

Chartres Cathedral: The Truths Hidden behind the Myths

by Paul Creamer

Introduction: Chartres Cathedral? It's Complicated

Few people ever forget their first glimpse of Chartres Cathedral. It is a strikingly large and imposing structure, yet finely and magnificently wrought. Its enormity and its *finesse* work together, however improbably, to create a stunningly beautiful house of worship that succeeds at being, counterintuitively, both intimidating and inviting at the same time. The full history of this 800-year-old cathedral is long, complicated, and partially speculative. This insoluble complexity has caused textbooks, tourist guidebooks, and informational websites to publish oversimplifications concerning the cathedral, and these oversimplifications have, regrettably, fossilized over time into long-repeated “facts.” The contention of this article is that most of the information commonly circulated about this edifice is, at best, incomplete and therefore misleading or, at worst, flat-out wrong. We take as our starting point that much of what non-specialists believe about Chartres Cathedral is myth, rather than actual fact. So we set out, in this essay, to hold a magnifying glass up to the four most widely circulated myths about the edifice in order to parse them and then, as necessary, to modify or correct them.

Myth 1: Chartres Cathedral Is a Gothic Structure

In 1979, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (hereafter, UNESCO) declared Chartres Cathedral to be a World Heritage Site. On its website, the organization celebrates the structure as an architectural pinnacle of the Gothic period: “Chartres Cathedral marks the high point of French Gothic art.” Similarly, *Encyclopedia Britannica*’s online article devoted to the edifice claims that it is a “Gothic cathedral located in the town of Chartres, northwestern France.” We must point out, however, that to call Chartres Cathedral a Gothic structure is to tell only a small portion of its complex, multigenerational, and quite fascinating history.

The *locus* of the present cathedral—a compelling site atop a large hill that looms high above the city’s *basse ville*—was considered special long before the current structure was finished, indeed long before any sort of Christian shrine or building was built there. Architectural digs in the immediate vicinity have found suggestions of a pre-Roman, pre-Christian religious structure, a sacred temple that might have been employed, among its other uses, as a sort of “incubation chamber” where women who had been unable to conceive would spend a full night sequestered in the temple’s lowest level with the goal of becoming fertile (Morant 241). It has often been suggested by archeologists that a Roman religious temple once stood very close to where the present-day cathedral now stands (Morant 241). In other words, it seems quite probable that the site where we today find Chartres Cathedral was already considered a sacred space roughly a millennium before France as a sovereign political entity came into existence in 987 CE.

The present Chartres Cathedral is definitely not the first Christian cathedral to have been built in the city of Chartres once the municipality had been Christianized. Malcolm Miller enumerates at least four such structures to have existed, and probably more than four, before the current cathedral—that is, the building we are able to visit today—was consecrated (8-9). This present-day Chartres Cathedral is indeed mostly Gothic, but there is also a strong presence of the Romanesque architectural style. This is because the western façade and the adjoining bases of the two towers of the present-day edifice, as well as its *crypte* (that is, its subterranean level, which to this day remains the largest *crypte* in France), are almost entirely intact chunks remaining from the immediately preceding cathedral, an edifice that had been built during the Romanesque period and that was indeed executed in the Romanesque style. A terrible fire in 1194 had claimed this Romanesque cathedral, except for the aforementioned portions. These surviving Romanesque portions were not razed, but instead left essentially “as is” and then incorporated into the structure’s nearly wholesale post-fire rebuilding. Reconstruction of the severely fire-damaged cathedral began almost immediately, and this reconstruction was executed in the (then-current) Gothic style. So it is, at the earliest, only the *fifth* Christian cathedral built in Chartres that can be properly labeled Gothic, but even then this structure is, in point of fact, an admixture of Romanesque and Gothic.

Myth 2: Chartres Cathedral Was Built Quickly

The number 26 has gained currency today as the number of years it took for Chartres Cathedral to be rebuilt after the devastating fire of 1194. The UNESCO website claims, for example: “[The cathedral was] reconstructed over a 26-year period after the fire of 1194.” Philip Ball cites the same number: “But Chartres was essentially completed by about 1220, only twenty-six years after it was begun. (280)” We will criticize this figure of 26 years in two ways. First, the original plan for the Gothic cathedral at Chartres (that is, the original plan for the present-day structure) initially called for nine, rather than two, towers (Favier 169-170). Ultimately, this ambitious plan was abandoned because, over time, the preference in Europe for such heavily spired cathedrals faded, and a taste for simpler, cleaner rooflines emerged (James 75-76). Had the original plan been executed, however, we may comfortably suspect that finishing the nine towers would have taken far longer than 26 years.

We can also point out two totemic outbuildings whose construction dates from long after the year 1220, the year commonly alleged to be the cathedral’s principal date of completion. The beautiful-inside-and-out *Chapelle Saint-Piat*, which stands directly southeast of the eastern end of cathedral proper and is connected to it by a covered staircase that rises upward as it reaches the chapel, was built between 1324 and 1353 (Miller 16). The cathedral’s *horloge astrolabique*, too, dates from long after 1220. This mechanical device—quite unfamiliar to us today—is composed of a large, elaborately detailed, clock-face-like metal disk featuring one gold-colored, slowly pivoting, arrow-like indicator. The *horloge astrolabique* is mounted in its own three-story-high mini-tower, which stands just a few feet due north of the cathedral’s north tower. Crudely, this device resembles an enormous grandfather clock in a stone case. The *horloge astrolabique* dates from the Renaissance, and is concerned not with telling time as we understand it scientifically today,

but rather with measuring “time” as a function of the alignment of, respectively, the sun, the moon, and certain major stars. Chartres Cathedral’s *horloge astrolabique* dates from 1527, more than three centuries after the cathedral was allegedly all but complete (Jourd’heuil 9).

Myth 3: Chartres Cathedral Possesses a Noteworthy Unity of Design

Rick Steves is arguably the most-read and most-respected travel writer in the United States today, in addition to being the host of his own long-running, widely viewed PBS television program focusing on Americans traveling in Europe. The *New York Times* hails Steves’ power to inform and influence: “[A]mong travelers, Steves has established himself as one of the legendary PBS superdorks—right there in the pantheon with Mr. Rogers...(Anderson).” On his travel website, Steves speaks glowingly of Chartres Cathedral. He even alleges that its putatively quick build time gave its architectural features, its statues, and its stained-glass windows a laudable unity: “This remarkably speedy effort resulted in a much-appreciated unity of architecture, statuary, and stained glass—preserving a relative snapshot of the time (Steves).”

We are easily able, however, to challenge Steves’ claim of unity. We might begin with the most obvious bit of evidence: the cathedral’s vastly different towers. There was indeed a time when the towers of the present Chartres Cathedral were a matching set, each comprised principally of wood. Each tower was subsequently rebuilt in stone, although at different times. The current south tower (that is, the tower to one’s right as one stands in front of the structure’s royal portal and faces the cathedral) is in the Gothic style, and dates from circa 1160 (Wilson 69). The current north tower is in the Flamboyant style and is noticeably taller, having been completed by 1513 after a fire had burned down much of the preceding, and chiefly wooden, version (Miller 16, 18).

The cathedral’s instantly recognizable seafoam-green roof might serve as our second example of why the cathedral is not, in fact, a unified architectural creation. The roof we see today atop the edifice is, oddly, a product of the nineteenth century (Ball 256-257). That is, in its materials, in its engineering, in its pitch, and in its overall *allure*, the current roof is the outcome of the best practices of the 1800s, not those of the Middle Ages. In 1836, the cathedral’s massive original roof, comprised of grille-like grid of long-dried-out, medieval-era wooden beams covered with a “skin” composed of thin sheets of lead, caught fire and burned (Ball 256). We note in passing that this fire was hauntingly similar to the ghastly conflagration that struck Notre Dame of Paris Cathedral on April 15, 2019. By 1841, the rebuilding of Chartres Cathedral’s roof was complete (Miller 18). The whole of this new roof was built using metal, including a copper (and therefore copper-colored) outer “skin,” a surface whose color has, over time, slowly mellowed into the calm, appealing, faded-light-green hue that we see today in photographs and on postcards.

Myth 4: Chartres Cathedral Has Been Untouched by Disaster and Conflict

It is often claimed that Chartres Cathedral, unlike so many other major churches, has been left remarkably unscathed by natural disasters and human conflicts. We find, for example, in the “Chartres Cathedral” article published on the Frommer’s Travel Guides

website: “The new cathedral was dedicated in 1260 and has miraculously survived the centuries with relatively little damage. The French Revolution somehow spared the cathedral. (Brooke)” In fact, Chartres Cathedral has not been so fortunate. Let us begin by considering the Christian cathedrals that preceded the present Chartres Cathedral. One of the earliest such structures was destroyed in 743 of the Common Era by Hunald, Duke of Aquitaine, who, after a bitter quarrel with Charles Martel’s son, decided to stand up for himself by tearing down the cathedral (Miller 8). Scarcely more than a century later, in 858, the Vikings invaded the city of Chartres and destroyed the relatively new cathedral that had been built to replace the one that Hunald’s army had destroyed (Miller 9). In 1020, a fire in Chartres claimed most, but not all, of yet another replacement cathedral (Miller 10). And as mentioned *infra*, the major part of the immediate predecessor of the present-day Chartres Cathedral was burned to the ground in 1194.

As concerns the present-day Chartres Cathedral, we recall that one day during the early Renaissance, fire claimed the medieval-era, mostly wooden spire of the north tower, and that another fire, which broke out three centuries later, consumed the whole of the cathedral’s roof in 1836. Too, it should be pointed out that there was considerable damage done to the cathedral during the French Revolution. The revolutionaries: broke into the cathedral’s treasury and looted it; stole and then handed out numerous holy relics; tore down statues and sold them; stole a talismanic, Druid-era statuette considered by Christian believers to have been a sculptural prefiguration of Mary, and burned it in the street; and seized the cathedral’s by-far-most-precious holy relic, the *Sancta Camisia* (alleged to be the tunic worn by Mary at the birth of Jesus), and ripped it in two (Massé 20-21). And the edifice was not so fortunate as to escape World War II untouched. A medieval art historian *cum* U.S. Army “Monuments Man” inspected the cathedral in person only weeks after the city of Chartres was liberated and documented that: a gable on the south tower had been badly damaged; a statue on the north tower had been destroyed; and copious small-arms fire had left the two towers pockmarked with bullet holes (Ross 229).

Conclusion: What about What Happened *in* Chartres Cathedral?

We have now seen how four widely circulated and deeply rooted myths about Chartres Cathedral are, in fact, inaccurate, and inaccurate in ways that sap some of the complexity and some of the majesty from this remarkable edifice and its beguiling history. We add that is almost unheard of in short-form descriptions of Chartres Cathedral to find any sort of mention of the remarkable *human* events (that is, events that are not in some way related to architecture or art history, or to the standard religious practices of the Roman Catholic Church) that have taken place within the cathedral itself. This absence is unfortunate in at least two ways. First, it ignores the centrality of Chartres Cathedral in many pivotal events in French history. Second, it erases the human element from the structure, even though it is human beings who designed the cathedral, built it, repaired it after disasters, maintain it, and, since its inception, who have prayed, rejoiced, sung, celebrated, and mourned within it. Three examples should suffice to suggest the strikingly variegated types of non-religious human activities that have transpired within the present cathedral over its 800-year history.

A first example: it was in Chartres Cathedral on February 27, 1594 that, in a fragmented nation long bloodied by factional violence, Henri IV of France (1553-1610) was consecrated as king. He was arguably the greatest king, and perhaps the greatest leader, in French history. Despite the violent chasm separating France's Protestants (referred to by historians as "Huguenots") from its Catholics at the time, the consecration was a joyous, elaborate, even raucous spectacle (Babelon 395-422). The cathedral in Chartres was chosen for safety reasons; in a tradition that had remained unchanged for five centuries, every new French king had been consecrated at Reims Cathedral, but in 1594 Reims lay in a region of France packed with violent political enemies of Henri IV.

A second example: in 1793, during the fourth year of the French Revolution, Chartres Cathedral was officially converted from a Christian church into a so-called *Temple de la Raison* (Massé 21). The revolutionaries, who had seized control of the edifice, consecrated it as a house of worship for their brand-new religion, a newfangled *culte* invented by the Revolution's idealistic leaders. This new faith was putatively based on reason, rather than on Jesus Christ. This quickly birthed religion is almost entirely forgotten today, but it did have a very brief run in France some 230 years ago.

A third example: the cathedral being used as a temporary shelter for wounded French civilians at the outbreak of World War II. This grim scene was documented the now-iconic French national hero Jean Moulin (1899-1943), who was serving as *préfet* of the *Département* of Eure-et-Loir when the German Army marched into Chartres seized it on June 17, 1940. In his diary, the then-*préfet* notes that he visited the *crypte* of the cathedral at 8:30pm on June 15, 1940, and found it packed with wounded or dying people, as the hospital in Chartres was already filled to capacity with victims of the recent German air bombings, and couldn't accept additional patients (Moulin 53). Deprived of "les commodités les plus élémentaires," the wounded and the dying, many of them aged, had caused the *crypte* to reek of what Moulin calls "cette puanteur! (Moulin 53)" We note that this situation, although appalling, is apt: the *crypte* had originally been built some thousand years earlier as a sort of underground hostel to lodge pilgrims overnight, particularly those who had fallen ill (Miller 10).

There is still an enormous amount to be learned about Chartres Cathedral. Correcting myths that stray a troublingly distance from the truth is a first step. Yet many discoveries await in terms of the site's currently foggy pre-history, and the present cathedral's fascinating blend of architectural styles, its pioneering and durable engineering, its bristling in-house "population" of some 10,000 figural residents—human, animal, or monster—dwelling either in its stained-glass windows or in its sculptural programs, and the underreported panoply of historic events in which present cathedral has played a role. Let us conclude, then, with a plea for further investigation into this singular yet understudied house of worship. We can borrow a portion of the Gospel of Matthew 7:7-8 (a brief text doubtless pronounced thousands of times over the centuries within the walls of Chartres Cathedral) to serve as our researchers' call to arms:

Continue to search, and you will find. Continue to knock, and the door will open for you. Yes, whoever continues to ask will receive. Whoever

continues to look will find. And whoever continues to knock will have the door opened for them.

EAST STROUDSBURG UNIVERSITY

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