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GOTHIC CATHEDRALS: A SHIFT IN CHRISTIANS' RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

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Humanities: Western Civilization

May 1st, 2019

Medieval cathedrals epitomize the Gothic style. With their immense height and cavernous space, soaring vaults and pointed arches, religious sculptures and stained glass, Gothic cathedrals exude elegance. Pillars and arches begin wide at their base and thin out as they ascend upwards. So too do the flying buttresses, ascending to Gothic architecture's most signature feature: the towering steeple. The Gothic style first emerged in the 12th century, and most cathedrals were built in the following few centuries.<sup>1</sup> Gothic architecture differed from previous styles in that it had to convey the Christian ideals expected from an overwhelmingly Christian society.<sup>2</sup> Naturally, this goal to represent Christian values in architecture shaped cathedral design. Unlike the simple, open temples of ancient Greece and Rome, Gothic cathedrals are massive, enclosed structures. Cathedrals' walled-in design intends to block out nature and earthly distractions, modeling Christian themes of inner focus and sin resistance. The soaring pillars, arches, and steeples of Gothic architecture compel viewers to trace these features upwards with their eyes, conveying the Christian ideas of heaven and God. These architectural themes of enclosure and upwardness in Gothic cathedrals reinforce specific ideas of Christian ideology. Overall, the emergence of this unique, new Gothic style and the subsequent construction of Gothic cathedrals enabled Christians to develop a more personal connection to God.

Before the emergence of Gothic cathedrals in the 12th century, two main power structures shaped Europe: the Catholic Church and secular rulers, such as kings or emperors. During this extremely Christian age, the Church held immense power and governed the "Papal

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy M. Thibodeau, "Western Christendom, c. 1000–1400," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, *Oxfordreference.com*, 2018, doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.536.

<sup>2</sup> Francis D.K. Ching, Mark M. Jarzombek, and Vikramaditya Prakash, *A Global History of Architecture* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2007), 614.

States”<sup>3</sup>. The Church claimed supreme authority over kings and emperors, citing Constantine’s Donation.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, kings and emperors sought to retain power over their domains, often clashing with the Church. Conflicts between Church and state arose over the idea of lay investiture, the practice of secular rulers appointing church officials themselves instead of the Church. This period of dispute is characterized as the “Investiture Controversy” in which “a sharp division between the clerical order and the laity was imposed on Christian society.”<sup>5</sup> Famously, Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV clashed with Pope Gregory VII over the idea of lay investiture. Gregory wanted to retain the power of appointing church officials, so he wielded the power of the Church to excommunicate Henry. However, Gregory later revoked Henry’s excommunication after Henry traveled to beg the pope for forgiveness. But when Henry began practicing lay investiture again, Gregory excommunicated him for the second time. This time Henry responded by marching on Pope Gregory and running him out. Overall, the time period leading up to the emergence of Gothic architecture and cathedrals was shaped by the chaotic power dynamic between the Church and secular rulers.

The development of the Gothic style characterizes a shift in architects’ goals and their personal effect on Christianity. Unlike prior architectural styles, the physical features of Gothic architecture “prompt particular mental associations and ideas” and convey a “religious feeling,

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<sup>3</sup> Italian territories governed by the Pope from 755 CE to 1860 CE.

<sup>4</sup> "Donation of Constantine," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, Oxford University Press, 2005, *Oxfordreference.com*. Constantine’s Donation is a forged document in which Emperor Constantine ceded ruling authority to the Pope.

<sup>5</sup> "Investiture Controversy," *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. Livingstone, E. A., Oxford University Press, 2013, *Oxfordreference.com*.

an appreciation of the presence of the Deity and the Christian supernatural.”<sup>6</sup> Christians would now be reminded of God by physical structures, which signifies a shift from the intangible, abstruse nature of religion to a concrete, observable representation of faith. The sketchbook of Gothic-era designer Villard de Honnecourt exemplifies the architectural shift toward the religious Gothic style. Unfortunately, absolutely nothing is known about Villard de Honnecourt outside of his sketchbook.<sup>7</sup> Even his birthplace, the small, French commune of Honnecourt, provides no evidence of Villard or his work; however, based on his sketches and captions, historians estimate Villard de Honnecourt was active between 1225 and 1250.<sup>8</sup> Villard’s sketches of cathedrals such as those at Cambrai, Chartres, and Rheims show at the very least that he observed and studied the construction of great cathedrals, if not worked on such projects himself.<sup>9</sup> Villard further validates the underlying religious motivations of Gothic architecture in his design for a lectern. Villard states, “Whoever wishes to make a lectern for reading the Gospel, see here the best way I know” (*Ki velt faire .i. letris por sus lire evangille. ves ent ci le mellor*

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Aspin, "'Our Ancient Architecture': Contesting Cathedrals in Late Georgian England," *Architectural History* 54 (2011): 215, *Jstor.org*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41418353>.

<sup>7</sup> Villard de Honnecourt, *The Sketchbook of Villard De Honnecourt*, ed. Theodore Bowie, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959), 6. This page refers to the editor’s introduction, not Villard de Honnecourt’s sketches.

<sup>8</sup> de Honnecourt, *The Sketchbook of Villard De Honnecourt*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> de Honnecourt, *The Sketchbook of Villard De Honnecourt*, 41, 47, 49. These pages correspond to sketches of the cathedrals at Cambrai, Chartres, and Rheims respectively and are cited merely as examples, as they do not encompass all of Villard de Honnecourt’s sketches of cathedrals.

*maniere que io sace*).<sup>10</sup> Understanding the overtly religious purpose of Villard's lectern explains his incorporation of dragons into the design, given their biblical connotations.<sup>11</sup> The religious nature of Villard's sketch reflects Gothic architects' goal to create "testimonials of this high epoch of medieval Christianity"<sup>12</sup> and represent Christianity in physical structures. In the Gothic time period, designers and architects were able to personally contribute to the creation of a Christian style.

In addition to the individual contributions of architects, secular leaders played a prominent, individual role in the construction of Gothic architecture, not only demonstrating a shift in the Church's power but also a change in Christians' perceived relationship with God. For example, in the early 13th century, England's King Henry III oversaw the financing and construction of Salisbury Cathedral. The cathedral was created after "conflicts between secular and ecclesiastical authority" forced the cathedral chapter of Old Sarum "from the precincts of the outer bailey of Sarum Castle."<sup>13</sup> In a letter to King Henry III, the bishop of Chester confirms the plan to relocate the church of Old Sarum to New Sarum<sup>14</sup>:

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<sup>10</sup> Carl F. Barnes and Stacey L. Hahn, *The Portfolio of Villard De Honnecourt (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale De France, MS Fr 19093) A New Critical Edition and Color Facsimile*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 57.

<sup>11</sup> Three dragons make up the base of Villard de Honnecourt's lectern. In the Bible, Satan is compared to a dragon, while the lectern's base is the closest part to the ground (thus Hell).

<sup>12</sup> Jean Gimpel, *The Cathedral Builders*, trans. Carl F. Barnes, (London: Evergreen, 1961), 12.

<sup>13</sup> Pamela Z. Blum, "The Sequence of the Building Campaigns at Salisbury," *The Art Bulletin* 73, no. 1 (1991): 7, *Jstor.org*, doi:10.2307/3045776.

<sup>14</sup> New Sarum and Salisbury are used interchangeably and refer to the same place. As of 2009, Salisbury is the official name of the city.

You should know that we, out of reverence and honor for God and the blessed Mary, eternal virgin, and for the health of ourselves and of our ancestors and heirs, conceded and with the present charter confirmed to God, to the church of Saint Mary, whose translation from our castle of Salisbury to a lesser place we hold [to be] correct, and at whose foundation we laid the first stone.<sup>15</sup>

This concession acknowledges King Henry III's involvement in overseeing the cathedral chapter's relocation and constitutes the king's substantial authority over his territory, as the Church apparently lacked the ability to make this decision without the king's consent. King Henry III also led the Gothic rebuilding of Westminster Abbey. Henry steadily increased his involvement in the project until he "took over as sole patron in 1245 ... creating an ideological base from which Henry III could claim the right to exert royal power over the bishops."<sup>16</sup>

Henry's dominant role in the rebuilding of Westminster Abbey displays the power of local leaders and the crucial role they played in the construction of Gothic buildings. Henry's devotion in erecting religious structures not only displays his role as an administrator but exemplifies his goal to personally contribute to Christianity. Henry, whose "personal piety tended to be wide-ranging, capricious, and shallow,"<sup>17</sup> may have constructed religious buildings in the Gothic style to improve his own image in the eyes of God. Although altruistic by appearance, Henry's

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<sup>15</sup> "Charters and Documents Illustrating the History of the Cathedral, City, and Diocese of Salisbury in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries," ed. W. Rich Jones, trans. Richard Barton, *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores (Rolls Series)*, v. 97 (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1891), reprint, Kraus Reprint Ltd., 1965.

<sup>16</sup> Suzanne Lewis, "Henry III and the Gothic Rebuilding of Westminster Abbey: The Problematics of Context," *Traditio* 50 (1995): 147, *Jstor.org*, [www.jstor.org/stable/27831914](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27831914).

<sup>17</sup> Lewis, "Henry III and the Gothic Rebuilding of Westminster Abbey," 145-146.

commitment to construct Gothic structures can be seen through the lens of the shift within Christianity, where Christians sought a more personal relationship with God. It's not that rulers were more pious or devoted to Christianity than the lower classes, but King Henry III's position of power enabled him to personally contribute to Christianity and connect to Deity. The Gothic period ushered in the ability for secular leaders to personally contribute to Christianity demonstrating the growth of an individual connection God.

Furthermore, laypeople played a key role in the development of Gothic cathedrals. Generous churchgoers would often contribute voluntary donations to help fund cathedrals. This individual participation in the process of constructing cathedrals indicates a shift within Christianity in which laypeople sought a more personal relationship with the religion and God. For example, in building the cathedral at Cologne, the Church heavily relied on contributions from local church patrons to fund the cathedral's construction: "expenses for the works are for the main part paid for from the alms and offerings of the faithful" (*ipsius sumptus fabricae pro magna sui parte ex Christi fidelium elemosinis et oblationibus probeniunt*).<sup>18</sup> Whether money was donated at the altar or the cemetery, laypeople aspired to contribute to the construction of religious buildings, and in certain cases, "contributions from the faithful outweighed all others."

<sup>19</sup> For instance, Chartres cathedral, after being destroyed by a fire in 1194, underwent an expensive reconstruction (Image 1). Although the bishops provided the primary funding for rebuilding the cathedral in the three years after the fire, contributions from faithful pilgrims

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<sup>18</sup> Wim Vroom, *Financing Cathedral Building in the Middle Ages: The Generosity of the Faithful*, trans. Elizabeth Manton, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 155.

<sup>19</sup> Vroom, *Financing Cathedral Building in the Middle Ages*, 156.



surpassed even their funding after a series of miracles occurred.<sup>20</sup> Because Gothic cathedrals were shaped by an “architecture of the spirit” and reflected “the inner structure of man and his thoughts,”<sup>21</sup> laypeople felt a personal connection to Divinity when they contributed monetary donations to such works. Whether church patrons merely contributed a one-time donation or only donated after miracles occurred is irrelevant; laypeople’s monetary donations were meant to cultivate a more personal relationship with Christianity and God. The funding of the cathedrals at both Cologne and Chartres demonstrates the importance of laypeople in the construction of religious monuments and characterizes a shift within Christianity where individuals gained the means to develop a direct relationship with Deity.



Image 1: Chartres cathedral was rebuilt after the fire in 1194. Most of the Gothic-era stained glass and sculpture survive, making the cathedral one of the most 'complete' medieval buildings in existence.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Vroom, *Financing Cathedral Building in the Middle Ages*, 156. A relic worn by the Virgin Mary, the *Sancta Camisia*, was kept behind the high altar at Chartres cathedral, and Mary is rumored to have performed a series of miracles at Chartres cathedral during the cathedral’s reconstruction.

<sup>21</sup> Ulrike Altenmüller, Bruno Taut, and Matthew Mindrup, "The City Crown," *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-) 63, no. 1 (2009): 122, *Jstor.org*.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40481009>.

<sup>22</sup> Etienne Neurdein, Chartres Cathedral, North Portal, Church; photographs, Place: Washington University (Saint Louis, Mo.) Art & Architecture Library, *Artstor.org*,  
[https://library.artstor.org/asset/SS34144\\_34144\\_15627774](https://library.artstor.org/asset/SS34144_34144_15627774).

The development of Gothic cathedrals indicates the underlying force that shaped medieval society was piety. Cathedrals were born out a communal effort undertaken by the Catholic Church, revolutionary architects, secular leaders, and generous laypeople. The field as a whole must further examine cathedrals as manifestations and expressions of society's goal to connect with God on a personal level. The idea that Gothic cathedrals signified a shift in Christianity, in which Christians sought and achieved a more personal relationship with God, is an idea not commonly associated with Medieval society. Most historians would link the theme of individualism to the Renaissance time period. Examining Gothic cathedrals through the lens of individualism could help explain the initial development of this theme, which helped incite the Protestant Reformation. Gothic cathedrals may have been the first step in the evolution of individualism. The modern relevance of this topic and the physical importance of cathedrals was reinforced by the recent fire at Notre Dame cathedral which broke out on April 15th, 2019. The extensive news coverage and the emotional reactions of onlookers demonstrate the significance of the structure itself as a symbol of Christianity and people's ability to feel a personal, emotional connection to God, through the building. The reaction of Christians and non-Christians alike speaks to the significance of Notre Dame cathedral as not only a symbol of religion, but a symbol of architecture and even a symbol of France as a whole.

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