The Evolution of the Western Christian Church: Architecturally and Artistically

Resource Packet

In this packet you'll find several short overviews of the historical context in which the early Christian churches were designed and built as well as a few diagrams that help to demonstrate the architectural elements of the Romanesque and Gothic churches.

A quick read of the packet will be useful to understand more fully the various conditions and events that helped literally to shape churches from 300 to 1300 CE

The Fall of Rome and Its Impact on Western European Organization

As an empire, Rome at its height ruled territory that stretched from northern Africa in the south to Britain in the northwest and northern Germany in the north, from the Iberian Peninsula in the west to present-day Romania in the northeast and directly east as far as modern-day Iraq. Maintaining this vast empire was extremely difficult at a time when communication and transportation technology were limited to written or oral messages physically carried by individuals on foot or horseback or carried over the seas in boats moved by the wind or the muscle-power of oar-wielding slaves. To compensate for the slow movement of people and information, the Romans were forced to create a variety of mechanisms for the governance and administration of their subject peoples, for the defense of their territory, and for the safety and security of its bureaucrats, merchants and traders, and other travelers.

From its position in the center of the Mediterranean Sea, at nearly the center of the territorial empire, Rome built, maintained and defended a network of roads and sea routes that connected the imperial capital to a number of provincial capitals. Protected by army legions, these centers served the purpose of housing the governors, legal and judicial officers, tax collectors and other bureaucrats necessary for enforcing Roman law and carrying out Roman policies in the conquered territory. Over time many of these provincial capitals became large urban centers— cities—where a high level of economic, social, cultural and intellectual activity took place. Exotic goods from Egypt found their way to Britain in the ships of traders; lead and tin from Britain found a variety of uses in Rome. Many noted philosophers and writers of Rome's Silver Age lived in the provincial capitals. *For its time*, the movement of people, goods and ideas was safe, speedy, and lively. The Roman Empire, in fact, enjoyed three elements critical to "success" in the Western context

- A strong, centralized government with clearly focused decision-making bodies and a system of local authorities for carrying out policy;
- A number of large urban centers where government, production, trade, learning, justice and cultural/social life abounded;
- An extensive, well-kept and relatively safe network of transportation/ communication lines between the urban centers that allowed for significant local, medium and (especially important) long distance trade.

This did not continue indefinitely, however. Beginning as early as 150CE, the Roman Empire began experiencing problems, both internal and external, that would lead eventually to weakness and ultimately to collapse. Internally, political instability and corruption appeared as a number of weak, eccentric, debauched or even demented individuals became emperor. After a time the army became more influential in the selection of emperors. Put in simplistic terms, soldiers replaced their love of *patria* and allegiance to the emperor with love of spoils and allegiance to the general who provided them. This became even more pronounced when the

border armies became overwhelmingly recruited from the conquered, barbaric peoples rather than Roman citizens. Economically, a number of conditions led to an ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor and a staggering increase in the number of unemployed poor. The rise and spread of Christianity throughout the Empire (especially among the poor) led to increasing disregard of Roman traditions, loosening the cultural "glue" that helped keep the empire intact. Externally, of course, the largest problem, and ultimately the one that would bring down the empire, was the successive waves of nomadic warrior peoples from the North and East—Ostrogoths, Visigoths, among others—who first ate away at the outlying areas of the empire and eventually took over the Italian peninsula and Rome itself. The "fall of Rome" is dated from the year 476CE when a barbarian became the emperor of the Western part of empire.[1]

With the fall of the Western Empire, the three elements noted above for the most part ceased to exist in Europe. As a general rule, it can be said that the farther geographically that an area was located from Rome the less likely it was to enjoy the existence of any or all of the three elements. In other words, in northern and western Europe after about 450CE:

- There were no strong, centralized governments (and therefore obviously no dependent provincial or regional governments and no clearly-focused decision-making authority);
- Without a strong central government and its military capability (and with the continuing appearance and presence of barbarian armies), there was insufficient security to protect merchants, traders, and other travelers as well as the "civilians" (city-dwellers without military skills), so that
    - Large urban centers ceased to exist, some being totally depopulated and others falling to the status of mere villages, as their citizens were killed in large numbers or fled to the protection of nearby walled and militarily-defended villas[2]; and
    - Trade, except for the most simple, local trade usually based on barter, ceased to exist—that means no long-distance trade and only exceptional medium distance trade was carried on, and people were forced to survive on only what they could grow or make locally with indigenous resources.

Western and Northern Europe became a patchwork of extremely local governmental/judicial authorities, evolving highly complex and elaborate nexes of power and subservience based on

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[1] The Empire had been divided into eastern and western portions in the 300sCE as the difficulty of administration and defense had increased. The Eastern Roman Empire, centered on the eastern capital of Constantinople (named after the emperor Constantine and later called Byzantium and presently Istanbul), continued in existence until it was conquered by Moslem Ottoman Turks in 1453. After the fall of Rome, the Eastern or Byzantine Empire became based increasingly more on Greek linguistic, cultural, religious and political models rather than Roman/Latin ones.

[2] These generally were the property of former officers (and sometimes even soldiers) of the Roman Legions who had been granted land in exchange for their military services. They lived on the produce of the land which was most commonly worked by slaves, and they generally supported a number of former comrades in exchange for their aid in defending the property.

*reciprocal **personal** relationships* known as feudalism, and of local economies, based on *reciprocal **personal** relationships* essential to the survival of both parties. Government and economy became functions of *individuals*, not of *institutions*.

For a brief period in the late 700s-early800s, it appeared that this fragmentation would be replaced again with order and central authority under the leadership of Charlemagne (Charles the Great). A Frankish king, Charlemagne used military exploits, Christian proselytizing and support of the Papacy against barbarians, and an interest in a cultural-intellectual rebirth to re-create a "Roman Empire."   His empire centered on Aachen (in modern western Germany) and extended southwest to the Pyrenees, southeast to Rome, east to modern-day Austria and west and north to the sea. He was able to control this vast territory through the loyalty of his counts and dukes and through the use of personally loyal bureaucrats who traveled the length and breadth of the kingdom, carrying his laws and instructions to his subjects. In 800, the Pope crowned Charlemagne "emperor" while he was attending a Christmas mass in Rome. Until his death in 814, Charlemagne was a patron of the arts (commissioning great building and importing workmen to create major works of mosaics), a reformer of the Church (imposing strict rules and increasing the literacy of the clergy), and a supporter of learning as well as a powerful symbol and reality of central authority.

Charlemagne's empire and the central authority and order that came with it were to be short-lived. Following Frankish custom, his only son and heir divided the empire upon his death among his three sons who soon fought amongst themselves for larger portions. Renewed barbarian invasions—by the Magyars from the East and the Vikings from the North—further threatened the stability of the land, and by the late 800s power had moved again from a central authority to local war lords capable of providing more immediate response to danger.

The only entity that survived intact the fall of Rome and that came to supplant secular imperial authority as a kind of "universal authority" was the Christian Church in the West, eventually to be known as the Roman Catholic Church.[3] Based in Rome, with its acknowledged head the Bishop of Rome—the spiritual descendant of St. Peter who would later also be known as the Pope—the Church had survived a period of bloody repression under the Romans before the emperor Constantine converted and one of his successors declared Christianity the state religion of the Empire. The Church had organized itself with a clear hierarchy and geographical dispersion modeled after those of the Empire itself. Its bishops lived in the Roman provincial capitals; they answered to the central authority of the Bishop of Rome and enforced the Church's policies and spread the Word among the populations under their jurisdiction. The

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[3] Almost from its beginnings, the Christian Church in the Middle East, Greece and the Balkan Peninsula developed differently from the Church in the West. Differences included those rooted in theology (nature of Christ), calendar, liturgy and practice. Efforts to bring the two sides back together included major church councils and conferences, including one in the 1400s at which time it was decided "to agree to disagree."

Church did not succumb to the barbarian attacks but worked to convert these unbelievers, frequently with the military support of erstwhile Roman warlords immediately after the fall of Rome and later with the military and cultural support of Charlemagne. It was eminently successful in these attempts, so that by 1000CE it could be said that the whole of the population of Western and Northern Europe (with the exception of an extremely small minority of Jews) was Roman Catholic.

The history of the Middle Ages in Europe is for the most part the history of attempts to re-create the three critical elements of **central authority, urban centers, and trade**. These attempts would mean:

- that efforts to re-create a "universal" empire like that of the Romans would run up against the claim to "universal authority" of the Church and its head, the Pope;
- that a centralizing authority (king) would have to take power away from local (war) lords [transform feudalism to a feudal monarchy];
- that the centralizing authority (king) would have to create *institutions* to replace the personal relationships of the fragmented authority;
- that significant advancements had to be made in technology and security to allow the production of enough surplus foodstuffs to support a non-food-producing urban population [transform manorialism to a money-based rudimentary capitalism] ;
- that sufficient peace and security had to be re-established to enable medium and long-distance trade to occur.

Historical Changes in the Middle Ages, c. 1000-1300*

Political:

Local, *personal* and *reciprocal* relationships provide an element of law, government and security	→ Creation of *centralized* monarchies, with royal law, royal taxes, and a royal army, significant portion of which was directly obedient and loyal to the king

Economic:

Nearly self-sufficient manors with limited local trade, in most cases of the barter variety	→ Re-creation of a monetary economy with long-distance trade and the production of consumer goods by skilled and regulated artisans and craftsmen

Social:

A class system based on the Feudal/Manor system: Those who Fight, Those who Work, Those who Pray	→ The appearance of a new class—an urban-based merchant/artisan/craftsman group standing between the serfs and slaves and the feudal landowners of the rural areas – i.e. a "middle class"
Most urban centers outside of Italy vanish after the the collapse of medium and long-distance trade	→ The building, rebuilding and/or repopulati of significant urban centers where few had existed since the fall of the Roman Empire

Religious:

The Roman Catholic Church is the most powerful institution in Europe, based on Political, Economic, Social, Intellectual and Theological sources of influence	→ The increasing efforts of the Roman Catholic Church to develop more centralized structures and dogmatic theology at the same time that it saw its secular power diminishing

Intellectual/Cultural:

Most advanced intellectual life is lost with cities or dominated by the Roman Catholic Church	→ The development of a lively cultural and intellectual life—both sacred and secular— arising from the interaction of peoples, ide and cultures in the new urban centers

*It is important to note that, though these changes were significant, none were inevitable or steady. Each of them moved along at different tempos in different geographical areas—and sometimes even regressed—throughout the period. This is especially true of the developments in the Catholic Church.

The Realities of Medieval Europe

In the period 1000-1300 (the so-called High Middle Ages), a number of conditions existed in Europe that were generally accepted and that structured all facets of life for the people of the time. While it would be an over-simplification (and, in some cases, absolutely wrong history) to say that all these conditions existed in exactly the same way and to the same extent everywhere, a fairly accurate snapshot of the political, economic, social, religious, cultural, and intellectual life of the place and time can be gleaned from these realities.

Political Realities

- For most of Western Europe, this was a period of centralizing authorities, as kings successfully wrested power from feudal lords and the Roman Catholic Church and began to create organized monarchies with loyal bureaucrats, royal law and courts, and militaries supported at least in part by taxes rather than feudal obligations. Major exceptions occurred in "Germany" and "Italy."
- One of the most important factors allowing the rise of kings was the rebirth of towns and trade.
- Although losing substantial independent political power, feudal lords retained at least a modicum of military power and all of their status and prestige.
- By the end of this period the Roman Catholic Church, because of both internal corruption and the rise of kings, had lost a significant amount of political power.
- The modern notion of "state" (an entity with defined borders, uniform law and central authority organized at least in part to serve the population within) did not yet exist. The medieval "kingdom" had ever changing boundaries and was defined as the property of the king and his family. There was no sense that the king was obligated to serve "the people" (who counted for nothing); public order and external security were the functions of his government and served to maintain his hold on his property.

Economic Realities

- By the end of this period, a "money economy" and revitalized trade had gone far in supplanting the institution of serfdom and a "gift economy."
- Guilds, organizations controlled by master artisan-merchants, dictated the economic and to a significant extent the political life of towns.
- Long distance trade with other parts of the world was in the hands of very few merchants, many of them Italians or Jews.

Social Realities

- There was a strict hierarchy of status and social class which nearly all accepted as the will of G-d to be obeyed without question.
- "Identity" was corporative, meaning that people identified themselves not as individuals (hence only the aristocracy had true "last names") but by the groups to

which they belonged—their lord, their monastery, their guild or town. This gave a sense of security in insecure times.

- Families were economic units where each member had to have a role and function, and marriages were contracted not out of love but out of benefit (territorial, economic or political) to the families of the parties involved.
- In an age that valued the skills and qualities of the warrior, women were seen as inferior because of their lack of warrior skills. They were valued, however, for their dowries, family connections and possible inheritance, and their ability to give birth to more warriors (or workers).
- Women were also perceived in a subservient way by the Church that taught that they were more inclined to sin or to lead men into sin (the "Eve" figure). Midway through this period women came to have a dual image when the Cult of the Virgin became popular, and women were perceived also in the image of the Virgin Mary.
- The Church was one place where women could gain a semblance of independent power as they headed convents as abbesses.
- Wealthy and noble widows, if sufficiently strong and clever, could sometimes gain control of inheritances and wield power in their own right.
- Inheritance of land and title (or of the business in a merchant or artisan family) was usually placed in the first-born son; the second son in a noble family was expected to enter the Church as priest or monk and rise to power and status there. Younger sons either became knights, giving military service to lords (not necessarily or even normally their brother), or entered the Church if they had a vocation.
- First-born daughters generally received the largest dowry and were entered into the most advantageous marriages. Younger daughters, especially if there were more than two, were "encouraged" to enter convents (which also expected a dowry).

Religious Realities

- Nearly everyone in Western and central Europe was a Roman Catholic; the people of Eastern Europe and the Balkans had been converted to the Eastern (Greek) Orthodox form of Christianity. These two forms of Christianity formally separated (because of liturgical and theological differences) in the 1000s.
- Because of the universality of Catholicism in Western Europe and the nature of its theology , it maintained a high level of conformity of religious belief and individual behavior. It alone held the keys to salvation, a concept with a great deal of reality and importance to the people of the Middle Ages.
- There was a high degree of "superstitious" practice within the population, and the Church itself supported such concrete exhibitions of piety as the veneration of saints, pilgrimages, and the collection and veneration of relics.
- There were a very few Jews who lived mostly in the larger towns and cities and until the 1000s lived with at least limited toleration. After 1050, acts of discrimination and violence against these communities increased greatly, and by late 1100s Jews had been expelled from most Western European kingdoms.
- Another minority, Moslems, lived in the Iberian Peninsula where they had their own kingdoms. These were the target of sporadic warfare from their Christian neighbors from 800 until the collapse of the last one in 1492.

- The Church was an active force in areas of life where modern religious institutions have no legal standing; Church law was "law" and sins were punishable by civil/criminal secular courts.

    Politically it challenged emperors and kings, and although it never mounted its own army against political foes, it was the largest single landowner and therefore the largest single feudal lord. The military support that it could muster made it a key player in the power struggles of the age.

    Economically, it was a major producer and consumer. It also laid out and enforced strict regulations for business and commerce. Culturally, it laid down the norms and was the major commissioner and user of art, architecture, and music in its great cathedrals, parish churches and monasteries.

    Intellectually, it had the monopoly on education with its cathedral and monastery schools, its provision of all the masters of the new universities, and its oversight of ideas.

- The Church could wield significant power through its theological weapons of excommunication and interdiction (withholding the sacraments from an individual or an entire area, thereby preventing the attainment of salvation).
- Because many clergymen were younger sons of the nobility who had entered the priesthood or monastery for reasons of family and power, not because of true devotion, many clergymen (especially those in positions of power) were corrupt and immoral.

Cultural and Intellectual Realities

- The bulk of artistic, cultural and intellectual production of this era was produced by and for the Roman Catholic Church and as such had the functions of glorifying G-d and the Church, teaching the lessons of Christianity (the sculpture of Gothic churches should be seen as visual teaching aids in an age of limited literacy), and maintaining conformity of belief and behavior. Painting was done on a very limited basis as it was perceived by the Church to be pagan and blasphemous.
- Those who failed to conform to theological or behavioral norms were frequently branded as heretics and burned at the stake.
- At the beginning of the period, when war was more frequent and widespread, the valued skills were those of the warrior—riding, the use of sword and lance and the like; therefore, literacy was little valued and not always acquired by the noble classes. Literacy was the characteristic of the clergy (although many monks and some priests were illiterate). As the period moved on and order was somewhat restored and the rise of towns created a class of literate and numerate merchants, values changed somewhat, and the noble classes became more involved with educating themselves and their children.
- Despite this change, the rurally-based aristocracy and the town-based merchants and artisans had very different and conflicting values, the nobles being defined as warriors and the townspeople having a need for order and peace in order to prosper. Nobles

thought of townspeople as inherently less stable and moral because of their lack of connection to a piece of land (*deraciné or "rootless"*).

- Monasteries served as centers for the preservation of knowledge with their scriptoria and manuscript-copying monks.
- Universities (which began in Bologna and Paris in the 1100s) were the seats of new learning, especially in the introduction and incorporation of the classical logic of Aristotle and other Greek philosophers into the Christian intellectual context, St. Thomas Aquinas being the outstanding scholar in this area. His work did much to "sanitize" classical (pagan) learning for Christian use.
- The school of thought was called "Scholasticism," and one of its major precepts was that where logic and revealed Truth (Christian belief) differed, it was the human reasoning that was in error, not the Divine revelation. This meant that "science" as such was largely held back by both belief and "method."
- There was a thriving popular culture outside of the Church, at first in the oral tradition (minstrels and troubadours) and later written. Chivalric tales, romances, lays, chansons were all produced and avidly listened to or read. Some exhibited pure and chaste heroes and heroines; others were downright bawdy, especially the student drinking songs. The Church on occasion sought to curb the most outrageous excesses.

The Process of Creating Feudal Monarchies

As has been seen, around the year 1000 central governmental institutions were largely lacking and political power was a private possession in the hands of feudal lords who could put together small armies in order either to defend themselves or to wage aggressive war on their peers. During the two centuries following 1000CE these circumstances began to change in several parts of Europe (notably in those areas which will come to be called "France" and "England") as "kings" began to wrest power away from the feudal lords and exert more authority through the military, law and justice systems, and the intangible of "esteem" or status. These "kings" were sometimes merely feudal lords whose feudal connections made them relatively more powerful and able to conquer sufficient or specific territory which earned them the title of "king." The best example here is, of course, Duke William of Normandy (aka William the Conqueror) who became the king of England after the Battle of Hastings in 1066. At other times, the "kings" were the remnants of families who claimed royal blood going back to the age of the Romans or even claiming ancestry to Christ himself in one case (the Merovingians of France). Frequently in these cases, the "kings" were "kings" in name only—being only equally or, more often, less powerful than other feudal lords and able to exact no devotion, taxes, or obedience except from their personal feudal vassals and serfs, having no capital city, no body of paid civil servants and no royal (read "national") army.

So what was the process by which these feeble kings or feudal lords made themselves into "feudal monarchs"? While there are innumerable variations on the specific paths to kingship, a common pattern is discernible and can be broken down into three steps:

- The aspiring "king" becomes the most powerful feudal lord. In a society in which military prowess and success count for everything—especially the ownership or control of land which in turn guarantees the ability to put together a military force—it stands to reason that to be a king who commands obedience, one must be a powerful feudal lord. The acquisition of land/power can come from inheritance, skillful marriage(s) and, of course, conquest. It may take several hundred years (as in the case of the Capetians in France) or several days (as in the case of William the Conqueror who claimed the whole of England by right of conquest).
- The "king" begins to build "institutions of kingship." These are kingdom-wide institutions that apply to all persons living in the "kingdom"—a unit of territory which is NOT limited to the king's personal land holdings. It is, in fact, normally defined as the extent of territory in which the royal institutions have authority or are obeyed. The first of these institutions are usually laws and courts of law with judges appointed by the king (and sometimes the king himself) presiding, rather than feudal lords acting on their own behalf. Other royal institutions are taxes, a royal bureaucracy to collect taxes, and a royal army made up of individuals willing to fight for the king but not all of whom are his feudal vassals and most of whom are paid in tax revenue rather than land or titles.
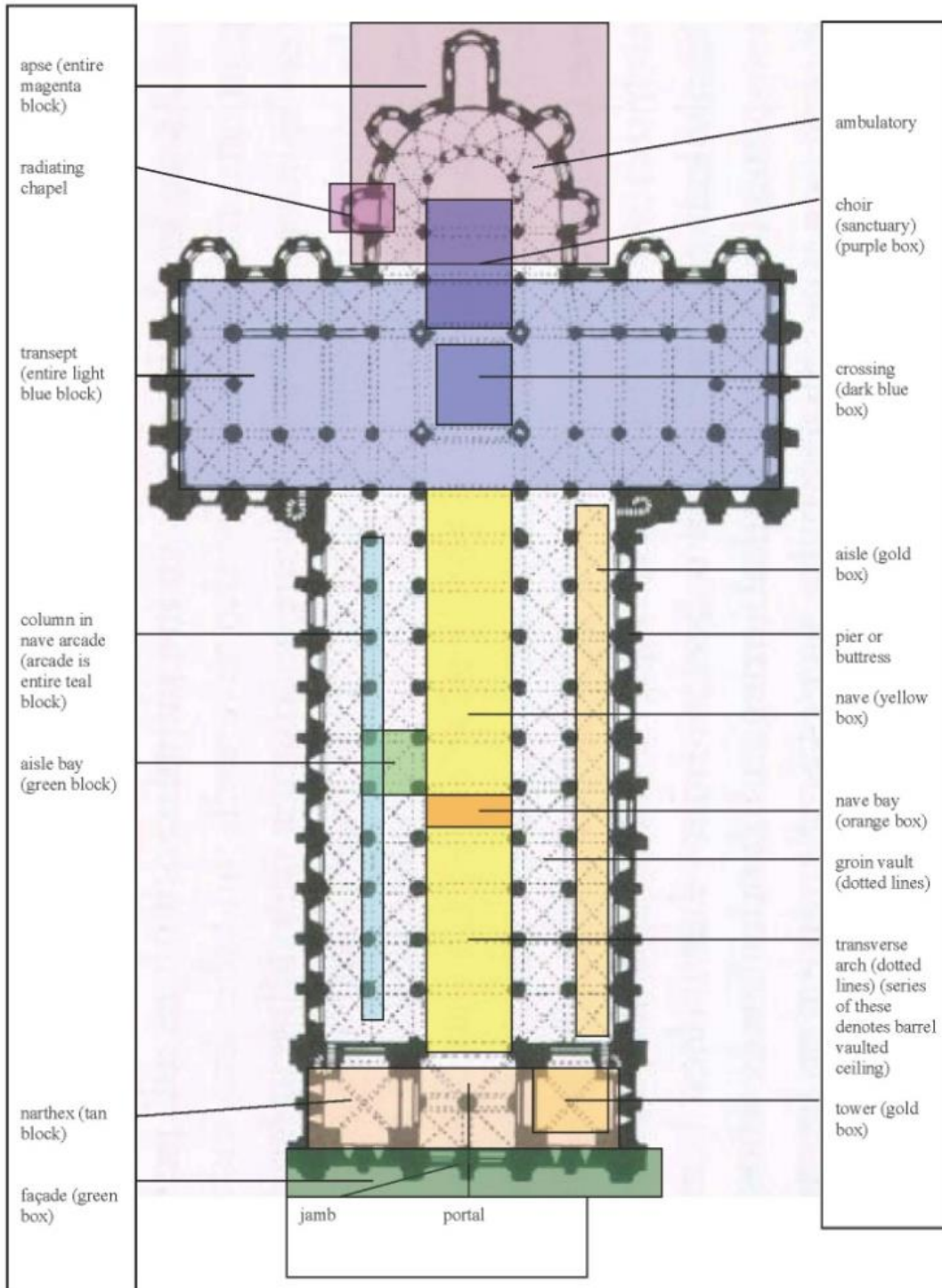
- The "king" asserts his authority over the Church. In doing so, he makes it clear that he is the focus of power and decision-making. He may assert his authority by establishing his right to try clergymen in royal courts (rather than Church courts) for secular crimes, by establishing his right to tax the wealth and income of the Church, and/or by appointing men loyal to him as bishops, archbishops and abbots.
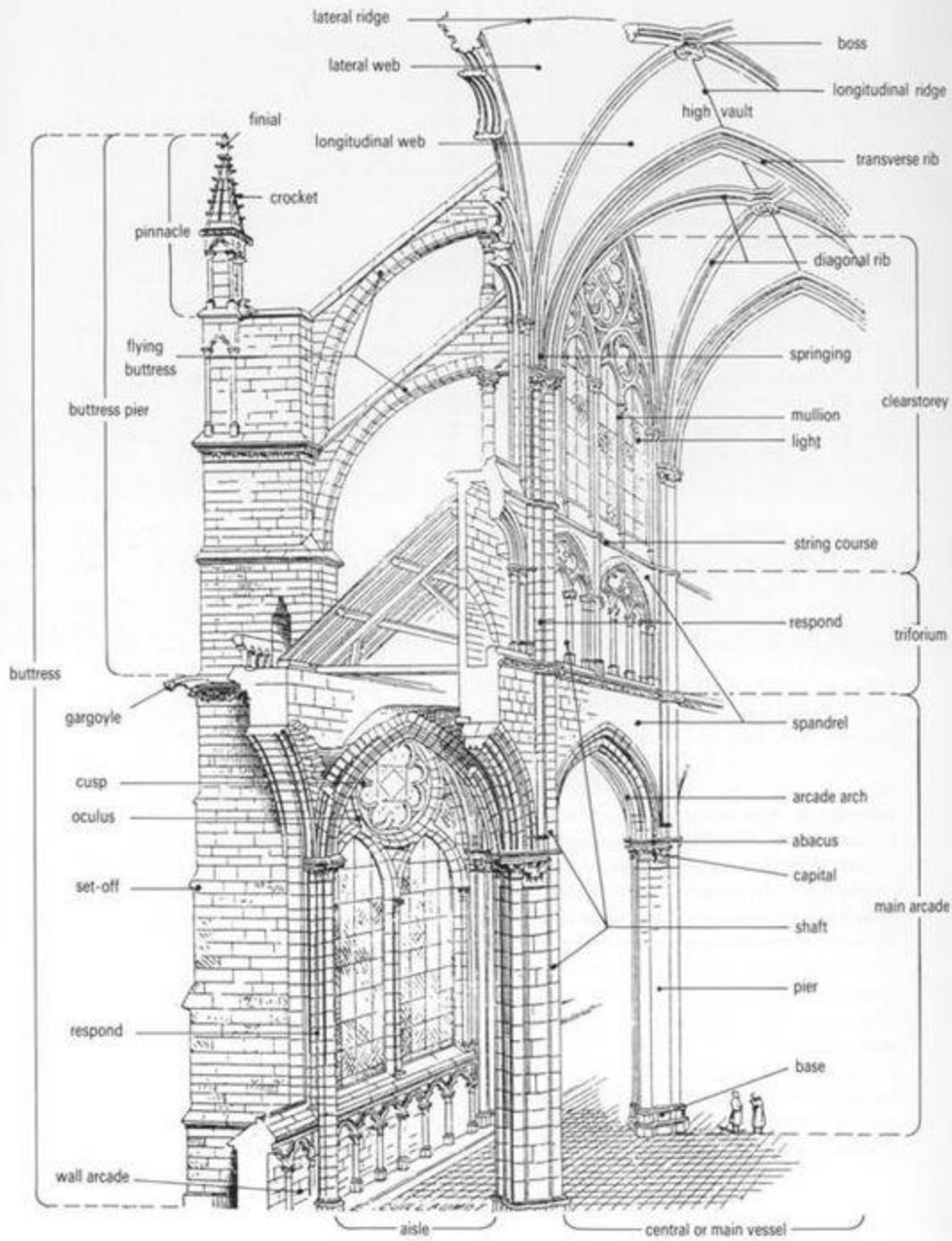
In general, the "king" must have achieved some success in Step One (becoming one of the most powerful feudal lords) before he[4] could begin working on Step Two (institutions) or Step Three (taking down the Church). But once he had laid the foundation of power, he could move along simultaneously on the last two steps. In the one clearly documented case where the "king" (in this case, actually the "emperor" of the Holy Roman Empire) took on the Church before he had secured power over the feudal lords, his attempts at centralizing power came to no success at all and led instead to significantly more fragmentation of the empire and division of power among the feudal princes, dukes, margraves, and Ritter (sovereign knights).
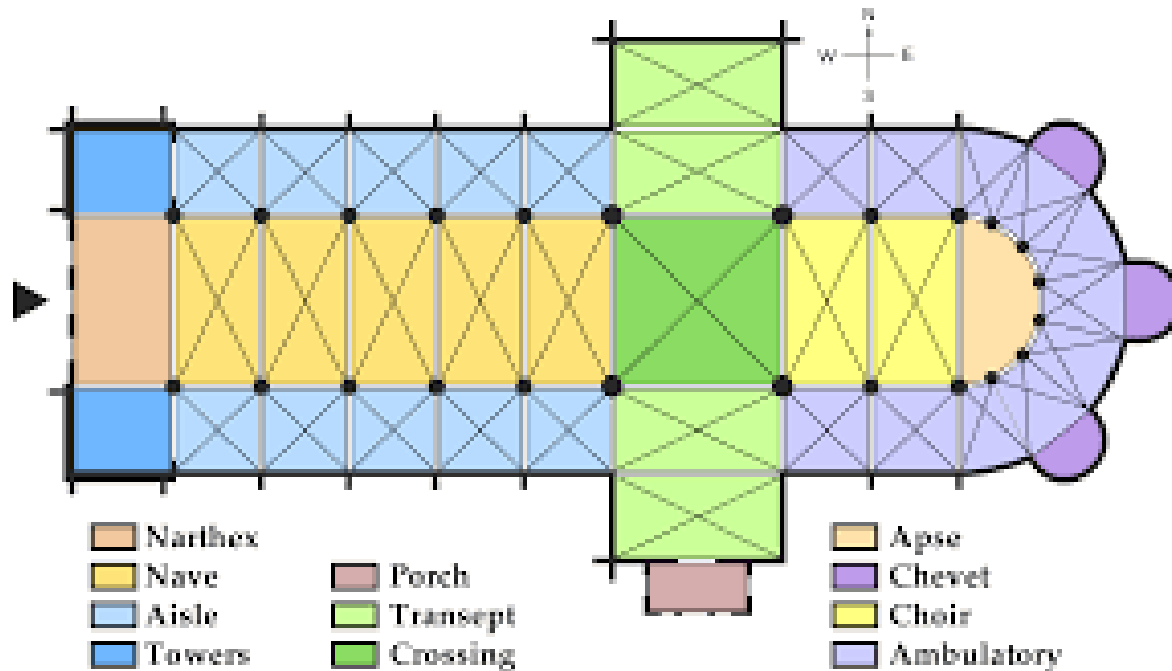
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[4] A note on gender-neutral language. It is not used here or in any other handouts in which it is wholly inappropriate. The Franks (i.e., French) actually had a law (the Salic law) that forbade women from inheriting the throne of France. While the English did not have a formal law against female royal inheritance, on the one occasion during the Middle Ages in which a woman was in line to inherit (Matilda or Maude, as she was called in French), a male relative of the deceased king claimed right of succession and fought a bloody civil war against Matilda and her supporters for more than a decade to prevent her taking the throne. She never did in fact reign, although her son did and became Henry II, one of the most important kings for the development of English legal and judicial institutions.

Annotated Plan of Romanesque Church

apse (entire magenta block)

radiating chapel

transept (entire light blue block)

column in nave arcade (arcade is entire teal block)

aisle bay (green block)

narthex (tan block)

façade (green box)

ambulatory

choir (sanctuary) (purple box)

crossing (dark blue box)

aisle (gold box)

pier or buttress

nave (yellow box)

nave bay (orange box)

groin vault (dotted lines)

transverse arch (dotted lines) (series of these denotes barrel vaulted ceiling)

tower (gold box)

jamb   portal

lateral ridge

lateral web

boss

longitudinal ridge

high vault

finial

longitudinal web

transverse rib

crocket

pinnacle

diagonal rib

flying buttress

springing

buttress pier

clearstorey

mullion

light

string course

respond

triforium

buttress

spandrel

gargoyle

cusp

arcade arch

oculus

abacus

capital

set-off

main arcade

shaft

pier

respond

base

wall arcade

aisle

central or main vessel

Legend:
- Narthex
- Nave
- Aisle
- Towers
- Porch
- Transept
- Crossing
- Apse
- Chevet
- Choir
- Ambulatory

Basic Plan of Gothic Church

The nomenclature of the detail portions of the Romanesque structure (words like portal, jamb, bay, and the like) also apply to Gothic structures.

The chevet (also spelled chevette) as it is used here is a bit misleading as it generally refers to the eastern end of the church. What is denoted here as a chevet is a radiating chapel.