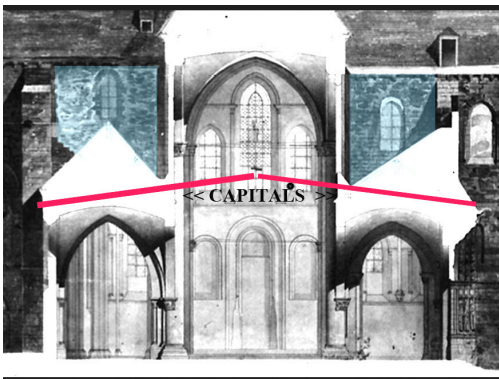


Short version of the building of Notre-Dame at Etampes.

The evidence for the history of Notre-Dame is not clear. One could believe that it was built in the natural erection order and that the anomalies we see were simply the result of confusion and uncertainty. It is my belief that medieval builders would tend to be respectful of their work and the care that went into the carving of each stone. Not always, but most often. After all, each stone needed attention to determine the size and profiles, cost money to carve, involved a lot of hard labour to move from the quarry, to lift to its level and place with precision, while building the scaffolding and mixing the mortar. Thus, it behoves us to respect their work and assume that they most of the time they know what they were doing and how best to spend their resources. Therefore we should give close attention to any anomaly with the real possibility that it reflects an act, an unintended and unplanned act that may lead us to understanding what occurred.

This is the case at Etampes. The most important anomaly that has been given the least attention is the rubble in the external walls around the nave clerestory and in the adjacent walls of the transepts. In itself, rubble would not be exceptional, but on a building that is otherwise ashlar, the presence of rubble raises questions.

The first step is to imagine the state of the building when these rubble walls were built. Look at the section through the nave facing east [blue in the drawing]. The clerestory walls flanking the rubble, on both sides, appear to have been erected first, and the rubble butted up to it later. My first reflection would be that the rubble is later than the transept clerestories, even later than the last part in the southwest corner. My second reflection is that without the rubble walls there would have been a “hole” in this part of the church, a part that was at a much lower level than the capitals in the choir, and that it may have extended down the nave.

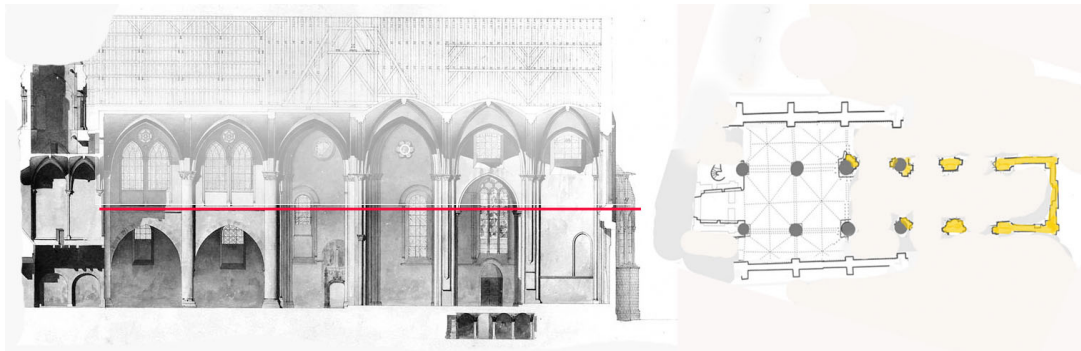


Then I observe that the rubble walls are supported on stonework that can be seen to step down from the second buttress on the north. It looks like the inclined wall was stabilising the north transept as the nave was unable to do so. As the lowest course of rubble lies well below the present-day level of the clerestory capitals, my third reflection is that this marks the position of the clerestory capitals in Phase 8. I would conclude that they were no higher than the lowest part of the rubble, and coincided with the internal stringcourse, eleven courses below the present-day capitals in the nave or choir. Presumably they had roofed the nave, shown in red, and that this roof stood in the way while the transepts were being built.

At the other end of the nave, against the tower, there is a vaulted loft behind the organ. The coursing is continuous from the western window on the external face, across the room, around the corner and along what forms the upper west wall of the nave. It more or less bonds with the upper eleven courses of the corner drums. The style of the capitals inside the loft and to the western windows suggests this stonework should be dated to the 1190s, phases 35-37. The lowest courses of the clerestory windows in the nave look contemporary, though the window heads, the vaults, and the flying buttresses, may have been later.

It thus appears that when last of the clerestory walls in the south transept were completed close to 1160 in phase 34, the nave roof was at a much lower level and continued to prevent the completion of the crossing and adjacent bays, and that it was only some thirty years later that the nave walls were raised and the clerestory capitals were brought up to the same level as the choir.

When I reflect on the many anomalies and irregularities among the choir capitals from the campaign of the 1120s, I would suspect that the choir capitals were originally placed at the same level as those in the nave, in phases 12-13. This would be some 11 courses lower than today at the same level as the later lateral chapels [marked by the red line in the section]. I would recall that at this time there was no evidence for the mighty church we have today. The side walls of the eastern bay of the apse look like external faces for the church, and that the as-yet-unbuilt aisles would have continued alongside the central vessel until they met up with the aisles in the nave [as in plan]. This would have been a perfectly normal arrangement for the 1120s.



Then, starting in the next decade, the present grand proposal was begun in the north, and they continued until the whole of the older choir was enveloped by the new work. Reflecting on the eastern wall of the choir I am aware that the coursing in the uppermost eleven courses is pretty uniform, and from the outside can be seen to tie in with those to the upper parts of the room to the south. The capitals in the eastern windows and in this room are all 1150s vintage. Yet the corner capitals in the choir are part of the 1120s project. The design of the windows to the east wall is different to those underneath and logic suggests they too were part of the 50s campaign. So how did the capitals in the corners get there if they had not been moved up. The other capitals from the 1120s would have been shifted up in a piecemeal manner as the surrounding work allowed.

There are many details missing from this description, and for those I refer you to the phase-by-phase discussion. The details only add weight to the very real possibility that all the clerestory capitals in the nave and the choir had been placed eleven courses lower than they are today, and that little if anything had been built above that level by phase 10. Further work was held in abeyance while the now much larger building was catching up. You may ask why would people stop at this level and not continue, yet we know that money was an enduring difficulty, and that great buildings were erected in many small campaigns averaging some 5 to 8 courses. Also, the clergy did not like being shut out of their space while building was going on, and they did all they could to get a roof over useable parts as quickly as they could. The roof may have been temporary, but never wasted as the timbers would be reused at the upper levels when work advanced.

To summarise, in this scenario the nave clerestory capitals were placed at the level of the present stringcourse, being about the 38th course; and remained there until they were raised eleven courses to their present height, around phase 31. A temporary roof over the nave would have allowed the clergy to move in while the choir was being built, though over the next 70 years the roof became an encumbrance by obstructing the completion of the transepts. In the west the walls and capitals of the organ loft from the 1190s in phase 37 are loosely bonded with the two corner drums above the level of the stringcourse, showing that the upper parts of the drums were probably built at the same time, and with at least the lower courses of the nave clerestory windows. With the completion of the choir the clergy could move out of the nave allowing that roof to be removed, so the outer skin of rubble walling in the two adjacent transept walls could be built in phases 32 and 36.