

A theory on levels at Mogneville

The capitals are set at seriously different levels. There is logic in each level, but nothing apparent that would justify the 400mm difference between opposite sides of the crossing. Large consequences flowed from this difference, the most obvious that the arches between these capitals had to be exceptionally stilted on the low side. Not noticeable from underneath, but very clear from the nave.

Many of the churches we visited have these imbalances. Most immediately recognized in the bases, where one side of the building will be a course or more above the other, such as Monthodon.

I think this has to do with the sacredness of existing structures, which may have been destroyed or rebuilt since then. Every part of the church was consecrated as it was built. These were important ceremonies, and in many cases are the only records that have survived. Consecration sanctified the structure. It aligned the work with God's purpose and, in the mystical sense, became Divine. Once stones had been placed in a campaign they do not seem to have been touched in any later work, even if the design was radically changed in later campaigns. No one tidied up the older work that was out of step with the new. This may have been an economic decision, but it may also have been because once placed into the building it was consecrated and could not be touched.

The second consideration is that not all alignments – of parts or whole elements – followed pure geometric forms. The angle between the sides of the apse at Auvers, measure 80 degrees, rather than 90, for example. The inclination of the bases at Glennes were twisted away from the square in order to align with something, though we were not clear on what.

In the geometric studies at Chartres I found a logical purpose in most of the irregularly shaped elements. The geometry would be formed on its own principles – such as relating to structure – but would then be 'distorted' so the sides would be aligned on important nearby elements. For example, the octagons under the choir flyers were not true octagons, but were twisted to connect with the clerestory piers or the faces of the external buttresses.

Like the worshiper, the mason is trying to connect his work with God. Making connections is essential element in any sacred journey. We would say today that every part is connected to every other part, and if I knew Latin I am sure we would find similar phrases from the texts.

So, in laying out the structure they would be mindful of other parts and would want to integrate the old with the new. How better to do that than by a little twisting of sides or modifying of heights.

And the major tool in accomplishing this task would have been string. Any work on a building site involves string as much as a square or a compass. String makes sure all the faces are in a common alignment. It connects. It was through the use of string at Chartres that I established the relationships between 'misalignments' and where they were connected.

To return to the different levels at Mogneville I would postulate that the different heights were attempts to make connections with the nave. There are remnants of a much earlier structure on the south wall. There are parts of a possible arcade and a clerestory window that would have formed a much smaller building with a somewhat lower floor level. The height to the top of a wall suggested by the height of the old clerestory window arch could have been exactly that of the lower capital.

Thus, by lowering the capital on one side they would have connected the new work with the old. They would not have intended to demolish the nave at that time. It was the consecrated 'home' for the congregation. The choir, the crossing and its new tower were not an add-on but an integral extension of the older edifice that had served them so well.

Not to have attempted such connections – for I am sure there were others – would have separated the new from the old. The separation would not only have been visual but psychological. They may not have been noticed after a while, but at the time were part of the mind set of the builders, part of the discussion between mason and client, and part of the appreciation for the new structure encouraged among those who were going to pay for it.

The later demolition of the earlier nave and its replacement by taller structure that itself connects with the raised heights of the crossing now obscures the original connectedness, though its height just reinforces the principal, but in the opposite direction.