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The Gothic Cathedral as a Theological and Aesthetic Project

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When looking at a Gothic cathedral,[1] one has the irresistible impression that it is not merely a sacred building. Its compact architectural structure, unlike that of other buildings of the period, like nothing else focuses in itself as in a lens all that formed the essence of the era in which it was created, its *epistemé*. In other words, a Gothic cathedral may be called the heartbeat of its age. The most important feature that should be noted when analyzing the sacred architecture of Europe between the 12th and the 14th centuries is that it goes far beyond the architectural design itself (understood as the building's functionalism), the style, or the use of innovative structural solutions. The Gothic cathedral is where aesthetic preferences are interwoven with the prevailing ideology, the

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[1] The term Gothic cathedral used in the text is a generalization made for the purposes of these analyses and does not refer either to a particular building or to any specific region in which cathedrals were built. Rather, it is an indication of some of the common features of sacred buildings which first appeared in France and influenced sacred architecture across Europe between the 12th and the 14th century.

idea of statehood, the relationship between papacy and the empire, and the philosophy of the time.

Modern reception of the Middle Ages

Unfortunately, today's reception of Gothic is not a simple matter, for several reasons. The common way of understanding Gothic is fraught with many misunderstandings, beginning with the very name of the style which suggests that it was created mainly by the Goths. Behind this misinterpretation is the reluctance of Renaissance architects (particularly the Florentine architect Leon Battista Alberti) to do anything that was foreign to the Renaissance theory of beauty. In Italy, foreign works of art, unlike the sophisticated architecture of Italy and Greece, were considered barbaric, primitive and simplistic; in other words, such as may have emerged in the German mind, for example, which was viewed in the Middle Ages as lacking aesthetic finesse, clumsy and tasteless. In fact, the Gothic style had nothing to do with the Goth tribe; it emerged in France, and then gradually spread to the rest of Europe. Another difficulty involved in the perception of Gothic is the still prevalent belief that the Middle Ages produced an endemic and very hermetic system of theocentricism that rejected sensual sensitivity in favor of spiritual values. In this view, the Middle Ages are seen as a time of civilizational stagnation in which the moss-grown scholastic mind fought against every sign of progress and science, suppressing all sensual sensibility whose purpose was not to contemplate God. One needs only to confront this mistaken and most unjust belief with the abundant Latin literature of the Middle Ages, however, to see its great sensual sensitivity to the world. Latin Middle Ages[2] developed a systematic aesthetic theory using sophisticated philosophical language to analyze phenomena related to beauty, sublimity, art, and artistic creation. Admiration for beauty, the search for it in nature, is therefore

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[2] The term Latin Middle Ages refers to theoretical reflections (both in philosophy and theology) written in Latin as the universal language of the age.

a constant feature of the era, which is why in addition to strictly theological speculations medieval literature inculdes numerous treatises describing, for instance, the beauty of women (see *Ars Versificatoria* by Matthew of Vendôme[3]), sensual commentaries on the *Songs of Songs*, or even issues in fashion or tips on how women should braid their hair to arouse admiration (*Tractatus de Beatudinibus Evangelicis* by Baldwin of Canterbury[4]). If we accept the hypothesis about the sensual nature of the Middle Ages, we will not be surprised by the peculiar 12th century text *Sermones in Canticum Salomonis* by Gilberth of Hoyt in which the clergyman dwells on the right proportions of women's breasts. As pointed out by Umberto Eco, "his ideal reminds us of the ladies of medieval miniaturists, their tight corsets binding and raising the bosom. *Pulchra sunt enim ubera, quae paululum supereminent, et tument modice quasi repressa, sed non depressa; leniter restricta, non fluitantia licenter* (The breasts are most pleasing when they are of moderate size and eminence. …They should be bound but not flattened, restrained with gentleness but not given too much licence)."[5] Among the many signs of delight in the idea of beauty, the Gothic cathedral undoubtedly remains one of the highest achievements of Latin art. When admiring it, we have no doubt that in aesthetic terms it may be called a rather audacious project, being an attempt to show in architecture that which could not be seen or known through the senses.

The Gothic cathedral as a self-contained structure

The design of the cathedral was not intended solely as a visual display of the wealth of the founder, or as a pragmatic presentation of the idea of progress in engineering or technology, as these were merely the means and tools employed in order to achieve the overarching goal which was

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[3] Matthew of Vedôme, *Ars versificatoria*, in: E. Faral, *Les Arts poétiques du XIIe et du XIIIe siècle. Recherches et documents sur la technique littéraire au Moyen Age*, Paris 1971, p. 129.

[4] Cf. Baldwin of Canterbury, *Tractatus de Beatudinibus Evangelicus*, Paris 1924, p. 481.

[5] U. Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. by H. Bredin, New Haven–London 2002, p. 11, quoting *Sermones in Canticum Salomoni*, XXXI, 4 (PL 184, col. 163).

an attempt to resurrect the memory of the biblical house of Solomon. Therefore, the original design of the Gothic cathedral was conceived as an image of the heavenly Jerusalem, a building that was to be an earthly representation of the future paradise. Consequently, all engineering solutions were subordinated to a design taken from the Apocalypse, describing the archetype of a perfect temple. The first step towards this ambitious plan was made by Suger of the Abbey of Saint-Denis in France. Suger was a rather unique figure, a stubborn visionary with in-depth knowledge. At the age of twenty-six, he took part in debates on the issue of crusades on behalf of the Benedictine Order. He was appointed legate for the Council of Poitiers in 1106 and acted as a representative of the Order responsible for contacts with the Holy See. Since the future Abbot of Saint-Denis went to school together with Louis VI, later King of France, he was able to raise considerable funds for the expansion of the Abbey, which under his visionary curate became over time not only the largest abbey in France, but also a seedbed of changes in sacred architecture. In a sense, in addition to being a skilled manager of the Abbey, Suger was also an able politician and someone along the lines of a humanist. In time, under the rule of young Suger, the Abbey of Saint-Denis turned into a meeting place of the empire and papacy, and due to its unique character became the burial place of the royal family. The Abbey also stored the insignia of power: the royal crown, seals, scepter and the royal ring. Before this happened, however, Suger decided to completely rebuild the old Abbey, starting with the choir behind the main altar. At first, the change consisted in opening up the space behind the altar. This was made possible by the use of an innovative network of ogival connections supporting the vault, which allowed for the installation in the supporting walls of not so much stained-glass windows, but entire stained-glass panes providing unprecedented illumination of the main apse. It was an innovative and groundbreaking solution, not only in terms of architecture and construction engineering, but also in terms of theology. Thanks to use of a new architectural form, lucidity and elegance of the solutions would, according to Suger, lead the faithful to reflect on God. Otto von Simson was certainly right

to say that Suger "was a child of his age."[6] Yet even though the aesthetic concept of the remodeling of the Abbey of Saint-Denis was approved and received with much enthusiasm, it should be borne in mind that it also had some fierce opponents. Resistance to Suger's vision stemmed from a different understanding of the function of sacred art. One of the fiercest opponents of Suger's project was Bernard of Clairvaux who argued that *decorum* in a temple was an unnecessary, detrimental, and costly luxury that interfered with contemplation and distracted the faithful from God, needlessly disrupting their prayerful concentration. As an accomplished preacher, Bernard of Clairvaux argued: "We who have turned aside from society, relinquishing for Christ's sake all the precious and beautiful things in the world, its wondrous light and colour, its sweet sounds and odours, the pleasures of taste and touch, for us all bodily delights are nothing but dung."[7] Suger's concept was based on an entirely different idea – it was precisely through visual and sensual exposure to sophisticated art that the faithful were to be assisted in contemplation and prayer, and the luminous nature of the building was to be a simple path to God.

The Benedictine vision of splendor – the Abbey of Saint-Denis

In spite of his many duties, Suger personally participated in remodeling the Abbey, made decisions about supplies, visited nearby quarries to find suitable building materials, walked through forests looking for strong timber for the roof truss. The archives of the Abbey still hold mock-ups which he personally constructed, together with a meticulously kept chronicle of the remodeling.[8] His visionary determination was

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[6] O. von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral. Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order*, Princeton 1988, p. 80.

[7] Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apologia ad Guillemum*, in: *S. Bernardii opera omnia*, ed. J.-P. Migne, vol. 1, Parisiis 1859, c. 12 (PL 182, cols. 914–915), as quoted in: U. Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, p. 7.

[8] Cf. E. Panofsky, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St. Denis and Its Art Treasures*, London 1979.

so great that he refused to hire carpenters and masons working on the construction of churches in Normandy as he feared their old building habits would interfere with the form of the new church. Suger's aesthetic audacity was manifested in his desire to create a building that resembled the biblical temple of Solomon. His vision of the building was based on a fundamental principle: the church must exude light, because light reflects the spiritual and directs the senses towards the Heavenly Jerusalem. His conviction bordered on the certainty that the faithful, enchanted by the flicker of colors inside the church, would be transferred from the material to the spiritual sphere, that the luminous splendor would lead them into a state of contemplation which is the beginning of every prayer. In his architectural vision, the church was to reveal to the senses a symbol of the supernatural world.

In the history of Latin art, the Abbey of Saint-Denis is particularly important due to the fact that it has become an inspiration and a model for later Gothic buildings, including the Notre Dame cathedral in Paris. The groundbreaking nature of Gothic architecture consisted, among other things, in the fact that it was not an heir to the previous era (the Romanesque style with its massive, dark, gloomy buildings) but its contradiction; thus, it was not characterized by accumulation, but rather by breakaway and discontinuation. It was an explicit act of criticism, not only of the existing architectural solutions, but also of the overall goals and functions of sacred art. One groundbreaking technical solution behind the artistic innovation was the incorporation of large stained-glass windows into the load-bearing walls. Opting for this spectacular luminism, Abbot Suger wanted his structure to be described by a single word: splendor. Consequently, Gothic architecture practically transforms load-bearing walls into huge frames for luminous stained-glass windows. This artistic treatment entailed a number of technical and engineering obstacles. In the architectural solutions employed in sacred buildings so far, the entire tectonics of the roof was supported by massive stone walls and solid columns connected by a Roman arch. In order to fit windows into the exterior walls of the building, it was necessary to find suitable solutions that would relieve the side walls supporting the weight

of a massive roof. The architects of Saint-Denis constructed a specific form of ribbed vault which further relieved the lateral thrust by transmitting it to side walls supported by flying buttresses. With this procedure, the weight of the roof was transmitted to the outer arches, and this in turn enabled the installation of large panes of stained glass into the side walls of the church. Such a design allowed for light to filter through the massive tectonics of the sacred structure in an unprecedented way and give the impression of extraordinary lightness and finesse. At first glance, this kind of treatment seems to be an innovative engineering solution, which finally made it possible to adequately illuminate the interior of the temple. In fact, it was something else. It is precisely in such procedures that we can see the primacy of the theological program over technical solutions, or even over the very aesthetics of the building. The entire structure of the temple was subordinated to the idea of *claritas*, which was connected with the idea of God. In the sophisticated philosophy of the Middle Ages, the idea of light provided the link between the material and the spiritual, as light was the only element of nature that was both visible and intangible, which made it an ideal metaphor that was laden with meaning, as a sign, a symbol of God. Therefore, the idea of luminism was the binder and keystone of the whole structure. The attributes of light were connected with divinity, which is why Christ was called the Sun of Justice, *Sol Invictus* (Invincible Sun) or explicitly *Pantakrator* (Lord of Light). In line with the principle of associating light with divinity, saints in Christian iconography wear radiant discs above their heads, called halos, as their identification mark.

The entire form of the Gothic cathedral was founded primarily on theology. The concept of its architectural structure was closely related to the system of relations between the faithful and the place of worship in which God was present. It is for this reason that the altar in Gothic cathedrals is always the center of the building. In accordance with the accepted theological tradition (referring back to Hellenistic and Romanesque solutions), the church's apse was oriented eastwards, and liturgy during the period of Gothic religious buildings could only be celebrated at dawn. As the twilight still lingered in the main aisles, the apse with the

altar emerged illuminated by the first rays of the rising sun like a clearing in the forest. The brightest place in the cathedral thus indicated the central point of the building, establishing a certain system of relations, separating the brightly lit place of celebrating the Eucharist and the celebrant from the rest of the faithful, who remained in the less illuminated part of the building. This aesthetic arrangement emphatically set the sacred apart from the profane, established clear boundaries, with light spreading from the altar to the rest of the church. The central, most important moment in the liturgy, celebrated on behalf of the people by the celebrant, was clearly visible and separated from the faithful by the light of daybreak. Thanks to this aesthetic treatment, those present during the liturgy had no doubt they were participating in an unworldly mystery. It is also worth remembering that the solar effect was further enhanced by objects used in liturgy: richly gilded chalices, candle holders, with bright elements of enamel and precious stones producing bright reflections of colored light coming in through the stained-glass windows. All these elements were subordinated to the solar theology.

While the altar with the apse was oriented eastwards, the exit from the cathedral was the least illuminated part of the church and faced westwards where, according to the Judaic tradition, was the land of the dead called Sheol. In other words, a person walking out of the church was leaving behind a vision of the rising sun lighting up the presbytery, and heading towards darkness. This procedure pointed to a system of opposing theological figures: the Lord of Light fighting the Prince of Darkness, the light of grace contrasted with the darkness of sin, and so on. Well thought out down to the last detail, the overall structure required placing figures inspired by medieval bestiaries, i.e. gargoyles in the shape of monsters, horned animals or dragons, outside the cathedral, to be contrasted with smiling figures of angels, free from the troubles and worries of everyday life, placed at the entrance to the church, and the dignified statues of the saints found in the side aisles. A similar structure of relationships may be seen in the stained-glass windows placed inside the building: in the northern, least illuminated part of the cathedral, they showed scenes from the gospels or from the Book of Revelation, and

in the eastern and southern parts, those with the best exposure to light, they depicted scenes of the triumph of faith. Stained glass as such was not only an architectural element, but also had a symbolic function and was an important component of the entire structure. The very layout of the building in the shape of a cross was not accidental either.

Gothic art and scholasticism

In the context of these reflections, it is worth noting a certain coincidence in time. During the same period as the sacred building boldly designed by Abbot Suger, early scholasticism represented by Anselm of Bec, Gilbert de la Porte and Abelard makes heroic attempts at a systemic and philosophical reconciliation of the conflict between faith and science. Later, at the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries, when a new style of sacred buildings was adopted as official and became international, the same occurred in the philosophical system – mature scholasticism entered its period of greatest splendor (Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Alexander of Hales, William of Auvergne). It would seem that achievements in the field of architecture have little in common (apart from coinciding in time[9]) with achievements in philosophy and theology. However, when we compare the ambitions behind the bold architectural design for the expansion of the Abbey Saint-Denis and the attempt to describe and understand, on the grounds of speculative philosophy, individual objects perceived by the senses together with the accompanying psychological acts, we will see that there is some kind of convergence here. Abstract metaphysical ideas derived from the Gothic architecture of sacred buildings (paths to transcendence leading through sensory perception) coincide with the scholastic point of view (reason illuminated by faith is able to explain the central truths of revelation). As mature scholasticism seeks to explain man's place in the world and his relationship with

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[9] Erwin Panofsky points out that *Summa Theologiae* by Alexander of Hales was completed in 1231, the same year that Pierre de Monte began the construction of a new nave in the Abbey of Saint-Denis. Cf. E. Panofsky, *Studia z historii sztuki*, trans. J. Białostocki, Warszawa 1971, p. 35).

God using the tools of formal logic, so Gothic architecture seeks to show and justify the same using the language of art. Both scholasticism and Gothic architecture have a didactic tendency which becomes manifest in their explanation of the intricate truths of faith. In addition, mature scholasticism creates comprehensive *summas*, just as the compact Gothic architecture of sacred buildings is characterized by totality; the Gothic cathedral is a closed system, with a particular structure and appropriate articulation.

The Gothic cathedral is above all a great theological project in which both architecture, engineering and aesthetics are subordinated to one thought: to show the mysteries of faith, its depth and metaphysical beauty through material features. The limits to creative imagination in architecture were determined by liturgy and the Scripture. There was no room for anthropocentrism in this system of relations. Nowadays, it is more difficult for us to appreciate the technical and artistic solutions of the time, because the cathedral is only one of the many massive buildings in the center of Europe's large cities. It is worth remembering, however, that urban planning at the time cathedrals were built was characterized by a skyline of up to three floors, with compact and dark buildings, most often with tiny windows. A man of the Middle Ages walking into a cathedral had the irresistible impression that he was entering a specially dedicated space, a sanctuary of chromatics and splendor, which not only gathered light, but actually exuded it through its stained-glass windows.

Conclusion

In the context of these reflections, it is difficult to uphold the hypothesis about "dark and gloomy medieval times," or the view that the Middle Ages were an era with no aesthetic identity, and therefore their place was between the great Antiquity and the magnificent Renaissance. The example of the medieval Gothic cathedral shows how much of the speculation of Latin Middle Ages was sensitive to sensory stimuli. The art of Gothic cathedrals also had different functions and objectives than modern

sacred art. It was not designed as an artificial, delusive world, it was not a form of escape from the ordinary. For a man of the Middle Ages, the cathedral was real in that it defined the most important things. It was not contractual, but stemmed from timeless premises; it was not an illusion aimed at escaping the truth, but defined is very core. Moreover, one could hardly speak of a full autonomy of art in that period, as it had some overriding objectives: didactic, theological, or utilitarian. In other words, Gothic art stemmed from the longing for a better, more orderly and meaningful world. In the history of art, Gothic architecture strongly emphasizes strictly architectural issues, structural elements are not decorated with mosaics or frescoes, they themselves become part of the *decorum*, endowing the entire building with aesthetic taste. In the Gothic cathedral, the otherwise obvious difference between function and form disappears. The scarce presence, if not downright absence, of wall paintings was aimed at highlighting the perfection of the building, its intricate construction. For this reason, the architecture of Gothic cathedrals should not be regarded solely as a fine architectural style, but rather as a great monument to Latin theological thought, which combines the spiritual with the sphere of art.

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Abstract

The Gothic Cathedral as a Theological and Aesthetic Project

The Gothic cathedral is above all a great theological project in which both architecture, engineering and aesthetics are subordinated to one thought: to show the mysteries of faith, its depth and metaphysical beauty through material features. Moreover, the art of Gothic cathedrals had other functions and purposes than contemporary sacred art. It was not designed as an artificial, illusory world, it was not a form of escape from the ordinary. For a man of the Middle Ages, the cathedral was real in that it defined the most important things. It was not contractual, but stemmed from timeless premises; it was not an illusion aimed at escaping the truth, but defined is very core.

Abstrakt

Katedra gotycka jako projekt teologiczno-estetyczny

Katedra gotycka to przede wszystkim wielkie przedsięwzięcie teologiczne, w którym zarówno architektura, inżynieria, jak i estetyka podporządkowane są jednej myśli: ukazaniu poprzez atrybuty materialne tajemnic wiary, jej głębi i metafizycznego piękno. Architektura katedr gotyckich miała nieco inne funkcje i cele niż współczesna sztuka sakralna. Nie była projektowana jako sztuczny, iluzoryczny świat, nie była formą ucieczki od codzienności. Dla człowieka średniowiecza katedra była realna w tym sensie, że określała to, co w jego życiu najważniejsze. Nie wynikała też z doraźnych potrzeb, lecz z ponadczasowych przesłanek, nie była iluzją, która miała na celu ucieczkę od prawdy, lecz określała jej sedno.

Słowa kluczowe

katedra gotycka, sztuka gotyku, estetyka, filozofia sztuki, scholastyka, *claritas*