Memes and assumptions

Extract from The Template-makers of the Paris Basin, Leura, 1989

In art-historical studies there are two levels of analysis: what we may call an 'upper' level concerned with those broad issues of style and built form that have interested most art historians in this century, and a 'lower' level concerned with a large quantity of detailed and minuscule data about the day by day process of construction and the full range of decision-making that went into it. It forms one basis for upper-level analysis.

Lower-level analysis is like an examination of the stresses in the frame of a violin. The knowledge we gain in no way affects our appreciation of the music played on it, but it does add to our understanding of both the instrument and the maker. Each level is a semiautonomous subsystem augmenting the way we know a violin - or a church. To proceed with an analysis at one level we actually put aside concepts inherited from any other level, just as theories about harmony will not be relevant to tests of material stress.

Generally, the researcher believes he proceeds inexorably from one well-established fact to the next, never being influenced by any unproven conjectures. Nevertheless, the truth is that much of medieval art history is based on unverified assumptions that are quite tenaciously held. They have been taught and accepted for so long they have become the belief systems of the profession, so that even eminent historians have foundered.

A useful way to conceptualise the nature of *a priori* assumptions is through Richard Dawkins' concept of the meme, which he defines as a "gene-of-memory."[1] A meme is like a catchy tune, a new fashion in clothes or a way of building an arch. When an architect hears about a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students, and if it catches on it will, like a gene, propagate itself by spreading from brain to brain. This process can, in the broad sense, be called imitation. Yet memes are living structures, for "when you plant a fertile meme in my mind, you literally parasitise my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitise the genetic mechanism of a host cell." The consequences may be as physical as the impact of a gene on a living organism, for the ideas in the brain realize themselves physically. They form structures in the nervous system from where they are manifested in the world around us. Selection may favour those memes which exploit the cultural environment to their own advantage and, like a gene, the meme is the only thing we leave behind us when we die. In short, the meme is any idea which has ceased to be open to reflection and has been accepted to the point that it unconsciously directs our thoughts and actions. It is therefore invasive and concealed, parasitic and often, limiting.

Some art-historical processes are based on sets of conventions that we might more properly call assumptions and memes. True, they have evolved over the past hundred years to provide an intellectual framework to order the often confusing, if not conflicting, evidence it deals with. These assumptions have been built into a logical, coherent and self-validating system, but like all mental constructs they tend to limit observation. Some of its proponents, like Lefèvre-Pontalis, hold such an exalted reputation that their conclusions have been questioned only on a piecemeal basis.

No doubt we need coherent mental sets in order to observe in the first place, for the eye is not a camera to see everything at equal value, but a selective instrument. If programming is essential to learning, then deprogramming is fundamental to any growth in understanding.

Art-historical assumptions stem in part from the way that stylistic analysis seldom concerns itself with the construction process. The first is the long-held belief that the inventions which made the Gothic revolution came from the great workshops around the larger cathedrals, whence they spread to other places. This might be called the "from-the-greater-to-the-smaller" assumption, and is a meme because it has formed part of the belief-system of more than a generation of scholars and for which there is insufficient evidence.

For example, it was presumed that the abbey of Braine could not have been designed until the scheme for Chartres had been worked out: Longpont had to come after the nearby cathedral in Soissons, and Soissons cathedral could not have been even begun until the footings at Chartres had been laid.[2] The belief-system is summed up in Branner's claim for Reims that the ideas generated there were "passed on to a large number of new shops that it formed and colonized,"[3] or Mâle's "once the work at Saint-Denis was finished ... the workshop gathered together by Suger was moved to Chartres."[4]

Three further assumptions have flowed from this. First, that the masters in charge of the major workshops remained in one location for decades and that only the apprentices or minor craftsmen moved. This implied, second, that ideas were carried to the smaller workshops by lesser masters who had been influenced by one of the greater from a major shop, rather than being carried by the genius himself working on buildings of all sizes and taking his ideas with him. And finally, the major fallacy, that because Parisian workshops "established the mode that others followed" in the late thirteenth century, they had done so from the time of Abbot Suger.[5] It may be hard to believe that these assumptions, when stated so baldly, could play any significant role in our scientific age, but close reading will show that nearly every writer has paid court to one or more of these concepts at some time.

A second venerable meme is that the whole building as we see it today was conceived at the footings, as if a complete set of construction drawings were being followed during all the many decades needed for the work. Thus at Soissons it has been assumed that the present elevations of the south transept and the choir were determined when their respective footings were laid, from which it was argued that as the choir was eight meters higher than the south transept, the latter must have been completely finished before the choir was begun.[6]

A third is that chronology within one building, or even between buildings, is often established by noting that one thing is more stylistically advanced or retarded than another, as in most of the disagreements on whether the choir or the nave of Chartres Cathedral had been built first.[7] Related to this lies the ideal of progress, in which every stylistic concept is placed in an ordered sequence with a steady and, one fears, almost implacable order, as if the medieval artist was guided by destiny itself. This is the "logical bond which links together all individual trends...the forward march of a singularly progressive architecture, which steadily advances from generation to generation."[8] From this, the entire range of creative endeavour which does not conform to such 'progress' may be dubbed 'regional' or 'archaic' and relegated to some back chapter of history.

Regionalism is not synonymous with backwardness; it is just different. With hindsight, we relegate these buildings to limbo which do not fit into our definitions of historic development. These definitions follow the threads of artistic evolution and are needed as teaching tools, for without them much human endeavour would be awfully hard to pass on. But our view of their part in historical progress need not match any contemporary assessment. Just because the pointed arch seldom appears in eleventh century buildings but is found in most fourteenth century churches, does not mean that around 1200 people felt the pointed arch was more advanced or progressive than the round. Indeed, more vaulting ribs were set to a pointed form around 1150 than around 1200.[9] It says nothing about the inherent qualities of, say, African or Japanese art that neither was greatly appreciated in Europe before 1850, but that moment in history when they came to be loved says much about the Europeans.

A fourth, if disappearing, meme is that bishops or other members of the clergy were responsible for innovation, a concept stimulated both by the medieval habit of stating that some bishop 'constructed' or 'caused to be built' something, and by Abbot Suger's sophisticated involvement in the construction of his own abbey. From this, the travels of the clergy and patterns of ownership have received more prominence in the search for the source of ideas than the builders.

One might feel that the repetition of these matters is no longer necessary, and that serious art historians are aware of these traps and have been avoiding them for some time. Unhappily, this is not the case, not when this was first written in 1989 nor today. It is still instructive to recognise the presence of assumptions, and to see how continue to influence professional opinion.

Putting these assumptions aside threatens to unravel the hundred-year foundation of Gothic history. The analysis of Stoddard, Focillon, Branner, Mâle etc may have to lose some of the orderly simplicity which has made teaching so easy. The emerging picture is more complex, but also more interesting. No appreciation need be lost. The first step in this project is to complete the process already begun to revise the dating. Many scholars have been working on this since the War, including Madeline Caviness, William Clark, Anne Prache, Dominique Vermand, Malcolm Thurlby and Danielle Johnson.

Below I will discuss some of the consequences that will emerge in this book.

The most important technical innovations - structural rib vaults, flying buttresses, tracery, massive lifting gear and so on - have until recently been dated to coincide with their first use in a Gothic-like setting. For example, the first flyers were located in the Paris Notre-Dame nave in the 1180s just in time to support the tallest interior spaces yet built. However, a few years ago I showed that the first flyers were created forty years earlier than this, from which it follows that tall buildings were created only after the ability to support them had been developed.

The area that was most creative in the structural sense lay along the Oise river. Mostly in the 1120s they created the peaked arch (a variation of the pointed arch), flyers, thin-wall construction, the structural buttress and the structural rib. The latter were most important for the evolution of Gothic. This may be from the presence of good local quarries and skilled carvers with some of the earliest building funds in the region.

I have recently studied the relative flow of money into architecture. The graph over the page shows the different amounts being spent in the northeast and the Parisis. Though neither I nor my colleagues have any idea what caused the 1150s to 70s decline, it had a profound effect. In foliage naturalism replaced abstraction, and in architecture the northeast developed height, spaciousness, great glass walls and theatricality, while the Parisis tended to hold onto the opposite qualities until well after 1200.

The decline in the 90s in the northeast coincided with the start of a fifty-year drought. As funding collapsed inventiveness disappeared with it, and designs reverted to both the ideas and the techniques of a generation earlier. Nowhere did style evolve continuously in the one direction, but there was a coming and going in ideas and inventions. This brings up another assumption: that artistic ideas moved progressively towards one high goal. In fact, ideas that play a major role at a later date often seem to disappear for a while between their invention and their flowering. This is a curious paradox, and may shed light on the inner processes of creation which may be very illuminating.

One other matter has arisen that may have a considerable bearing on any updated history - the origin of the concept itself. It has been written that Gothic was first manifested in the choir Abbot Suger built at Saint-Denis. Every book eulogizes its openness, wide windows and exquisite vaults. Rightly so. But excellent as it is, was it the first conscious step towards the new?

It seems likely that, like every other church of the period, the choir was not the creation of one genius, but of many. In the ambulatory the walls with large windows were constructed by one master to support domical and groin vaults over the chapels. He was followed by another who installed drum piers with rib vaults. Though revolutionary and beautiful, no later building by either master show any influence from what they created at Saint-Denis. Coupled with the fact that Saint-Denis remained uncopied for over twenty years, it would seem that the choir was not a deliberate attempt to create a new spacial form, but the result of a fluke of appointments and opinions.

This raises the possibility that the key aspects of Gothic were the natural product of another time. The ramifications of this possibility are enormous. Indeed, it would seem that the first building with the key elements of Gothic - extremely thin members, hollowed-out walls, flying buttresses, no wall between windows and shafts, totally integrated shafting and vaults - may be the axial chapel at Saint-Rémi from the mid-60s. From here there is an unbroken line of development through the Soissons south transept to Braine and Chartres. These four key buildings are all by Soissonaise and Remois builders, where most of the stylistic ideas that created Gothic architecture were made

The role of the abbeys has seldom been mentioned. The redating of the austere Cistercian abbey at Longpont to 1180 suggests the monks may have inspired the extreme simplicity that developed in local carving after a long period of very ornamental work. The resulting simplicity may have concentrated architect’s attention on structural rather than decorative form, which is the heart of the Gothic revolution. There are personal connections between Soissons and Longpont that make this more likely.

The eastern chapel in the Benedictine abbey of Saint-Rémi of the 1160s may have made the first Gothic statement. Later, the abbeys of Orbais and Essômes found how to create the impression that the main vaults could be designed to appear weightless, so they seemed to hover over the congregation, like a canopy. Tracery and the linked triforium were also invented in these Benedictine abbeys.

One consequence is be that the driving creative force behind Gothic in the northeast may have been a popular enthusiasm kindled by the ruling bishops, funded by wine and guided by the monastic orders, in contrast to the oft-quoted version that Gothic was an expression of the emerging authority of the Capetians. Gothic - the quintessential architecture of the spirit - would then have been the creation of a spiritual/agricultural rather than an imperial/mercantile society.

The size and location of the buildings in the Ile-de-France between 1130 and 1150 suggest that funds came from the royal treasury and those of Louis' closest allies, and that after 1180 they came from the merchant and urban communities. In the east, on the other hand, the same factors suggest that money came from the farmers and vignerons. The possibility would radically alter our views of the political and social setting in which Gothic evolved.

Concerning sculpture, some of the consequences are no less momentous. The fourteen decorated portals carved before 1170 are usually spread evenly over the five decades between 1130 and 1180. However, the evidence for dating is minimal. Rigorous studies of foliated capitals and the hands that carved them is providing an alternative dating procedure. This is showing that all may have been built between 1134 to 1145. It raises many important art historical issues that could fundamentally alter the way we understand the period. It also leaves a most intriguing hiatus between 1150 and 1190. To what extent were the portals inspired by Eleanor of Aquitaine? Her homeland has some of the most magnificent portals in the country. The construction of nearly all these portals continued only while she remained in Paris and - can we say? - in love with Louis, which was between 1137 and the mid-1140s.

The majority of later work in the Ile-de-France before 1230 could not be called Gothic in the way we would define it. With a few exceptions, churches are squat, dark and cave-like. They do not soar to great heights with complex internal spaces and huge windows. They are simple rectangles with clerestories that may have no windows at all or only small oculi. The role of the Paris region in these years would seem to have been overvalued. It was not until the late 1230s that a new and adventurous mode emerged that Branner called "The Court Style" of la Sainte-Chapelle. It was this, based on ideas imbibed from the northeast, that the High Gothic of Amiens and Beauvais was to develop.

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[1] Dawkins, *Selfish gene*, 143: quotation from N. K. Humphrey.

[2] Consistently promulgated by Lefèvre-Pontalis in his many publications, well-illustrated in his *Les façades*. His dates are now being picked off one by one, but his methodology has not yet been questioned, save obliquely: Branner, *Saint-Louis*, 15.

[3] Branner, *Saint-Louis*, 28.

[4] Mâle, *Religious art*, 380.

[5] Branner, *Saint-Louis*, 2.

[6] James, *Template-makers,* ch. 7.

[7] James, *Contractors,* 23-24.

[8] Bony, Hurlimann and Meyer, *French cathedrals*, 8.

[9] James, *Template-makers,* ch 8.