

Soissons cathedral south transept and choir

Where the style of the south transept was closer in feeling and scale to Saint-Remi begun a dozen years earlier, the changes to the choir created a colossal space of great height. The gallery was eliminated, the triforium doubled in height, and the high vault springing pushed well into the clerestory so they were for the first time set well above the sills of the full-width windows. It has long been understood that Soissons predates Chartres, with opinions summarised by Crossley.

By studying the construction course by course its story can be made more precise and its relationship with Chartres becomes more interesting. After fitting the construction into the known dates **the average progress of the south transept was 5 to 6 courses per year**. Barnes believed that the south transept was begun as a cameo addition to the earlier church.

The analysis in the *Template-makers* showed that every course in the aisle walls of the choir was tied in with and dependent on the rate of construction of the south transept. This showed that work on the wall bases of the choir began only a few years after the start of the transept. The footings were being dug by 1180 and the choir walls had been raised to the level of the sills by the time the south transept gallery capitals were carved.

The decadic range for these capitals suggests a date around 1182, and those in the upper levels point to a year or two later. The choir was planned for an aisle that encompassed both the two lower stories of the transept. The capitals all indicate a date in the early 1180s, and into the rest of the decade for the upper capitals in the transept, yet the capitals of the choir piers indicate the later 1190s, as do those in the choir triforium. How do we sort out this situation?

I propose that the walls of old choir lay along the line of today's drum piers, and that the external walls of the new choir were built as a bracelet around the old choir. The space between the new wall and the old choir could, until it was demolished, have housed the various chapels referred to in the documents. This was a not uncommon way to extend the church, thereby drawing endowments that would help to pay for new construction. The annual processions around the choir noted in 1190 could have occurred in this space between the new wall and the old church. Meantime, services would have been continued in the old choir.

When the outer walls could not be raised any further until the interior piers had caught up, around 1185. This put pressure on the decision to demolish the old choir, and this had to wait for seven years while they pressed ahead to complete the transept. That was vaulted by 1192. The chaplaincy for the upper transept chapel of Saint-Jacques could have been installed in 1190, and it was two years later that Guillaume gave money to decorate the altar. I propose that this altar was inside the hemicycle of the south transept under its high vault, and that the moving of the altar indicated that the old choir could be demolished. Moving the altar into the transept would have been at the same time as the remains of Bishop Josselin were translated to Longpont where the choir was well and truly finished by then.

This would help resolve Dany Sandron's difficulty in reconciling "la délicatesse du bras sud au gigantisme du chœur". To have been completed as it was originally designed as a 'minuet' to its intended neighbour suggests that the clergy were totally aware of the difference, and saw some liturgical or aesthetic benefit from the separation. In a sense, the south became a chapel to the rest of the church. It may, as Barnes suggested, have reflected the proportions of the opposite north transept built a century earlier.

By 1185 the external walls of the choir had already been constructed to the height of the aisle capitals, or those of the windows a few courses further up. On the south wall of the choir progress may have been much faster to support the wall of the transept triforium.

The foliage in the capitals of the drum piers of the choir is in the mode of the 1190s. Drums were quick to build and may have taken only a year or two. The platform over the vaults would then have been ready to receive the triforium by the end of the decade, which was when the piers at Chartres were being capped. With the demolition of the ancient structure the way was clear to erect the tall thin drums, carve their capitals around 1197, vault over the aisles and then continue the almost 100 courses to the roof cornice. Working at the same pace as at Chartres, around 4 courses per year in the upper parts, the vaults could have been in place ready for occupation in 1212 as attested by the plaque still attached to the south wall.

Thus the choir needed twenty-seven years from footings to completion, excluding the six-year pause while the south transept was being completed. It would remain an open question whether the vaults were erected after occupation or before, but it makes little difference to either the pace of work or the completion of the first tall-clerestory choir in France with its double-tiered flyers. This was finished in time to inspire the masters at Chartres to create their tall clerestory, a decision that I believe was made in 1210. It places the start of the Soissons ambulatory fifteen or so years earlier than Chartres, and the tall triforium and clerestory some six years earlier. When we adjust for the pause, the Chartres nave took the same number of years for almost the same number of courses.