes such as squares, triangles, and circles, and Suger's lacy, intricate designs.¹

Before Gothic, the Romanesque style was the primary architectural approach in Europe, and it provided many of the basic techniques used in Gothic. Much of Gothic architecture is simply a reconfiguration of Romanesque features, especially in Germany, which has a long history in the Romanesque tradition. The difference is that whereas Romanesque buildings depict an apocalyptic coming of the City of God, Gothic architecture strives to embody the crystalline, sparkling nature of the glorious City.²

To inspire a sense of the glittering divine, Gothic architecture places a distinct emphasis on light in the cathedral. In part, this supports the image of Christ as the "true Light," as in St. John's Gospel, or as the "lux nova,"³ as Suger calls Him.⁴ In this respect, bringing more light into the church gives the impression of being closer to Christ. However, despite such an emphasis on light, Gothic cathedrals are actually not as bright in reality as they are in theory. The tall intricate stained glass windows let in little sunlight, and often only at certain times of day, but since the "lux nova" that

¹ Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 330.

² Ibid., 331.

³ meaning "new light"

⁴ Ibid., 330, 331-32.

reaches worshippers is filtered through divine images in the windows, medieval people were nevertheless reminded of the sparkling City of God.⁵

To accommodate all of these iconic windows, many Romanesque techniques had to be modified in the architecture in order to replace large sections of wall with vast expanses of glass. Some distinct Gothic traits that served this purpose are the pointed arch, vaults, and flying buttresses.

Vaults were made up of crossed pointed arches, allowing the weight of the building to be concentrated on the corners of the vault, rather than along the whole length of the wall, as in a barrel vault. This lessened the need for the wall to provide structural support, and so allowed for large windows. The combination of pointed arches and vaulting expanded the architectural possibilities of width, since a pointed arch does not lose stability as it gets wider, and vaulting could provide support on straight sections as well as around corners.⁶ Flying buttresses served as external support for the columns that descended from the corners of the vaults, and they were often intricately decorated, so that “heavy pieces of stone were made to appear light, delicate, even ephemeral, to float and soar in ways that seem impossible.”⁷ This is one example of the integration of artwork directly into the practical and essential support of the building. A Gothic cathedral was not only meant to display excellent artwork, it was itself one grand masterpiece. The medieval understanding of art was that it is a human expression of something that cannot be found in nature, therefore it was deemed special and worthy

⁵ Ibid., 331-32.

⁶ Ibid., 333.

⁷ Robert A. Scott, *The Gothic Enterprise: A Guide to Understanding the Medieval Cathedral* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 163.

to be used in the holy Mass. Using anything but the best available art could be interpreted by God as an offense, or something less than total devotion.⁸

The display of faith through the art of a cathedral soon became a popular form of devotion, and Gothic architecture spread widely from France into other parts of Europe, most notably England, Spain, Italy, and Germany. In Germany, the Gothic style was accepted very slowly and with much resistance, due to the long and deeply entrenched history of Romanesque architecture. During the time Germany was ruled by the Hohenstaufen Dynasty, the Romanesque style pervaded as the accepted German norm, however, when the dynasty ended in 1254, Germany gradually broke apart into several “semi-independent” states, and the Romanesque consistency dissolved as well. As a result, foreign artists and architects brought their individual and cultural styles to Germany, and any distinctly “German” tradition began to dissolve.⁹ The reason Gothic did not immediately replace Romanesque as the German style was because a “unified national tradition of Gothic cathedral design” would have required a unified nation. Instead, “centralised authority was everywhere in retreat before regional particularism and the bishops had become ... [preoccupied] with extending their temporal powers.”¹⁰ The bishops were very adept at gathering support from the lay population for church construction projects, and since these churches reflected the bishops’ own power and stylistic preferences, their designs varied widely across the country until Gothic began to take hold as a popular tradition.

⁸ Ibid., 155.

⁹ Wim Swaan, *The Gothic Cathedral* (Hertfordshire: Omega Books, Ltd., 1969), 225.

¹⁰ Christopher Wilson, *The Gothic Cathedral: The Architecture of the Great Church* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 150.

Although the architecture of post-1250s Germany is considered Gothic, it shows a clear German interpretation of the style. German architecture was heavily influenced by the Romanesque buildings of the Dominicans, Franciscans, and especially the Cistercians, who built simple, unadorned structures that eventually gave rise to the popular “Hallenkirche,” or “hall church.”¹¹ Hall churches were built in the Cistercian view as a place of prayer, not as “the model of heavenly Jerusalem or the house of God.”¹² The most distinctive aspect of the hall church is its single large space, dedicated to prayer and worship. This created a sense of oneness, an important feature that was adapted to the Gothic style to illustrate the unity among worshippers. Many elements of Gothic architecture were at first considered excessive to the German taste, as early hall churches were largely unadorned, with low vaulting and undecorated buttresses. Similarly, transepts, ambulatories, and radiating chapels were virtually nonexistent. When the Gothic style was eventually accepted in Germany (about one hundred years after the rebuilding of St.-Denis), very little sculpture could be found on the exterior of the churches, as it was mostly held inside.¹³

Without question, the most important and spectacular work held in the Cologne Cathedral is the shrine of the Three Magi, attributed to the workshop of Nikolaus von Verdun and considered “one of the most celebrated examples of the Romanesque goldsmith’s art.”¹⁴ Much of Cologne’s fame can be attributed to the shrine, as well as to other relics relating to the Magi, who were thought to be the first Christian kings.¹⁵ Once the relics of the Magi were brought to Cologne in 1164, the city became a primary

¹¹ Louis Grodecki, *Gothic Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977), 279.

¹² Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture*, 343.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 343-44.

¹⁴ Wim Swaan, *The Gothic Cathedral*, 225.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 226.

destination for pilgrims from all over the world. The shrine attracted Christians from all walks of life to gather under one roof as equals and offer gifts and prayers. Peasants as well as nobles and even kings came to pay homage at the shrine.¹⁶

The social situation in the city that held the site of such an important church was one that was very diverse, with a thriving merchant population. Cologne's economy depended mainly on trade via the Rhine River, as the city's location in the 14th and 15th centuries was an important point at the crossings of European trade routes.¹⁷ As a centre of economic activity, Cologne attracted people from all over Europe, particularly artists. It was impossible for one unified artistic style to dominate, because artists came from many different places to study in what Petrarch called, "the royal city."¹⁸

Cologne had been an important centre for many centuries, and one with a constant religious population, as evidenced by the ancient churches beneath its surface. The cathedral that preceded the current structure dates back to Carolingian times, and beneath that are the remains of a Merovingian building. The Carolingian church, the "old Cathedral," was much smaller than today's church, and it had two choirs, each with a crypt beneath it, one dedicated to St. Peter, and the other dedicated to St. Mary.¹⁹ In contrast to the current building, the west front of this old Cathedral was rather nondescript. Besides the constant presence of a cathedral in Cologne, there were many other churches, which were considered prime examples of German Romanesque architecture. These beautiful works made the old Cathedral look archaic, and its design

¹⁶ Prof. Dr. Andreas Huppertz, *Der Kölner Dom und seine Kunstschatze*, my translation (Köln: Greven Verlag, 1964), 23-24.

¹⁷ Rolf Toman, *The Art of Gothic: Architecture, Sculpture, Painting*, translated by Christian von Arnim, et al. (Cologne: Könemann Verlagsgesellschaft, 1999), 428.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 264.

¹⁹ Karl Hegel, Karl Gustav Theodor Schröder, Anton Birlinger, *Die Chroniken der niederrheinischen Städte*, vol. 3, my translation (Leipzig: Verlag von S. Hirzel, 1877), 627.

seemed somewhat inadequate for its important role as the site of the shrine of the Three Magi.²⁰ The only other Gothic structure in Cologne at the time the Cathedral was built was the town hall, the majority of the city being in the Romanesque style, a contrast that helped the Cathedral to stand out in particular glory.²¹ Archbishop Engelbert of Cologne realised the inadequacy of the early Cathedral once the shrine was brought, and plans for the new Gothic church were begun. The current Cathedral, with its soaring vaults and magnificent west front, is second only to the cathedrals in Milan and Seville in size.²² The grand scale of the Cathedral embodies the builders' goal to achieve perfection in their architecture, and to outperform their French counterparts in height and splendour.

Although the plans were never finalised during the time of Engelbert, the project was continued by Archbishop Konrad von Hochstaden, whose power and influence neared that of a king. Cologne was one of Konrad's most important cities, so he needed a cathedral in the classic French style, not anything too individualistic, so that he could make an impression with the French king. The Cologne Cathedral is therefore modeled after French buildings, but constructed to make an even more impressive statement.²³

The building of any cathedral is no small task, and the Cologne Cathedral was a particularly ambitious endeavour. Over many centuries, countless people were involved in the planning and construction of the Cathedral, and they came from both religious and secular circles. The first plans for the Cathedral were drawn by the architect Master Gerhard, who had studied the cathedrals at Amiens and Beauvais in detail, but whose

²⁰ Prof. Dr. Andreas Huppertz, *Der Kölner Dom und seine Kunstschatze*, 15-16, 19, 24.

²¹ Rolf Toman, *The Art of Gothic*, 114, 264.

²² Wim Swaan, *The Gothic Cathedral*, 226.

²³ Rolf Toman, *The Art of Gothic*, 114.

nationality is controversial between sources. The French Gothic style was spread by traveling architects, of which Gerhard (or, Gérard) may have been one, but other sources (particularly German ones) claim Gerhard to have been indisputably German.²⁴ What is important is that his design gave Germans a cathedral to be proud of, one that exemplifies the epitome of Gothic architecture. Enough variation exists between Gerhard's separate building projects throughout his life that it is clear he did not restrict himself to any one style, however he still adhered to architectural norms within a style. By designing the Cologne Cathedral using classic, basic shapes and methods, he closely followed the Gothic "norm" and created *the* Gothic cathedral, rather than a variation of it.²⁵

In order to begin construction on the new Cathedral in Cologne, the eastern part of the old one was removed, during which process the building caught fire and all but the walls was destroyed. It was rebuilt enough that Mass could be held there, and construction on the new Cathedral was begun in 1248. Archbishop Konrad ceremoniously laid the foundation stone in a celebration attended by the German king Wilhelm von Holland and various princes. Ample funding from the Cathedral chapter, as well as from citizens and foreign enthusiasts, allowed building to begin confidently and immediately.²⁶

As a sacred space, the medieval belief was that the Cathedral should be built using materials that were adequate in God's eyes. As a result, it is made of stone, a material considered worthy because of its ability to withstand time, weather, change,

²⁴ Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture*, 343. Paul Clemen, H. Neu, F. Witte, review by Heinrich Appel, *Der Dom zu Köln: Die Kunstdenkmäler der Rheinprovinz*, my translation (München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, GmbH, 1938), 67.

²⁵ Paul Frankl, *Gothic Architecture*, trans. Dieter Pevsner (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1962), 127.

²⁶ Prof. Dr. Andreas Huppertz, *Der Kölner Dom und seine Kunstschatze*, 26.

and human activity. Similarly, in order to attract God into the cathedral, sacred space was clearly separated from secular space by massive walls, and the “Gates of Heaven” in the west front.²⁷ The space within the cathedral is also divided, into areas of increasing sacredness, indicated by steps in the nave, and the choir screen between the west and east ends. Moving from west to east up the nave, steps lead upward at intervals to illustrate the progressively more intense sacredness from the ground level at the west end to the elevated altar. The choir screen divides clergy and laypeople into their prescribed areas of the choir and nave, and even among the clergy only certain people were allowed into the most sacred presbytery, where the high altar is located.²⁸

Due to the high concentration of divine forces in the presbytery, Gothic cathedrals were typically built with much emphasis on the beauty of the eastern apse and choir, however, Cologne Cathedral is the first to focus more on the west front. The plan for the west front, called the “F Plan,” influenced the design of the famous tower at the Freiburg cathedral, and Cologne’s features can also be found in churches such as the Marienkirche in Lübeck, the cathedral in Verden-an-der-Aller, and the chapel of the Marburg Castle.²⁹

The construction of the Cathedral proceeded smoothly since its beginning in 1248, and when the choir was dedicated in 1322, the relics of the Three Magi were returned to the church.³⁰ Once finished, the choir was closed off with a temporary wall, however, unbeknownst to the builders at the time, the “temporary” wall would remain for

²⁷ Robert A. Scott, *The Gothic Enterprise*, 154-58.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 159-60.

²⁹ Rolf Toman, *The Art of Gothic*, 195-200.

³⁰ Karl Hegel, *Die Chroniken der niederrheinischen Städte*, xcvi.

over five hundred years.³¹ Construction stopped in 1560, due to economic and political crisis, after sporadic work during the one hundred years prior. The Cathedral was then left untouched, and at the mercy of “wind, rain, [and] frost” until its completion in the nineteenth century.³² It gradually fell into a state of decay, the wooden structures suffering much water damage and the vaults threatening to collapse.³³ As a sorrowful tribute to the incomplete masterpiece, the crane used for lifting building materials was left atop the stump of the south tower, and it “appears as a landmark in every view of the city between the fifteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries.”³⁴ It was not until the 1800s when, in “a great burst of nationalism,” enthusiasm for the Gothic style was rekindled and work on the Cathedral was continued.³⁵

After several hundred years of neglect, the goal of completion had to be set aside while intensive restoration work took place. The first three master builders were limited to stabilising vaults and replacing woodwork, but in 1863 the temporary wall that sealed the choir was taken down, and the choir and nave were connected to unify the body of the Cathedral. In the same year work on the towers was continued, until the whole Cathedral was finally completed in the fall of 1880, an event attended by Kaiser Wilhelm I, and marked ceremoniously by the placing of the finial on the south tower.³⁶ Before any of this restorative work could be carried out, though, many people were involved in reviving interest in the Cathedral and persuading those in authority to sanction its completion.

³¹ Wim Swaan, *The Gothic Cathedral*, 226.

³² Prof. Dr. Andreas Huppertz, *Der Kölner Dom und seine Kunstschatze*, 34.

³³ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁴ Wim Swaan, *The Gothic Cathedral*, 226.

³⁵ Louis Grodecki, *Gothic Architecture*, 290.

³⁶ Prof. Dr. Andreas Huppertz, *Der Kölner Dom und seine Kunstschatze*, 37-42.

In the 1790s, when the French Revolutionary Army drew close to Cologne, the Cathedral treasures were removed for safekeeping. These included the plans and drawings for the west front, which were transported with other items to Amorbach and eventually lost and forgotten. In Amorbach, the large “F-Plan” was used by a family for some time to dry beans, and later wrapped around their son’s new suitcase to protect it as he traveled to the university in Darmstadt. It was in Darmstadt, in the attic of the inn where the son arrived that the Plan was rediscovered and recognised by G. Moller as the missing drawing of the west front.³⁷ The discovery of the F-Plan was part of the reason the Cathedral was continued, because the availability of the Gothic drawing allowed the west front to be built in keeping with the original design. However, a more powerful force behind the renewal of interest in the Cathedral was Sulpiz Boisserée and his detailed drawings of the Cathedral as it would appear when completed.

Sulpiz took a strong interest in the Cathedral, and felt it was a shame to leave such a magnificent church to decay. To gain support for his plan to have the Cathedral completed, he committed his time and energy to producing incredibly detailed drawings of the Cathedral in its state of disrepair in the early 1800s, as well as how it would look if completed. Once Sulpiz had a considerable collection of elevations and cross-sections, he presented his drawings to influential religious and secular leaders on his journey to Heidelberg to meet with his most important supporter of all: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.³⁸ While Goethe was considered the “apostle of Classicism,” he was also known to show “the most uncompromising hostility to every form of medieval art.”³⁹ Upon

³⁷ Ibid., 57-58.

³⁸ W. D. Robson-Scott, *The Literary Background of the Gothic Revival in Germany*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 158-61.

³⁹ Ibid., 161.

seeing Sulpiz' drawings, however, Goethe became an advocate of the cause by helping Sulpiz to exhibit his works, and by publicly praising Sulpiz' dedication and expertise.⁴⁰

It was Sulpiz' drawings that first began to awaken a sense of nationalist commitment to the Cathedral, when in 1814 author Joseph Görres' "flaming words instructed the completion of the cathedral, as thanks to God for the Fatherland's liberty from France." Such fervent words inspired much enthusiasm among Cologne's citizens, and people were once again inspired to come together in an effort to finish their Cathedral. Once the Cathedral was completed, however, it did not stand long before valuables were once again removed in anticipation of World War I. After the attacks, a lack of funding prevented repairs from taking place, and the stones of the Cathedral slowly deteriorated in the thickly polluted air. WWI was only the beginning of the severe damage the Cathedral would suffer, as Andreas Huppertz notes, "In no way...could the destruction of the first World War be compared to that of the second...the Cathedral became the victim of fourteen bombs and nineteen grenades."⁴¹ This could be due in part to the church's proximity to the train station and rail bridge, which were frequent targets. Much of the vaulting and remaining windows were destroyed, as well as the Cathedral organ. After WWII, rebuilding took place quickly until 1948, when the 700th anniversary of the 1248 groundbreaking was celebrated, and the Cathedral was fully restored by 1956.⁴²

It is difficult to determine exactly how closely the finished Cathedral resembles its original design, but it is certain that the designer had some comprehensive vision for the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 183.

⁴¹ Ibid., 42-43.

⁴² Ibid., 43.

church, even though he knew he would not live to see it completed.⁴³ As a Gothic cathedral, Cologne represents the flawless unity of art and architecture, as well as the bond between God and humankind. People of the city not only come together as one to worship, rather they have been as one throughout the life of their beloved Cathedral, from its beginning to its restoration, and they continue to work together to maintain its status as a symbol of unity.

Some critics argue that the design of the Cathedral is faulty, particularly the F Plan, because the towers of the west front make the portal appear shrunken and disproportionate, so that a single tower may have suited it better. While this may have improved the aesthetic, the builders were more interested in the representation of oneness, and a single tower would have been an “‘imperfection’ [that] would never have been countenanced by the nineteenth-century patriots to whom the completed Cathedral was to be a symbol of German unification.”⁴⁴

During that time, when the west front was completed, Cologne had just gained freedom from French control and the Gothic revival took hold. The Cathedral was finished according to its original design as a tribute to the Germans who started it, and to Germany’s medieval past. Cologne’s citizens took great pride in their Cathedral, because it was a masterpiece of Gothic style that rivaled its French counterparts, and it was built by German hands. The Cathedral has remained the focus of the city, and even today the people retain a sense of care and responsibility for the old building. The south window, for example, which was destroyed in WWII, was replaced in 2002 with a window designed by local artist Gerhard Richter, a project that brought “over 1000

⁴³ Paul Clemen, *Der Dom zu Köln*, 68.

⁴⁴ Wim Swaan, *The Gothic Cathedral*, 230.

citizens [together]...to collect €370 000 for the building expense.”⁴⁵ Just as it promoted the collaboration of clergy, artisans, worshippers, and donors hundreds of years ago, the Cologne Cathedral continues to bring people together and remains a divine representation of the human community.

⁴⁵ Edgar Haupt, “Gerhard Richters Fenster für den Kölner Dom: Es werde Licht!” my translation, *Baumeister*, 2007, 8.

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