

Chapter 4: Intermission: the Vexed History of Great Spires in Thirteenth-century France

The paucity of French great spire construction in the thirteenth century, which stands out as one of the most puzzling features in the diffusion of the spire concept in the century and a half after its invention, has to date received little direct scholarly attention. This neglect largely reflects the natural tendency of art historians to study extant monuments, especially when the monuments in question are as impressive and charismatic as the great cathedrals of France. The cathedrals of Chartres and Reims, for example, are so glorious in their present state that it is hard to think of them as incomplete fragments, even though they lack the dramatic multi-spired silhouettes that their original designers intended.

The few historians of Gothic architecture who have considered the failure of French thirteenth-century spire-building initiatives have generally explained it in terms of style, suggesting that builders soon turned away from the heroic scale of the High Gothic to pursue the delicate and complex formal effects of the mid-century Rayonnant style. According to Louis Grodecki, for instance, "buildings belonging to the generation of 1230 would now tend toward reduced monumentality and a higher degree of sophistication . . . the "gigantism" typical of Chartres has given way to more modest dimensions and less towering proportions."¹ Similarly, Robert Branner affirmed that designers in the decades after 1220 were "preoccupied with decoration, not dimension, and they took other aspects of [the High Gothic] as their sources of inspiration."² From this perspective, the abandonment of ambitious spire projects appears symptomatic of a global retreat from monumentality.

While art historians have at least tacitly accepted this stylistic picture of spire truncation, they have offered widely divergent interpretations of its meaning. In his discussion of Chartres, for instance, Hans Jantzen suggests that "theories about the ideal appearance for a cathedral had undergone some changes in the period around 1220. Many towers impaired the unity of general effect. . . . [The truncated format was] more appropriate to the grouping of the building as a whole than a composition with nine towers".³ For Jantzen, therefore, the restrained proportions of mid-century buildings reflect careful aesthetic judgements on the part of the designers. Indeed, he seems here to imply that good taste required the renunciation of

¹ Louis Grodecki, with Anne Prache and Roland Recht, *Gothic Architecture*, trans. I. Mark Paris (New York, 1985), 68.

² Robert Branner, *Saint Louis and the Court Style of Gothic Architecture* (London, 1965), 15.

³ Jantzen, *High Gothic*, 112.

spires. John James, meanwhile, laments the passing of the High Gothic spire. On the one hand he agrees with his colleagues that "wherever we look in the 1220s we find that taste was changing, and that the multi-fingered silhouettes that seemed to propel us into the heavens were giving way to simple roofs."⁴ On the other hand, he departs from Jantzen in adopting a nostalgic tone in describing the demise of the project at Chartres. "Gradually the dream dissolved, and Chartres was brought into line with the new ideals current in the rest of France. . . . Personally I think that the age of religious mysticism that had produced the energy to produce these cathedrals had passed. . . . The beginning of the change in this spirit can probably be marked as closely by the elimination of the crossing tower as by any other historical act we know of."⁵ As the contrast between Jantzen's and James's opinion begins to suggest, the meaning of the thirteenth-century intermission in French great spire construction has not yet been firmly established. Indeed, these claims have received very little critical attention. This apathy reflects the primitive state of spire studies, which remain largely uninformed by the socio-economic and technical perspectives that have enriched many other aspects of medieval art history.

When these perspectives are taken into account, a more nuanced and motivated picture of the thirteenth-century spire crisis begins to emerge. The abandonment of the great spire projects mentioned above was not simply a symptom of decreasing interest in monumentality in the decades after 1230. Although many historians of Gothic architecture have stressed the distinction between the elephantine High Gothic and the supposedly delicate Rayonnant that succeeded it, this distinction was by no means clearcut. Even leaving aside the objection that broad taxonomic terms such as "High Gothic" and "Rayonnant" grossly understate the complexity of thirteenth-century architectural culture, there was substantial continuity between the two phases, each of which had its monumental strand. "Theories about the ideal appearance for a cathedral" changed in part because the many Rayonnant builders who remained committed to dimension as well as decoration had to deal with structural and economic constraints that their predecessors had not had to confront.

Political conflicts and economic setbacks played an important role in derailing many of the most ambitious French spire projects of the thirteenth century, including those of Chartres and Reims. Because developments in Gothic architecture were driven to a large extent by

⁴ John James, *Chartres: The Masons Who Built a Legend* (Boston, 1982), 77.

⁵ James, *Chartres*, 78.

competition, such setbacks produced a ripple effect, retarding thirteenth-century spire design. It is certainly true that the competitive dialog of great spire development broke down in thirteenth-century France, but this breakdown needs to be understood as the result of a dialectical process involving patronage, reception, and urban history as well as artistic intention.

Spires are the supreme monuments of self-assertive local authority. The power relations of a town defined its skyline, especially in the Middle Ages, when architectural projects were financed primarily at the local level. The construction of major buildings drew heavily on local resources, and demanded a certain measure of social stability. Because of their expense, and because they played little practical role, great spire projects proved particularly vulnerable to economic and political fluctuations. Great spire projects might thus be seen as hothouse flowers, their health requiring the maintenance of favorable conditions of patronage. An atmosphere of mutual enterprise was particularly helpful, whether broad-based and communitarian, or enforced by a local strongman. The former case pertained in the late Middle Ages, when the burghers of German and Brabantine cities displayed their civic pride by undertaking enormous spire projects, as at Strasbourg, Ulm, and Antwerp. The High Gothic spire projects of France, however, were the affair of the clerical aristocracy, whose members were born into the great baronial families of the realm.

In the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the barons of France enjoyed a high degree of autonomy. Local lords were generally responsible for regulating weights and measures, minting coins, and administering justice. They also raised private armies, making them indispensable allies for the still vulnerable French monarchy. They filled the ranks of the secular clergy as well. Spiritual authority might thus be used to advance the barons' temporal agenda. This was especially the case in towns like Beauvais and Reims, where one man served as both bishop and count. Such a form of local government appears tailor-made for the construction of cathedrals. By the middle of the thirteenth century, however, several developments had made it difficult for the "seigneurial mafia"⁶ to carry through with their building projects. These changes acted on both the local and national levels, and affected both the temporal and spiritual spheres.

On the local level, the growing wealth of the burghers challenged the power of the clerical aristocracy. By the middle of the twelfth century, communes had sprung up in many cities of northern France. Although they

⁶ The phrase is from Stephen Murray, *Beauvais Cathedral: Architecture of Transcendence* (Princeton, 1989), 35.

never attained the autonomy of their northern Italian counterparts, their establishment helped to focus burgher self-consciousness. The existence of rival burgher and clerical power structures often undermined the spirit of common enterprise conducive to large-scale building. In the case of Laon, for example, the growing communal movement came into conflict with the power of the bishops at several points in the twelfth century. One recent study of Laon Cathedral argues that "there can be little doubt that the commune would have been opposed to supporting the building of the bishop's church The cathedral chapter, the principal promoter of the construction, was decidedly hostile toward the communal movement. Furthermore, the commune vied with the bishop for control of the municipal administration, and, while their rights and revenues increased, those of the bishop remained fixed by the charter, or even decreased. Thus the commune, in fact, interfered with the construction by arrogating to itself revenues that might have gone toward the building of the cathedral."⁷ This political and economic shift may go some way to explaining why only one stone spire was added to Laon Cathedral, even though seven appear to have been planned. As discussed below, Laon was only one of many French cities in which the rise of burgher power eroded the authority of the traditional clerical aristocracy.

An analogous breakdown of centralized authority occurred in urban religious life as the mendicant orders began to challenge the hegemony of the cathedral clergy. Like the Cistercians, the mendicants embraced austerity and rejected the pomp of cathedral-style architecture. While Cistercian monasticism had been an essentially rural phenomenon, the mendicants appealed to the urban masses. Their popularity grew rapidly in the thirteenth century. With donations that might earlier have gone to cathedral chapters, the friars soon constructed innumerable churches in the great cities of Europe.

The authority of the "seigneurial mafia" was challenged at the national level as well. The increasingly powerful Capetian monarchy began to take seriously claims of sovereignty that had previously existed only in principle. Especially during the reign of Louis IX, over-mighty magnates learned to appreciate the power of the throne. The territories acquired by Philip Augustus were welded into the French kingdom by Louis' administration, which insisted on the monarchy's ultimate authority in temporal affairs. The king's piety did not prevent him from confronting prelates who were abusing their spiritual power. Indeed, he managed to

⁷ Clark, *Laon Cathedral*, 16.

convince Pope Gregory IX that the overuse of excommunication and interdict could only weaken the Church in the long run.

The ecclesiastical policies of Louis IX favored Cistercians and mendicants. Despite the king's insistence on the autonomy of temporal authority, the Capetian administration was composed largely of clerics, especially members of these orders. Early in his reign, royal ties with the Cistercians were particularly close. Cistercian bishops like Gautier de Chartres served as important advisors to the crown, which founded many new Cistercian houses. Later, the mendicants grew to greater prominence. The Sainte-Chapelle, despite its rich decoration and palatine associations, was staffed by mendicants.

Louis IX's ecclesiastical and secular policies merged in his decision to undertake a crusade in the Holy Land. Besides underlining his piety, the crusade allowed the king to divert the energies of restive magnates. Preparations for the crusade joined all members of the kingdom in a common enterprise, Christian in its goals but nation-building in its effects.

All of these developments contributed to the reduction in spire construction of the mid-thirteenth century. The factionalization of urban congregations undercut the sense of common cause so necessary to monumental building. The growing prestige of the mendicants and Cistercians, with their vows of institutional poverty and dedication to austerity, threw the vainglory of spire design into high relief. To the extent that "taste was changing" in the 1220s, it was largely due to the popularity of these orders, although the grandiose strain of Gothic design continued to thrive where patronage allowed it to do so. The chapter of Senlis Cathedral, for example, was able to finance the construction of their great spire in large part because of royal donations to the fabric in the episcopate of Bishop Guerin, a friend and advisor of King Philip Augustus.⁸ In most cases, however, the growing power of the Capetian monarchy undercut the authority of barons and bishops. In a very real sense, the national enterprise of the crusade replaced the local enterprise of cathedral construction.

Episcopal finance reflected the changing priorities of the day. The crusade alone cost 1.5 million pounds, of which one million were contributed by the clergy.⁹ It would be unfair, admittedly, to see the crusade as bankrupting bishops and their chapters. Large building projects continued to go forward, as at Beauvais, Amiens, Metz, and Narbonne, well after the middle of the century. The obligatory donations to the crown did, however, reduce the overhead for non-essential construction. All churches

⁸ Aubert, *Cathédrale de Senlis*, 22-23.

⁹ William Chester Jordan, *Louis IX and the Challenge of the Crusade: A Study in Rulership* (Princeton, 1979), 80.

needed a nave, a choir, and liturgical furniture, but spires are not functionally necessary. When money got short, therefore, spire projects were often the first thing to be placed on hold.

The burst of cathedral construction at the beginning of the thirteenth century coincided with the best days of the French medieval economy. Many of these buildings were still under construction later in the century, when economic decline had become palpable. Architectural projects were not the cause of the downturn, but their visible extravagance must have provoked widespread envy, leading in a number of cases to violent confrontations between townsfolk and the clergy, as discussed below. Spire projects, generally among the last additions to a building, often had to be abandoned in such an environment.

These general trends affected each city differently. Broadly speaking, however, it makes sense to see spire truncation as a phenomenon of the 1250s, brought on by urban fragmentation, economic constriction, and Capetian policy. Purely style-driven theories of the truncation, which concentrate on changing ideals of beauty in the 1220s, provide a distorted picture of masonic intention in the thirteenth century. A more realistic perspective emerges from the following case studies.

Chartres

In 1194 fire consumed nearly all of the Romanesque cathedral of Chartres, sparing only the west facade and spire completed a few decades earlier. The safe recovery of the Virgin's shroud, the cathedral's most precious relic, lent an apparently miraculous favor to bishop Regnaud de Mousson's call to rebuild. The rebuilt cathedral was meant to be one of the largest and most impressive monuments yet conceived in the Middle Ages, and it has long been recognized by art historians as a seminal example of High Gothic architecture. The use of flying buttresses and quadripartite vaults in conjunction with an innovative three-story elevation allowed clerestory windows of unprecedented size. Nor were the windows the only large elements of the new church. The nave aisles, which were as high as the clerestory, featured piers dwarfing those of Laon Cathedral and Notre-Dame in Paris, two of the largest cathedrals of the early Gothic era.

The exterior of Chartres Cathedral was meant to be just as impressive as the interior. In the course of the thirteenth-century construction project, six towers were added to the cathedral, joining the two surviving twelfth-century towers of the western block. If spires had risen atop all these towers and the central bay of the crossing, as many scholars have assumed



4-1 Chartres Cathedral, digitally modified to include nine spires.

was the original design goal, then the cathedral of Chartres would have presented an extraordinary silhouette of bristling verticality (fig. 4-1).¹⁰

In fact, the evolution of the tower arrangement at Chartres was extremely complex, as the publications of Jan van der Meulen in particular have begun to reveal. Van der Meulen argues that the first campaigns of construction were based on the premise that the twelfth-century west complex would be replaced by an entirely new two-towered west facade. Only after the abandonment of this project, van der Meulen believes, was the cathedral's design modified to include transept towers.¹¹ In the meantime, plans to crown the crossing with a lantern tower were given up. On this basis, it is no longer obvious that the full vision of nine-spired verticality ever held sway in the Chartres workshop. However, interest in a

¹⁰ Jantzen, *High Gothic*, 112; Grodecki, *Gothic Architecture*, 110; and James, *Chartres*, 76.

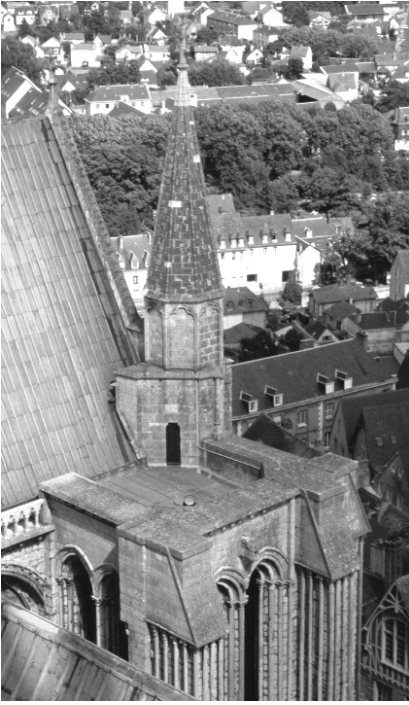
¹¹ Jan van der Meulen and Jürgen Hohmeyer, *Chartres: Biographie der Kathedrale* (Cologne, 1984), 104, 136. This point was originally made by Yves Delaporte, "Remarques sur la chronologie de la cathédrale de Chartres," *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique d'Eure-et-Loir* 21 (1959): 305-7.

multi-spired silhouette evidently persisted, since it is generally recognized that the stumps of the first free stories of the transept towers were among the last components to be added to the fabric in the course of the major High Gothic rebuilding initiative (fig. 4-2). The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries also witnessed the addition of new stone spire supports and a timber spire atop the north tower of the west facade. The history of the north tower termination, unfortunately, proves difficult to reconstruct in detail. There was certainly an elaborate timber spire on the site in 1506, when it was destroyed by lightning and replaced by the current stone version. This final timber spire was constructed only in the late fourteenth century, but an earlier and simpler version likely crowned the tower for the preceding 150 years or so. The fact that the north tower came to be known in the thirteenth century as the "turris nova," or new tower, strengthens this interpretation. The stone spire supports, at the very least, must have been added by that point.¹²

Although the relationship between these various phases of the Chartres spire project are complex, one underlying point remains clear: the builders were repeatedly forced to compromise their spire-building plans. Structural concerns may have prompted the elimination of the crossing tower, as discussed below, but the overall pattern of spire truncation at Chartres suggests the action of economic constraints. The construction of a single timber spire instead of a more impressive ensemble, in particular, may well represent an attempt to salvage some vestige of spired monumentality in an era of lowered expectations and depleted resources.

A variety of factors contributed to this depletion. Perhaps most important was slowing growth of the wheat-based agricultural economy in the area around Chartres. Most of the income for cathedral construction came from the vast land holdings of the bishop and chapter. Despite significant improvements in administrative efficiency in the late twelfth century, the stagnating income from these holdings could not keep pace with inflation. This situation compounded the already great financial demands of cathedral

¹² The chronology of the west facade is discussed briefly by van der Meulen in *Biographie*, 224-25. Van der Meulen's former assistant, Rüdiger Hoyer, provides a more detailed discussion of the north tower termination in *Notre-Dame de Chartres, Der Westkomplex*, 26-28. Jean Villette dates the final timber spire of the north tower to circa 1386, while also noting that the term "turris nova" was applied to the north tower already in the thirteenth century. See "Le Clocher vieux de Chartres," 6. Peter Kurmann has recently cautioned, however, the "tower" mentioned in a cartulary of 1240 may have been only a reliquary, rather than a full-scale tower. See Kurmann and Kurmann-Schwarz, *Chartres: La Cathédrale*, 40-41.



4-2 Chartres Cathedral, stump of southwestern transept tower.

construction, contributing to the increasingly strained financial situation of the Chartres clergy in the early thirteenth century.¹³

The importance of the agricultural economy for the construction project was so great because contributions from other sources were relatively small, in contrast to what romanticized and propagandized accounts of the "cult of carts" have formerly suggested. Pilgrims did indeed come to Chartres, many of them aristocrats seeking souvenir tunics from the Virgin's shrine that were thought to confer favor in tournaments.¹⁴ Their donations, however, did not provide a large measure of support for the fabric fund. The Capetian monarchy, meanwhile, contributed only a single gift of two hundred pounds to the thirteenth-century rebuilding project, although the bishops of

Chartres were supporters of the crown. This support earned the bishops royal support in their conflicts with their local rivals, the counts of Chartres. Because of the expenses incurred by the bishops when they joined the kings on crusade, however, the alliance with the crown may ironically have diverted resources away from the cathedral fabric fund.¹⁵

Even with all these problems, the canons of Chartres might have been able to proceed with construction of spires if they had been supported by the citizenry of the town in the way that romanticized accounts of the construction project had suggested. In fact, however, the burghers of

¹³ The key study of the social history of Chartres in this period is André Chédeville, *Chartres et ses campagnes, XIe-XIIIe siècles*, Publications de l'Université de Haute-Bretagne (Paris, 1973). The politics and economics of cathedral construction in Chartres are discussed in Jane Welch Williams, *Bread, Wine, and Money: The Windows of the Trades at Chartres Cathedral* (Chicago, 1993). For the importance of wheat and the funding challenges of the early 13th century, see Chédeville, 525; and Williams, 33, respectively.

¹⁴ Chédeville, *Chartres*, 510.

¹⁵ Williams, *Bread, Wine, and Money*, 32-33.

Chartres were locked in conflict with the cathedral clergy for most of the thirteenth century. Jane Welch Williams has argued, in fact, that the so-called "windows of the trades" at Chartres were not donated to the cathedral by pious merchant citizens, but that these windows were propagandistic representations of lay obedience to ecclesiastical authority that contrasted dramatically with the situation of mutual antagonism that actually pertained in Chartres.¹⁶ Williams may have over-reached somewhat in stressing partisan political agendas so strongly at the expense of the cathedral's manifest religious function, but she was certainly right to challenge the romanticized fiction of Chartres as a harmonious community united in the adoration of the Virgin.¹⁷ Many burghers were in the hire of the counts of Chartres, bitter rivals of the cathedral clergy.

Already in 1195 Pope Celestin III had empowered the canons of the cathedral to use spiritual censure against those in Chartres who were agitating for the establishment of a commune. In 1210 violence erupted between the chapter and the countess, but Bishop Renauld de Mousson persuaded his cousin the king to impose sentences against the countess and her men. Thus by the second decade of the thirteenth century, the alliance of crown and chapter was firmly cemented, much to the chagrin of the burghers and the countess.¹⁸ This conflict crystallized the rivalries which would plague urban politics in Chartres throughout the thirteenth century.

Despite this simmering hostility, construction of the cathedral went forward quickly in the early decades of the century. The bishops and chapter were obviously determined to complete at least the liturgically functional portions of their new building as rapidly as possible, even if projects such as the replacement of the west facade and crossing tower had to be put aside. Not coincidentally, the six new towers added during this period were all built up to the level of the upper clerestory windows--the level necessary for them to resist the thrusts of the high vaults within. It seems, therefore, that the towers were seen less as ends in themselves than as means to the support of the church vessel. Spire construction remained a theoretical goal, but one that would be pursued only after the rest of the church was complete. In later medieval Germany, by contrast, ambitious burgher-funded spire projects were often pursued aggressively in a spirit of civic pride even when the church vessel itself remained unfinished.

¹⁶ Williams, *Bread Wine and Money*, 139-45.

¹⁷ In *Chartres: Cathédrale*, 22-23, Kurmann insists on the primacy of religious meaning in the Chartres glazing program, explicitly challenging Williams's notion of the windows as propaganda.

¹⁸ Chédeville, *Chartres*, 377; Williams, *Bread, Wine, and Money*, 21-29.

In Chartres, the idea of the cathedral as a symbol of civic pride would have appeared bitterly ironic in the middle of the thirteenth century.¹⁹ Tension between the burghers and the chapter had become so bad that in 1253 Pope Innocent IV allowed the canons to say matins at 5 A.M. because doing so at midnight was too dangerous. That same year, a group of burghers murdered two serfs of the chapter. A dissenting faction within the chapter, led by one Hugh de Chavarary, offered refuge to the murderous burghers. Another canon, Renaud, accused Hugh of treachery against the chapter. Soon thereafter, on his way to matins, Renaud was assassinated by Hugh's brother Colin de Chavaray. In this hostile and chaotic atmosphere, the chapter fled the city. They remained in exile from 1253 until 1257, not returning until their cloister had been fortified. Count Jean de Chatillon had grudgingly allowed the agents of the chapter to seal off the cloister, but he had to explicitly forbid the chapter from constructing large towers that could be used as archery platforms. In response, the citizens of Chartres barricaded their own doors around the walls of the cloister.²⁰

This breakdown of civil relations between town and clergy, compounding the problem of the already faltering economy, made cathedral construction difficult and an expensive spire-building program unthinkable. As van der Meulen has pointed out, the dedication of the cathedral in 1260 had more to do with the return of the chapter than it did with the completion of the church, which at that time still lacked not only most of its intended spires, but also the gallery of kings and the three large gables over the principal facades, whose construction lagged into the fourteenth century.²¹

The cathedral of Chartres fully deserves its reputation as one of the most glorious and important monuments of medieval France. Nonetheless, despite the impressive achievement of the masons who built most of the body of the church remarkably quickly in the early thirteenth century, the building falls well short of its designers' intentions. The truncation of the grandiose spire project at Chartres, far from being a freely made aesthetic judgement, was forced on the builders by changing conditions of patronage in which urban unrest and a broadly-based economic slowdown played an important part. These problems plagued Gothic masons not only at Chartres, but at many of the most important buildings of the thirteenth century.

¹⁹ Kurmann notes that the very idea of "the city" as a coherent political entity would have been anachronistic in early thirteenth-century Chartres. See *Chartres: Cathédrale*, 22.

²⁰ This narrative is adapted from Luc[ien] Merlet, "Historique du cloître de Notre-Dame de Chartres," *Memoires de la Société Archéologique d'Eure-et-Loir* 1 (1858), 128-30.

²¹ Jan van der Meulen, with Rüdiger Hoyer and Deborah Cole, *Chartres: Sources and Literary Interpretation, A Critical Bibliography* (Boston, 1989), 3.

Reims

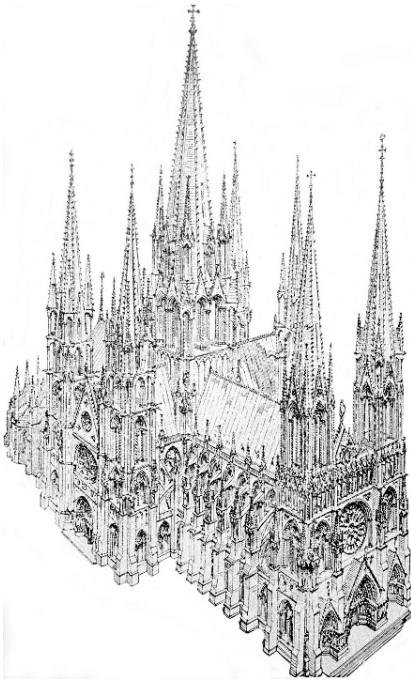
The High Gothic cathedral of Reims, begun in 1211, clearly owes a great deal to its cousin at Chartres. In certain respects, the forms of Reims betray the influence of local tradition, but in general terms the building may be read as a play on themes present also at Chartres. These affinities between the two cathedrals would have been evident on the exterior, since both were meant to present dramatic multi-spired profiles, with transept frontals fully developed into two-tower facades. At Reims, the choir towers of Chartres were abandoned, recovering the seven-spire format of Laon, but the overall effect would closely resemble that intended at Chartres.²² A famous drawing by Viollet-le-Duc suggests what Reims Cathedral might have looked like if completed according to this vision (fig. 4-3). It is easy to criticize this drawing as a nineteenth-century fantasy, but the presence of incomplete tower platforms at Reims Cathedral demonstrates that something along these lines was contemplated there, much as it was at Chartres.

If the cathedrals of Chartres and Reims appear quite similar, however, their home cities were very different. While authority in Chartres was split between the ecclesiastics and the count, in Reims the churchmen held all the cards, as they had since late antiquity. The archbishop of Reims was himself the local count. While the religious practice of Chartres centered around Marian devotion and pilgrimage, the key events at Reims were the royal coronations. The Remois economy depended not on wheat but on the cloth trade, and on real estate speculation within the city.²³ Despite these distinctions, however, the socio-political drama of spire truncation unfolded in Reims much as it had at Chartres.

Although many nearby cities had developed communal governments by the middle of the twelfth century, the dominance of the church prevented the formation of a commune in Reims. Nevertheless, Bishop Guillaume aux Blanches Mains, formerly bishop of Chartres, issued an extensive charter of liberties to the Remois burghers in 1182. This document, known as the *Willelmine*, served as the foundation of Remois government until

²² Pierre Heliot has argued that the central spire planned for Reims would have been considerably taller than those of the transepts and west facade. Such a pyramidal massing would recall that seen as Limburg an der Lahn rather than at Laon or Tournai, where the central towers were comparatively low and squat. Heliot's opinion agrees with the hypothetical reconstructions of Reims and Chartres offered by Viollet-le-Duc and James respectively, but all these reconstructions must be considered somewhat fanciful in the absence of archeological evidence or medieval documents. See Pierre Heliot, "Sur les tours de transept dans l'architecture du Moyen Âge," *Revue archéologique*, 1965, part 2: 76.

²³ Pierre Desportes, *Reims et les Remois aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles* (Paris, 1979), 93-131.



4-3 Reims Cathedral, as amplified by Viollet-le-Duc into an ideal church.

the eighteenth century.²⁴ Significantly, though, the Willelmine did not provide for the establishment of a commune. During Guillaume's episcopate, the burghers and the clergy remained on fairly good terms. By the mid-thirteenth century, however, conflict had erupted between later archbishops and the town. These struggles greatly weakened all local authority, since the Capetian monarchy had to be called in to re-establish order.

Despite the general prosperity of Reims in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries,²⁵ tensions between the archbishop and the townspeople manifested themselves in the years preceding construction of the Gothic cathedral. In 1209 Philip Augustus encouraged the Remois

to erect a new fortification wall, but the citizens refused on the grounds that it would strengthen the hand of the archbishop.²⁶ In the wake of a fire that destroyed most of the Carolingian cathedral on 6 May 1210, the Remois chapter moved quickly to rebuild.²⁷ A year to the day after the disaster, Archbishop Aubry de Humbert laid the first stone of the present Gothic structure. Work appears to have proceeded rapidly during the first

²⁴ Desportes, *Reims*, 73, 85-89.

²⁵ Between 1170 and 1250 the city doubled in area, and the population had grown to over ten thousand persons by 1200. Desportes, *Reims*, 93, 104-105.

²⁶ Desportes, *Reims*, 175.

²⁷ Just how rapidly depends on which scholar's chronology one follows, of course. The classic study of the building, Hans Reinhardt's *La Cathédrale de Reims: Son histoire, son architecture, sa sculpture, ses vitraux* (Paris, 1963), argues for a very rapid construction, and puts a great deal of faith in the accuracy of the nave labyrinth. Despite its great usefulness, especially for the later, better documented campaigns, Reinhardt's study has been largely superseded by subsequent findings, notably the discovery of a document suggesting that work on the west facade cannot have begun before 1252. This book follows Peter Kurmann, *La Façade de la cathédrale de Reims: Architecture et sculpture des portails* (Lausanne and Paris, 1987), which provides a more up-to-date treatment.

two decades of construction. By 1228, the lower stories of the choir and eastern nave arcade were evidently completed and in service.²⁸

The greatest political crises in thirteenth-century Reims erupted in the episcopate of Henri de Braine, which began in 1227. As son of Robert II of Dreux, Henri could claim membership in one of the greatest baronial families of France. Initially, he took a conciliatory attitude in local affairs, but his shared interests with other barons soon placed Henri at odds with both the citizens of Reims and the French crown. Henri de Braine and Miles de Nanteuil, bishop of Beauvais, had participated in the baronial movement against Blanche of Castile in 1226, and Henri supported Miles against the royally appointed mayor of Beauvais in 1232. The burghers of Reims, historically frustrated in their attempts to establish a commune, hoped to turn this situation to their advantage by staging an armed insurrection at a time when the king might support their rights against the archbishop.²⁹ The Remois citizenry was sadly deceived in thinking that the conflict between Louis IX and Henri de Braine would automatically redound to their benefit. In 1236, almost two years after the burghers drove the archbishop and cathedral chapter from Reims, Louis passed judgment against the burghers, who were forced to dismantle their fortifications and pay reparations to the archbishop. Despite his apparent victory, Henri de Braine recognized that his local authority had been undercut by the king's intervention. When relations between the clergy and the burghers again grew tense in 1238, the archbishop made no appeal to Louis, choosing instead to occupy the town with a troop of armed hirelings. Unable to maintain control of Reims by this means, Henri turned not to the king but to the pope. The city was excommunicated and the entire province placed under interdict. The death of Henri de Braine in 1240 allowed the burghers to negotiate a peace with the cathedral chapter, and the excommunication was lifted, but the citizens were forced to pay another fine, and many of their leaders were forced to demonstrate their penance in public processions.

The crises of the 1230s affected the construction of the cathedral on a number of levels.³⁰ When the burghers were engaged in fortifying the city against the archbishop, they used stones from the cathedral stoneyard to build their ramparts. Despite this interruption, however, work appears to have gone forward surprisingly quickly in the late 1230s. In 1241, the

²⁸ Reinhardt, *Cathédrale de Reims*, 71; Kurmann, *Façade de Reims*, 21.

²⁹ The whole conflict is well sketched in Desportes, *Reims*, 155-69.

³⁰ See Robert Branner, "Historical Aspects"; also Barbara Abou-el-Haj, "The Urban Setting for Late Medieval Church Building: Reims and its Cathedral between 1210 and 1240," *Art History* 2, no. 1 (March 1988): 17-41.

chapter occupied the completed choir of the structure. At this time, the easternmost bays of the nave were probably finished as well. Stylistic evidence suggests that work on the upper choir cannot have been begun before 1231, so that these massive campaigns must have been undertaken in the very years bracketing the rebellion. During these years as well, the towers of the south transept were constructed, while those of the north side appear to post-date 1241.³¹ This chronology provides further evidence that towered monumentality had not been rendered obsolete in the 1220s. On the recently completed north transept portal, sculpture was rearranged to describe the theme of burgher contrition.³² This iconography mirrored the public processions of penance in which the burgher leadership was forced to participate as part of the settlement.

From the perspective of cathedral construction, the most significant result of the insurrection was the alienation of the Remois citizenry, which deprived the cathedral chapter of an important potential source of funding. Thus, although the violence of the 1230s had not greatly interfered with the construction campaigns then underway, the bitter legacy of the crisis made it hard to press the work rapidly to completion. Many signs point to continuing burgher disaffection with the cathedral and its chapter.³³ No professional group gave funds or windows to aid in the construction process. Popular assemblies met in the grange, the cemetery, or the churches of the minor orders--anywhere, in short, except the cathedral. By contrast with the pattern in other cathedral cities, the great church was used only for worship.

This is not to say that burgher patronage had dried up by the middle of the thirteenth century. On the contrary, during these decades the burghers gave lavishly to many Remois churches--but once again, with the exception of the cathedral. Mendicant establishments grew rapidly, with new buildings erected for both the Friars minor and the preachers between 1250 and 1280. The Remois church of the Dominicans also grew in these years into one of the greatest in its order. Indeed, new and impressive churches sprang up all over town, fed by lay donations that once might have gone to the cathedral chapter.

Architecturally speaking, however, the most direct rivalry was between the cathedral and the abbey of Saint-Nicaise. This large cathedral-like church, begun in 1231, became the principal beneficiary of Remois donations in the wake of the urban insurrection of the 1230s. Thanks to

³¹ Reinhardt, *Cathédrale de Reims*, 10; Kurmann, *Façade de Reims*, 65-68.

³² Abou-el-Haj, "Urban Setting," 24-28.

³³ Desportes, *Reims*, 176-77.

this telling shift in patronage patterns, the twin western spires of Saint-Nicaise were completed by the end of the thirteenth century, while those of the cathedral were left truncated. Events in thirteenth-century Reims thus begin to hint at the growing importance of burgher support for great spire projects, a trend most conspicuously evident in later medieval Germany.

The western facade block and spires of Saint-Nicaise, as noted previously, embodies the brittle and rather mannered early Rayonnant style of Hugh Libergier. The slotted spire cones of Saint-Nicaise were quite simple, unadorned even by crockets (fig. 3-16). The octagonal stories of the twin towers were also fairly stark, but their diagonal faces carried delicate two-story aediculae that can be seen as brittle Rayonnant interpretations of those at Laon. The spires of Saint-Nicaise, therefore, deserve recognition as two of the only great spires completed in France in the middle decades of the thirteenth century. The transparency of the delicate openwork arcade between the towers enhanced the visual autonomy of each tower, which was an important consideration at Saint-Nicaise because the tower octagons departed directly from the square facade structure at the level of the gable base, without another free-standing tower story to raise the spires to greater height.

Although the facade of Saint-Nicaise was smaller and less massive than those of many French cathedrals, its rapid construction was a major achievement. Delicately tooled diaper work covering the lower reaches of the facade, together with the twin-spired format, made the facade block quite expensive. Records of building expenses at the abbey show that the annual construction budget grew from five hundred pounds in 1242, to one thousand pounds in 1245, growing steadily to over two thousand pounds by 1258. These higher expenditures, totaling 48,000 pounds between 1245 and 1282, evidently correspond to the construction of the west facade and its spires.³⁴ These dramatic expenditures in the Saint-Nicaise workshop were made possible in large part by burgher donations. Meanwhile, Innocent IV's bulls urging donation to the cathedral met with lukewarm

³⁴ See Branner, "Historical Aspects," 32 n. 44; and Bideault and Lautier, "Saint-Nicaise de Reims," 300-301. The precise chronology for the construction of Saint-Nicaise remains uncertain. Because work at Saint-Nicaise appears to have proceeded from west to east, at least in the general sense that the nave was completed before the choir, some recent accounts suggest that the beginning of work on the facade should be placed around 1231, rather than in the 1240s as Bideault and Lautier had proposed on stylistic grounds. See, for example, Paul Frankl, *Gothic Architecture*, rev. ed. by Paul Crossley (New Haven, 2000), 142. Bideault and Lautier's account nevertheless remains plausible, both because theirs is the most detailed study of Saint-Nicaise yet undertaken, and because the generally eastward drift of the construction sequence does not automatically imply that the facade was built first. Moreover, spires were rarely constructed in 13th-century France before the completion of the main church vessel, so it would be an odd exception indeed if the Saint-Nicaise spires were completed before the rise in expenses seen in the 1240s and beyond.

receptions in 1246 and 1251. Questors for the cathedral and the abbey came into conflict repeatedly in the decades after 1240. Evidently, the citizens of Reims had turned their back on the cathedral, adopting Saint-Nicaise instead as their pet building project.³⁵

The continuing donations to Saint-Nicaise throughout the course of the later thirteenth and early fourteenth century deserve mention all the more because the economic vitality of the town was beginning to wane during these years. The conservative attitude of Remois lenders led to a general economic stagnation, which put an end to two centuries of steady growth. The prosperity of the community, which had peaked in roughly 1235, declined rapidly after 1250.³⁶

Despite the increasingly inauspicious financial and political situation, the builders of Reims cathedral remained committed to their ambitious program. Certainly they did not abandon the monumentality of the High Gothic. Although the western bays of the nave were completed only in the last decades of the thirteenth century, their style closely matches that of the eastern bays, completed by 1241 at the latest. For this reason, the workshop of Reims Cathedral has been tarred by a reputation for academic conservatism.

While the builders of the cathedral made an effort to harmonize with the work of earlier campaigns, the evolving design of the west facade clearly demonstrates that they were not stuck in their ways.³⁷ On the contrary, this project embodies a creative synthesis of plastic monumentality and up-to-date Rayonnant form (fig. 4-4). Construction of the lateral buttresses was probably undertaken in 1255, but the design was modified in 1261 to bring it more up-to-date. The magnificent sculpted portals stand in front of the facade buttresses, their prominent gables suggesting influence from the recently completed transept portals of Notre-Dame in Paris. Despite its innovative glazed tympana, though, the Reims facade rejects the precious delicacy of Notre-Dame and rival Saint-Nicaise. The gables are treated not as flat metallic cutouts, but instead are inhabited by sculpted figures surrounded by intricately sculpted tabernacles. Biased openwork pinnacles in the latest style mediate the transition between the portals and the upper reaches of the facade. The triforium of the facade is glazed and the clerestory-like lancets of the facade are fashionably gabled, but the angels

³⁵ Indeed, Desportes suggests that "tandis que l'oeuvre de Notre Dame s'essoufle, les chanoines étant à court de l'argent, les fidèles semblent prendre un malin plaisir à financer à préférence le monument élevé en l'honneur du fondateur de la cathédrale" (*Reims*, 176).

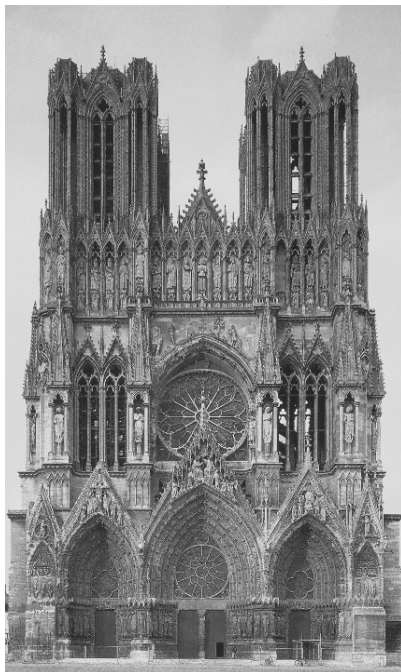
³⁶ Desportes, *Reims*, 131, 181.

³⁷ See Kurmann, *Façade de Reims*, 115ff.

in their spired tabernacles hark back to earlier campaigns, completing a decorative belt all the way around the perimeter of the cathedral.

Work on this magnificent project proceeded slowly. The lower story with its portals probably remained incomplete until the middle 1270s, while construction on the rose story dragged on until the end of the century. Only in 1299 was the lead purchased to cover the roof of the westernmost nave bays.³⁸ At that point construction on the elaborate arcade of kings and openwork towers had not even begun.

Thus, at the end of the thirteenth century, the cathedral of Reims remained without its intended spires, but not because spires had gone out of vogue as part of a supposed retreat from monumentality in the decades after

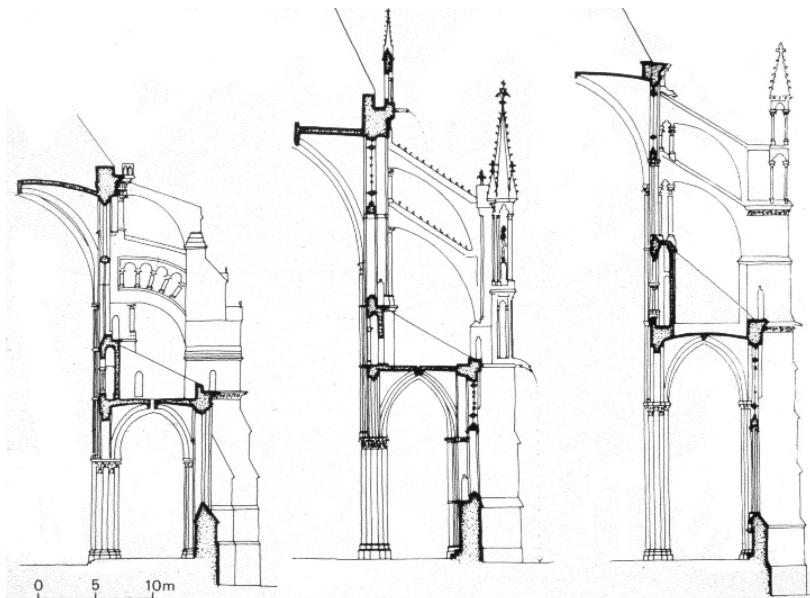


4-4 Reims Cathedral, west facade.

1220. The example of Saint-Nicaise demonstrates that spires retained their appeal for progressive Rayonnant builders like Hugh Libergier. The equally ambitious masons at Reims Cathedral attempted to respond in kind, but the economic and political conditions of the day slowed their work substantially. Even during the Hundred Years War, the Reims Cathedral workshop remained committed to the ideal of completing their building with spires. Practical initiatives in this direction were undertaken in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, as discussed in chapter 10.

Although the cathedral workshop in Reims stubbornly refused to abandon the seven-spired program, Hans Jantzen was correct in at least one sense when he claimed that "theories about the ideal appearance for a cathedral had undergone some changes in the period around 1220." The spire program of Reims Cathedral, first conceived in the early thirteenth century, was the last link in the chain of multi-tower development leading back through Chartres and Laon to Tournai. Major Rayonnant spire projects would tend to involve just two spires, as at Saint-Nicaise, Strasbourg, and

³⁸ Kurmann, *Façade de Reims*, 24.



4-5 Comparative sections of Chartres, Reims, and Amiens Cathedrals.

Cologne. Despite Robert Branner's insistence that builders in the period after 1220 were concerned with decoration rather than dimension, this turning away from the many-spired vision should not be understood as a symptom of Rayonnant preciousness. On the contrary, reductions in spire number were made necessary by increasing interest in monumentality and scale.

The drive toward greater concision in monumental spire programs operated on three levels: the economic, the aesthetic, and the technical. Given a certain sum of money, a builder might plan to erect many small spires or a few large ones. For a builder preoccupied with dimension, the latter course would clearly prove preferable. In practice, a building with one or two completed spires was more monumental and impressive than one with seven or nine tower stumps. In this respect the economic and aesthetic rationales for concision in spire layout reinforced each other. In its extreme form this logic suggests that, for maximum monumentality, all resources should be directed to the construction of a single gigantic spire. This is precisely what was done in the later Middle Ages, in the workshops of Freiburg im Breisgau, Ulm, and Mechelen, for example. The Rayonnant

abandonment of the many-spired vision did not yet reflect this degree of single-mindedness, but it was a step in that direction.

Structural factors also played a role in turning Rayonnant builders away from spire complexes like those of Laon, Chartres, or Reims. Each of these complexes was meant to include a massive crossing tower. The increasing scale of thirteenth-century buildings, however, made the construction of such crossing towers inadvisable. In two structures of the same proportions, dead load stresses increase linearly as a function of size. A format that worked at the small scale of Romanesque Tournai or the medium scale of Early Gothic Laon, therefore, could not be relied upon in buildings as large as the cathedrals of Chartres or Reims.

The increasingly slender proportions of thirteenth-century piers further exacerbated this problem. Even in England and Normandy, where vessels were relatively low, crossing piers often began to buckle when the towers above them were enlarged.³⁹ From this perspective it may have been a blessing that colossal crossing spires were never erected over the cathedrals of Reims or Chartres, since it is by no means clear that their crossing piers would have supported the load reliably. Large spires could not safely be constructed over the crossings of High Gothic and Rayonnant churches without massive reinforcement of the crossing piers, but such reinforcement would have compromised the seamless interior aesthetic that was the ideal of many thirteenth-century designers. When spired monumentality was called for, it made both structural and artistic sense to confine the towers and large spires to the perimeter of the edifice, where they could receive the support of massive buttresses without intruding substantially on the interior space. Dramatically spired monumentality was not always called for, however, as the case of Amiens demonstrates.

Amiens

Begun in 1220, the cathedral of Amiens has been widely interpreted as the building in which the High Gothic design principles of Chartres and Reims cathedrals achieved their full maturity. There is admittedly a certain reasonableness to this view. The interior elevations of all three buildings feature cantonnated piers, blind triforia, and large clerestories. All three were conceived with single-aisled naves, double-aisled choirs, and elaborate hemicycles. Moreover, a comparison of their cross-sections demonstrates a clear trend towards greater interior height and increasingly slender proportions (fig. 4-5). The builders of Amiens adopted the same basic

³⁹ At the cathedrals of Salisbury and Wells, for example, strainer arches were added to reinforce the piers of the crossing.

structural system as their colleagues at Chartres and Reims and brought it to a new level of elegance.

Seen in isolation, such evidence makes Amiens appear to be simply a more up-to-date, improved version of its predecessors. In the context of this linear narrative, the essentially towerless format of Amiens seems to represent a "correction" to the overly exuberant spire programs of Chartres and Reims. The plan of Amiens provided for no transept towers at all, and the west facade was designed as a sculpted screen lacking the depth necessary to support large spires, or indeed large upper stories of any sort.⁴⁰ A timber and stone spire of some sort crowned the crossing of the cathedral from the late thirteenth to the early sixteenth century, but it cannot have been very massive or imposing, since the crossing vault below survived the spire's destruction by lightning in 1527.⁴¹ Its replacement, a slender timber flèche completed in 1532, today provides the only vertical punctuation to the cathedral's otherwise boxy silhouette (fig. 4-6). The case of Amiens thus provides evidence for the argument that "multi-fingered silhouettes were giving way to simple roofs" as a function of changing taste in the 1220s.

The danger of this interpretation lies in its overly linear picture of stylistic development. Amiens was not simply as an improved version of Chartres and Reims. It represented, instead, a genuinely alternative vision, and its towerless format was an inherent part of that vision. Many other telltale signs suggest that the design of Amiens Cathedral drew on traditions unrelated to the legacy of Chartres and Reims. Unlike the other two, Amiens has proportions in which the main arcade occupies fully half of the elevation. The triforium design of Amiens bears no resemblance to the four-arched pattern common to Chartres and Reims. The nave wall at Amiens recedes in a succession of setbacks, rather than remaining in plane.

⁴⁰ The planar facade appears to have been a feature of the cathedral's original design, rather than a modification introduced in the course of construction to a more conventional towered facade block, as had earlier been argued. See Stephen Murray, *Notre-Dame, Cathedral of Amiens: The Power of Change in Gothic* (Cambridge, Eng., 1996), 93.

⁴¹ Stephen Murray, noting that the crossing vault differs in its rib profiles from the rest of the cathedral's vaults, and noting that the walls flanking the crossing vault are finely finished, suggests that a lantern tower may originally have been intended over the crossing. A lantern would have provided a dramatic central focus to the interior space, complementing the central focus that Murray has discovered in the cathedral's plan geometry. The lantern idea, if it was entertained at all, seems to have been forsaken early on, however, since the present crossing vault closed off this zone long before the lightning strike of 1527. The dating of the crossing vault is somewhat uncertain--dates from the late thirteenth to the late fourteenth century have been proposed--but this vault probably would not have been built at its present level if the thirteenth-century crossing tower had actually been a lantern. There are, moreover, no colonnettes in the corners of the upper crossing square, as there are in lantern towers like that of Laon Cathedral. See Murray, *Notre-Dame, Cathedral of Amiens*, 66, 188 n. 23; also Norbert Nussbaum and Sabine Lepsky, *Das gotische Gewölbe: Eine Geschichte seiner Form und Konstruktion* (Munich and Berlin, 1999), 176.

Moreover, while Chartres features a double ambulatory, and Reims a single ambulatory with exceedingly deep chapels, Amiens adopts a relatively shallow apse arrangement in which seven small chapels cluster tightly about a single ambulatory. This plan type, also employed at the nearby cathedral of Beauvais and at the Cistercian abbey of Royaumont, first appeared at the Cistercian church of Longpont.⁴² Other elements of the Amiens plan also suggest affinities with Cistercian practice.⁴³



4-6 Amiens Cathedral.

Cistercian influence provides one possible explanation for the essentially towerless design of Amiens Cathedral. The Cistercians had emerged as a reform order in opposition to the lavish Cluniacs, and their architecture reflected the austerity of their ideals. For this reason, the order explicitly stipulated that its churches should not include monumental towers.⁴⁴ Slender timber crossing spires like that now seen at Amiens, were, however, seen in many Cistercian Gothic buildings. Given the political history of Amiens and the place of the cathedral in the community, it is conceivable that reference to Cistercian prototypes was part of a deliberate symbolic program.

The rapid construction of Amiens Cathedral was made possible by an unusually close partnership between the burghers and clergy of the city. The citizens of Amiens, unlike their brethren in Chartres and Reims, had succeeded in establishing a commune in the twelfth century. The circumstances of its foundation were rather remarkable, in that both the king and the bishop favored popular rebellion against the local count.⁴⁵ With the help of the burghers of Amiens, Louis VI displaced the count from his fortified position after a two-year siege. The commune of Amiens,

⁴² Murray, *Beauvais*, 102.

⁴³ The plan, for example, seems to have been based almost exclusively on the square. Such geometries are typical of Cistercian architecture. For more on Cistercian influence on High Gothic, see Caroline Bruzelius, "Cistercian High Gothic: The Abbey Church of Longpont and the Architecture of the Cistercians in the Early Thirteenth Century," *Analecta Cisterciensia* 35, nos. 1-2 (1979): 3-204.

⁴⁴ Hans Erich Kubach, *Romanesque Architecture* (New York, 1975), 284.

⁴⁵ The following account is based on Henry Kraus, *Gold was the Mortar: The Economics of Cathedral Building* (London and Boston, 1979), 41-42.

formed by the victorious burghers in 1117, therefore enjoyed a highly favorable relationship with the monarchy. Indeed, the communal seal of Amiens included the royal fleur-de-lys.

The commune also enjoyed unusually close ties with the local clergy. The cathedral chapter and the commune assumed joint ownership of the local quay, from which the woad and wine central to the Amiens economy were exported. When the old cathedral of Amiens burned down in 1218, the clergy and the burghers shared the cost of rebuilding. Moreover, the clergy and the citizens apparently agreed that the cathedral project should be the principal beneficiary of charitable donations. For at least the first few decades of the reconstruction, the healthy economy of the city allowed work to proceed rapidly. The new cathedral of Amiens, far more than those of Chartres or Reims, grew as the fruit of mutual effort.

The literally communal nature of the architectural undertaking at Amiens may indirectly have recommended reference to Cisterian prototypes. The commune of Amiens cherished its privileged relation to the crown. The Cistercians, meanwhile, were the principal beneficiaries of royal patronage in the early thirteenth century. At Royaumont, for example, Louis IX and Blanche of Castile founded a Cistercian abbey with a choir and hemicycle geometry that may have informed the design of Amiens cathedral.⁴⁶ By building their cathedral as an overgrown Cistercian church, the citizens of Amiens may have meant to call attention to their royal ties even as they competitively exceeded the interior heights achieved at earlier High Gothic cathedrals. From this perspective, the towerless form of Amiens cathedral could be interpreted as part of a politically motivated attempt to make the cathedral conform to Cisterian conventions.

In the end, such hypotheses about the background to the Amiens project prove less important than the fundamental point that the overall massing of Amiens Cathedral represented an alternative to the vision embraced at Chartres and Reims, rather than a correction to it. In the years when the basic design of Amiens was first being laid out by master Robert de Luzarches, the multi-spired projects of Chartres and Reims were still being carried forward energetically. It would be a mistake, therefore, to see the towerless format of Amiens as reflecting the shared ideals of cathedral designers in the 1220s. Taste in High Gothic period was not monolithic, after all.

An analogy to the Early Gothic era may help underscore this point, since the diversity of Early Gothic taste has long been recognized. The relationship between Amiens Cathedral and its High Gothic cousins at

⁴⁶ Murray, *Beauvais*, 102.

Chartres and Reims roughly paralleled the one that had earlier pertained between Notre-Dame in Paris and the cathedral of Laon. The interior elevations of Amiens resemble those of Chartres and Reims in the same general sense that those of Paris resemble those of Laon. Conversely, Robert de Luzarches rejected the many-spired massing of Chartres and Reims much as the first designer of Notre-Dame rejected that of Laon. Of course, this decision on the part of the Notre-Dame master did not spell the end of Gothic interest in many-spired programs, as the examples of Chartres and Reims themselves indicate. The decisions of Robert de Luzarches at Amiens, however, have often been treated as if they spelled the end for thirteenth-century interest in ambitious spire projects. As the twin-spired facade projects of Saint-Nicaise, Strasbourg, and Cologne would demonstrate, however, the towerless format of Amiens was not the only alternative to the inherently troublesome many-spired format adopted at Chartres and Reims.

Although the choices of Robert de Luzarches did influence the progress of Gothic design through the process of reception and response, appeals to global changes in High Gothic taste are by no means necessary to explain his decision to build a cathedral without massive towers. A towerless format offered several advantages over and above any possible political or religious significations. First, it would almost certainly have been less expensive than a many-towered layout, allowing more money to be spent on figural sculpture, stained glass, and other desirable features. Second, it represented a more prudent course from a structural perspective.⁴⁷ Finally, although the aesthetics of both the interior and the exterior of the Amiens facade have been widely criticized, its essentially planar structure permitted a visitor to the cathedral to enter directly into the open and brightly lit nave space without having to pass through a heavily reinforced tower vestibule.⁴⁸

The successful completion of Amiens Cathedral, together with the failure of the spire-building initiatives in Chartres and Reims, contributed to the relatively advanced state of vessel design as opposed to great spire design at the middle of the thirteenth century. The Amiens nave was completed under the direction of Thomas de Cormont, a former assistant to Robert de

⁴⁷ Massive crossing towers were particularly dangerous in tall Gothic churches, as the short existence of the 16th-century spire of Beauvais Cathedral, discussed in a later chapter, would demonstrate. The original central spire of Amiens Cathedral, like its extant replacement, would have been much less massive, and hence less dangerous to the cathedral's crossing piers. Large towers on the perimeter of an edifice can be both useful and dangerous, in structural terms. On the positive side, they can be used like bulky bookends to buttress the thrusts from the rest of the church vessel. If built too tall, however, they can cause acute distress in the foundation structure.

⁴⁸ Thiebaut, *Picardie*, 133.



4-7 Amiens Cathedral, openwork flying buttresses of transept.

Luzarches who remained faithful to the original High Gothic plans. Beginning in the 1250s, however, the upper portions of transept and choir were built in the brittle-looking Rayonnant style of Regnaud de Cormont, son of Thomas. In these portions of the building, windows and traceried holes were punched into every available stone surface, including the flying buttresses (fig. 4-7).⁴⁹ Although this format ultimately proved troublesome, it marked an striking instance of the Rayonnant

tendency to treat structure as tracery, a tendency already evident in the 1230s with the introduction of the fully glazed triforium in the choirs of Troyes Cathedral and Saint-Denis Abbey. Spires of comparably skeletal design, however, would appear only after 1300.

The rapid pace of development in church vessel design decisively outpaced that in great spire design in the early thirteenth century because the competitive dialog between major monuments was much more intense in the former field. Every church had to have a liturgically functional interior, but the circumstances encouraging great spire construction came together rarely in thirteenth-century France. Two complementary glosses on this argument are provided by the cases of Notre-Dame in Paris and Beauvais cathedral, neither of which was equipped with great spires by the end of the thirteenth century, even though both structures had been enlarged and amplified in ways that their original designers could not have foreseen.

Paris

The history of design intention at Notre-Dame remains surprisingly murky given the building's fame and prominence. Only in recent years, for example, have scholars begun to appreciate the important role of the Notre-Dame workshop in the early development of the flying buttress.⁵⁰ Notre-

⁴⁹ Robert Bork, Robert Mark, and Stephen Murray, "The Openwork Flying Buttresses of Amiens Cathedral: Postmodern Gothic and the Limits of Structural Rationalism," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 54, number 4, 1997, 478-493.

⁵⁰ William W. Clark and Robert Mark, "The First Flying Buttresses: A New Reconstruction of the Nave of Notre-Dame de Paris," *Art Bulletin* 66, no. 1 (1984): 47-65; Stephen Murray, "Notre-Dame of Paris and the Anticipation of Gothic," *Art Bulletin* 80, no. 2 (1998): 229-53.

Dame's place in the history of facade and spire design has received even less scholarly attention. Notre-Dame's famous facade, one of the most well-known and iconic images in the history of art (fig. 4-8), remains poorly understood. The facade of Notre-Dame has often been compared to those of Chartres, Reims, Amiens, and Laon. Since all these great facades include two towers and three richly sculpted doorways, many of the same design problems arose in each case. This grouping, however, obscures fundamental differences between the various facade projects. The facade of Chartres, for example, differs from the others in that it is really an agglomeration of parts rather than the product of a single unified plan. The three doors of the Royal Portal at Chartres, moreover, are wedged between the towers rather than extending across the full width of the facade. Even more obviously, the Chartres facade appears different from the others because it includes spires. As noted previously, however, spires were also intended at Reims and Laon. From this perspective, it is the curious spireless screen facade of Amiens that stands out as the exception. In this context, it makes sense to ask whether the massive towers of Notre-Dame in Paris were not meant to carry spires as well.

Viollet-le-Duc, for one, believed that spires were indeed part of the original plan for the Notre-Dame facade. He managed to convince himself, in particular, that the small arches in the interior corners of the Notre-Dame towers were meant to serve as supports for octagonal spires above.⁵¹ Drawing on his knowledge of other French spire designs from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, most notably those of Chartres and Senlis, he created a dramatic elevation drawing showing the facade of Notre Dame crowned with large spires (fig. 11-18). This drawing, like his drawing of Reims Cathedral with seven spires, embodies Viollet-le-Duc's tendency to extrapolate wildly from limited archeological givens.

In fact, the evidence for this kind of spire planning at Notre-Dame was substantially weaker than that seen at Reims, or at Chartres. The partially completed transept towers of Chartres, and the truncated spire stumps atop the west facade at Reims, clearly indicate that ambitious tower and spire projects were planned and then abandoned. Nothing so obvious can be found at Notre-Dame. The corner arches seen by Viollet-le-Duc may be readily understood as supports for the flat belfry roofs that define the facade's current square-topped profile. The only other feature of the facade design that suggests, even indirectly, that the original builders may once

⁵¹ Alain Erlande-Brandenburg notes that "Viollet-le-Duc, en analysant le monument, avait constaté que les souches des tours avaient été prévues pour recevoir les flèches dont il proposa une restitution. Il ne savait pas que le parti en avait abandonné lorsqu'on edifia la flèche à la croisée du transept." *Notre-Dame de Paris* (Paris, 1991), 215.



4-8 Paris, Notre-Dame, west facade.

have contemplated adding spires to the towers is the overall ground plan of the towers. Each tower corresponds to a two-by-two square grid of aisle rather than just a single aisle bay, as was more typical of French facade towers. This format accords naturally with the double-aisle plan of the Notre-Dame nave, but it also provides an unusually wide and strong base for further construction. Such a plan becomes structurally necessary when truly massive towers are part of the design. The only Gothic church to adopt the ambitious tower plan of Notre-Dame, in fact, was Cologne Cathedral, where the broad tower bases were designed to carry enormous spires over 150 meters high.

The plan of the Notre-Dame towers may appear tailor-made for the construction of spires, but the static and blocky forms of the facade suggest that calm monumentality rather than surging verticality was the principal formal goal of the designers. Indeed, the facade of Notre-Dame has garnered praise for its calm assurance and balance between verticals and horizontals. Begun around 1200 in a mural and regimented High Gothic style, the facade had reached its present square-topped state by roughly 1240. The openwork gallery above the rose displays a degree of Rayonnant transparency, but the towers themselves are massive and static in appearance. Unlike the towers of Chartres, Laon, Senlis, and St-Nicaise, all of which have octagonal stories, those of Notre-Dame remain square in plan all the way up to their terminal balustrades. Nothing in the exterior appearance of these rigidly foursquare towers prepares the way for the complex geometrical transformations characteristic of the great spire type. In the absence of any compelling archeological evidence to the contrary, therefore, there is little reason to believe that the designers of Notre-Dame ever intended to build spires atop the cathedral's majestic facade.

The overall building history of Notre-Dame suggests that the square-topped tower format was seen as a viable design solution. This is not surprising, since the older Ottonian and Romanesque facades that served as models for many Gothic builders were also spireless. The thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries saw a great many modifications to the fabric of Notre-Dame, but no attempt was ever made to add spires to the western facade towers.

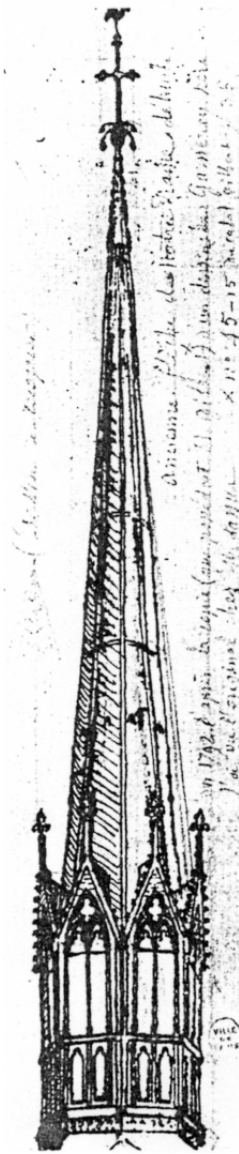
Some of these modifications were motivated by structural necessity, others by new patterns of patronage. The flying buttresses of Notre-Dame's nave had begun to deteriorate only a few decades after their construction, and had to be replaced. The chapter made a virtue of this necessity by simultaneously extending the clerestory and adopting a more fashionable three-story interior elevation. A similar rebuilding of the choir took place in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries in an exuberant program which saw the addition of numerous pinnacles, gables, and decorative flying buttresses to the exterior.⁵²

Over the course of the thirteenth century, the perimeter of Notre-Dame became encrusted with a belt of chantry chapels, mostly financed by burgher patronage. Unlike the cathedral of Amiens, however, Notre-Dame was not the principal beneficiary of burgher generosity. Thanks to the prestige of the Capetian monarchy, Paris had grown into the largest metropolis in western Europe, with enough resources to support the simultaneous building of a vast number of churches. The royal presence made formation of a commune impossible, and the organization of the citizenry remained fairly decentralized. The religious identity of the average Parisian citizen was likely to be associated with his guild church or neighborhood parish, rather than with the cathedral. Indeed, burghers were not allowed to be buried in Notre-Dame, which was reserved for high ceremonial. Despite the construction of the chantry chapels, therefore, Notre-Dame was not really a burgher-oriented church.⁵³ The broad-based but highly focused groundswell of communal energy that helped to erect the spires of Saint-Nicaise and the later churches of Germany and the Low Countries was simply not present in the case of Notre-Dame.

The other major thirteenth-century modification to the fabric of Notre-Dame was the rebuilding of the transept frontals (fig. 5-7). Since the surviving portions of the twelfth-century transept appear to be sturdy, structural factors are unlikely to have motivated this project. Instead, the transept frontals of Notre-Dame designed by Jean de Chelles and Pierre de

⁵² See Michael Davis, "Splendor and Peril: The Cathedral of Paris, 1290-1350," *Art Bulletin* 80, no. 1 (March 1998): 34-66.

⁵³ Kraus, *Gold was the Mortar*, 23-29.



4-9 Paris, Notre-Dame,
original flèche (dwg.)

Montreuil should probably be seen as a competitive rejoinders to those constructed a few years earlier at Saint-Denis Abbey. Indeed, the clerics of Saint-Denis and Notre-Dame were at mid-century competing for the right to possess the relics of Saint-Denis himself, the patron of France. This rivalry played itself out architecturally on the transept frontals of the two churches, those of Notre-Dame being executed as larger, more elegant versions of the ground-breaking early Rayonnant design of Saint-Denis.

It is a telling sign of the relative prominence of spire and vessel design in the mid-thirteenth century that the canons of Notre-Dame made no direct attempt to erect western spires rivaling the one built several decades earlier at Saint-Denis. As part of the refurbishment of the Notre-Dame transept, however, they chose to erect a slender wooden spire, or flèche, over the crossing (fig. 4-9). This flèche survived until the Revolutionary era, and Viollet-le-Duc later replaced it with the present version. Although wooden bell-cotes and belfries of various kinds had been common since the early Middle Ages, the tall narrow wooden flèche seems to have been a Gothic invention, and the flèche of Notre Dame appears to have been one of the earliest specimens of its kind. A similar flèche was soon erected at the nearby Sainte-Chapelle as well. Flèches of this type were structurally part of the timber roofs from which they emerged. More fragile and less imposing than the stone spires of Chartres, Senlis, or even Saint-Denis, but vastly less expensive to construct, they became extremely popular in French Rayonnant architecture of the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Because of their fragility, few early examples of the type survive. The oldest extant specimen in France, in fact, is the crossing flèche of Amiens Cathedral,

which was rebuilt from 1529 to 1532.⁵⁴ This slender spire complements the towerless screen facade of Amiens, just as the flèche of Notre-Dame complements the massive spireless facade of the Parisian church. The example of these great cathedrals helped legitimate the square-topped facade type. The failure of the spire-building initiatives at Chartres and Reims, conversely, contributed to a breakdown in the competitive dialog of great spire design. In the middle and later decades of the thirteenth century, therefore, great spire construction in France largely stagnated, except in isolated workshops like those of Senlis Cathedral and Saint-Nicaise in Reims.

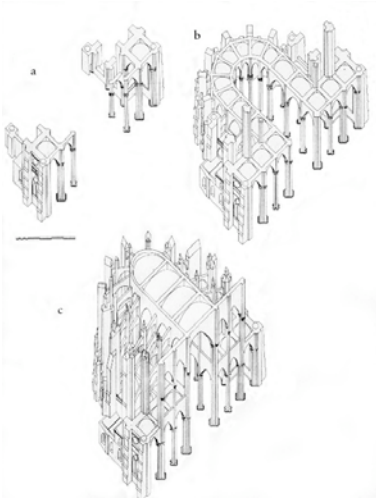
Beauvais

The history of Beauvais Cathedral illustrates how the abandonment of major tower-building projects reflected the specific competitive dynamics of thirteenth-century French architectural culture, rather than a global retreat from monumentality. Even a casual student of medieval art soon learns that Beauvais boasts the highest interior of any Gothic church and that its partial collapse, soon after completion, heralded the end of record-breaking church construction in northern France. Because construction of the Gothic cathedral of Beauvais was undertaken in 1225, this narrative at first appears to support Grodecki's claim that "buildings belonging to the generation of 1230 would now tend toward reduced monumentality . . . more modest dimensions and less towering proportions." In fact, however, the titanic upper stories of Beauvais were not undertaken until the 1250s, as part of an ambitious Rayonnant scheme that could hardly have been foreseen in the 1220s.

As Stephen Murray has shown, the first project at Beauvais attempted an ambitious synthesis of the Bourges-type pyramidal elevation and the Chartres-type fully towered transept (fig. 4-10).⁵⁵ Work on this innovative project was interrupted by the clash between bishop Miles de Nanteuil and king Louis IX. When construction resumed under Miles's successor, a more modest servant of the crown by the name of Robert de Cressonac, Miles's plans were abandoned in favor of a restrained project derived from the royally endowed Cistercian abbey of Royaumont. The wildly ambitious program for the upper stories of the building dates from the episcopate of Guillaume de Grez, a champion of the rights of the secular clergy against the incursions of the royally-sponsored mendicants (fig. 4-

⁵⁴ Robert Mark, ed. *Architectural Technology up to the Scientific Revolution: The Art and Structure of Large-Scale Buildings* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 221.

⁵⁵ Murray, *Beauvais*, 61-83.



4-10 Beauvais Cathedral,
successive phases of construction.

11).⁵⁶ From this perspective, the grandiose choir of Beauvais appears to Murray as an architectural manifesto on the rights of the traditional ecclesiastical aristocracy.

In their pursuit of grandiosity, the designers employed by bishop Guillaume de Grez clearly sought to outdo their predecessors' work at the nearby cathedral of Amiens, then the tallest of Gothic churches. This fact directly contradicts Branner's claim that builders in the decades after 1230 were "preoccupied with decoration, not dimension, and they took other aspects of [the High Gothic] as their sources of inspiration." Actually, Gothic masons appear to have reacted competitively to the most recent and

innovative features of similar monuments. When work began at Beauvais in the 1220s, the towers of Chartres and Reims were under construction, in anticipation of visionary spire projects to come. Not to be outdone, the builders of Miles de Nanteuil's cathedral incorporated transept towers as well. By the time heroic aspiration returned to Beauvais in the 1250s, little progress had been made on the spires of Reims and Chartres. Great progress, however, had been made both in interior height, as at Amiens, and in decorative sophistication, as in the Parisian work of Pierre de Montreuil. Actual monuments, of course, demand a more vigorous competitive response than even the most ambitious dreams, so it comes as no surprise that the builders of Guillaume de Grez's cathedral concentrated their attention on the construction of a titanic and elaborate church vessel, leaving the construction of spires as a task for later generations. In this respect, the history of Beauvais Cathedral exemplifies the tendencies and changing priorities seen in many contemporary French building projects.

The Temporary Sublimation of the Spire Concept

French thirteenth-century achievements in full-scale spire construction were certainly unspectacular compared with the developments seen in many

⁵⁶ Murray, *Beauvais*, 39.

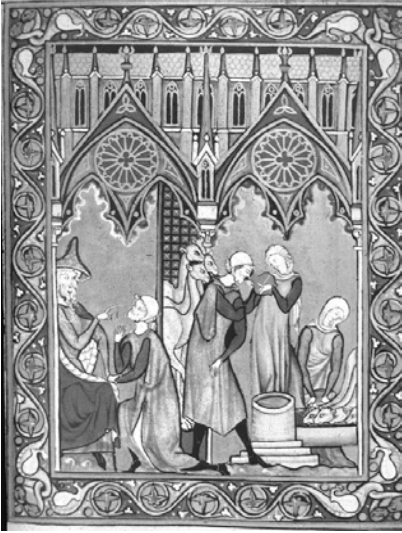
other facets of contemporary architectural culture, but this temporary eclipse of the great spire form cannot be explained simply in terms of a Rayonnant turn away from the enormous scales and aspiring silhouettes of the High Gothic era. In Amiens and Beauvais, and less famously in cities such as Metz and Narbonne, builders working in the Rayonnant mode worked at or even beyond the scales established by their most ambitious High Gothic predecessors. As the rival west



4-11 Beauvais Cathedral.

facade projects of Reims Cathedral and the nearby Saint-Nicaise demonstrate, many Rayonnant designers remained interested in both size and soaring verticality.

It was in the middle decades of the thirteenth century, moreover, that the pinnacle, the miniature cousin of the great spire, truly came into its own as a major motif in Gothic design. From its invention in the twelfth-century Chartres spire group, the pinnacle concept had diffused slowly at first, appearing in the lower facade of Laon Cathedral by around 1200, taking over the upper choir of Reims Cathedral in the 1220s and 1230s, and transforming the appearance of virtually every major French church exterior in the subsequent decades. Together with the gabled niche, the pinnacle became part of the basic grammar of Gothic architectural ornamentation, even in stained glass panels and illuminated manuscripts. The windows of the Reims Cathedral choir and transept clerestory, from the 1230s, and the *Psalter of Saint Louis*, from the 1260s (figs. 8-1 and 4-12), attest to this widespread use of pinnaced architectural canopies. Upon the death of Saint Louis in 1270, moreover, elaborate spire-like markers known as Montjoies were built along the route of his funerary cortege. None of these Montjoies has survived to the present day, but their appearance was recorded in drawings, and one even seems to occupy center stage in the Limbourg Brothers' depiction of the meeting of the Magi from the *Très Riches Heures* of Jean de Berry (fig. 4-13). The Montjoies of France served as the prototypes for the Eleanor Crosses of England, which were erected at the behest of King Edward I following the death in 1290 of his wife, Eleanor of Castile (4-14). The Montjoies, moreover, appear to have been the



4-12 Abraham, Eliezer, and Rebecca,
from the *Psalter of Saint Louis*.

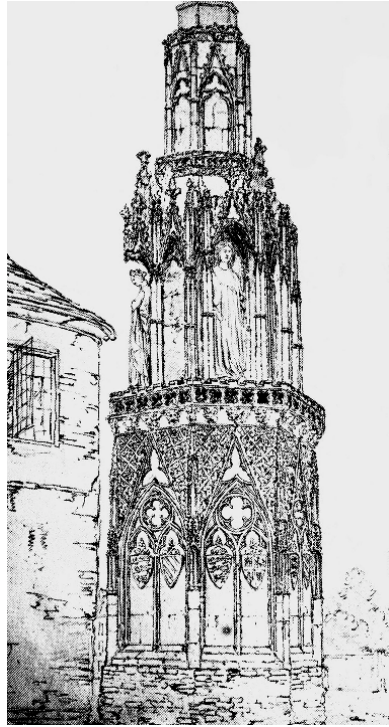


4-13 The Meeting of the Magi,
from the *Très Riches Heures* of
Jean de Berry

models for an innovative full-scale spire design shown in the drawing known as Strasbourg Plan B, to be discussed at length in the following chapter. As this example begins to suggest, the experimentation that took place in the design of pinnacles and spirelike shrines in the thirteenth century would ultimately prove fruitful in the development of subsequent great spire schemes. Thanks to the work of French Rayonnant designers, Late Gothic spire builders were able to draw upon a highly sophisticated vocabulary of aspiring forms which had not been available to their precursors at Laon and Chartres.

The relative poverty of great spire construction in thirteenth-century France, then, appears particularly surprising given the enduring popularity of enormous churches and surging vertical forms in the architectural culture of the period. This curious lull between the invention of the great spire type and the flowering of great spire design in the Rhineland roughly 150 years later can best be explained in terms of a socio-economically induced breakdown in the competitive dialog of spire construction, in which the truncation of major spire projects like those of Chartres and Reims cathedrals played an important part. The bishops and cathedral chapters in these cities obviously placed a higher premium on the completion of the liturgically functional interior spaces of the cathedrals than on the

construction of the large spires that their designers originally foresaw, and the local citizenry in these politically polarized cities failed, naturally enough, to adopt the spire projects as manifestations of civic pride. The failure of these ambitious initiatives, together with the brilliant contemporary achievements in church vessel design and the legitimation of the square-topped facade type, had a pronounced ripple effect, reducing the relative urgency of spire construction for competitively-minded patrons and builders alike. It would be an overstatement, however, to say that spires simply "went out of style" in thirteenth-century France. The impulse to design spirelike structures remained strong, although it was largely sublimated into the realm of micro-architecture and ornament. The construction of full-scale spires at



4-14 Eleanor Cross at Waltham
(19th-c. drawing).

Laon, Senlis, and Saint-Nicaise in Reims, meanwhile, kept the tradition of great spire design alive, preparing the way for the spectacular achievements of later spire builders in the Holy Roman Empire, where the circumstances of architectural patronage proved more favorable to spire construction than they had been in thirteenth-century France.