

Laon cathedral, Notre-Dame

Laon has a lighter construction than Chartres, and is not as tall, though it does have a gallery as well as triforium. It seems from the documents that work may have been begun under Gautier de Montagne, which means any time after 1145 when he became dean and before his death as bishop 29 years later.

The style of the capitals and the toichological evidence shows that construction of the first stage stopped at the clerestory sills just above the triforium of the choir, and somewhat lower in the eastern transept walls. Services would have been held in that space, one presumes under a temporary roof.

Work on the clerestory was not resumed until the square eastern extension had been built to this level, after which the whole of the choir from crossing to eastern wall was continued to the cornice and roof, and was vaulted. The choir gallery is entirely the work of the mid-60s from the style of the capitals, as is the triforium.

Scholars who write that the choir of Laon is from the 60s and the extension from the 80s give the impression that there was a 20-year gap between the two campaigns on the choir, whereas one followed close on the other. There is no reason to assume that the gift of the Chermizy quarry dates the extension. Though the capitals in the eastern section of the choir, in both the aisles and gallery, are in the style of the 80s, work would have begun on the foundations before that. There would have been only a short pause of a year or two between completing the clerestory around the ambulatory and deciding to pull down the newly completed hemicycle and extend the choir seven bays to the east with a great rose. The discussions that would have been involved around this decision would have occurred close to 1168, and may be why work on the choir stopped at the level of the clerestory sills.

Within a couple of years the transepts had been laid out and the first bays of the nave begun. From here both transepts and nave, and the eastern extension of the choir were built more or less together. They remained so close in tandem that when it came to building the great rose windows, those on the eastern and western walls were erected at the same time to the same design.

The first act in extending the choir occurred just after Gautier de Montagne's death. It may have been prompted by the change in bishops in 1174, or it may have been the last act of an exceptional administrator. It was in any case implied in the noble spaces of the transepts and the first bays of the nave that were being set out and excavated while he was still bishop.

With that decision came the simplification of the design for the nave piers that occurs west of the third bay.